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Reflections on Culture, Heritage and Preservation

Eunice Ribeiro Durham

Since culture is the subject of this seminar¹ I would like to begin with a discussion of the commonsense notion of culture. As CONDEPHAAT is charged with formulating cultural policy, it is important to understand commonsense meanings of the term in order to be better able to reach the most diverse public possible. This is relatively easy to do because commonsense notions of culture are part of our own understandings of the concept. Could one of you please give me a commonsense definition of culture?

(From the audience): "For the majority of people culture is somehow intangible and far above ordinary things. It includes painting, music, theatre, cinema."

This is a good definition and contains important points for us to analyze. First of all, it reveals that culture has to do with the elite. It is sophisticated and therefore requires sophistication to be understood. But this elitist conception of culture contains two dimensions: that of the nature of cultural goods themselves, somehow spiritual and elevated; and that of the special ability that only a few people have to be able to appreciate them. "To be cultured", according to commonsense views, means having a certain amount of knowledge and information that aren't necessary for day to day life and also having a special ability to appreciate culture and to make use of it. In addition, culture so defined tends to be highly valued, not only by intellectuals but people in general, who show respect and admiration for people considered cultured, even if this attitude may contain some degree of ambiguity. Those who research in working class areas know about this. The fact that

¹ Lecture followed by a debate held in July 1983 during the seminar *Culture, heritage and preservation*, organized by technical staff from CONDEPHAAT (Historic, Artistic and Tourist Heritage Defence Council) of São Paulo State. The sound recording was transcribed by Mada Penteadó, revised by the author and published in Arantes, 1984.

most people see researchers as highly educated and cultured means that they are treated with a certain respect but also possibly with a degree of suspicion or even hostility as if they were unable to understand the problems of ordinary people. Even so, the idea that the social world is split between “those who know” and “those who don’t know”, those who “are cultured” and “those who are not” is an idea shared by all.

(From the audience) – “Do you mean to say that the Secretariat for Culture operates on the basis of this meaning of culture?”

I believe so. Apart from anything else, the Secretariat is composed of people who “are cultured”, who tend to think that they alone are able to define what culture is. In the case of CONDEPHAT, this means deciding what should be included as a part of cultural heritage and what should not.

Coming back to the basic understandings of the concept of culture, we can conclude that it covers diverse aspects. In the first place, the idea that culture is valued and should be preserved establishes a bridge between the interests of CONDEPHAT and those of the people as a whole who give legitimacy to preservationist policies. Secondly, it is important to recognize the multiple referents of the concept of culture, including objects, knowledge and abilities. This second aspect is important because it formed the basis for the way anthropology came to reformulate the term, creating an entirely new concept. The fundamental shift consisted of “de-elitizing” the notion of culture, removing the idea that culture consists of special and superior knowledge produced by certain people of a particular social class. All of the commonsense meanings of culture were maintained but they were extended to include the entirety of human production and all social behavior.

The commonsense notion of culture recognizes that certain goods are considered superior and of great symbolic complexity. The anthropological concept of culture starts from the premise that such qualities impregnate all human behavior: in the ceremonial of official receptions as much as in the relations between workers and their bosses; in the painting of a picture as much as the cooking of a cake; in the understanding of a book on geography as much as the ability to move around a city.

By classifying all behavior as culture, anthropology presupposes a distinction between nature and culture. The basic idea of the anthropological

concept of culture is that human beings as very special animals, whose specificity lies in the fact that most of their behavior is not genetically transmitted. Thus, collective social action is organized through symbolic systems. In this way specific forms of adaptation come into being, producing knowledge and regular patterns of behavior that are learned, transmitted and also transformed from generation to generation.

All human behavior is in this sense “artificial” and not “natural”. Human beings are animals who build artificial environments through the development of symbolic systems, in which they live. Culture, then, is the creation, transmission, reformulation and transformation of these artificial environments.

There is something very democratic about the anthropological notion of culture, based as it is on the recognition of the immense creativity and the abilities of all human beings. This can be seen clearly through a consideration of language. Languages are an extremely rich and complex cultural creation. Almost all humans learn to speak and are, therefore, “cultured”. Anyone who is able to learn something as complex as language is fully able to manipulate symbolic systems and thus participate in any cultural activity.

Recognizing the importance of the symbolic dimension of human behavior allows us to reposition certain aspects that we found in the commonsense notion of culture. One of them points to the *products* of human activity, in particular the production of material goods: paintings; monuments; objects. But one must also take into account specifically symbolic production that involves the manipulation of language: literary works; scientific theories; religious systems; judicial codes. The notion of *symbolic production* is fundamental because it allows us to focus on the central problem of the concept of culture: the question of meaning.

Seen from the perspective of meaning, the distinction between material and symbolic production disappears. It is easy to see how material goods carry symbolic meanings and that it is the wealth or importance of these symbolic meanings that characterize those goods defined as culture under the commonsense definition of the term. A work of art, and by extension any material product, is simultaneously the matter out of which it is made and the meaning it crystallizes and expresses.

But there is another aspect of the concept of culture which I could like to discuss. The commonsense definition of culture covers not only goods, but

also the human ability to make them and to enjoy them. When we say that someone is cultured, we mean to say that he or she is well informed and that he or she is able to enjoy cultural goods.

A cultured person is someone who goes to a concert and feels pleasure when he or she hears a symphony. So the concept of culture is not passive. It includes not only cultural goods but also the actions surrounding them. Since its inception, Anthropology has been concerned with the dynamic aspect of culture through the study of *custom*.

The concept of custom is slightly different from the concept of a symbolic good, because we are not talking about the product of human action, but the very nature of such action; a standardized action that is organized through rules which are symbolically coded and thus, as is the case of cultural goods, bearers of meaning.

This is the dimension of culture, which, I would argue, is fundamental. It implies a definition that is based on the regularity and meaning of behavior that have resulted from the manipulation of symbolic systems.

If we think of culture in this way it is possible to compare it to the notion of work in Marxian theory. When Marx refers to work he is thinking of material production. But by analogy we can think of symbolic production. One important aspect of work is its cumulative nature: through work, men not only establish a relationship with nature, extracting from her useful goods that may be immediately consumed, but they also produce tools, knowledge and techniques (acquired bodily abilities) that constitute the means of production. Culture is like this. Once it has been created it establishes the basis for future creativity. But there is another important factor in the notion of work and, particularly that of means of production, namely that any good contains dead work that may be brought to life by further work. For example, a pen is the product of work. If it is kept in a drawer this work is effectively dead. But if the pen is then used to write an article through this additional work it becomes an instrument of production.

We can think of culture and symbolic production in a similar way. Symbolic products also possess a certain concreteness. But if they are not used, the work that brought them into being is in a sense dead. This is the case of an article that was never published nor read by anyone. But once published, read, discussed and contested through additional “cultural work”, it becomes an integral part of culture. The basic idea I am trying to impart

is that culture is not so much goods themselves, but their utilization. We should think of culture as a process through which human beings are obliged constantly to produce and utilize cultural goods in order to be able to act in society. This is the only way that collective life can be organized.

Mendel's theory of heredity is a good example of what I am trying to say. As we all know, Mendel's theory was ignored for a long time. It was in a way dead. It existed. It had been written. But in effect it was dead because no one knew about it or used it. When it was rediscovered and people began to undertake genetic experiments and to interpret the world in terms of the theory, it became alive as a part of culture, a tool for men to act on the world and for them to relate to one another. It may even be understood as a consumer good since I am sure that certain people derive pleasure from understanding Mendel's theory even if they do not utilize it in practical terms.

This notion of culture as something that is constantly recreated and re-utilized, a basic instrument for all human action provides us with a powerful analytical perspective just so long as it is not employed in an exaggeratedly utilitarian mode.

Culture satisfies more than material necessities. Indeed, much of what we call culture has no practical utility whatever. In most societies, people spend an inordinate amount of time producing things that are economically useless but which are esthetically satisfying and have the effect of establishing social relations. Take body painting for example. Among many indigenous peoples of Brazil a great amount of time is dedicated to painting elaborate designs on faces and bodies. But the adornment survives only two baths. There is clearly no practical utility involved. It is however a source of esthetic pleasure and a way of bringing about social relations. People admire one another, sometimes competitively. Painting a son or husband can show affection. A particular pattern might indicate the member of a kin group or a position in the social hierarchy. Painting bodies may also have important ritual significance. All cultures are full to the brim with apparently useless and frivolous activities. Look at our own habit of baking elaborate cakes, especially for birthdays and weddings. An enormous amount of work is invested in producing cakes that will immediately be consumed. Yet it is such activities that are the pleasure of living, exactly because they celebrate social relations. It is true that everyone worries a lot about making sure they have the basic necessities. Yet whenever possible even these are

subject to “superfluous” elaboration.

An example of this is provided by the way the Trobriand islanders studied by Malinowski deal with their yams at harvest time. You might imagine that once the harvest is over the yams are simply stored for future consumption. But that is not what happens. Once they have been harvested, the yams are carefully cleaned to the extent that even the filaments are shaved off. Then they are arranged in huge pyramids with the largest and most beautiful yams on the outside so they can be easily admired. A shelter is then constructed to protect them. After a few days and much admiration, the pyramid is broken down and most of the yams are transported with much pomp and ceremony to the house of the farmer’s sister’s husband where the pyramid is rebuilt to receive more admiring visitors. Finally the yams are stocked in large granaries, which surround the central patio of the village. They are elaborately constructed out of trellised wood with the largest and most beautiful yams on the outside. Thus, food is produced not only to satisfy hunger but also to mark out social relations and to provide esthetic pleasure.

We are not so different. In our own society the exhibition of large quantities of highly elaborate foods constitutes the very soul of our celebrations. So it is clear that we cannot understand culture in utilitarian terms. Even the most useful of material goods are immersed in a dense web of social relations, esthetic elaborations and ritual forms from which so much satisfaction is derived.

Returning to the notion of culture as signifying action that relies on the manipulation of symbolic tools, we can now try to apply it to the notion of cultural heritage. To do this, we must define heritage in terms of the meaning that it has for the population at large, on the understanding that the meaning of a cultural good depends on the way in which it is used in society. We should understand cultural heritage as a series of crystallizations of “dead workers”, that has become important again with an investment of “cultural work”, through which the good in question acquires new uses and new meanings. Indeed, one of the characteristics of this process of cultural construction lies in the fact that the greater the symbolic charge conferred on the past of a cultural good, the greater the possibility of its future use. So we can agree that there are certain special goods that deserve a special effort to preserve them for future generations because of the meanings they have acquired.

While it is relatively easy to discuss all this in general terms, the problem

becomes more complex when we turn to the constitution of heritage in our own society. Here we must return to the discussion at the beginning of this talk, namely the elitist nature of the concept of cultural heritage under the commonsense definition of culture. When working with primitive societies this problem ceases to exist since they tend to be relatively homogeneous and egalitarian—all members of the society know the same things, use the same techniques and have equal access to the material and spiritual resources of the culture, which is thus a collective heritage available to all. In a differentiated society such as our own, the question must be asked in a different way. The culture, which is produced by society as a whole, is still a collective heritage. Yet distinct groups and social classes do not have the same access to this heritage, just as these diverse segments of society contribute in their own specific way to this heritage. To a certain extent this is inevitable since the social division of labor has led to such a wealth and complexity of cultural production that no one individual is able to cover it alone. In a differentiated society, different forms of work, regional and ethnic differences, together with various historical traditions contribute to an increase in heterogeneity. In the very process of nation building, groups and classes appropriate specific cultural elements that are frequently used to differentiate one group or class from another. Such cultural differences are often highly valued by the groups concerned and lead to the development of specific moral and esthetic patterns.

It would however be disingenuous to suggest that these phenomena are fully reciprocal. The fact that social relations are permeated by power means that certain groups manage to impose their tastes, deciding what is good for the others or, inversely, restricting the access of dominated groups to highly prized cultural goods. In effect, the dominant classes direct material and cultural production, which they then have the privilege of appropriating for themselves.

This means that dominant groups in society have access to cultural goods that are different, but also often better and more elaborate than those available to the others. A certain amount of leisure and material resources are needed to be able to acquire and use a sophisticated cultural good, above all those that are considered superior because of the quality and quantity of work that has been invested in their production. The building of a house requiring specialized labor, architects, engineers and a wide range of material

resources, is quite different from building a house in a *favela*. Great creativity can go into building a house in a *favela* but the material resources will be limited. A considerable amount of creativity and work is required to produce a technically adequate solution for a dwelling. This is true for cultural goods as a whole. Owning and appreciating a cultural good requires a certain amount of training, the right education, a certain amount of leisure time and the necessary material resources. This is why class differences are not qualitatively equivalent. The elitist component of the commonsense definition of culture contains a grain of truth in the sense that it recognizes that dominant classes have the privilege to possess the resources, the time and the knowledge necessary to appropriate and appreciate the most elaborate cultural goods.

Members of the working class lacks these resources. Often they are obliged to produce their own cultural goods with much difficulty and shortage of resources. As this kind of cultural production is not stored, it can rapidly be lost. Thus, working class memory tends to be short because it depends entirely on word of mouth. The history of Brazilian trades unions is a case in point. The vast majority of Brazilian workers have not the slightest idea of trade union history. Those who do are the intellectuals in the universities who have the time, resources and training necessary for safeguarding it. So what are workers' chances of recovering the memory of their struggles and traditions? This will depend on the word of mouth within the unions themselves. They lack the time and training to study trade union history. That is why they tend to have access only to recent data. This is not the case of the dominant classes. We work with much greater historical depth. We are privileged classes because we are able to produce and utilize cultural goods of this nature.

Looking at things from this point of view enables us to envisage with greater clarity the sort of policy on cultural heritage that might be developed in a society that aspires to democracy. It is based on the notion that cultural heritage which in effect is produced collectively should be appropriated collectively as well. This means that ways must be found to make sure that members of all social classes gain access to those elements of cultural heritage that are symbolically charged and yet which have until recently been monopolized by the dominant sectors of society. When I think of cultural policy I don't simply in terms of folklore and the populist celebration of popular

culture. Surely we must give value to popular culture, but we must also ensure that so-called high culture ceases to be the monopoly and privilege of any one class. A collective heritage must be available to all. Bricklayers, tile layers, plumbers, etc produce great works of architecture. Yet the dominant classes use these buildings investing them with symbolic importance. A more democratic conception of cultural and historical heritage would diminish this kind of class privilege.

Heritage policy in Brazil has two important aspects. In the first place, the history that is preserved tends to be the history of the dominant classes. The monuments that are preserved are the ones associated with the historical and cultural achievements of these classes. The history of the dominated is rarely preserved. Looking again at working class movements, it is easy to see that the long history of past political action is not marked by physical objects (monuments, museums, exhibitions, commemorations) that would serve to keep them alive in people's minds.

This is not the result of purposeful mystification. Many of these events and cultural achievements are not even perceived by the members of the dominant classes who control heritage policy and who are led, often unconsciously, to think only of their own history and those symbolic goods closest to their own experience. To a certain extent these attitude can be justified by the fact that such cultural artifacts are effectively more elaborate, more "monumental" than those produced by subaltern segments of society. Yet it is true that this process leads to the loss of innumerable cultural goods whose importance has not been perceived by the elites. Thus, significant and important historical events that are important for understanding society as a whole are forgotten.

Although my presentation of these cultural phenomena is somewhat simplified and schematic, my talk aims to draw attention to a few issues that seem relevant to those who are interested in formulating new policy for the preservation of our historical and cultural heritage. In the first place, I argue that we should to give importance to the use of this heritage in such a way as to ensure that the "dead work" that has been invested in it can be transformed into new symbolic investments. Secondly, we should democratize collective cultural heritage in two ways: by eliminating the material and educational barriers that exclude the vast majority of the population from gaining access to cultural goods that tend to be monopolized by the dominant

segments of society; and by preserving and disseminating the cultural work of the working class, making sure that members of this class have access to the tools required for this work, for communicating it to society as a whole and for transmitting it to future generations.

These are the ideas I wish to put forward.

Excerpts from the debate

A question from the public: You observed that the cultural goods of the dominant classes are more elaborate and require more work to produce. From the point of view of anthropology does this mean that they are really better? In addition, is there any anthropological criterion for determining which heritage items should be given priority for preservation?

Eunice – Two difficult questions. The reply to the first is that there are no such criteria. It is possible to evaluate the technological processes involved, but even this depends on a plethora of criteria. For example, you could devise as criterion the survival and expansion of the group that carries the culture. If you did that you would be giving value to the arts of war. You could argue then that barbarian culture was superior to Roman culture because it was able to destroy it. The history of humanity is full of examples of cultures that have disappeared because the groups that developed them were destroyed by others. So a truly objective criterion exists. But you may not wish to adopt it (as I would not). I would expect more from a culture than its ability to conquer others. But this is an objective fact that cannot be denied. For example, the technological developments of the Industrial Revolution had the effect of eliminating the possibility of the survival of older technologies. This is an historical reality. We may not approve of all that came with this revolution, but it took place. Lévi-Strauss has argued that this criterion marks two fundamental periods of human history. He pointed to two revolutions that led to fundamental changes in the way natural resources were appropriated and, consequently, in social relations also. The first was the Neolithic Revolution that involved the domestication of animals and plants, the development of pottery and metal working. The second was the Industrial Revolution. In fact we could add a third revolution that Lévi-Strauss does not do. The first revolution was the production of fire, the first industrial revolution, in fact. But

the Neolithic Revolution changed the relations between peoples to such an extent that those groups that first embraced it gained such an advantage that the people who did not adopt agriculture, the herding of animals and other Neolithic techniques were relegated to distant and inhospitable regions of the earth. They were therefore in a totally disadvantageous position when the Industrial Revolution arrived. On the eve of the Industrial Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, these were the hunters and gatherers of Australia, the pygmies of the African forests, the San of Southern Africa, and the peoples of Patagonia. Groups who had developed in one way or another the techniques of the Neolithic Revolution had dominated the rest of the American and African continents and all of Asia and Europe. So in a way an objective criterion exists, or rather two: one is the degree of control over nature, the other, related, is the possibility of dominating other groups.

The Industrial Revolution brought about such an enormous transformation that societies it passed by lost all competitiveness. While we must recognize that societies compete with one another, this criterion is relative. We cannot deduce that the “winning” culture is *better* than others. You may say that it is more competitive than others. But by other criteria, even technological prowess, one cannot say that one culture is better than another. In Western societies, for example, the technique of working with feathers that had been developed in the Inca empire does not exist. Those adornments can no longer be made because no one knows how. Even the societies of the Amazonian forest have sophisticated techniques for working with feathers that we do not. For certain forms of artisan work, techniques do not vary along with general development; basketry, for example. The best examples of basketry are made by primitive people and not by our own artisans. The same is true of pottery. The ceramics produced in the empires of Mexico, the Maia, Toltec, Aztec, etc. are simply wonderful. The ceramics of the Assurini, a Brazilian Indian society, are also truly wonderful and esthetically highly elaborate, even if somewhat limited by the fact that this small group produces them only for utilitarian purposes. This limits variability.

When turning to symbolic production, ritual for example, there are no criteria for excellence. Indeed many anthropologists suspect that the development of western civilization had a negative effect on people’s lives. Recent calculations show that members of primitive societies worked generally for four hours per day, using the remaining hours for flute-playing, rituals

and other intense social activities. Exhausting work occupied a relatively short amount of time. Even if people died earlier they spent most of their time enjoying themselves. On the other hand, it is clear that the Industrial Revolution ushered in a daily working day of 16 hours in dangerous filthy environments. Manufacture was increased but with it a brutal exploitation of labor. So, returning to judgments of value, we can say that they exist and yet don't exist. As far as technical goods are concerned, a more objective view is possible. You can say with objectivity a pot that is worse than another is the one that cracks when put on the fire. It is also possible (with a certain effort on account of highly variable patterns) to admire the esthetic refinement of certain goods. As Boas wrote, "an artistic good is one that shows a particular rhythm allied to excellence in manufacture". It is possible to judge material objects in this way. Among primitive people, where all production is by artisans, these patterns are shared so that there are commonly shared criteria for evaluating production. The best work is thus recognized. This is the opposite of what happens when such objects become tourist items. This is because the tourists, who have no knowledge of native criteria of quality, often prefer goods considered by them to be inferior. This leads to the almost inevitable deterioration of artisan crafts.

While one may define certain goods as better or worse, this is not possible for other ones. What, for example, would be the criterion used to claim that a monogamous family is better than a polygenous one or even a polyandrous one? None. It just is not possible to compare them, saying that one is better adapted, or more natural or whatever. They are different. In this case no comparison is possible. That was the first question. I took a long time to reply. The second question?

P – I asked if there were criteria for creating priorities for the preservation of material goods.

E – Well, I think that here also we have two answers. One reply is to say that it depends on the meaning it bears; its historical significance. Some goods that are full of meaning. These can easily be re-appropriated and reutilized. They are always at the top of the list of heritage items to be preserved. The other answer is that it depends on politics. We tend to preserve those things whose political significance is greatest. They may be monuments to the achievements of the dominant classes or the dominated ones. Then there is, I think,

a tendency to preserve the greatest variety of cultural products, because so much of human creativity is easily lost. In our own society less is lost because of our tendency to document everything. I recall again Malinowski when he drew attention to the importance of tradition for the Trobriand islanders. He argued that we had to imagine how their elements of tradition had been obtained and preserved with great sacrifice. In the case of an epidemic that kills four key members of society, they might not be able to build a canoe again. Say there are two specialists who know the sacred myths. Should they die without passing them on, this heritage is lost. All that humanity has created was in effect was brought into being with great effort and in large part with the gross exploitation of many people. The possibility of recovering and developing this heritage as something that circulates in cultural action must be taken into account in the planning of the institutions responsible for cultural policy.

*P - How would you relate the preservation of cultural heritage and the nation?
When was the nation born?*

E - Well, in the modern sense of the term, the Nation-State came into being through an act of domination. It was based on the fictive existence of a common cultural heritage, which is evidently a gross fabrication. A common cultural heritage was created through the action of the State. Take the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for example. What we call the United Kingdom resulted from the brutal conquest of the Welsh and the Scots who still refuse to see themselves as truly part of Britain; not to mention the Irish. The same is true of France, where, especially after Napoleon, regional languages and place names were prohibited in the name of a common culture. Until quite recently you couldn't register your child by a Basque name. From the point of view of the nation builders, cultural particularities are loci for the crystallization of political opposition such as the Walloons in Belgium and the French speakers of Canada.

I am not sure whether this was exactly the question you asked. In Brazil the same process is very clear. The Portuguese conquerors expropriated and destroyed indigenous culture and the very Indians themselves. After this, similar efforts were made to eradicate the cultural forms brought by slaves from Africa. Slavery is one of the most violent forms of cultural destruction. Absolute control was established to impede the reproduction of African

culture and to bar slaves from access to the dominant culture. The immense black contribution to Brazilian culture is nothing short of a miracle; the miracle of survival in the face of the most hostile circumstances. These are the negative aspects of nation building.

But there are also positive aspects. In general the contact between two groups results in cultural enrichment. Most inventions do not occur independently in distinct groups; rather they pass from one to another. This applies to productive techniques, myths, histories, games, hairstyles, bodily adornments etc. Human beings are good imitators like their closest kinsfolk, apes and monkeys. Contact heightens the imagination. Cultural exchange has been continuous throughout the history of humanity. This has two implications for any nation state: the weakening of specific manifestations due to the denial of internal cultural difference; or a strengthening of many diverse cultural aspects that are in their turn appropriated by diverse groups. So as far as culture is concerned, no easy recipe for action exists. It all depends on you're your aims are.

P – I am interested in the way you see culture as an ideological issue. When I visited the United States I was impressed by their museums. I was a bit shocked to find that they had appropriated cultural items from all over the world and put them in their museums, as if to say, we possess the world's cultures, it is not by chance that we are who we are...

E – It is not by chance that we have the world's cultures; we have them because we are who we are, right? Well the question is a difficult one. In the first place I would argue that each people should struggle for its own heritage. But the accumulation you mention is somewhat inevitable. If you think about dominant societies throughout history you will see that they systematically took over the cultural production of the groups they dominated. That was the source of the wealth of Babylonia, of Assyria, of Egypt, of Greece, of Rome, of the Holy Roman Empire, of the British Empire, of the United States. Those who have shall have more and there is no way of avoiding this problem. The only way is to have more yourself. The competition for power implies competition for resources. So I would argue that we should leave behind moral indignation and enter the political arena, recognizing that those who have most power have more, right? Let us see if we can be a bit more powerful. There is no other solution. You might prefer that the United States

had never bought the works of art that they now show off in their museums. But what would you do? Would you develop a moral attitude of restriction? I think it is unreal to think in these terms. We have to protect our national heritage to avoid it being exported. But to imagine that it is possible to stop countries buying from other countries is a little simplistic.

The question of ideology is a complex issue. I am somewhat tied up in this having spent three years trying to write an article about how to distinguish between culture and ideology. To tell you the truth, I don't really like ideology as a concept because it has two meanings with which it is difficult to work. It contains the notion that ideology is mystification. You can't work with the concept of ideology without this idea creeping in, forcing us to begin by distinguishing between what is being mystified and what is not being mystified. As an anthropologist, I start from a different point of view. I prefer to use the term ideology in a wider sense, as a vision or project for ordering society as whole. When we talk of a liberal ideology or a socialist ideology the term makes sense. But for other ends, I prefer to use terms such as cultural relations, cultural policies or political aspects of cultural relations.

You went to the United States, right? Go to Mexico. There you will find is a constant utilization of popular culture and indigenous culture as a way of glorifying the State through the so-called Mexican Revolution. En passant one might observe that this is something of a hoax. The truth of the matter is that nation states are built on the cultural creation of a common heritage and a common identity. There is no other way to build a society. States do this to a great extent to benefit the dominant classes. You can't get away from the fact that the states themselves operate in this way. Since nations are organized by states and since nations can only function through a common heritage (this is what expresses the idea of nation) this process is inevitable. I see no other way forward. We may say that we should act politically to make this process less exploitative, less violent and less likely to destroy existing cultural diversity. This would be an ideological attitude, a political attitude I would defend. It is, I argue, a necessary cultural policy. Take the case of Brazilian history: a history of the dominant classes. This creates serious problems for the members of the working class who have no access to this history.

During recent research I have been interviewing members of segments of the working class, especially those living on the periphery of São Paulo, to see how they understand their relationship to the State. The complex way in

which this issue is thought through will not however result in a satisfactory political project because there is a lack of general information. When you talk to these people the State appears as so distant that any attempt to influence it would be impossible. Well this is not a false perception. It is correct because the State is indeed distant and there are no mechanisms available for influencing it. But people do not distinguish between the Legislative Power, the Executive Power and so on. It is important to understand why they do not have this information. This kind of knowledge is power. And members of the working class are only too aware of the importance of acquiring such knowledge if they are to improve their living conditions by obtaining resources through and from the State. The notion of ideology is complex also because it is ubiquitous in the sense that it is always associated with specific interests and political projects. In fact everyone has an ideology. The concept only really works well when related to major projects for social organization. On the other hand, I do not see the possibility of organizing a society that is culturally totally segmented. This is not because it would be economically unviable, but because it would create unnecessary conflicts. I think that all should have access to all cultural goods and that all of them will be ideologically contaminated. This seems inevitable also.

P - I understand that dominant groups were interested in preserving things that identified the dominant within the wider historical process. So one would think that a central interest of these groups would be to preserve what we call historical heritage in order to strengthen their own identity. Yet in practice this does not happen. How do you see this question?

E - We should look at the present moment. The Brazil we have today is a very recent Brazil, fundamentally post 1945. We must not forget that industrialization brought about a major change in the composition of the dominant classes and their interests. Their interests are different, they are of distinct social origin and their histories are also different. And there are certain specificities in the Brazilian situation, which I find difficult to explain. In Brazil there is a fascination for all that is new. In other countries there is a greater interest in the past. This is not exclusive to the dominant classes. Everyone is enchanted by novelty. I still remember the introduction of louvered windows. It was madness. Everyone removed their venetian shutters to put in louvered windows. It was an immediate success. I remember also when it became

fashionable to paint walls in different colors. This was also a success in Brazil. It began among the dominant classes but five years later it reached the town in the hinterland where I came from. Soon every wall was in a different color. You would go into your friends' houses and all the walls were different colors and the windows were all louvered; a total success.

I undertook my first research project in the hinterland of the states of Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais soon after the opening of the main road linking Rio de Janeiro to Salvador, Bahia. It amazed me to see the building of lots of little houses along the road, all built in "modern" style; the popular appropriation of what was called "modern": with geometric designs on the façades, all in different colors. Impressive. The same applies to clothing fashions.

I really can't explain why this is the case in Brazil. People love all that is new. This is not the case in Mexico, so much so that I have the impression that this is because in Mexico the State was so active in promoting an interest in national heritage as a form of strengthening the state and building national identity.

P – Isn't this the central issue?

E – Now we identify ourselves through things that are new instead of things from the past. That is what is happening.

P – But things that are new cannot constitute an identity because they are ephemeral. Is all that is new really new? I don't know.

E – You've raised a very interesting problem. I have no ready explanation but it would be interesting to investigate this in relation to the cultural history of Brazil, which is not my specialty. But what I observe is that people identify themselves by their willingness to adopt novelty. If you are working with people who have just arrived from the rural areas and compare your interviews with the opinions of others who have lived for a longer time in the towns, you will see how extraordinarily ready they are to accept change. I also think that this has not always been the case in Brazil, but it is a characteristic....

E – I would just like to mention one more little thing. I am not sure whether all this is new or whether it arrived on the last boat.

P – *This is old.*

E – Yes, very old. I think it is a bit of both. In fact it is not just that which has arrived on the last boat but also something of the novelty produced here in Brazil. In the modern world the economy is internationalized and national cultures have to be looked at relatively. We should not think that each country will produce its own little culture. There is movement always in two directions, at once of uniformization and of differentiation. I cannot present this as a general theory, but as something to be investigated in concrete cases.

And just to reply again to another question, I would like to insist that the dominant classes are not monolithic. They are diverse and open to criticism. Indeed the ability to elaborate a critical position is also an example of class privilege since critical faculties are also social constructed. Also, this is often associated with power struggles between distinct segments within the dominant classes. And, finally, it is a powerful weapon in the hands of the intellectuals as they struggle to move into a privileged position in this process. Criticism is this also.

Translated by Peter Fry

Reference

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