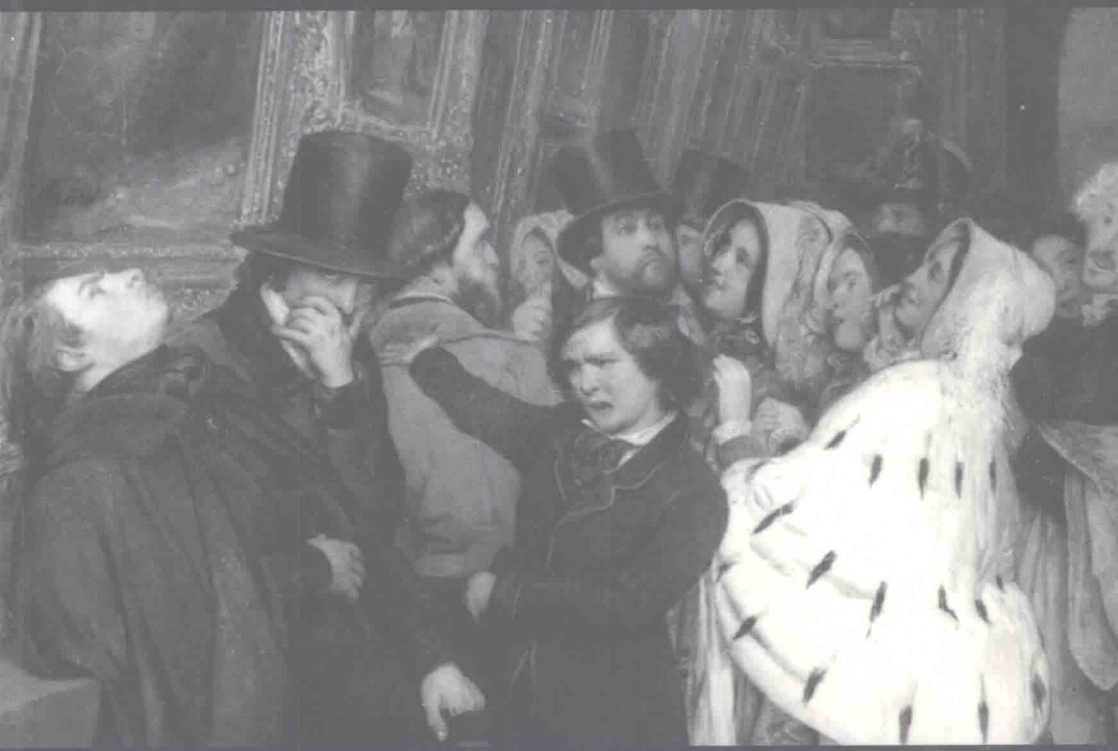


NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

The Logic of Culture

Authority and Identity in the Modern Era



William Ray



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Series Editor's Preface

History is one of many fields of knowledge. Like other fields it has two elements: boundaries and contents. The boundaries of history first acquired their modern shape in early modern Europe. They include, among other things, such basic principles as the assumption that time is divisible into past, present, and future; that the past can be known by means of records and remainders surviving to the present; that culture can be distinguished from nature; that anachronism can be avoided; that subjects are different from objects; that human beings are capable of taking action; and that action is shaped by circumstance. Above all else, of course, they include the assumption that history does actually constitute a separate field of knowledge that is in fact divided from neighbouring fields – not merely a hitherto neglected corner of some other field whose rightful owners ought ideally, and are expected eventually, to reclaim it from the squatters now dwelling there without authorization and cultivate it properly with the tools of, say, an improved theology or a more subtle natural science.

A prodigious harvest has been gathered from the field bounded by those assumptions. Making a tentative beginning with the humanist discovery of antiquity, gaining confidence with the Enlightenment critique of religion, and blossoming into full professionalization in the nineteenth century, modern historians have managed to turn their produce into an elementary ingredient in democratic education and a staple of cultural consumption. They have extracted mountains of evidence from archives and turned it into books whose truth can be assayed by anyone who cares to follow their instructions. They have dismantled ancient legends that had been handed down through the ages and laid them to rest in modern libraries. They have emancipated the study of the

past from prophecy, apocalypticism, and other providential explanations of the future. Pronouncements on the past no longer command respect unless they have been authenticated by reference to documents. Myths and superstitions have given way to knowledge of unprecedented depth, precision, and extent. Compared with what we read in older books, the books of history today are veritable miracles of comprehension, exactitude, and impartiality.

Success, however, has its price. None of the assumptions defining the modern practices of history are self-evidently true. The more they are obeyed, the less it seems they can be trusted. Having probed the realm of culture to its frontiers, we cannot find the boundary by which it is supposed to be divided from the empire of nature. Having raised our standards of objectivity to glorious heights, we are afflicted with vertiginous attacks of relativity. Having mined the archives to rock bottom, we find that the ores turn out to yield no meaning without amalgamation. And having religiously observed the boundary between the present and the past, we find that the past does not live in the records but in our own imagination. The boundaries of history have been worn down; the field is lying open to erosion.

The books in this series are meant to point a way out of that predicament. The authors come from different disciplines, all of them specialists in one subject or another. They do not proceed alike. Some deal with subjects straddling familiar boundaries – chronological, geographical, and conceptual. Some focus on the boundaries themselves. Some bring new subjects into view. Some view old subjects from a new perspective. But all of them share a concern that our present understanding of history needs to be reconfigured if it is not to turn into a mere product of the past that it is seeking to explain. They are convinced that the past does have a meaning for the present that transcends the interest of specialists. And they are determined to keep that meaning within reach by writing good short books for non-specialists and specialists alike.

Constantin Fasolt
University of Chicago

Preface

Yes, another book on culture. It takes a certain amount of foolhardiness even to use the word in a title these days, much less to use it in the way I intend to. For unlike the many excellent accounts of culture that have been published in the past half century, and especially in the past decade, I do not intend to catalogue the meanings of the word or analyze its affiliation with a discipline or particular social class, much less lay bare its pernicious complicity with structures of domination. Most of the works that have been written on culture from the perspective of the humane – as opposed to the social – sciences, have been concerned with either the genesis of the term, or the various ways in which it has been used by individuals, political movements, ideologies, or historical periods, especially in the British tradition. My goal here is both humbler and more ambitious. I intend to explain what I think culture means for all of us at the level of a foundational logic of thought. Rather than looking at the different ways in which particular parties have invoked or used the term, I want to uncover what they all have in common, what the shared way of thinking might be that justifies their – and our – collective reliance on a term which manifestly means very different things for different people. The chapters that follow constitute a speculative essay, not a scholarly inquiry in particular traditions. What I am after might be called the “deep structure” or “grammar” of culture: the implicit conceptual syntax it provides for our thinking about individual and social identity, and historical progress.

As a category of thought and conceptualization, culture exercises extraordinary leverage. In the contemporary era it has acquired the status of a universal given, “a manifest truth unsullied by historical contingency,” as Christopher Herbert aptly put it in his inquiry into the genesis of the anthropological concept of

culture.¹ Yet the rule of culture is a historical phenomenon in all of its dimensions, not merely as a category of analysis, or signifier of social identity, but also as an ethic of self-realization, a model of moral progress, a form of authority, and a set of institutions. Only in the last two centuries have these various notions merged under one category and achieved widespread assent as a framework for understanding how individuals and collectives relate to each other, themselves, social practice, and history. It is the goal of this essay to shed some light on that merger, from its origins in the early modern revaluation of discursive authority, through its crystallization at the end of the Enlightenment in the word “culture,” to its legacy in our contemporary practices of critique.

This would be an overly ambitious menu for a scholarly investigation. Like many other master tropes of our age, culture is too invested with conflicting values and meanings to be simply “understood.” I shall therefore make no pretense of accounting for all the uses of the term in specific contexts. My concern is with excavating the underlying logic or grammar of thought which the “cultural way of thinking” purveys and charting the historical antecedents of that logic.

Even thus limited, the topic would be too vast were I to attempt accounting for national differences. While the paradigms and trends I outline are more or less applicable to most Western European and American traditions, I have focused on the articulation of culture as it occurred in Revolutionary France, with secondary emphasis on German and British thinkers. One could chart similar developments in most other developed European nations, but France makes an especially useful example for two reasons: it had set the paradigms of cultivated life during the preceding century; and the Revolutionary theoreticians who set out to create a new polity and citizenry were particularly explicit and methodological in their elaboration of culture as an instrument of social formation. Using specific case studies to complement the theoretical and historical overviews, I will examine the ideals of behavior, analytic strategies, ethical postures, cognitive agendas, and ideologies out of which the concept or logic of culture emerged, and which it has been used to underwrite.

It is a consequence of its brevity that this essay can do little justice to many of the complex historical developments it alludes to in the course of the argument, much less attend to the tremen-

dous amount of excellent secondary literature that has in recent years undertaken the reevaluation of specific cultural phenomena or polemics. Many of the developments I chart are embedded in multiple systems of determination and can be understood from a number of different perspectives more attentive to material, political, spiritual and social dimensions. However, this is a book about the emergence of a very broad framework of analysis, the full account of which has required neglecting these many other factors. I would simply refer the reader to the numerous detailed studies of how “culture” functions with relation to specific political, economic, and ideological systems in various periods and countries.

Similarly, the more general philosophical and historical developments that I invoke as a framework of analysis have received extensive treatment elsewhere. It is not my intention to discount their particularities or downplay the many ways in which they are unrelated. However, at the risk of running counter to the post-Foucauldian infatuation with ruptures and discontinuities, I seek to uncover the ways in which these various periods and practices might be united by a subterranean logic or shared analytic framework that has become so universal, so deeply embedded in our thought that we take it for granted.

Many people and many discussions are behind this book. I have come to understand what I mean by culture in the course of a decade of vigorous debate, with colleagues, friends, and students. In a sense this essay is a way of explaining to all those who were generous enough to spend their time trying to enlighten me, that which I could never quite get across in the course of a conversation, namely, just what I mean by culture. Were it not for their interest this essay would never have seen the day. Needless to say, none of them should be held responsible for the defects in what follows.

The idea of this book came from Constantin Fasolt, who should receive any credit it accrues. Under his encouragement, it took shape in a number of discussions with him and the other Fellows of the National Humanities Center in 1996–7, to all of whom I am indebted, but especially David Armitage, Don Lopez, and Chris Waters. I also received valuable feedback on my ideas on reading from the French History Seminar sponsored by the

Center, and am grateful to Philip Stewart, Steven Vincent, and the other members of that group for inviting me. I could not even begin to calculate the contribution of Keith Luria, with whom I have shared many a lively discussion over lunch in Paris, or Mary Sheriff, who has been a source of stimulation and support for years. It has been my great fortune to teach for many years at an institution that actually still has a distinct “culture” and the kind of “community” that theoreticians of culture generally evoke only with nostalgia. My debts, intellectual and otherwise, to the following friends and colleagues are so great and varied that I can only express them alphabetically: thank you, Doris Berkvam, Samuel Danon, Nathalia King, Lisa Steinman and Christopher Zinn, for years of intellectual stimulation and friendship. I am especially grateful to Elizabeth Drumm and Hugh Hochman for their careful reading of early drafts, and to Géraldine Deries, who took on the task of reading the final draft of the entire work in spite of pressing time constraints of her own. And finally I must thank my best reader and friend, Kathleen Nicholson, for her indefatigable support and perceptive critique, from the start of this project to the end.

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Introduction:

The Paradox of Culture

In 1791, during an impassioned plea for the founding of new monuments, a French administrator named Armand-Guy Kersaint evokes a “new religion that considers people in their relationships with one another.” Kersaint christens this new religion the “cult of laws” because its immediate objects of worship are the laws emanating from the national assembly and in particular the new constitution.¹ However, the deity behind these laws, the entity that gives them their authority and guarantees that they are just, is none other than the collective will and identity of the people – what the Revolutionaries called “the public thing.” In that sense, what the people are to venerate, the entity to which they are to pledge their obedience, is simply an abstract projection of themselves, considered as members of a coherent collective. The French people understand themselves as both the subject and the object of their “new religion” – and in two different capacities: as individuals lending their will to the legislative process and legitimating its decrees with their free consent and obedience; and as a collective entity whose identity transcends the sum of its parts and can only be inferred from the rules it leaves in its wake – the decrees, laws and shared practices which express and constrain it.

Such ideas would have been unthinkable in France a few centuries earlier, as in most other parts of Europe. The law was embodied not in the people, but in the church and the monarch; the human community did not reflect collective will, but divine design. One of the purposes of this book is to understand what made it possible to think the way Kersaint does, and to seek the answer in the new forms of discursive behavior that developed from the early modern period up through the nineteenth century.

It is fitting that Kersaint makes his observation in the course of an argument about monuments and art, and how they relate to the nation's collective identity. For his "new religion" outlines a dialectic model of self-expression and law formation that would subsequently be generalized to all human communities under the rubric of "culture." Like the cult of the law, which aimed at securing the coincidence of law and individual belief "in the heart of the virtuous person," the idea of "culture" welds rational autonomy and the expression of individual will to the disclosure and production of a framework of rules, values, beliefs, and practices. These situate, legitimate, and give meaning to specific acts, as well as a distinctive identity to the community; the complex whole which they form is what social scientists denote with their use of the term "culture."

But just as in Kersaint's model the new religion is both the ground of individual initiative and its result, so too there is another side of culture that consists of the free acts of self-expression that produce the historical legacy of the collective. This is Culture with an uppcase, and it designates the endeavors of self-realization we undertake within the constraints of our culture and, by extension, the products of those endeavors. Culture, like the "public thing" is both the origin of individual action and its result. It is both the abstract term we use to characterize a communal heritage and the acts of assessment and interpretation individuals engage in as a means of improving that heritage – and asserting themselves as both different from, yet members of, their community.

These various meanings resonate unevenly in the expressions that have proliferated in the last half century around the term "culture." "Cultural Revolution," "cultural evolution," "culture shock," "culture wars," "cultural capital," "corporate culture," "counter culture," "working-class culture," "popular culture," "high culture," "the culture of personality," "cultural literacy," "the Culture Industry," "multiculturalism," "cultural diversity," "cultural opportunity," "cultural studies" – the proliferation of concepts like these testify not only to protean character of "culture," but also to its value as an ideological category and political trump card. Few terms are as persistent and ubiquitous in modern western intellectual discourse, and few combine so many contradictory meanings. Wielded by the Left and the Right alike, from

Matthew Arnold to Maxim Gorky, from advocates of cultural diversity to those who decry it, "culture" resists reduction to any simple meaning.

In our general usage, we use the term to designate the shared traditions, values, and relationships, the *unconscious* cognitive and social reflexes which members of a community share and collectively embody. Paradoxically, though, we use the same term to denote the *self-conscious* intellectual and artistic efforts of individuals to express, enrich, and distinguish themselves, as well as the works such efforts produce and the institutions that foster them. In the first case "culture" names the beliefs and practices we *share* with all members of our society; in the second "Culture" marks our efforts to fashion ourselves into *particulars*, that we might acquire a measure of distinction within that society.

"Culture" thus articulates the tension between two antithetical concepts of identity: it tells us to think of ourselves as being who we are because of what we have in common with all the other members of our society or community, but it also says we develop a distinctive particular identity by virtue of our efforts to know and fashion ourselves as individuals. In abstract terms, culture simultaneously connotes sameness and difference, shared habit and idiosyncratic style, collective reflex and particular endeavor, unconsciously assimilated beliefs and consciously won convictions, the effortlessly inherited residue of social existence, and the expression of a striving for individuality.

To these conflicting semantic vectors of "culture" correspond two modalities of being and two visions of how we acquire our identity. Culture as communal identity tells us we become who we are in spite of ourselves, effortlessly and inexorably, as we unconsciously internalize our community's habits of thought, values, and forms of behavior. Culture as self-improvement contradicts this message by encouraging us to think of our selves as something we construct through a strenuous, deliberate, self-conscious pursuit of individual perfection. Culture thus locates authenticity simultaneously in our most reflective, institutionally mediated strivings and in our immediate social reflexes which elude awareness precisely because they set its parameters. Paradoxically, although we cultivate ourselves in order to realize our unique potential against the pressures to conform, we measure our level of cultivation in the degree to which we have assimilated

norms and rules: canons, bodies of knowledge, artistic traditions, rhetorical skills.

"Culture"'s alternate celebration of the conscious and the unconscious complicates its ethical valuation as well. Identifying a practice as "culturally constructed" has become shorthand in recent years for disqualifying it as inauthentic or at least open to examination and revision.² At the same time, however, cultural heritage is regularly invoked as a sacred domain of identity so authentic that to contest or attempt to regulate its content, especially in the case of minority communities, is tantamount to obliterating the identity and dignity of its subjects. A similar contradiction is visible in the cultivated classes' nostalgia for undivided, "organic" life, which is always enunciated from within a high Cultural enterprise. Celebrations of the blissful cultural embeddedness of others almost always occur as part of a project of critical self-distancing from the reflexes and practices of one's own society.

The most visible paradox of culture in the postmodern era is of course the fact that the imperative to "distinguish oneself" has become universal. What we all have in common is our uniqueness. We are all taught to think for ourselves; and the badge of our self-awareness is our ability to question the cultural values we take pride in understanding. The compulsion to overcome cultural reflex has become our distinguishing cultural reflex.

If our common usage of the term "culture" is fraught with contradictions, so too are the formal models of knowledge and truth that have been elaborated in its name. The idea of culture as rational self-perfection assumes knowledge can be achieved through systematic inquiry, self-discipline and social self-awareness – the kind of programs which educational institutions promulgate in the name of civilization, progress, and self-fulfillment. Yet since before the Enlightenment, the idea that truth is the product of disciplined rational inquiry has competed with a view that sees all claims to "truth" as transcriptions of cultural prejudice and preconception, as accounts biased by local contingencies, internalized through habit and ritual, and operating at a subconscious level.

This conviction that our culture contaminates what and how we know leads not only to skepticism of received truths, but to an instinctive enthusiasm for forms and practices that subvert

tradition. Contesting one's culture thus comes to compete with assimilating that culture as the surest course toward intellectual and moral autonomy: it is the only certain means of avoiding determination by collective habits. Of course, both intellectual skepticism and the taste for the subversive can themselves be thought of as culturally determined tendencies: wanting to get free of culture is a cultural trait.

Culture's predication of both rational reflection and unreflective bias yields conflicting frameworks for moral judgment. One of these sees rational analysis of the high Cultural kind as leading to universal values. This places the onus of ethical behavior on the self-aware individual and the community made up of such individuals, arguing that people should know the difference between right and wrong, and if they do not, they can learn it. However, if moral value is culturally relative, the product of inherited value systems and habits of thought that no person or community can ever fully overcome or impartially judge, there can exist no such absolute right. Even if people are educated to know the difference between right and wrong, the terms of that difference are always ultimately determined by a cultural system which attenuates the individual's responsibility.

The ambivalences of culture have found little resolution in recent efforts to understand what it is and does, not just on the part of anthropologists and students of the arts, but also in the work of literary scholars and proponents of Cultural Studies. Norbert Elias's early study of culture and civilization and Raymond Williams's oft-cited analysis of the word's history have been supplemented with a number of astute studies focusing on the historical developments tied in with its appearance, the various ways it has been used in the recent past, the long-term fortunes and misfortunes of the ideals it conveys, and the ideological projects which have relied on it.³

Understandably, most of these attempts, like most of their predecessors in the nineteenth century, assume that intuitively we know what culture is; they thus elucidate its complexity – and they do so very well – by examining specific instances of its deployment by various individuals, periods, or theories.⁴ This has been the rule, historically: one defines culture by opposition or comparison to competing or related terms or historical forma-

tions. Thus as a philosophical concept, it has been alternately opposed to nature and to civilization, to anarchy and philistinism, to the passivity of the masses and the more authentic venues of subjectivity that preceded the industrial revolution. As social practice, it is alternately identified with the pursuit of artistic value, with the articulation of moral law, with the subordination of the poor by the affluent, with the natural formation of elites, with the interpellation of the citizen by the state, with the development of disciplinary discourse, and with concrete activities ranging from museum-going to the hunting and gathering techniques of early peoples. As a set of objects, it is identified with everything from potsherds to cantatas, pyramids to pornography. As a political force it is associated with deliberate strategies of state formation, but also with the assertion of minority identity, and with the development and perpetuation of an oppressive class hegemony. As the bedrock of tradition, it is seen by almost every generation as declining, on the verge of fragmentation or suffering fatal dilution. As the excrescence of a dominant society it is vilified as a malignant force of repression that relentlessly expunges dissident identities. Yet when invoked by those minorities, the same homogenizing powers are seen as a valuable form of resistance against just such oppression. Culture here is exalted as a redemptive force, a principle of identity whose menaced status confers upon it an indisputable positive value.

Culture can assume so many different guises in part because of our tendency to confuse the fundamental framework of thought which we designate by that name with the particular scenarios of social and political order that are elaborated with its assistance. For reasons that shall become clear, the idea of culture lends itself to ideology. My concern in this essay is, however, not to catalogue the various reconfigurations of the social world or polity which have been proposed in the name of – or in opposition to – culture, but to excavate the fundamental logic or grammar of thought on which they all draw.

Even at this level of a fundamental paradigm of thought, however, culture is not a coherent concept. It is far more a strategy for understanding in dialectical terms, and thus legitimating as reciprocals of each other, the competing imperatives of social order and individual freedom, hierarchy and mobility, continuity and change, law and choice. As a kind of underlying

logic that persists through all of its ideological reductions, culture embodies both the play between these imperatives and the acknowledgment of that play which allows us to imagine and strive for – or against – alternative modes of social organization, values, practices, and expressions of identity. If it accommodates so many competing accounts, it is because it frames truth, law, and identity not as stable structures or unvarying doctrines, but as the constantly changing products of *a dialectic between individual initiatives of understanding and the rules and traditions which undergird them – and are continually being revised by them*. Most simply put, the cultural way of thinking always imagines autonomy and individuation in terms of the mastery and internalization of customary ritual and law, while at the same time understanding law and customary ritual to be precipitates of individual judgment and action.

One way of grasping this transaction might be to understand culture as a process and structure of accommodation – of the sort Freud had in mind when he noted that “a good part of the struggles of mankind centre around the single task of finding an expedient accommodation – one, that is, that will bring happiness – between this claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group.”⁵ In fact, culture has long been at some level intuited as a way to “imagine and reconstruct a lost wholeness” as Geoffrey Hartman puts it.⁶ From Matthew Arnold through Ortega y Gasset and F. R. Leavis to E. D. Hirsch, culture is seen as a way of resolving what Hartman calls “the antinomy between culture as a social or collective process and culture as the province of individual and often rebellious creation.” It thus becomes synonymous with the recovery of a fullness that would overcome the alienation of modern mediated subjectivity

However, I would suggest that the idea of culture is as much the origin of this ideal as its recovery. Envisioning identity and social order in terms of a dialectic that knows no end, but locks us into historical becoming, culture precipitates the ideal of wholeness and closure as its logical obverse. It is this vision which lures us into the project of self-definition central to culture’s logic of social consolidation. By simultaneously insisting that our identity is a projection of shared categories *and* that we must be the authors of that identity, culture draws us into the project of articulating our social inscription – of specifying and making the