Beyond a Present Defect: Culture in Social Movement Analysis

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This paper explores the issue and the place of culture in social movement analysis. In particular, it examines the problem of culture's present defect. Culture is perceived as defective in much of social research and in movement theorising because it fails to be fully present or fully absent. This is also a reason why it is sometimes presented to occupy some space in between the oppositional determinations of different pairs of alternatives. In this essay, I analyse two such pairs, namely one between the individual and the collective and the other between emic and etic perspectives. The analysis is to show that borders between the alternative determinations are easily disbanded and the claim that culture combines both alternatives in some mixture reintroduces the desire for a fullness of all theoretical models. This paper takes a poststructuralist stance and uses Derrida's theoretical vocabulary and in particular, his 'notions' of community, différence and khôra in order to illustrate that what is culture's 'defect' is actually structurally determined. This other understanding of the place of culture is important in social movement analysis and practice because it could facilitate political mobilisation.

KEYWORDS culture, Derrida, social movements, social movement theory

In the multicultural, postmodern and relativistic reality of the dominant social discourses in the Western world, tracing the influence, the role (but rarely – traces) of culture in every area of political life has become an exhausting enterprise. It is exhausting mainly because the bearers of the ‘task of culture’ are out on a mission that aims to provide an exhaustive account of all possible answers to the questions of what culture is and how one can think about it. Little like conquistadors, once the borders of a new land are drawn up, they are left with the opposition between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ land that is now firmly established. Today's conceptions of culture and ways to analyse it rely to a great extent on diverse pairs of such oppositions: public and private, holism and individualism, structuralism and constructivism – examples are plenty. The imperialistic, if you will, ferment that permeates these oppositions is not that one of its parts is privileged over the other. The general ‘defect’ of culture is, rather, that it is never fully ‘present’ at either side of the ocean. Nobody can ever grasp culture in its ‘real’ entirety. Betraying my metaphor, then, culture is most often analysed as if it happened on ‘international’ waters, on the route to the other land – in the space in between the conceptual oppositions. Culture is rooted in both sides i.e. it combines elements of both oppositional terms and makes them work together. I wonder how can it be rooted in both when there is no other place to be as rootless as in the middle of the ocean?

Recently, culture fares well in social movement analysis to the extent that is has even been co-opted by some structural theories of movements. What better evidence of the success of the cultural in the cultural-structuralist dichotomy if not the latter’s affirmation of the former as its own? This essay will concentrate on analysing culture as operating on/between the collective and the individual level(s) and from
(the in-between of) the emic and etic perspectives. A reason why it is particularly important to examine these two pairs is that in the context of contemporary social movements, the problem of unity in multiplicity of individuals and identities still remains at the front of all main debates. Social movement theorising’s standard preoccupation has not changed in decades and it still seeks ways to ‘better’ understand how people come to form collectivities. Is culture something that brings people to act together on cultural and non-cultural issues? How do they come to identify with one another? Finally, social movements are (ideally) bottom-up pressures to institutionalise their emic perspectives and counter the etic attitudes of the authorities. Does culture reside in those grassroots hubs for collective action? To what extent is it shaped by the ruling arrangements of states and societies?

This paper takes a poststructuralist stance and it utilises Derrida’s theoretical vocabulary in order to explore why culture is ‘never enough’ in movement analysis. In particular, I explore this problem in reference to the conceiving of culture as occupying some ‘present’ space in between the two oppositions of each of ‘its’ pairs. My contention is that if one cannot say that culture is just this or that, the constitutive identification of opposite ways of talking about culture is the current attempt at its closure. This contributes to the view that there is some defect in culture that inhibits its formalisation, something that one cannot (yet) get to know. What makes culture seem deficient in this view, however, is structurally determined and inevitable from a perspective that resists all binary determinations. Perhaps what social movement theorists search for in culture (and fail to find it there, constrained by dialectical negotiations), they could instead find in khôra – perhaps place itself (Derrida, 1993b). This ‘third’ place – beyond the two ends of the oppositional spectrum – does not do away with them but points to the realms of responsibility and the other. By eschewing the view of culture as a present defect – something that trying to fill the gap in the structure of meaning, widens it even further – social movements gain an important source of political mobilisation. Such politicisation does not rely on any presences or absences in culture, or negotiations on the line of collective-individual, emic-etic, but embraces alterity. It is as if one was to set sail with a map but without a heading, open to a future.

**Attempts at Present-ing Culture**

At the centre of the theoretical conundrum with culture in social movement research are the desperate attempts at making it present. They breed the ‘defective’ view of culture (or of our understanding of it) since the more they know how to define what it apparently is, the more they fall short of the thing. This impasse or dissatisfaction with culture has led some to hope “in the future to do without it, but because it continues infinitely deferred” (Sewell, 1999: 38). The two texts that I briefly review in this section are to provide the theoretical underpinning for the analysis of the place of culture in social movement analysis. Here I attempt to explicate (despite their claims to the contrary) their desire for a fullness of theoretical models built on the distinctions: collective-individual and emic-etic.

Hannerz makes the uneasiness that ‘this is not yet everything’ apparent already in his first paragraphs when he asserts that: “[c]ulture is in *some* way collective” (1992: 3 emphasis added). He means to say that culture is embedded in public forms, the understanding and meaning of which, however, is created and interpreted by ‘human minds’ – the other locus of culture. He comes up with a metaphor of the cultural flow in order to illustrate how culture operates in and between its external and internal loci. As such, the cultural flow is endless but one thing remains constant – it is a negotiation between externalisations and interpretations. Hence, the cultural flow needs an agent who would perform this negotiation. This is why the pair of the cultural loci is translated into dimensions of culture and a third element, namely social distribution, is added. Hannerz (1992) concentrates on the collective end of the spectrum because in his view, the complexity of today’s societies stem to a great extent from the complexity inherent in the processes of distribution and externalisation. Anthropological analyses tend to neglect this sociological-collective perspective and hence, always lose something – or as reads the author’s diagnosis – they have done so “at some cost.” Thus, Hannerz chose to study the “existential circumstances of meaning in society” (1992: 10). This is to account for the sources of differences within cultures, which is to counter the view that culture is collective and homogeneous for a particular group. Cultural sharing should not be taken for granted, not so
much in order to stay alert to the possibility that not everybody is similar, as to bear in mind that the reciprocal construction of the social by the cultural and vice versa allows one to respond in her own way to cultural formations and to make sense of them. So much of the understanding of culture as interactionist.

As long as Hannerz is able to uphold the view that cultural meanings are effects of interactions among people in societies, he does not specify the nature of these interactions. It does not seem that those interactions leave any trace in the production of meaning since they only serve as spaces for the affirmation of diversity. In other words, interaction does not lead to the creation of meaning based on difference. This is why the author’s assertion that culture is a “moving interconnectedness, nothing less, not necessarily anything more” (Hannerz, 1992: 22) is self-contradictory. His view of interaction explains all but sources of differences within cultures; it takes the differences between individuals for granted in order to explain diverse ways in which they understand culture and relate to it. Identity, not difference is the source of meaning. This is not to mean that people are all alike. The mentioned interconnectedness is the connectedness of self-identical individuals. In Hannerz, it is their diversity as the sum total of self-present identities that produces differences in understandings, not the processes of externalisation and distribution which would have to go through a recognition of differences between diverse identities. Following Saussure, however, not the fullness of identities but the differences that distinguish between them make up a system of meaning. How can, then, this interconnectedness be moving? By the sheer force of its assemblage of diverse identities? Interaction between self-identical individuals, even if different, without making explicit how they can relate to this difference and hardly move things forward. In fact, it stalls them forever.

Culture that is supposed to be present (and present ‘live’ at that) in the process of negotiation between externalisation and interpretation, i.e. in the process of social distribution, instead of being ‘in some way’ collective, turns out to be individual through and through. Culture that is to be both collective and individual becomes impossible (and hence more desirable) because the dispersion of identities and their influence in meaning-making can never become a separate position and hence, some totalistic closure enters through the back door. Since this dispersion introduces a play of overdeterminations, a desire for a fullness and a feeling of the defective ‘not yet’ re-emerge.

More than a power of cultural distribution which has to have an agent on the border of the social and the cultural (for Hannerz, it is a self-identical individual), Bourdieu (1999) stresses the constraining power of the state over society. He points the finger at the educational system through which the state imposes certain categories of thought in order to give arbitrary hierarchies and meanings an appearance of the natural. He recommends to submit those categories to a radical doubt and this is to include the thought of the analyst herself as well. The state claims right not only to physical but also symbolic violence and it perpetrates it in objective organisational structures and mechanisms as well as categories of thought and perception. Tracing back the eventualities lost in the moment of inception appears to be an instrument of the radical doubt which shows the contested nature of the beginnings of what now appears natural. Hence, it counters symbolic violence of the state.

I believe that Bourdieu (1999) wants to challenge all major hierarchies and possible determinations as he sets out to provide a model of the emergence of the state. If he does so (instead of for example subjecting to the radical doubt why women of colour are valued less at work than their white-male counterparts), does he think that it is necessary because all those narratives of a smaller scale eventually come down to this grant imposition of people’s ways of thinking by the state? Why does he call it a model then? Is it only a result of humbleness and self-reflexivity of the analyst? His text is peculiar because it seems to juxtapose the emic of society to the etic of the state. At the same time, however, he produces just a model of state’s emergence. At the beginning of the process of concentration of different forms of capital, was there a state or was there not? In fact, if there is a model, it means that the state could be remade in some other fashion. It does not mean that there could simply be no state or something other than a state not even in its place but a place of some radically other way of thinking about organising people, if there, in fact, were a need to ‘organise’ them at all. Bourdieu (1999) fails to think beyond the state as he still perceives sovereignty and unitary territory as sources of power. In this, he succumbs to a view that claims to find these categories before any signification is effected (as, feminists note, happens with the female body in discourses about abortion, for instance) (Butler, 1993). The state is unifying, culture is unifying. In his view, the state curbs multiplicity and complexity of the social. The imposing power of the state lies in its objectifying and
codifying of symbolic capital. This remains in opposition to the capital that is diffused and sustained only by collective recognition. This double power of the state – both physical and symbolic – prompts Bourdieu to advocate an explanatory model that would combine the approaches that account for ‘physicalist’ and ‘semiological’ aspects of the state.

He does so while upholding the difference between the etic of the state and the emic of society (the physical guarantee of certain symbolic determinations and the realm of pure virtuality of ephemeral collective (re)cognition). Moreover, in the approximation of the emic, he grants a lot of space to the logic of the etic and the state since it is not clear whether he wants to see its demise or only its adjustment. People submit to the established order as an effect of the agreement between the work of the objective structures of the state, collective and individual history. The monopoly of the universal rests on the recognition that legitimacy lies in the universal. What Bourdieu seems to propose is that through radical doubt, people engage in different renegotiations of the universal – enter (counter)hegemonic struggles in the neo-Gramscian terminology. In this play, the emic turns to the etic whenever a societal claim becomes institutionalised. The etic, on the other hand, could also dissolve into the emic as it is this almost primordial desire for universality that gives rise to and legitimises the etic. The defect of culture is, therefore, again that culture combines the emic and the etic in a mixture, which is, however, never present as such. Universality is generally the realm of the etic. The emic in such an arrangement can only be perceived as a gap, inadequacy in the structure of the universal for it to be truly so (at least according to the democratic understanding). When some aspect of the emic claims the right to be included in the etic, it also means that the lack of this emic in the etic is an aberration, that it ‘normally’ belongs to the etic. A desire for fullness is, therefore, reaffirmed. And the Lacanian Real – a limit to all resignification – in this theoretical arrangement is the state as the etic.

**PLACING CULTURE IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT ANALYSIS**

In the binary determinations of collective-individual and emic-etic perspectives on culture, the borders between them are disbanded as one dissolves into the other. Moreover, to have an understanding of culture as combining elements or approximations of both at the same time becomes impossible because it unleashes a game for the domination between various overdeterminations and hence, reintroduces the desire for a fullness of all models. The perception that culture as deficient is, then, maintained by the conviction that it fills the place in between oppositional determinations. In this section, I trace some consequences of this placing of culture in social movement research and contrast it with Derridean understanding of community, différence and khôra.

According to the reigning structuralist orthodoxy of social movement theorising, action has been understood as an outcome of the opening up of political opportunity structures and movements have been defined in terms of whether they combine sustained campaigns and repeated displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (McAdam, 1996; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007; Tilly & Wood, 2009). Under the pressure of constructivism, more attention is now being paid to the ‘cultural’ dimensions of movements, namely the issue of framing and identities. Framing refers to the movements’ ability to produce collective meanings and interpretations that serve to mobilise members and non-members alike (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald 1996; Snow 2004). This has led to the conception of framing as a strategic activity. Movements draw on cultural stock and need to be understood in context but they also create cultural stock (Zald, 1996). Even Gamson and Meyer (1996), who are most well-known for their concern with the concept of political opportunity structure (which by being too narrow becomes irrelevant, and by being too broad risks falling into triviality), assert that one needs to posit movements in context in order to analyse them. They also oppose institutional, state structures to the cultural aspects of opportunity which are to reside in society although some other structuralist contributions have recognised that culture (as objective, enduring and constraining) can also be operating within political institutions (Polletta, 2004). The issues of framing and context immediately bring the two oppositions of this paper to the fore. Framing is another negotiation between a collective meaning and its acceptance by an individual and context opposes the emic of society to the etic, institutional perspective of the state.
The strategic use of framing and the embeddedness of culture in society and (for some) in objective structures of the state result in the understanding of community as self-identical. They privilege gathering rather than dissociation (Caputo, 1997). As regards community, however, the place of culture is created in the collective realm (by self-identical individuals through the process of contention) and imposed on individuals. Alternatively, individuals are left ‘on their own’ and through the process of interpellation, identify ‘their’ cause with the goals of a movement. The state is again reaffirmed as the Real since the only problem for movements is how to recognise opportunities when they come and not – how to bring them about (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Such a view of culture as an external element filling some gap for a strategic purpose does not serve political mobilisation well. Rather, a place of culture should be more inside, which would render it more ethical and responsible. This is not to say that the place of culture is in everyone’s inner understanding of herself, her ‘soul’, her identity. Derrida’s understanding of community can encourage mobilisation because it induces the responsibility towards the other. Community is internally differentiated – not so much because it consists of individuals who each has their ‘own’, different identity as because community ‘defines’ itself in difference to other communities and non-communities. Furthermore, individuals also have identities which are “different from [themselves],” it is, therefore, impossible to be “one with oneself” (Derrida in Caputo, 1997: 14) as it is impossible to speak a totally private language.

The injunction to analyse movements in context fails to attend to this understanding of community and identity and perpetuates the thinking in oppositions because all demands to ‘put movements in context’ already assume that they have been taken out of it (Bennington, 1999), that there is an irreducible gap between a social movement and ‘its’ context, which is, however, to be negated by putting it back into its place. Things, and movements especially, never exist outside of a context, even in a theoretical analysis. They may only exist in another context. In fact, proposing to put things in context may mean as much as claiming that this or that context is inadequate and movements should be instead analysed in some other particular context. Hence, keeping culture in between the oppositions masks political dispositions of those who want to keep it there. Moreover, no context can determine meaning in an absolutely exhaustive way so there is no assurance that contexts will secure some borders as impassable (Derrida, 1993a).

The dominant notion of political identity sits uneasily between the individual and the collective and is analysed from a perspective that combines both the emic and the etic. Identities arrive at the scene of contention already formed and the mechanism of boundary formation uses them to create boundaries, sides in a conflict (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). In fact, contentious politics only activates or deactivates those borders and although identities are malleable to some extent but not too easily, individual identities are the solid base of solidarity (Tarrow, 1998). The phenomenon of the new social movements seems to create a place for culture in which it is both individual as members often protest in order to gain cultural freedom, and collective because they recognise that this freedom is only possible if changes in individual consciousness are accompanied by the transformation of political structures (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Melucci, 1996). What about the transformation of society itself? There is a strong commonsensical connection between the individual identity which is reaffirmed as admissible in the same identity of the other in a movement and its wider acceptance in society and by the state. It is not entirely clear, however, which appears first – whether society forces changes in the state or the state imposes its acceptance of some cultural forms on society. What is certain is that the reappropriation of identity that takes place in social movements is represented by culture as a “rediscovery of the nonsocial” (Melucci, 1996) or non-state. Culture as a force for political mobilisation resides in individuals who form movements to challenge the emic which they equate with conservative traditionalism and/or the etic that underpins the oppressive signifying power of the state. The defect of culture is that its place can, therefore, be different any time one wants to analyse its influence on the social movement but it has to be in between the two oppositions.

Culture is to explain whatever movement or change happens – it is to set things in motion. In the current understanding of its place, it cannot accomplish this. In it, culture is the place where the sheer diversity of self-identical things is proclaimed. This place lacks all life and more fundamentally, it does not exist so culture is never present even in the sense in which it was at its most secure (i.e. in self-presence of individual identities). Culture or identity as self-identical is immobilised (Caputo, 1997) and indifferent. As such, it does not exist because there is no place to attest to this unity in diversity; identities are unable to
recognise differences among themselves for they are equally unable to notice differences with(in) themselves – to recognise 'their' identity as a 'nothing beyond' this play of differences.

Rather, the place of culture is better served by the twin 'concepts' of différences and khôra. Unlike culture in its current place, they are able to explain political mobilisation in a manner that would not give one a feeling of a defective reasoning although they are both called by Derrida (1993b) the products of a corrupted or bastard reasoning. In order to explore the force behind the motion of societies and social movements, one has to pay attention to alterity. Différence helps understand how identities may be comprehended as non-self-identical entities in that through its movement, any system of references such as culture becomes genealogically 'presented' as a fabric of differences (Derrida, 1982). Differences do not only exist in space, but they also testify to a deferral, which means that différence also temporizes differences. By the same token, all oppositions as these between the individual and collective, the emic and etic become disarmed because one term can be always shown to be the différence of the other (Derrida, 1982).

The frustration about culture's defect aims to find a relief in the desire for a fullness, the realisation of which it approximates by placing itself in the middle of various oppositions. New alternatives and overdeterminations of mixtures of two oppositional terms still pertain to the belief that there remains something present but hidden – something one needs to yet get to know about the role of culture. Culture's place is, then, on the brink of the present absence which necessarily bears witness to some unrealised presence. Culture could have gained a lot in social movement research if it held analysts in a relation with what would exceed the opposition of presence and absence and ascertain alterity instead (Derrida, 1982). This helps imagine new bases for political mobilisation. Culture is, then, not only a pure play of differences whose temporality is emphasised, thanks to which everyone is open to the other since to some extent she has to 'be' the other; but it also opens actors up to a future where they could only assume radical responsibility for their acts since there is no higher 'present' guarantor to justify them.

The place of khôra is potentially a remedy for the deficiency of the dominant concept of culture. It is a place—perhaps only that—that effaces itself; it exists in a dissymmetrical relation to all to which it 'gives' place. It is independent of anything that comes to occupy it; it exists in a relation "of the interval or the spacing to what is lodged in it to be received in it" (Derrida, 1993b: 125). First of all, it further illustrates that the structuralist-constructivist marriage of the two oppositions analysed in this paper should be troubled because the 'order of polarity' is rooted in the distinction between logos and myth. The former reasons on the subject of 'higher' or eternal beings and structures and the latter is satisfied with deliberating about what is probable on the subject of discursivity of meaning, the 'subject of becoming' (Derrida, 1993b). Once this 'probable myth' of culture's absent presence in the space in between the oppositional determinations – the reigning understanding of culture in social movements today – is accepted, this has important political consequences because it obliges one to cease seeking further. This is not to mean that the only way out of the circle is to rebel against all binary determinations, prompted by the desire for some extra-metanarrative about the possibility of the metanarrative, to use the Lyotardian term. This is hardly radical since the system is such that to say that something is a mere result of determination is to continue to use the vocabulary of the very structure one was supposed to radically displace (Derrida, 1982). In the place of khôra, one can appreciate the defect of culture as inevitable, a structural law; hence, it is no longer its weakness. Khôra is the place for a necessity that does not engender or generate anything particular but 'receives'. To analyse culture from this place is to recognise that this place has received the image of oppositions. The task is to go beyond and below the inevitable abstraction that one makes when she interprets social movements. This effect of her artifice is, to be sure, always turned back against the heterogeneity of social movements (Derrida, 1993b). It does not disappear with some overdeterminations. Attention to the place of khôra may make culture mindful of its inner alterity, its anachrony. Nobody ever escapes this anachrony because all determinations are in some way retrospective and it is a structural law which even the most rigorous interpretation cannot escape.

Analysed from this angle, the inability to determine culture by positing it in between the alternatives and combining within it some doses of both of the oppositions is not a defect of culture but of one's interpretation of its place. The role of culture in social movement analysis needs to account for the processes of framing and identity formation but it can (fail to) accomplish this in a more political and ethical way. Khôra, différence and community attest to the traces of all those elements that a particular thing is not.
It becomes marked by these other elements when it gets its identity in its difference from other elements (Bennington, 1999). The ultimate problem is, however, that a trace can never be recognised as such (consequently, the same applies to the différencé). One denounces it at the very moment she proclaims it as every trace refers to another trace refers to another trace. Khôra also testifies to this unending progression as in its case, every receptacle leads to another receptacle leads to another receptacle. When a trace or a receptacle announces itself, it also proclaims that it is the last in the chain of determination, which would mean that it refers to a self-presence and hence, betrays the very 'logic' of itself as nothing more but a difference. The political and ethical reverberations of such an understanding of culture are that one becomes mobilised, alert to the needs of the other, prepared to take responsibility for her actions and open to a future to-come.

CONCLUSION

In order to counter some demobilising effects of conceiving of culture's place as an absent present posited in between the oppositional determinations of the individual-collective and emic-etic pairs, this paper has outlined a poststructuralist way of speaking about the place of culture in social movement analysis. It utilised some of Derrida's vocabulary to show that what is today understood as the main defect of culture – the impossibility of determining what it is or where it is on the line between the two alternatives – is structurally determined. Analysing Hannerz's and Bourdieu's theoretical contributions and the dominant paradigms in social movement research, I tried to uncover how each of them pertains to a certain desire for a fullness of its model built on the oppositional distinctions. Even when these accounts claim to combine or negotiate between the alternative ends of the individual-collective and emic-etic spectra, they remain caught in this desire since they must refer to some absent presence which 'we do not yet know about but which is definitely there – somewhere – it is present – waiting for us to be discovered'.

I pointed out that the Derridean notion of community can demonstrate that the place of culture as a simple affirmation of unity in diversity of self-identical individuals is impossible. Bearing this in mind may have profound consequences for social movement research and action because it induces responsibility towards the other. Furthermore, the brief analysis of différencé and khôra pointed to alterity, to the expediency of understanding culture beyond the opposition of presence and absence, which can immobilise people in social movements and beyond. It should also be clear from all that have been said, that this paper does not embrace a stance which will do away with all oppositions and claim to think without them. My aim here was not to unmask the 'real' place of culture but (perhaps in a quasi-deconstructive mode) merely to attend to some paradoxes and uncertainties in order to show that culture can serve social movement analysis and action better (or certainly in a more ethical and political way) if it keeps things radically 'on guard against themselves' (Lather, 2003).

The above conclusions are necessarily themselves disputable. They bear witness to a certain partisanship of their author, which is most evident in that I do not take into account these social movements that are popularly called reactionary movements. The politicisation and responsibility that are of concern here are radical in their openness to a future and the otherness of the other. There is a precipice between this position and the traditionalist or conservative political stances. I also have to acknowledge that a great limitation of this paper is that I attended to the academic understandings of the place of culture. The picture 'on the ground' may be much more complex and these understandings are perhaps much less or much more heterogeneous than the view that culture 'is' somewhere in between the oppositions and it combines elements of both alternatives. It seems, then, that the place of culture is indeed rootless in the middle of the ocean.

REFERENCES


