

Culture, a Modern Cage?

‘Culture’ allows us not to blame it all on psychology; psychology cannot take responsibility for the use of this word in modernity, at least not at first. Culture seems to do in the outside what identity achieves in the inside. Culture is as fleeting as identity is; yet in the service of education, culture serves to explain, many times, as identity does, failure or success. Bad in both cases, no doubt about it, but more destructive to the marginalized if their ‘failure’ is explained through it.

The impressive growth of the use of culture in modernity has not gone unnoticed, especially when considering it as a substitute for race (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Malik, 1996, 2005). The pervasive use of culture as an (pseudo) analytical concept in the social sciences for the last fifty years represents paradoxically the opposite direction of that taken by the discipline supposedly responsible for adopting the term in the first place—that is, anthropology, for which the term has become suspect for it tends to exoticize, stereotype and essentialize (Sewell, 2005). Its multiplicity of meanings, today, renders it useless for serious analytical work.

In general, but more specifically in educational matters, we seem to attach two main meanings to culture. In both cases, the meanings attached are hierarchical. The first meaning approaches culture as that type of knowledge and/or performances that are worthy, the ones that belong to the civilized, those that reflect in their being, the epitome of human development. In this case, we get higher culture as opposed to lower culture, the uncivilized the primitive, or using a more exact language, those that

do not belong to the Western tradition. This of course does not free the westerners from having their own scales to measure. Even within the West, there are those who are more cultured than others.

The second meaning points at a group to which an individual belongs. This or that person could belong to the English or the Sri Lankan culture. Belonging to the English culture is generally better for it implies whiteness rather than the blackness implied by Sri Lankan culture. At times, there seems to be a strong fit between culture and race, which as we all might remember was also hierarchized. What is the great difference, you might wonder, other than political correctness (though not always bad)—a liberal addiction—to say someone belongs to the Afro-American culture or to say someone is Black?

Folk and academic understanding of culture seem to have forgotten that culture means originally work. We should not have forgotten, for agriculture (*agros* Greek for field; *cultura-ae*, Latin for work) is known to all of us, but words are unlucky and their histories are forgotten with ease (Williams, 1976).

We should question how the new meaning of culture evolved and who are those served by the new meanings. The old concept of culture is still around when our children have a throat ache, we visit a doctor's clinic and have our children ordered to have a culture done. Some saliva is gathered and then set on a culture, an infrastructure for growth. Ironically, this might be the meaning of culture as in the group to which we belong: the 'primitive', the 'marginalized', the 'uncivilized' supposedly grow on a rotten infrastructure.

Still remembering that we grow on an infrastructure is positive for at least it reminds us we are not individuals/solipsistic but that we evolve in contexts. The problem is that when we use the word 'culture' we reduce the context only to that we judge as similar to the individual being talked about and nothing else. The fault might not be any more the individual's, but it is now the group's, only his/her group. Saying the child fails not because of him or herself but because of the culture he belongs to is not qualitatively different, just quantitatively so. Blame is now spread on all those to which the individual 'belongs' to culturally. Yet, while we do this for the marginalized, we are less inclined to do so for the privileged. If privileged individuals are successful, it is not because of their group's culture (i.e., their parents' bank account!) but because they are geniuses on their own right.

In one way or another, identity has become the psychologized inner essence of ‘I’ or ‘Us’ or ‘Them’, and culture has become the outside, no less rigid, ‘container’ into which (marginalized) individuals (or groups) are cast. ‘Identity’ and ‘culture’ seem now to be an inseparable couple. When they fit together well, such as, for example, with the identity of a ‘Gentleman’ and ‘English culture’, you are set for life! If your identity is Murri or Anangu and your culture is ‘aboriginal Australian’ you are set too, for life, but differently. Identity and culture ‘love’ each other and social scientists love them both!

When approaching ‘reality’ analytically though, we should beware of such social sciences for their approach fails to recognize the multiple complexities (political, social, emotional) that are present in social interactional processes. Moreover, this approach hides the multiple relations of power in which these complexities are immersed, relations that cannot be explained by simply attributing them to issues of identity and/or culture (Hall, 1996; Shotter, 1989). Identity is not a given (in the individual’s mind) but a *product*; identity is not a property or quality of mind but a *practice/performance* in the world, and culture is not a container (McDermott, Raley, & Seyer-Ochi, 2009) but the changing product of human interaction. Seeing it as such means that our inquiry should lead us not to the inner borders of individual minds or their imagined containers/molds/casts but to the outer spheres of human interaction—in our case the interaction that takes place in educational settings and among educational agents.

In conflicted societies, ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ become even more salient. Krauts, Tommy, Frogs, Japs, Kikes, Hajjis, Moors, and plenty of other derogatory options, essentialize the human that can now be slaughtered. These slurs reflect the assumed unquestionable existence of an inner self; and the unquestioned existence, or should we say preexistence, of human groups and associations cast into recognizable patterns. As such, culture becomes the prison of the individual (self, identity, etc.) outside. Cultures are presented as static containers from which there is no escape (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

But what is a culture for someone to be able to belong to? And if culture holds power over us how does it do so? Does it have secret powers? Where are these powers? Who can recognize them? What is even more important is to ask who can recognize cultures and those that belong to them. We should pay attention to the fact that for the most part those that are recognized as belonging to a certain culture (and by the fate of positive or negative prejudices—both equally bad—paying a price for this belonging) are

always outsiders to the mainstream and more so marginalized and marked. The powerful have no culture; they go unmarked and if they are marked, their mark is that of high culture. What is worst, their unmarkedness (or their marked high culture) becomes the measure of that which they mark (down). Could it be that culture is only a reality for the peripheries? When you come to think about it and when considering what was said previously about the (assumed) autonomy of the self and the individual, speaking about culture as a thing that imprisons the individual is somewhat paradoxical; the individual is indeed autonomous and responsible for his failures or he is not. If he is autonomous, how can it be that culture imprisons him? Yet both these metaphors—identity inside and culture outside—live together and trap the individual in their in-betweenness. As long as the context and other variables (economic system, teachers, etc.) need not share the responsibility, the contradictions involved in the understanding of an autonomous self at times imprisoned by a culture (which no one really defines in any coherent way) can go unnoticed. Culture as identity, self and individual, are all good to keep for the ones entitled to judge success or failure; through them, those entitled to judge are guarded from having to explain exactly how success or failure are achieved or not.

We suggest that re-conceptualizing culture as *becoming* (while doing work) in the world) through complex but describable social activity, contrary to being essentialist traits in people's 'heads' or cages that imprison them—will help us overthrow the bondage of cognitivist and psychologized perspectives and situate our educational efforts in the realms of *practice* and *activity* (we dedicate the second section of the book to expand on these issues). Our educational work needs to acknowledge the intricacies of human interaction and networks, the intermittent nature of meaning making, and the necessary exuberance and deficiency of all trans-cription and trans-lation (the next chapters elucidate these concepts). This work involves using the revealed complexities as a lever to humble our perspectives when confronting multifaceted 'realities'. We are, therefore, critical of western epistemology and its domination in our general interpretation of the world and more specifically education. This epistemology is responsible for describing the world in particular ways; these ways are grounded in abstractions about the internal minds of individuals and the external characteristics of cultures.

What we argue, however, is the need to re-ontologize what has been epistemologized; that is, we emphasize the need to materialize abstractions and ask about their consequences in everyday life. In other words, we are asking whether and how (if it is possible) we can re-ontologize our

work in education (Bekerman, 2016). For this to be done we need to work hard on understanding language, that human tool of communication, which shapes the ways in which we describe and reflect on the world. Indeed it is the psychologized educational ‘culture’ (language) the one we are trying to dismantle. We will return and expand on these issues in the final chapters of the book.

Clearly language is not unique to human beings for other animals communicate among themselves too. They communicate through multiple and varied channels—scent, sound, markings, gesture and posture—which are used, among others to signal danger, territory, sexual overtures and so on, but these communicational behaviors, which differ from human language, appear to have fixed and stable and universal meanings. All dogs display similar behaviors when signaling submission or joy. Human language lacks this stability and universality of meaning; it is for better or for worse always indexical, that’s to say if language has at all meaning its meaning shifts from context to context.

And yet our common-sense view of language in its relationship to the speaker sees the one as a means of expressing the other. Language and our common-sense appreciation of its function is indeed one of the main reasons for our understanding that self, personality, identity or experience precedes and exists independently of the words used to describe it. We believe it is language that offers us names through which to describe our feelings and thoughts. But as we will see in the following two chapters, language from a poststructuralist perspective is not a clear, pure medium through which our thoughts and feelings can be made transparent to others but the product of dialogic negotiation in situ.

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King: Got it. I am what I am and you are a Cilician.

Slave: Cilician cannot be all by itself. For a Cilician to be there needs to be a non-Cilician. So what are you?

K: I am what I am and you are a Cilician. I am the rule, you are different.

S: If you say so. But keep in mind that I was not even born in Cilicia; only my grandfather was born there. He benefited from being transferred here in Athens and sold as a slave. I was even luckier as after my parents died I was transferred to your house. So tell me master, in what way am a Cilician?

- K: Well you were raised by Cilicians.
 S: Not really. I was raised in your household.
 K: Do you mean to say then that you are a king?
 S: No, no, no, master. I just mean I'm not a Cilician.
 K: So you think you are Athenian.
 S: Well it all depends on who sets the rules as to what being an Athenian means.
 K: You are the culture you were born into!
 S: Even if the day after I was born I was set in a different culture?
 K: Forget it. It doesn't really matter, but you are not a king!

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