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CULTURES, TRADITIONS AND RADICAL HUMANISM²

ABSTRACT In this paper I review debates concerning the analytic use and ethnographic prevalence of the culture concept in social anthropology with specific focus on Anglo-American and South-East European anthropological traditions. I draw specific attention to the highly problematic use and prevalence of the culture concept amongst people with whom I spoke whilst conducting fieldwork in Belgrade and Zagreb. The paper begins with a discussion of problems concerning the idea of culture and how the term is used. It then moves to consider debates surrounding culture with particular emphasis on its use amongst the academic Left. Writing from an antinational, radical humanist perspective, I argue that the insistence on strong versions of cultural difference and the definition of culture as a bounded whole resonates with a mainstream Western tradition that anthropological writing on the Balkans would do well to avoid. The paper concludes with a discussion surrounding the possibility of acknowledging the importance and reclaiming the concept of *tradition* as an alternative for 'culture talk', which is rejected for its insistence on radical cultural difference and uncomfortable tendency to reify social wholes.

Key words: culture, anthropology, Marxism, nationalism, difference, tradition

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a well-worn word, not only in Anglo-American anthropology but in many different contexts all over the world at present. Its meanings and uses have been discussed, dissected and deconstructed by various anthropologists; particularly those writing in or commenting on the

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mainstream anthropological tradition in the USA, for which the concept was imported via Franz Boas from German Romanticism (see Kuper 1999, 539). Whilst the debates may be somewhat exhausted, its use is not – as Kuper remarked, “*Everyone* is into culture now. For anthropologists, culture was once a term of art. Now the ‘natives’ talk culture back at them. “Culture’— the word itself, or some local equivalent, is on everyone’s lips,” Marshall Sahlins has observed” (ibid., 2). As such, it is worth paying continued attention to the concept, and especially to how it is used by those people alongside whom anthropologists work when conducting fieldwork. This is particularly the case as the concept has become more fashionable since the Second World War in articulating nationalisms, as biological explanations in terms of race came to be regarded as dangerous and/or distasteful. In this article, I discuss the use of the term culture with respect to the context in which I heard it when completing fieldwork, as used in the context of everyday discussions with scientists and students in Belgrade, Serbia and Zagreb, Croatia. I focus in the first instance on reviewing a theoretical debate in the discipline rather than discussing my fieldwork in great detail. I do however highlight, where relevant, how my perspective on the debate emerged when thinking through my field work experiences. I begin with a brief discussion of cultural relativism as employed by some informants and anthropologists in the Balkan context. I then review the use of the term culture in the Anglo-American anthropological tradition. My central argument is that the insistence on strong versions of cultural difference and the definition of culture as a bounded whole resonates with a mainstream Western tradition that anthropological writing on the Balkans would do well to avoid. The paper concludes with a discussion surrounding the possibility of acknowledging the importance and reclaiming the concept of *tradition* as an alternative for ‘culture talk’, which is rejected for its insistence on radical cultural difference and uncomfortable tendency to reify social wholes.

CULTURE IN THE FIELD

Given the sensitivity of the Serbian and Croatian post-war contexts in which I worked, I was told by some people with whom I spoke that I would never be able to, nor should I try to write a project based around recent events, as I could never know the language or historical background well enough to make

an informed assessment, or that I wouldn't be able to understand as I hadn't been there during the nineties.³ Such accusations could be divided into two categories – a 'gentler' accusation that my lack of first-hand experience of the wars meant that I could not make an informed assessment, and a more 'extreme' accusation that I would never be able to adequately master the language or experience the 'culture' first hand if I didn't have roots in the region. These experiences resonated with documented experiences of other anthropologists working in the region, such as Simić (2009) and Van de Port (1999). Simić, who grew up in the region, was questioned about the 'gentler' aspect, namely over whether she had been in Yugoslavia during the nineties, particularly during the time of the NATO bombings.

Another anthropologist, Van de Port, who came from a Western European background in some ways similar to my own, discussed these issues in his article "It takes a Serb to know a Serb". During his fieldwork in the early nineties, he frequently faced similar charges that he would never be able to understand the situation or language sufficiently to comment upon events. From this, he drew a series of highly problematic and non-empirical conclusions, accepting the nationalist terms of debate with which some informants presented him, as expressed in the charge, "you don't know *our* history", where the first person plural 'our' often (but not always) depicted 'Serbs'. His analysis of tavern life in Novi Sad displayed a strong version of cultural relativism whereby he insisted on what he termed the 'obstinate otherness' of the *culture* he believed himself to be investigating, and that he could never 'know' sufficiently. He thus appropriated 'culture' as an analytic concept. This was by no means an unorthodox move in social anthropology, although he acknowledged that the extreme relativism he and some of his informants were promoting was fairly radical even within the discipline (Van de Port 1999, 8).

I repeatedly came across informants who had understandings of Serbian and Croatian culture as bounded wholes which I did and could not belong to whilst engaged in fieldwork as well. For example, I found that the concept of a

3 A colleague from the UK whom I met in Belgrade whilst attending language classes, who lived there throughout the nineties was very highly regarded by many due to the fact that he had been there.

‘national mentality’ was often referred to in everyday speech, with attributed ‘personality’ characteristics, often indexed using the first person plural pronoun ‘we’.⁴ Despite reference to a national mentality which evokes a static and unchanging personality or ‘collective ego’, it struck me that the concept of national mentality was often understood as being a historical fact, with references made to the effects of different historical legacies (Todorova 2009), such as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. This was unsurprising given the organisation of social and political life in the region over the past century, some details of which I will now briefly discuss.

NATIONALISM DURING AND AFTER THE SFRY

Whilst the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (hereon SFRY) was antinationalist, it most certainly was not antinational. Despite the leadership arguing against nationalisms as a political organising principle, they accepted national categories developed in earlier nation-building attempts, reifying the existence of national categories such as ‘Serb’ and ‘Croat’. For instance, the president Josip Broz Tito stated that, “for almost twenty years I have been living in Belgrade, and among the Serbs, I feel as a Serb, whereas in Croatia, I feel as a Croat. I am a Yugoslav and it cannot be otherwise” (Štaubringer, cited in Godina 1998, 416). Furthermore, as the writer Dubravka Ugrešić observed:

“If anything in former Yugoslavia can really be described as abundantly stressed (rather than *repressed*), then it was folklore.⁵ For some fifty years, the Yugoslav peoples capered and pranced, tripped and jigged in their brightly coloured national costumes in various formations (*of the songs and dances of the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia*)...ethnic identities were forged by stamping, skipping, whirling, twirling, choral singing, pipes, lutes, harmonicas and drums” (Ugrešić 1999, 131–2).

4 The use of the first person plural by no means always denoted a national grouping. In fact, one interesting ethnographic strategy I pursued was following the implicit referents of first person plurals.

5 Folklore in Central Eastern Europe refers to traditional songs and dances and not fairytales. I made this mistake whilst enthusiastically anticipating the folklore classes delivered as part of the Croatian language school I attended.

Indeed, a stress on folklore is present to this day in Central Eastern European anthropological traditions, which typically have at least one section of anthropology departments committed to ethnology and the study of folk traditions and culture in the region. This is often alongside anthropological work which draws more heavily on other traditions, particularly the Anglo-American tradition at present, and which is often more theoretical in focus. The SFRY thus actively continued in a process of constructing ‘ethnic’ identities, which had begun in early periods of nation-building, notably in the late nineteenth century. This was achieved through the promotion of a multicultural politics underpinned by the socialist rhetoric of ‘brotherhood’ and unity *amongst* the various Yugoslav ‘nations’. In the 1974 constitution, provision was made for extensive decentralisation, a political move which lay the ground for the recent production of nationally defined states. This view, far from being challenged over the past twenty years after the SFRY ceased to exist, was reinforced both by advocates of nationalist political strategies in the post-Yugoslav states, and international institutions such as the EU, who accepted the accession of states based on an ethno-national definition of citizenship and promoted the mosaic logic (Malkki 1992) of a world of bounded cultures happily coexisting (see Žižek 1997). Given its widespread prevalence in both social anthropological traditions and widely differing state contexts in which liberal or Marxist ideas were circulating, it is also worth looking at some aspects of the history of the term in more depth.

CULTURE IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRADITION

The term ‘culture’, traced back to Herder and *Volk* romanticism⁶ in Kuper’s (1999) genealogy, was first used in a distinctively anthropological sense by (Tyler [1871] cited in Kuper 1999, 56) to describe “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”. This contrasted with another important use of the term in the sense of ‘high culture’, which I also frequently

6 From hereon, when I refer to *Volk* romanticism, I am referring to Herder’s understanding of cultures as bounded, organic, spiritual wholes.

came across when conducting fieldwork, phrased as *kultura*, to describe works of art, literature, film and so forth which were produced and valued highly by groups of people. Indeed, the adjective *kulturan* also designated ‘culturedness’ understood as politeness and etiquette and is key to understanding processes of distinction in the post-Yugoslav region. *Kultura* may designate a subset of the anthropological use of the term culture, but the anthropological sense is much wider and more holistic in definition. Furthermore, the presence of *kultura* does not necessarily presuppose the existence of ‘culture’ in Tyler’s sense; collections of notable works may be referred to without reference to Tyler’s sense of the term culture, in the style of, for example, Bourdieu’s (1986) analysis in *Distinction*.

The anthropological sense which Tyler used gained popular currency in Anglo-American social/cultural anthropology⁷ via Franz Boas. This view entailed the belief that:

“Every people expressed through its culture a distinctive *Volksgeist*. This was the approach that Franz Boas brought from Berlin to Columbia University at the turn of the century. Through his influence it became institutionalised in American cultural anthropology, the dominant school in twentieth-century anthropology” (Kuper 1999, 539).

Boas’ embrace of a culturalist approach took place in a context in which Aryan race theory was in the ascendant throughout Europe, and his advocacy of culturalism was an explicit rejection of what he viewed as a dangerous biological racism (Sandall 2000, 54). However, following the horrible conclusions of the Second World War, culturalist understandings came to assume increased importance in the articulation of nationalisms given the unpopularity of Aryan race theory at that time, both in European academic circles and popular discourse. Kuper argued that, by focusing broadly around the key ideas of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, culturalist trends produced a line of

7 It is typically referred to as social anthropology in the UK, in a tradition emphasising the social relation, and cultural anthropology in the USA, with a greater focus on the concepts of culture and identity/difference. I use the term Anglo-American tradition as the American focus on culture is also popular in the UK.

argument “that fe[d] readily into a current political discourse that links identity, culture and politics” (Kuper 1994, 543). This trend became mainstreamed in later twentieth century USA and Western Europe through the ideology of multiculturalism.

Kuper was not the only anthropological critic of the culture concept. The concept was also criticised from the political right in the discipline by advocates of civil society, such as the Australian scholar Sandall who derided the “culture cult” (Sandall 2000) in anthropology as steeped in German romanticism. Such romanticism, according to Sandall, was best understood as a reaction of inferiority to the global ‘success’ (on his view) of Anglo-American liberal economics. The anthropologist Rapport, in advocating a ‘post-cultural’ anthropology, has also criticised the concept from a liberal humanist position (Amit and Rapport 2002). Such a position argues that the concept of culture is unnecessarily collective, that this collectivity generates an unnecessary burden and may be overcome through recognising others as individual humans unmarked by cultural belonging. Other anthropologists such as Gupta and Ferguson made strides in the direction of ‘uprooting’ the culture concept through examining its relationship with understandings of place in anthropological discourse:

“The inherently fragmented space assumed in the definition of anthropology as the study of cultures (in the plural) may have been one of the reasons behind the long-standing failure to write anthropology’s history as the biography of imperialism. For if one begins with the premise that spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 8).

They asked: “What is ‘the culture’ of farm workers who spend half a year in Mexico and half a year in the United States?” (ibid., 7). Gupta and Ferguson continued to use the concept, in a sense similar to the processual definition employed by Clifford, who argued that ‘culture’ should be retained “for its differentiating function while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous process” (Clifford 1988, 10).

Indeed, despite relatively recent postmodern trends in Anglo-American anthropology which have layered several criticisms against certain aspects of the Romantic tradition, notably critiques of authenticity and of metaphysical speculation as manifest in Kantian ‘things in themselves’, culture talk has continued. Assuming a depth or reality beneath the world of appearances was derided in postmodern circles as relying on metaphysical assumptions.⁸ Nevertheless, Kuper argued that culture talk persisted in a romanticisation of the ‘community’ or ‘ethnic’ voice, for:

“Though lacking independent authority, and without making claims to objective insight, there was a kind of truth to which the ethnographer was nevertheless obliged to bear witness: the natives had to be given their unedited say. This prescription was justified by a political argument against domination, and in favour of democratic expression most explicitly, perhaps, in Marcus & Fischer (1986)” (Kuper 1994, 542).

On this understanding, anthropologists in the Anglo-American tradition often became spokespersons or conduits for a particular voice, or set of voices, which on many occasions had an ‘ethnic’ connotation. This view, namely that the social universe is made up of a mosaic of discrete yet cross-cutting cultures – the English, the Croatian, the Serbian, and also the ‘black’ community, the ‘lesbian’ community, the ‘scientific community’ and so forth – constitutes a set of assumptions which continue to form the basis of legitimation for both nationalisms and multiculturalisms. Indeed, the expansion of such ‘culture talk’ increased in intensity during the postcolonial period which saw the opening of numerous Cultural Studies departments, especially in the USA and UK, in an era which both saw a political focus on promoting, managing and ‘celebrating’ cultural difference and a massive increase in economic differences between groups, characterised by ‘globalisation’.

Despite attempts to redefine and reconfigure culture as a dynamic concept ultimately relating to the production of difference, I argue that the Herderian sense of an organic, perhaps spiritual whole continues to lurk in the background.

8 This is key to Derrida’s (1998) revision of Martin Heidegger’s (1978[1927]) existential project, which he sought to purge of metaphysics.

In my experience, anthropologists often continue to refer to ‘cultures’ they attribute to the ‘American’ context, the ‘Serbian’ context and so forth, rather than to ‘cultural difference’ alone. Crucially, referring to an ‘American’ or ‘Serbian’ context potentially conflates state and nation, and frequently reifies a bounded whole when that context is understood as cultural.⁹

Additionally, arguments which mobilised ‘culture’ in order to explain social facts often, but not always, downplayed the role of history as an explanatory factor shaping social change. Mary Douglas’ ahistorical structuralist approach in which she conceived cultures as “sets of principles and values founded in particular institutional forms” (Douglas 2003, 1357) is a prime example. The lack of attention such approaches paid to history was of particular concern for Marxist anthropologists, some of whom argued vociferously against the mainstreaming of culturalist trends in US anthropology (see Gregory 2007). The issue was well-stated by Fabian (2002), who argued that the use of the present tense in ethnographic writing often served to situate the narratives of the communities with which anthropologists engaged, ‘outside’ of the history of the West. As Fabian described, “the present tense ‘freezes’ a society at the time of observation; at worst, it contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability, and conservatism of primitives” (Fabian 2002, 81).

Yet anthropologists who chose to pay attention to the role of history in effecting social change still often made culturalist assumptions. Examples include dialectical Marxist or Hegelian approaches whereby ethnic groupings or ‘communities’ were understood as snapshots of a moving ‘society’ at a point

9 However, I argue that regularities do occur by virtue of state and international policy which take ‘national’ groupings as given, although the extent of these regularities may be overstressed by state-builders. I suggest then, that it makes sense to refer to a Serbian (state) context, as the effects of state policy shape people’s everyday interactions. The adjective ‘Serbian’ here becomes a place holder distinguishing the name of the state from others, rather than having an ‘ethnic’ connotation. Where reference to a state context in my opinion becomes problematic, is when it is invoked as a ‘natural container’ in policy formation, for example by seeking to promote ‘cultural’ changes in Croatian or Serbian society. I have taken time to disentangle this conflation, as it is often unclear in the literature, which often refers to ‘nation-states’ (hyphenated (sic)).

in time. Miller's discussion of Coca-Cola in Trinidad, which Narotzky (1997, 109) described as 'Hegel inspired', is one such example. Miller described the local 'Trinidadian' contextualisations of global capitalist forms (Miller 2002, 259). This led Miller to a culturalist understanding of capitalism as a process of comparative practices, in which consumption appears as a mutually constitutive process of culture and identity creation (Narotzky 1997, 108). This resonated with Appadurai's discussion of the commodity form in which he expanded the definition of commodity to encompass many more exchanges typically understood as 'gift' exchange (Mauss 2001[1923]). In so doing, he moved away from discussion of value (singular) to his concept of 'regimes of value', "which account for the constant transcendence of cultural boundaries by the flow of commodities, where culture is understood as a bounded and localised system of meanings" (Appadurai 1988, 15). In other words, culturalist assumptions often persisted even in analyses which focused on flows and processes of movement across cultural boundaries.

Finally, Kuper has been criticised by some anthropologists from Central Eastern Europe such as Buchowski (2004) for painting a crude picture of the region as the geographical 'home' of the *Volk* romanticism that influenced Malinowski and ultimately the Boasian tradition. Kuper's misconceptions may have arisen from his lack of knowledge of a vernacular from the region and limited awareness of social and political processes that might have resulted in *Volk* romanticism having attractive qualities for some people and anthropologists working in the region (see Naumović 1998). Yet the dominance of this ideology in the Boasian tradition and the blind spot created by that tradition in critiquing nationalism is more difficult to question.

Kuper has also been criticised by anthropologists in the Anglo-American tradition who have argued for the continuing relevance of the culture-concept and of *culturally* relativist approaches in the discipline, notably by Sahlins (1999). However, Sahlins continued to work inside a set of assumptions – namely that there exist 'peoples' (Sahlins 1999, 399) of the world, against which Kuper was arguing. In Sahlins' defence of the culture concept, he attacked what he referred to as a Marxist tendency, most cogently articulated in the text *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), and

which drew an explicit connection between processes of ‘celebrating’ cultural difference, where timeless cultural images of different societies were presented and displayed, and the increased emphasis on commercialism and alongside other social changes under the conditions of economic globalisation, whereby ‘natives’ were required to repackage and sell difference to tourists.

One interesting aspect to this debate from the perspective of academics sympathetic to Leftist ideas is the fact that Marxist approaches have on the one hand offered a route out of reifying ‘culture’ as an analytic concept, and at the same time, were seen to remarkably accommodate the idea in contexts in which ruling elites made Marxist claims.

MARXISM AND CULTURE: AN AWKWARD RELATION?

To recap, so far I have argued that the culture concept implicitly entails the ‘ghost of Herder’; the idea of the existence of organic cultural wholes, to which people ‘belong’, albeit in a variety of different ways. Additionally, I have noted that Marxist anthropologists, more concerned with the common unity of humankind (Gregory 2007), than with displaying difference, and indeed contributing to the production of new distinctions, would be loathe to focus on the elaboration of cultural difference as an analytic strategy. Nevertheless, such writers have still often assumed the existence of national cultures, the outcome of earlier elaborations of cultural difference on the part of nationalist scholars. This potentially explains the tacit acceptance of the existence of national cultures, in states with Marxist government and in which Marxist concepts were circulating. It echoes Brubaker and Cooper’s observation regarding the Soviet Union, where they argued that:

“Although antinationalist, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but anti-national. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the regime went to unprecedented lengths in institutionalizing and codifying it. It carved up Soviet territory into more than fifty putatively autonomous national ‘homelands’, each ‘belonging’ to a particular ethno national group; and it assigned each citizen an ethnic ‘nationality’, which was ascribed at birth on the basis of descent, registered in personal identity documents, recorded in bureaucratic encounters, and used

to control access to higher education and employment” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 25–6).

As earlier mentioned, whilst *antinationalism* was promoted as an ideal in the SFRY, and indeed, prominent members of the communist party such as Franjo Tuđman were criticised for taking a more nationalist approach in some of their writings, the fact that Marxist approaches are not necessary *antinational* hints that there is a blind spot in the Marxist tradition surrounding critique of the culture concept, a fact which explains the multiculturalist understanding of the ‘peoples’ of Yugoslavia in a state context making Marxist claims. The documented shift from socialist to *Volk* nationalist ideology as a political organising principle on the part of some intellectuals during and after the collapse of the SFRY (see Coulson 1993 for the case of the Praxis group) is an example of this. In short, Marxist approaches in sociology and anthropology can be roughly divided into two camps; one which assumes the existence of ‘cultures’ as an analytic and not simply ethnographic reality, and another which does not.

FOR CULTURE

The sociologist Raymond Williams famously advocated the concept of “working class culture” (Williams 1957) which he discussed, amongst others, in terms of a ‘way of life’. Such a definition could provide an important source of solidarity amongst members of the working class. McGuigan (1992) entered the debate describing himself as a “sympathetic critic” of what he termed “cultural populism”; the tendency to take the ‘culture’, symbolic life and practices of ‘ordinary people’ seriously, with particular reference to the Birmingham school of cultural studies, acknowledging the origins of this in Herder’s *Volk* romanticism (ibid., 10). In particular, orthodox Marxist approaches which made base/superstructure distinctions and then focused on superstructure, understanding cultural as part of superstructure and the base as causally producing it, rather than the dialectic production of both, were also prone to make culturalist assumptions, yet without ‘animating’ culture as a causal agent.

One attraction to such approaches perhaps lies in an understanding of ‘culture’ as offering particular forms of local solidarity in the face of a bourgeoisie promoting increasing individuation. This relates to the American sociologist Calhoun’s famous argument with Brubaker in which they debated precisely this point; Calhoun taking issue with proponents of liberal cosmopolitan arguments. Calhoun argued that,

“an approach that starts with individuals and treats culture as contingent cannot do justice to the legitimate claims made on behalf of ‘communities’, and the reasons why ‘thick attachments’ to particular solidarities still matter – whether in the forms of nations, ethnicities, local communities, or religions” (Calhoun 2003, 532).

Brubaker replied as follows:

“Participants may well represent such conflicts in groupist or even primordialist terms. They may well cast ethnic groups, races, or nations as the protagonists – the heroes and martyrs – of such struggles. This is entirely understandable, and doing so can provide an important resource in social and political struggles. But this does not mean analysts should do the same. As a social process, reification is central to the *practice* of politicized ethnicity, as indeed to other forms of politics. Reifying groups is what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs (like other political entrepreneurs) are in the business of doing” (Brubaker 2003, 554).

Whilst such solidarities are experienced as very real by participants, the question is whether sociologists and anthropologists ought to accept the categories of analysis substantively, or explore their everyday pervasiveness as a social fact to be explained, exercising what Ricoeur referred to as a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 2005). The tacit acceptance by some Marxist theorists such as the above, of the existence of substantive cultural totalities, whether they are experienced as ‘working class culture’ or in national or ethnic categories leads to their deserving the name, cultural populism, which McGuigan (1992), as earlier mentioned, ascribed to them.

AGAINST CULTURE

In his study, McGuigan (1992) also described the work of several Marxist writers who have been critical of the culturalist assumptions inherent in the idea of ‘cultural populism’. For instance, he noted that for Laclau and Mouffe, “populism is not inherent in the movement, nor in the ideology, but in the articulation of ‘non-class contradictions’ into political discourses originating in class contradictions” (cited in McGuigan 1992, 15–16). Other anthropologists writing in a Marxist tradition, such as Wolf, have also been highly critical of the use of terms such as ‘culture’, arguing as Brubaker suggested in the above quote, that the ethnographic realities of cultures and ethnicities need not, and indeed ought not be reified by analysts. Wolf argued that:

“Concepts like ‘nation’, ‘society’ and ‘culture’ name bits and threaten to turn names into things. Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they were abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and increase our share of understanding” (Wolf 2010 [1982], 3).

The most famous Marxist academic to challenge such approaches however, is perhaps Hobsbawm and his famous concept of ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). For Hobsbawm, invented traditions refer to:

“A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 1).

Hobsbawm takes care to distinguish traditions from customs, and takes issue with a particularly static definition of tradition, targeted specifically at images of rituals, ceremonies, activities and objects which give the impression of changing little over time, a phenomenon he argues constitutes a sociological problem: in the context of a rapidly changing modern world, why do many people experience an apparent need to keep certain things unchanging and invariant? Both Wolf and Hobsbawm suggest that anthropologists and sociologists ought not take such rituals, ceremonies and traditions considered

timeless at face value, but ought to understand them as ‘bundles of relationships’ in need of explaining, with a political meaning frequently ‘captured’ in the acts of producing rituals as fictitiously timeless:

“Students of peasant movements know that a village’s claim to some common land or right by custom from time immemorial often expresses not a historical fact, but the balance of forces in the constant struggle of village against lords or against other villages” (ibid., 2).

Critics, and notably Sahlins as earlier mentioned, have taken issue with the incessant placing of a political meaning on acts which they would simply accept as referring to aspects of a cultural tradition, which do not always necessitate an instrumentalist understanding. As Sahlins commented:

“This is perhaps the main criticism of contemporary culture-talk: it is really instrumental, an ideological smokescreen of more fundamental interests, principally power and greed - practical functions, nota bene, that have the added persuasive virtues of being universal, self-explanatory and morally reprehensible” (Sahlins 1999, 403).

RECLAIMING ‘TRADITION’

Whilst I disagree with Sahlins’s defence of the main tenets of the Anglo-American anthropological tradition, I am sympathetic to his criticism of the politicisation Hobsbawm advocates, which may be appropriate to some contexts but not others. There is an extent to which the authors talk past one another however, as Sahlins’s understanding of tradition is much more dynamic – suggesting a carrying across; a movement, than Hobsbawm’s static definition of tradition (which he contrasts with ‘customs’), which appears to be squared more at proponents of nationalist images, and more generally, arguments that assign an authority to institutions due to a perceived, long historical legacy; an attribution which from a dialectically materialist perspective, falsely represents what is a dynamically changing social world creating constant new possibilities.

This dynamism is also expressed in the etymology of the word tradition, a term derived from the Latin ‘trans dare’, which literally means ‘giving across’, which, besides conveying a sense of ‘handing something down’, also connotes a process of movement and transmission.¹⁰ In contrast, the term ‘culture’, however, has a genealogy focused much more closely around cultivation and horticulture, evoking organic metaphors of growing and breeding and equally of roots, which are clearly much closer to the definitions of a (spiritual) whole which emerged in the *Volk* Romantic tradition, and which in turn, influenced the Anglo-American anthropological tradition via Boas.

I share Sahlins’ enthusiasm for what he described as the inventiveness of tradition (ibid., 408), in his broader, more dynamic use of the term. Traditions produce new and dynamic perspectives on the world. Yet there is a clear leap from the concept of tradition, which as earlier mentioned, genealogically evokes a sense of giving something across, of transmitting something, to that something being the continuation of some kind of organic, perhaps spiritual whole, or a ‘people’.¹¹ The slippage in Sahlins’ usage here perhaps reflects the dominance of regimes of private property and a particular politics of difference in the USA which has forced other traditions to have to formulate their claims in a reified ‘culturalist’ mode in order to have a voice (see Roseberry 1994).

As such, I argue that it makes sense to talk about different traditions, and indeed different anthropological traditions, as I have in this article. The problem rather lies in the reification of social wholes on the basis of these different traditions, and furthermore the assertion of radical cultural differences between such reified domains, and associated cultural relativism. For in focusing on difference, we contribute to its consolidation and further production. Whilst such an approach would claim that any kind of humanism is in some sense a ‘Western’ cultural perspective, one can equally argue that the radical differences they presume exist are just as deeply caught up

10 <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/tradition?q=tradition> [accessed on 16/11/12]

11 Sahlins conflates the terms ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ (Sahlins 1999, 403), and appears to understand culture as traditions belonging to ‘peoples’ (ibid., 402).

in the history of the West, taking their lead instead from ‘cultural’ strands of *Volk* Romanticism. The reification of traditions as culture furthermore creates a space for the production of hierarchies between ‘cultures’ and the dehumanisation of cultural others associated with war. Whilst the debates surrounding the culture concept are well-trodden, they are worth returning to on a regular basis, particularly in light of recent historical events in Europe and the continued prevalence of the concept as important in the lives of many people with whom we, as anthropologists and sociologists, continue to work, and attempt to understand.

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Kulture, tradicije i radikalni humanizam

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Odeljenje za socijalnu antropologiju

Sažetak: U ovom radu razmatram debate o analitičkoj upotrebi i etnografskoj rasprostranjenosti koncepta kulture u socijalnoj antropologiji sa specifičnim fokusom na angloameričku i istočnoevropsku antropološku tradiciju. Posebna pažnja je posvećena vrlo problematičnoj upotrebi i širokoj rasprostranjenosti koncepta kulture među ljudima sa kojima sam radio terensko istraživanje u Beogradu i Zagrebu. Rad počinje razmatranjem problema povezanih sa idejom kulture i načinima na koji je ovaj koncept upotrebljavan, a zatim se bavi debatama u vezi sa ovim konceptom u okviru akademske levice. Pišući iz antinacionalističke, radikalno humanističke perspektive, smatram da je intenzivno insistiranje na kulturnim razlikama i definiciji kulture kao zatvorene celine, povezano sa zapadnom antropološkom tradicijom pisanja o Balkanu, pogrešno. Rad se završava raspravom o mogućnostima priznavanja značaja koncepta *tradicije* i njegovog ponovnog uspostavljanja kao alternative ‚govoru o kulturi‘, kojem se protivim zbog njegovog insistiranja na radikalnim kulturnim razlikama i problematičnoj tendenciji da reifikuje društvene pojave kao zaokružene celine.

Ključne reči: kultura, antropologija, marksizam, nacionalizam, razlika, tradicija