

## ENVISIONING CULTURE: A SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

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**ABSTRACT:** Culture is an ambivalent term, coined by a series of narratives that are often hard to separate from one another. In difference, this article intends to bridge these narratives not by compromising the discussion, but instead by pointing out a horizon that every contemporary theory of culture should be addressing. Such a horizon is a future, very different from the ones we are familiar with. Following the thread of Sebastião Salgado's photography, I briefly analyze four themes that I believe to be universal in the studying of culture and show how they can form an alternative narrative. I argue for an expansion of the concept of "cultural hybridism" – the latter implies that we have to embrace the mixing and changing of cultures as something natural and creative. Instead, I propose "futuristic culture" as a new concept that is based on the idea that hybridization can also be organized and planned in such a way that culture becomes a project for creating a fertile future – especially since globalization already seems to be an inevitable result.

**KEYWORDS:** *culture, planning, social science, hybridization, value*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of science, both that of theory and that of practice and living, culture has been addressed again and again from a variety of perspectives. Among others, it was seen as an essence or a construct, an identity or a set of practices, a way of living or a way of thinking, and so on. According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), at least 157 definitions of culture were presented in the scientific papers alone, between 1920 and 1950. A novel inquiry into the collection of its definitions can also be found in Spencer-Oatley (2012). In 2012, Jahoda revisits his 1984 article "Do We Need a Concept of Culture?" and comes to the conclusion that such attempts are necessarily in vain, and that culture can be perfectly functional as a theoretical concept even if it is not defined. Of course, his writing provoked new writings. And it is not even a new discussion: Mayhew wrote about culture in 1987, describing it as a "core concept under attack" by the imposing of "rational strategy" as the central task of social scientists (1987: 587). However, I will not focus on either of these narratives nor propose my own definition of culture. By pointing out some central themes that have been and remain to be discussed in the sociological science of culture, I will emphasize a perspective that does not discriminate between the various elaborations on what is culture, but instead adds what I believe is a universal referential point of view that all of the theories of culture have had to address. They also conveniently lead to a developing conclusion, which is yet another, but different reference – an invitation that future theories of culture will have to embrace.

The foundation for my writing are the photo albums made by the Portuguese photographer Sebastião Salgado. They were also featured in a film by Wim Wenders and Juliano R. Salgado, titled "The Salt of the Earth" ("Le sel de la terre", 2014), that portrays Sebastião Salgado's life path, philosophy, travels, and new horizons about his photography. I suggest that his albums – I will mention "Workers" (1993), "Migrations" (2000), "Genesis" (2013), and "Amazonia" (2021) – can be seen as sources from which a sociologist can extract four narratives (one from each album) that constitute the field of sociology of culture. These are: human resource, fluidity (and exchange), tradition, and prospective. All of the albums are multi-layered and feature very specific examples of models from a variety of different contexts. I do not intend to develop more thoroughly, for example, the economic base as it is presented in the album Workers, nor will I compare the statuses of different workers across intra- or extra-cultural structures. I will only claim that Salgado's photography captures the four dynamics that seem to be central enough that humans are unable to escape from them, making them eternal topics of both social discussion and criticism, as well as integral inspiration for artists like Salgado. They are dynamics that all systems address and take certain control of, hence they determine both existential and social aspects of our lives.

## II. HUMAN RESOURCE: THE MAKERS OF CULTURE

In *Workers*, Salgado portrays people as workers in an industrialised world. When visiting the lowest and harshest working conditions in Brazil, India, Cuba, Rwanda and other countries, his black and white images strike even more critically. Although Salgado mostly captures the people who struggle – in order to provoke a social awareness and concern – I will emphasize that a worker is, in general terms, a producer. Hans Jonas also mentions this aspect as central to culture. He writes that there are three dimensions in the genealogy of cultural development that are specific to humans: the use of tools, the use of images, and the burying of the dead. In his eyes, culture has to do with pragmatic causality (the tool), the original lack and incompleteness of the human self (the image), and the intertwining of memory, mystery, and dignity (the grave). (Jonas, 1996) When talking about culture, it is also key to distinguish between the relations of those who produce it and those who later assimilate it and live it. Again, in order not to make too many reductions, I will not expand on the different levels of how cultures are created, transmitted and changed. Just as well, there are several points of view across different disciplines that can contribute constructively to a more holistic scientific understanding and representation of what is culture. Nevertheless, there are basic statements that are impossible to avoid. For example: when producing theory and talking about culture, we are supposing it as a concept which is, naturally, central to certain relations.

In classically marxist terminology, we can describe culture as a result of the human use of technology. What man had taken from the environment and modified and appropriated had ceased to be nature, and became culture. Technology is the means of how we do this. In a broad sense, mental activity and raw materials are already a sort of technology. Anna Tsing is an anthropologist who gives a relevant example of these processes of transformation. She describes plantations as controlled ecological simplifications, where “living things” are taken from their natural environments and transformed into “resources”. To achieve this, man has to perform alienation (in Marxist terms), which Tsing calls “cultural work”. In her article “Earth stalked by Man” (2016), she argues that this process of alienation has created a platform of environmental dilemmas that we commonly call “anthropocene”: climate change, extinction of species, radioactive pollution, and so on. Additionally, she says that alienation requires control, and control can activate “hidden forces” that result in unpredictable accidents. I appreciate that Tsing’s take is very insightful in the way that it connects to both the fundamental aspect of humans being producers, and how our production can affect our large-scale and long-term futures. To repeat: man is a producer, and culture is always a product. And because production implies morphing and change, it is also always related to a level of planning and concern. This will be very important later on, in my conclusion. But first, planification requires a reflection of the present, as well as existing ambitions about the future. As an exercise, I suggest an analysis of one of the most dominant trends in today’s society, in the above respect.

## III. FLUIDITY: GLOBALIZATION AND HYBRIDIZATION

In *Migrations*, Salgado portrays “humanity in transit”. He took the photos during 7 years in over 35 countries, which effectively captured several critical social phenomena such as warfare, environmental degradation, population growth, economic differences, lack of citizenship, etc. For a variety of reasons, people have always migrated. Of course, migration is not always spatial; metaphorically (but without the loss of practical meaning), we can also speak about migration between mental or ontological frameworks – some are also geo-politically grounded, while some are not. Since I have defined human beings as sources (and resources) of culture, I insist that culture migrates whenever human beings migrate. The same way that migrations cause mixing of people, they cause mixing of cultures. In today’s time, globalization is the phenomenon of people and cultures experiencing a connection in a global socio-economically interconnected structure that likewise began to interconnect (that is, to universalize; e.g. americanization, the “Coca-Cola” effect) or at least mix certain aspects of culture as well. The latter is named cultural hybridity and it is normally defined as the reorganization of one or more cultures due to their interaction with another culture. One of the central theorists of cultural hybridization is Peter Burke (2009, 2016). He gives the example of three different types of hybridity: relations with artefacts, practices, and people (respectively). I would add that hybridity is a reflection of two distinct preoccupations. One is the relation to the past: the intention to investigate genealogies, determine causalities and restore the memory of what can be understood as the process of one culture influencing some other, by positive or negative (or neutral) form. The other preoccupation that reacts strongly to this mixing of cultures is, reversely, the relation to the future: a concern about the survival of life, environment and values.

However, there is often a disconnection between the two temporal narratives in how they manifest about (both physical and mental) historical entities. For example: we all recognize another thorough and creative thinker of this topic is John Berger and his famous TV series “Ways of Seeing”, which was later published as a book (1972). In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger points out various anachronisms between the role and the understanding

of painting now and at the time they were painted. One of his most favourite themes is renaissance art. He is concerned with how images are taken from their original habitat, for instance: from churches to museums, homes, and commercial use. In this, he sees the reflection of a loss of historicity, and a reproduction of a different, “non-original” ontology about the artwork. People who see that renaissance oil painting was a great mark of prestige are fewer. Another issue is identification: Berger talks with many women who cannot identify nor understand the mass painting of naked women’s bodies. On the other hand, we are often not concerned with the historical aspect as long as we are able to market and consume it. Overall, we are caught in a paradox, because scientists nevertheless struggle for decades, in order to be able to say with a certain level of conviction: yes, this is the authentic work of Leonardo. In short, culture is simultaneously being interconnected in the present as well as disconnected to the past. Although social scientists agree that this is natural, many are considering this phenomenon as dangerous. If values and identities are constitutive for a society, then they should be treated with conscious care, and not abandoned spontaneously by the habits that we inherited as “children of capitalism”. This divide in theories of culture has been symptomatic for some decades. To further investigate fluidity and change in terms of culture, I feel it is inevitable to also address the confrontation and inter-being of tradition and technology – and how they can co-exist effectively.

#### IV. TRADITION: THE AUTHOR AND THE AURA

A grand historical discussion was introduced with the newer technologies, especially photography and film, that began to question the authority of the author in his personal, stylistic and technical relation to the success of his artwork. Walter Benjamin even argued that, with the utilization of these inventions the so-called “aura”, a sort of document of authenticity of an artwork, was lost. Benjamin’s position – in its central pattern, a marxist one – was that revolution in the society’s superstructure will take place much more slowly than in its (economic) base. Therefore, he was very concerned with the questions of art, esthetics and beauty. Since the invention of photography questioned whether the photographer was truly also it’s author, in the full meaning of the word, Benjamin was intrigued in the role that photography had in both high and proletariat art. He described that a painter “creates”, whereas a photographer “captures” – he only maneuvers which aspects of materials and lighting the technology (the camera) will record. Immediately, Benjamin began to question the originality of a photo, since a photo made by technological reproduction lacks the reference point and, said Benjamin, authenticity – a sense or perception of sanctity – of an original. The only trace of human “aura” in the film tape is that of a memory that the photographer was physically and mentally present when the photo was taken. According to Benjamin, the intervention of these technologies in the creation of artworks have caused the aura to decay and diminish. In traditionalist terms, this would seem a catastrophe – but for Benjamin, it was something that he welcomed. The “death” of the aura is directly associated with the loss of some traditionalist aspects of valuing and praising artworks. Benjamin understood that the industry of “the beautiful” had been revolutionized to the degree that new terminology and concepts were introduced to the theory of art; such that Benjamin had seen them as very appropriate and powerful for expressing revolutionary demands in the politics of art, and consequently, perhaps, in the art of politics.

The question of authenticity implied a question of value and, therefore, of ethics. In general terms of culture, this center of values and identifiers is usually associated with the concept of tradition. At this point, I would like to go back to Burke who also took the example of renaissance art, but for a different reason than Berger. He wrote an entire book, “Hybrid Renaissance” (2016), dedicated to showing how the same art that we have ever since considered the “cultural treasure” of Europe was actually inspired by and even integrated several elements from different cultures: African, American, Oriental, Asian, etc. This kind of thought is an important correspondent, and an additional context provider, to the album *Genesis* where Salgado takes photos of nature and small societies in places where signs of the industrial, globalized world are not yet directly visible. Many viewers see something primitive, undamaged, ideal and pure in such pictures, and begin to feel sadness and resentment with regard to how humanity and our industry had changed the ecologies on our planet. However, Burke’s analysis provides an alternative perspective where the basic elements of what we consider authentically “Ours” are actually taken from an “Other’s” cultural context. As humanity migrates, so does culture; tradition, too, is something fluid. What is more: Genesis is where culture started and, therefore, where it cannot end. As man creates culture, he changes the environment. This is an objective and not at all a negative regard. But in order to keep life and the environment safe and stable, humanity has to be able to control the anthropocene, so that the anthropocene does not take control of humanity. In technical terms: humanity has to control its own control. It has to be able to organize (to alienate) the alienation that it is producing, so that the process does not select its own direction without our consent. Which, in turn, requires an even larger scale of planification than the “original” alienation.

## V. PROSPECTIVE: REPRESENTATION, ENVISIONING AND CRITIQUE

I have described human beings as producers, and have thus conceptualized ourselves (as individual and social entities) as not only cultural actors, but also as cultural resources. On the other hand, I have conceptualized – although not strictly defined – culture as a product, where the process of “making” culture implies its fluid nature and thus its exposure to change and exchange. Everything that was once made will inevitably be made different with time. These thoughts imply that the clashes between tradition and modernity (or future) are natural, and that the coordination of values between the two is not occasional and peripheral; instead, it is central to the condition of human societies as such. It is my conviction that human beings should not always and for any price protect their culture, but culture should always protect human beings. In fact: all cultures should protect all human beings. I believe that our respect for culture is intrinsic to our respect for human life, which is both the resource and the user of cultural products. Therefore, every discussion about culture, both in terms of its roots and its future, should be considered from the position of what serves humanity. It is clear that many different and mutually exclusive ontological systems do not permit an all-encompassing consensus about what are the origins and the ends of human life, and of life in general.

However, the demand is not to abandon tradition, nor to prioritize survival of the human race above our common or particular values. As I see it, what is necessary is to better and more widely understand and emphasize the temporal nature (structure) of culture, in order to envision (in advance!) a globality of dialogue and common values – a challenge that was never before as possible, and never before as fundamentally important as it is now. We are invited and, to a degree, forced to change our understanding of culture as something traditional, and begin to view it as fundamentally futuristic; that is, as fundamentally changing and with potential to be planned, modified and designed. Culture as a project for the future. *A futuristic culture.* Such that exists in a certain time because it was envisioned *before it's time*. When creating *Amazonia*, Salgado did not only take photos of the Amazonian forests because he appreciates them, or simply to draw attention to its beauty and importance. He didn't even do it for the beauty of it, alone. His motivation was even larger than in the case of Genesis, because he himself had physically re-built a large part of the Amazonian forests, demonstrating how quickly and effectively such a project can be done by only a handful of people and a few decades of time. In a similar sense, culture also needs a vision for the future. Especially in today's times when we are faced by planetary ecological dangers. What I suggest is in the spirit of Geertz's discussion on the influences between the concept of culture and the concept of man – indeed, to appreciate what man is by being cultural (that is: one of and one with culture), one must first appreciate what man *may become* by the means of being cultural:

“If we want to discover what man amounts to we can only find the answer in what men are; and what men are is various. An understanding of that variousness – its range, nature, basis, and implications – will lead us to a concept of human nature which, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth. It is here that the concept of culture has its impact on the concept of man. Seen as a set of symbolic devices for controlling behavior, culture provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually in fact become.” (Geertz, 1966: 7)

## VI. THE FUTURISTIC CULTURE: A CONCLUSION

Social scientists can play an important role in this planning. For example: a whole branch of anthropology, called practical anthropology, is based on this premise. Normally, before creating visions for the future, a science needs to revisit its own epistemological structure and presuppositions. Both anthropology and sociology of culture have been aware and active on this issue in the last decades. A fascinating model is provided by Vidmar Horvat (2012), a sociologist of culture who writes about the contemporary concept of “patriotic cosmopolitanism”. She observes that there exists an agreement that globalization and cultural hybridity have resulted in the demand of a new form of social contract. On the one hand, a patriot is, traditionally, someone who embraced individual liberty and democracy, among other modern values that were to be organized by the state. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism is not only the face of accepting the differences between (as well as connectedness of) various identities, but is also the understanding that the interdependency and responsibility are to be mapped and shared more openly and across national and ethnical borders. Vidmar Horvat notes that, at the end of the 20th century (after the Cold War), some popular models for interpreting the present and the future included concepts such as “regressive progress”, and slogans like “back to history”. Nevertheless, the future seems to be configured in such a way that it requires the creation of alternative identities and new types of willpower. The patriotic cosmopolitan is a self-conscious and socially responsible driven identity that every individual can adopt for himself and begin to consider himself the “resident of the world” and, by the same token, to consider every other individual as someone to whom he is personally responsible. I agree strongly with such a vision.

Of course, this is a long and not at all revolutionary process. One example of a futuristic understanding of culture was the project of enlightening, and it had to be revisited heavily after the shock of the two world wars. However, the scenarios differ greatly. For instance: if the 18th century was faced with a tradition that it wanted to part ways with, we are now faced with a future we are not ready for, and a relation to tradition that is very complex, ambivalent, and uncertain.

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