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The Power of Culture: A Map, a Manifesto and a Message in a Bottle

Abstract: Culture, and culture-talk are ubiquitous. After the linguistic turn there is a cultural turn; but this seems to be far more widespread in its popular and intellectual ramifications. This situation is telling, or symptomatic, but it is also confusing, or disturbing — for that which is everywhere is also, in a sense, by definition nowhere. These days we talk easily of high and low or pop culture, more perhaps of core and subcultures, multicultures, and there is a wide spectrum of not only critical but also applied and managerial interest in the category culture, where culture is imagined as a magic word or fix. This paper enters this labyrinth using three bodies of work as devices of orientation in this broad field. The first is Raymond Williams' classic study, *Culture and Society*, where culture is viewed as the key to understanding a whole way of life, and perhaps even more, the field of emerging modernity itself. The second is the work and manifesto or Strong Program for Cultural Sociology of the Alexander School at Yale, where culture is viewed through a neo Durkheimian lens as the primary focus of social science. The third is the long project and tail of the work of Zygmunt Bauman, in which culture is both possibility and prison. These three steps, or takes on culture are not intended to be teleological, or to represent progress across time. Rather, they offer the opportunity to circle our object, or subject. Here then they are used as approaches to the same or similar problems of making sense of culture, the first — historical and local, place bound but also necessarily imperial, because English; the second — also local or national but also global in aspiration; the third — originally East European, now continental and cosmopolitan in intention. Behind these thinkers, there are two other frames of reference, not equally applied: those of Gramsci and of critical theory, more specifically the Frankfurt School. Culture here is in common viewed as a matter of making/doing/being. It refers to plasticity as well as to common ways of going about making our everyday lives, to solidity and the solidarity of shared repertoires of conserving, coping, and creating and recreating our lifeworlds. Culture in this sense is indeed everywhere.

Keywords: culture, Williams, Alexander, Bauman, Gramsci

What is the fuss about culture? Evidently we are now living after the hard distinction between high and low culture, or popular or mass culture, though some hierarchies still apply and will continue to apply. After Warhol, we know that art also belongs in the street, though we also know it helps if you have a good credit

line. We all know it's about the economy, stupid! And yet the talk about culture is ubiquitous. We talk about organizational culture, about the culture of sexism in workplaces, firms or in sport or in the armed forces; we know that when an organizational unit works, a university or a centre or a company works well it has something to do with culture. We talk about food cultures, water usage cultures, digital cultures; some decades ago, there was much talk about political cultures, and about cultures of poverty. There was much talk of cultural revolution, before then of proletarian culture; these were not good ideas or projects, and we do not talk enough about them any more.

We still talk about civic cultures, about big cultures. We do not always talk about small cultures, though there was much enthusiasm for counterculture, and then for multicultural. We do not, generally, talk about, say, family culture, but we do know a toxic family situation when we see one (not ours!). We do talk about the culture of primary groups, if not so much of couples or triads. Perhaps another useful category here would be that of household cultures. For we would likely talk about the way that couples organize their own repertoires, the way that cultures are enacted in the bedroom, in the kitchen, or in dealing with the trash. We know, or we think we know, that culture has to do with a whole way of life, or with its local variants or microclimates. We know that culture matters, and that it may be ineffable. We know that Culture is the Vibe. Culture is the Black Box, the Silver Bullet, the X Factor.

There seem to be at least two levels of activity or thinking here, now, which might correlate with the old distinction between high and low culture, but are not identical with them. First, in academic discourse, there was the linguistic turn, which precedes the cultural turn. Language, discourse, communication all receive a new level of attention into the 20th century. Culture then follows, not only as one canon or period style replaces another, but also because of the proliferation of popular culture production and consumption and new media forms from radio and TV to Hollywood and the Net. These days we all talk a great deal, though we risk forgetting how to listen. We give Voice, not Ear.

Culture, the word and its phenomena, seem to become universalized after World War Two, the Long Boom, the Consumer Revolution. Perhaps it is the economy, stupid! after all. Perhaps culture becomes obsessive when we, in the West, move from generalized scarcity to more generalized abundance. There is simply more stuff in our lives, and it begs for interpretation. The interest of sociology in everyday life expands as the practice of everyday life and its objects expand. So culture comes more to be seen as everyday creation, and not only the romantic genius variation thereof; it comes to be seen as concerning resilience, coping, flourishing, falling over and getting up again, adapting, making do with the materials and repertoires to hand.

Culture is to do with making/doing/being. Sociologists and anthropologists have been dealing with these questions for more than a century. The rise of cul-

tural studies has drawn further emphasis and interest to these issues, to the extent that there is nothing, these days, that seems outside culture. If culture, however, is everything, then it may also be nothing, or at least nothing in particular. If culture has been pluralized, democratized, it may also have been diluted beyond the point at which it has much critical purchase. In this context, it might be useful to look to nailing down some dynamics, to look to begin explaining this power of culture.

This paper offers a triptych, or a threestep, looking to throw some light on these fields and issues. I begin with an attempt to map culture, this at the hands of Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society*¹. Second, I examine a Manifesto, the Strong Program for Cultural Sociology laid down by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith in 2001². Third, and finally, I indicate something of the contents of a message in a bottle or two, this last left for us by Zygmunt Bauman across forty years of writing in English.

Where does it all begin? With semantics, and definitions, and with changes in usage both authorized and not. What do we know? As a beginning, that words matter; that their meanings change across times and places. There could be fewer, clearer and more thoughtfully problematized authorities to start with here than with Raymond Williams. As he stakes out his field, his concern is in *Culture and Society 1780–1950*. As Williams puts it, the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern usage, came into English thinking in the period of the Industrial Revolution. Williams' interest is in words and things in modern times. As he sees it, in the last decades of the 18th century, and the first half of the 19th, a number of words, now of capital importance, came for the first time into common English usage, or else took on their present meanings. His prose is precise; he is interested in words and things, but also in words themselves. If they seem to take on lives of their own, words also have other correlates and contexts. There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer³.

Five keywords are to follow: and then, subsequently, Williams was to work on the dossier that was *Keywords* itself, the 1976 masterpiece⁴ that so beautifully combines ambition and wisdom and the sense of the tentative and contingent, as it implies that you could, after all with some time and some culture do this yourself, DIY; for here culture is democratic and educative at the same time. But in *Culture and Society*, in 1958, the five leading keywords are anticipated: they are industry, democracy, class, art, culture. Like Stuart Hall after him, Williams was to wear his Marxism lightly. What is most striking about these *leitmotifen*

¹ R. Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Harmondsworth 1958 (reprint 1985).

² J. Alexander, P. Smith, 'The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology', [in:] *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, ed. J. Turner, New York 2001.

³ R. Williams, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴ R. Williams, *Keywords*, London 1976 (reprint 1985).

is that they slide so easily across culture and technology; there is no suggestion of economism or reductionism here, rather a sense that all is connected, that it is naming more than the things in themselves that matter. Technology and Culture, these are words used to characterize things that all flow together, or are mutually constitutive. For as Williams observes, across his five chosen keywords, the development of the use of the idea of culture is probably the most striking of all these. It is, as Williams insists, culture that has the widest structure of meanings, which is a wide and general movement in thought and feeling, and which is not just a function of Industry. As he famously puts it, “where *culture* meant a state or habit of mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means, now, also a whole way of life”⁵. Plainly Williams refers here to the emerging components of a national, or regional or even cosmopolitan European culture; this was before it was common to focus on the fragments, to speak of subculture, counterculture, or of multiculturalism. So that the method then followed by Williams in the body of his study is to work through the words and concepts of exemplary thinkers, posited in contrasts: Burke and Cobbett, Lawrence, Tawney, Eliot, Richards, Leavis, the Marxists and of course Orwell. And so British cultural studies arced out from the older established universities, and the magic signifier of place became Birmingham, the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies, though serious activity happened in many other places such as Essex and even in Oxford, via the *History Workshop Journal* and its people: culture from below. And this was, of course, a broader trend, connected earlier to labour history, then to feminism, to the German interest in *Alltagsgeschichte* and to the French historiography of the Annales School, the event, and of private life.

Culture and Society was, as Williams understood, a map of region, times and places, rather than a manifesto. Its concerns were limited in time and space to a small window of modern history, though they also inflected the British Empire and the emergent empire and hegemony of the English language. The contents and approach of the book were also a symptom of how it was that cultural studies was to develop a style, that of the essay, so that some of its most prominent practitioners, from Stuart Hall to Meaghan Morris, wrote almost exclusively in instalments, their subjects of the moment, attracting the *essai* in form rather than the masterwork. Cultural studies as a movement was connected to the discipline of English, but also to the new universities and polytechnics where boundaries were more open, disciplines less entrenched and more open to contestation, where newer cultural forms from graffiti to punk, fashion and Bowie, Madonna and MTV beckoned, and where even antipodean voices might get a look in, not least those from Western Australia and Queensland and engaged more closely with Asia⁶. Cultural

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ J. Frow, ‘Australian Cultural Studies’, *Australian Humanities Review*, 37, 2005 and J. Stratton, ‘Perth Cultural Studies: A Brief and Partial History’, *Thesis Eleven*, in press.

studies at its peak then became what looked like a mobile party, where bricolage was the main method, and Uncle Antonio Gramsci was the genial backstory lineage of the Marxism that made itself useful here⁷.

Some of this activity impacted upon university life in the United States, even if not quite so much in sociology. Cultural Sociology, earlier Sociology of Culture was a hardy perennial in North America, until its substantial growth for example in the American Sociological Association in more recent years, to the point where you might even say that in institutional or section membership terms Cultural Sociology rules. The sum of the story should not be reduced to its part, but the most ambitious and coherent story here is that led by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues, first at UCLA, now at Yale. Wiggershaus writes of the Frankfurt school that its success was not only to do with good ideas, capturing the moment, or charismatic leaders, though all of these were in good supply there. He insists that there are three institutional symbols which tell you when a school has arrived: A Centre, a journal and a Manifesto⁸. The Yale Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) now has all of these, and it may be the case that the journal, *American Cultural Sociology*, will show the best promise here as the flagship of this movement.

The work of the Yale CCS is itself both extraordinary and exemplary, from Alexander's astonishing early work on classical social theory to more recent studies of iconicity, trauma, performance and the civil sphere, Smith's work on war, law, violence and civility; the work of Jacobs and Townsley and Eyerman, Wherry and many others. In contrast to Williams, it offers not a map but a manifesto, for the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology.

I will not seek to summarise the Strong Program here. It is a wideranging and ambitious document, as manifestos are wont to be; and it spends some time surveying the field and its existing actors and achievements, as well as diagnosing the strengths, and mainly weaknesses of earlier work in the field. Alexander and Smith begin with Levi-Strauss and the metaphor of geology. This is an interesting image, but it solves nothing, as it resembles too much the layering model later associated with Marx, and later claims to base and superstructure. Alexander and Smith want to insist on the autonomy of culture. They also want to take a distance on the earlier interest in sociology of culture, insisting that culture is not just an object or domain, but a method and an attitude. The earlier sociology of culture approach is for them a weak program in cultural sociology. Theirs is a clarion call for bringing Culture back in, and centring the conduct of American sociology upon it. There are many sources of inspiration for this project, but Geertz's thick description is lead among them. There are other magisterial presences that are less obvious, at least from the outside: Parsons, for example. But the central claim is

⁷ See for example *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, P. Treichler, New York 1992.

⁸ R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, Cambridge 1995.

that humans are meaning-making creatures, then, even in, against and beyond the rationalization of the world and its effects. So that unlike Birmingham, Williams, Gramsci and Hall and unlike Bauman, critical theory in its conventional Frankfurt sense is not a strong presence here, and this is to signal a significant difference in mood between these ways of thinking. Critical theory, however defined, tends to put the emphasis exactly on critique, or negation: the Strong Program is Durkheimian in inspiration, affirmative, American and democratic in spirit. The social world, on this account, is based on power, and modernity has its dark side; and yet, it moves.

The Strong Program has, of course, generated its share of controversy: that is one purpose of the manifesto form⁹. It calls out other, differing ambitions, as in Charles Lemert's two-cheers call for the revival of a Weak Program, and John Hall et al.'s request for a Broad Cultural Sociology¹⁰. And it makes some gestures that still raise an eyebrow, as in the proposed combination of the distinct traditions of structuralism and hermeneutics. Like all projects, it seems to me, the UCLA/Yale project is best judged by its results. Here Alexander's works, in fields such as iconicity, trauma and performance are truly inspirational, as is the legacy of his summa, *The Civil Sphere* (2009). Here Alexander plots the hope of the civil society, and the prospect of civic repair, against the struggles of women, Jews and especially powerfully the Civil Rights Movement in the USA. This is national, but also cosmopolitan macro cultural sociology at its best, less manifesto than monument to the Strong Program of Cultural Sociology.

A distinct, peripatetic snail's trail in cultural sociology is that bequeathed to us by Zygmunt Bauman. As I have observed, his is a path closer to that of Critical Theory, but like Stuart Hall's it also has a fundamental affinity to the legacy of Gramsci.

How does Gramsci matter here? Gramsci is typically associated with the idea of Western Marxism, though given his interest in the Southern Question this position might today better be described as south-western Marxism. The infamous key category here is that of hegemony, though the background impulse is clearly directed to the issue of the autonomy of culture. Gramsci steps away from reductionism with his embrace of the idea of *The Revolution Against Capital* and of the notion of philosophy of praxis. Humans are creative animals who work within particular constraints. They suffer, they struggle, they express; all this sounds very like the early Marx. Both Hall and Bauman drank deep of this thinking as it became available to them¹¹. Bauman credited Gramsci with granting his honourable

⁹ See generally J. Hall, L. Grindstaff, *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, New York 2010.

¹⁰ A. Elliott, C. Lemert, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory*, New York 2014; J. Hall, L. Grindstaff, op. cit.

¹¹ Z. Bauman, K. Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*, Oxford 2005, p. 25; S. Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(5), 1986.

discharge from the orthodox Marxist tradition. Gramsci becomes a kind invisible companion for Bauman in his later travels, this not least because Bauman also becomes well known as the great ecumene in social theory; all kinds of thinkers and conversationalists turn up at his door and across his books.

Let us look just to joining up some of the dots. As Bauman was given to saying when I first met him, 25 years ago, the coordinates of his thinking to that point were two: socialism and culture. In some of his earliest work in English Bauman anticipates, if in different register, the research of what Stedman Jones in social history was later to call *Languages of Class*. *Between Class and Elite*¹² leads to *Memories of Class*¹³ ten years later. The shadow figure of culture here is Freud, together with Marx, and the ghosts that we carry with us, in memory, even when our collective histories or locations have moved on. Culture, like tradition, is carried by us, and can be disabling as well as enabling, as the modern world moves apace, so that even generationally one vocabulary will not well seem to fit the needs of new times. This is one sense of culture for Bauman, and it is mediated by another, related version, which appears in *Socialism: The Active Utopia* in 1976. How best to accommodate socialism as a modern keyword, into this changing vocabulary? At this point, Bauman wants to define socialism as the counterculture of modernity: of modernity, necessarily, and yet pointing also beyond it. And in variation, further afield, this was also to become his way of thinking postmodern culture, that it was at once immanent to modernity and striving beyond it.

Early, again, Bauman also followed the semantics of culture in *Culture as Praxis*¹⁴. There, like Williams, he was to differentiate between culture and civilization, between culture and cultivation, culture and, say, agriculture; between culture as a hierarchical and a democratic form, between the hard cast high and low categories and the pluralization and democratization of cultures. And he was to anticipate the later argument for culture as order-building, which would mean of course that by *Modernity and the Holocaust*¹⁵. Nazism, too must be understood as a culture, in its attitude to Others, and in its approach to nature. The backstory to this was indeed that modernity itself had to be understood as a culture, not least as a culture of classification, which was the message of *Modernity and Ambivalence*¹⁶. Modernity could therefore be understood also as a Faustian culture, a culture based on the fantasy of the rational mastery of the world and all its subjects.

When it came to the postmodern, and then the so called liquid modern, Bauman's culturalism was to swing into play yet again. The postmodern initially had two dimensions for Bauman, one creative or aesthetic, the other consumptive and material. The first took place in the gallery, so to speak, perhaps in the street;

¹² Z. Bauman, *Between Class and Elite*, Manchester 1972.

¹³ Z. Bauman, *Memories of Class*, London 1982.

¹⁴ Z. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, London 1973.

¹⁵ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Oxford 1989.

¹⁶ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Oxford 1991.

the second in the mall. And the malls came to rule, in Bauman's way of thinking, just as consumption for Bauman came in the west to overshadow production, or its site actual and metaphorical, in the factory. The so called liquid turn, which can be dated from around 2000 with the publication of *Liquid Modernity*¹⁷, is necessarily a cultural logic at work in Bauman's sociology. For its purpose is precisely to address how we live, how we as subjects see and treat each other, what forms individualism now takes, what the bonds are that hold us together and to what extent these may be changing (for this is, indeed, for Bauman an inquiry into future latent and possible trends). The idea of liquid modernity becomes for Bauman a kind of canopy for culture, with especially powerful applications to issues such as love and loyalty, and to the notion of liquid fear, where the big metaphor is used to throw light on Hurricane Katrina¹⁸.

One theme that holds this journey together for Bauman, implicit more than explicit, is the idea of second nature. Like the word culture, it has a commonsense or ordinary usage, but it also has a longer history, reaching back at least to Hegel. In fact, the idea of second nature becomes a kind of codeword for culture, with an implicit definitional difference like that which Gramsci seeks to mobilize in distinguishing between common sense and good sense. Social relations are to us as second nature; the argument could just as well be Freud's, where the unconscious provides a kind of script or repertoire which circumscribes what is possible, and what it is that is permissible. We are not the masters in our own house, but the illusion of mastery remains powerful. Second nature, for Bauman, need not necessarily be disabling, but it can limit in the way that conformism and thoughtless rule-following do. Second nature can help us to get by, but it often encourages habit and repetition rather than innovation or creativity. Bauman's mission, in contrast, is to seek out the defamiliarization of the familiar. Culture remains central to Bauman's project from beginning to end, even after socialism has lost its bite.

What is the fuss about culture? Plainly it allows us to obtain some sense of purchase on the practices of everyday life, be these in terms of the great transformations of modernity pioneered in Britain (Williams), the challenges and achievements of the United States and its cultures (Yale School), or the constraints and opportunities for humans across Europe and elsewhere after the Century of Camps (Bauman). Perhaps they each, then, also represent in some way the difference of their national cultures or their paths across these cultures. These three different approaches indicate a difference of scope as well as method, but they are also united in their ambition — not that everything social can be explained, but that all that is social is interesting, worthy of our attention. This kind of curiosity is not peculiar to sociology, or even to cultural sociology; rather, it seems to animate

¹⁷ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Oxford 2000.

¹⁸ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Oxford 2006.

us as humans, as storytellers and as observers and makers of everyday life. The three views examined here, however, do more than work the commonsense that culture matters as a precondition of institutional feasibility, efficiency or productivity maximization. The point, rather, is that culture is what makes us human, or inhuman. It is open to discussion, to observation, to examination, and to change. Even in the hardest of times, humans know that they are capable of doing better or other. This is why culture matters.

Potęga kultury: mapa, manifest i wiadomość w butelce

Abstrakt

Kultura oraz refleksje o niej to zjawiska wszechobecne. Po zwrocie lingwistycznym nastąpił zwrot kulturowy; jednak fenomen ten zdaje się dużo bardziej powszechny, jeśli spojrzymy na jego popularne i intelektualne konsekwencje. Sytuacja ta jest jednocześnie wymowna lub wręcz symptomatyczna oraz zmatwiana, żeby nie powiedzieć niepokojąca — albowiem coś, co jest wszędzie w pewnym sensie i niejako z definicji, nie istnieje nigdzie. W dzisiejszych czasach z niezwykłą łatwością mówimy o kulturze wysokiej lub niskiej bądź o popkulturze, ze szczególnym naciskiem na jej główny nurt oraz subkultury czy wielokulturowość. Kultura wzbudza zainteresowanie nie tylko z punktu widzenia krytyki, lecz także jej praktycznego lub zarządczego zastosowania, w którym pojęcie „kultura” traktowane jest jak magiczne słowo klucz. Niniejsze opracowanie to podróż do wnętrza tego skomplikowanego labiryntu, gdzie za kompas posłużą nam trzy inne prace. Pierwszą będzie klasyczne już opracowanie autorstwa Raymonda Williama pt. *Culture and Society*, w którym kultura postrzegana jest jako klucz do zrozumienia całości stylu życia oraz, może w jeszcze większym stopniu, jako obszar, z którego wyłoniła się nowoczesność. Drugim dziełem będzie praca czy manifest ogłoszony w ramach *Mocnego programu socjologii kultury*, realizowanego przez szkołę Jeffreya Alexandra w Yale, gdzie kultura postrzegana jest przez pryzmat neodurkheimowski jako główny punkt, na którym skupiają się nauki społeczne. Ostatnie dzieło to długoterminowy projekt oraz efekty pracy Zygmunta Baumana, który kulturę traktuje zarówno jako zjawisko stwarzające możliwości, jak i ograniczające niczym więzienie. Owe trzy kroki — lub lepiej ujęcia kultury — nie są w zamyśle teleologiczne i nie mają prezentować postępu w czasie. Stwarzają one raczej okazję do uwypuklenia przedmiotu lub podmiotu dyskusji, a zatem użyto ich tutaj jako metod ujęcia podobnych bądź takich samych problemów związanych z określeniem sensu kultury. W pierwszym przypadku jest to sens historyczny i lokalny oraz, naturalnie, imperialny, z racji swego brytyjskiego rodowodu. Drugi przykład to również ujęcie lokalne lub narodowe, choć o globalnych aspiracjach. Trzeci zaś, wywodząc się z regionu Europy Wschodniej, zawiera aspiracje kontynentalne i kosmopolityczne. Poza ramami reprezentowanymi przez wymienione ujęcia punktem odniesienia będą też dwa kolejne, stosowane w różnym stopniu: filozofia Gramsciego oraz teoria krytyczna, a dokładniej koncepcja szkoły frankfurckiej. W tych ujęciach kultura jest powszechnie postrzegana jako kwestia czynienia/robienia/bycia. Odnosi się to zarówno do plastyczności, jak i wspólnych sposobów urządzania życia codziennego, do trwałości i spójności współdzielonego repertuaru zachowywania, naśladowania, tworzenia oraz odtworzenia naszych światów społecznych. W tym ujęciu kultura jest w rzeczy samej wszechobecna.

Słowa-klucze: kultura, Raymond Williams, Jeffrey Alexander, Zygmunt Bauman, Antonio Gramsci

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