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Culture in Social Theory
Greg Beckett

1.

The concept of 'culture' is central to both social theory in general (which can also be conceived of as the human sciences) and anthropology in particular, but exactly what culture 'is' remains problematic. Indeed, the general consensus in social theory seems to be that culture is not a 'thing' at all, but rather a process through which people live their lives. I suggest, following theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens, Williams and others, that the cultural process mediates between what can be seen as the two essential categories in all social theory - the objective (material/structural) and subjective (ideational/social) domains. The purpose of this paper, then, is to engage some of the various theoretical analyses of culture (or practice, etc.) into one discourse, so as to define the key elements at issue in any social analysis, and to suggest a specific role that anthropology can play in relation to a general theoretical analysis of cultures, social systems and social actors.

If it is the case that social theory in general is always an attempt to deal with the duality between subjects and objects, then any attempt to theorize culture as a process that mediates between these two seemingly separate domains must first attempt to move beyond the duality itself, and then attempt to remove any form of determinism which preferences one domain over the other. To begin with, the first suggestion is that subjects and objects are only analytically separable. This can be traced back at least to Marx, who in the 18th Brumaire wrote the famous lines:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (1869: 15)

For Marx, the material aspects of society (the mode of production) and the ideational aspects (the way people think and act) are intimately connected in specific historical realizations. Other philosophers linked the realm of ideas and the realm of 'the real' before Marx, but for a variety of reasons Marx and Marxism have been particularly important in social theory in the last half of this century, and it is precisely because of his importance that he provides such a salient starting point. In fact, many of the prominent elements of a theorization of the mediation between social systems (as objective 'things') and social actors (as subjective groups) can be seen in Marx's historical materialism and his critique of the capitalist mode of production. However, though Marx may have argued otherwise, his historical materialism is a deterministic mode of analysis that, though it links the material and ideational domains, still preferences the mode of production. Thus, the economic system becomes the base on which an entire cultural superstructure rests, and from the relations engendered by a mode of production come specific social groups (classes) and specific forms of consciousness. This notion of a determining base and determined superstructure has been held to be the key of Marxist cultural analyses by many (at least until the latter half of this century) (Williams 1977: 75). Determinism aside, what this notion of a base and a superstructure successfully demonstrates is that the cultural realm is only analytically separable from the material conditions of society. Of course, in this sort of Marxist cultural analysis, the indissoluble, and multi-directional connections between social groups, cultural forms and social systems are missed, as, over time, ideas of a base and a superstructure have become reified into distinct and separable categories. Against this, Raymond Williams argues for a reevaluation of all three terms:

...We have to revalue 'determination' towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content. We have to revalue 'superstructure' towards a related range of cultural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And, crucially, we have to revalue 'the base' away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and
economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process. (Williams 1980: 34).

So, the notion of a uni-directional mechanical determinism (of the base over the superstructure) is untenable in a cultural analysis, but the idea of determination, which is linked to the idea that social groups 'make their own history', is still necessary. Allowing determination to remain qualifies the idea of agency or action; determination is the setting of limits or constraints on the action of social groups (Williams 1977: 85). The move that is being made here is one that resists the conflation of the subjective domain of social groups and their consciousness from the objective domain of the (economic) mode of production which sets the conditions of society. Instead, a re-formulated Marxism allows for a conceptualization of culture as the process which mediates between these seemingly separable domains of action or practice. In reality, though there is no -ism named for such a view, we must conceptualize human societies as constituted by a whole matrix which includes both the objective/material relations in which people live and the subjective/ideational relations through which they experience their lives. Stuart Hall (1977) expresses this another way. For him, the base-superstructure formation must be rethought of in terms of a structure-superstructure complex. What is most important for Hall on this point is the principle of determinacy, which is the "structured sum of the different determinations" (1977: 327). As with Williams, this is to be thought of not as a final or mechanistic determinism, but as real constraints that exist, as the limits within and against which social agents' act.

To further elaborate a place for culture, the ideas of the objective and subjective domains of society, and the process that mediates between them all need to be reformulated. Until now, I myself have let these terms seem unproblematic, but in reality they may be some of the most difficult words to define, as they tend to be used differently by different theorists. The central problem that I am concerned with here is based on the ideas of what system, structure, culture and agency all mean. Following Giddens' theory of structuration, it seems that the first two ideas that need to be reworked are 'system' and 'structure', as these have tended to be collapsed into one another previously, especially in functionalist theories of society (Giddens 1979: 61). What Giddens proposes, and what I also suggest, is that the social system be viewed as the set of organizing principles, as the processes that engender specific relationships between the elements that the system organizes. Thus, systems only exist as logical sets of related (though sometimes contradictory) ideas. This is close to Marx's notion of a mode of production, which can only be understood in terms of the means and relations of production that it both needs and creates. In contrast to this, social structures are the embodiment of a social system in time and space. For Giddens, structure is better conceptualized as "structuring properties" which provide the "binding of time and space in social systems" (1979: 64). The progressive mood is important here, for it clearly illustrates the necessity of temporal specificity in any discussion of social structures. That is, structures are to be thought of as emergent forms or historical realizations of a social system.

This emphasis on time and the historical formation of social systems and structures is again reminiscent of Marx, whose material analysis of modes of production was explicitly historical. In fact, one of the central problems that Giddens was working on was precisely how systems are maintained or changed over time - that is, he was theorizing about the mechanism for the reproduction or transformation of social systems. For Giddens, any such discussion must include a discussion of agency and action (and in fact it must unite a discussion of agency with a discussion of structures). In recent anthropological discourse, it seems that the concept of agency has come to mean something close to individual, autonomous action. However, building on Giddens' use of that word, I suggest that the proper way to view the term agency is as a theory of social action. This itself entails several specific points. First, action is to be seen as a continuous flow rather than a discrete list of events. Thus, it is something that social beings are always doing. Second, though it may be more or less constrained (that is, subject to determinations), action is never determined fully - social actors could always have acted otherwise (Giddens 1979: 55-56). Beyond this, however, action should be conceived of as a historically specific and emergent process. Thus, social actors are continuously engaged in acting.
But how should we think of ‘social actors’? For Marx, individual human actors were never separable from the general social relations in which they were enmeshed. Thus, the notion of social classes became his primary category or unit of analysis. In a similar way, social agents or actors should here be read as social groups, for though individuals do act and engage with social structures through time, they do so in relation to other actors. This is not, however, to suggest that we take up Marx’s class-based analysis exclusively, for it may be that the social groups that are relevant for any particular analysis are not defined primarily by their (economic) class position. For example, it could be the ethnic fragmentation within a class position that is important in particular situations, or something else altogether.

But how does a notion of social groups acting help us to answer the question of the nature of the reproduction or transformation of social systems? The general idea is that the process of social groups interacting over time with social structures (as the embodiments of a system) will either reproduce or transform that system. Precisely how such a process might work needs to be examined more closely before we can begin a discussion of where culture fits in. In this regard, it will again prove helpful to begin with Marx.

2.

Following Hegel, Marx was interested in the dialectical nature of social systems. His generative scheme for societies, which involved movement through different modes of production, placed the engine of change from one mode to another within the system itself. That is, there exists some irreconcilable contradiction within any mode of production that will provide a space for one group to transform society (and thus establish a new mode of production, which brings new relations). Giddens and others have maintained this dialectical or contradictory conceptualization of social systems. However, the presence of contradictions within the propositional set which makes up a system is not enough to successfully provide a basis for a theory of social reproduction and transformation, because the precise nature of how any such contradictions can manifest, or how they can be concealed, necessitates a discussion of ideology and of the relation between social production and material production.

In a strict Marxist framework, the reproduction of social forms and of the material existence are linked - specifically, social actors reproduce themselves (their consciousness, classes, and subjective modes of living) through an engagement with social structures that the material mode of production (the social system for Marx) engenders (Hall 1977: 315). In his critique of the capitalist mode of production, Marx was most concerned with the contradiction between the idea of capital and private property (the ownership of the means of production) and the idea of labour (as a uniquely human attribute which becomes commodified in a capitalist system). But in a more general sense, the contradiction is between two distinct, and historically formed, classes - the bourgeoisie who own the means of production and the proletariat who must sell their labour power. The maintenance of this system can only depend on the successful concealment, by the ruling class, of the contradictory interests of capital and labour. The real engine for social transformation, then, becomes class-consciousness, which provides an awareness of the ‘real’ objective/material conditions of the capitalist social system, and the only possibility for the reproduction of the capitalist mode would be the continued concealment of these material conditions. That is, only social actors engaged with the social system can reproduce it - systems cannot maintain themselves (despite what functional anthropology says). Any theorization of the connections between the domain of social groups and that of social systems will thus have to be based on certain ideas of consciousness, ideology, and power.

To understand the role that ideology plays, and exactly what it is, it is necessary to understand how Marx used the term. First, realize that Marx was explicitly arguing against Hegelian idealism in German philosophy. As such, his historical materialism had the creation of consciousness and of ideas following from the ‘real’ conditions of society, by which he of course meant the material conditions or the mode of production. There are two important aspects here. First, Marx says that the "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men" (Marx & Engels 1947: 47). Second, he makes the nature of this connection clear when he says that:
Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. - real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces... Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (1947: 47)

Consciousness is determined by the material conditions in which people live their lives. Here Marx comes close to formulating a cultural theory, though he does not pursue it. He does, however, make a crucial distinction between consciousness and ideology. Consciousness is determined by life; it is practical and arises out of the way people live. In contrast, ideology is a set of historically formed ideas that obfuscates and naturalizes the conditions of existence. What is important, though, is that ideology is not what is obscured or concealed, but rather it is the domain of ideas that are most openly available. Thus, it is only the ‘real’ conditions of production that are concealed (Hall 1977: 325).

But both consciousness and ideology in Marxist theory are linked specifically to the mode of production, and in fact the dominant ideology in a society will be the ideology of the ruling class. This conceptualization necessitate a theory of power, and power for Marx should perhaps best be seen as structural domination of the ruling class over other classes. In a Marxist theory of culture, then, a social system becomes embodied in structures (e.g. the mode of production, political institutions, etc.) and in the practices and discourses with which social actors are engaged. Social systems, conceived of as sets of propositions and relations that organize society, are both integrative and contradictory, and these principles of integration and contradiction will be expressed in the cultural domain. Ruling ideologies both serve to integrate groups in specific relations and to conceal contradictions that would expose what for Marx were the ‘real’ relations of production. Perhaps more satisfying than this use of ideology is Gramsci's use of hegemony as a total organizing and integrating principle that naturalizes the social order. This itself can only make sense in relation to alternatives, or what Gramsci called counter-hegemonies, for without this, social systems become completely determining and transformation and change cannot be accounted for. The fundamental aspects of hegemony that make it more useful than ideology, are that hegemony must be secured and constantly maintained over time (i.e. transformation can occur by the replacement of one hegemonic system with a counter-hegemony), and that it cannot be maintained only by a ruling class, but in fact must be accepted and internalized by other social groups (Hall 1977: 333).

As we move towards a theory of culture, then, the above discussion means any such theory will need to conjoin the subjective, experiential domain with the objective, structural domain. If culture is to be placed as the mediator between these two analytic categories, then a discussion of ideology and hegemony leads directly to a discussion of power and action, and their relation to structures. Following Giddens, I suggest that power can be either the ability of an actor to achieve his or her will, or structural domination by one group over another - that is, power is both transformative capacity and domination. The difference lies in the differential uses of resources, which are always mediums for power (Giddens 1979: 91). Social practices, ways of living, action or cultural, are all ways of naming the process through which social groups use resources to either maintain the social system or transform it. All action involves power, and power is never completely held by one group over another:

...Power relations are relations of autonomy and dependence, but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy. (Giddens 1979: 93)

Here Giddens leaves the necessary space for a social theory that deals with both reproduction and transformation. The next step is to theorize about the nature of action and consciousness. Giddens distinguishes between several different degrees of conscious action: 1)
consciousness, which enables actors to express their intentions discursively.

2) practical consciousness, which is tacit knowledge that actors possess, but which they do not formulate discursively, and 3) unconsciousness, which is the realm of unexamined motivations (wants and desires) (Giddens 1979: 57-58). This multi-leveled formulation of the wide domain of consciousness further opens up a space for action in social theory, because it removes the more rigid notion of conscious, ideological domination of a ruling class in opposition to the false consciousness of the proletariat that emerges in many Marxist theories. It also allows for a range of differential levels of awareness of the social conditions in which action occurs, and in which people live. So, if Marxism says that social actors make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, than we can extend this to social actors reproducing society under conditions which they may be more or less conscious of. The final move that Giddens makes along this line is to distinguish between the intended and unintended outcomes of action, so that even if the action of social actors is directed towards a specific end, that action may have consequences which the actors themselves did not intend or desire, and of which they may not even be consciously aware (Giddens 1979: 59). Of course, unintentional outcomes may themselves become the basis for further action, because social groups do not only act, they also react to the conditions in which they live.

Giddens' theory of structuration provides a framework in which to place a theory of culture, but this itself might be more attainable if we move from his notion of practical consciousness and action to Bourdieu's theory of practice, which is likewise committed to the establishment of a dialectical relation between the objective and subjective domains, and to a theory of the reproduction of the social system by social actors (Bourdieu 1972: 3). As is the case for Giddens and his notion of practical consciousness, Bourdieu is interested in the rules which are not discursively available to social actors, but which they nevertheless seem to reproduce, and which seem to guide the sorts of practices which reproduce social systems over time (1972: 17). For Bourdieu, social agents are the producers and reproducers of the objective conditions of society (and thus of the social system) because their actions are in part determined by their own formation. The key analytic concept which Bourdieu brings out here is his notion of habitus, which is the... durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, [which] produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principles... (1972: 78)

That is, habitus is the effect of historical determinations on social actors, and it constrains the action or practice of social agents in a way they themselves are unaware of. More than that, the product of practices determined by the habitus is meant to be precisely those conditions or principles of production which created the habitus in the first place (1972: 79). It is thus the constraint on practice that makes social agents both the product of a historically specific social system and the (re)producers of that system. This is, in part, similar to the general idea of socialization, in that it is based on the internalization, by social agents, of the principles of a social system through the medium of social structures and culture in which agents are produced, though it differs in that socialization is usually conceived of as internalized through a variety of social learning processes. In contrast to socialization, the habitus, appears as natural rather than social or historical (Bourdieu 1972: 78). As such, the notion of habitus is similar to hegemony, but the difference lies in the degree of explicit power that operates to maintain this naturalization of an arbitrary though historical social order, and the degree to which alternatives can be said to exist. As an analytic concept, habitus provides us with a space in which to talk about subjectivity and identity. More specifically, it provides us with a space to talk about the formation of certain identities and what those identities might mean. This provides the necessary movement away from discussions of action, power and determined constraints and towards a discussion of how, exactly, people are both formed by those constraints, and, more importantly, what they might do within such constraints. This is, I believe, the area which Giddens meant to capture with his notion of `agency'.

Bourdieu's theory of practice, and more specifically his notion of habitus, brings us full circle back to discussions of naturalization. Taken together, as a single discourse on the processes
through which systems reproduce themselves, Marx, (and the later cultural Marxists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall), Gramsci, Giddens and Bourdieu all provide theories that overlap and converge. Whatever the precise nature of the cultural process might be, it seems to include the various processes that these theorists have outlined: ideology, determination, hegemony and counter-hegemony, action, power, habitus and practice. So, if social systems are to be seen as dialectical in a double sense - that is, as both in a dialectical relation to social agents and internally contradictory - then I suggest that the process that mediates this dialectical relationship must itself be complex and relational. That is, the processes that conjoin social groups and social systems can be viewed as a set of disjunctions, as a series of potential processes (...or...or...or...or). This disjunctive series, which I suggest we call 'culture', is then a list of the ways in which social groups are formed by systems and the ways in which systems are produced and reproduced by social groups. The particular aspects of these formations cannot be theorized in a general sense, but rather must be examined historically.

3.

What I have sought to do so far in this paper is mark the bounds within which a theory of culture can exist. The first move must be to locate culture between the domain of social groups and social systems. But this can only be done if the entire relationship between groups, cultures and systems is analyzed historically, and if the separation of the subjective and objective domains remains only an analytic one. Marx and Giddens provide successful theories for the connection between the material and social conditions of society, as well as theories of the nature of the reproduction of social systems by social groups. As discussed above, this can only be achieved through a variety of processes happening over time. For Marx, reproduction is based on the ideological domination of a ruling class and transformation is based on the attainment of awareness of the true material conditions of society (class-consciousness). For Gramsci,
4.

If I have at least succeeded in bounding the limits in which we can place culture for the purposes of analysis (for in reality, the elements of the model proposed above cannot be separated from one another), then it would be seem necessary to consider the possible ways in which culture itself is either produced or transformed, for this itself would be the process of reproduction or transformation of the social system. This means that we would need to talk about the social production of identities, hegemony, action, etc. Marx himself realized that his economic ‘base’ was most importantly about the ‘real’ relations between people as they engage in material production, and following Marx, theorists such as Giddens and Gramsci have placed an emphasis on the sociality of production. For most, it is primarily the use of power (whether direct or indirect) that is implicated in the reproduction of social systems. As such, I suggest that the contribution of anthropology to social theory lies not a theorization of ‘culture’, or social reproduction in the general sense, but rather in the production of historic and particular accounts of such processes. Others, however, disagree. Consider how Margaret Archer, in her book Culture and Agency, outlines a theory of the connection between the domain of culture and social groups. The suggestion is that there is also a systemic analysis available for culture that can illustrate the links between the cultural and structural domains. This of course must rest on a definition of culture:

... At any given time a Cultural System is... all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone... By definition the cultural intelligibilia form a system, for all items are expressed in a common language... (Archer 1988: 104)

The central problems with which Archer is concerned, are: 1) the lack of theorization of ‘culture’, 2) the problem of the conflations of social systems and social groups, and 3) the problem of the conflations of cultural and structural analyses. Like Giddens, she argues against the preferencing of either a determining social system (as in Marx’s economic base) or a determining realm of ideas and social groups (as in Hegelian idealism). But Archer goes further by suggesting that Giddens’ theory itself conflates the objective domain of social systems from the subjective domain of social agents precisely because he lacks a specific theorization of culture. This itself is a point well taken (and it has been taken up in this paper, though in a different way). More than this, though, Archer is concerned with the damage done by the reduction of action and practical consciousness to an essentially structuralist analysis which prefers the social system as the ‘hidden motor’ that generates the cultural domain and social groups (Archer 1988: 282). Again, there does seem to be a tendency to preference a structuralist analysis (usually some derivative of Marxism), especially in anthropology. However, this itself is an historical formation that is connected to anthropology’s self-critic and its subsequent ‘political’ or ‘moral’ agenda (both of which are connected to changes in social theory in general in the latter half of this century).

The question that I think is important is ‘how successful is it to theorize a general cultural system?’ I have deliberately left the idea of culture vague in this paper, preferring instead to attempt to only mark the boundaries of culture by suggesting the multiplicity of processes which constitute it. Archer, on the other hand, is theorizing about the specific and systematic relations between the cultural system and the social system. Specifically, she wants to examine how culture influences structure and how structure influences culture (1988: 285). What I would like to suggest is that any attempt to write a general program for precisely how culture does what it does (how it mediates between our analytic categories of ‘agents’ and ‘systems’) is doomed from the beginning. First, a conceptualization of a cultural system is not a successful way of talking about culture in social theory, or especially in anthropology. The advantages that Archer’s analysis affords do not outweigh the damages that may be done by conceiving of culture as a system. As I stated at the beginning, culture is best conceived of as the process of mediation between a social system and social actors. Systematic approaches to culture, rather than processual one, reify culture itself and offer it up to quasi-structuralist analyses (which Archer does, though she also argues against it). The specific mediatory processes of culture, which join agents and systems, cannot be theorized generally - they only make sense if approached through particular historical/ethnographic frames. In this sense, the
formulation outlined here (which follows from the theories of Marx, Giddens and Bourdieu) is more successful for anthropology as it does not make any claims as to the form that cultural processes will take or how they will operate. The ‘hidden motor’ which Archer points out does exist, but this in itself is not as problematic as she suggests, for it need not be the structural domain that is preferred (that is, anthropologists can and have preferred the domain of social agents and experience, pushing a hermeneutic analysis over a structuralist one). These preferences are perhaps necessary by-products of the specific intentions of the researcher and the specific nature of the fieldwork experience, and in anthropology, at least, the space for analyses to emerge from the ethnographic ‘data’ is a blessing, not a curse.

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