

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking culture and cultural analysis

Joachim Braga & Christian Möckel (Eds.)

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The present volume collects the papers presented at Coimbra International Conference on the Semantics of Culture *Why 'Culture'?*, held in Coimbra, on 24-25 November 2011, of course carefully reviewed by the two editors. At least two aspects characterize the contributions made within the volume:

1. On one hand, it is the strict philosophical assumption regarding the perspectives on culture. In this way, contemporary interdisciplinary approaches, increasingly complex in respect to methodology and problematic receive a reply worthy of consideration. Defining the concepts of cultural theories, presenting the theoretical suppositions and the reflexivity of the analytical approach are the trademarks defining the critical discourses of this book.

The authors of this volume do not assume, however, in a non-reflective fashion the thesis of the philosophy of culture traditionally represented by authors such as Georg Simmel and Ernst Cassirer. Jeffrey Andrew Barash or Christian Möckel are delivering remarkable analysis on the sources and equally on the connections that are to be traced between the theoretical frameworks or the classical concepts of the philosophy of culture. Having in mind the complex figure of Cassirer, these analyzes serve to highlight the theoretical gestures or parallels that can be considered as 'paradigmatic' analysis of cultural phenomena. Mythical and magical thinking (in Cassirer's and Levi-Strauss's works) or the dispute regarding the essence of a 'rich vs. poor humanity' (arising with the criticism served by Blumenberg to Cassirer) become operational concepts and theoretical options beyond their original context, worked now to describe the virtual space of a new kind of reflection. Olivier Feron starts over the problem of culture from the topics of Cassirer and Blumenberg discussions in order to deconstruct the idea of a metaphysical foundation of culture and turn it into a historical product of human activity.

Based on the most relevant cultural faculty, the faculty of symbolization (Symbolisierungsvermögen), Joachim Braga describes the theoretical alignments of the reflections concerning culture. The author's thesis is that the philosophy of culture is not a philosophical *domain*, but a *way* of philosophy as such, by itself a form of culture. In resonance with the cultural definition of philosophy itself is

Jales Henrique Ribeiro interesting analysis on the concept of *national philosophy* and on the models that generates the construction of such a concept.

Some other contributions, such as those of Paul Cortois and Liza Cortois, have a more applicative gain. They propose the extension of the analysis pointed above, studying the applicability of philosophical ‘tools’ (arising from the twentieth century analytic stream) to the traditional topics of the philosophy of culture, such as identity or cultural difference. Is more than convincing that distinctions established in the philosophy of language or science, developed in the twentieth century, can carry out successfully the classic problems of the philosophy of culture. In fact, the authors establish that the process of communication and significations within a society always admits a specific interconnection to the processes of symbolization from which cultural phenomena arise.

Oswald Schwemmer’s text describes, in the paradigm of language and then in visual codes, on one hand, the function of designation as operating the externalization of information (the ‘occurrence’ of culture) and on the other hand, the social organization of the process understood as management of cultural codes. Finally, João Maria Bernardo Ascenso André or Ecaterina Pătrascu addresses specific areas of cultural analysis, for example, the theater as a form of intercultural dialogue and cultural trauma of post-colonialism or post-communism.

As a preliminary conclusion, the perspective adopted by the authors of this volume is one of ‘problematizing’ the concept of culture with the contemporary ‘toolbox’ of philosophy, the angle chosen highlighting ‘the articulations of the phenomenon of culture as a theoretical object and as a thematic object’ (Joachim Braga and Christian Möckel, *Preface*). Thus, a second aspect that deserves attention appears.

2. Another notable mark of the papers is the redefined concept of culture that lies in the background of the author's concerns. The editors, Joachim Braga and Christian Möckel, mention in the *Preface* the specific elements of this concern. From the beginning, two types of ‘deformations’ are avoided: the prevailing discourses of public space (engaging political actors and the media) for whom culture, loosely defined, is substantiated and excessively crossed by ideology, and that of philosophy itself, which sometimes grants culture a metaphysic normative burden not easy to carry.

Joachim Braga and Christian Möckel point out that the evolution of the concept of culture has two main stages: the Enlightenment period with a normative understanding of culture, and the period described in terms of ‘cultural turn’ in philosophy providing a generally critical significance of the concept. In this respect, Cassirer’s work serves as the main reference of all the papers of this book. Culture is, in this context, ‘a critical form of understanding the mental and social manifestations of human experience. At the same time, it is dissociated from modern schemes of interpretation which are based on the distinction between civilization and barbarism, and their application to the discrimination of ways of life regarded as inferior’ (p. IV). Avoiding the pitfalls

of normativism and those of ideology, this understanding precisely can produce a concomitant reassessment of cultural phenomenon as such and of theoretical suppositions underlying the investigations gathered under the name of *philosophy of culture*.

Finally yet importantly in respect to the original context of present book, it is notably that professors Christian Möckel and Oswald Schwemmer are part of the Ernst Cassirer Nachlass Edition held at the Institute of Philosophy of Humboldt University in Berlin and they managed in time to coagulate a study group concerned with the revaluation of the concepts and ideas of Cassirer. This volume illustrates a confident success of the work produced within this framework.

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