Carola Lentz

Culture
The making, unmaking and remaking of an anthropological concept
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Abstract
Culture is a key concept in anthropology, but has also long become integral to how social actors conceive their own identities and group boundaries. In the context of identity politics culture is often understood as existing in more or less closed systems of values, norms, and world views that determine human action. How should anthropologists respond when a concept so central to their own discipline is practically 'naturalised' in public political discourse? How should they react in face of the overwhelming culturalisation of research perspectives in neighbouring disciplines, where culture has become so all-encompassing that practically everything becomes culture and the term's analytical value is eroded? Can and should culture be retained and further developed as an analytical category, and if so, how? In what ways can it serve as a concept that facilitates fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration? This paper discusses these questions by first presenting a brief, highly selective overview of the varied history of the anthropological culture concept, including the moments when it was subject to trenchant critique. Then it considers why anthropology as a discipline should retain culture as a key analytical concept, and what challenges anthropologists face in reformulating the term in a post-essentialist, constructivist manner.

Zusammenfassung

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Introduction\(^1\)

Like many concepts in the social sciences and humanities, culture has long become integral to how social actors conceive their own identities, build communities, draw group boundaries, and claim rights. In the context of identity politics, the humanities and social sciences are often instrumentalised in the ‘pluralisation of demands for recognition’ (Fluck 2007; my translation). What are the implications of these developments for anthropology? How should anthropologists respond to the fact that one of the discipline’s core concepts has been appropriated by the public, reified, and simplified sometimes almost beyond recognition? And in what ways have certain anthropological conceptions of culture even encouraged such instrumentalisation? Some anthropologists, like Adam Kuper (1999), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002) and Chris Hann (2007), indeed see the problem as lying not so much in the external instrumentalisation of the culture concept, but rather in the disciplinary dead-end to which the mainstream anthropological conception of culture has led. They consider the concept to be irredeemably diffuse, and at the same time reified and blind to power relations. They insist that anthropologists should abandon it and recommend, as one way forward, that they instead specifically name the various symbolic codes or social practices to which they are referring in specific contexts. I would disagree and propose instead that anthropologists retain a focus on culture, along with culture as an analytical concept. This is the only means by which anthropologists can actively engage popular uses and abuses of the culture concept, as Christoph Brumann (1999) has already observed. In a similar vein, Evangelos Karagiannis and Shalini Randeria (2016) have recently encouraged anthropologists to defend the critical potential that an anthropological understanding of culture has introduced into social theory by insisting on the plurality of culture, its historicity, relativity, and formative power, and by propagating a holistic perspective. However, in order to cultivate this potential, I would argue, anthropologists must further develop the culture concept along post-essentialist, reflexive-constructivist lines.

Further developing the culture concept is also important in order to enter into fruitful dialog with neighbouring disciplines. A rather simplified, diffuse conception of culture that often equates ‘cultures’ and ‘societies’ has not only crept into public discourse, but also been appropriated by other disciplines. Does the concept of culture necessarily, as Niklas Luhmann seems to suggest (1995: 32), lack the precision and distinctiveness required of analytical concepts? How can anthropologists retain and further develop it

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in order to not only facilitate interdisciplinary exchange, but also impart such exchange with their own impulses?

This paper is an attempt to contribute to a critical understanding of the anthropological culture concept, which I argue is necessary in order to intervene in public culture debates and interdisciplinary discussions. In my view, two unresolved issues are central in this regard. First, how to conceptualise culture or the cultural in their respective specificities: what is culture not? Or, in other words, what aspects of reality does culture capture and what aspects lie beyond it, and how can anthropologists conceptualise how culture relates to society and cultural repertoires relate to social practice? Second, how can they better engage with the problem of the pluralisation of culture and the concomitant issue of the relationship between the boundaries of ‘cultures’ and the sociologically palpable boundaries of ‘societies’ or ‘communities’? What conceptions of cultural difference and boundaries can anthropologists develop beyond a simplistic container model of culture?

These are fairly thorny issues, and this paper will not resolve them. However, it does explore the possible directions for further thought. In doing so, it shows that older culture concepts can provide fruitful points of departure, as Ira Bashkow (2004) has suggested in his defence and further development of Franz Boas’ conception of cultural boundaries. At the same time, it is necessary to cast a critical eye on the conceptual history and problematic simplifications that have been undertaken by both the makers and un-makers of the culture concept. In the following I will first discuss some of the major milestones of the history of classical anthropological understandings of culture as well as some of the key critical responses to them voiced since the late 1980s. The objective is not so much to provide a balanced overview of the literature, but rather to lay out particularly pronounced standpoints in the conceptual work on the culture term that highlight the challenges of reformulating the concept. In the final section of this paper I will discuss wherein these challenges lie and the directions a reformulation of the culture concept might take.

On the history of anthropological conceptions of culture

The overview provided here focuses in particular on those positions which I regard to have contributed to the problematic essentialisation of the concept of culture. I am aware that this does not do full justice to the often far more nuanced discussions of the authors cited here. However, here I am primarily interested in working through the stages of the pluralisation, essentialisation and de-sociologisation of the anthropological conception of culture, or the separation of questions of culture and meaning from issues of power and agency.

It is no accident that my overview deals mostly with American contributions to the culture discussion. As John H. Moore (1974) showed in his critique of the ‘culture concept as ideology’, culture served the Boasians as a term that integrated members of this school, distinguishing them from the evolutionists who had been dominant in the nine-
teenth century, while helping to establish the new discipline of cultural anthropology at American universities. In British social anthropology the culture concept was by no means as important, at least not in its development after Edward Tylor. Culture was for Bronislaw Malinowski (1944)—following the evolutionary understanding of culture as Culture writ large, and in the singular, rather than cultures writ small and plural—the functional ensemble of practices and instruments that people created to satisfy their primary and secondary needs. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown saw culture as something akin to an ideological superstructure that held society together, and, in his view, ‘enculturation’ ensured that the social structure was continually reproduced. Radcliffe-Brown regarded anthropology to be a form of comparative sociology (1952: 3), and its objects of study ought to be defined from a sociological-historical and not from a cultural perspective. ‘We do not observe “a culture”’, he insisted, ‘since that word denotes, not any concrete reality, but an abstraction’ (1952: 190). The ‘real stuff’ was the social structure or system of social relations, culture only the ‘ideational content of the real stuff’ (Sahlins 1999: 400).

Several decades later, Adam Kuper and Jack Goody were to echo Radcliffe-Brown’s view and to present social anthropology as a European alternative to American cultural anthropology. Kuper (1994: 538–9) accused American anthropology of idealism, romantic populism, and ‘culturological talk’. Goody (1994) was adamant that anthropology ought not to limit itself to the study of culture as a symbolic system. Cultures were not clearly bounded entities, and they could not be studied independently of social relations and material phenomena. Marshall Sahlins (1999) in turn polemised against this British criticism and accused structural-functionalism and its contemporary supporters of culture-society-dualism and of reifying ‘social structure’. Since the 1950s, according to Sahlins, the ‘transatlantic working misunderstanding of the culture concept’ that divides British and American anthropologists has periodically been revived (1999: 399). But Sahlins’ attacks target not only European, but also postmodern and poststructuralist American anthropologists; their critique of essentialist, reifying culture concepts, too, was based on a mere caricature of the Boasian conception of culture. In reality, Sahlins believes, Boasians never understood culture as closed, coherent, homogenous, or unchanging.

These controversies make one thing quite clear: engagements with the history of the anthropological conception of culture are never innocent; they are always implicated in longstanding conflicts that are concerned with not only the scientific purchase of concepts, but also have much to do with academic factionalism, loyalties, and prestige. My own perspective on this history is certainly influenced more by British social anthropology, but also critical of the way in which the American debates over culture have themselves been oversimplified by those supporting the British.

**Points of departure: Edward Tylor and Franz Boas**

Two of anthropology’s founding fathers—the British evolutionist Edward Tylor and the German-American pioneer of cultural anthropology Franz Boas—developed differ-
ent culture concepts, both of which to this day continue to shape how anthropologists talk about culture. In 1871, Tylor published his magnum opus under the ambiguous title *Primitive Culture*, which can be read as meaning both primitive culture and the culture of primitives. In Great Britain, at the time, culture was generally understood as high culture, something that could neither be attributed to the English working class nor to non-European peoples. Tylor’s often-cited definition of culture, ‘or civilization taken in its broad, ethnographic sense’, distanced itself from such a limited, and elitist, notion of culture, and instead defined it as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (Tylor 1920: 1). According to this cumulative definition, culture encompasses science, religion, and art, as well as norms and values, technical capabilities, and material way of life. Culture is collective, not the product of individual genius, and it is not a natural given, but rather socially engendered. At the same time, for Tylor, culture still existed in the singular, as civilisation, which, in the course of human history, evolved from simple into increasingly complex forms. The opposing term was quite obviously nature, which man was able to master through culture to an increasing degree.

For Franz Boas, on the other hand, the most important opposing term to culture was race. However, in so far as the concept of race was anchored in biology, Boas’ conception of culture, too, was formulated in contradistinction to nature. At any rate, he insisted that the cultural repertoires that shaped a people’s way of life were historically constituted and engendered by human creativity, not geography and physiology. Race, according to Boas (1911), was fundamentally hybrid and unstable, and Boas adamantly rejected equating race, culture, and language, just as he rejected environmental determinism of any sort. Although culture was certainly a means by which humans interacted with their natural environment, Boas emphasised that it was also shaped by migration and cultural exchange between neighbouring groups. He further rejected the idea that there were universal stages of human development, or a linear history of cultural evolution. Every group had developed its own way of life and needed to be understood in light of its own history. Boas thus pluralised the concept of culture, thereby paving the way for his students to propagate cultural relativism. Well into the 1930s, however, Boas resisted developing a holistic-systemic conception of culture, but rather adhered to an additive understanding of it. Or, as George Stocking (1974: 5–8) observed, Boas’ concept of culture was marked by a duality, regarding cultures on the one hand as assemblages of cultural traits that diffused between neighbouring groups and, on the other hand, as integrated wholes.

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2 Here my own interpretation differs from that of John H. Moore (1974), who saw Boas as an intellectual successor to Tylor. According to Moore, for Boas and Tylor the counterpoint to the term culture, which they would define as ‘learned behaviour’, was ‘instinct’. Boas’ understanding of culture as that which distinguishes humans from purportedly instinct-driven animals attained popularity because it corresponded to the dominant discourse of the time on the uniqueness and superiority of humankind.
One could say that that both Tylor’s and Boas’ conceptions reflected two older European intellectual traditions, which have time and again influenced the way anthropologists and other scholars of the humanities talk about culture. One of these traditions is that of Kant, who, along with a number of other Enlightenment philosophers, propagated the idea of universal civilisation and progress (Culture in the singular and writ large). The other was that of Herder and Rousseau, among others, who were critical of such notions of civilisation and progress, emphasising instead the virtues of specific (national) cultures found among the (common) people vis-à-vis the cosmopolitan culture of Europe’s elites, thereby pluralising the conception of culture. And yet, Herder himself did not wholly reject the idea of progress, nor did he regard cultures to be self-contained entities. However, he did ascribe to the view that a people was unified by its language and culture, an idea that was adopted later by some of Boas’ students.  

From civilisation to cultures: American cultural relativism

Edward Sapir was perhaps one of the first of Boas’ students to explicitly take up Herder’s ideas on the plurality of cultures and ‘volksgeist’. He distinguished between culture as civilisation, as individual cultivatedness, and as the ‘“spirit” or “genius” of a people’ (1924: 405). In Sapir’s view, the only one of these three options that had any prospects in anthropology was the third understanding of culture as ‘the spiritual possessions of the group…., those general attitudes, views of life, and specific manifestations of civilization that give a particular people its distinctive place in the world’ (1924: 405).

Sapir resisted the evolutionist ranking of various levels of civilisation, while at the same time also developing a normative understanding of ‘genuine’ culture. ‘The genuine culture is … inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory’, Sapir asserted, it is ‘the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow unified and consistent attitude toward life… nothing is spiritually meaningless’ (1924: 410). Such an authentic and holistic culture was particularly prevalent among smaller, autonomous groups with a limited division of labour, whose members were connected by direct and intimate ‘spiritual contact’ (1924: 426). Sapir criticised the materialism of American society, in which the majority of its members had to sacrifice their spiritual needs for civilisational progress (1924: 417). However, his arguments regarding the relationship between individuals and the community of culture were ambivalent. On the one hand he presented cultures as collective subjects: ‘great cultures’ were ‘healthy spiritual organisms’ that grew like plants (1924: 410–3). On the other hand, he emphasised the role of individual creativity and the active appropriation of cultural traditions by members of a culture (1924: 418–22).

What in Sapir’s work remained open and unresolved—at times he emphasised the integrating aspects of culture as the spiritual foundation of a community of values, at
other times he regarded culture as the outcome of individual creative action—was transformed by other members of the Boasian school into a rather straightforward cultural determinism. In *Patterns of Culture* (1934) Ruth Benedict formulated a decidedly idealistic and psychological conception of culture. She drew on ideas taken from Gestalt psychology, as well as on Oswald Spengler’s model of the growth and demise of cultures. Less interested in the hard facts of the economic, social, and political organisation of societies, Benedict defined culture primarily as consistent patterns of thought, feeling, and action. Every culture, according to Benedict, decides among an ‘arc’ of available possibilities and intricately interweaves them with selected cultural elements. The integrated whole of a culture determines its individual elements, much like an artistic style, or a Gestalt (Benedict 1946). Individual cultures aggregated around dominant leitmotifs, of which members of the culture were not necessarily aware, nor did they have the capacity to change them (Benedict 1932: 4).

While Boas had emphasised cultural exchange and interaction, Benedict and other Boasians tended to focus more on the internal integration and coherence of individual cultures. Like Boas, Benedict, too, regarded cultural boundaries to be porous and subject to manifold processes of diffusion. However, her concept of ‘cultural patterns’ emphasised the integrative manner in which a culture incorporated imported elements into its existing basic patterns (Bashkow 2004: 445). The various cultural patterns and worldviews that resulted, Benedict argued, were ultimately incommensurable; they shaped the individual ‘normal’ types in a society—a notion that was later popularised under the rubric of cultural relativism. To a much greater extent than Sapir Benedict emphasised the normalising power of culture(s) into which individuals were born and socialised. In mainstream histories of anthropology4 the works of Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and others often appear under the heading ‘Culture and Personality’ and are classified as belonging to a single school that, as the name suggests, understood culture to have a deterministic influence on personality—a notion that rapidly gained popularity outside academic anthropology and that Ayşe Çağlar (1990) once provocatively called the ‘prison house of culture’.

Despite differences in their individual approaches, Boas’ students continued his programme of liberating the anthropological concept of culture from its older universalist formulations that were tied to ideological notions of progress and cultural evolution. They mentalised, pluralised and, by emphasising internal coherence, tended to homogenise the notion of culture. To what degree this replaced Boas’ more open understanding of cultural boundaries with a more closed ‘container model’ of cultures that identified individual cultures with clearly demarcated ethnic groups and localised them in specific geographical territories is a matter of debate. Ira Bashkow (2004), an avowed neo-Boasian, has insisted that Boas’ students shared the central elements of the Boasian conception of cultural boundaries, on which contemporary anthropologists could still fruitfully draw. All Boasians, according to Bashkow, regard cultural bound-

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4 See, for instance, Stocking 1986; and Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 61–4.
aries as being porous and permeable. Moreover, they work from the premise that different cultural traits may have varying areas of diffusion and that one ought to speak instead of ‘overlapping zones of trait distribution’ (2004: 446) rather than closed cultural systems. Further, they would understand that the ‘folk boundaries’ drawn by social actors do not necessarily have to correspond to those observed by anthropologists. However, in my view this is a too generous interpretation of Boasian anthropology in so far as it projects into older texts contemporary perspectives on the problem of defining cultural boundaries. Ira Bashkow himself concedes that since the 1930s, especially with the ‘national character’ studies conducted by Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and others during World War II as well as the rise of area studies in the context of the Cold War, rather simplistic container models of culture—equating culture and ethnic group or nation and associating it with a specific territory—took hold and became popular outside the academy as well.

**Culture versus society: Parsons’ division of labour between anthropology and sociology**

Alfred L. Kroeber, Boas’ first PhD student, promoted the notion of humans as carriers of cultural patterns in his postulation of the ‘superorganic’ nature of culture. He formulated this idea as early as 1917 in a journal article; Edward Sapir (1917) rejected it as quasi-religious social determinism, while Ruth Benedict further developed Kroeber’s superorganic notion of culture in her own studies. Yet, Kroeber’s best-known work on concepts of culture was written only later, when he, together with Clyde Kluckhohn, published a volume that provided an overview of the growing number of anthropological definitions of culture. Taking up Kroeber’s conception of the superorganic, Kroeber and Kluckhohn emphasised that culture not be regarded solely as an integrated, structured whole, but that it be distinguished from the social system as such. Culture, they argued, ‘consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols. … [T]he essential core of culture consists of traditional … ideas and especially their attached values’ (1952: 181). This definition reflects the influence of Talcott Parsons, who in 1946 founded an interdisciplinary social-science research department at Harvard University that also included anthropologists, among them Kluckhohn. In Parsons’ view (1951), the general system of social action consisted of multiple interlinked sub-systems—the social, the cultural, the individual-biological, and the psychological systems—that he felt ought to be reflected in the division of labour among the social sciences. Psychology, thus, was to concentrate on the individual, while sociology attended to the study of the social system, and anthropology devoted itself to culture. This division of labour, however, was premised on a much narrower definition of anthropology’s subject matter than had been the case previously. ‘Cultural objects are symbolic elements of the cultural tradition, ideas or beliefs, expressive symbols or value patterns’, Parsons argued (1951: 4), and demanded that anthropology ought to limit itself to the study of the emergence and transformation of symbolically mediated value systems and world views.

Yet Kluckhohn and Kroeber were initially sceptical of Parson’s vision, since the rather narrow definition of culture would have called into question many of the classical
fields of study in American anthropology, archaeology, and physical anthropology, and would also have questioned the importance of historical inquiry. ‘In particular’, Kroeber and Kluckhohn wrote (1952: 136), ‘we are resistant to his [Parson’s] absorbing into “social systems” abstracted elements which we think are better viewed as part of the totality of culture’. But later, they did decide to ascribe to the Parsonsian definition of culture as symbolic system. Kroeber and Parsons went on to formulate this agreement rather provocatively in a manifesto published in the American Sociological Review: ‘We suggest ... to define the concept culture for most usages ... narrowly ..., restricting its reference to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior’ (Kroeber and Parsons 1958: 583). Although culture and society were interrelated, they were to be distinguished as objects of study, and anthropology was to dedicate itself to culture (1958: 582). A number of American anthropologists objected to this ‘desociologisation’ of the concept of culture and resisted putting it into practice, but it did not remain without consequences. It paved the way for a definition of culture, like the one formulated by Clifford Geertz, for instance, that tended to bracket the social, focussing on meaning, values, symbols, and world views rather than on institutions, actions, and power.

*Culture as text: Clifford Geertz and the interpretive turn*

In the early 1970s a number of American anthropologists diagnosed the demise of the culture concept. Since the Boasians had overcome the evolutionists and no one questioned the legitimacy of cultural anthropology as a discipline, the culture concept was dead, ‘or at least is now in the process of dying’, John Moore (1974: 546) argued. Such assertions, however, would prove to be premature, as around the very same time Clifford Geertz’ semiotic-symbolic understanding of culture began to take hold of the discipline. Geertz invoked Max Weber and hermeneutic traditions in his critique of the positivism that characterised anthropological structural-functionalism. At the same time, Geertz’ focus on culture as systems of symbols and meanings was grounded in the approach espoused by Kroeber and Parsons. It was eventually widely received not only in anthropology, but also in the social sciences and humanities at large and contributed to the interpretive turn in these fields. Geertz’ theoretical perspectives underwent significant changes in the course of his long career. In this context what is most relevant are the essays he published in the 1970s that formulated his interpretative conception of culture, which, as critics like Adam Kuper (1999) would insist, promoted the further desociologisation of the conception of culture.

In keeping with Parsons’ proposed division of labour between anthropology and sociology, Geertz argued that culture had to be defined more narrowly than it had been up until that point. Rather than understanding culture as Tylor had, as something that was additively holistic and encompassed a whole way of life, Geertz proposed: ‘The concept of culture that I espouse ... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs’ (1973a: 5). Elsewhere Geertz defined culture as an en-
semblance of symbolic systems—ideology, religion, art, science, ethics, and common sense—that provides people with orientation in the world and gives meaning to their actions; Geertz referred to this as the ‘symbolic dimension of social action’ (1973a: 30). In his view, the anthropologist’s task was to understand people’s actions in an unfamiliar culture – which, in the tradition of cultural relativism, Geertz took to be the relevant unit of analysis – as part of a web of meaning, as ‘signs’ in a symbolic system (1973a: 14). Although culture was comprised of ‘ideas’, it was not something that existed only in people’s heads, at least not in the sense of people as individuals, but rather as a ‘public document’ (1973a: 10). It was thus not about understanding the knowledge, norms, and motivations that guided individual action, but rather about analysing collectively shared symbolic systems that were publicly manifest in social action (1973a: 19–20).

Although Geertz does regard people’s self-interpretations of their actions as having heuristic value for anthropological analysis (1973a: 15), ultimately the emic point of view proves to be irrelevant to the Geertzian project. When Geertz writes that the ‘culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’ (1973b: 452), he attributes to the anthropologist a privileged role in the interpretive act. And, in fact, it was precisely this privileging of the anthropologist’s perspective that provoked intense criticism (e.g. Clifford 1988; Crapanzano 1986). Geertz’ Parsonian desociologisation of the concept of culture, however, elicited fewer protests. Echoing Parsons, Geertz wrote in an early essay that symbolic systems are both ‘a product and a determinant of social interaction, they are to the process of social life as a computer’s program is to its operations’ (1973c: 250). Yet, even more so than Parsons, he went on to emphasise the coherence as well as internal dynamics of symbolic systems. Culture could not be explained in terms of the function it had in specific social processes, but had to be understood as the context within which social action became meaningful and could be ‘intelligibly described’ (1973a: 14). Adam Kuper sees this shift in perspective as a retreat from the social in favour of an idealistic anthropology which becomes ever more prominent in Geertz’ later work. Geertz’ main message, according to Kuper, is ‘that culture is the essential element in the definition of human nature, and the dominant force in history. ... Culture rules: indeed, high culture rules’ (1999: 119–120; emphasis in the original).

Even if one has reservations with regard to such a polemic characterisation of Geertz’ work, one cannot deny that the metaphor of culture as text bears the risk of the ‘illusion of autonomous symbols’, as Andreas Reckwitz has conceded, a sociologist who otherwise has received Geertz’ work positively (2006: 473; my translation). Geertz’ notion of culture has been particularly attractive for the humanities, more so than the materialist conceptions of culture inspired by political economy that viewed culture as
whole way of conflict’, as the American anthropologist Eric Wolf and the British social historian E. P. Thompson did.⁵

Reckwitz sees Geertz as a key figure in a shift towards a social-constructivist understanding of culture that decouples culture from community (2008: 33–34, 79–80). But if one reads Geertz’ ethnographies carefully, it becomes clear that his work continues to be grounded on the premise that cultures constitute social communities, which are to be taken as the actual units of analysis. Geertz repeatedly points out the complexity, contradictoriness, and layeredness of structures of meaning and criticises the idea of culture as a closed symbolic system. His desociologisation of the concept, however, ultimately results in an understanding that continues to identify a specific society (as nation, people, or ethnic group) with a specific culture.

‘Adieu, culture’:⁶ the demise of the culture concept

Sherry Ortner (1984) criticised the ‘acrimonious debate’ between Geertz and other representatives of ‘symbolic anthropology’, with their strong focus on culture, and supporters of a positivist, neo-evolutionist ‘cultural ecology’. Both sides, in Ortner’s view, gave too little attention to a ‘systematic sociology’. They were failing to analyse ‘the social groups, social relationships, social structures, social institutions, that mediate both the ways in which people think (“culture”) and the ways in which people experience and act upon their environment’ (1984: 134; emphasis in the original). For Ortner, the way forward lay in an anthropology of ‘practice’, which, taking up the work of Bourdieu, could contribute to ‘an understanding how society and culture themselves are produced and reproduced through human intention and action’ (1984: 158). Nevertheless, Ortner did see the potential in Geertz’ understanding of culture. All it required was some expansion that would, for instance, ‘emphasize the issue of meaning-making … as against the notion of cultural “systems”’ (1999: 8; emphasis in the original). Renato Rosaldo, too, remained rather moderate in his criticism of Geertz’ understanding of culture. However, Rosaldo pointed out that it was shaped by an ‘unresolved tension about whether to describe cultures as loosely tied bundles of informal practices, or as well-formed systems regulated by control mechanisms’ (1989: 94). Rosaldo himself, in fact, favoured the ‘loosely tied bundles’ perspective. He proposed to focus on ‘cultural borderlands’ and ‘zones of difference’ (1989: 27–28). Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, too, proposed to focus on ‘borderlands’ and ‘border crossings’ in order to overcome the quasi-naturalised and rather misleading ‘isomorphism of space, place, and culture’ that characterised classical conceptions of culture and even continued to inhere in post-modern criticisms of Eurocentrism (‘the West versus the rest’) (1992: 7). Jean and John Comaroff have insisted on the necessity of an analytical perspective that brings togeth-

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⁵ See, for example, Eric Wolf’s early demands to revise the notion of bounded cultures (1982: 387f.).

⁶ This is the title of a programmatic essay by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002), which argued that anthropology ought to abandon the concept of culture altogether (see below).
er issues of power and cultural meanings (1992: 45, 176). Anthropologists could certainly defend the concept of culture against its critics, provided ‘that we treat culture as a shifting semantic field, a field of symbolic production and material practice empowered in complex ways’ (1992: 30).

At least in the 1990s, however, Ortner’s prediction of the predominance of practice theory and a productive further development of Geertz’ conception of culture failed to materialise. Instead, the critique of the classical conception of culture became more radical, leading even to calls for it to be abandoned completely. Joel S. Kahn (1989), for example, argued for the demise of the classical (neo-)Boasian conception of culture, a conception he also attributed to Geertz. Cultures (in the plural) could not be clearly demarcated from one another. The groups studied by anthropologists were not to be culturally defined; if at all, they could at best be demarcated geographically. Abandoning the scientifically untenable conception of culture was necessary, not least because outside the academy a simplified anthropological conception of culture had become an ideological weapon through which a ‘new kind of racism in which in fact culture and not physiological features provide the basis for discrimination and domination’ (1989: 20).

Such a linking of politically-morally inspired postcolonial theory with a critique of the classical concept of culture became commonplace in innumerable anthropological publications in the 1990s and 2000s. Here I will discuss only two especially striking examples of this wider trend: Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1991) streitschrift ‘against culture’ and Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (2002) historical contextualisation of how the politically reactionary reification of what had once been an anti-racist culture concept had come about.

‘Writing against culture’

Alluding to the seminal edited volume Writing Culture published by James Clifford and George Marcus, Lila Abu-Lughod presented her vehement arguments ‘against culture’, asking anthropologists to abandon the concept. Culture, she asserts, is ‘the essential tool for making other’ (1991: 143), practically forcing the making of hierarchical, power-laden distinctions between self and other. When anthropology describes, and explains social phenomena in terms of, cultural differences, it contributes to the construction and maintenance of these differences, thus locking non-Western groups into otherness (1991: 146). Focusing on the boundedness and closure of groups, any argument grounded in culture emphasises their internal coherence and homogeneity. But even if culture is drawn on for emancipatory purposes, in order to engender new identities, it perpetuates essentialist arguments and reifies difference.

In Abu-Lughod’s view there is no way to free culture from such tendencies. ‘Ethnographies of the particular’ (1991: 149) that focus on practices, strategies, and interests, rather than producing representations of coherent cultural systems, are the only way for anthropology to escape its predicament. Rather than aiming to analyse cultural differences between large groups, anthropology ought to focus on the individuality and
immediate comprehensibility of each individual. Individual stories would highlight and elucidate connections rather than cultural boundaries—a project that Abu-Lughod regards as a contribution to ‘tactical humanism’, but which would not change the fundamental fact that anthropology occupies a privileged position of power in a world riddled with inequalities (1991: 159).

**Anthropology’s ‘savage slot’ and the culture concept**

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002), too, takes as his point of departure the fact that variants of the essentialist understanding of culture have become increasingly popular outside the academy. Politicians, journalists, non-governmental organisations, and social movements make recourse to them when attempting to explain socio-political problems and to claim (or deny) rights. Culture serves as an argumentative wild card, standing in for nation, ethnicity, or even race; it is used to explain difference in the same way that race once did. People are thus considered to be members of a culture by virtue of descent and believed to be unable to deviate from the prescriptions of their culture.

‘How did such a conception of culture manage to nudge out the previous anti-racist approaches espoused by anthropology’s founding fathers?’ Trouillot (2002: 42) asks and locates the reasons for this shift in the historical circumstances and political context of the development of the culture concept. In his view, the conditions under which American anthropology had become institutionalised in the 1920s had shifted the meaning of culture ‘from being a domain of analysis to being something out there’ (2002: 42). Non-western regions and groups were considered to be so ‘fundamentally different both in essence and in practice’ (2002: 42) that they had to be studied using methods that were different from those used to study Western societies, and anthropologists positioned themselves as specialists for this ‘savage slot’ (Trouillot 1991). Their units of analysis were distinguished in accordance with the same conceptual scheme as that used by sociologists and political scientists, who in the spirit of methodological nationalism presumed state borders to be quasi-natural boundaries separating the societies they studied. Anthropologists, according to Trouillot, ‘mimicked the state-centrism of the other social sciences, often assuming for these [non-Western] peoples a waterish version of the nation-state’ (2002: 42–3). Cultures were thus conceptualised as natural units of analysis that were congruent with societies. The foreign cultures appeared as classless entities: ‘For North American anthropologists, primitives became those who had no complexity, no class, no history that really mattered—because they had culture’ (2002: 44). These powerful oversimplifications allowed the discipline to secure a place for itself in the academic world. Anthropologists thus became specialists for culture, and ethnography as a genre, the description of a foreign culture in monograph form that became a disciplinary *rite de passage*, cemented precisely this unit of analysis: culture(s).

Trouillot concludes his discussion of the history of the culture concept by deploring that there is not much one can do about the uses and abuses of culture outside of an-
thropy. He therefore demands that at least anthropologists abandon it as an analytical concept. Instead, they should explicitly state the focus of their concerns: ideologies, norms and values, religious beliefs, specific practices, rituals, or whatever. ‘The less culture is allowed to be a shortcut for too many things,’ Trouillot believes, ‘the more sociocultural anthropology can thrive within its chosen domain of excellence, documenting how human thought is patterned and how those patterns are produced, rejected or acquired. Without culture, we will continue to need ethnography’ (2002: 58).

**Remaking the culture concept**

The classical conception of culture is irredeemably reified, serves problematic purposes in discourses outside the academy, is no longer useful as an analytic concept, and thus needs to be abandoned: such assertions were presented not only by Kahn, Abu-Lughod and Trouillot, but also by a number of other scholars, such as by Roger Keesing (1994), Adam Kuper (1999: 245–247), and Chris Hann (2007). In the eyes of these critics there are three problematic assumptions that go along with the classical, cultural-relativist conception of culture: 1) The world is a mosaic of territorially anchored, discrete cultures (i.e. the container model of culture); 2) cultures are historically relatively stable; 3) intra-cultural variations are insignificant in comparison to inter-cultural differences and may therefore be neglected. Closure, stability, homogeneity, and coherence: this circumscribes, in the eyes of the critics, the classical anthropological conception of culture. Variability and conflict are bracketed, and the dimension of power is ignored. Moreover, 4) the classical concept presumes an ‘over-socialised’ individual, failing to take into account agency and creativity. Consequently, cultural change is difficult to explain, except as the outcome of ‘culture contact’.

This list of desiderata is the outcome of an orientalising, and in its own right reifying, reading of the ‘classical’ culture concept of American cultural anthropology, as Christoph Brumann (1999) has noted. Nonetheless the points of criticism do point to challenges that a reformulation of the concept of culture must face. Central in this regard are questions concerning the ‘pluralisation’ of culture, cultural boundaries, and the relationship between the constitution of social groups and their cultural repertoires. There have been various proposals for revising and salvaging the culture concept that engage precisely these challenges. In the following section I would like to present two such proposals—Christoph Brumann’s (1999) suggestion to regard cultures (in the plural) as partly overlapping clusters of cultural traits, and Andreas Wimmer’s (1996) view of culture as a process of negotiating meanings.

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7 To avoid any misunderstandings: demands to abandon the classical culture concept and proposals to reformulate it were presented during the same time period, starting in the 1990s, and did not emerge subsequently; sometimes, but by no means always, do critics and supporters refer to each other’s works.
Cultures as clusters of cultural traits

Brumann (1999) concedes that the classical anthropological conception of culture might be put to politically questionable uses, as Abu-Lughod had argued. But unlike Abu-Lughod, he is convinced that the problematic assumptions of boundedness, homogeneity, coherence, and permanence, as well as the essentialising equation of ethnicity with culture, are not necessarily inherent to the concept. In Brumann’s view, it was not the classical definitions of culture per se that promoted its essentialisation, but rather the tradition of ethnography, which represented the world as a mosaic of territorially bounded, internally homogenous, stable cultures. Moreover, if anthropologists wish to intervene in political debates on culture as experts, they cannot abandon the concept, but rather need to reformulate and reinvigorate it.

Brumann suggests defining culture as ‘the set of specific learned routines (and/or their material and immaterial products) that are characteristic of a delineated group or people’ (1999: 6). The question of cultural boundaries is for Brumann one of an overlap of bundles of characteristics, i.e. of identifiable ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Three possibilities are conceivable for the distribution of cultural characteristics: 1) the perfect correspondence and co-variation of all selected characteristics, allowing for the straightforward identification of two (or more) bounded cultures; 2) a random distribution that does not allow the identification of bounded cultures; 3) the formation of clusters, in which a number of cultural characteristics overlap, while others do not—the third constellation being what Brumann considers to be the most widespread case. If one were to distinguish between core characteristics shared by all members of a culture and other characteristics that were less central, then culture may simply be defined as the shared cluster of core characteristics. Such a conception of culture, grounded in observation and cluster analysis, would not necessarily imply problematic assumptions of homogeneity and longstanding stability. To speak of ‘Japanese culture’, for instance, is ultimately little more than practical shorthand for referring to certain routines, values, etc. that are shared by most Japanese, regardless of class, gender, or other differences; ‘that which… [they] think, feel and do by virtue of having been in continuous social contact with other Japanese’ (1999: 7).

Here a central problem entailed in Brumann’s positivist conception of culture becomes clear, namely the question as to which elements of the cultural inventory are to be regarded as definitive for the anthropologist’s demarcation of a culture. The inductive method that Brumann proposes does not really indicate how the cultural inventories that are to be considered as definitive of a culture could be ranked, or how ‘core’ and less important characteristics can be distinguished. Brumann suggests resorting to statistical consensus analysis: ‘In identifying a culture, we have to abstract such a set of items from observed instances of thought and behavior, selecting that which occurs repeatedly rather than that which is singular’ (1999: 6). However, I am sceptical that this would solve the problem. I would argue that diacritical cultural features cannot be identified without engaging with the interpretations and contestations of the members of the culture to be defined, beyond a simple statistical analysis. In addition to the an-
thropologist’s observation of how certain cultural features are distributed (which may not coincide for different traits), an analysis of cultural boundaries would need to pay attention to processes of group formation and actors’ distinctions between indigenous and foreign customs.

These reservations concerning Brumann’s take on the boundary problem notwithstanding, I would subscribe to his summary of what a useful reformulation of the culture concept should take into consideration: that the social reproduction of culture is never an automatic given, but rather a process in which power plays an important role in achieving cultural consensus; that culture does not determine all social action, nor does it wholly define individuals; and that culture is not necessarily bound to ethnic boundaries, nor is it necessarily constitutive of identity.

**Culture as negotiation**

These insights also form the starting point of approaches that define culture, not as a shared canon of worldviews, practices, and norms, but as a discursive field (Schiffauer 1999), or as an arena in which central values and institutions are continuously being (re)negotiated. In Schiffauer’s view, cultural commonality is only temporarily achieved. It is constituted not through substantive agreement on specific values and practices, but through a consensus on the rules by which people engage in debates, through collective remembrance of past debates, and through shared points of dispute.

Andreas Wimmer, too, defines culture as ‘an open, unstable process of negotiating meanings ... that links cognitively competent actors with differing interests’ (1996: 413; my translation). Here, Wimmer takes up the anti-Parsonian tradition of symbolic interactionism and distinguishes between ‘internalised culture’ or habitus, public culture with its collective representations and negotiation processes and finally the process of social closure and cultural distinction. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Wimmer admits that there are learned and largely unconscious routines—those cultural differences that everyone experiences, for example, in their encounters with strangers when travelling. Yet, he insists on the universal competence of people to ‘weigh the costs and benefits in light of their own interests’ (1996: 407–408.). Consequently, nobody is fully determined by habitus. ‘In their everyday interactions, actors negotiate how the situation is defined, what roles are ascribed, what courses of action pursued and what norms of social interaction are to be valid’ (1996: 409). These negotiations take place against the backdrop of a general agreement regarding the valid rules of action and eventually lead to a ‘symbolic social contract’ or ‘cultural compromise’, as Wimmer puts it, that ‘give rise to the corresponding cultural boundaries’ (1996: 413).

A cultural compromise is brought about when all actors in an arena are able to formulate their long-term interests in a shared symbolic code. Ultimately, such cultural compromises also define the boundaries between the proponents of the compromise and those who are positioned beyond the limits of its validity. The making of cultural compromises therefore goes hand in hand with social closure: ‘If such practices of distinction become a central component of a group’s sense of ‘we-ness’, and if that group con-
siders itself to be a historically constituted community of descent, i.e. as a group of people who share a culture and a history, we speak ... of ethnic groups’ (1996: 413). Wimmer thus understands ethnicity—in keeping with Frederic Barth’s (1969) concept of ethnic boundaries and other constructivist theories of ethnicity (for an overview, see Lentz 1995)—as a phenomenon of social closure, not as an expression of ‘objective’ cultural difference.

The advantage of this approach is certainly that it allows to address culture’s inner variability and the impact of power relations, as well as to account for processes of cultural change. It also enables the study of actors’ cultural discourses and strategies of distinction without uncritically subscribing to their essentialisations or to become mired in a statistical cluster analysis. Cultures (in the plural) are not considered as simply given units of analysis. And yet, the emphasis on negotiation presumes that social groups are capable of a high degree of verbalisation and strategic thinking. This does not fit well with the importance of non-verbalised routines implicit in Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Furthermore, Wimmer’s focus on individual ‘rational choice’ does not mesh with his more group-oriented concept of ‘cultural compromise’. Nevertheless, Wimmer’s thoughts do make an important and lasting contribution to the much-needed re-sociologisation of the concept of culture, not least because it highlights the problematic relationships between power-saturated processes of social group formation and practices of cultural distinction.8

Culture and its future

In conclusion I would argue, as Brumann, Wimmer, and other defenders of the culture concept have done, that anthropologists should retain culture as a key term. For one, anthropologists need to concern themselves with how social actors and institutions have appropriated the concept of culture, as well as understand how differences, and the cultural boundaries into which they may congeal, are being made and stabilised, or contested, deemphasised, and unmade. They cannot do this without retaining culture as an analytical concept. Alternative concepts that some scholars have suggested should replace the supposedly irredeemably reified notion of culture, like society, ideology, or religion, have theoretical histories, and popular appropriations, that are no less implicated in essentialisations than the concept of culture is. Secondly, anthropologists need culture as a connective concept to facilitate exchange with other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, as well as with the cognitive and natural sciences. Anthropologists must criticise the un-reflected, uncritical adoption of simplified anthropological culture concepts, but they should not exclude themselves from the debate by abandoning culture altogether. To achieve this, anthropologists, of course, need to develop further a post-essentialist understanding of the term. This poses (at least) two challenges that I would like to discuss in closing.

8 For a similar perspective on ethnicity, and an even more radical attempt to liberate the concept of ethnicity from its boundedness to social groups, see Brubaker 2004.
Culture vs. ? Or: What is not cultural?

The anthropological conception of culture was historically defined in contradistinction to other concepts, i.e. against the background of the question as to what is not cultural. For Tylor it was nature, for Boas it was race, for Parsons it was society. What contrasting terms are relevant today if anthropologists wish to delineate the cultural? What specific aspects of reality are highlighted by the concept of culture and what aspects are not?

One important counterpoint defining the specificity of culture is certainly to be found in the domain of the natural and life sciences. Against the backdrop of their research perspectives one could ask: How does the existence of human societies differ from that of molecules, atoms, plants, or primates? To answer this question one could turn to Stefan Hirschauer’s (2010) proposed minimal definition of the term culture: cultural phenomena are comprised of meaningful distinctions that are shaped by historically, geographically, and socially specific contexts. Of particular importance are acts of distinction in which those making the distinctions choose to distinguish other humans, attribute membership to individuals, and define the composition of groups. Understanding this making of distinctions as a contingent process, and observing such processes in a self-reflexive manner, is what constitutes the epistemological foundation shared by the social sciences and humanities, regardless of whether they explicitly invoke the term culture (or cultural) or not.

In formulating a revised conception of culture the social sciences and humanities must for their part critically engage with systemic and reified understandings of culture (and society), as well as rethink in a more open manner the relationship between culture and society. We should not presume the existence of clearly bounded social systems (groups, institutions) that then somehow ‘have’ a culture, in the sense of a coherent system of meanings and cultural codes (the ‘container’ model of culture discussed in this paper). Rather, social closure and group self-conceptions are just as much in need of careful analysis as the congealment of certain kinds of distinctions into stable cultural configurations. Both fields, the social and the cultural, require attention, not so much with respect to the bounded units, but rather to the contingency of the boundary-making process, that is: processes of emergence, stabilisation, and closure, as well as destabilisation and dissolution. Anthropology therefore must inquire into how differences are being made, i.e. study processes of differentiation, and not simply assume differences as ontological facts.

Yet, to what extent should the social sciences and humanities distinguish between the social and the cultural, or is culture an all-encompassing concept? Andreas Reckwitz suggests that we understand the social as the linking of initially meaningless ‘behavioural acts of mobile materialities’, while the cultural is to be understood as the ‘rules

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9 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the recent post-humanist discourses on the anthropocene and the ‘nature-and-culture-no-more’ discussion that dissolves the conventional distinction between nature versus culture; on this, see, for instance, Descola 2013.
by which “meaning” is produced’ (2009: 414–5; my translation). To some extent this approach is reminiscent of the old Parsonian separation of institutionalised, ‘hard’ social structure and ‘soft’ culture as a system of values, symbols and meanings; and I would therefore insist that this opposition is not very helpful. Rather, the ‘social’ and the ‘cultural’ reflect different aspects of one and the same process; there is no ‘social’ practice and there are no institutions without ‘cultural’ meanings, and vice versa. If we understand culture as the making and unmaking of meaningful differences, then these processes can be analysed as evolving in different material forms, ranging from, for instance, more or less ephemeral speech acts, or more durable written and iconographic forms, to material infrastructures, such as clothing or architecture, and more or less durably institutionalised social arrangements, including policy guidelines or legal structures. Cultural differences are not simply discursive effects or cognitive schemes, they are also ‘real essentialisms’, engendered in practice, materialised in the body, and secured through institutions. Anthropologists and other social-science scholars should therefore explore the wide range of practices by which actors make contingent but meaningful distinctions using discourses and symbols, as well as bodily, materialised, and institutionally more or less solidified forms.10

Furthermore, I would support a fairly encompassing, wide definition of the cultural (rather than culture) that goes beyond the making and unmaking of distinctions that are used in defining group boundaries. Arjun Appadurai once distinguished between ‘Culture 1, constituting a virtually open-ended archive of differences’ and ‘Culture 2, that subset of these differences that constitutes the diacritics of group identity’ (1996: 14). Appadurai suggested to focus on the second understanding of culture and to ‘regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities’ (1996: 13). He conceded that this would bring the ‘word culture uncomfortably close to the idea of ethnicity’, but still felt that this was a necessary move in order to get away from an understanding of ‘culture as a substance’ (1996: 13; emphasis in original). I would argue, however, that such a narrow conception of culture robs social scientists and anthropologists of the possibility of studying the dynamics and interplay of other differences which Appadurai would not consider to be ‘cultural’ and which do not necessarily lead to the formation of ethnic groups, differences such as those of gender, age, or social class.

Culture or cultures?

A second challenge that anthropologists face in revising their conception of culture is linked to the question of whether they should refer to culture in the singular or the plural. If anthropologists no longer automatically presume social-cum-cultural closure, i.e. if they abandon the container model of culture, then how can they talk about cultural difference? Does this dissolve the distinctions made by cultural-relativist ap-

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10 This is the culture concept that informs the work of our research group ‘Un/doing differences: practices of human differentiation’ at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz; for a broader discussion of the group’s theoretical approach, see Hirschauer 2014.
proaches between different cultures as relatively stable configurations of group-specific values, norms, and practices and leave scholars with a chaotic, impenetrable jumble of doing and undoing differences that are continuously subject to reconfiguration? How can they find a productive middle ground between the container model and a muddle of arbitrarily distributed cultural differences?

Addressing these questions involves tackling the issue of how anthropologists can best conceptualise cultural boundaries. Ira Bashkow’s (2004: 447, 451–3) suggestion to distinguish between cultural boundaries drawn by the social actors themselves and by the social scientist for analytical purposes seems important here. With respect to the dynamics of folk boundaries, Wimmer’s (1996) approach is useful, drawing attention to how cultural boundaries are being made, contested, or abandoned in the context of power struggles. Anthropologists need to explore how cultural boundaries (and thus folk understandings of ‘different cultures’) are entwined with processes of group formation and social closure that involve, among others, achieving consensus on selected diacritical cultural features to mark the ‘we-group’. Such a perspective allows them to attend to actors’ cultural discourses and practices of distinction without also having to uncritically adopt their essentialisations. The question of difference between ‘cultures’ can thus be reformulated as an inquiry into how contingent and mutable cultural configurations of difference come about, how these configurations are (temporarily) stabilised, and how this is linked to processes of social closure and group formation (or, as the case may be, dissolution).

At the same time, however, anthropologists need to keep in mind that not all folk boundaries, and certainly not cultural boundaries drawn by the observer, result in, or are engendered by, processes of group formation. They may concern only specific aspects of people’s lives, and be discontinuous as well as incomplete. As Bashkow insists, cultural boundaries ‘do not actually separate; they only demarcate or differentiate’; ‘in and of themselves, [they] do not exclude or contain’ (2004: 450). They should not be imagined as spatial ‘lines’, and in many cases, they are not rigidly maintained or ‘shored up’ (2004: 450). They may often better be imagined not as solid blocs, but multiply intersecting ‘isoglosses’ (the mapping of particular linguistic features of dialects), resulting in ‘tangled patterns of crisscrosses and loops, making it impossible to establish a definitive line of demarcation’ (2004: 451). Just how erratic or congruent the distribution of different cultural features is, and how permeable, fluid, or stable cultural boundaries are, are empirical questions that cannot be answered beforehand. There may be cases where relatively many boundaries coincide, and even cases where the social actors’ and the social scientists’ distinctions correspond. Conversely, there may also be cases where people emphasise diacritical features as ‘their own’ that the analyst would clearly identify as historically ‘imported’ and ‘foreign’.

In any case, these nuances make it all the more difficult to speak of ‘cultures’, in the substantive sense and in the plural. The positivist conception of cultures as clearly bounded units of analysis is no longer tenable. The critique of methodological nationalism, which robbed sociologists and political scientists of apparently clearly bounded
societies and nation-states, ought to make it impossible for anthropologists, too, to see cultures as systemic phenomena and to simply equate ethnic groups, society, or the nation-state with culture. The task is thus not so much to study culture(s), but rather to analyse historically and geographically field-specific practices of differentiation, of making and unmaking differences.
References


