The Uses and Misuses of ‘Culture’ –
A Comment

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Introduction

To provide some groundwork for discussion, a few remarks of a general nature concerning our notions of culture are necessary for a number of reasons, not least being the fact that the term ‘culture’ has lately become a contentious one, a concept that, among its other uses, has been wielded to defend reactionary policies of exclusion and to excite xenophobic passions.

As one anthropologist has recently written, ‘the standard anthropological definition of culture as constituting a way of life and a “peoplehood” is now being used by reactionary political forces to justify social prejudice and nativism. Immigrants and their descendants are condemned as “not belonging” by this opportunistic use of the concept of cultures and cultural relativism...’.

Another anthropologist has argued that, in the context of European attitudes toward Third World immigrants, ‘...a perceptible shift in the rhetoric of exclusion can now be detected. From what were once assertions of the differing endowment of human races there has risen since the seventies a rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion that emphasises the distinctiveness of cultural identity, traditions, and heritage among groups ...’.

This, she suggests, is different from racism because, although ‘There may be occasional references to “blood” or “race”, there is more to this culturalist discourse than the idea of insurmountable essential cultural differences or a kind of biological culturalism..., namely, [there is] the assumption that relations between different cultures are by “nature” hostile and mutually destructive because it is in human nature to be ethnocentric; different cultures ought, therefore, to be kept apart for their own good.’ An extreme and extremely well-publicised formulation of this assumption is found in Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations, which argues that, in the foreseeable future, ‘The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.’

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As Edward Said (in a new afterword to his now classic Orientalism) recently asked, 'What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilisation) 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')?'

The Notion of 'Culture'

I would like to look more closely at the notion of 'culture', in order to help us avoid the extremes that Said warns against. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, whereas 'culture', in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals ... a decisive change of use occurred in [Johann Gottfried] Herder ... [who argued that it was necessary] to speak of 'cultures' in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation. It is interesting to note, as Williams does, that Herder's innovative usage was closely tied to his attacks on both 'the assumption of the universal histories that civilization' or 'culture'... was what we would now call a unilinear process', and on 'what he called the European subjugation and domination of the four quarters of the globe...'. Williams goes on to say, 'This sense was widely developed, in the Romantic movement, as an alternative to the orthodox and dominant "civilization." It was first used to emphasize national and traditional cultures, including the new concept of folk-culture.'

This view of culture gave pride of place to diversity but, at the same time, it tended to abstract a population's shared symbolic representations from material social relations and conditions, and helped to make the opposition between culture and material social relations a foundational principle of modern social consciousness.

This foundational principle is in operation in many studies of the relationship between culture and economic behaviour - the unremarkable coupling of these terms suggests the pervasive nature of this principle - but perhaps the best known example lies in the work of the German sociologist Max Weber on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, during the first decades of this century. For better or worse, Weber's book set the terms for subsequent discussion of the issue.

Weber focused on the relationship between attitudes towards work and profit on the one hand and doctrines of religious belief, particularly the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, on the other. He argued that this doctrine induced in believers deep anxiety over their personal salvation and that they came to view worldly success as a sign that God had predestined them for salvation in the afterlife. The Protestant Ethic dealt particularly
with Christianity, but in other studies Weber examined why capitalism had not developed in China, India, within ancient Judaism or in the Muslim world.

In general, his work on this subject has often been criticised as somewhat too idealistic. As regards Islam, for example, Weber noted that early Islamic society had many of the preconditions for capitalist expansion, but he tended to offer what he saw as Islam's 'fatalism' as the decisive force to explain why capitalism remained stillborn. This interpretation has, of course, been challenged and one of the strongest refutations is that of Maxime Rodinson who argued, in *Islam et capitalisme*, that the crucial factors inhibiting capitalist development in the Islamic world had their source in the confrontation in the Middle Ages between Islam and Christianity. Whatever the case may be, the main point I want to make here is that this debate carried forward the German Romantic notions of 'culture', or 'Weltanschauung' (world view), or 'spirit'.

To draw out some of the implications of this view of culture, let me take one of the standard anthropological formulations of the term as defined by Hatch: 'Culture is the way of life of a people. It consists of conventional patterns of thought and behaviour, including values, beliefs, rules of conduct, political organisation, economic activity, and the like, which are passed on from one generation to the next by learning – and not by biological inheritance."

Hatch notes that in this definition certain aspects are usually highlighted:

- 'the patterns which both guide and define thought and behaviour are learned...';
- 'a large component of culture is below the level of conscious awareness' – for example, language, and
- cultural patterns are not simply forms of behaviour but '... structure both thought and perception'.

For a variety of reasons that there is not scope to address here this view, which had the clear merit of providing us with notions that did not lead inevitably to determining and ranking superior and inferior but encouraged us to look at societies and social groups on their own terms, led to the view that cultures were self-contained, relatively impermeable, and composed of comparatively stable entities like rules, values, and beliefs that persisted from one generation to another. This has been called, aptly, the 'billiard-ball' theory of culture. However, among the many issues this view had difficulty treating was the question of cultural change: if culture is largely unconscious, transmitted from generation to generation, and cultures are incompatible and incommensurable, how then would cultures ever change?
Today this view may seem out of date to many of us, and no longer applicable to a world of significant population movements, growing global integration, glaring distinctions within societies, and where many people speak not only their native language but other dialects and languages and where 'by some calculations, more than 99 per cent of the world's peoples live in states containing more than one ethnic group'. For these reasons among others, the billiard-ball view is no longer intellectually defensible, but this has not stopped its being used effectively to advance tactical political goals.

As a remedy for some of the paramount deficiencies of the billiard-ball view, a different vision has gained currency, a vision that sees cultures as overlapping (people of one culture find themselves situated in another), interacting (globalisation leads to growing influence and interchange across geographical boundaries), and internally negotiated (meanings and practices are not given once and for all, but are a product of the interplay of the various forces and constituencies both within and outside the unit). While undeniably an improvement on the previous formulation and constituting a more faithful representation of the world we live in, this more recent formulation leaves aside or does not sufficiently emphasise at least two crucial aspects: first, that the construction of the notion of 'culture' and of a particular culture as having certain characteristics is just that - a construction from a particular perspective. Secondly, as a situated construction, the notion becomes self-reflexive - it opens to question both the situation of the user and the relationship between this situation and the programmatic implications of the notion.

If we place a renewed emphasis on cultures as constructed or imagined entities, and insist on interpreting these reflexively, we might then see a culture (or a tradition) as constructed from the diverse actions and dispositions of individuals within social groups who inevitably have different perspectives, different psychological and physiological profiles, different points of view ... [a 'culture' is] a more or less coherent construction of these historically and geographically situated differences, a simplifying construction of course, but it too situated historically and geographically. To move in this direction helps us see competition between meanings as open-ended, reminding us of the unpredictability of the future and of the fact that any construction is inherently 'unstable, vulnerable to being called into question by other constructions, ... [and] its domination at any given moment and in any given place is not a forecast of its future domination.' Also, viewing these terms as situationally constructed and self-reflexive pushes us to question not only particular boundaries and the processes behind their construction but, at the same time, the 'we' that works to construct them.
I hope that highlighting these principles helps draw attention to the dangers entailed by certain kinds of usage of the term 'culture' and also goes some way toward enabling us to avoid them. Let me list these principles here in summary form:

- 'cultures' overlap and interact,
- their meanings are negotiated,
- these meanings and the very notion of 'culture' that these meanings presuppose are 'situated' or elaborated from particular perspectives, in particular situations, implying particular programmes, and
- use of these terms should encourage self-reflexivity – any particular interpretation calls for questioning the stance of the interpreter and the kinds of boundaries the interpretation constructs.

The effect of keeping these principles in mind when we deal with the notion of culture is not to provide a definition of culture but rather to encourage use of the concept in certain ways rather than in others. By holding these principles before us it also becomes more feasible, I believe, to approach complex questions like those of cultural change and the relationship between culture and economic behaviour with a recognition of the unpredictability of the phenomena we are addressing.

Globalisation, Culture and Management Systems

I would now like to turn to the paper by Professor Riadh Zghal, which examines the extent to which globalising trends impose constraints on one particular aspect of behaviour, human interaction within economic firms. She sees two major views: one, formulated by Mueller and others, which rejects the influence of local societal factors and argues that convergence is bound to occur; and a second which has many variants and sees these factors as having an important and sometimes positive influence on the management of firms. Zghal examines how these hypotheses have been formulated, what their differing relevance for developed and for developing countries might be, and then looks more closely at the case of Tunisia.

The questions with which I am most concerned in her paper are: what kinds of notions of culture do we find in it and what are the implications of these notions. I think there are three basic views presented – culture seen as composed of traits as composed of complexes, or as a guide. I think each view has some strengths and weaknesses, and each has certain practical implications and promotes certain policy initiatives.

By the view of cultures as traits, I mean the view that one can isolate a series of rather simple factors that:
can be defined cross-culturally,
can be described as either present or absent in a given society,
are relatively independent of one another, and
can be recombined in almost any conceivable way.

Mueller's study reflects this kind of approach: management style can be broken down into components. Certain combinations of these components will lead to more efficient outcomes than others, and, under the pressures of global competition, these components will in fact recombine in the most efficient way, with all other combinations necessarily converging to it. I agree with Zghal's point here that this view may seem plausible when the phenomena are viewed from afar but that the similarity of traits quickly disappears when scrutinised more closely.

The view of culture as composed of complexes may be taken as a more sophisticated version of the trait view: here, traits come in bundles, each bundle coheres as a somewhat self-contained system. Unlike the trait view, these complexes are not strictly similar to one another across societies – it would not be easy to describe them as either present or absent since they may take on slightly or dramatically different forms from society to society. The studies on Western management practice that Prof. Zghal refers to seem to share this view: those she cites on Africa appear to convey elements of both the view of culture as traits and culture as complexes.

I think there are serious problems with these two views. They are rather mechanistic and perhaps too congruent with an 'engineering' approach to culture: one may pick and choose the traits that are desired and then by changing their utility functions (by exacting penalties through coercion or offering benefits to encourage adherence) produce a new constellation of traits. In the view of culture as complexes, such engineering becomes, of course, more difficult, but the principle remains the same, only perhaps the investments made and penalties applied would need to be greater.

The third view – culture as guide – appears to be the one Zghal supports. It is formulated in her introduction to the section on Tunisia: 'to speak of culture as a determining factor in human behaviour is to speak of an internal logic which members of a particular society share and which appears as customs – an unspoken agreement that everyone respects as if it were the pledge which determines social membership."

While I have some reservations regarding this third type – for example, it does not address some of the principles I mentioned earlier – I think it is important to note that this view presents values as a flexible system with many points of internal tension, meaning a dynamic character much less in evidence with the other approaches. The Essautian values is also assigned a potentially creative function in the subsequent elaboration of the kinds of
management practices that would best satisfy the particular needs of an enterprise, a sector and a community.

Zghal's approach also has the advantage of not positing its own omniscience as the other views seem to do. It recognises, as Zghal says at the very end of her paper and consonant with what I have stressed above, the importance of allowing space for creativity in the conflict of interests, something that can only be achieved by maintaining a significant degree of diversity.

While I was asked to comment directly only on Professor Zghal's paper, it is worth emphasising that each of the three preceding papers raises in different ways, questions about the relationship between culture and economic activity: Professor Zghal's paper asks whether, in a 'globalising' context, the local character of behaviour within institutions can be maintained and whether losing this character would be a good thing; and Professor Mahjoub's paper asks, in the light of the economic and social pressures that the partnership accords between Tunisia and Europe are likely to produce, whether Tunisia has the political and cultural resources to respond positively. Each paper presents us with a more or less explicit vision of the relationship between culture and economic activity and each vision has certain policy implications that should not be overlooked.

These three papers, together with my comments, raise a series of questions that I hope we will be able to address in future discussion, among them being: what are the various views of culture that we see articulated around us, what are some of the benefits and disadvantages of these views, what are the programmes and policies that these views imply? As we proceed with this discussion, we would no doubt do well to advance our views tentatively, reflecting our deep-seated knowledge that an 'engineering' approach to human society is of very limited relevance, and that the future will no doubt sharply surprise us once again, as it has so often in the past.

NOTES

3. Ibid. p.5
7. For an anthropological example of this argument see Turner, Terence (1995), Comment in Current Anthropology, 36/1 pp.16-18.
10. Ibid.
15. Ibid, p.78.