

# **DIVERSITY AND UNITY IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF PEOPLES, STATES AND HUMANITY**

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## **Contents**

1. Introduction
    - 1.1 Materialist theory of cultural history as non-linear
    - 1.2 Sensuous nature of materialist theory of knowledge: hearing and speech
  2. Brief history of concept of cultural unity from Herder to Lenin
    - 2.1 Problems with postulating "unity" as a goal
    - 2.2 The question of sources
    - 2.3 Problems with a historicist approach to culture
    - 2.4 The difficulty of translation
  3. Historical definitions of cultural diversity
    - 3.1 Rousseau and the romantic tradition
    - 3.2 Reasons for diversity
  4. Contemporary definitions of culture
    - 4.1 Cultural relativism versus cultural hegemony
    - 4.2 Culture as process
    - 4.3 Prevalence of visual-spatial root-metaphors in Western science
    - 4.4 Preserving ancient cultures in museums and research institutes
    - 4.5 Tourism as a means of preserving memory of a culture
    - 4.6 Simultaneity of the dissimilar
  5. Hybrid cultures
    - 5.1 Minority and majority cultures
    - 5.2 Individual self-determination and cultural determinacy
  6. Promoting a culture of mutual respect for cultural difference
    - 6.1 The problem with cultural "centrism"
    - 6.2 Confronting the "object" as basis for culture of respect
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

## **Summary**

Materialist and sensuous aspects of cultural history are discussed. The concepts of unity and diversity of cultural heritage are subsequently presented in detail. Examples of historical definitions of cultural diversity are given as a pre-requisite for contemporary definitions of culture. The problems of tourism as a means to preserve cultural heritage

are presented. Problems of minority vs. majority cultures, as well as of cultural centrisms are discussed.

## **1. Introduction**

One could argue that the discursive field of cultural studies was opened by the German philosopher, Herder, when he posited that the connection between culture and the enlightenment was the precondition for thinking about culture in a scientific way. His axiom suggests that the grammar, syntax, metaphors, concepts and methods of enlightenment rationality are brought to bear on the hitherto unreflected object of culture, be it the scientist's own European culture, especially in its folkloristic manifestations, or that which European scientists had encountered on their voyages.

At the time, science itself was inextricably bound up with travel and one could speculate on the economic basis for this in the colonial and imperialist project of conquering new markets. Apart from the economic and political interests that might have informed these empirical studies into one's own as well as other cultures, which were on the verge of being swamped and eventually destroyed by the global process of industrialization, the attitude of the cultural scientist is one of self-reflexiveness in relation to his/her own culture and an open-minded curiosity about other cultures. The result of this scientific attitude was a suspension of value judgments and a historicization of one's own and other cultures that in turn laid the basis for a comparative study of the many cultures of the world.

Being mindful of the pitfalls of Eurocentrism inherent in an uncritical belief in the superiority of Western science, it could nevertheless be argued that such a comparative cultural studies would render visible both the diversity and unity of various cultures at different points of their history and consequently global history. An awareness of both our diversity and unity as human beings could foster tolerance towards other cultures without turning a blind eye to the hidden iniquities they may contain, thus bringing about the possibility of settling cultural and political conflicts in a peaceful way based on common respect in today's global environment.

### **1.1 Materialist theory of cultural history as non-linear**

History, within these parameters, should not be seen as the linear, evolutionary progress towards an allegedly higher, technologically advanced European culture, but as the non-linear, discontinuous progression of a specific people or state or humanity over time. We all occupy this planet simultaneously at a particular point in time and at our own discontinuous levels of existence.

Marx made this point clear when he wrote that research into the principles of social organization must not be relegated to a mythical time of origins, nor can it be reduced to the construction of stages. Forms of social differentiation must be seen as "moments" which, from the beginning of history, and ever since human beings lived, have existed *simultaneously* and still determine history. This is the materialist connection among human beings that is conditioned by their needs and the mode of production and is as old as mankind itself.

## 1.2 Sensuous nature of materialist theory of knowledge: hearing and speech

If we extend this insight to culture, we could say that the first and fundamental assumption of a materialist theory of knowledge is to make consciousness, individual and collective, the starting point. This could be modified to mean that the only way to think of consciousness without separating it from the organism or banning it to some kind of *forum internum* is to insist on its sensuous nature; and one way to conceive of that sensuous nature (above the level of motor activities) is to tie consciousness as an activity to the production of meaningful sound. Inasmuch as the production of meaningful sound involves the labor of transforming, shaping matter, it may still be possible to distinguish form and content, but the relationship between the two will then be *constitutive* of consciousness. This would entail privileging hearing above sight. Fabian asserts that if there needs be a contest for man's noblest sense (and there are reasons to doubt that) it should be hearing, not sight that wins. Not solitary perception but social communication is the starting point for a materialist cultural studies, provided that we keep in mind that man does not "need" language as a means of communication, or by extension, society as a means of survival. Man *is* communication and society. Language produces man as man produces language. *Production* is the pivotal concept of materialist cultural studies.

## 2. Brief history of concept of cultural unity from Herder to Lenin

Herder believed that a comparative cultural studies would prove that the similarities between "primitive" and "civilized" people -- he still made this problematic distinction -- far outweighed their differences. He based this assumption on the observation that even if members of other cultures did not have words for things such as "intellect" or "virtue", they displayed them by their thoughts and actions, thereby implying that cultural difference can be reduced to language and that there might be a primal, universal language from which the different languages have evolved. The task of enlightenment humanist science would then be to recover this universal language and lift it to a higher level of consciousness.

According to Fichte the similarities between people, as far as their intellectual and sensual faculties are concerned, are also far greater than their differences, owing to a common physiological constitution. He draws the conclusion from this that the aim of a humanist universal culture should be to overcome these superficial differences in order to make the goal of a universal humanity a reality. Lenin seems to continue in this tradition of enlightenment thinking when he calls, referring specifically to Hegel and Marx, for a dialectical reworking of the history of human thought, science and technology. His thoughts go beyond Herder and Fichte, however, in so far as they consider the link between theory and praxis, history and experience as central to a materialist cultural science.

As Lenin understood and practiced the Hegelian dialectic, it is the universal instrument of cognition as well as the subjective praxis of human beings. In this regard it does not only sublimate the opposition between necessity and freedom, nature and history, natural science and social science as far as methodology is concerned, but it seeks to achieve, in a revolutionary way, the formal identity between the history of thinking and the laws of thinking. The concept (the insight) uncovers the essence (principles of cause, identity,

difference etc.) in being (the immediate appearances) -- this is really the general progression of all human cognition (of all science). This is the progression of natural science as well as political economy (and of history). In this regard Hegel's dialectic is a generalization of the history of thinking. It should be a gratifying task to pursue this more concretely and thoroughly in the history of the individual sciences. In the field of logic the history of thinking must by and large coincide with the laws of thinking. This does not only imply a scientific endeavor but also a new praxis, a new way of making history.

## 2.1 Problems with postulating "unity" as a goal

Philosophers of the enlightenment, as well as social reformers and revolutionaries, postulate unity as a desirable goal, because this allows for an objective and rational analysis of social and economic circumstances and organized collective action. On the other hand, they do not reflect on a number of problems posed by the concept of unity for a universal history as well as a universal human culture.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Anette Horn** studied German and English Literature at the University of Cape Town. She graduated with a Ph.D. in 1998 (*Nietzsches Begriff der décadence. Kritik und Analyse der Moderne (Heidelberger Beiträge zur Germanistik 2000)*). She was co-editor of *Like a house on fire* (COSAW 1994). Essays on Anna Seghers, Nietzsche, Musil, Uwe Timm, Jürgen Fuchs and South African literature (Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, John Coetzee etc.). She has taught at the University of Cape Town and was a research associate there. She was an Alexander von Humboldt post-doctoral research fellow at the Technische Universität Berlin, and is now senior lecturer in German at the University of Pretoria.