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L597: Libraries as Cultural Institutions

Summer Session I, 2003

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Assignment 1: What is culture?

I. General dictionaries

A. Definitions

1. Morris, William, ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. New College Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976. 321.

Culture n. **1.** The cultivation of the soil; tillage. **2.** The breeding of animals or growing of plants, especially to produce improved stock. **3. Biology** a. The growing of microorganisms in a nutrient medium. B. Such a growth or colony, as of bacteria. **4.** Social and intellectual formation. **5.** The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population. **6.** A style of social and artistic expression peculiar to a society or class. **7.** Intellectual and artistic activity.

2. Stein, Jess, ed. in chief. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1967. 353.

culture 1. The quality in a person or society that arises from an interest in and acquaintance with what is generally regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits, etc. 2. that which is excellent in the arts, manners, etc. 3. a particular form or stage of civilization, as that of a certain nation or period: *Greek culture*. 4. *Sociol.* the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another. 5. *Biol.* a. the cultivation of microorganisms, as bacteria, or of tissues, for scientific study, medicinal use, etc. b. the product or growth resulting from such cultivation. 6. the act or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage. 7. the raising of plants or animals, especially with a view to their improvement. 8. the product or growth resulting from such cultivation. 9. the development or improvement of the mind by education or training.

B. Comments

Interestingly, American Heritage gives the agricultural and biological definitions of “culture” first, while Random House Unabridged gives first the traditional humanist definition related to arts and letters—a definition that American Heritage does not clearly articulate despite its common usage. Both dictionaries put the anthropological or sociological definition in the middle of their lists. I am curious as to why Random House places at the very end of its list the definition probably most relevant to the history and philosophy of public libraries in the United States (“the development or improvement of the mind by education or training”), separating it from the correlational “arts, letters, manners” definition first by Sociology and then by Biology.

II. General Encyclopedias

A. Definitions

1. Kottak, Conrad Phillip. “Culture.” *The World Book Encyclopedia*, vol. 4. Chicago: World Book, Inc., 2002. 1186-1190.

p. 1186: “Culture is a term used by social scientists for a way of life. Every human society has a culture. Culture includes a society’s arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, inventions, language, technology, and values. A culture produces similar behavior and thought among most people in a particular society. ... People are not born with any knowledge of a culture. They generally learn a culture by growing up in a particular society.” Sections of the article: Characteristics of culture (Satisfying basic needs; Learning; Using symbols; Forming patterns); The boundaries of cultures; Culture and society (multiculturalism; Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism); How cultures change (Contact with other cultures; Invention); How people study culture.

2. Wegley, Charles. “culture.” *Academic American Encyclopedia*, vol. 5. Deluxe Library Edition. Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Inc., 1997. 415-417.

p. 415: “Anthropologists and other social scientists define human culture as learned behavior acquired by individuals as members of a social group.”

pp. 415-416: “Each human society has a body of norms governing behavior and other knowledge to which an individual is socialized, or enculturated, beginning at birth. ... Human culture in the technological sense includes the insignificant and mundane behavior traits of everyday life, such as food habits, as well as the refined arts of a society.”

Wegley deliberately contrasts this social scientific definition with the more conventional understanding related to arts, letters, and “high” culture in the Euro-American tradition, and goes on to give a historical profile of how the term has been defined and used academically, including commentary on the ongoing controversies over how (or whether) to use the term at all.

B. Comments

World Book typically gives solid information while avoiding controversies or “negative” presentations, and this entry is no exception. Kottak’s article is well-structured, however, and provides a sound introduction to modern anthropological concepts. In keeping with the tradition of the Academic American encyclopedia, Wegley gives more in-depth information in historical academic context, presenting the more advanced reader with a fuller understanding of problems surrounding the term—although perhaps not so clear a picture for the layperson of how to use and understand the idea of “culture”.

III. Specialized sources

(Comments included with Definitions)

1. Tylor, Edward Burnett. *The Origins of Culture*. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970. Repr. Of *Primitive Culture* Ch. I-X. London: John Murray, 1871 (2nd ed. 1873).

p. 1: “Culture or Civilization, 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.”

Commonly cited as the first anthropological definition of the term. This is where my background in Folklore, and personal library, come in handy!

2. Calhoun, Craig, ed. “culture.” *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 105.

“...two modern significations stand out: the humanistic definition that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe in reference to the arts, music, and letters, and the anthropological definition that developed in the nineteenth century to describe the sum

total of human activities. This second meaning initially referred to humanity as a whole, but it increasingly developed a discrete and pluralist sense that asserted the existence of separate and different cultures.”

Traces the development of the term from Tylor’s 1871 definition across the various conflicting strands of anthropological and sociological theory in the U.S., Britain, and Europe. Emphasizes the motion away from evolutionary, racist assumptions in Tylor’s day, through controversies of where culture is situated and how societies are constituted, into the post-modern politicization and diversification of the term in various social scientific disciplines that has led to its distrust by many scholars as too “loaded” to provide a feasible conceptual framework. “The question of whether cultures can be viably described as integrated wholes has prompted the rise of a range of other interpretive tools that attempt to account for the diversity and conflict within cultural formations.”

3. Schweder, R.A. “Culture: Contemporary Views.” *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Eds.-in-Chief Neil J. Smeiser and Paul B. Baltes. New York: Elsevier, 2002. Vol. 5. 3151-3158.

Presents an excellent if involved discussion of how the term has developed over time, including important quotations of definitions that have shaped academic disciplines and fueled various controversies. Includes this seminal definition from Kroeber and Kluckhohn (p. 132): “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action.” [Kroeber, A.L. and Clyde Kluckhohn. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, MA: The Museum Press, 1952. 357.]

As Schweder points out, this definition meant studying “not just other people’s beliefs (their ideas of what the world is like) but also other people’s normative standards (their idea of what is good and what is right).” Kroeber and Kluckhohn sought a middle ground between behaviorism (looking only at what people do and not what it means) and idealism (considering only what people think).

After outlining more elegantly stated extensions of Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s definition, Schweder goes on to describe schools of thought that have “deconstructed” the idea of culture and attempted to challenge or discard it. He concludes that much of the controversy stems from misconceptions or misinterpretations of the idea, based on reactions to implications that are not rooted in the term itself but in the political history of colonialism and the intellectual history of Euro-American scholarship.

4. Andrade, Roy. “culture.” *The Social Science Encyclopedia*. 2nd ed. Eds. Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper. New York: Routledge, 1996. 161-163.

p. 161: “In its most general sense within the social sciences, culture refers to the socially inherited body of learning characteristic of human societies.”

Andrade outlines the components of culture as: learned activities; artefacts [sic]; symbol systems (including language); and ideational systems. He provides a particularly cogent discussion of the problems surrounding implications of causality and location for culture, as well as the boundaries of culture. Is culture limited to the ideas we share, or is

it also what we do or feel as a result? Do individuals own or carry culture within them, or does it exist only in a kind of shared “intersubjective” (Geertz) cosmological space? Does it control individual behavior or regulate social activity as a “superorganic” (Kroeber) normative force, or do individuals respond to inherited standards on a personal and even variable basis? Etc, etc., etc.

5. Berry, John W. “Culture: Cultural Foundations of Human Behavior.” *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Ed. in Chief Alan E. Kazdan. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 392-400.

Begins with a summary of anthropological/sociological definitions from Tylor through Geertz, and outlines issues relating to “cross-cultural psychology” and “cultural psychology” (two related divisions). Berry acknowledges the traditional anthropological idea of culture as something “out there” as a kind of entity to be studied, observed, and described, but locates the psychological understanding of culture in the post-modern conception of the term as something socially constructed and individually interpreted. “This reciprocal relationship between person and culture, leading to the modification and creation of new cultural forms as a result of acculturation, has been of long-standing interest in the field.” (395)

6. George, Diana and John Trimbur. *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

p. xv: “...a way of life that organizes social experience and shapes the identities of individuals and groups. ... how people make sense of their worlds and ... the values, beliefs, and practices in which they invest their energies and allegiances.”

This text, intended for college students, aims to stimulate analysis of the written word as situated in social and cultural contexts and influenced by cultural assumptions. A primer for critical thinking as a basis for higher education, founded not on traditional ideals of logic and rhetoric but on awareness of ideas or values that underlie discourse.