Culture as Praxis

BY Zygmun Bauman 1999
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The unyielding ambiguity of the concept of culture is notorious. Much less so is the idea that this ambiguity follows not so much from the way people define culture, as from the incompatibility of numerous lines of thought, which have come together historically in the same term. Scholars are usually sophisticated enough to realize that similarity of terms is a poor guide when identity or diversity of concepts is to be established. Still, methodological self-consciousness is one thing, the magic of words is another.

Because of historical circumstances not exceedingly relevant to our subject, the term 'culture' has been incorporated into three separate univers du discours. In each of the three contexts the term orders a different semantic field, singles out and denotes different classes of objects, brings into relief different aspects of the members of these classes, suggests different sets of cognitive questions and research strategies. Which means that in each case the term, though keeping its form intact, connotes a different concept. There is one term, but three separate concepts.

**Culture as hierarchical concept**

This usage of the term 'culture' is so deeply ingrained in the common pre-scientific layer of the Western mentality, that everybody knows it well, though sometimes unreflectively, from his own everyday experience. We admonish a person, who has failed to live up to the group standards, for his 'lack of culture'. We repeatedly stress the 'transmitting of culture' as the leading function of educational institutions. We are prone to grade the persons with whom we come in touch according to the level of their culture. If we mark somebody as a 'cultured person', we mean usually that he is well-educated, polished, urbane, enriched above his 'natural' state, ennobled. We tacitly assume that there are others who do not possess any of these attributes. The 'cultured person' is an antonym of an 'uncultured' one.

Several assumptions were necessary to make sense of the hierarchical notion of culture.

1. Whether inherited or acquired, culture is a detachable part of a human being, a possession. It is a very peculiar kind of possession, to be sure: it shares with the personality the unique quality of being simultaneously the defining 'essence' and the descriptive 'existential feature' of the human creature. Since the lyric poets of seventh-century Greece discovered the discord between desire and duty, between duty and necessity, Western man has been condemned to the agonizing precariousness of a dual, Janus-faced identity: he is a personality, but he also has a personality, he is an actor, but also an object of his own action, created and creating at the same time. What he is, is determined by his essence; but he is insistently made responsible for this essence and required to shape it through his existential performance. Culture in its hierarchical meaning leads the same frustrating and awesome life of an object being its own subject. 'What Socrates tried to get the Athenians to
understand was the duty of “caring for their souls” . . . To an Athenian of the fifth century BC . . . it must have seemed very strange indeed.11 To an Athenian of the fifth century the soul (Ψυχή) was the seed and the bearer of life which disappears together with the conscious existence of the human being. An idea that one can—much more, should—try to act on something which was the fountainhead of all action was at the time revolutionary enough to make a genius of Aristophanes’ stature ridicule its prophet. Still the culture, the peculiarity of its existence notwithstanding, is a possession. And all possessions can be acquired or squandered, manipulated and transformed, shaped and framed.

(2) Indeed, the quality of a human being can be shaped and framed; but it can be also left unattended, raw and coarse, like fallow land, abandoned and growing wild. The Ψυχή is the medium through which the wilderness of Nature is forced to fit human needs. Plutarch’s immortal metaphor of cultura animi was comprehensible to his contemporaries only because it was buttressed by Cicero’s codification of the stance behind agricultural practice: the soil bears ripe and sweet fruits only when attended by an apt and skilful farmer who assiduously and painstakingly selects the seed of best quality. After eighteen centuries the primary source of inspiration was still alive—and the Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française supplemented its discussion of ‘culture’ by a Plutarchian remark: ‘se dit aussi au figuré, du soin qu’on prend des arts et de l’esprit.’12 To Aristotle the analogy between soul-perfection and technē must have seemed self-imposing; the soul was to him like ‘the capacity of a tool’.13 A very odd tool, to be sure once again, with its edge pressed against itself. Faithful in this respect to Socratic adage, Aristotle wanted men to be moulders of their own souls. It remains, alas, an unexplored question to what extent the ancient Greeks’ intense preoccupation with the mystery of soul-formation, revealed in their well-nigh religious treatment of everything related to educational processes, was stimulated by the ambiguous existential status of the human personality. Against the background of, say, Gorgias’ rigid distinction between ‘acting’ and ‘acted upon’, the first alone pretending to the kind of perfection available only to eternal, never-originated existence, the second always transitional, imperfect, degraded, the elusive human personality loomed dangerously over the critical boundaries of the world order. It was only natural in the circumstances for Plato to bestow on the human soul the sacred status of immortality: ‘Only that which moves itself, since it does not leave itself, never ceases to move. . . . Every soul is immortal. For what is ever moving is immortal.’14 To a logical Greek mind this solution-by-taboo would have easily revealed its nature as a desperate subterfuge, had Plato been less consistent in drawing necessary conclusions from the fateful decision. But he was not. Re-shaping according to an extrinsic project—the very heart of Ψυχή—was replaced by a self-revealing cultivation of intrinsic qualities; the soul-formation lays bare its essence which always was there even if inconspicuous and invisible to the sensory experience. Which leads us directly to the absolute nature of the educational ideal, the inexorable attribute of the hierarchical concept of culture. Before we turn to it, let us
note that even the absolutistic system of Plato allowed for the hiatus between the potential and the actual, thus leaving plenty of room for the creative activity of techne.

(3) The hierarchical notion of culture is value-saturated. The above phrase indicates however (to everybody trained in the descriptive preoccupations of post-Boasian anthropology) merely taking a partisan stance in the notorious argument over the comparability and/or relativity of cultural solutions. For fear of understatement of what constitutes the pith and marrow of the hierarchical concept, we had better re-phrase the initial idiom. The real issue is not the admission or denial of the existence of an objective criterion for the comparative evaluation of cultures. The term 'cultures', if understood hierarchically, can hardly be used in the plural. The concept makes sense only if denoted straightforwardly as the culture; there is an ideal nature of the human being, and the culture means the conscious, strenuous and prolonged effort to attain this ideal, to bring the actual life-process into line with the highest potential of the human vocation.

Culture as differential concept

In its second meaning the term 'culture' is employed to account for the apparent differences between communities of people (temporally, ecologically, or socially discriminated). This usage locates the differential concept of culture among numerous 'residue concepts', contrived frequently in the social sciences to explain away the sediment of deviant idiosyncrasies unaccountable for by the otherwise universal and omnipotent regularities (where it shares the ascribed function with ideas, tradition, life experience etc.).

Coming across cultural differences does not necessarily mean noticing them; and noticing them does not automatically imply conferring an equal existential status on contradicting ways of life. Relativity of cultural standards was conceived historically only when the burgeoning modern social structure had undermined the former unity of the individual and his community.

Alternative ways of life had to win their legitimate status inside a community unified by a single source of legitimacy to make possible the abrogation of an absolute and unrivalled social system and its sacralized image, the absolute standards of morality, beauty, decency.

The moment the differential concept of culture emerged from the ashes of its absolute and hierarchical predecessor, it was buttressed by several tacit (sometimes explicit) premises which were to remain its undetachable attributes throughout its history.

The peculiar vision of cultural field associated with the differential concept of culture begets a wide range of specific issues on which research interests tend to be focused. The paramount issue is, of course, the phenomenon of 'cultural contact'. If any culture constitutes by definition a unique, cohesive and self-contained entity, then any situation of ambiguity, equivocality, lack of visible unilateral commitments, even of apparent lack of cohesion, tends to be viewed as 'encounter' or 'clash' between otherwise separate and cohesive cultural wholes. This impact of the differential concept of culture is already so deeply ingrained in popular thinking, that we employ and perceive the notion of 'cultural clash' as self-evident, commonsensical truth. A look backward into the intellectual past of the Western world however casts serious doubts
on the timelessness and spontaneous origin of the belief. Margaret T. Hogden
discovered that the enormous travel-literature left by numerous pilgrims to
the Holy Land in the late Middle Ages contained no single proof that intelli-
gent Europeans of those times experienced anything comparable to the
nowadays fashionable and 'commonsensical' cultural shock: 'They expressed
little or no curiosity about their fellows, little interest in alien ways, little
reaction to cultural diversities.' Similarly, there is no evidence that the Indians
brought to Europe by Columbus – in an advanced stage of the Renaissance –
stirred any noticeable commotion among the enlightened public. The notion
of cultural clash apparently became an integral part of popular thinking fol-
lowing recent experiences of modern society; but it also played an active role
in articulating these experiences and moulding their mental image.

Viewing the world through the spectacles of the differential concept, stu-
dents of culture are forced to trace the roots of any change to some kind of a
contact between the culture under study and another culture. Trying to
arrange all the data related to the studied community around an internal
axis of cohesion, they destroy by the same token potential analytical tools
necessary to locate the 'inside' causes of change. Homogeneous, cohesive is
the culture of a 'slowly changing' society; since the cohesion of any culture is
achieved through successful re-creating, in the process of early training, of the
same basic personality type, cohesion and homogeneity become synonymous
terms for a sluggish pace of change (the change must not be vigorous to the
point of creating significant discontinuities between the conditions in which
two successive generations are trained). Inconsistent, heterogeneous cultural
conditions (one hesitates to use the term 'culture', which implies a systemic
nature of the whole) become, on the other hand, inextricably bound up with
the continuous presence of 'full secondary culture contacts' (mingling of
individuals brought up in conditions already affected by contacts) or at least
'primary cultural contacts' (encounters between individuals brought up in
homogeneous but disparate cultures).

Advocates of the differential concept of culture are often too much con-
cerned with vindicating the self-identity and uniqueness of 'a culture' they
study to withstand the temptation of viewing any contact and any mixing of
'cultures' as something intrinsically abnormal, if not undesirable and evil.
Sometimes this attitude finds an ethical expression, as in Ruth Benedict's
famous metaphor of the broken cup. In most cases the same attitude is
embodied in allegedly descriptive, empirical terms; it is, for example, broadly
accepted that the conditions of 'cultural contact' are conducive of a rela-
tively high rate of mental disorders and psycho-somatic diseases. Nobody
seems to care that the crucial act of referring respective statistical data to the
clash between the expectation fed into immigrants by their native cultures and
the new cultural reality is an arbitrary theoretical decision, not an empirical
result. What is allegedly borne out has been in fact assumed from the outset.
Were an alternative theory employed, the same phenomena could have been
explained by, say, peculiar factors operating in self-selection of prospective
immigrants, or by the exceptional severity of economic, social etc. obstacles
piled up in the way of an immigrant in comparison with the settled inhabitants.

The differential concept of culture is not an accidental concomitant of the intellectual climate of modernity. It affirms several of the focal assumptions of modern thinking by lending them the spurious air of empiricism. But it also helps to bridge some disconcerting discrepancies between these assumptions and a number of stubborn facts of observable reality. Both functions make it indispensable.

To begin with, the axiom of biological equality of the human races and genetical uniformity of the whole genus of homo sapiens is continuously and jarringly at variance with the obstinate differentiation of historical achievement and performance. This contradiction can be conveniently explained away by the contingencies of cultural values and traditions. In its extreme, the method takes the shape of the Weberian formula: beliefs → behaviour → social structure and process, a formula far more persistent and fertile than even the extensive argument over the role of protestantism at the cradle of modernity would suggest. Hagen would point to the watershed between cultures which turn out authoritarian personalities and those which rear innovators; F. S. C. Northrop would try to demonstrate the aesthetic orientation of oriental cultures as opposite to the rationality of the West. And hosts of theoreticians and field workers would try to enumerate innumerable culture-determined barriers to modern ways of life. In each case culture, in the differential sense of the term, is saddled with the principal responsibility for the disparate destinies of peoples equally endowed genetically and confronted with, allegedly, an identical array of economic opportunities.

For better or worse, ours is the age of relativity. 'History posits the problem of relativity as a fact, the sociology of knowledge as a necessity of our condition.' For 'sociology of knowledge', on which Berger's polemical wrath is focused, we can as well read 'modern informed mind'. It would be odd indeed if the differential concept were not pushing its hierarchical predecessor beyond the confines of what passes for the legitimate scholarly endeavour. Nearly all spokesmen for the Modern Mind (though some joyfully, and others with sorrow) have proclaimed that the only absolute element in our condition is the end of the Absolute. Whatever are the reasons, we find it increasingly difficult to believe in absolute and universal standards of good or beauty. We tend to treat moral norms as well as aesthetic raptures as matters of mere conventionality. No wonder that 'comparative cultures' look to us like collections of curios, sharing first and foremost the feature of being equally unfounded in anything but human, past or current, options.

To put it briefly, the differential concept of culture seems to be an indispensable constituent of the modern world-image, closely related to its most sensitive articulations. In this intimate affinity lies the genuine source of this concept's intellectual forcefulness and perseverance.

Generic concept of culture

The generic concept of culture feeds on the overlooked and the unsaid parts of the differential one. In this sense it is an inescapable corollary to its major adversary. The more successful the differential concept is in splitting the human scene into a multitude of unrelated, self-sufficient enclaves, the more strongly the need is felt to tackle the problem of the essential unity of mankind. It is not a biological, pre-cultural unity which is sought — unity of this sort is, in fact, ubiquitous in all discussion of culture — it is a theoretical foundation of the relative autonomy and distinctiveness of the cultural sphere in general, the differential concept in particular. Cultural differentiation is not, conceptually, at odds with the assumption of essential pre-cultural unity. On the contrary, the idea of cultural differentiation was called for to account for empirical variations unexplained by the modern, egalitarian, humane view of basic identity in the biological endowment of human races.
In this sense we can conceive of the cultural process as an extension, or sub-category, of a much more general relation of adaptation, entered by all living organisms and at the other end of biological-cultural evolution—by man-made self-regulating mechanisms, in short, by all 'open systems', i.e. systems which cannot survive without some input of energy and/or information from the part of the universe beyond their confines. According to Piaget, this process of adaptation, compellingly initiated by the life-cycle of the open system, consisted of a two-faceted relation of assimilation and accommodation. The first is the outward aspect of adaptation; various elements of the environment are assimilated by the subject, either energetically, or informatively, or both. The second is the inward aspect of the same relation: the intrinsic structure of the system itself undergoes constant modifications required if the exchange with the environment is to be perpetuated. Adaptation is achieved if, and only if, assimilation and accommodation are reciprocally equilibrated; or, rather, adaptation is an equilibration of assimilation and adaptation.

Now, we have described adaptation in terms sufficiently broad to account equally for both factors, usually sharply discriminated—body and mind. Adaptation, as well as its two facets, if described in the above terms, and so far as their definitions are held within the universe of meaning warranted by these terms, is neither 'bodily' nor 'mental'. What is being described in other contexts as the bodily or the mental we can depict as two correlated forms or applications of adaptation, retaining however an identical structure; as, definitionally, two reflections of one structure, imprinted on two different kinds of medium. It is hard to conceive how mental processes like thinking or intelligence could be defined in any other way than by indicating structures and their transformations. Applying 'mind' as an explanation of a system's behaviour seems to be a logical error, since, as Anatol Rapoport put it, 'mind' is only a name invented to distinguish the class of things which 'behave' or 'perform actions' as distinct from those which only 'participate in events'. Rapoport indicates 'plasticity of response, the ability to modify the response
to a given stimulus’ as recognizable symptoms of ‘intelligence’; in other words, the one thing we can say reasonably about the concept of ‘intelligence’ is that we can apply it whenever the above symptoms are actually present. Similarly, according to the classic study by A. M. Turing, unless we define mental processes in a way which compels us to agree with a statement that the only way by which one can be sure that a machine thinks is to be the machine and to feel oneself thinking, the only alternative way of solving the question of ‘machine thinking’ is to test a machine’s performance in a situation usually describable as requiring intelligent behaviour.

The generic notion of culture is coined, therefore, in order to overcome the persistent philosophical opposition between the spiritual and the real, thought and matter, body and mind. The only necessary and irreplaceable component of the concept is the process of structuring, together with its objectified results – man-made structures.

The continuous and unending structuring activity constitutes the core of human praxis, the human mode of being-in-the-world. To carry on this active existence man is supplied with two essential instruments – manus et lingua, as Aquinas put it; tools and language, according to the Marxian tradition. With these two implements man handles – through structuring – the world he lives in and himself. This ‘handling’ consists in drawing energy and generating information. The two components of the human mode of existence tend to be perceived in different ways. Energy is what man needs; in gratifying this need he is dependent on the forces which are not entirely under his rule. This state of dependence man perceives as being-an-object, as being exposed to a manipulation he cannot avert precisely because he cannot survive unless complying with the conditions his dependence sets for him. Information he experiences as something he wishes; in generating it he subjects hitherto elemental and unbridled forces to his will. This state of creation man perceives as being-the-subject, as exposing the world to his own manipulation. Hence the continuous persistence in human thinking of the world of the multi-named dichotomy of spirit and matter, mind and body; and the invariable tendency to associate the first with freedom, the second with thralldom.

Culture is a perpetual effort to overcome, to remove this dichotomy. Creativity and dependence are two indispensable aspects of human existence, not only conditioning, but reinforcing each other; they cannot be transcended conclusively – they overcome their own antinomy only by re-creating it and re-building the setting from which it is generated. The agony of culture is therefore doomed to eternal continuation; by the same token, man, since endowed with the capacity of culture, is doomed to explore, to be dissatisfied with his world, to destroy and to create.