

CULTURE

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These are my lecture notes on the subject of 'culture'. Use them for references, ideas and pointers for useful discussion. As you should see, there are two possible ways to understand the word. Either culture is a product of human nature as essential as, say, an animal or plant culture. Or culture is a condition that humans acquire by rising above their nature.

The relevance of the discussion of culture to the topic of the MA is this: are the claims of astrology, or astronomy or cosmology for that matter, to be taken as inherently true, or are they culturally determined? Astrology is particularly vulnerable in this respect because it lacks a modern rationale and so is subject to criticism on the grounds that it can't demonstrate its 'truth' in a modern, that is, twenty-first century scientific, manner. However, science is also vulnerable to such criticisms. Because the dominant discourse, as expressed in the media, in western society is heavily 'pro-science' (though many scientists would dispute this statement) the serious academic critiques of scientific claims are little known outside academia. However, within academia, there have been powerful voices from post-modernists and feminists in particular, for whom the claims of modern science are the product of power relations within society (such as domination by middle-class, white, secular, male, patriarchal, western modernisers), rather than any true insight into the nature of reality.

The struggle between what is 'true' and what is 'culturally determined' therefore occurs across the intellectual arena. We should also point out that there are other possible determinants of what, say, astrology (as much as any world view) might be, such as psychology.

First, some problems of definition:

"Culture" is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite - nature - is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all'.¹

'It is hard to resist the conclusion that the world "culture" is both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful. Its anthropological meaning covers everything from hairstyles and drinking habits to how to address your husband's second cousin, while the aesthetic sense of the word includes Igor Stravinsky but not science fiction. Science fiction belongs to "mass" or popular culture, a category which floats nebulously between the anthropological and the aesthetic'.²

Cultural Astronomy/Astrology

What do we mean by this?

- Astrology/onomy **in** culture - i.e. as part of culture
- Astrology/onomy **as a** culture - i.e. as a culture in itself
- Sub-cultures within astrology/onomy?

Do/does astrology/onomy have an existence as a set of absolutes independent of culture?

¹ Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 1.

² Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 32.

The view that astrology is culturally relative, with no absolutes, is proposed by a number of influential astrologers:

the notion that 'an astrology with a capital A which exists somewhere, has always existed, and to which we should all submit ourselves or be faithful to...is merely the result of our imagination'.³

Are external classifications astrology/onomy within culture negotiable?:

'For the sciences I study are those related to the stars, and they include not only various astral omens, astrology, magic, medicine, and law... All these subjects, I would argue, were or are sciences *within the contexts of the cultures* in which they once flourished or are now practiced'.⁴(my italics)

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- If 'western culture' exists as a recognisable entity, can/does it have an attitude to sub-cultures, such as astrology, which many people would consider as not being a part of 'western culture', if the latter is seen as synonymous with modernism?
 - If astrology/onomy are cultures, or complexes of cultures, how do they portray the world?

'Whatever these empathetic errors, it is true that Western culture shows a lamentable failure to imagine other cultures. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the phenomenon of aliens. What is really sinister about aliens is just how unalien they are. They are dismal testimony to our inability to conceive of life forms radically different from our own. They may have bulbous heads and triangular eyes, speak in a chillingly robotic monotone or emit a strong stench of sulphur, but otherwise they look much like Tony Blair. Creatures capable of travelling for light years turn out to have heads, limbs, eyes and voices. Their spacecraft can navigate black holes but tend to crash in the Nevada desert. Despite being built in galaxies inconceivably remote from us these ships leave ominous burn marks on our soil. Their occupants take a curiously familiar interest in examining human genitals, and tend to deliver vague, waffling messages about the need for world peace, like a UN Secretary-General. They peep into kitchen windows in their inconceivably alien fashion, and take an excited extra-terrestrial interest in false teeth. In fact, as immigration officers might do well to note, creatures with whom we can communicate are by definition not alien. The real aliens are those who have been sitting in our laps for centuries without our noticing'.⁵

3 Ruperti, Alexander (2002), *Meaning of Humanistic Astrology*, p. 3, <http://www.stand.cz/astrologie/czech/texty/rez-ru-a/rez-ru-a.htm>, consulted 25 Jan. 2003. See also Rudhyar, Dane, *The Lunation Cycle: A Key to the Understanding of Personality*, Santa Fe: Aurora Press 1967, pp. 9, 12, 13.

4 Pingree, David, 'Hellenophilia versus the History of Science', *ISIS* 1991, Vol. 83, p. 554.

5 Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, pp. 49-50.

Definitions of culture

E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) is the first great name in anthropology - perhaps the greatest to date, and *Primitive Culture* is his greatest book. It was Tylor who first clearly isolated - in English at least - the concept of culture in its scientific sense, defined it, and constituted it as the core of anthropology.

'Culture, or Civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is 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'.⁶

Tylor believed that there were universal laws governing human nature and society, and his contribution to the goal of discovering these was to examine the evolution of 'lower tribes' into 'higher nations'. The evolutionary model of cultural development is now unfashionable amongst most anthropologists, who would argue that 'primitive' people possess practices and belief systems which are no more 'primitive' than modern ones. The evolutionary model, though, remains popular amongst scholars who believe that science is a higher mode of inquiry and understanding than any other, and that all other explanatory models are errors, relics of previous, inadequate and primitive modes of understanding.

Among those who undermined Tylor, was Walter Taylor:

'Of the many definitions of culture put forth since E. B. Tylor, the one I prefer, and find most useful in my work is that of Walter Taylor, in his 1948 *Study of Archaeology*. Taylor sees culture as a mental construct, not directly observable, but understandable through its various objectifications, be it ritual practice, social structure or the material world. It is that set of plans and concepts used by any group, national, ethnic or tribal, to order its existence, to make sense of it, and to come to a happy and effective accommodation of the outside world, social as well as environmental. Certainly it serves an adaptive function, but more than that, for those "psychological encounters" can only come about if there is an underlying coherence to a culture's way of coping with the world'.⁷

Etymology

Derived from the Latin *colere*, cultivating, inhabiting, worshipping, protecting.

nature: husbandry or the tending of natural growth - i.e. *cultivate*, i.e. it is an *activity*

Therefore, is astronomy/ology a means of cultivating the heavens, or of cultivating a relationship with the heavens?

Also *cultus*, cult.

⁶ Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture*, 3 Vols., New York: Harper Torchbooks 1958 [London: Murray 1871], Vol. I, 'The origins of Culture', p. 1.

⁷ The Plymouth Colony Archive Project: *Cultural Dimensions of Ethnicity in the Archaeological Record* by James F. Deetz, Keynote Address, 28th Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Washington, D.C., 1995
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/deetz/Plymouth/JDeetzmem6.html> Accessed 15 Jan 2008.

Culture and nature began as synonyms. They then came to be antonyms. In the post-modern world, have they become synonyms?

'If the world "culture" traces a momentous historical transition, it also encodes a number of key philosophical issues. Within this single term, questions of freedom and determinism, agency and endurance, change and identity, the given and the created, come dimly into focus. If culture means the active tending of natural growth, then it suggests a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what it does to us'.⁸

- Is to be cultured to express human nature or to transcend it?
- Is it spontaneous or carefully arranged?
- To be cultured is to follow rules

'The Idea of Culture' automatically suggests opposition to nature: a 'double refusal' of organic determinism on the one hand and the autonomy of spirit on the other.⁹ A rebuff to naturalism and idealism.

But there is a paradox. Human beings are natural. Therefore, if human beings are cultured, there must be something in their nature which 'exceeds and undoes it'.

Therefore culture as a word 'faces both ways'. It suggests a division within ourselves between that within us which constitutes the raw material for refinement, and that which cultivates and refines.¹⁰ Nature then achieves a double meaning both as the stuff of the world and that which encourages the anarchic forces which are the opposite of culture.

'Culture is thus a matter of self-overcoming as much as self-realisation. If it celebrates the self, it also disciplines it, aesthetic and ascetic together'.¹¹

Relationship to civilisation. Are the two synonymous?

19th c: Culture characterises our humanity. Culture is a kind of ethical pedagogy, an ethical theory of education, in which we must be educated, cultivated, in order to become good citizens.

And is culture then represented by the individual? Or the state, in which we play our part as good citizens. (Schiller, Eagleton, p. 8).

But is the model an Enlightenment one, a grand narrative in which education brings us out of a nasty, brutish, natural selves, in a linear process?

Or a Romantic one in which education liberates our true, deeper, selves? Under the German Idealists (Eagleton p. 12), culture assumed some of its modern meaning as *a way of life*.

Hence primitive culture: civilisation and culture are no longer synonyms.

⁸ Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 2.

⁹ Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 4.

¹⁰ Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 5.

¹¹ Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 5-6.

'The origin of the idea of culture as a distinctive way of life, then is closely bound up with a Romantic anti-colonialist penchant for suppressed 'exotic' societies. The exoticism will resurface in the twentieth century in the primitivist features of modernism, a primitivism which goes hand in hand with the growth of modern cultural anthropology. It will crop up later, this time in postmodern guise, in a romanticising of popular culture, which now plays the expressive, spontaneous, quasi-utopian role which "primitive" cultures had played previously'.¹²

Such ideas, Eagleton argues, then lead to a cultural relativism on which all cultures are considered equally valid and, in the sense that 'natural' and primitive' cultures are romanticised. This relativism is characteristic of post-modernism. However, he adds this is an essential bias: dissident or minority cultures are romanticised, majority ones castigated: e.g. lesbianism is celebrated, nationalism castigated (p. 14).

Culture then become plural: a nation may contain many cultures.

This then makes it difficult to maintain culture's positive gloss as a grand narrative of personal or collective improvement, as sociologists discuss 'Mafia culture' or 'police canteen culture' (p. 15). Or the culture of Bavaria or Microsoft or the Bushmen (pp. 20-1). It then becomes impossible to define any idea of culture as normative.

As a way of life we can identify 'identity culture' (p. 26): 'a sociable, populist and traditional way of life, characterised by a quality that pervades everything and makes a person feel rooted or at home'.¹³

- Can astrology constitute an identity culture?

Popular Culture

We are not directly considering popular culture in this module, partly because theorists in the discipline have explicitly avoided the 'esoteric', 'supernatural' and 'superstitious', within which most of them would class astrology, even though some are now considering religion.

Central to the theory of popular culture is the notion of **The Culture Industry**. In Strinati's summary,

The culture industry deals in falsehoods, not truths, in false needs and false solutions, rather than real needs and real solutions. It solves problems 'only in appearance', not as they should be resolved in the real world...The power of the culture industry to secure the dominance and continuity of capitalism resides, for Adorno, in its capacity to shape and perpetuate a 'regressive' audience, a dependent, passive, and servile consuming public.¹⁴

The primary theorist of popular culture in the English-speaking world is the Marxist, Stuart Hall.¹⁵ Drawing on Theodore Adorno, (who was a bitter critic of astrology) and Antonio Gramsci,

12 Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 12.

13 Hartman Geoffrey, *The Fateful Question of Culture*, New York 1997, p. 211, cited in Eagleton, *Culture*, p. 26.

14 Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge 1995, p. 64.

15 Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Studies: two paradigms', *Media, Culture and Society*, 1980, Vol. 2, pp. 57-72

1. Hall saw culture as an 'industry' in which people are both producers and consumers
2. Argued that meaning is negotiated between the intent of the producer and the social and class identity of the consumer; there are therefore no identifiable fixed meanings.

According to Gordon Lynch, There are three key ways in which "popular culture" has been defined in relation to a cultural; "other" "others":

1. popular culture as an opposing cultural form to *high culture* or the *avant garde*.
2. popular culture as a category that is defined in relation to both *high culture* and *folk culture*, or which is seen as displacing *folk culture*.
3. popular culture as a form of social and cultural resistance against *dominant culture* or *mass culture*.¹⁶

A note from the web:

Cognitive Evolution (stages)

<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/COGNEVOL.html>

C Joslyn Jan 1992

accessed 19 June 2006

The origin of the nerve cell marks another major step in biological evolution. As a communicative device, the function of a nerve cell is to vary so that it can communicate information. Nerve cells can affect a variety of semantic coding relationships, allowing multicellular organisms to rapidly develop many levels of hierarchical anticipatory control. In particular, we recognize in the following schema the major steps of neural evolution:

Culture is control of thought;
 which is control of associating;
 which is control of complex reflexes;
 which is control of simple reflexes;
 which is control of movement;
 which is control of position.

Summary

Culture has several main meanings (p. 20)

- As civilisation - a grand narrative of human self-development

Then as a response to the failure of the above:

- A utopian critique
- A way of life
- Artistic creation

Books

Leavis F.R., *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, London: Folcroft 1930.

Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, London: Pelican 1971.

Hall, S., 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge, 1981.

16 Lynch, Gordon, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2005, p. 3.