

The Conceptual Incoherence of “Culture” in American Sociology

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Abstract The meaning of the concept “culture” as used in American sociology is incoherent. Despite the advances and maturing of cultural sociology, the central idea of “culture” itself remains conceptually muddled. This article demonstrates this critical point by analyzing the definitions, meanings, and uses of the word “culture” in the field of cultural sociology’s most significant, recent edited volumes, handbooks, readers, companions, annual review chapters, and award-winning books and journal articles. Arguing for the scholarly importance of conceptual coherence, this article calls for more disciplined and cooperative theoretical work to clarify and move toward a more standardized meaning of “culture” in American sociology.

Keywords Culture · Meaning · Symbols · Codes · Concepts · Definitions

The meaning of the concept “culture” in American sociology remains as conceptually incoherent as it has ever been. When sociologists, even cultural sociologists, use the work “culture” to describe and understand human life and society, it turns out to represent an amazing variety of often-discordant ideas. Despite the fact that “culture” is a basic and essential concept in social science, especially sociology and anthropology, what that term denotes remains uncertain. Naïve inquirers and young graduate students looking to social science for a clear, coherent definition of culture will be disappointed. That is a problem. It has been more than two decades since the much-touted “cultural turn” in the social sciences. The study of culture has burgeoned in myriad fields. A host of leading cultural theorists have matured in their careers. The field of cultural sociology, we are told, has been “settling down,” has developed “a canon” of authoritative literature, and “several key concepts have come to form deep intellectual structures of the field.”¹ (Lamont 2000) Sociology has

¹The key concepts being “fields,” “cultural capital,” “cultural tool-kits,” “repertoires,” “cultural diamond,” “cultural resonance,” “idioculture,” and “cultural structures.”

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developed “a more muscular understanding of culture” and a “strong program” in cultural theory (Alexander 1992; Alexander and Smith 2001). There is no good reason, then, why American sociology has not by now theorized a clear and coherent concept of “culture.”

Why Coherence Matters

But why, one might ask, is conceptual incoherence even a problem? Who cares? Many scholars who study culture may respond to concerns about incoherence with a shrug of the shoulders. *Coherence is overrated*, I can easily imagine them saying. Why? For some perspective, let us engage in some sociology of knowledge. The cultural turn in academia roughly coincided with the “postmodernist turn” in the humanities and parts of social science—the late 1980s and the 1990s being a crucial time for both. The sensibilities of the former were hardly immune from the influence of the latter. From that perspective, a drive for theoretical coherence would be seen derisively as reflecting particularly Modern obsessions with “Science,” “Reason,” universality, order, and control, all of which became passé at best. Furthermore, many of the *empirical* claims about culture that scholars have made in the last decades—that culture itself is disjointed, unclearly bounded, unevenly shared, and inconsistently used—fit nicely with a scholarly *theoretical style* that is loose, unsystematic, and eclectic. For some it might make sense that the style of theory should reflect the nature of the empirical object theorized. Moreover, the larger political-activist environment broadly contextualizing academia and the particular cultural “politics of identity” that many scholars of culture since the cultural turn have embraced have emphasized diversity, tolerance, affirmation, and inclusion. In that kind of context, calls for “coherence” might sound suspiciously like a demand for uniformity, which feels oppressive and exclusionary. Finally, culture scholars’ achieving greater coherence around their central concept would require engaging in sustained intellectual criticisms of and arguments with culture-friendly colleagues with whom they disagree about culture, yet who also share deeper oppositions to theory rivals, like social “structuralists,” materialists, and rational-choice theorists. That might generate real internal conflict and divisions, and external perceptions of those divisions, which might seem to do little for the cause of culture. Better to live and let live. Given all of these factors, it is not surprising that culture scholars might be comfortable living happily with conceptual incoherence around the idea of “culture.”

I suggest, however, that in the end we all need to believe that *coherence matters*. When it comes to social-science concepts, definitions, and theory, we should value and strive for intellectual coherence. Coherence in theory is an important end. The empirical world may be messy, but that does not mean our collective scholarly thinking should be muddled. The point of social science is not to mimic the disjointed world with incoherent ideas. The point is to understand and explain that complicated world with clear, illuminating insights and lucid theoretical accounts. Social science if grounded on the presupposition that humans can know true things about reality—always fallibly, often incompletely, and sometimes badly, but also sometimes genuinely truly as real knowledge about reality. That, in fact, is why any academic discipline exists: to help us better understand reality, what its parts consists of, and how it works. If that were not possible, then universities and colleges should simply be shut down and everyone allowed to live in whatever fantasy-worlds they prefer to construct for themselves or

power-dominated world they are able to subjugate. But, happily, true knowledge about reality is possible through disciplined inquiry, among other means.

As a critical realist, I am also persuaded that reality—not our understandings of it, but reality itself—is ultimately a unified whole. Reality is of course complex, differentiated, stratified, and often difficult to understand well. But critical realism claims that reality ultimately hangs together in a kind of unity of coherence-in-complexity. And since reality does hang together, disciplined human efforts and practices seeking to understand reality should want their conceptually mediated theoretical accounts and explanations of reality, the outcomes of their work, to value and seek intellectual coherence, concord, and lucidity over incoherence, fragmentation, and inconsistency. We face difficulties in achieving intellectual coherence. We may never finally get to full theoretical coherence. But we should desire it as a worthy goal, as part of what counts as success in our disciplinary scholarship.

Finally, the kind of valid, reasoned, conceptual judgments and exclusions that all scholars *must* and *do* make in the realm of *theoretical ideas* has nothing whatsoever to do with the social and political exclusions against which the identity-politics activism of the last decades has struggled. We ought not conflate the necessary exclusion of bad *ideas* (good) with the unjust social rejection of certain minority groups of *people* (bad). There is nothing incompatible about expecting theoretical coherence in definitions and conceptualizations of culture, on the one hand, and being a cultural and political progressive, if that is what one is, on the other hand. Of course, intellectual openness, creativity, and readiness to consider all reasonable arguments are crucial virtues in social science. But those are different from wishing to avoid difficult intellectual arguments with colleagues, wanting to avoid airing the dirty laundry of a field's internal disagreements, and being happy to live with conceptual incoherence around one's intellectual community's key concept. I proceed, then, based on these reasons, with the belief that conceptual coherence in our social science definitions and theories is a good to value and seek.

Assessing the Literature

The conceptual incoherence in the scholarly literature on “culture” as a state of affairs is not new. It has been endemic. In 1952, the U.S. anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, which referenced 164 different definitions of culture proposed by various scholars.² I am also not the only scholar to point out the conceptual incoherence of “culture” in contemporary social science. Consider these other similar observations (Mayntz 1992; Silbey 2010; Spillman 2002a; Archer 1996; Berger 1995; Bonnell and Hunt 1999)³:

Whenever a group of sociologists meets to discuss *culture*, it becomes quickly apparent that there is (still) no agreement on the meaning of this core term of sociological analysis.

² Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University Vol. 47, No. 1; subsequently published in 1963 by Vintage Books.

³ From

Culture is a hotly debated and contested construct.... The meaning of the word “culture” alone is unstable.

[The concept of culture is] slippery yet inescapable [and] culture is notoriously difficult to define.... The concept can seem misty, all-encompassing, and ambiguous.

The notion of ‘culture’ remains inordinately vague despite little dispute that it is indeed a core concept.... There is no ready fund of analytical terms for designating the components of the cultural realm.

In spite of the Herculean efforts of scholars to agree on its meaning, “culture” remains one of those words that have eluded consensual usage.... It is the common property of a variety of users who employ it to different purposes.

Many critics have pointed to the vagueness of the concept of culture.... Is it an aspect of life...or a way of defining a certain set of beliefs and practices...? If it permeates every other aspect of life...then how can it be isolated for analysis in a meaningful way?

This article substantiates these observations, demonstrating that the concept “culture” in the social sciences remains conceptually incoherent.⁴ But before trying to resolve this problem, we first must be convinced there *is* a problem to solve. To make my case here, I examine a variety of important theoretical writings about culture published since the 1990s, analyzing their definitions, conceptualizations, and assumptions. Most come from cultural sociology, a few from anthropology, psychology, and political science. My sample of writings analyzed here consists of: (1) three important edited volumes theorizing culture in sociology and social history, published in 1992, 1995, and 1999 (Münch and Smelser 1992; Crane 1995; Bonnell and Hunt 1999); (2) four eminent collected works (two handbooks, one reader, and one companion) in the sociology of culture, published in 2002, 2005, 2010, and 2012 (Spillman 2002b; Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005; Hall et al. 2010; Alexander et al. 2012); (3) four *Annual Review of Sociology* chapters directly related to the study of culture (Edgell 2012; Kaufman 2004; Peterson and Anand 2004; DiMaggio 1997); (4) six books and five journal articles that were winners of the annual Mary Douglas Prize for Best Book and Clifford Geertz Award for Best Article of the Sociology of Culture section of the American Sociological Association between 1999 and 2012 (Benzecry 2011; Gowan 2010; Garland 2010; Fourcade 2010; Go 2008; Steensland 2007; Fourcade 2011; Zubrzycki 2011; Isaac 2009; Weber et al. 2008; Espeland and Sauder 2007); and (5) a variety of other interesting works theorizing culture in

⁴ I specifically mean “incoherent” here, not confused or contested, and at a collective scholarly, mostly not individual-author level. Individual culture scholars seem rarely confused, but often clear in their own minds—so it is not particular thinkers but the sum of their collective conceptualizations of “culture” that are disjointed and unclear. Also, scholars simply disagreeing about the nature of culture would not be problematic if the reasons for their disagreements were clear and their perspectives internally coherent, which they sometimes are not.

sociology, anthropology, and psychology that I have collected since the 1990s because they seemed valuable.⁵ *If we should find a coherent social-science conceptualization of “culture,” it should be in these writings.*

Neglecting the Basic Question

The first thing to note about these works is how little they ever address directly the concept of culture. Only a minority of them explicitly defines or conceptualizes “culture.”⁶ And only *one* out of the more than 210 chapters, articles, and books I systematically examine for this paper offers an extended, well-explained account of what culture is and how it works.⁷ Most of the works I examine here use various terminologies and images that imply different notions of culture that they seem to be presupposing, but otherwise they ignore the basic question of what conceptually they are even talking about. Whatever “culture” means is taken for granted. Of course, if most scholars shared something like a theoretical consensus about the nature of culture, then each writer would not need to spell out their own view—we could assume that they adopted the common view. But no such common view exists, as we see below. So the majority of chapters ignoring the question leaves us unclear about their approaches. Take for example Hall et al. 2010 *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. It contains 65 chapters and an Introduction, of which only seven (10.6%) offer an explicit definition or conceptualization of culture. Five (including one of the previous seven) summarize the conceptions of *other* cultural theorists, sometimes approvingly. The remaining 55 chapters develop their arguments without addressing what culture means. None of the *Annual Review* chapters I studied directly define “culture.”⁸ Of the five Clifford Geertz Best Article awardees, none directly defines “culture” or explains what culture denotes in their arguments, although one explains what a “cultural/semiotic code” is.⁹ Of the 30

⁵ Referenced below in individual footnotes not reflecting the works cited above.

⁶ Which is why most of the works I studied for this paper are not quoted below.

⁷ Go 2008, pp. 12–18. Go’s approach is intelligent, complex, and synthetic, but I think still inadequate, for reasons I explain in following chapters.

⁸ Edgell’s chapter (like many pieces we will see below) speaks of many things that are “cultural;” and she does mention concepts that seem related to culture, such as “shared...symbols,” “moral order,” “ideas in history,” “discursive traditions,” “legitimation,” “symbol systems,” “identification,” “meaning making,” “normative and nonrational pressures,” “logics,” “language,” “practices,” “symbolic struggles,” “the habitus,” “ideas,” “boundaries,” “metaphors” (pp. 250–251, 254, 255), but Edgell never clearly defines culture itself. The same is true of the Kaufman and the Peterson and Anand chapters, which seem to take whatever culture is for granted and focus on other concerns, only mentioning things like its “expressive-symbol elements” (Peterson and Anand, p. 311); Kaufman does note other scholars’ definitions of culture, however (344, 345). DiMaggio is explicit that his chapter’s focus is not on what culture *is* but on “how people use culture” (264), although he does note (and seems to endorse) the widespread contemporary view of “culture as complex rule-like structures that constitute resources that can be put to strategic use” (265). “Structures” of *what* exactly remains unspecified by DiMaggio, although whatever is structured is “complex,” “rule-like,” and able to “constitute resources.” He clearly rejects the view of culture as a “seamless web” or “latent variable” (264), and suggests that culture involves “shared symbols,” “frames,” “toolkits,” “schemata,” “logics,” “and that “culture exists, sui generis, at the collective level” as well as “is manifest in people’s heads” (267, 269, 272).

⁹ Weber et al. 2008.

chapters in Alexander et al. 2012 *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, only one (Paul Lichterman's) explicitly defines culture, and one other (the Introduction) references how other scholars think about culture. Likewise, of the 32 chapters plus Introduction in Spillman's Blackwell Reader in *Cultural Sociology*, only five entries (15%) offer explicit definitions or conceptualizations of culture, another one summarizes other theorists' views of culture, and the remaining 25 entries provide at best implicit conceptions of culture.¹⁰

We might think that these scholars have well-defined ideas about culture that they simply feel no need to explain. Or perhaps they are aware of the larger conceptual incoherence concerning "culture" and wish to talk about their own interests without digging up that larger problem. In light of the collective conceptual incoherence described below, however, we cannot take the lack of direct and explicit addressing of the nature or meaning of "culture" by most individual culture scholars as a sign of clarity or consensus within entire fields and disciplines. Part of the lack of attention to clearly defining culture may also reflect the fact that some culture scholars have been more focused on the *structure* of cultural elements than on the *content* of cultural systems. And other strands of culture research have been more concerned with explaining how culture "works"—for example, under what conditions it exerts different causal influences—rather than what culture *is*.¹¹ All of that is understandable and valuable. But it does not ultimately get us around the problem of needing to define "culture" itself. In the end, if scholars do not share a clear idea of *what they are even talking about, conceptually*, attempts to analyze culture's structure, "working," causal conditions, and so on, they are going to be beset with unnecessary theoretical and analytical problems.

Incompatible and Incommensurate Claims about Culture's Ontology

What do we learn from those culture scholars who do directly define or conceptualize the term "culture?" What we learn is that culture is a vast variety of quite different kinds of entities. I count at least 11 basically distinct views. Some of these descriptions seem to be meant literally, others only as metaphors. In any case, culture is not conceptualized by culture scholars as one or a few things, but as many fundamentally different sorts of things. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, to get us started, observe that many

scholars emphasize *practice* in order to oppose what they see as an overly linguistic or discursive definition of culture.... Many are...unhappy with a definition of culture as entirely systemic, symbolic, or linguistic. The focus on *practice*, narrative, and embodiment...is meant to...restore a sense of social embeddedness without reducing everything to its social determinants.¹²

Ann Swidler similarly suggests that culture consists essentially of *practices*:

¹⁰ Spillman 2002; the five are by Spillman, Bourdieu, Schudson, Zarubavel, and Alexander and Smith; the other one is by Swidler.

¹¹ Kaufman notes: "Many...[culture] scholars...show tacit disregard for the content of culture...tend[ing] to show more interest in the structure of culture than the content thereof" (2004, p. 353).

¹² Bonnell and Hunt 1999, pp. 12, 26, italics added.

There is now an abundance of work...arguing that culture should be seen as socially organized *practices* rather than individual ideas or values, that culture can be located in public symbols and rituals.... The notion of culture as a semiotic code has been one of the hallmarks of the new cultural studies... [which] usually refers to deeply held, inescapable relationships of meaning that define the possibilities of utterance in a cultural universe.¹³

A quite different way that other scholars conceptualize culture ontologically is as *cognitive representations* or *mental schemas*. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, claims that culture involves

agents' *representation* of the social world...of the contribution they make to the construction of the vision of this world, and, thereby, to the very construction of the world, via the labor of *representation*... [concerning] their own vision of the world... [or] their own position in the world, that is, their social identity. The perception of the social world... [involves this] "subjective" side...because the schemes of perception and evaluation susceptible of being brought into operation at a given moment...are laid down in language, are the products of previous symbolic struggles and express...the state of symbolic relations of power.... [This entails a] legitimate *vision* of the world and...all the cognitive strategies of fulfillment which produce the meaning of the objects of the social world."¹⁴

Yet other thinkers describe culture as a particular *realm* or *space* or *ground*. Ron Eyerman, for example, writes that "culture should be conceptualized as a relatively autonomous *space* of expression and knowledge." (Eyerman 2006)¹⁵ Ewa Morawska and Willfried Spohn say that "culture [is] understood in this overview inclusively as the *realm* of symbolic forms (ideational, material, and institutional) that individual and collective actors invest with intersubjective meanings."¹⁶ Mabel Berezin described the view of culture of John and Jean Commaroff as a "*space* of signifying practice, the semantic *ground* on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves to each other.... It has form as well as content; is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered."¹⁷ And Mark Smith repeatedly refers to culture as "a space," "a terrain of struggle," "a contested space," "an arena for the negotiation of meaning," and "a contested space or terrain." (Smith 2000)¹⁸ Thus, the particular kind of realm, space, terrain, or ground that culture *is* might be *about* expression, knowledge, symbols, or contestations, but culture itself in these cases is a realm, space, terrain, or ground.

Alternative views of culture include conceiving it as a *programming code*, akin to genetic or computer codes, that tell people how to think and act. For example, Leah Greenfeld and Eric Malczewski write: "The best way to define culture is by analogy to

¹³ Ann Swidler, 2002, "Cultural Power and Social Movements," p. 315 in Spillman, italics added. Exactly how "socially organized practices" are "located" in public symbols, however, is unclear.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 2002, "Cultural Power," p. 69, in Spillman, italics added.

¹⁵ italics added.

¹⁶ Morawska and Spohn, 1995, "'Cultural Pluralism:' in Historical Sociology," p. 45, in Crane, italics added.

¹⁷ Berezin, 1995, "Fissured Terrain," p. 102, in Crane, italics added.

¹⁸ for just a few examples.

DNA.... In human society, culture is the functional equivalent of the *genetic code* in animal species: whereas animal social orders are replicated genetically, the bases of our social orders are transmitted symbolically, or culturally.”¹⁹ Geert Hofstede writes similarly that, “I treat culture as the collective *programming of the mind* that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” (Hofstede 2001)²⁰

Making a quite different claim about the ontology of culture, various theorists tell us that culture is actually not a thing or a realm but a *process* or *processes*. Lyn Spillman, for instance, writes that “contemporary scholarship on culture in the humanities and social sciences... implicitly or explicitly treat[s] culture as *processes* of meaning-making.” She believes that many “confusions and disputes [over the concept] can be resolved if we consider ‘culture’ as referring to *processes* of meaning-making.”²¹ And while Morawska and Spohn said above that they view culture as a realm, they also observe that most culture scholars view “culture as a *process*, and cultural meanings and identities as flexible, diversified, and multivalent.”²² Likewise, Gordon Matthews writes, “I conceive culture as ‘the multitude of *processes* through which selves shape society and society shapes selves within a given linguistic and institutional matrix’ (Matthews 1996).”²³

Margaret Archer, taking yet a different approach (employing concepts first advanced by Karl Popper (Popper 1972)), defines culture as all of the *propositions* that all of human thought have produced and objectified—which Archer calls “*intelligibilia*”—namely, everything in the world which *can be understood* as true or false:

Culture as a whole is taken to refer to all *intelligibilia*, that is, to any item which has the dispositional *capacity of being understood* by someone. Within this I then distinguish the Cultural System, which is that sub-set of items to which the law of contradiction can be applied. These are *propositions*.... The Cultural System is restricted to the *propositional register* of society at any given time.”²⁴

Archer repeats that, “at any given time a Cultural System is constituted by the corpus of existing *intelligibilia*—by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood, or known by someone... society’s ‘*propositional register*’.”²⁵

A more popular conceptualization claims that culture consists of *meanings*, not so much the public codes in which meanings are inscribed but of the *meanings* themselves. Michael Schudson thus defines culture as “the *meanings* people incorporate in their lives.”²⁶ And Bennett Berger argues that culture consists of “symbolic *meanings*”

¹⁹ Greenfeld and Malczewski, 2010, “Nationalism as the Cultural Foundation of Modern Experience,” pp. 526–27, in Hall et al., italics added.

²⁰ italics added.

²¹ Spillman 2002, p. 2, italics in original, italics added.

²² Morawska and Spohn, 1995, p. 81, in Crane, italics added.

²³ italics added.

²⁴ Archer 1996, p. xviii, italics added. Archer thus moves experiences, myths, symbols, and so on—which other scholars consider central to the idea of culture—out of the cultural realm and into the world of interpersonal relations: “Obviously we do not live by propositions alone.... In addition, we generate myths, are moved by mysteries, become rich in symbolics and ruthless in manipulating hidden persuaders. But all of these elements are precisely the stuff of Socio-Cultural interaction. For they are all matters of interpersonal influence” (pp. xviii–xix). Archer quotes Popper, who fits her categories: “So we have these two different worlds, the world of thought-processes, and the world of the products of thought-processes.... The latter stand in logical relationships” (1996, p. 105).

²⁵ Archer 1996, p. 104, italics added.

²⁶ Schudson, 2002, “How Culture Works,” p. 141 in Spillman, italics added.

that are produced, reproduced, and altered by “identifiable groups of people” through “recurrent ritual practice,” “institutional forms,” and “the clash of subcultures.”²⁷

Another influential conceptualization of culture—following Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Ferdinand Saussure—defines culture as *public symbolic codes, systems, patterns, or sets*. Such symbolic codes or systems do not reside in people’s subjective minds or experiences, but rather in *objective, external, structured discourses, logics, or arrangements of signs* that have internally meaningful significance by virtue of their inner ordering and structure of relations. Two leading proponents of this approach are Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, who write:

Culture can be thought of as a structure composed of *symbolic sets*...[that] provide categories for understanding the elements of social, individual, and organic life.... A cultural system [is] composed of these structures...located in binary relations.... *Sign sets* are organized into discourses. These discourses not only communicate information, structuring reality in a cognitive way, but also perform a forceful evaluative task.”

Continuing, Alexander and Smith repeat that, “culture should be conceived as a *system of symbolic codes* which specify good and evil...by virtue of its *internal semiologies*.”²⁸ Elsewhere, Alexander writes similarly that, “I define culture as an organized set of meaningfully understood *symbolic patterns*.... Culture is a form of language [and] cultural sets have definite *codelike* properties.”²⁹ Other scholars agree with this approach, including Sharon Hays, who writes that, “culture [is] a structured *symbolic system*.... Culture operates according to socially constructed *logics* that are no less “real” than the built environment they permeate.” (Hays 2000)³⁰ Paul Lichterman also argues that, “Culture is a set of publicly shared, *symbolic patterns* that enable and constrain what people can say and do together...whether real, textual, or virtual.”³¹ Margaret Somers follows a roughly similar approach: “I use culture here to refer to inter-subjective *public symbolic systems* and networks of meaning-driven schemas *organized by their own internal rules and structures* that are...loosely tied together in patterns of relationships.”³² Quoting Geertz, Barry Schwartz says that “culture is...‘an historically transmitted *pattern of meanings embodied in symbols*, a *system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form* by means of which mean communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life’.”³³ And Julian Go defines culture as “*patterns of oppositions* and contrasts between *signs*. These patterns form an *internal logic*; they are relatively autonomous from the world [i.e., ‘events, happenings, things’] and thereby enable people to make meaning of it.”³⁴

²⁷ Berger 1995, p. 63, italics added.

²⁸ Alexander and Smith, 2002, p. 234, in Spillman, italics added.

²⁹ Alexander 1992: pp. 296, 297, in Münch and Smelser, italics added.

³⁰ italics added.

³¹ Lichterman, 2012, “Reinventing the Concept of Civic Culture,” p. 212–213 in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith, italics added.

³² Somers, 1999, “The Privatization of Citizenship,” p. 125, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

³³ Schwartz 2010, “Culture and Collective Memory,” p. 620, in Hall et al., italics added.

³⁴ Go 2008, p. 16, italics added; Go calls this a “seminotic system-in-practice” approach.

In contrast to this approach and some others above, yet other culture scholars—particularly those in cognitive anthropology and sociologists influenced by them—define culture as *practical knowledge* located in individual people’s minds, the kind of useful *ideas* and *know-how* people need to function well in a society. Richard Schweder, for instance, writes that, “by ‘culture’... I mean community-specific *ideas* about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient... [that are] socially inherited and customary... [and] constitutive of different ways of life.”³⁵ The anthropologist Eugene Hunn similarly writes that “culture is *what one must know* to act effectively in one’s environment.” (Hunn 1989)³⁶ Orlando Patterson also focuses on knowledge as ideas in information systems that comprise what people know:

By culture I mean a repertoire of socially transmitted and intra-generationally generated *ideas* about *how to* live and make judgments, both in general terms and in regard to specific domains of life. It is an *information system* with varying levels of specificity: on one level it is as broad as a set of *ideas* about styles of self-presentation; on another level, it is the micro-information system prescribing the best way to make bagels, curried chicken, or Jamaican jerk pork.... Culture is acquired by individuals; it is *what they know*.³⁷

Other definitions of culture that focus on knowledge instead emphasize not its practical nature but knowledge’s capacity to provide interpretive understandings about the world. Anthropologist David Schneider’s conceptualization of culture emphasizes what are essentially *ideas* and *beliefs* of these sorts: “Culture constitutes a body of definitions, premises, statements, postulates, presuppositions, propositions, and perceptions about the nature of the universe and [the person’s] place in it.”³⁸ Missing here is the strong emphasis on practical how-to knowledge. Bergesen discusses culture are based on “mental modules” and “mind/brain modules.”³⁹ Brian Steensland discusses culture in terms of “ideas,” “paradigms,” “subjective understandings,” “schemas,” “arguments,” and what is “cognitive and symbolic”—although it is not always clear whether he is advancing his own views or summarizing those of others.⁴⁰ In a different but related way, Steve Dorné emphasizes in his conceptualization of culture commonsense *descriptive frameworks of understanding*, suggesting that “an important component of culture” is “commonsense... *descriptions* people use to orient themselves to the world” and “stories, beliefs, and values [that] attribute meaning;” he recurrently refers to “social *frameworks for understanding*” and “commonsense *descriptions* of the world” and “*frameworks for understanding*” and “ways of *understanding*” and “ways of...perceiving action” and “social *frameworks for understanding*” and “social *understandings* actors must contend with.”⁴¹ Chandra Mukerji assumes that culture has to do with “*knowledge* systems.”⁴² And elsewhere, Mukerji and

³⁵ Schweder, 2000, “Moral Maps, ‘First World’ Concepts, and the New Evangelists,” p. 163, in Harrison and Huntington, italics added.

³⁶ italics added.

³⁷ Patterson, 2000, “Taking Culture Seriously,” p. 208, in Harrison and Huntington, italics added.

³⁸ Schneider (p. 202–203) quoted approvingly in Steve Dorné, 1995, “Cultural Conceptions of Human Motivation and Their Significance for Cultural Theory,” p. 269, in Crane, italics added.

³⁹ Bergesen, 2005, “Culture and Cognition,” pp. 37, 38, 39, in Jacobs and Hanrahan.

⁴⁰ Steensland, 2008, pp. 27, 28, 30, 250, italics added.

⁴¹ Dorné, 1995, pp. 267, 269, 271, 272, 276, in Crane, italics added.

⁴² Mukerji, 1995, “Toward a Sociology of Material Culture,” pp. 143–145, in Crane, italics added; she also refers, however, to “a symbolic world of meanings embedded in language,” “word meanings,” and “symbols.”

Michael Shudson write about “a network of *background assumptions*, symbolic taken-for-granted. And *that* is culture.” (Mukerji and Shudson 1991)⁴³ Marion Fourcade discusses “culture” in terms of “*conceptualizations* for imagining the social order and their associated institutionally embedded practices,” a view which she says is close to Sewell’s idea of “schemas.” Culture for Fourcade has to do with “*understandings*” and “*tacit knowledge*...[that people] acquire as members of [a] particular society and state.”⁴⁴

Then again, some thinkers argue that culture is not an ontological entity, exactly, a “thing” per se, but rather an *analytical aspect* or *dimension* of the complex, concrete world of human society. The cultural element of human life is present everywhere, but culture is not everything, since some aspects or dimensions of reality are non-cultural, even if they are organized or inhabited by culture. William Sewell, Jr. has been an articulate advocate of this approach, emphasizing semiotics. “Culture is,” he writes, “the *semiotic dimension* of human social practice in general,” “a network of semiotic relations cast across society.”⁴⁵ Margaret Sommers’ definition explains that, “I separate the realm of culture from other social forces by *abstracting* it out for *heuristic purposes* only as a distinct *analytic dimension* of meaning.”⁴⁶ Alexander writes, “culture is not a thing but a *dimension*, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but a thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of, every conceivable social form.” (Alexander 2003)⁴⁷ Here the network of culture covers or touches everything social, although culture is not everything social—since only the semiotic or symbolic aspects of human life are cultural. One can thus examine any aspect of human reality as cultural, but only by engaging in analytical abstractions that highlight the semiotic or symbolic dimensions of reality. Wendy Griswold offers a similar approach, defining culture, however, not in terms of semiotic dimensions but rather aspects of life that are *expressive*—culture can consist of anything, she claims, as long as its character is “expressive”: “Culture designates the *expressive aspect* of human existence...the *expressive side* of human life—behavior, objects, and ideas that can be seen to express, to stand for, something else.” For any human community, she writes, culture refers to “its enduring *expressive aspects*, its symbols that represent and guide the thinking, feeling, and behavior of its members.”⁴⁸

Finally, various additional scholars conceptualize culture using miscellaneous other images and claims about what culture “is.” For Berezin, for instance, culture is about shared *visions* of reality: “Culture [is] collectively held *visions* of social order,” though these are seemingly interchangeable with “meanings.”⁴⁹ Others (often in cultural studies, communication studies, and those with postmodern and postcolonial orientations) seem to believe that culture is defined by *self-reflexive agency* and *resistance*. For

⁴³ first italics added.

⁴⁴ Fourcade 2010, pp. 15, 270, italics added. At the same time, Fourcade also refers in discussions of culture to “meanings,” “styles of reasoning,” “constellations of practice,” “ideational elements,” “knowledge,” and “representations” (p. 3, 15, 17, 22, 239, 261).

⁴⁵ Sewell, 1999, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” pp. 48, 49, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

⁴⁶ Somers, 1999, p. 125, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

⁴⁷ italics added.

⁴⁸ Griswold 1994, p. 11, italics added. For Griswold, a “cultural object” is thus “shared significance embodied in form, i.e.,...an *expression* of meanings that is tangible or can be put into words...[such as] a religious doctrine, a belief...a sonnet, a hairstyle, and a quilt” (described by Berezin, 2002, p. 246, in Spillman, italics added).

⁴⁹ Berezin, 1995, p. 92, in Crane, italics added.

Steven Feireman, for instance, culture is about “agency” and *resisting* “conventions.”⁵⁰ Karen Halttunen says that culture has to do with “self-conscious *self-reflexivity*” expressed in “narrative.”⁵¹ Other scholars advance other images. Alasuutari describes culture as any people’s *way of life*: “Culture consists...[not only in] products and the implicit values they carry, but also ‘*the wider life [people] live*’... Culture referred to each group’s or community’s *way of life* and outlook on the world” and “the concept of culture has been taken to refer to something like *collective subjectivity*—that is, the *way of life* or outlook adopted by a community or a social class.”⁵² “I understand culture,” says Bennett Berger, on the other hand, “as a set of *tools*, or...a set of strategies constituting a repertoire—*instruments*...that get us through our days and help us make it through the night.”⁵³ Biernacki says that “culture...[is] a kind of *linguistic system* or...the symbolic *mediator* of agents’ experiences.”⁵⁴ Mark Jacobs and Nancy Hanrahan observe, after the cultural turn, “culture...[is] seen not primarily as a distinct or overarching system of belief, but as something more *pervasive* and integral to everyday life—indeed, as *the very medium of lived experience*.”⁵⁵ Mohr and Rawlings suggest that culture refers to all aspects of “the world” that are “social constructed.”⁵⁶ Harry Eckstein defines cultures as “the variable and cumulatively learned *patterns of orientations to action* in societies.” (Eckstein 1997)⁵⁷ Sun-Ki Chai write that culture is “the *basis* for individual *preferences* (goals) and beliefs” and “a *social-psychological* variable comprising an individual’s *attitudes*.”⁵⁸ David Swartz writes that culture, by which he seems to mean “symbolic systems,” broadly “includes beliefs, traditions, values and language.” (Swartz 1997) Nancy Hanrahan describes culture as comprised of three distinct levels, a symbolic order, an institutional order, and the level of experience.⁵⁹ Ronald Inglehart defines culture as “enduring...attitudes, values, and skills.” (Inglehart 1990) And, to conclude this overview, Columbia University Anthropologist Sherry Ortner writes sprawlingly that, “‘Culture’ is the *means of understanding* the ‘*imaginative worlds*’...within which...actors operate, the *forms of power and agency* they are able to construct, the *kinds of desires* they are able to form, and so forth...Culture is...*the grounds of action* and *the stakes of action*, with *real outcomes* in the real world and with *powerful representations* in literature, drama, and art.” (Ortner 1999)⁶⁰

To summarize, different culture theorists in the last few decades define culture as very many different things—as cognitive representations or mental schemas, practices, a realm or space, collective subjectivity, processes, propositions, meanings, public symbolic codes, practical know-how, interpretive knowledge and understandings,

⁵⁰ Feierman, 1999, “Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories,” pp. 206, 208, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

⁵¹ Halttunen, 1999, “Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity,” pp. 177–178, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

⁵² Alasuutari 1995, p. 25, italics added.

⁵³ Berger 1995, p. 8, italics added.

⁵⁴ Biernacki, 1999, “Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History,” p. 65, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added.

⁵⁵ Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005, “Introduction,” p. 1.

⁵⁶ John Mohr and Craig Rawlings, 2012, “Four Ways to Measure Culture,” p. 75 in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith.

⁵⁷ italics added.

⁵⁸ Chai, 1997, “Rational Choice and Culture,” pp. 45, 49, in Ellis and Thompson.

⁵⁹ Hanrahan, 2005, p. 50, in Jacobs and Hanrahan.

⁶⁰ italics added.

beliefs, the semiotic or expressive aspect of dimension of all of social life, visions, self-reflexive agency and resistance, ways of life, tools, patterns of orientation to action, linguistic systems, and the grounds, stakes, and outcomes of action (Fig. 1).

In case my larger meaning so far is not clear, here it is: “Culture” simply cannot be all of these things—that it, unless it is *everything*. It cannot even be many of them. As a matter of ontological reality, most of the ideas and claims above are incommensurate or incompatible. A “practice,” for instance, is a fundamentally different kind of thing from a cognitive representation, mental schema, idea, or belief. One is something people recurrently *do*, the other something in people’s *heads*. Both of these are also essentially different from (culture as) a “realm” or a “space”—since *activities* and *cognitions* are in essence ontologically dissimilar to *locations* or *places*. This sort of incommensurability and incompatibility also applies to many other of the above claims. “Collective subjectivity,” for example, is really different from an objective, public system of symbols and signs and from information systems (one is *interior* to persons, the others are *external* and *inscribed*). “Programming codes” are, as sorts of entities, also essentially dissimilar from “processes” (one is a *syntactic arrangement*, the other a *happening*). Furthermore, “practical knowledge” and people’s “meanings” are also not the same kinds of items as each other. And what could the objective “propositional content” of a society, its “intelligibilia,” have to do with, say, self-reflexive agency and resistance to social conventions? Very little. The bottom line is that many of the best culture scholars define and conceptualize “culture” in ways that make the definitions and conceptualizations of many of their fellow culture scholars impossible. So while leaders among culture scholars present the study of culture as having become an intellectually mature and lucid set of fields, evidence from the recently published theoretical literature

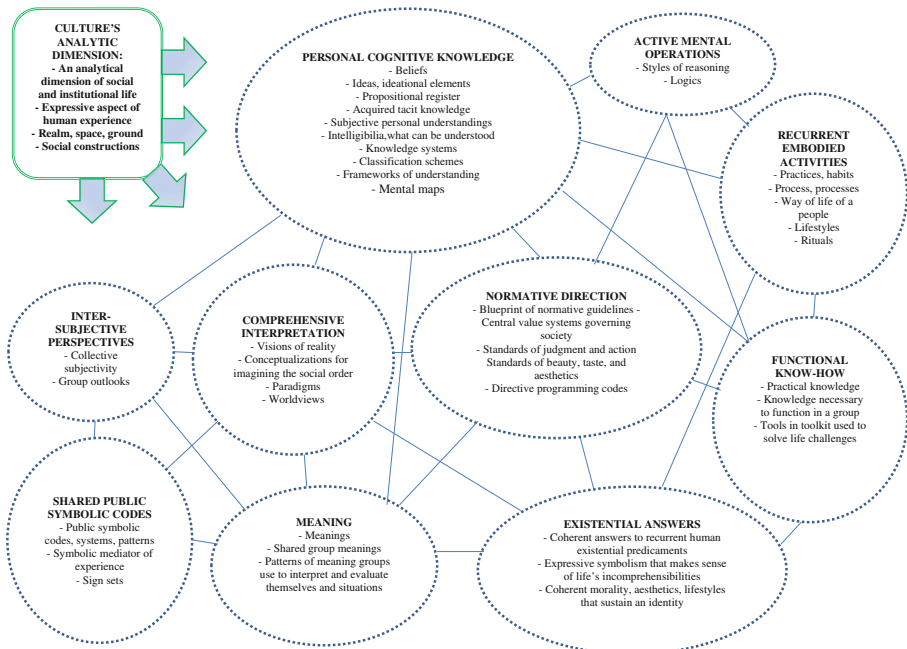


Fig. 1 Conceptual clusters of the culture literature’s definitions of culture

on culture suggests instead a certain “emperor’s new clothes” dynamic at work in that arena, at least when it comes to the concept of “culture” itself. What individual scholars claim about culture may be highly plausible. But what they as a group claim collectively just does not fit together. It is conceptually incoherent.

Complicating Combinations

So far we have mostly reviewed simpler, relatively focused definitions of culture. It gets more complicated. Numerous scholars conceptualize culture not with reference to one of the ontological entities or images offered above, but combine two or more of them into their single conceptualization of culture. Some of these are scholars named above, elaborating or writing elsewhere; others are new to us here. This multiplicity of defining images tends to add to the conceptual disjointedness, incommensurability, and incompatibility of the offered definitions of culture. To keep things simple, I merely list some of these as examples (Baumeister 2005)⁶¹:

Ideas + conduct: “Culture must be understood as encompassing both *ideas* and *activities*. It can be understood as a system of meanings that presides over a complex and possibly large set of actions and interactions.”

Values + meaning: “Most researchers adopt the common-sense notion that culture consists of *values* and *meanings* that its members share.”

Meanings and practices: “Culture is often regarded as the body of *meanings* embraced by individuals in a given society...the sum of *practices* through which humans build their societies or worlds.”

Process + action: “Culture is a *process* of semiosis, or sign-action, intrinsically involving the capacities of the human body for memory, communication, and imaginative projection, and is not completely separable from those capacities.”

Semiotic system + practices: “Culture...should be understood as a dialectic of [*semiotic*] *system* and *practice*, as a dimension of social life autonomous from other such dimensions both in its logic and in its spatial configuration, and as a system of symbols.”

Beliefs + practices: “One meaning [of culture] names a particular world of *beliefs* and *practices* associated with a specific group...referring to the distinctive customs, opinions, and practices of a particular group.”

Information processes + public representations, both *internal* and *external*: “Culture is the production, reproduction, and transmission of relatively stable

⁶¹ Respectively, Gary Gregg, 2010, “Culture and Self,” p. 224, in Hall et al.; Mark Poster, 2010, “The Cultural Turn,” p. 46, in Hall et al.; Eugene Halton, 1992, p. 40 in Münch and Smelser; Sewell, 1999, p. 52, in Bonnell and Hunt; Susan Silbey 2010, “Legal Cultures and the Culture of Legality,” p. 470, in Hall et al.; Patterson, 2010, pp. 139, 140, in Hall et al., italics added to all; Ellis and Thompson also allude to “values and beliefs” as constituting the heart of culture (1997, p. 4).

information processes and their *public representations*, which are variously distributed in groups or social networks. The information is declarative and procedural, pertaining to ideas, beliefs, values, skills, and routinized practices as well as information about the transmission process.... Culture is both *internalized* and *externally represented* in social relations, material structures, symbolic media, and other artifacts.”

Still other theorists of culture combine *three* different definitional focuses or images⁶²:

Action + material artifacts + discourse: “Culture should be conceptualized as a set of *actions*, *material objects*, and forms of *discourse* held and used by groups of individuals.... Culture is a tool that is situated in particular communities of action, shaping the contours of civic life.... Culture is tied to the existence of shared pasts and prospective futures.... Culture...is a form of practice that is linked to local understandings and social relations.”

Goals + values + world images: “Culture refers to...‘*goals, values, and pictures of the world*’ that are made manifest in speech, laws, and routine practices of some self-monitoring group.”

Symbols + meanings + practices: “Culture [is] a system of *symbols* and *meanings* and their associated social *practices*. In its most effective and theoretically plausible uses, the concept of culture is invoked...to recognize signs and performances, meanings, and actions as inseparable.”

Symbols + inter-subjective norms + propositional information: “I propose to use the word cultural (or culture) solely to denote the fact that a certain object is available in a *symbolic* form...when actors necessarily orient themselves toward these objects by means of symbolic operations.... The important thing is for actors only to be able to communicate with each other by having at their disposition an *intersubjectively shared* and *normatively regulated* set of symbolic operations that can allow the construction of *informative propositions*, which in turn can be kept open to collective...argumentation or use.”

Symbols + beliefs + thought modes: “‘Culture’...is [often viewed as] a set of overarching *symbols, beliefs, and modes of thought* with a recognizable pattern.”

Symbols + material objects + practices: “‘Culture’...designate[s] myriad socially produced, arranged, and employed *symbolic* and *material* aspects of the world” relevant “in the invocations and *practices* of the social actors who develop or encounter them.”

Objects + values + relationships: “Cultural Systems...[according to Martin Hollis] are fluid, complex, and often unstable compounds of *objects, values, and relationships*.”

⁶² Respectively, Gary Allen Fine, 2010, “Group Cultures and Subcultures,” p. 213, in Hall et al.; Schweder, 2000, p. 163, in Harrison and Huntington; Silbey 2010, p. 471, in Hall et al.; Michael Schmid, 1992, “The Concept of Culture and Its Place in a Theory of Social Action,” p. 98, in Münch and Smelser; Schudson, 1995, p. 23, in Crane; Hall, Grindstaff, and Lo, 2010, p. 5; Seigel, 1999, “Problematising the Self,” p. 296, in Bonnell and Hunt, italics added to all.

Many of these definitions, we must concede, are imprecise, some even theoretically sloppy. Still other scholars are definitionally even more inclusive, employing *four* or more significant features in conceptualizing culture. For example⁶³:

Symbolic codes + ideology + meanings + identities: “‘Culture’ is understood [by some] as a structure of *symbolic* forms, *codes* and schemas, or *ideological systems*, but also...as shared *meanings*, *identities*, and purposes.”

Symbols + ritual + discourse + practices: Social historians “began to turn in cultural directions and to look at the cultural contexts in which people... acted...[which] foregrounded *symbols*, *rituals*, *discourse*, and cultural *practices* rather than social structures or social class.”

Language + symbols + rituals + narratives: “Culture in a word...[is] *language*, *symbols*, *rituals*, and *stories*.”

Schemas + symbols + practices + life logics: “Culture involves “implicit *schemas* employed in practice,” employing “*symbols*,” “*bodily practices*,” and “the *informal logic[s]* of everyday life” as a perduring ethos of style of practice.”

But why stop at only four distinct features of culture? Some scholars discuss culture as including nearly “everything but the kitchen sink.” The following are examples, not of single definitions of culture, but rather lists of the terms and concepts used by different authors in the course of their larger analytical discussions of culture. These I glean from their treatments of things cultural. I take it—in the absence of more focused, coherent definitions—that we are justified in concluding that these authors suppose culture to involve or be composed of all of the following terms and concepts⁶⁴:

“Categories,” “styles,” “criteria,” “boundaries,” “tastes and lifestyles,” “status signals,” “standards,” “moral orientations,” “mental maps,” “cultural codes,” “resources,” “repertoires,” “meanings,” and “significance.”

“Islands of meaning,” “social convention,” “archipelagos of meaning,” “ways of classifying reality,” “logics of classification,” “norms,” “knowing how to behave...[and] perceive reality,” and “mental entries.”

“The semiotic side of...practices,” which involves “myth and symbol,” “social constructions,” “social customs,” “practices,” “ideology,” “intersubjective agreement,” “cultural models,” “social norms and conceptions,” “categories,” “rules,” “notions,” “ideas,” and “conceptual abstractions.”

⁶³ Respectively, Morawska and Spohn, 1995, pp. 54–55, in Crane; [Bonnell and Hunt 1999](#), p. 8; Schudson 1995, p. 22, in Crane; Biernacki 1999, pp. 75, 76, in [Bonnell and Hunt](#), italics added to all.

⁶⁴ Respectively, Lamont 1992: 1–9; Eviatar Zerubavel, 2002, “The Fine Line,” pp. 223, 224, 228, 230, in [Spillman](#); Frank Dobbin, 1995, “Cultural Models of Organization,” in Crane, throughout chapter; Hays, 1996, pp. 14, 21, 45, 69, 95, 198; Kalberg 1992, throughout chapter, in [Münch and Smelser](#); Eder, 1992, throughout chapter, in [Münch and Smelser](#). Geneviève Zubrzycki works with a Victor Turner-esque view of culture involving “cultural goals, means, ideas, outlooks, currents of thought, [and] patterns of belief which enter into those relationships, interpret them, and incline them to alliance or divisiveness” (2011, p. 28).

“Systems of meanings, including language, symbolic objects and representations, formal and informal rituals, conscious ideologies, and common sense,” “socially constructed meaning,” “ideas and practices,” “cultural models,” “ideas,” “a fully elaborated, logical cohesive framework for thinking about and acting,” “sensibilities,” “moral values,” “implicit guidelines,” and “ideology.”

“Reasons,” “values,” “moral obligations,” “ethics,” motivations,” “understandings,” “ideals,” “orientations,” “notions,” “configurations,” “world orientations,” “legacies,” “beliefs,” “attitudes,” “evaluations,” and “patterns.”

“Discourse,” “ideas,” “ethics,” “deep feelings,” “morality,” “virtues,” “expectations,” “significance,” “attitudes,” “orientations,” “virtues,” “moral style,” “duty,” “practices,” “symbolic resources,” and “ideological systems.”

Or take the example of David Garland’s impressive book, *Peculiar Institution: America’s Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition*. Garland discusses “culture” in myriad ways without ever actually directly defining or conceptualizing it. The book, which talks about culture almost continuously, seems to presume that readers are already quite clear about what culture is. Garland does, however, use a plethora of terms—I count at least 30, many of them used repeatedly—to describe what seems in his thinking to comprise the key *components* of culture. These include: sentiment, sensibilities, norms, values, beliefs, understanding, taste, symbolic markers, traits, attitudes, meanings, ideas, preference, concerns, speech codes, scripts, traditions, mores, dispositions, patterns of action, patterns of choice and expression, public support, established habits of thought and evaluation, cultural tropes and habits of thought, discourses, established scripts, habits, themes that figure prominently in the public sphere, communal belief, and majority opinion.⁶⁵ He also writes about what culture *does*, saying that culture “operates,” “ensures the...intelligibility” of practices, is “organized...around forms of life,” makes practices “[more or] less legitimate,” “views” the world in particular ways, is “a real cause of action,” “becomes effective” under certain social conditions, and serves as the object of conflict in “culture wars.”⁶⁶ Garland also uses modifiers to name a host of specific *kinds* of cultures, including “modern humanist culture,” “revenge cultures,” “open, democratic, confessional culture,” “a culture that shies of talking about death,” “liberal culture,” “anti-authoritarian cultures,” a “culture of civilized refinement and humanism,” “elite culture,” “warrior culture,” “bourgeois culture,” a “culture of refinement...[and] humanist feeling,” “Christian culture,” “a masculine culture of honor-violence,” “a culture of civilization and humanitarianism,” a “culture of liberal democracy,” “Southern culture,” “today’s death-denying, Thanophobic culture,” “civilized culture of contemporary liberal-democratic America,” “due-process cultures,” and “cultures of civility and humanism.”⁶⁷ Yet in and through all of this, we are never told exactly what culture *is*. Again, if culture scholars operated with near consensus about the meaning of culture, this would be expected. But just the opposite is the case.

⁶⁵ Garland pp. 26, 68, 147, 149, 151, 169, 174, 175, 176, 178, 180, 181, 182, 190, 198, 222, 252, 254, 268.

⁶⁶ Garland pp. 26, 60, 84, 89, 144, 188, 189, 235, 244, 253, 287.

⁶⁷ Garland, pp. 32, 50, 55, 56, 96, 97, 130, 144, 145, 146, 148, 183, 189, 190, 203, 209, 222, 251, 256, 288, 300.

One of the few explicit and developed definitions of culture found in the literature I analyzed consisted of the following, offered by Mark Smith in his book on culture “reinventing the social sciences”:

Culture involves the lived intersubjective symbolic relationships through which we understand the conditions in which we live.... The idea[s] of culture...are part and parcel of systems of representation which regulate the production of meaning...[and] distinct attempts to make sense of who we are and in what kind of social relations we exist. They...define what we can and cannot take seriously. Culture is at once a product of fragile connections established between the various elements of language and it is also bound by the institutions which are themselves the products of cultural practices.... Culture is a linguistic, symbolic, and dialogic set of relations, it is also contingent and its elements can be disarticulated and rearticulated.... Communication and cultural interpretation involve the negotiation of meanings and are seen as characteristically contested.⁶⁸

Breaking this conceptualization into its main component parts, we see that culture *involves* (is?) “lived intersubjective symbolic relationships,” and seems to be (is?) *part and parcel* of “systems of representation.” Culture also appears to *consist of* “distinct attempts to make sense of who we are and in what kind of social relations we exist” and “*is* a linguistic, symbolic, and dialogic set of relations.” What culture *does* is help people “understand the conditions in which [they] live,” “regulate the production of meaning,” and “define what [humans] can and cannot take seriously.” Some of culture’s *features* are that it has to do with “fragile connections...between...elements of language,” it is “bound by...institutions,” is “contingent,” has elements that can be “disarticulated and rearticulated,” and “involves negotiations of meanings” that are “contested.” Okay, so what are we to make of this definition? Much of it may be true. But, at the very least, it cannot be said to be tight and lucid. By my lights, it is rather sprawling and vague on various points. There is a lot packed into this definition and it remains unclear how all the pieces fit together. If anyone expects such a concept of culture to underwrite the “reinventing of the social sciences,” we have reason to be doubtful about what that newly designed social science will look like and be about.

Such wildly inclusive and expansive thinking about culture justifies Lyn Spillman observation that “different scholars...emphasize different analytic dimension of meaning and value, stressing artifacts, norms, customs, habits, practices, rituals, symbols, categories, codes, ideas, values, discourses, worldviews, ideologies, or principles. And this list is not exhaustive.”⁶⁹ William Sewell, Jr. also rightly notes that theorists have conceived of culture as “learned behavior,” “an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning,” “creativity or agency,” “a system of symbols and meanings,” and “practice.”⁷⁰ Correct, too, is this assessment: “At one time or another, myths, values, eating and dressing habits, scientific theories, social norms, novels, and situational definitions have all been treated as elements of culture.”⁷¹ Jacobs and Hanrahan note

⁶⁸ Smith 2000, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Spillman 2002, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Sewell, 1999, pp. 340–46, in Bonnell and Hunt.

⁷¹ Mayntz 1992, pp. 219, in Münch and Smelser.

that “the cultural turn embraced a...pluralistic conception of culture.”⁷² That is clearly an understatement. In fact, we are today dealing with a concept, “culture,” that, depending on who one consults, might mean anything from meaning, social norms, and “tool kits” to values, significance, myths, ideologies, eating and dressing habits, scientific theories, novels, situational definitions, visions of the world, perceptions, symbolic relations, representations, schemas or categories or patterns of perception and evaluation, classifications, classificatory strategies, namings, social conventions, symbolic sets, discourses, strategies of action, aesthetic qualities, “ways of doing, feeling, or conceiving,” “bodied sign practices,” images, gestures, expressions, cognitions, life-styles, attitudes, worldviews, cultural codes, aesthetic standards, webs of symbolism, mental maps of meaning people hold in their heads, rhetorical strategies, socially positioned agency, social constructions, styles of argument, paradigms, agentic resistance, and more.⁷³ One concept that involves all of that suffers conceptual incoherence.⁷⁴

⁷² Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005, p. 1, in Jacobs and Hanrahan.

⁷³ Hall et al. 2010; Spillman 2002; Alexander and Smith 1993; Bourdieu 2002; Zerubavel 2002; Halton 1992; Mayntz 1992; Richard Münch, 1992, “The Production and Reproduction of Inequality: A Theoretical Cultural Analysis,” in Münch and Smelser; Alexander 1992; Berezin 1995; David Brain, 1995, “Cultural Production as ‘Society in the Making,’” in Crane.

⁷⁴ A brief review of select definitions of “culture” theorized by sociologists after Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s 1952 paper, mentioned above, and before the “cultural turn” of the 1980s and 90s, shows that the conceptual incoherence I describe here ran continuously across these decades too. For instance, Herbert Gans’ discussion of various forms of culture make clear that underlying them all in his mind is “values,” a word which he uses 19 times in five pages of discussion of definitions, joined by adjunct concepts like “symbolic products,” “standards of taste and aesthetics,” “cultural forms which express...values,” “attitudes and activities,” “products,” “contents or products or cultural items,” and “standards of beauty and taste” (1974: 10–14). In 1976, Daniel Bell wrote that, “Culture, for me, is the effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the existential predicaments that confront all human beings in the passage of their lives;” it is “the realm of meanings, the effort in some imaginative form to make sense of the world through the expressiveness of art and ritual, particularly those ‘incomprehensions’ such as tragedy and death that arise out of the existential predicaments which every self-conscious human being must confront at some point in his life;” that “I mean by culture...the realm of symbolic forms and...the arena of expressive symbolism...which seek to explore and express the meaning of human existence in some imaginative form;” and that “culture...is a continual process of sustaining an identity through the coherence gained by a consistent aesthetic point of view, the moral conception of the self, and a style of life which exhibits those conceptions in the objects that adorn one’s home and oneself and in the taste which expresses those points of view. Culture is thus the realm of sensibility, of emotion and moral temper, and of the intelligence, which seeks to order these feelings” (1976: xv, xx–xxi, 12, 36). This definition, Bell said, “means less than the anthropological catchall which defines any ‘patterned way of life’ as a culture, and more than the aristocratic tradition which restricts culture to refinement and to the high arts” (xv). Then again, “culture [consists of] meanings shared in common by large groups,” wrote Daniel Yankelovich in 1981 (12). Milton Yinger said, “among the numerous definitions, I prefer those that focus on culture as a blueprint, a system of normative guidelines” (1982: 39). Edward Shils defined culture in 1982 as “the realm of values and beliefs...the orders and symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society.... [involving] general standards of judgment and action, and certain concrete values...the central value system of society...intimately connected with what the society holds to be sacred” (2002 [1982]: 47, 48, quoted in Spillman). “Culture may be...defined as the symbolic-expressive aspect of human behavior;” wrote Robert Wuthnow, James D. Hunter, Albert Bergesen, and Edith Kurzweil (1984: 3). Finally, writing near the start and as a partial cause of the “cultural turn,” Robert Bellah and colleagues defined culture as, “those patterns of meaning that any group or society uses to interpret and evaluate itself and its situation.... Since culture always has a history, it frequently takes the form of tradition.... We take culture to be a constitutive dimension of all human action” (1985: 333).

Six Related Concerns

Before moving forward to engage more constructive thinking, it is worth briefly raising six issues related to the definitional problems noted above. Noting them here may help us to avoid repeating them later. One problem in some theoretical descriptions of culture is the confusing of different *kinds of statements* about culture. Sometimes a “definition” or “explanation” of culture conflates descriptions of what culture *is* (nouns) with what culture *does* (verbs) and with what culture *is like* (adjectives). This conceptualization of culture, for example, intended to prepare the reader for a discussion of the environment and culture, does exactly that:

We nominate four ways to think about culture: 1. *Culture is performed*. This is the ordinary anthropological sense of culture as something held and practiced in common—a whole way of life. Culture is something humans do.... 2. *Culture is autonomous*. Culture is viewed here as signs, customs, symbols, codes, and texts of meaning.... 3. *Culture is creative*. Human cultures are expressive, reflexive, and creative. 4. *Culture travels*. And in its movement it is transformed...[and] embedded in a series of relationships and exchanges across time and space...that are reflexive and transformative.⁷⁵

The conceptual slippage evident here adds another layer of confusion to an already problematic literature. What in all of this, if anything, tells us what culture *per se is*? And then, knowing that, what part elaborates on what culture is able to *do* or always *does*, that is, what kinds of capacities and limits culture has? And then, having said that, what parts of this statement simply modify or qualify the given definition by describing particular qualities, attributes, or features of culture? I, for one, cannot tell. The moral of this story, then, is: When we explain culture, we have to be very clear about what we are claiming regarding its ontology, its “location,” its causal capacities, its limits, and its descriptive characteristics. These are not all the same thing. The clearer we can be about them, the better.

Second, and somewhat related, another problematic slippage often occurs in the theoretical literature on culture—namely, a subtle but important shift in writing from the use of the noun “culture” to use of the adjective “cultural.” Labeling items as “cultural” is of course fine, but only if we first actually know what “culture” is that modifies the items then said to be “cultural.” Very often, however, theorists do not first conceptualizing culture before attributing its relevance to other objects. Take, for example, Marion Fourcade’s award-winning article, “Economic Valuation and the Nature of ‘Nature.’” Nowhere in it does she say what *culture is*, what she means the concept to denote. Yet she modifies a host of noun objects as *cultural*, including cultural “claims,” “narratives,” “conditions,” “specificities,” “reasons,” “difference,” “publicly funded works,” “sense,” “meaning,” “formation,” “assumptions,” “inventory,” “inclination,” “tension,” “significance,” “authorities,” “understanding,” “constructions,” “identity revivals,” “process,” “universe,” “coherence,” and “category.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Trevor Hogan, Divya Anand, and Kirsten Henderson, 2010, “Environment and Culture,” p. 341, in Hall et al., italics in original.

⁷⁶ Fourcade 2011, pp. 1725, 1728, 1729, 1730, 1731, 1734, 1735, 1736, 1737, 1739, 1740, 1751, 1766, 1768, 1769, 1770; Fourcade also refers in her discussions of culture to “views,” “attitudes,” “symbolic boundaries,” “values,” “assumptions,” “ideas,” and “sensibilities,” pp. 1729, 1730, 1735, 1770.

Fourcade is only one example. This pattern can be observed in many if not most of the articles, books, and chapters examined in this analysis.⁷⁷ What is going on here? Defining “culture” as a noun forces us to say what culture *is*, what it consists of, to describe its ontology. That is not easy. To instead call something “cultural” by using the word in adjective form enables us to slide past the definitional question, pretend we know and agree on what culture is, and then freely apply it as a descriptor or modifier to other nouns. That is easy. To shift from having to explain “culture” (hard) to simply naming things “cultural” (easy) may offer a kind of escape hatch through which to slip when the ontological question is too difficult to answer. But if we do not really know what culture is, then on what basis can we proceed to identify other things as cultural?⁷⁸ Again, authors may know what culture means in their own heads, but if they do not explain it clearly in writing, the public world of scholarship and its consumption remains muddled.

Third, one notes in a broad review of the social science literature on culture the heavy reliance of theorists on *metaphors* to make key points. We read much in this literature about toolkits, maps, pictures, webs, networks, models, DNA, genetic codes, spaces, realms, programming, information processing, instruments, repertoires, and islands of meaning, symbols, semiotics, knowledge, etc. This use of metaphors is appropriate and useful, both because metaphors can convey insightful images and connotations of meaning that non-metaphorical language cannot, and because culture itself seems to entail and employ the kind of suggestive visualized associations that operate in metaphorical communication. Indeed, much of human thinking and communication in all its richness relies heavily on metaphors. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003) At the same time, we must be careful not to let metaphors *substitute* for careful thinking, definition, and explication—which I think it sometimes does. Definitions and conceptualizations that say that “X is something *like* A and something *like* B” are usually anemic. The power of metaphors is precisely their suggestiveness, incomplete comparisons, and the intuitive insights they evoke. But metaphors are relatively weak on clarity, precision, and direct explanation. As we theorize culture, therefore, we should rely on metaphors to enrich, elucidate, and suggest—but not to replace the heavy-lifting work of clear, straightforward thought and prose to define and explain precisely what we mean by “culture.”

A fourth problem worth noting concerns the difficult matter of “meaning.” Michèle Lamont writes that cultural sociology has solidified “a clearly shared focus on meaning-making.”⁷⁹ Lyn Spillman agrees that cultural sociology is all about “processes of meaning-making.”⁸⁰ Alexander, Jacob, and Smith write that “all cultural sociologists are committed to meaning-centered analysis.”⁸¹ While numerous such theorists claim

⁷⁷ Including, among very many others, Weber et al. 2008; Isaac 2009; Zubrzycki 2011; and Mukerji and Schudson (eds.), 1991.

⁷⁸ A common variant of the practice (also noted above in Garland) just described is adding modifying adjectives to the noun “culture” in a way that specifies the kind of culture in question, yet, again, without necessarily explaining culture in the first place—including, for instance, “audit culture,” “modern culture” “visual and material culture,” “Polish culture,” “popular culture,” “folk culture,” “Catholic culture,” “movement-relevant culture,” “cooperative culture,” and “American culture” (Espeland and Sauder, 2011, pp. 2, 4; Zubrzycki 2011, pp. 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 29, 32, 48; and Isaac 2009, pp. 942, 943, 950, 958).

⁷⁹ Lamont 2000, p. 606, italics added.

⁸⁰ Spillman 2002, pp. 1, 2.

⁸¹ Alexander et al. 2012, pp. 4–6.

that meanings and meaning-making stand at the center of what culture is about, culture scholars who *directly, explicitly, and clearly theorize the nature of meaning* are few. It hardly ever happens. But how can academic scholars name “meaning” as the defining feature of their careers’ field of study and research agendas, and yet neglect to address and explain what “meaning” actually *is*, where it comes from, where it is located, and how it works? It’s like electrical engineers not really understanding electricity, or architects not thinking very clearly among themselves about the nature of function and form. Yet Pertti Alasuutari is correct in conceding that, “the ‘meaning’ of something is what it ‘means,’” but it is surprisingly difficult to move beyond this circular definition. Indeed, in the literature the term has been used quite loosely, and with more than one meaning.”⁸² David Maines likewise observed—in a 2000 *Contemporary Sociology* symposium on “Culture and Meaning”—that, “meaning...is at best a sensitizing concept” and “meaning has been seriously under-theorized” in cultural sociology. (Maines 2000) Illustrating this very point, Barry Glassner, in his piece in the same issue, “Where Meanings Get Constructed,” never defines what he or anyone else means by “meaning,” but only observes that “there is little agreement, even among [social] constructionists, about where meanings are constructed.” (Glassner 2000) For that matter, *none* of the writers in that symposium on meaning directly theorize meaning.

On the few occasions when culture scholars do attempt to explain “meaning,” their own meanings prove to be unclear and at times nonsensical. Take, for example, three instances of Pertti Alasuutari trying to explain how meaning relates to culture and so functions in human social life. First: “In empirical sociological research, the concept of meaning often refers to the symbolism that is associated with specific objects or activities.”⁸³ What? “Meaning” denotes symbolism? Or “refers to” it? What might that mean? That meanings are simply defined as or consist of symbolism per se? How is that illuminating or helpful? Second, Alasuutari writes that everyday social life is

mediated through meanings.... Reality is socially constructed through and through; it is composed of interpretations of meanings and rules of interpretations on the basis of which people orientate themselves in their everyday life.... Reality only exists to people through meanings. The world does not present itself to us ‘as is,’ but always through the relationship we have to the world.”⁸⁴

On first hearing, this sounds like ordinary social constructionism. When it comes to the matter of meaning, however, it is nonsense. Reality is *not* “composed of” interpretations of meanings. Material entities are part of reality. Nor is reality somehow restricted to humans by meanings that operate as some kind of master perceptual or cognitive traffic-control operator. Humans in fact naturally *belong in and to* and are *composed of* reality. (Smith 2010; Searle 1997) Anyway, what actually *is* meaning here? The “relationship we have to the world?” Mediating social constructions? What do those mean? At best this is confusing. Yet Alasuutari is not surrounded by a lot of culture-theory colleagues who are performing that much better than he. Take David Maines, who says that, when attempting to theorize meaning, “most sociologists draw

⁸² Alasuutari, 1995, p. 26.

⁸³ Alasuutari, 1995, p. 26.

⁸⁴ Alasuutari 1995, p. 27.

from a general social behavioristic framework to direct attention to shared or common responses, significations, intentions and goals, and, in general, the interpretive and representational processes that underlie human conduct.”⁸⁵ That is at least intelligible. But, again, it does little to tell us much about meaning itself. The metaphors “direct attention,” and “underlie” create ambiguity here. Maines seems to be suggesting that “meaning” has to do with representations and interpretations related to “responses, significations, intentions, and goals” (but how, exactly?) that make possible or cause human behavior and action. That is not wrong sounding, necessarily. But neither is it very clear or informative. Again, Maines is not particularly guilty of intellectual vice here. He at least is directly addressing this thorny topic. But he, like Alasuutari, illustrates the unsatisfying nature of the discussions on the few occasions when culture theorists explicitly engage the nature of meaning. The moral of this story is: Any account of culture that hopes to improve on the current state of the literature, and thinks that meaning or meaning-making is an important component of culture, will have to directly, explicitly, and clearly theorize the nature of this crucial idea, “meaning.” (Bergen 2012)⁸⁶

Fifth, many contemporary culture theorists are intent on attacking the idea that culture has anything to do with human subjectivity. They presuppose that people’s subjectivities are either methodologically inaccessible⁸⁷ or substantively extraneous, and conclude that culture cannot be centered in the human subjective but must be “located” elsewhere—in bodily practices, symbolic systems, and so on. Ann Swidler thus disparages views of meaning that associate it with “ineffable subjectivity,” “ephemeral subjectivities,” and mere personal “mentalities.”⁸⁸ Jeffrey Alexander writes that understanding culture “does not mean orienting ourselves to the *idiosyncratic* attitudes of individuals. This is the ‘*getting into the actor’s head*’ approach” that others wrongly advocate.⁸⁹ Julian Go makes a point to say up-front that his approach “locates meaning *not* in...people’s heads and hearts.”⁹⁰ And Sharon Hays claims that, “sociologists who have not participated in the cultural turn still frequently conceptualize culture in narrow ways.... For instance, much of sociology continues to be *haunted* by an image of culture as solely *subjective, private, buried deep inside the heads* of individual actors, and therefore relatively inaccessible to empirical research.”⁹¹ Such examples could be multiplied.⁹² Apparently, then, the cultural turn has sidelined human subjectivity. The problem, however, is that subjectivity is actually impossible to escape or eliminate.⁹³ So if

⁸⁵ Maines 2000, p. 578.

⁸⁶ For a recent attempt by a cognitive scientist to explain meaning.

⁸⁷ The problem here is social science being captive to an impossible doctrine of empiricism, which states that only that which can be directly observed may count as evidence forming knowledge—see Christian Smith 2010.

⁸⁸ Swidler, 2002, pp. 313, 315, in Spillman, italics added.

⁸⁹ Alexander 1992, p. 296, in Münch and Smelser, italics added.

⁹⁰ Go 2008, p. 16, this after having critiqued the structural functionalist view of culture that locates “values” “inside” of people.

⁹¹ Hays 2000, p. 596.

⁹² Bonnell and Hunt correctly note that numerous scholars “advocate a cultural approach that is less intellectualist and mentalist and more corporeal” (1999: 13).

⁹³ Thus we observe sneaking back into Hays’ account the observation that, “culture encompasses language, symbols, rituals, everyday practices, values, norms, ideas, the categories of thought and knowledge, and the material products, institutional practices, and ways of life established by these” (2000, p. 597)—how, we might ask, could values, norms, ideas, thought, knowledge, and even rituals operate apart from human subjectivity?

sidelining subjectivity is where the cultural turn has headed us, then it was a wrong turn. In fact, most of the post-cultural-turn definitions of culture reviewed above implicitly depend upon and often explicitly reference the reality and function of human subjectivity. How else could meanings, beliefs, ideas, interpretations, knowledge, understandings, cognitive representations, norms, values, standards, visions, outlooks, information, self-reflexivity, and so on make any sense, if not through human subjectivity? The effort to sidestep the subjective by focusing on “embodied practices” does not work, since practices by definition are *meaningful*, repeated bodily actions. And those meanings eventually have got to be meaningful *to somebody*, usually to those engaged in the practices and their “audiences,” or else they simply are *not* meaningful. Without the “subjectively meaningful” of practices, all that is left over is mere *behavior*—which hardly seems like a good end-product for a robust *cultural* social science. The attempt to avoid human subjectivity by focusing culture on “objective, public sign systems” likewise falters, since such meaningful sign systems are always created, “read,” interpreted, and responded to by people for whom and precisely because the signs also have *subjective* meaning.⁹⁴ In short, the meaning of the sign system that is indeed objective and public necessarily presupposes and depends upon the reality and operation of subjective human persons who construct, understand, and are shaped by them.⁹⁵ To think that a cultural (or any) social science can or should ignore human subjectivity is a not-very-clearly-considered position. (Smith 2015) I will develop this argument about subjectivity elsewhere. For present purposes, suffice it to note that part of the incoherence in contemporary theories of culture results from an impossible attempt to evade human subjectivity, and that any more coherent and fruitful account of culture will have to take subjectivity entirely seriously, however methodologically difficult that is.

Sixth and finally, a different angle on understanding theorists’ conceptualizations of culture is gained by considering that which *contrasts* with culture, what culture is *not*. Many scholars, for example, contrast culture with *biology*, *nature*, and human *universals*. Spillman writes, “the focus on culture contrasts with accounts of human action emphasizing nature or biology...[and] universally shared psychological processes or principles.”⁹⁶ Hayden White explains that, “I call consumerism a ‘culture’ because obviously there is nothing ‘natural’ about it. The desire to consume is a cultivated desire, a product of the processes of cultural production.”⁹⁷ Steven Feirerman likewise discusses what is “cultural, not natural.”⁹⁸ For other theorists, cultural explanations contrast primarily with *materialism* and *materialists accounts of history*, which, expressed in scholarship, place an explanatory focus on “the relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and power.”⁹⁹ Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith similarly observe that many

⁹⁴ Genealogically, the crucial mistake which led cultural theorists to think otherwise is traceable to Ferdinand Saussure’s misguided insistence that signs are not externally referencing, but instead obtain their meaning by virtue of their *internal* structures of relations; to correct our course we need to recapture a critical realist understanding of signs as externally referencing, which is what makes their structured internal oppositions also meaningful—see Christian Smith 2010, pp. 119–205.

⁹⁵ Alexander and Smith, after stressing the objective, public nature of cultural codes also must end up acknowledging that they indeed “are *internalized*, and hence provide the foundation for a strong moral imperative” (2002, p. 234, in Spillman).

⁹⁶ Spillman 2002, p. 5.

⁹⁷ White, 1999, “Afterword,” pp. 318, 319, in Bonnell and Hunt.

⁹⁸ Feirerman, 1999, p. 208, in Bonnell and Hunt; also see Poster, 2010, p. 46, in Hall et al.; Greenfeld and Malczewski, 2010, pp. 526–27, in Hall et al.; Sewell, 1999, p. 40, in Bonnell and Hunt.

⁹⁹ Bonnell and Hunt 1999, p. 8; Sewell, 1999, p. 36, in Bonnell and Hunt.

assume a “duality between meaning and materiality.”¹⁰⁰ John Mohr and Craig Rawlings also contrast culture with “the material,” as well as “the practical, the structural, the social, and even the biological” and with “the economic base, the material infrastructure, the tyranny of numbers, the demands of biology, the mandates of functions, the transformation of structure, [and] the rhythms of the super-organic.”¹⁰¹ Thompson and Ellis shift the focus a bit and contrast culture with “economistic approaches that take preferences as given and interests as self-evident.”¹⁰² Larry Isaac lists what is “extra-cultural” as “institutions, industries, and markets.”¹⁰³ “Many sociologists,” Spillman observes, “also contrast cultural accounts with investigations of *social structures* shaping human life... [e.g.,] class structure” (although that contrast makes no sense, as Spillman knows, and as I argue in the next chapter, since social structures and institutions are always culturally constituted).¹⁰⁴ Lichterman differentiates culture from “social relations” and “social-structural relations”—noting, however, that they all “interpenetrate in everyday life.”¹⁰⁵ Fourcade differentiates cultural from what is “institutional” and from “institutions.”¹⁰⁶ Alexander and Gao contrast culture’s power with “mechanisms” and things “mechanical.”¹⁰⁷ David Garland identifies what is “not culture” as things like “history and social structure,” “state formation,” “institutions,” “group dynamics,” and “power and control.”¹⁰⁸ Reflecting a different approach, theorists who inclusively describe culture as the entire “way of life” of whole nations are left with less in society with which to contrast culture as non-cultural, so they tend instead to draw their contrasts between different holistic cultures as units, such that any given person either belongs to a culture or does not belong to it.¹⁰⁹ Then again, the anthropologist David Schneider argues (somewhat obscurely—again, due to an over-use of metaphorical rather than non-metaphorical language, and no doubt strangely for most sociologists, who tend to think of social norms as belonging to the arena of culture) that *social norms* actually stand in contrast to culture: “Where norms tell the actor how to play the scene, culture tells the actor how the scene is set and what it all means.”¹¹⁰ In sum, what culture is *not* may or may not include biology, nature, human universals, materialism, economistic explanations, social relations, social structures, social institutions, mechanisms, group dynamics, power, and possibly social norms. These contrasts may provide some light, but they are often not well developed, remain unclear how they relate to each other, and, in the end, offer insufficient clarity or coherence to the problems discussed here. Any theory of culture that seeks to improve on current accounts needs cogently to explain what, by its account, is *not* culture, what *contrasts* with culture, in order to make itself as clear as possible on the matter.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander et al. 2012, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Mohr and Rawlings, 2012, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁰² Thompson and Ellis, 1997, “Introduction,” p. 1, in Ellis and Thompson.

¹⁰³ Isaac 2009, p. 939.

¹⁰⁴ Spillman 2002, p. 5, italics added. See, for example, Archer, 2005, in Jacobs and Hanrahan.

¹⁰⁵ Lichterman, 2012, p. 213.

¹⁰⁶ Fourcade 2010, p. 29; 2011, p. 1727.

¹⁰⁷ Alexander and Gao, 2012, “Remembrance of Things Past,” p. 584, in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith.

¹⁰⁸ Garland, pp. 147, 308.

¹⁰⁹ See Sewell, 1999, pp. 54–55.

¹¹⁰ Schneider (p. 203), quoted in Demé, 1995, p. 269, in Crane.

Conclusion

William Sewell, Jr. has candidly noted that, “to clarify what we mean by culture seems both imperative and impossible.”¹¹¹ Above I have documented the problematic results of that tautly difficult situation. Eugene Halton also seems to me to be correct in observing that, “the very term *culture* is so indeterminate that it can easily be filled in with whatever preconceptions a theorist brings to it.”¹¹² In my view, nearly all of the definitions and metaphors for culture observed in the previous pages are useful and important, insofar as they bring various valuable aspects of things cultural to the theoretical table. The problem is not that most contemporary theorists of culture are way off base, but rather that culture theory as a whole, considered collectively, is incoherent and unsystematic. Nearly all of the individual chapters, articles, and books that I analyze in this paper make helpful and valuable contributions—some of them are indeed fantastic. But when all put together, they show as a collection that real conceptual problems remain. Some particular individual theoretical approaches to culture may be clear and consistent in and of themselves. But, collectively, theory in the strongly *cultural* approach to social science is not. In response to my critique, some cultural sociologists may claim that the ill-defined and inclusive pluralism of concepts and definitions that I document above is actually an advantage, not a liability in culture theory, since, they argue, “cultural sociology is a church, not a sect” and “pluralistic, as opposed to conforming to one ontological scheme,” that since “‘culture’ is no single thing...there are different elements of culture,” and since “it is not only their commonalities but also their differences that provide their intellectual reference points for cultural sociologists to practice their trade.”¹¹³ I am not here suggesting the need for uniformity. However, I suggest we must have some basic intellectual coherence about this elementary but crucial concept in social science, “culture.” Moving in the right direction, some reviews of the culture literature have tried to categorize different approaches to culture into two or three main types.¹¹⁴ To me, however, the reality is much messier and more problematic. We need not simply to shake the incoherent diversity detailed above into some categories according to apparent family resemblances. We need to step way back and re-think culture from the ground up. In 1974, the anthropologist Roger Keesing recommending that theorists of culture “narrow the concept of ‘culture’ so that it includes less and reveals more.” (Keesing 1974) I take that to be good advice, a task on which cultural sociologists ought to focus in the near

¹¹¹ Sewell, 1999, p. 35, in Bonnell and Hunt.

¹¹² Halton, 1992, p. 30, in Münch and Smelser.

¹¹³ Alexander et al. 2012, p. 12; Lichterman, 2012, p. 212; Isaac Reed, 2012, “Cultural Sociology as Research Program,” in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith.

¹¹⁴ For example: “We can distinguish three basic approaches. The first conceives of culture as a kind of grammar, as the ‘code’ that underlies and structures language and ritual.... The second approach conceives of culture as ‘values’.... There is also an intermediate view, which understands culture as a ‘map’ or a ‘script,’ which people use to orient themselves” (Xu and Gorski, 2010, p. 539, in Hall et al.); and “Sometimes we think of culture as something that connects us to other people in our groups, by contrast with outsiders...[involving] certain ways of seeing the world, or habits, or shorthand codes and assumptions...an attribute of an entire group of society.... The entire way of life of a people is thought to be embedded in, and expressed by, its culture.... Another way we often think of culture...[is as] a separate realm of human expression [and] special activities or material artifacts characteristic of particular groups, like opera, rap music, folk song, novels or haiku, quilts or masks or building styles” (Spillman 2002, pp. 2–3).

future. The purpose of this paper has been to motivate and to help clear the ground for work on that task by highlighting the conceptual incoherence that still dogs our use of the word “culture.”

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