Ideas and Culture: A Response to Don Mitchell

Denis Cosgrove


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-2754%281996%2921%3A3%3C574%3AIACART%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O

*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* is currently published by The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).
Don Mitchell (1995, 103) is worried that the
so-called 'new cultural geography' has fallen into
the very trap which its promoters, in criticizing
previous work under that name, have sought to
avoid; that is, treating culture as an ontological
category which is 'socially causative'. While sym-
pathetic with much of the scholarship produced by
'new' cultural geographers, he is concerned to
emphasize that culture is an idea with both a
specific history and explicit ties to the exercise and
representation of social power. In his words, it is
'an idea through which the various machinations
of the "political economy" are represented as cul-
ture' (ibid., 110). In the limited space of a response
to a thoughtful and tightly argued paper, I shall
make just three points.

First, there is something faintly quixotic about
Mitchell's whole project. In drawing exclusively
upon programmatic statements and theoretical
criticisms, he ignores the substantive monographic
work of those whom he criticizes (other than in a
brief, complimentary footnote). Over the course of
his paper, he moves from a fairly cautious criti-
cism, closely tied to published theoretical claims,
to unsubstantiated and sweeping attributions of
belief:

'Culture' is certainly reified as explanation, given
causal force even when, or especially because, no one
has been able to specify what 'culture' is ... this
remains just as true no matter how much cultural
geographers would like to claim that their newer, more
subtle conceptualizations of culture, or their attention
to an expanded list of traits which they presume
truly constitute culture, allows greater room for 'sub-
cultures' to manoeuvre. (ibid., 106–7)

Nowhere, to my knowledge, have any of the
'new' cultural geographers named by Mitchell
claimed – explicitly in theoretical writing or implicitly in their substantive work – that an expanded
list of traits constitutes a more true definition of a
reified 'culture' than existed previously. To claim
such is entirely to misconceive their intentions. While an explicitly geographical examination of
the idea of culture may be lacking (although David
Livingstone's examination in The geographical
tradition (1992) of what he has called 'the geo-
graphical experiment' offers some suggestive
leads), historically sensitive 'new' cultural geogra-
phers have worked along precisely the lines
Mithcell seems to be promoting. This is true of my
own study of the idea of landscape and, more
recently, of The Palladian landscape (Cosgrove 1993)
which is indeed an examination of how a range
of material practices, technical and intellectual
endeavours, memories, desires and spiritual yearn-
ings were integrated by located social groupings
through

... a very clear process of demarcation and interpreta-
tion ... [into] a structured system of representation of both
people and things. (Mitchell 1995, 111)

I could make similar arguments for Duncan's The
city as text (1990) and various of Jackson's (1987,
1989, 1991, 1993) studies of minority groups in
Britain. The point is that, in practice, 'new' cultural
geography does not treat culture as causative
but much more along the lines that Mitchell's
argument requires.

Secondly, Mitchell points out that theoretical
writing in cultural geography has sought to turn
aside from reifying culture by embracing 'meta-
phors of spatiality' which emphasize processes of
social construction and contestation. He then asks
the question 'in what are these spatial metaphors
grounded?' (Mitchell 1995, 103). I am disturbed
by his persistent demand that metaphors be
grounded. A metaphor is a linguistic device – a
rhetorical construction developed and deployed
within persuasive argumentation, not a technique
of scientific explanation. By definition, metaphors
cannot be ‘grounded’ unless, of course, we are
being asked to accept a mimetic theory of lan-
guage, a position which Mitchell implicitly rejects
in his later appeal to a realist philosophical stance. 
Indeed, the later part of his paper seems to shift the
argument away from the demand for ‘grounding’
metaphors to a realist critique of the relative
theoretical efficacy of different concepts. This shift
is a necessary consequence of the sub-Marxian
agenda of the paper. This is apparent in the pas-
sage from which I have quoted in my opening
paragraph, where Mitchell claims that

the idea of culture arises from within the need to
regularize or normalize contradictions between sys-
tems of production and consumption. (ibid., 110)

For Mitchell, the idea of culture is henceforward an
ideology and, for all the subtle protestations to the
contrary, we find ourselves firmly back in a modi-
fied base-superstructure position. In order to evade
the well-rehearsed criticism of such a position
(as much a part of the agenda through which the
‘new’ cultural geography was shaped as was
criticism of the ‘superorganic’), Mitchell resorts to
the claim that culture is a more ‘chaotic’ and less
theoretically incisive a concept than, for example,
‘political economy’ or ‘class’, both of which he uses
unproblematically.

Finally, in his conclusion, Mitchell (ibid., 112)
makes the observation that ‘culture is an idea that
integrates by dividing’ and throughout the paper
he refers to the significance of division and ‘other-
ing’ within the discourse of culture. Here, I think,
he is in much firmer and more fertile terrain and I
am surprised only that he seems distracted from
pursuing the dialectics implicit in this aspect of the
idea of culture by the desire to ‘ground’ concepts.
Although he refers early in his paper to Raymond
William’s (1982) historical study of the origins of
the idea of culture and, given that his own concern
is to explain the ‘idea’ rather than the (non-
existent) ontological reality of culture, Mitchell
pays surprisingly little attention to such historical

study. Had he done so, he might have recog-
nized that in the linguistic origins of ‘culture’ (for
example, in agri-culture, viti-culture, arbori-
culture, api-culture, silvi-culture) it is not so much
a ‘tending of natural growth’ (Mitchell 1995, cited
in Williams 1982, 87) that is being expressed but
rather a process of differentiation from ‘nature’
through wilful human intervention. In other
words, ‘culture’ is that which is not ‘nature’. The
two concepts, nature and culture, can exist only in
dialectical relation to one other and this aspect of
the idea of culture is, I believe, consistent as a
dimension of its meaning through all the various
shifts in linguistic usage of the word ‘culture’.

Thus, I agree with Mitchell that the idea of
‘culture’ generates distinctions and differentiates
the world. I am less convinced than he that the
differentiations formulated and expressed through
the idea of culture are reducible to contestations
of power alone. Such a position is tenable only
when the geographical imagination is sub-
ordinated to the sociological and when the
environmental curiosity which motivated the
‘geographical experiment’ is forgotten. But that is
a much broader problem than Don Mitchell’s
paper.

References

Cosgrove D 1993 The Palladian landscape. Geographical
change and its cultural representations in sixteenth-century
Italy Leicester University Press, Leicester

Duncan J 1990 The city as text: the politics of landscape
interpretation in the Kandyan kingdom Cambridge
University Press, Cambridge


Jackson P 1989 Maps of meaning: an introduction to cultural
geography Unwin Hyman, London

Jackson P 1991 Mapping meanings: a cultural critique of
locality studies Environment and Planning A 23 215–28

Jackson P 1993 Towards a cultural politics of consump-
tion in Bird J Curtis B Putnam T Robertson G and
Tickner L eds Mapping the future: local cultures, global
change Routledge, London 207–28

Livingstone D N 1993 The geographical tradition: episodes in
the history of a contested enterprise Blackwell, Oxford

Williams R 1982 The sociology of culture Schocken,
New York