

MATTERS OF CULTURE

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Ten years ago, Alain Touraine famously defined culture as the new paradigm for understanding today's world. Five years before, Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington had edited their volume under the heading "Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress". Arguably, in the 21st century the study of culture represents an emerging and expanding field, dealing with the central challenges of contemporary society. Because the abstract paradigm of culture seems to be the motor of social change, the study of culture has been increasingly showing its multidimensional relevance at the interface of smart development and critical inquiry. Old, new and renewed cultural practices ask for innovative theories and for advanced research methods. In addition, new approaches such as arts based research, connectivism or the examination of big data challenge the hereto overwhelmingly interpretative humanist scholarly practice. For many academics, trained in the traditional humanities disciplines (from art history to literature or philosophy), the study of culture, perhaps a paradigm that is none, continues to bring added complexity and anxiety. How does culture matter in today's world? How does culture relate to globalization? How does cultural change shape our mind? Which possible worlds does contemporary culture allow for? In which ways do culture, conflict, citizenship and sovereignty correlate? And, finally, how does the study of culture challenge the critical scholarly endeavor of the humanities? The CECC conference "Matters of Culture" discussed the state of the art of this debate and has acted as a gateway to future research.

The conference was organized in three sessions aimed at specifically discussing the following issues:

- 1) Cultural theory with Geoffrey Galt Harpham and Ansgar Nünning, Moderation: Luísa Leal Faria
- 2) Culture, conflict and globalization with Paulo Medeiros and Isabel Capelo Gil; Moderation: Alexandra Lopes
- 3) Culture and cognition with Vera Nünning, Gerhard Lauer and Peter Hanenberg; Moderation: Ana Margarida Abrantes

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Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

“The Constitution is manifestly the product of a cultural theory”



1. The academic area most deeply invested in the idea of culture, the focus of this gathering, is what is in America called the humanities. In one way or another, the humanistic disciplines all focus on and produce cultural knowledge, and are inconceivable apart from some concept of culture. The humanities, moreover, are the source of the idea that knowledge itself is culturally conditioned, an idea that has been expanded to include the sciences and social sciences, to their dismay. So for me the idea of culture leads us directly to a consideration of the humanities, and especially of the differences between the humanities and other disciplines.
2. A few years back, I wrote a book called *The Humanities and the Dream of America* in which I made the claim that as an academic category—as opposed, say, to a philosophical or literary one—“the humanities” was an American invention, a product of the post-WWII period when a victorious nation determined to create an educational system that not only served the needs of the nation but broadcast to the rest of the world, much of it devastated by the war, the values and principles on which a free nation was based. This system, unlike any other then in existence, was to be universal, liberal, and general. That is, it was to be designed to serve the maximum number of people possible, to be non-vocational or instrumental in that it encompassed a variety of disciplines to be studied in themselves, and—the most distinctive feature of all—to be oriented toward the production of citizens rather than professionals or employees.
3. The premise was that education so conceived would give all people the tools they needed to be able to determine their own ends beyond the mere accumulation of wealth or the choice of a job, and to participate in a meaningful way in governance. Education was to be training for life for the individual, and, for the society at large, a means of ensuring the equality of access to opportunity on which democracy was supposed to be based. As a direct outcome of initiatives taken at this time, college enrollment grew quite dramatically, and a system of “community colleges” designed to prepare for college people whose high school training was inadequate was put in place. In the words of James B. Conant, the Harvard president who convened the committee that provided the architecture of this system, the purpose was “to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free.” While

many of the specifics of the program this committee came up with seem outmoded, impossible, or otherwise undesirable, the entirety constituted, in the words of the political theorist Wendy Brown, a “radical democratic event.”

4. I draw attention to this moment because this is the moment when the idea of the humanities as a distinct set of disciplines—history, language and literature, study of the arts—came into focus as the heart and soul of the entire curriculum. The very first “Program in the Humanities” was created at Princeton in 1930. The concept of the humanities gathered strength throughout that decade and the one following, and emerged by the end of the war as the focal point of what was called “general education.” Indeed, the concept of the humanities was indispensable to this system. Without a robust concept of the humanities as the site of non-quantifiable knowledge, the proposed curriculum would have lacked depth and flexibility; it would have been unable to make any claim about developing citizens who could exercise free choice, or who enjoyed significant freedom. Without the humanities conceived as the study of cultural knowledge to which all citizens had access, the system could not claim to create a sense of cultural cohesion. And without the humanities considered as a discipline of evaluation and judgment, the system would lack moral seriousness.
5. The point is that the idea of the humanities that emerged at this time grew directly out of a normative theory of culture. This is in fact the American innovation in educational theory—the educational system grows not out of the needs of the professions or the civil service, but out of a shared understanding of the ends of culture. Or, to put the matter in another way, a strong and well articulated understanding of a common culture produced, as one of its offshoots, a system of education designed to support and extend that understanding. And so, while the global reach of English has meant that the term “the humanities” is universal, the practices and even the concepts behind the humanities are not universally consistent. In Portugal, in Japan, in Germany, in South Africa, the term means different things because the local culture has its own history, its own values, its own institutions, which are not necessarily reflected in the “American” concept of the humanities.
6. I do not mean to claim that the United States has any monopoly on freedom, autonomy, self-determination, or any of the other virtues that the humanities are supposed to develop. Nor am I saying that the humanities actually do all the things that they are supposed to do, even in the very best instances. A disconfirming reality is too depressingly available for anyone to make such claims. What I am saying is that the humanities, as this term is understood in the United States, is a different concept from the humanities elsewhere because in the United States the concept grew out of a very specific normative understanding of culture. This understanding properly resists globalization, as globalization resists it.
7. One feature of the American system seems, however, somewhat less parochial and naïve than others. I am referring to the strong emphasis on the interpretation of written documents. It could be claimed—and in a forthcoming book I do claim—that the country was founded on the premise that all people should be interpretively competent, able to determine for themselves not just the meaning of texts, but the intention behind those texts. Asserting this right to interpretation was the essence of the Reformation, and none asserted it more strongly than the English Puritans, who were forced to leave their country because they insisted on the irrelevance of learned clergy in the reading of the Bible. Puritanism as a theocracy lasted only a few decades, but this strong insistence on the right of all people to interpret foundational texts was transposed onto the Constitution, which was, out of respect for this insistence, written in simple

language so all could understand it. Universal literacy and interpretive competence were written into the founding document of the nation.

8. People had to be able to interpret the foundational law because the meaning of the law, unlike statutory law, was always to be in dispute and always yet to be determined. The Constitution stipulates the conditions under which other laws or regulations may be enacted, and sets limits to their authority regardless of the actions of legislatures or other governing bodies. Interpreting the Constitution thus becomes a civic responsibility enjoined on all; it is also a primary means of social progress, as groups appeal to the Supreme Court to see in the Constitution what they see. While there are different theories of Constitutional interpretation, the most powerful—even, to some, disturbingly powerful—approach appeals to the “original intent” of the Founders and Framers of the text. The humanities in America, and in particular the discipline of English, respond to this feature of American civic life by stressing the interpretation of texts, and especially interpretation based on the concept of intention.
9. The Constitution is manifestly the product of a cultural theory—the same theory that has produced an educational system in which “the humanities,” construed in a particular way, have emerged. It is a peculiar system, but in its aspiration to freedom and equality of opportunity, its derivation from a concept of culture, it has, I think, a lot to recommend it—more, perhaps, than a system in which access to higher education is restricted by examinations or other means, or one in which education is itself restricted by a neoliberal imperative to produce not citizens but wage earners and employees.

Ansgar Nünning:

“Cultures Matter: Modest Proposals for Preventing National Traditions from being a Burden to Research and for Making Travelling Concepts Beneficial to the Transnational Study of Culture”



1. As both the interest that various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have paid to culture, and the co-existence of various kinds of British Cultural Studies, American Cultural Studies, German *Kulturwissenschaften*, and other national traditions already serve to demonstrate, the study of culture is essentially an interdisciplinary and an international field of research. With regard to both the range of disciplines that are concerned with culture and its international dimension, the study of culture is characterized by theoretical and methodological pluralism as well as multiperspectivism. The study of such a broad research domain as culture demands novel forms of interdisciplinary research, crossing the boundaries between disciplines and different academic cultures of knowledge.
2. Although the development of Literary and Cultural Studies, just like other disciplines in the humanities, has been characterized by an ongoing trend towards internationalization and globalization, there are still marked differences between various national research cultures and traditions. The cultural and national specificity of approaches to the study of culture can hardly be overlooked when comparing, for instance, British Cultural Studies and German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’, which are both concerned with the domain of culture, but differ considerably with regard to their respective research traditions, conceptual frameworks and methodologies.
3. Such differences between national approaches testify to the fact that cultures in general, and cultures of research and education in particular, matter, i.e. the study of culture is itself very much a cultural practice which is characterized by national specificity. Although this is seldom acknowledged, let alone subjected to self-reflexive research, different approaches to the study of culture are themselves culturally and historically conditioned and thus subject to change and cultural variation. Such differences between national cultures of research can pose serious obstacles to both the transfer of approaches and concepts from one national research culture to another, and the development of genuinely transnational approaches to the study of culture.
4. There are arguably several reasons why approaches to the study of culture as developed and practised in different national and institutional contexts still display considerable differences, even in an age of globalisation and worldwide mobility, especially among academics. Among the most important reasons that can explain such cultural and

national differences are language, intellectual styles (sensu Galtung; cf. Nünning, „Wissenschaftsstile“), the cultural contexts and historical development of disciplines and approaches, and institutional differences between research cultures and their traditions. Differences in intellectual style manifest themselves in a number of concrete and tangible ways, shaping both prevalent research agendas and practices. While German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ display a predilection for theorizing, what constitutes the lowest common denominator of most of the features specific to British Cultural Studies is a much more pragmatic and empirical orientation, a clear preference for particulars and concrete ‘facts,’ and a concomitant distrust of generalities and abstractions.

5. As a comparison between German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ and British Cultural Studies can serve to show, the differences between these national traditions of studying culture are still so big that it would be unwarranted to speak of transnational approaches as though they actually existed. In spite of some similarities with regard to subject matter and methods, the German version of *Kulturwissenschaft* should be distinguished from the special brand of Cultural Studies developed in Britain. At the risk at oversimplification, the main differences between British (and American) Cultural Studies and German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ can be located on at least five levels.
 - First, British Cultural Studies were developed as a response to concrete social and political challenges of the British class-system and as a politically motivated project aimed at producing changes in society and strategies of resistance; in this research tradition, culture and politics have been inextricably intertwined. By contrast, the German tradition of ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’, which can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century, has quite a different genealogy, lineage, and non-political agenda, being largely an academic enterprise which explores cultural phenomena as objects of academic research, not with an eye to engendering political change.
 - Second, while British Cultural Studies is characterized by an ideological position and marked by a Marxist approach, German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ display a more pluralistic, multiperspectival theoretical orientation, exploring symbolic forms and ways of worldmaking.
 - Third, as the term ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ already indicates, there is a strong emphasis and methodological insistence on the scientific quality of the discipline in the German tradition in which the study of culture has been characterized as a form of textual science. This has far-reaching implications for the scholar’s position and self-understanding, which is quite different from that of scholars working in the British tradition of cultural studies.
 - Fourth, as the very name of its most renowned and important institution, the “Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies” already indicates, British Cultural Studies has tended to expand the concept of culture from high-brow culture to popular culture, paving the way for a new approach to contemporary forms of popular culture, on which the Birmingham school largely focussed. By way of contrast, German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ has favoured a broader anthropological and semiotic concept of culture, taking a wider range of cultural objects, and a broader diachronic perspective into consideration.
 - Being an integral part of the respective national, institutional and academic cultures from which they have emerged, British Cultural Studies and German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ have fifthly developed different research questions, topics and methods.
6. One of the problems and impediments for the development of transnational approaches to the study of culture results from the prevailing tendency to ‘import’ British (or

American) Cultural Studies into other (e.g. German or Portuguese) academic and institutional contexts and merely emulate or imitate the imported model(s). The main problem with such a transfer, however, is that while British Cultural Studies must be seen against the background of Britain's class system, the American debates about race, class and gender, or the revision of the Western canon, only make sense in the context of the US' multicultural society. The strength of the study of culture as practised in e.g. Germany, the Netherlands or Scandinavian countries, for that matter, resides precisely in the fact that they can apply the differences between their own and the foreign culture(s) in a fruitful manner. Both the canon debates (and revisions) with their focus on race, class and gender and the British and American forms of Cultural Studies can thus themselves be seen as (highly interesting!) objects of inquiry, both from the point of view of English and American Studies as practised in Germany and other countries and in a broader transnational framework for the study of culture(s).

7. Rather than just taking a particular approach for granted or uncritically trying to adopt or emulate either British Cultural Studies or American Cultural Studies, cultural theory and the study of culture should first of all regard them as an object of inquiry in its own right, representing as they do complex manifestations of e.g. Englishness (or Britishness) and Americanness respectively. Just as there is arguably a 'national style' of English literary criticism, historiography, and cultural studies. German '*Kulturwissenschaften*' likewise share a number of epistemological claims, discursive strategies and institutional practices that set them off from their American and British counterparts. The German term '*Kulturwissenschaften*', just like '*Literaturwissenschaften*', is lost in translation. It serves to emphasize the scientificity of the discipline that it designates, implicitly claiming that the study of culture can be as scientific as any discipline in the hard sciences. As Peter Zima has shown in a pioneering article, the term '*Literaturwissenschaften*' in the German sense is very much "a language- and culture-bound phenomenon" that "becomes questionable as soon as it is projected into an intercultural context" (Zima 26). The same holds true for the term '*Kulturwissenschaften*', which should not be confused with the English term 'cultural studies'. What is at stake here is much more than just a question of terminology, in that there is a semantic rupture between the German and English sociolinguistic contexts that concerns the constitution and traditions of the respective disciplines and research cultures as a whole, including the ways in which they construct their objects, define their objectives, develop their methodologies, select their subject matter, and practise the study of culture.
8. While there is a broad range of different national traditions of studying culture, including various kinds of British Cultural Studies and American Cultural Studies, but more recently also of 'Latino/a Cultural Studies', the development of genuinely transnational, or even trans-European, approaches to the study of culture is still a desideratum for future research rather than an established fact in that such a project does not yet exist as a fully-fledged theoretical or analytical framework.
9. There are, however, several recent contributions to research that have fostered, or are fostering, the development of transnational approaches to the study of culture. These include approaches that either cut across national traditions or that have successfully travelled from one research culture to others, e.g. a number of influential "cultural turns" (Bachmann-Medick) in the humanities, or 'cultural sciences' (*Kulturwissenschaften*), and the notions of 'travelling concepts' (Bal, Nünning/Neumann) and 'translation' as promising ways of overcoming boundaries between different research cultures and national traditions. Approaches that have cut across disciplinary and national research traditions include e.g. cultural semiotics

(‘*Kultursemiotik*’, see Posner), cultural anthropology, historical anthropology, literary anthropology, the new cultural history, cultural ecology, and area studies (for an overview, see Nünning/Nünning). Although the traditions, research foci and methodologies of these different ways of studying culture differ quite substantially, all of these approaches embrace both inter- or transdisciplinary collaboration and an international or even global orientation. These approaches and developments have been conducive to transcending the limitations of national research traditions, in fostering transnational as well as transcultural approaches to the study of culture, and to foregrounding both global and transnational cultural issues and the concept of transnationalism itself.

10. Much more work, however, needs to be done in order to gauge the complex differences between national research cultures, to reconfigure and reconceive particular national kinds of ‘cultural studies’ as a transnational study of culture, and, even more so, to develop fully-fledged transnational approaches and concepts for the study of culture. It would also be desirable to enhance the dialogue among the approaches and disciplines involved in the study of culture, and among different cultures of research, thus fostering self-reflexive, interdisciplinary, international, and potentially even transnational approaches to the study of culture. In order to move beyond nationally based boundaries and academic styles, transnational approaches to the study of culture need to investigate in detail the (usually unacknowledged) presuppositions, discursive practices and structural features of its own research traditions, which have so far been largely unacknowledged and have tended to become naturalized. Such a project also involves a sustained dialogue about the key concepts that are used in order to define the subject-matter, research areas or domains, and the theoretical and methodological frameworks deployed. Transnational and transcultural approaches to the study of culture require the development of a new set of guiding principles, travelling concepts and other ways of academic worldmaking that expand the limited horizons of British Cultural Studies, American Cultural Studies, German ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’, and other nationally specific research traditions.

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Paulo de Medeiros

“Splinters, Freedoms, Matter”

To speak of a crisis in the Humanities is not merely a cliché. It is also at one and the same time a recognition of the conflictual and conflicting nature of the Humanities and of human societies, and an easy opening to just ignore the real threats directed at the very core of the Humanities and what might be understood as critical thought. The stakes are high; too high for any one of us to simply resign ourselves and accept the way the world is turning because we might feel too small or insignificant or removed from the sites of power. Because if we do, if we simply capitulate, lulled by a false sense of complacency, inevitability and our own relatively privileged positions we shall have betrayed the trust society has placed on us as both bearers of tradition and questioning critics.. There is a duty, a duty common to any citizen, but very especially so, also an intellectual duty, to question, expose and resist the insidious and pervasive ways in which basic advancements in social justice, including the right to a free and public education, are being systematically threatened and eroded. To that effect Adorno’s warning at the opening of the *Minima Moralia* has not only not lost any of its incisive power, but, unfortunately, has never been more actual and urgent: “Der Blick aufs Leben ist übergegangen in die Ideologie, die darüber betrügt, daß es keines mehr gibt” (“Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer,” Jephcott, 1974). I would thus like to propose adopting an Adornian “splintered” vision (“The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass”) towards the question of the Humanities for two reasons: for one, the very concept of the Humanities as it might have been originally conceived has been necessarily broken. It shattered as the flaws and blind spots of Enlightenment discourse, that still allowed for it to remain in so many instances an instrument for domination and the preservation of privilege, have been exposed. And, secondly, the potentially emancipatory premises of that same discourse have become increasingly targeted by reactionary forces ruthlessly bent of turning back the process of democratization and social justice that characterized, at one point, the very notion of western societies and for which the Humanities were both a guarantee and a motor for progress.

The notion of progress itself has also already been problematized, if not completely discarded, and I am not in any way advocating a return to a belief in a teleological understanding of human society. However, it is crucial to distinguish a progressive critique of progress and a reactionary sleigh of hand through which the rightful gains in democratic rule and social rights would be destroyed. At this point it is useful to recall how Henry Giroux has set the question before us when he affirmed: “The crisis of class is not restricted to an economic crisis. Workers are not

merely exploited; they are also under assault through forms of neo-liberal intellectual violence that diminish their sense of agency and depoliticize the spaces in which they may produce the language and social relations necessary to resist the ravages of economic Darwinism” (2013). As our societies – at least in the West – become increasingly dominated by fear and through the continuous implementation of all of the mechanisms set up in order to increase that fear while pretending to assuage or control it, this is a point that can easily be forgotten. Yet, together with questions of race and gender, basic issues of inequality in our societies risk being sidelined, dismissed and even denied, with an obvious consequence: the sliding into an amorphous and uncritical mass in which workers receive as much training as considered necessary to be productive and any form of difference will not be tolerated. The extent to which the crisis of the Humanities has come to occupy a great many intellectuals can be glimpsed by the establishment at Princeton of a taskforce charged with inquiring into the “Future of the Humanities”. In its October 2015 report we can read right from the start how the humanities and with it the study of culture in all of its forms is inextricably tied up with financial issues: “Universities have become increasingly identified in the public mind with mere vocational training, but a supple education in the arts and humanities is a good investment in the modern environment, however paradoxical that may seem to anxious parents and students. (...) Numerous studies show that, on the basis of such a preparation, it is far from being financial or career suicide to major in a Humanities subject, especially if we look at the earnings of majors...” (<http://www.princeton.edu/strategicplan/files/Humanities-Task-Force-report-2015.pdf>). Without wanting to give the impression that the University or the Humanities can (or ever could) disassociate themselves from the world – the opposite will be my contention precisely – I still find it deeply disturbing when such a distinguished body of colleagues clearly sees no issue with making success in and of the Humanities dependent on one sole factor, the economic one. But none of this is really new of course. As Alain Badiou has made more than clear, reflecting on the causes for the attacks of 13th November in Paris, justice should always strive to enlarge public space but for the last thirty years we have observed an ever increasing and suffocating privatization. So culture also tends more and more to become either a private affair – private property that offers the prospect of a generous rate of return on the initial investment – or a mass commodity serving more often than not to generate controlled and marketable desires in a vicious circle that creates the illusion of freedom and choice while reinforcing absolute forms of control that deny any form of agency to the individual, especially as that too becomes a suspect category.

Rather than discussing the “future” of the Humanities – how many times does an appeal to the “new” hide an attempt to keep things as they are and preserve the transmission of power along established lines as Giuseppe di Lampedusa so powerfully showed in *The Leopard*? Instead, what I find urgent is a reconsideration of the materiality of culture. Without wanting to merely hark back to discussions on materialism and dialectics, but also without totally reifying the subject and transform it into “new materialisms” that tend to ignore the difficult and even dehumanizing material conditions, which a massive amount of people still must endure. There is a need to pay close attention to those very simple issues that are at the root of so many masterpieces and that go on affecting our lives in profound ways. While rejecting any form of nostalgia I think that only in relating the present to the past – our contemporary understanding of the past that is – can we make sense of our predicaments and imagine solutions for the ills that afflict us and that, as Badiou stressed in the title of his recent lecture, come from long ago. If our present world puts forward ever changing and complex processes of cultural relations our task is to analyse them, without falling in to the trap and temptation of believing that critique amounts to social change, but in the firm conviction that theory and praxis go together and mutually inform each other. Ultimately, as much as we might worry about the financial success of future generations, we owe them as much, if not more, to remain intellectually honest. If culture is to matter we must pay attention to its matter.

Isabel Capelo Gil

“Culture is never neutral or disinterested”



Having increasingly acquired prominence over the past decade and a half, the study of conflict in the field of culture could be easily mistaken as the serendipitous result of living a conflict-torn temporality. But this would be a naïve assessment. There are no more conflicts today than in the past, and more importantly conflict and culture are not simply brought together by a representational nexus or by political design. In other terms, culture’s relation with conflict does not simply happen by dint of representing a lived violent event or a conflictual interaction, nor can it be subsumed to a supporting role in the geopolitics of what Samuel Huntington named the global civilizations and their ‘fault line conflicts’ (Huntington, 1996:207). And yet, even though the argument I take here refutes the determinism that binds culture with violent conflict, it is no less true that without conflict there is no culture, and that without culture there are no conflicts.

1. **A brief genealogy:** Foundational texts in the Greek and Jewish traditions already expound an embedding of conflict and culture. Hesiod in *Erga* (vv.14-26) distinguishes between bad conflict, associated with Eris, the producer of strife and communal disruption, and good conflict, connoted with the reuniting of social bonds through the work of sacrifice. This same distinction between disruptive and productive conflict is laid out in multiple texts of the Jewish Bible, in which case the wars with Babylon or Egypt would be an example of the former whereas Isaac’s sacrifice speaks to the latter. In this mytho-poetical dimension, conflict results from the tension between the social and human realm and transcendental norms, a tension that is ultimately resolved through ritual practice. Another strategy equates conflict with aggressiveness, namely with the human biological propensity to act violently, as it comes across in the widely diverse and even contradictory approaches of Thomas Hobbes’ liberal thinking, Freud’s cultural theory or even Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s behavioral analysis. In this context, culture acts as a repressive external set of norms working to curb the violence within, its work has a corrective dimension that rests on a conflictual interaction with an essentially violent nature. A relevant marker of change is apparent in the turn taken by early 20th century sociology. In 1918, in the conference, ‘The Conflict of Modern Culture’, Georg Simmel defines conflict as a sociogenetic structure within the cultural. Culture is no longer observed as a repressive mechanism and the corrective of an ‘imperfect’ nature, but rather a process of socialization that integrates difference. Hence be it in the form of a productive and creative mechanism, conducive to artistic production, or as a disruptive action epitomized in war, conflict is the work of culture. Simmel’s work is groundbreaking in suggesting that culture is structured upon the negotiation of difference and that part of this process will be inevitably unsuccessful and lead to violent strife. Consequently, the principle of identity is perceived to be founded on the collision (productive or disruptive) with difference.

2. **Conflict is inscribed in the very matrix of the cultural.** The production of culture is marked by difference and it is the interaction amongst these distinctions that structures the flow of energies amongst the several threads of the web of culture. Conflict, in this basic assumption, is understood as the play of the differential, supporting key themes of the study of culture such as identity and diversity, memory and trauma, the translation of cultures and globalization, dislocation and emplacement, mediation, integration and exclusion. Hence, if there is no culture without difference, there is no culture without conflict. Be it as the necessary tension that structures dialogue or as the ‘enormous opposition’ (GT, KSAI: 25) between what in Nietzsche’s terms would be the drive for form and structure and the drive for creative dissolution that grounds the work of art and culture^[1], conflict is what makes the work of culture possible.
3. **Conflict lays bare that the work of culture is set on coming to terms with the existence of cultures.** The cultural has an existence which is not its own alone. It is sustained by a condition of interdependency, of mutual engagement, which is always situated and precarious, and it is a circumstance of a creation/production that does not belong to itself, whose meaning is ultimately negotiated for, by and with its others. Culture then allows us to address plurality and deal with the existence of otherness.
4. **Culture is never neutral or disinterested** and hence it will inevitably be present when difference is transformed into strife and war. In approaching conflict situations from a cultural perspective, one is struck by two dominant processes: first, the ways in which a cultural system successfully reproduces and even consolidates itself by inscribing conflict into its dominant practices and, second, the ways in which a conflict constitutes a symbolic encounter that threatens to affect deeply, even to transform, the meanings that make up the fabric of any culture. Thus, conflicts lay bare the normative mechanisms of a cultural system and the vulnerable, incomplete and provisional character of that normativity. It follows that conflicts – their regulation, representation and particularly their recollection – constitute privileged loci for cultural analysis.
5. **As a cultural marker of a situated production of knowledge, conflict, as dialogue and difference, inhabits the production of critical thought.** The ways in which knowledge is produced within the field of culture reflect the work of conjuncture, institutional abode and lived experience. Clearly how and what we think in academia is not simply the result of disciplinary difference, but also of the contingency of time and the multiple spaces inhabited by scholarly subjectivities. Research practice in the humanities promotes a renewed questioning, an inspection of received postulates, a self-reflexive attitude on the norms and the practices that regulate the field. This is perhaps the utopian approach that got so many cultural studies scholars on the wrong foot, but I would argue, this is also the horizon of relevance of a field continuously in the making and necessarily in need of embracing modes of scholarly production beyond the hallowed space of western academia. Arguably, then, conflict speaks to the very work of critical thought, when it is understood as a practice of interference. This is metaphorically condensed in the literary formula of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener’s” assertion ‘I prefer not to’. In fact, culture studies is defined by a strategic conceptual injunction to do otherwise. Rather than reproducing accepted knowledge, culture studies recuperates the task of the humanities as a practice of interference in the dominant organization of knowledge. As Jacques Rancière puts it in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, its work is about: “ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making” (Rancière, 2004:13). The defining attitude of a culture studies scholar is that of a cosmopolitan criticality that is proper to the humanities, looking at the plurality of cultures and embracing that difference in language, value, memory, religion and all the other different markers that structure our

ecology of cultures. Embracing this difference is not a naïve stance. It means to be aware of the tensions, of the conflicts, albeit continuously struggling to avoid any reification about the ultimate inevitability of war.

[1] “Their two deities of art, Apollo and Dionysos, provide the starting-point for our recognition that there exists in the world of the Greeks an enormous opposition, both in origin and goals, between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor [...] and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos. These two very different drives exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring [...]” (transl. Ronald Speirs, 199:14)

Gerhard Lauer

[“Culture and genes interact since millions of years”](#)



1. The common notion in many if not most parts of the humanities claims a non relation between culture and cognition. Whatever culture is, culture is not affected by cognition. To know something about cognition elucidates nothing about culture, so they say. Hence, for cultural studies any findings of cognitive psychology or neuroscience, from social psychology or even from science of reading are of no relevance for cultural studies. The realm of biological evolution seems to stop when culture came into play. Insights from areas of biological research are simply a naturalistic fallacy and any kind of cognitive literary studies is a neodarwinistic shortening of what cultural studies should do. “Essentialism” is the catchword to reject any approach to integrate culture and cognition into the humanities.

2. In the tradition of German academia the opposition of culture and cognition is mapped by the contrast of nomothetic natural sciences vs. ‘verstehende Geisteswissenschaften’ (hermeneutical humanities). Dilthey concept of ‘Geisteswissenschaft’ ignores by purpose and theory early empirical psychology as well as phenomenology and other more or less scientific approaches on cognition of his time, and stated, that both areas are divided by an insurmountable gap of methodological differences. From then to now only little attempts were made by groups like Russian Formalism or Structuralism to question the thesis of the non-scientific nature of cultural studies.

3. Against dominant theories cognitive approaches in the humanities suggest a different concept of the relation between culture and cognition. In this perspective culture is part of the biological evolution. More precisely culture and genes interact since millions of years, and the culture-gene coevolution has not yet ended. Humans are a cultural species and our cognition arises from the synthesis of our cultural and social natures, from the very fact that we readily learn from others and live in interconnected groups, which differs more in forms of social and cultural organizations than the rest of the primate order combined. Culture and cognition made each other up and cultural explanations become but one type of evolutionary explanation. Since evolution drives groups of primates to develop bigger brain culture is a necessary function to make use of big brains. Human cognition is social cognition since millions of years. In this framework the study of culture and the study of cognition are two sides of the same coin.

4. If humans are a cultural species, then one of the most crucial adaptation is humans ability to keenly observe and learn from other people, mostly from the more prestigious and skilled, with

biased to co-ethnics, co-language, and co-sexes. Humans can interfere conspecific's acts, and intentions, beliefs, and strategies. This is variously termed mentalizing, or theory of mind. Human cognition differs systematically from other primates. As culture became the primary driver of our species genetic evolution (some 2 million years ago) cognition was changed to improve social learning and cultural intelligence. We use more energy for cognition than other species, the myelination makes human brain more efficient and is developed later in infancy to make children's brain more plastic, and human neocortex sends corticospinal connections deeper into the motor neurons, spinal cord, and brain stem than in other mammals. We can better run and throw and even these neurological changes alter cognition and enable us to become a cultural species. By cooking, or the ability to change the colour of skin and of eyes, to change to lactase persistence etc. it has been consistently shown how culture can be among the most powerful selection pressures created in nature. The cooking-and-fire revolution, the projectile-weapons revolution, the spoken-language revolution, the agricultural revolution are among many others milestones how culture drives cognition.

5. Languages are part of the cultural-gene coevolution. Language enables more complex cultural trajectories and at the same time culture can influence the size and complexity of communicative repertoires. Like whistle languages came up in steep mountain terrains, vocabulary sizes expand with size and structure of populations, languages with more speakers tend to have more sounds/phonemes but shorter words, and sonority of languages changes with temperature, diverse acoustics environments prefer different types of language systems. As findings by cross-cultural psychology has shown language systems influence cognition in many ways. Most common is the difference between holistic vs. analytic thinking, between a more society-orientated thinking style in East Asian vs. a more individualism-oriented approach in Western cultures. Like languages, techniques, or rituals, also the arts differ according to the evolutionary driven interplay of cognition and culture. Learning to read changes the brain, basically by building a specific area, called letter box. Again culture alters cognition. We can trace the correlation of culture and cognition even in the structure of neurons. Culture matters and cognition too.

6. In this coevolutionary model one can understand culture not without understanding cognition, and human cognition would be an opaque riddle to be understood without understanding culture. In sum, cultural studies should think about, why not explore the correlation between culture and cognition more closely. Rewriting cultural theory as part of a larger history of human evolution is still a task.



Vera Nünning:

“Scripts, frames and mental models are tools of understanding”

The following theses are based on a few presuppositions:

Although my conception of culture is shaped by the semiotic approach to culture, according to which three dimensions of culture (i.e. the material, social and mental dimension) can be distinguished, the following observations will focus mainly on the mental (cognitive) dimension of culture and its relation to the material dimension, e.g. in the form of texts and narratives. In addition, the term culture serves as a shorthand for the pluralities of (sub)cultures prevalent in a given community, which are defined by transcultural relations and by continuous change.

In addition, I conceptualise minds as embodied minds (sensu Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991) and the brain as a cultural organ characterised by plasticity and molded by cultural factors; my epistemological framework is that of enactivism.

Theses:

(1) There is a reciprocal relationship between culture and cognition (this is a minor supplement to the brilliant exposition by Gerhard Lauer).

Scripts, frames and mental models are tools of understanding. The scripts and schemata that help us to understand human beings and sequences of action are shaped by culture: e.g. by tacit and explicit knowledge, by hierarchies of values and attitudes. In addition, these cognitive tools are acquired – and modified, revised and changed – not only in the process of acculturation, but also by dealing with the challenges of one’s daily life in a given culture, by social practices and the experiences that individuals (and communities) make throughout their lives.

There is a reciprocal relationship between culture and cognition in that, on the one hand, the experiences that are possible within specific cultures shape our brains and our minds, our scripts and frames. On the other hand, these experiences are processed and interpreted by means of cognitive scripts and frames; the way we act and form our environment is influenced by the use of these scripts. Cognition shapes culture just as much as culture shapes cognition.

(2) Narrative is one of the major ways of understanding life worlds (Jerome Bruner, Raymond Mar).

Daily encounters, the vicissitudes of life, human beings and events are interpreted by means of narrative. Cognitive scripts were reconceptualised by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson as narrative scripts, or a “story skeleton” which provides a basic tool of interpretation. In addition to such scripts which can be used in standard situations, complex narrative modes of understanding provide the means to understand complex situations. Narratives can be regarded as “pattern-forming cognitive system[s]” (David Herman) or “high-level generative models” (Hirsh, Mar, Peterson). The modes of interpretation available to individuals are shaped by cultures and the stock of stories which are in circulation in given communities or part of cultural

memories. To provide an example: the ability to construct one's life story is acquired in several steps throughout adolescence and formed by culturally accepted modes of narrative (e.g. implied importance of temporality and causality; individual vs. collective agency) and by (auto)biographic stories (Katherine Nelson, Tilman Habermas).

(3) If narrative is one of the major modes of understanding live worlds, there are two implications to be considered:

First, narrative competence, the ability to understand and create narratives, is an important means of social cognition; it encompasses more than what is called 'theory of mind', and is crucial for empathy and perspective taking.

Second, is desirable to know a broad variety of narratives (if possible from different times and cultures), featuring different modes of interpretation, since this knowledge can enlarge and refine one's tools for understanding.

(4) Fictional stories (particularly novels) can be important means of enhancing social cognition. Many fictional stories encourage readers to use their interpersonal abilities, their empathy, their 'theory of mind' and perspective taking in order to make sense of fictional characters and fictional worlds. Depending on the complexity of the story and of the narrative conventions inducing or blocking perspective taking and encouraging readers to empathise with or distance themselves from the characters, works of fiction can refine readers' abilities of social cognition.

(5) (Fictional) narratives are a powerful means of persuasion and of cultural change.

Empirical studies have shown that, whether fictional or factual, narratives can influence readers' cultural encyclopaedia and attitudes. By influencing listeners and readers, narratives are an important means of shaping cultures. Stories can confirm, perpetuate, revise, subvert or change implicit knowledge, hierarchies of values, and attitudes.

(6) Fictional stories are potentially more effective than overt means of teaching.

Since most adult readers know that fiction is 'just' fiction, i.e. something that is imagined and not meant to provide factual knowledge, they usually think themselves immune to the persuasive power of fiction and do not consciously scrutinise and check the implied beliefs and the values embedded in certain stories. If they read fiction as fiction, i.e. for pleasure and in a disinterested way, and immerse themselves in the fictional world, they fulfil an important precondition for changing their beliefs (Melanie Green, Arthur Jacobs). It is likely that they integrate the facts and attitudes encountered in such narratives in their knowledge stores. In addition, many of the barriers impeding empathy and perspective taking are either diminished or not applicable when reading fictional stories. For instance, reading fiction is 'safe'; one does not run the risk of social consequences when trying out different attitudes or experiences.

(7) Despite the productiveness of research in such fields as cognitive narratology and cognitive psychology in general and the effects of reading in particular, much more work needs to be done, especially in the following areas:

Particularly in the present situation, when more and more (young) adults read fewer novels, while spending more and more time using the new media, we need more research on the effects of different modes of reading, for instance on the differences of the consequences of 'deep reading' which accompanies immersion and the kind of interrupted 'skim-reading' that is encouraged by the new (social) media.

Although there are many productive studies in the field of 'ethical criticism', it would be profitable to know even more about embedded values in narratives: If narratives are persuasive and can change readers' encyclopaedia and attitudes, we need to know more about what kinds of knowledge and values are embedded in particular narratives. What are the dominant attitudes and values that are encouraged by reading specific (popular) texts and genres? Which tools are most promising in order to identify such embedded values?

We also need more research on the kinds of narratives and narrative conventions which heighten the persuasiveness of particular texts. There are many empirical studies on the effects of narratives and on states of mind which heighten or diminish the persuasiveness of a text. However, up to now there have been only few philological or narratological studies which focus on the persuasive potential of textual features, and even fewer collaborative studies by researchers from the fields of cognitive psychology and literary studies.

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Peter Hanenberg:

“Culture therefore shapes the mind as well as the mind shapes culture”.

Beck’s risk. In his laudation on Zygmunt Bauman – one of his last public statements – Ulrich Beck said (I translate from the German text): “It would be nice if that what Max Weber announced gloomily as the bureaucratic rationality of control would still control; it would be nice if – as Adorno and Foucault predicted – only the terror of consumption and humanism would terrorize us; it would be nice if the functioning of systems could be restored by appealing to ‘autopoiesis’. It would be nice if it were just a question of a crisis of modernity which could be mitigated with liturgical formula: more market, more technology, more functional differentiation, more rational choice, more growth, more weapons, more drones, more computers, more Internet and so on. It’s not a big deal to admit, that even we social scientists are reduced to silence in view of a reality which overruns us.” The conditions of liquid modernity, continuous change, constant mobility and recent threats of violence and terrorism make it impossible to transform experiences into attitudes, models of behavior, convictions and moral concepts which could work as common characteristics of a whole generation, time or culture – as Bauman explains in many of his studies. The silence, to which social sciences and the humanities feel reduced, is a consequence of their findings as much as of the conditions which led to them. However, science and humanities must not be reduced to silence. On the contrary, the conditions of an overwhelming reality ask for new forms of dialogue: research on liquid modernity needs liquid disciplines. It should be possible to read Beck and Bauman side by side with Semir Zeki, Bruce Wexler or Ernst Pöppel: on the way to Cognitive Culture Studies.

The concept concept. When Bauman points to the impossibility to transform experiences into attitudes, models of behavior, convictions and moral concepts he addresses one of the key issues in the research of social cognition. What Leonard Talmy has termed the Cognitive Culture System is all about the acquisition, exercise and the imparting of concepts, patterns and norms. Culture seen from the perspective of the brain is a set of concepts which allows to share meanings, predict, expect and condition behavior and to develop all kinds of moral and ideological standpoints. Culture therefore shapes the mind as well as the mind shapes culture. Cultural activities even transform the brain as the famous comparison of the cerebral structures of a piano player and a string player has shown. Other well-known examples refer to cultural difference as e.g. between collectivism and individualism in Eastern and Western societies which even lead (or base on) certain genetic differences, evidenced by statistical findings. There are two main challenges for future research: First, it has to be clarified “whether the embodiment theory of conceptual representations can serve as an integrated framework for both concrete and abstract concepts” (Kiefer/Pulvermüller, 2012). And second, the constitution in

form and content of those concepts has to be studied under the conditions of the embodiment theory. Embodied concepts ask for a permanent effort to guarantee a correspondence between conception and experience which is simultaneously the motor for change and for resistance to change – causing under certain circumstances the risk of no-response and silence, of distress and a notion of inconvenience in liquidity.

The metaphor metaphor. Conceptual integration is one of those “travelling concepts” which have found their way from Cognitive Sciences to Culture Studies (e.g. A. Nünning, 2011). The challenges of liquid modernity can be addressed by the theory of blending though in a metaphorical way. Where metaphor theory helps to understand the conceptual integration of a reference space on the one hand and a presentation space on the other, it explains how new meanings emerge from the blending of different mental spaces. Change and innovation are the distinctive qualities of metaphor as long as it does not crystalize into a regular form of representation. However, future research on conceptual integration might like to ask less for the conditions of change and innovation (as they are given), but for a better understanding of the forms of presentation which offer a certain kind of stability, indispensable to blending. We would need the metaphor of the metaphor to understand the common bases of representation without which no metaphor could ever make sense. Sense is not a matter of language, but of concepts (otherwise translation would not be possible) – and culture their accommodation. L. and P.A. Brandt have brilliantly shown how the sentence “This surgeon is a butcher” makes sense as a metaphor. They insist on the reflection of a “third space”, in which the force-dynamics of “agent”, “harm” and “patient” give relevance to the virtual space of blending from which meaning emerges. Cognitive Culture Studies could be the discipline to describe both relevance and presentation spaces as different examples of embodied cultural concepts interacting even in the construction of surprisingly new meanings. The metaphor is liquid; relevance and presentation are its solid and stable ground.

Critique critique. Going back to solid and stable grounds (or better: to the concept concept) is a challenge to Culture Studies. It is a matter of operation fields. Culture Studies claim to deal with those phenomena which are bigger than the individual (which would be dealt with by Psychology) and smaller than the universal (which would be dealt with by Biology). Culture Studies stand to Biology and Psychology like history to evolution and ontogenesis. Culture Studies deal with the institutional, textual and mental phenomena which constitute a defined operation field being simultaneously out of Biology and towards Psychology: making sense of the Human. Culture covers the distance between the solid and stable ground and the arbitrariness of a fluid singularity. That is why Culture Studies are central for a better understanding of society as much as of the individual. However, its central position has either led to a cut with all kinds of solid and stable grounds (namely in the rejection of certain methods) or – on the contrary – to a new submission to science and its empirical promises of exactness. The third way we suggest could transform such exclusiveness in a new form of dialog in which sciences learn as much from Culture Studies as Culture Studies from its solid and stable ground. Cognitive Culture Studies would claim a new critique critique asking if and how one can be critical without being normative. Could the concept concept be a way to turn visible and explicit the norms we are critical upon?

Do do. The surprising thing is that under such conditions Culture Studies would continue to do what they have always done. Cognitive Culture Studies would look at artefacts, texts and institutions as means to a better understanding of the mental construction of culture. They would allow for identifying concepts and metaphors and for analyzing how they negotiate meaning and relevance. They would help to reconstruct the narrative and performative construction of reality and bind it back to its neural formation. They would reject any kind of oversimplification in which culture is reduced to the movement of arms and fingers (like in the example of string and piano players) or to general distinctions (like between individualistic and collectivistic cultures)

which either appear as mere statistical findings or never existed or tend to vanish in fluid modernity. They would find a permanent challenge in the question, how abstraction and embodiment can come together. Only then we may understand how the human as a cultural being is simultaneously able and resistant to change. Cognition as the embodied mind is the battlefield in which culture drives meaning to life. In this simple sense, Cognitive Culture Studies is a Life Science.

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