

Introduction: Triumph of culture, troubles of anthropology

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Abstract: Culture has always been the defining feature and disciplinary asset of anthropology. Before the reflective conversations of the 1980s, anthropology had owned culture. In the aftermath of the “crisis of anthropology” came the expansion and augmentation of culture to disciplines, domains, and settings beyond anthropology. Culture is now present in every aspect of social life and it is possible to buy, sell, design, invent, market, perform, and circulate culture(s) individually or collectively in (in)tangible forms. With the expansion, “culture talk”—not always in benign variety—has also become the predominant mode of addressing citizenship, security, and even economy, which were conventionally considered to be distinct from culture. This article elucidates this expansive venture of culture from being a disciplinary analytical artifact to an authoritative arbiter of rights, difference, heritage, and style, and suggests “projects of culture” as an analytical tool to enter into the burdensome territory of culture today, without getting trapped in culture talk.

Keywords: culture industry, culture talk, difference, projects of culture, rights

How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or a race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the “other”)?

—Edward Said, *Orientalism*

The world is our culture.

—ESPRIT advertising slogan

From definitional wars to culture wars

Culture is (and has long been) the *natural* terrain of anthropology as a discipline and profession; and, defining culture has been anthropologists’ professional obsession. What could be

termed a denomination with a short long history (after Hobsbawm’s [1995] felicitous turn of phrase, “the short twentieth century”), culture has gone through numerous elaborations since the seventeenth century. It acquired its modern usages—presenting “a complex argu-

ment about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works of and practices of art and intelligence”—at the turn of twentieth century (Williams 1983: 91).

Throughout this complicated and “active” history (Williams 1983: 90), a plethora of anthropological definitions had emerged and found their way into Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s influential survey, giving rise to “a particular story,” as Barnard and Spencer note (2004: 136), that privileged E. B. Tylor’s renowned definition: “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871: 1).¹ Without much anxiety over the purchase of the assertion, one could state that, with its elusive terminology and tangible faculties, Tylor’s sense of the term has come to underlie public consumption and scientific deployments of culture to this day. This is not to affirm the singularity of Tylor’s definition but point to its allure and malleability because of its resonance with common sense. As will be apparent later in my argument, being commonsensical is what underlies the contemporary currency and significance of culture—hence the import I assign to Tylor’s sense of culture.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1963) book did not bring a closure to the definitional wars of anthropology but anticipated what was to come. Indeed, an expansive debate has been (and still is) underway on culture as an anthropological construct, and its (mis)uses—a debate exposed in *Reinventing anthropology* (Hymes 1969), *Recapturing anthropology* (Fox 1991), and *Rereading cultural anthropology* (Marcus 1992). Summarizing the extent of this debate is a laborious—and probably superfluous—task. Even a selective list of participants in the culture debates is seemingly endless. Nonetheless, three works stand out as crucial: *Anthropology as cultural critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and *Culture and truth* (Rosaldo 1989). The first instigates a passionate debate within the discipline as to the practices

and end(s) of anthropology, the second facilitates the expansion of ethnographic method beyond the discipline and brings in writing as an anthropological practice; and the third opens up the floodgates of contestation over multiculturalisms within and without the discipline. Put differently, these texts have posed “productive discomfort” (Herzfeld 1992: 16) for a raging controversy that has occupied disciplinary and public agendas since the 1980s. The terrain has never been the same since.²

Prior to the deliberative and reflective conversations of the 1980s—the times of fissure, so to speak—anthropology had owned culture. The debate that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) reported was internal to the discipline—or so it was assumed. Misuses and abuses of culture were effortlessly attributed to misunderstandings and lack of attention on the part of novices, nonprofessionals, and policymakers to what anthropology has to propose. In the aftermath of the debate came the expansion and augmentation of culture to disciplines, domains, and settings beyond anthropology, and proliferation and intensification of its deployment as a legitimizing agent and explanatory variable in public and private argumentations, policy documents, and codes of conduct and governmentality. Culture has become an elementary component of lifestyles, art worlds, commodity exchanges, tourist itineraries, and global mega spectacles (as in the opening acts of the Olympic Games). When taken as a product, “the supply of culture” has conspicuously “increased and continues to increase, giving more people more choices” (Gans 1999: 14). It is now possible to buy, sell, exchange, design, invent, concoct, market, display, perform, circulate, move, and migrate culture(s) individually or collectively in tangible or intangible forms, formats, styles, and sorts.

With the coming of the twenty-first century, the uses and deployment of culture have proliferated to such an extent that it has set aside class and society as concepts and models for making sense of the world we live in. “Culture as an expedient [has] gained [unquestionable and uncontested] legitimacy and displaced or absorbed other understandings of culture” (Yu-

dice 2003: 1). Culture has become the *common sense* in ordering, organizing, and managing the world.

In the meantime, anthropology has lost the sole ownership of culture—its foundational idea and basic tool kit. Debating culture has become everyone’s business and concern. Definitional wars that were supposed to be internal to the discipline have given way to culture wars of a public kind—waged intensely in the domains of art, citizenship, security, trade, and economy, some of which were conventionally considered to be distinct from culture. The more expansive culture has become, the more mundane and potent has become what it has come to signify. On the one hand, culture is now dispensable in extant quantities, its usage has become commonplace and unexciting, and it has lost all of its privileged significations, as in “high culture” or “exotic culture,” for instance. On the other hand, it has gained an exacerbated legitimacy to underwrite claims to personhood and collective existence and it has been freely deployed to facilitate spiritual and economic development.

The potency and ordinariness of culture are not invoked here in opposition to each other. Neither are they meant to evoke a normatively negative disposition with regard to the uses of culture today. The potency and ordinariness of culture are highly correlated: the more culture diffuses into everyday discourses, we observe that its potency—the degree of its use and acceptance to define, organize, manage individual and social worlds—sharply amplifies. Simply put, no domain of (personal and collective) life remains outside of or immune to culture. This expansive venture of culture into the ordinary and authoritativeness—its triumph, so to speak—does not necessarily warrant dissatisfaction: this is, after all, what anthropologists have been striving for.

Trouble with culture talk

In her widely received essay “Talking culture,” Verena Stolcke was among the first signaling the potential troubles with which culture, “anthro-

pology’s classical stock-in-trade” (1995: 1), would be confronted. Focusing on anti-immigrant sentiments and rhetoric of the day, she eloquently argued that we were facing an “apparently anachronistic resurgence, in the modern, economically globalized world, of a heightened sense of primordial identity, cultural difference, and exclusiveness” (ibid.: 4–5). Dismissing simplistic assertions that “the new anti-immigrant rhetoric” is a “new form of racism or a racism in disguise,” she asserted that “this culturalist rhetoric is distinct from racism in that it reifies culture conceived as a compact, bounded, localized, and historically rooted set of traditions and values transmitted through the generations by drawing on an ideological repertoire that dates back to the contradictory nineteenth-century conception of the nation-state” (ibid.: 4). According to Stolcke, this new doctrine, which she termed “cultural fundamentalism,” placed the emphasis on “differences of cultural heritage and their incommensurability” (ibid.).

It should be noted that Stolcke was writing at a time when notions of hybridity and cultural difference were in vogue, diaspora and diasporic cultures were becoming fashionable ways of identifying immigrant populations as cultural collectivities, and identity, particularly its cultural variety, was being deployed as an instrument of making politics and claiming rights. Hers was a formidable cautionary tale amid celebratory reverences of culture and its progressive potential to empower the excluded—immigrants and minorities of all sorts—and impart their rights.

Stolcke’s concern, however, is not limited by the exclusionary politics of immigration in Europe but goes beyond to comment on “tasks and tribulations of anthropology” (1995: 12). Although an aspect of the issue is how the popular “culturalist mood in anthropology” ended up “postulating a world of reified cultural differences,” the more pressing point is “the circumstances under which culture ceases to be something we need for being human to become something that impedes us from communicating as human beings” (ibid.). She impels us to turn our attention “away from self-serving rela-

tivisms” to “the relationships both within and between groups that activate differences and shapes possibilities and impossibilities of communicating,” and to “explore ‘the processes of *production* of difference” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 13–14; cited in Stolcke 1995: 13). Thus, under the direction of her careful argumentation and subtle politics, we move away from the narrow confines of cultural difference and once again arrive at the universalistic openings that anthropology promises—a world, “democratic and egalitarian enough,” for people to “develop differences without jeopardizing themselves and solidarity among them” (Stolcke 1995: 12ff).

In the aftermath of the infamous spectacle of destruction of a beloved New York trademark, the World Trade Center, the invasion of Iraq, and the war against terrorism, Mahmood Mamdani (2004) writes against “culture talk.” Mamdani asserts that in the post–Cold War world new culture talk “comes in large geo-packages,” as histories “petrified into a lifeless custom of an antique people [called Muslims] who inhabit antique lands [called the (Middle) East]” (2004: 17ff.). From the time of Stolcke’s essay to Mamdani’s book, and many more cautionary tales against politicized deployments of culture in between, not much appears to have changed in the nature of culture talk, with the exception that in the new version the Muslims of the world have replaced the immigrants of Europe. Culture is no longer what “anthropologists studied—face-to-face, intimate, local, and *lived*” as Mamdani concedes (ibid.: 17). He proclaims that we “need to think of culture in terms that are both historical and nonterritorial” and enjoins against the risk of “harnessing cultural resources for very specific national and imperial political projects” (ibid.: 27).

Arts of contemporary culture

When we talk about culture today, we primarily refer to three domains of action: *culture as right*, *culture as commodity/industry*, and *culture as analytical tool*. We make strenuous attempts to

differentiate these domains as well-defined and discrete, but more often than not, and perhaps inescapably, conflate them. In particular, as anthropologists, we are especially keen on keeping culture as a domain of analysis separate from the polluted arenas of consumption, while providing dedicated support to invocations of culture as a right. Neither of these moves lends itself to easy remedies and neither affords secure panaceas to the contemporary dilemmas of culture talk. Every attempt at discrimination leads to denser complicatedness and conflation.

Culture as right

One could trace the beginnings of the elevation of culture to the level of right to the Wilsonian principles of the right of nations to sovereignty. Here I specifically refer to a history that starts with Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and truth* (1989), and debates on multiculturalism that followed, emerging first in the US, then spreading to Europe and the world at large.

With this gesture toward what I refer to generically as multiculturalism, there began an era of visible presentation of selves as cultural beings and making claims to difference on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, or other distinguishing group characteristics—as in Deaf Nation. Accompanying this gesture came an avalanche of demands and distinctions, formulated as rights of persons to their culture and legitimated and facilitated by the amplified power of an ever-expanding human rights regime. Officially recognized or self-declared minorities and identity groups have advanced claims and gained rights to culture, mostly cast in terms of right to dress codes (allowing for Sikhs’ turban and Muslim women’s hijab in public spaces), food consumption (provision of halal or kosher food in schools and prisons), language use (teaching and broadcasting in mother tongues), cultural property (ownership of bodies of ancestors and sacred artifacts and places), and religious practices (establishing mosques, churches, and other houses of worship in places where they were not customarily present before). In time, gradually but surely, the limits of “tolera-

ble” difference have expanded, if not formally recognized and inscribed in law.³

Talking about culture as right is seriously compromised. We make pleas for our minorities to have cultures but not our own nations and Europe; or, we admit Europe to stand for culture, protect national culture, and promote diversity but stubbornly ignore or do not allow the rights of minorities to culture. Other permutations of distributing culture to identity groups, nations, and transnational entities such as Europe, as in cosmopolitanisms based on diversity, are also possible. Where do we stand vis-à-vis culture when talking about minorities, nations, and Europe? How do we avoid reification of cultures while we formalize them in law or how do we recognize cultures without inscribing them in law? More important, how do we avoid the predicament of cultural rights as it makes itself apparent for us in the matters of cultural practices such as female circumcisions, arranged marriages, and so-called honor killings, setting culture against human rights, gender equality, and individual freedom?

In such circumstances, asserting that culture is a field of public contention and contestation does not amount to saying much. Celebrating diversities, making distinctions between official multiculturalisms and multiculturalisms from below, or having a critical outlook on diversity does not amount to much as a political stance, either. Politics does not allow for shades of gray but demands clear positions, which are at best hard to come by.

It should be noted that culturalization of the civil and human rights agendas, and the institutionalization of culture as one of the most significant hegemonic discourses of contemporary times may not necessarily indicate a return to essentialist collectivism of the ethnic or religious kind. Put differently, the proliferation of culture talk, and the elevation of culture to the status of right, does not signal a deviation from the liberal emphasis on the individual. The individual is still at the center of the new, globalized economic and social order, but she owns, possesses, produces, and consumes culture. She is a *cultured* individual.

Culture as commodity and industry

In one sense of the word, culture has always been a product, made and sold in the form of books, records, movies, and so on. Benjamin ([1935] 2008) and Adorno and Horkheimer ([1944] 2000) provided powerful critiques of the industrialization and mass (re)production of arts and culture. Later in the times of subculture, primarily in the 1970s, elements of culture found their way to markets as fashion. The shift that had come in the late 1980s with the intensification of tourism, the penetration of entertainment into every aspect of social life, the widening role of consumption in economics and growth, and the discovery of design and creativity as instruments of expanding markets was simply unprecedented—and made the words of Adorno, in particular, prophetic. Culture, as a field of consumption and production, is now incorporated and a proper sector of industry.⁴

This newly incorporated culture penetrates the lifeworlds of persons globally, without much regard for borders or boundaries; it affects all segments of society and amplifies sociality. More than anywhere, the new emphasis on culture as industry is felt in the cities. Stripped of their conventional industrial bases, almost all the major cities of the world today risk their economies and livelihood on culture industries. The futures imagined by city planners and municipal leaders in Berlin and Istanbul, for instance, similarly invoke references to the rich cultural heritage of their cities, new entertainment complexes that will be realized, and revitalization schemes that single-handedly rely on projects deemed cultural. Most cities have a fashion week, a design week, one or more film festivals, and an art biennale. Urban transformation is not only conversion of the city into a big shopping district but also into a terrain of culture production, ranging from culture as in handmade designer artifacts to culture as in traditional or local lifestyles served in boutique hotels.

Furthermore, nostalgia for the pasts imagined or invented churns out streams of consumables and fashions with life cycles no longer

than months, if not weeks. Heritage allows for fabrication: Anthropologie store in New York City offers lifestyles, La Fayette in Berlin lures its customers to the new kitchenware in their *Tischkultur* (table culture) department, Vienna invites visitors and natives to enjoy “Vienna Shopping Culture.” More spectacles come in the form of exhibitions that are visited by millions of spectators. The Vatican Collections exhibited in San Francisco, Picasso in Istanbul, and MOMA in Berlin draw record crowds. Love parades, gay parades, carnivals of culture compete in attracting participants.

In short, in the age of culture industries, spaces and kinds of culture expand and more public sociality becomes available for consumption, leaving unanswered (or unanswerable) the question of how sustainable the promise of the culture industry—and a sociality premised on the expeditious and inordinate consumption of culture—is.

Culture as analytical tool

While working in Southall, a multiethnic suburb of London, Gerd Bauman (1996) identifies at least three usages/deployments of culture, a “dominant” discourse deployed by government authorities; a “demotic” discourse deployed by his informants, the youths, and activists of Southall; and his own, the anthropological discourse of culture. Bauman’s attempts to distinguish these three levels of discourse, however, falls short of satisfactorily delivering what he promises, amid tedious and difficult maneuvering to maintain a coherent balance between the desire to present a complicated picture and the desire to keep the classificatory exercise intact. It turns out Bauman’s informants’ fluent contestations of culture are hardly distinguishable from the non-essentialist anthropological approaches to culture. It is Bauman’s own argument that the youths of Southall are competent “in an alternative, non-dominant or demotic, discourse about *culture as process* and *community as a conscious creation*” (1996: 34; emphasis added).

What, then, seems to be the distinction between the conceptions of the anthropologist

and the informants? Where does the anthropologist confidently draw the lines that differentiate? I have argued for some time that in the face of the proliferation of culture in ways that perhaps were unexpected/unimagined decades ago, when culture was incorporated into liberal agendas, economies, and rights claims (as human right), the analytical purchase of culture has diminished—if not completely evaporated into thin air.

As a concluding remark, I offer “projects of culture” (Soysal 1999) as a way to enter into the burdensome territory of culture today. Projects as such are identifiable, tangible, and comparable and can in other words be operationalized—and thus promise analytical purchase. Conceptualizing, and exploiting, culture as project also opens space to account for agency—be it collective, individual, or institutional. One problem is, though, like culture, projects are everywhere. Not only culture but life, too, has become a project and there is no safe territory from its further proliferation. Identifying culture as a project promises analytical purchase at a time when culture has moved beyond the province of anthropology and all too successfully penetrated disciplines of others, the body politics, as well as the minutia of the world in which we live.

The articles in this theme section “Critical perspectives on the persistence of ‘culture talk’ in the making of Europe,” follow the footsteps of the cautionary forewarnings against talking culture or culture talk and expand figuratively on some of the dominant features of contemporary projects of culture.

Institutions: expansion and entrenchment of the definition

In her contribution, Mary Taylor traces the institutional foundations of defining “intangible” heritage as the “mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development” (UNESCO 2006). Even in this very short sentence, the shift in the definition of culture is clearly visible. Culture is not what Mamdani al-

ludes to as “face-to-face” and “lived” but an agent and instrument of development and diversity. Leaving aside the difficulties of defining “intangible,” let alone tangible, heritage, what this statement suggests is that culture is now part and parcel of the economy, and that culture does not designate diversity but is to be safeguarded and managed to create diversity. This is simply to turn culture on its head, and leave behind the “intimate” terrain of the anthropological understandings of culture and enter into the worldly terrain of neoliberal economies of culture, as Taylor succinctly maps out. What is crucial for us here is that the norms defined and made into programmatic statements by UNESCO rapidly diffuse and inform the agendas of other transnational organizations, national governments, and locally operating NGOs, creating a hegemonic discourse of/on culture.

Industries: arts, culture, and governance

Banu Karaca also takes issue with the “career” of culture and interrogates the hegemonic state of culture discourse in approaching the terrain of arts management in Europe. Focusing on two seemingly very different countries, one developed and one developing, she identifies how UNESCO-patented norms penetrate Europe and become European policy. Artists from two ends of the spectrum participate in mega art events that release the “civic and emancipatory” potential of the new European project. Art as culture necessarily overflows the realm of the political and takes its rightful place in the creative industries, expanding cultural policy into the market as a remedy to the troubles of the European welfare state. As Karaca points out, through creativity, public funds get channeled toward the market, and culture becomes a conduit for development. The hegemony of culture does not level out the hierarchies among the parties involved in the European project but the modes of governance it introduces are definitely new, bringing national governments and actors into new alignments vis-à-vis Europe.

Societal futures: cosmopolitanism

One could not talk about culture today without a necessary reference to cosmopolitanism. As Katharina Bodirsky indicates, in the realm of European politics and imagination, culture emerges in two guises, as source for “mere difference” or “disruptive difference,” the first being an anti-essentialist resource for diversity—thus premise of cosmopolitanism, the second being an agent of essentialism—thus anathema to cosmopolitanism. This seemingly contradictory dual task, one enabling and the other impeding, poses serious policy complications when it comes to incorporating immigrant diversities into national frameworks or dealing with “absorption” of candidate countries such as Turkey into the EU. There might be nothing wrong with advocating mere difference but as difference becomes a ground for claiming cultural rights we arrive at a paradox: mere difference easily lends itself to essential difference. Turkey’s “Muslimness” or “honor killings,” for instance, generate an intensified culture talk that traverses democracy, human rights, and the compatibility of Islam with European values, even feeding into the realm of sanctioning economic interventions. The crucial point is that mere difference and essential difference are both legitimated and facilitated by the same transnational discourses on/of culture.

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Notes

1. Cited in Barnard and Spencer (2004: 137).
2. See Barnard and Spencer (2004) for an overview of the prehistory and later enactments of the debate. Borofsky (1994) gathers together major contemporary exponents of this debate in a capacious volume. A special issue of *Social Analysis* (Boddy and Lambek 1997) is devoted to the question of “Culture at the End of the Boasian Century.” Also many a debate has taken place in *Cultural Anthropology*.
3. On rights, see Benhabib (2002), Kymlicka (1996), Soysal Nuhoglu (1994), and Young (1990).
4. Among others, on subculture, see Hebdige (1979), and on culture as commodity and industry see Lash and Lury (2007), Rectanus (2002), and Zukin (1995).

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