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Cultural twists and turns

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Culture imperious

While the recent cultural turn has been the occasion for the circulation of a great deal of theory in human geography, it has not yet been accompanied by a great deal of theorizing as such. Perusing recent work in human geography, there appears to be a pretty much taken-for-granted notion that ‘culture’ is to do with meaning, values, and signification. ‘Culture’ seems to function as a sort of “compacted doctrine” (Empson 1951, p. 39), as a word which secretes a whole host of senses every time it is reiterated but is hardly ever in need of detailed conceptual clarification. Accordingly, human geographers have become proudly and unapologetically catholic in their theoretical treatments of ‘culture’. Where there has been explicit theoretical reflection on the status of ‘culture’, it has been characterized by working-up categorical conceptions of notions of ‘the cultural’, ‘the economic’, ‘the material’, and so on (e.g. Crang 1997; Sayer 1997; Jackson Forthcoming). This mode of categorical conceptualization tends to reify particular elements of institutionally embedded understandings of ‘culture’ (e.g. culture as non-instrumental value, or culture as meaning and signification) into generic and therefore highly mobile understandings.

One of the reasons why ‘culture’ has been subjected to so little theoretical scrutiny in human geography is because of the power of this word to mean so much but to say so little: “You can’t go wrong when you call something cultural, for it is the one term that, without necessarily specifying anything, carries the full weight of all possible forms of specificity” (Gallagher 1995, p. 309). This distinctive lack of conceptual specificity about the specificity designated by ‘culture’ also helps to account for the easy coupling of ‘the cultural’ with ‘the geographical’, in which both come to refer to a general sensitivity to issues of context, difference, the local. A culturally inflected geography is re-tooled as the empirical supplement to theoretical

speculation carried on elsewhere, as both ‘the cultural’ and ‘the geographical’ surreptitiously take on self-evident explanatory value as names for all that is essentially residual to more general patterns and processes.

Of course, recent interest in ‘culture’ in geography has not just been about re-evaluating difference, contingency, meaning, and specificity. It has also been about power. The command metaphors of work touched by the cultural turn are domination and subversion, oppression and resistance, inclusion and exclusion. The notion of ‘cultural politics’ has been particularly important in the development of both a “new” cultural geography and in the extension of cultural analysis beyond the confines of a specific sub-discipline. ‘Cultural politics’ refers to the idea that power relations are represented and symbolized in myriad cultural practices. Peter Jackson describes cultural politics, in a very rare explicit statement of definition, as “the domain in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested” (1991, p. 200). This formulation tacitly relies on an idea of ‘culture’ as both a distinct realm of meaning and signification which is simultaneously central to the reproduction of all other social processes. The idea that ‘culture’ is where social relations and power are both symbolized and resisted can only retain any coherence by implicitly positing an expressive relation between culture and the social whole. The problem with this sort of notion of cultural politics, especially when it appears so often without any further detailed exposition, is that it tends to attribute a high degree of unity and intentionality to the exercise of power in order to be able to represent the active work of everyday meaning-making as so many acts of popular resistance. The political imaginary of the ‘cultural politics’ approach, whether understood as the symbolization of and resistance to power in ‘culture’, or as the discursive re-articulation of political subjectivities, is articulated around a split

between overarching structures of dominance and contingent acts of creativity and/or resistance. Power is read as simultaneously centered, all-encompassing, and yet always liable to transformation and usurpation.

The cultural politics approach has thus contributed to a peculiar paradox in the project of critical human geography, derived from the combination of totalizing yet ill-defined conceptualization of 'culture' with the notion that 'culture' is saturated with political significance. On the one hand, this allows all sorts of phenomena to be opened up to analysis as sites where power-relations are reproduced and resisted. The simple act of analyzing cultural practices takes on the appearance of having considerable political value. Doing one's job suddenly becomes an inherently political act (see Robbins 1997). On the other hand, this generates the constant worry that there must be more to politics than simply re-reading and re-writing cultural practices in the classroom or journal article. And so willful optimism alternates with agonizing doubt about political (ir)relevance.

This oscillation is in turn related to a more fundamental tension between two emphases in contemporary conceptualizations of 'culture'. 'Culture' is recognized as being thoroughly implicated in the reproduction of power-relations, yet at the same time it also continues to be affirmed as a realm of creativity, critical energy, even political resistance, and the terms of cultural analysis and aesthetic understanding are still presented as harboring the potential for critique. Elaborate conceptual efforts to simultaneously reconcile and maintain this separation between a social and historical understanding of the imbrication of 'culture' in technologies of power on the one hand and, on the other, an understanding that reserves for 'culture' a degree of autonomy which accounts for its continued critical potential, only indicate the extent to which contemporary cultural theory often remains trapped within the frame of modern

understandings of 'culture'. The untainted kernel of non-instrumentality ascribed to 'culture' continues to serve as the principle of the instrumental potential of 'culture' for left-politics, not in terms of moral uplift or civilizing mission, but rather in terms of counter-hegemonic radical democracy and the cultural politics of resistance.

What such notions share with the older understandings of 'culture' which they depart from and repeat is a continued persistence in figuring the relationship between 'culture' and 'power' through the prism of 'representation'. It is this continued investment in standard ideas of the redemptive value of 'culture' as an instrument for the transformation of consciousness, now re-written as 'politics', that leads Lawrence Grossberg (1993, p. 4) to propose "that we change our conception of culture from the field in which power is symbolized to a set of practices which apply power". This latter formulation implies a much less expansive notion of 'culture', and a greater degree of precision regarding the forms of power that are exercised through the array of practices we have come to recognize all too naturally as 'cultural'. This sense of 'culture' as practices which apply, rather than represent, power is founded on a commitment to theorize 'culture' in light of an acknowledgment of the institutional formation of its variable conceptualization and deployment (cf. Mitchell 1995). It relies upon a broader recognition of the close, constitutive connections between modern conceptualizations of culture, now cut loose from particular disciplines and circulating in an ever wider field of social sciences and humanities, and modern conceptualizations of the state (see Lloyd and Thomas 1998). 'Culture', as a variety of technologies of the self, is historically constructed in intimate relationship with the modern problematic of governing populations in the interests of state, political order, and democracy. Acknowledging this constitutive relationship, Tony Bennett therefore argues for a re-definition of 'culture' understood as "a historically specific set of

institutionally embedded relations of government in which the forms of thought and conduct of extended populations are targeted for transformation - in part via the extension through the social body of the forms, techniques, and regimens of aesthetic and intellectual culture” (1992, p. 26). This suggests that, rather than trying to refine novel conceptualizations of ‘culture’ as an autonomous object of analysis, the cultural turn might be more usefully re-formulated as a project which, firstly, traces the particular formations of ‘the cultural’ in different institutional situations and, secondly, examines how these formations of ‘culture’ are associated with strategies aimed at the extension of distinctive forms of social regulation into the fabric of modern social life (Hunter 1988). And it should be noted that methodologies of cultural interpretation are neither adequate nor necessarily primary in this sort of analysis.

Culture Ltd.

Rethinking ‘culture’ as so many practices which strategically apply precise forms of power related to the formation of subjective dispositions, enables a series of questions to be raised regarding the value of cultural methodologies in a discipline like geography. Modern academic geography has been formed in articulation with particular social practices, and has a distinctive relationship with the state, which accounts for the characteristic pedagogies, research objects, foundational concepts, and modes of transmission, which in turn distinguish it from the fields where modern concepts of ‘culture’ have been worked up and most extensively deployed. While the autonomy and enclosure of ‘culture’ has been subjected to a host of de-centering efforts in anthropology, sociology, the literary humanities, and cultural studies, geographers have only recently worked to invest culture with ever more positive

substance in order that it may function as new organizing category for a broad diversity of geographical research. The difference between the institutional genealogies of disciplines helps to account for the critical work that some rather old fashioned humanistic notions of ‘culture’ currently perform in geography. ‘Culture’, as a short-hand designating the value accorded to difference, meaning, and particularity, has been one means of unsettling notions of objectivity embedded in geography’s understandings of, for example, ‘fieldwork’ or ‘quantitative methodology’. But there is a danger of installing an equally problematic set of conceptualizations and methodologies in their place. The repertoire of cultural methodologies now circulating in human geography are historically implicated in distinctive practices for the administration and transformation of human subjectivities. These ‘new’ cultural methodologies are associated with their own regimes of truth, knowledge, and power. The more an undifferentiated *pot pourri* of methods and sensibilities (‘reading’, ‘interpretation’, ‘poetics’, ‘reflexivity’) are recommended as the primary route to cultivating a “critical” perspective, the more one begins to suspect that there is a really quite traditional scene of aesthetic subject-formation implied by the disciplinary embrace of essentially humanistic vocabularies of ‘culture’ and ‘criticism’. This supports an abstract construction of education as a practice for transforming subjective consciousness in the interests of liberty, emancipation, or enlightenment, which in turn transforms ‘politics’ into an act of ethical will and aesthetic discrimination helped along by a parade of exemplary teacher-writers.

As already suggested, cultural analysis in human geography and elsewhere is haunted by doubts about political relevance. But perhaps it is not conceptualizations of ‘culture’ that are really the problem: maybe it is our conceptualizations of ‘power’ and ‘politics’. The anxieties characteristic of so many commentaries on the cultural

turn (including this one) might be best read as an index of the pressing need to question the normalizing imperative to be 'political' as it functions in debates in human geography. "Critical human geography" shares with the expansive field of cultural studies from which it draws much of its energy, as well older traditions of "radical geography" which it sweeps up in its wake, a hope and desire that it might somehow succeed in being more than 'merely' academic. This is the "fantasmatic scenario" that secures our characteristic modes of evaluation, self-representation, and communication (see Rose 1987, p. 14). Yet one of the things that has been lost in the conceptual proliferation of 'power' associated with the expansion of totalizing notions of 'the cultural' is a sense of the historical constitution and institutionalization of 'the political' as a particular set of practices and activities for effective decision-making. Culturally tinged human geography has recently become consumed by abstract notions of resistance and opposition, in which a vocabulary of political evaluation derived from a displaced populist aesthetics substitutes for any significant analysis of social relations or institutions. This development might be usefully viewed in light of a mutation in the field through which our most favored notions of 'culture' have been worked-up. The historical role of the humanistic disciplines of 'culture' in relation to the modern state is now in crisis, as 'culture' no longer can nor is asked to perform its traditional role of legitimation and citizen-formation for the nation-state (see Readings 1996). With the weakening of the historical link between 'culture' and state, 'culture' is cut loose from particular disciplinary sites. And so 'culture' becomes widely available as an object of study and as a mode of analysis just at the moment when it loses its previously clear-cut political content. The drift of 'culture' across academic disciplines is, therefore, just one local example of the contemporary phase of the "the multiplication of culture's utility" (Bennett 1995), whereby everything from poverty to

the management of firms is being reconfigured as ‘cultural’ as part of efforts to manage social life and render individuals and groups self-regulating in accordance with the norms of neo-liberal economics and social conservatism. Seen in this light, the wisdom of continuing to construct ‘culture’ as a realm of opposition and resistance appears to be increasingly anachronistic.

Rather than constructing ‘culture’ as a model of politics by other means, the analysis of ‘culture’ might be better pursued by foregrounding the social structuration and the differential distribution of capacities to produce meanings. Contrary to the founding assumption of standard approaches to cultural politics, such an approach would not presume that each and every detail of everyday life is infused with political meaning. It would help re-focus attention on concrete issues of public access, institutional accountability, modes of participation, and political representation. An analysis of the politics of culture in this sense would examine the institutional frameworks and social relations which shape the terrain for effective decision-making and limit the scope for action in particular fields of ‘culture’. A more precise, less totalizing sense of culture should therefore open room for more mundane estimations of the political purchase of academic work, as well as opening up other sorts of questions. In place of the dissolution of politics into culture, and the reframing of both as hopelessly general and finally unspecifiable categories, it might still be possible to imagine interesting, important, serious questions which are not immediately swamped by over-extended understandings of ‘politics’ and ‘power’.

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