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Poverty and the savage slot

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In today's anthropology, the word "culture" is conspicuous by its absence from anthropological discourse. But the word is still alive outside anthropology, particularly in sociology and psychology, in ways anthropologists cannot ignore, as fields like urban poverty and education have been altered by the introduction of the culture concept. In this paper, I revisit the stakes of the debate over the analytic term "culture" within anthropology in the hope of revivifying the particularly anthropological take on "culture" that may help us answer more effectively those who still argue that poverty is reproduced through what poor people learn in childhood. I argue that the assumptions behind the marked term "culture" within the culture of poverty thesis are heir to two competing interpretations. In the first understanding, "culture" speculatively refers to what is embodied in individuals who perpetuate "a design for living" (Lewis, 1966) into which they have been socialized and reproduce it, causally and deterministically. In the second understanding, "culture" refers to what emerges as people interact with each other, their conditions and experiences, including those that had emerged earlier and can only be understood empirically as a product of everyday life. In what follows, I deliberately oversimplify a complicated intellectual history in order to throw the stakes of the culture concept into high relief.

Culture's circuitous career has been powerfully taken up by Trouillot (2003, pp. 113–115): he notes that it emerged from the Boasian tradition as an anti-concept designed to counter biological racism and social Darwinism, but today often underwrites unwarranted speculations on race and class. In the 50 years since the Moynihan report, as Trouillot laments, culture has only dug deeper into daily use as a bulwark against change, particularly change which might reshuffle the status quo in favor of those with lesser means. How did we get here? Looking back on the winding history of the culture concept within anthropology, Trouillot identifies the culture concept with "the Savage Slot (2003, 8–10)" that he argues was inherited by anthropology as the "savage or the primitive was the alter ego the West constructed for itself" (2003, 18). But an inheritance, like all gifts, can be refused.

While critiquing the unfortunate fate of the culture concept within anthropology, Trouillot notes that particular strands of anthropological thought have critiqued the existence of "the Savage Slot" by inverting the assumptions from which it stemmed and turning its gaze back upon the tradition of Western philosophy from which it originated. Thus, the culture concept has been deployed within anthropology both to recapitulate "the Savage Slot" and to critique its existence in the hopes of moving Western thought beyond the tired dichotomy. The infamous struggle to define culture within anthropology and its ultimate abandonment as an analytical concept serves as an index to these disagreements and debates (see Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). However, this nuance was lost when the culture concept crossed out of anthropology into sociology, psychology, and policy debates, where the "the Savage Slot" reemerged with dire consequences for those caught in its gaze.

Two debates starkly illustrate the contested interpretation of the culture concept: the classification of ethnographic artifacts within the nineteenth century Museum Anthropology and an exchange between Conrad Arensberg and Oscar Lewis over Lewis' use of the term "culture of poverty" to describe the ebb and flow of urban poverty. The first case illustrates contested versions of the culture

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concept in the nineteenth century, when the culture was in the process of being adopted as a conceptual lens by a then-(no dash) nascent cultural anthropology. The second case illustrates what we might call the reinvention of "the Savage Slot" in Lewis' work at a time when anthropological interest moved to development studies and urban locales.

Is Culture a Classification?

The history of museum anthropology illustrates how the culture concept was imported into cultural anthropology from wider currents circulating in Western science as a fixed classificatory scheme and how that introduction was challenged initially by Adolph Bastian in Germany and later by Franz Boas in the United States. The stakes of the debate demonstrate Trouillot's point about how deeply theoretical assumptions are held, how difficult it can be to dislodge them, and how they return to us in new guises – as evident initially in museum anthropology, later in ethnographic monographs, and tragically, in social policy.

Contra evolutionary taxonomies derived from Darwin's more speculative work, *The Descent of Man*, Adolph Bastian drew from his direct experience as a ship's physician on a trading vessel plying the trade routes between Europe and Asia to derive his concept, "the psychological unity of mankind." Bastian's concept, later imported by Franz Boas into anthropology, asserted the radical claim that the physiological basis of human thought and potential were everywhere the same. Based on this experience, when Adolph Bastian became the director of the Royal Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, he arranged the museum's ethnographic artifacts by area and region, placing each artifact within a concrete geographic context. Bastian deliberately contrasted his arrangement (Manias, 2012) against the speculative theories of social evolution and racial types then expounded by Darwin's popularizers, such as Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haekel. Bastian was particularly aghast at Haekel's theory that the life of an individual recapitulates the history of that individual's genetic type, and thus no individual could escape *a priori* classification. Contra Haekel, Bastian's arrangement of ethnographic artifacts argued the counterpoint, that humans may differ in the circumstances of their lives, but by any meaningful measure, humans everywhere are of one genetic type and therefore equal by any cultural measure.

Bastian's inclinations became institutionalized within the United States when his student, Franz Boas, took a professorship at Columbia University. At Columbia, Boas became embroiled in a similar debate with Otis T. Mason, an anthropologist from the Bureau of American Ethnology (henceforth BAE). Following the principle of similar causes, similar effects, Mason (1966, p. 17) designed a classification system for displaying ethnographic artifacts at the Smithsonian Institute that ranked civilizations according to their technological sophistication. Less complex civilizations, per Mason's speculation, could jump up the evolutionary ladder by acculturating ideas and technology from more sophisticated civilizations.

Boas opposed this viewpoint in an 1887 paper in which he argued, echoing Bastian's "psychic unity of mankind," that due to the intricacy of the acting causes of human action, it was impossible that like causes could be established and used for drawing broad generalizations from theoretical presuppositions (Boas, 1887, p. 485). For two generations, this arrangement formed the center of cultural anthropology, but as anthropology expanded in the postwar era, culture was repeatedly introduced as referring to transmitted traits reproduced through learning (Mead, 1937, 17; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, 357; Parsons & Shils, 1951, 159; Geertz, 1973, p. 89). As I discuss next, some anthropologists were surprised to find the culture concept put to such new uses.

Is Culture a Design For Living or a Product of Everyday Life?

The slow drift of the culture concept from an analytical concept deployed by Bastian and Boas to counter received classifications toward a conceptual bulwark reinforcing what Trouillot (2003, 18) memorably termed "the alter ego the West constructed for itself" (2003, 18) found its ultimate home

in the work of Oscar Lewis. At the height of his Culture of Poverty work, Lewis (1966) issued a definition of culture that directly echoes a change in anthropology over the 80 years separating Boas and Lewis:

> The culture of poverty is not just a matter of deprivation or disorganization, a term signifying the absence of something. It is a culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a readymade set of solutions for human problems

In Lewis' public declaration of the culture of poverty thesis, the term culture is close to Darwin's evolutionary speculations and Mason's idea of acculturation. There is a culture, a "design for living" and a "set of solutions" passed from generation to generation, which, passed along either genetically or through a learning process, are inevitably lived out. Gone is the Boasian postulate of deliberating over what it means to "act suitably" in the face of historically formed conditions with concrete consequences.

When anthropologists realized where their common sense about culture could lead them, many were aghast. Along the same lines as Boas had criticized Mason and Bastian had criticized Haekel, Conrad Arensberg criticized Lewis in an exchange of letters. The exchange begins with lewis describing his new theory to Arensberg in 1960 (Rigdon, 1988, p. 255):

> Fact is that the crucial meaning of the term culture, as I see it, is that it is a way of life passed down from generation to generation. These two criteria hold true for the life of the poor I describe. Poverty, and all that goes with it, is literally stable, persistent and passed down along family lines. Can all the many cross cultural similarities I have mentioned been the result of accident or coincidence?

If Lewis's public declaration tacked toward understanding culture as traits passed down generationally, in his private correspondence Lewis went further than his contemporaries (Mead, 1963; Redfield et al., 1936) in speculating that socialization and enculturation were inescapable straightjackets a la Darwin's evolutionary and Mason's acculturation theories. To Lewis' theoretical speculation that so many cross-cultural similarities of people laboring under poverty could not be accidental, Arensberg replied that Lewis had let a hasty speculation go unchallenged by his empirical work (Rigdon, 1988, p. 226):

> Villages and cities do not make culture, cultures use such settlement patterns. The reactions to poverty are many: Middle Eastern, Arab austerity, Puritan frugality, Chassidism, the lazzaroni of Naples, etc., show that poverty, even with urbanization, does not produce similarities of culture.

Ethnographic description of poverty in the locales Arensberg notes contradicts Lewis' speculation. Arensberg does not object to the observation that poverty is widespread; the emphasis of his rebuke of Lewis centers on the axle of "reactions to poverty." There is poverty, but acting suitably while in poverty varies across time and space and therefore, poverty cannot cause culture nor can culture serve as the basis for an eternal classificatory schema. For Arensberg, the axle of comparison cannot be the abstract condition of poverty, nor can it be the abstract traits that constitute a speculative culture of poverty. Comparison must be made around close empirical descriptions of what "acting suitably" in the face of poverty entails and when done, demonstrate that reactions to poverty are many and varied. In short, contra Lewis, Arensberg argues for using the culture concept as an anti-concept to counter the received common sense of poverty.

Contemporary Reproduction

Today, the culture concept has come full circle, from signifying the Boasian focus on empirical description to signifying the kind of speculative evolutionary theory Boas fought against. As often deployed over the last fifty years, culture is something to be written against (Abu-Lughod, 1991), as the race was something to be written against for Boas. Lewis wrote during a time of theoretical and empirical change within anthropology, when established concepts met new empirical challenges to uncertain effect. Today anthropologists write about epochs, epistemes, habitus, or ontologies to capture analytically all the evidence that, in human life, ongoing drifts in conditions and resources

get fixed, for some, and for a time. Yet, as Troullot's work demonstrates, though the culture concept is no longer analytically central to anthropological discourse, the ongoing struggle to resist, not capitulate, to "the Savage Slot" inherited by anthropology remains.

Against this historical backdrop, Lamont and Small (2008, 2010)) have put forward a call to put poverty back on the research agenda. This is also a call, in more muted tones, to put poverty back on the policy agenda. But we should have our concerns about Lamont and Small's use of the culture concept. While being careful not to define culture as Lewis had, positing a causal program of poverty research implies a standard against which a measurement can be made, and for Lamont and Small, that standard is found in an elaboration of the culture of poverty thesis. Like Lewis before them, Lamont and Small build their version of the culture around concepts drawn from psychological research – frames, repertoires, narratives, and cultural capital. They are advances, Lamont and Small claim, on Lewis (1966) formulation of culture as traits passed generationally. Yet, for Lamont and Small, as for Lewis before them, people learn a culture. Their claimed advance on Lewis's conceptualization of culture is in conceptualizing the generational passing of traits as a more dynamic process than Lewis (1966) imagined. And the theory Lamont and Small offer is dynamic. But that dynamism is constrained to a narrow oscillation between constricting options provided by learned cultural frames, repertoires, and narratives.

For Lamont and Small, as well as others in recent years (Wacquant, 2002; Wilson, 2009), one falls into poverty and then acculturates in such a way that one cannot leave. In all variation of what we have called the first understanding of culture, the burden is placed on the individual in poverty, and then on transmission from the individual (adult) to individual (child). Little emphasis is placed on what is actually involved in the ordinary business of living and who is a party to it, including those who may set the conditions for a particular state of poverty. Little emphasis is put on the everyday lives of the second generation as they discover the conditions their parents set for them and the evolution of the political context. Lamont and Small's (2008) use of abstract proxy data (e.g., rate of drug abuse or teen pregnancy) serves to mask the complexity of ordinary life and the reality that different sub-groups might respond differently to the same circumstances (even if they know of each other). What Lamont and Small cannot escape is that they too are inheritors of the intellectual tradition that produced (and continues to do so) what Trouillot (2003) has termed "the Savage Slot." Lamont and Small take up the culture concept, hoping to pass it into the world of policy, without taking account of its winding history. In their unreflective conceptualization, culture is a trap: for those struggling with unequal conditions, tragically, and for those researchers who fail to heed the lessons of history, farcically.

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