9504-DEF

DEFINING CULTURE :
'Society', 'Culture'
and other modern myths

paper by Zachàr Laskewicz

There is no doubt that the development of anthropology has had a great impact on twentieth century thought, which is largely thanks to theoretical developments concerning the study of the concept of 'culture'. In this assignment I will demonstrate that the important influence of anthropology results from some essentially theoretical concepts that are connected with a '(cultural-)anthropological' way of interpreting the behaviour of human beings. This assignment involves exploring the concept of 'culture' and the important impact its definition has had, particularly in making us aware of our own cultural boundaries that limit us when trying to analyse other social groups. In addition, the term 'society' and the importance of both the terms society and culture in an understanding of anthropology, will be explored.

The word culture can certainly present a confusing range of applications. In Clifford Geertz's important theoretical document <u>The Interpretation of Cultures</u>[1], many possible definitions are presented:

(1)   the total way of life of a people
(2)   the social legacy the individual acquires from his group
(3)   a way of thinking, feeling, and believing
(4)   an abstraction from behaviour
(5)   a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave
(6)   a storehouse of pooled learning
(7)   a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems
(8)   learned behaviour
(9)   a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour
(10)   a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and
        to other men
(11)   a precipitate of history

With such an array of alternatives, one is presented with difficulties in deciding what the boundaries of the term 'culture' actually are; numerous alternative suggestions are put forward, but in order to have a clear theoretical structure, we have to be able to choose one single meaning. We will return later in this assignment to Geertz's solution to this collection of confusing definitions, but first a little more about traditionally accepted definitions. In the development of the discipline of anthropology in the twentieth century we can detect two major schools of thought between which ideas of the concept of 'culture' have moved. Definition (1) above provided by Geertz suggests that culture is 'the total way of life of a people'. This relates most closely to the first school of thought in which 'culture' is observed as the "patterns of life" through which a society goes, in other words, everything a given group of people says and does. This concept was developed most strongly in the fields of archeology and ethnology in which practical research into the culture was of the utmost importance: 'fieldwork' and 'excavation' resulted in the accumulation of

---

[1] Geertz, C. <u>The Interpretation of Cultures</u>, New York: Basic Books (1973): Ch.1, pg.4.

data that could be used to make theories about the interpretation of societies (still extant or long lost in the sands of time). In these cases, culture became more an analysis of the "patterns of life within a community—the regularly recurring activities and material and social arrangements" characteristic of a particular human group (Goodenough 1961, quoted in Keesing).[2]   Keesing presents us with an example of this way of looking at 'culture'.

> "When archaeologists talk about the culture of an early Near Eastern farming community as an adaptive system they are using the concept in its first sense. It is the way-of-life-in-ecosystem characteristic of a particular people."[3]

The second school of thought contrasts highly with this more traditional conception, and of the definitions provided above by Geertz, only (2) seems appropriate: *the social legacy the individual acquires from his group.* Its acceptance into anthropology began with theoretical work growing from linguistics, based on positing the term 'culture' as an essentially mentalistic conception whereby one considers it as *a shared system of ideas.*   Contrasting this definition to the first is not simple because both systems involve the exploration of functional structures within society. Although important to fields of research such as ethnology and archeology where documentation of culture was of the utmost importance, the first school of thought definition of culture proves rapidly deficient when taken into other realms of cultural study involved with *comparative* research. To demonstrate this deficiency, it would be useful to use an analogy presented by Keesing involved with 'cultural glasses'. The first 'patterns of life' definition is involved with a descriptive cultural dialogue; exactly what a given society does in the process of daily existence, notated without 'bias'. However, when it comes to actually 'interpreting' cultural behaviour, especially behaviour of a culture radically different from the observer's, one becomes aware of one's own cultural 'restrictions' growing from the values and norms that observers unconsciously bring with them. Keesing uses an interesting analogy here, one which suggests that culture places boundaries on our means of perception suggesting that we "grow up perceiving the world through glasses with distorting lenses".[4] This makes it very clear that in analysing any other culture, we have to be made aware that our own cultural system differs and that we would judge this culture from our own background. This second definition involves an 'ideational' perspective, or a recognition of the order of culture which is based not in fact on observable realities but on agreed conventions between a given group of people. Keesing provides us with a useful definition at this point:

> "Cultures in this [ideational] sense comprise systems of shared ideas, systems of concepts and rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways that humans live."[5]

Changing the perspective from one of an 'observation of reality' to an 'expression of

---

[2] Keesing, R. Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective New York: Rhinehart and Wineston (1981): pg. 68.
[3] *ibid.*
[4] Keesing, R. (1981): pg. 69.
[5] Keesing, R. (1981): pg. 68.

agreed convention' was indeed dramatic: culture is then "what humans *learn*, not what they do and make". Culture moved from the area of ethnology and over to that of language which is also 'an agreed set of (vocal) conventions between a given group of people'. Up until important theoretical work on the basis of culture was done by such foundation-formers as Levi-Strauss, Geertz, Tambiah and Turner, these two highly contrasting conceptions of culture were used and confused. Today, however, thanks to the theoretical work by these founders of contemporary anthropological thought, the 'ideational' concept has been largely accepted and is used as a basis for most developments occurring in the field of cultural or social anthropology. This acceptance of an 'ideational' definition of culture is related to theoretical work taken from the field of linguistics, and is worthy of further discussion.

Now we can return to Geertz's definition of culture which he posits as a "semiotic one." Returning again to his volume on the interpretation of cultures, we find that he presents the image that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." [6] He takes culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore "an interpretative science in search of meaning." In this sense, anthropology has moved a step closer to the study of language where one studies a system of symbols agreed on in a given culture to communicate meaning. Turner[7], a founder of the study of cultural 'symbology' recognized also the importance of a semiotic conception to the development of cultural anthropology. He adopted the following linguistic terms to explain his 'semiotic' concept of *comparative symbology:*

> (1) Syntactics: The formal relationships of signs and symbols to one another
>   apart from their users or external reference.
> (2) Semantics: The relationships of signs and symbols to the things to which they
>   refer, that is, their referential meaning.
> (3) Pragmatics: The relations of signs and symbols with their users.[8]

The first two levels listed above (syntactics and semantics) involve on a practical level the structural and functional relations of individual symbols within a 'communication system'. In language these symbols are morphemes, words and sentences; in culture we could interpret it as the basic meaning-based functions of individual cultural 'symbols'. The most important term to the study of semiotics, however, is *pragmatics.* Within the study of linguistics pragmatics is involved with the 'force of speech events on the world', or the social context in which the language is spoken. In cultural anthropology, also involved with the classification of cultural 'symbols', the concept of pragmatics helped to provide a theoretical context in which theoreticians could explore the systems of cultural symbolism. By using a 'cultural analogy' Geertz helps us to understand this semiotic conception of 'public meaning' in which he proposes a 'thick' (pragmatic) conception of culture. The analogy is

---

[6] Geertz, C. <u>The Interpretation of Cultures</u>, New York: Basic Books (1973): Ch.1, pg.5.
[7] Turner, V. <u>From Ritual To Theatre</u>, New York: Performing Arts Publications (1982).
[8] Turner, V. (1982): pg.21.

presented in the form of interpreting the human behaviour of winking. According to Geertz, a 'thin' interpretation (merely semantic or syntactic) would define winking as "a contraction of the eyelid." This definition is clearly deficient if one is interested in understanding *why* the person is winking, and can be compared to the "patterns of life" definition of culture. A further expansion involves cultural 'interpretation' or 'comparison'. Geertz's 'thick' (pragmatic/semiotic) definition of winking is extended to explore the cultural context of the act of winking: was it an involuntary movement of the eyelid, or did it have a meaning-based, communicative function? Using this analogy, Geertz made important observations about the nature of 'cultural' interpretation:

> "Culture is public because meaning is. You can't wink . . . without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids."

Tambiah, in his important document entitled <u>The Magical Power of Words</u> also adopted these 'ideational' conceptions based on language when interpreting the magical rituals of the Trobriand islanders, functioning to extend the ground-breaking work of Malinowski. In referring to pragmatics, Tambiah uses the term 'outer frame' which can be compared to Geertz's 'thick' description of culture:

> "This difficult enquiry I call the 'inner frame' of Trobriand magic. . . We may call this perspective the 'semantics' of Trobriand ritual. . . I use the term 'outer frame' to refer to another level of meaning. Here the ritual complex as a whole is regarded as an activity engaged in by individuals or groups in pursuit of their institutional aims. This perspective we may call 'pragmatics', and it corresponds in some ways to what Malinowski called the 'context of the situation'. It investigates how ritual relates to other activities, in what contexts and situations it is practised and what consequences it may produce for various segments of society." [9]

This 'ideational' conception of culture has been highly important to the theoretical progress of cultural anthropology. Another point worthy of discussion is the contrast between the terms 'culture' and 'society'. These terms are essentially very closely related. Keesing's definition is useful here: "All the communities that are connected politically and economically can be taken as comprising a **society**".[10] A society, then, is made up of a 'total social system', and sociology is the study of the working and complex interaction between different 'social systems' within a society. An analogy could be presented in which an incredibly complicated factory viewed from above can be seen to be completing its product and producing an equilibrium. These concepts of society, economics and politics, have grown from important theoretical work done in the field of sociology, which were also an important

---

[9] Tambiah, S. "The Magical Power of Words" in <u>Culture, Thought and Social Action</u>, Harvard University Press (1985).

[10] Keesing, R. <u>Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective,</u> New York: Rhinehart and Wineston (1981): pg. 74.

influence to the British field of anthropology who were responsible for the concept of 'comparative sociology' or social anthropology as it is now known. The origin of cultural anthropology comes from significantly different school of theoretical perspectives where the study of large-scale 'societies' was left to the sociologists, and the 'cultural anthropologists' moved therefore to so-called 'primitive' people where the daily life of 'simpler' cultures could be studied. After a time, thought gradually changed and the complexity of tribal culture was recognized. Sociological perspectives were used in an attempt to understand the complexity of tribal cultures and at the same time, ways of looking at tribal culture were transposed onto the complexity of post-industrial society.[11] New theoretical perspectives were borrowed from sociology and linguistics, resulting in the contemporary 'semiotic' conception of culture which in its own way stands a safe distance between sociology and the "patterns of life" side of more traditional anthropological perspectives. The concepts of 'culture' and 'society', then, are products of different ways of analysing similar human behaviour, although the emphasis in the case of society is on examining this behaviour as a working 'system' (represented by an interest in economics and politics) and in the case of 'culture' an emphasis is placed on the behaviour of the individual in relation to his group (represented by an interest in language and religion). The two terms however, are not in any way clearly separable in the contemporary world; both are intimately related theoretically and historically, and are both important tools in understanding the anthropology of today.

---

[11] Take Victor Turner's work in transposing the 'liminality' of African rituals onto western art and theatre": means of providing social change.