



## **There's No Such Thing as Culture: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Idea of Culture in Geography**

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# There's no such thing as culture: towards a reconceptualization of the idea of culture in geography

Don Mitchell

The reconceptualization of 'culture' in the 'new cultural geography' has been important for turning attention to processes, politics and interrelationships with other 'spheres' of social life. But for all the important theoretical and empirical advances this reconceptualization has induced, cultural geography still reifies 'culture' and assigns it an ontological and explanatory status. In this paper I argue that such a reification is a fallacy and that cultural geography would be better served by following the 'new cultural geography' to its logical conclusion: a recognition that there is no such (ontological) thing as culture. I argue instead for a focus on the material development of the idea (or ideology) of culture. Such a further reconceptualization of the object of study in cultural geography may be undertaken in many ways but, by way of example, in this paper I suggest only one: how the idea of culture functions within systems of production and reproduction in the contemporary city. Through this example and the discussion that precedes it, I show that the recognition that there is no such thing as culture allows us better to theorize the workings of power in systems of social reproduction.

**key words** culture cultural geography ideology ontology abstraction reification

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## Reconceptualizing 'culture' in cultural geography

Marvin Mikesell (1978, 13) suggested more than a decade and a half ago that it was time for geographers 'to give more serious thought to how they wish to use the concept of culture'. Since then a new conceptualization of culture within geography has indeed emerged. This conceptualization explicitly denies superorganicism (Duncan 1980) in favour of seeing culture as socially constructed, actively maintained by social actors and supple in its engagement with other 'spheres' of human life and activity.

Building on theoretical developments in social geography, cultural studies, literary theory and 'postmodern' anthropology, geographers now

most often conceptualize culture, in the words of Cosgrove and Jackson (1987, 99), as 'the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomenon of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value'. In Raymond Williams' (1982, 13) words, culture is 'the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored' (quoted in Duncan 1990, 15; see also Daniels 1989). Somewhat more expansively, Peter Jackson (1989, 2) has suggested, as a 'working definition' for culture, 'the level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life', called cultures which themselves 'are *maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible'. In all

cases 'culture' is symbolic, active, constantly subject to change and riven through with relations of power. And in all cases culture is, perhaps, not a thing but rather an identifiable process, an analytic category, a mappable level or sphere. For cultural geographers culture *exists*.

Even after James Duncan's (1980) critique of superorganicism in American cultural geography, few 'new cultural geographers'<sup>1</sup> would disagree with Cosgrove and Jackson's (1987, 95) claim that

[c]ulture is not a residual category, the surface variation left unaccounted for by more powerful economic analyses; it is the very medium through which change is experienced, contested and constituted.

Culture, therefore, can be specified as something which both differentiates the world and provides a concept for understanding that differentiation. Culture itself is a sphere of human life every bit as important as, yet somehow different from, politics, economy and social relations. It is an important ontological category which must be theorized and understood if we hope to understand human differentiation, behaviour, experience and contest. Culture in this sense, of course, is not conceptualized as a determinant of human behaviour and thought that, while perhaps socially constructed, exists beyond human interaction (see Zelinsky 1973). Instead, geographers and others have resorted to metaphors of spatiality to define their object of study. Hence, 'culture' is represented in terms of spheres, maps, levels or domains. It becomes a medium of meaning and action.

This reconceptualization of 'culture' as a domain or level has allowed cultural geographers to retain a belief in an ontological culture that must both be explained and which itself is socially causative (even if not superorganic). Culture 'itself', subtly theorized and understood to be deeply connected to other 'spheres' of human activity, is increasingly used in contemporary geography as explanation for the material differences that mark the world. As Stephen Daniels (1989, 199) put it: 'Culture has, as it were, dissolved the categories of classical Marxism', and hence shown that economic explanations of everyday life are much too simple. In fact, the reconceptualization of culture has been intimately connected with what is increasingly identified as the 'cultural turn' (Ley and Duncan 1993a; Gregory 1993) in the social sciences, a turn away from economic explanations in favour of exploring other 'spheres' of life. A statement by the editors of

a selection of essays exploring the geography of racism is typical in this regard:

the myopic refusal by previous analysts to recognise racialisation (and indeed gendered relations) is even more puzzling, since as power relations shift from zones of production to those of consumption so too does *culture* increasingly fashion strategies of resistance. (Keith and Cross 1993, 27, emphasis added)

Culture, socially constructed and highly mediated, is causative and, in this sense, 'culture' explains action, behaviour, resistance or social formations in a way that 'economics' or 'politics' cannot.

While the turn away from superorganicism or other inadequate theorizations of culture toward metaphors of spatiality has had the effect of foregrounding process and of showing that culture is socially constructed and always contested, it has also raised new questions concerning the concept of culture. In what are these spatial metaphors grounded? Do they denote ontologically specifiable processes?<sup>2</sup> In this paper I would like to suggest that the shift from determinant 'thing' to nebulous 'level' has had the effect of further mystifying processes of social power as well as continuing to reify the essentially empty, untethered abstraction of 'culture'. To put this another way, I believe it is possible to apply Duncan's (1980) critique of reification in traditional concepts of 'culture' in geography to the concepts of culture that have been deployed in the 'new cultural geography': that cultural geographers still fall into the 'fallacy by which mental [and I would add social] constructions or abstractions are seen as having substance, i.e. independent existence or causal efficacy' (Duncan 1980, 181, following Berger and Pullberg 1964–5, 196–211; see also Duncan and Ley 1982).

Beyond (and certainly building on) all the ferment in cultural geography and cultural studies in general, I would like to suggest that there is a further reconceptualization of 'culture' in order. This reconceptualization begins by asserting that there is no such (ontological) thing as culture. Rather, there is only a very powerful *idea* of culture, an idea that has developed under specific historical conditions and was later broadened as a means of explaining material differences, social order and relations of power (cf. T Mitchell 1990). But these explanations are not of 'culture itself', whether defined as a level, medium or signifying system. These ways of seeing 'culture' do not avoid reification, rather they perpetuate it by smuggling right into the heart of

geography what are still a quite mystified set of assumptions about how social practice proceeds. And this will continue to be the case until social theorists dispense with the notion of an ontological culture and begin focusing instead on how the very idea of culture has been developed and deployed as a means of attempting to order, control and define 'others' in the name of power or profit.

That is a bold and rather too bald statement. In what follows, I will defend it – in broad outline at least. Such a reconceptualization of 'culture' is in order because, despite all the efforts at developing better theories of the internal structure of 'culture', 'new cultural geographers' have reached something of a dead end. While important empirical work exploring the social creation of many aspects of life continues, none of this work has been able adequately to explain what culture *is*. Cultural geography has remained incapable of theorizing its object. This is so, I will argue, because when analysed, the idea of culture leads to an infinite regress: there is no solid ontological ground that serves as a foundation for 'culture'. Even so, powerful social actors continue to behave as if there is something called 'culture', for it is precisely the phantom nature of 'culture' that provides the idea's power. A focus on how the idea of culture operates in the power-ridden world is, therefore, doubly important.

In this paper I will establish a rationale for dispensing with the notion that 'culture' is ontologically rooted, and then proceed to show how such an understanding liberates geographers and others to understand how the idea of culture (rather than culture 'itself') has been deployed by powerful social actors. I will conclude this essay by suggesting one way that the idea of culture has been actualized in social practice, one way in which the empty abstraction of 'culture' has been filled and solidified with social meaning and structuring impulses, one way that, while there is no such thing as culture, the idea of culture becomes very real indeed. This last section will also show that removing our gaze from 'culture itself' in order to look more closely at the idea of culture will allow us to see, as Timothy Mitchell (1990, 559) has put it, the 'distinction between a realm of consciousness or culture and some purely material or physical realm' is a socially and historically developed dualism that furthers 'the effectiveness of modern forms of domination . . .' As should be clear throughout, my position has developed out of the advances made in the 'new cultural

geography' and other cultural studies. Indeed, my conclusions are already implicit in much of this work. My goal is only to make these conclusions explicit.

## Defining culture

'Culture' is an incredibly slippery term. The idea of culture developed first, according to Williams (1983, 87), as a term describing the 'tending of natural growth'. In this sense, culture is the human appropriation of nature. 'Culture' was then extended to describe human development (tending to the mind) and eventually came to signal 'an abstract process or the product of such a process' with 'definite class associations': the cultured and the uncultured (Williams 1983, 88; see also Cosgrove 1983). This distinction is central to the idea of culture: from these earliest extensions, 'culture' was an idea used to differentiate and to classify. Thus, by the nineteenth century, in various European traditions<sup>3</sup> the term 'culture' had come to be used in three specific ways in scientific and common discourse:

- (i) . . . a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development . . . ; (ii) . . . a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general . . . ; (iii) . . . the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. (Williams 1983, 90)

While the distinctions Williams makes between the different usages of culture are important, more important still is the fact that in practice (both 'everyday' and 'academic') these distinctions are quite often conflated. As Williams (1983, 91) wrote:

The complex of senses [of the term 'culture'] indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both the works and practices of art and intelligence.

Hence the idea of culture is meant to describe not three but at least five things: (i) the actual, often unexamined, patterns and differentiations of a people ('culture'); (ii) the processes by which these patterns developed ('culture' makes 'cultures'); (iii) the markers of differentiation between one people and another (individuals are part of 'a culture'); (iv) the way all these processes, patterns and markers are represented ('cultural activity'); and (v) the

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hierarchical ordering of all these activities, processes, productions and ways of life (comparing 'cultures'). As the editors of an influential collection of papers in cultural studies claimed,

culture is understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth. (Nelson *et al.* 1992, 5)

Culture is everything.

In American cultural geography, all of these meanings of the term 'culture' came to be represented by mid-century, to a greater or lesser degree, as a superorganic system that existed above and beyond the wills and desires of individual members of the culture.<sup>4</sup> The clearest, perhaps most extreme, statement of the superorganic position was made by Zelinsky (1973, 71):

A cultural system is not simply a miscellaneous stockpile of traits. Quite the contrary, its many components are ordered. Moreover, the totality of culture is much greater than the simple sum of its parts, so much so that it appears to be a superorganic entity living and changing according to a still obscure set of internal laws. Although individual minds are needed to sustain it, by some remarkable process culture also lives on its own, quite apart from the single person or his volition, as a sort of 'macro-idea', a shared abstraction with a special mode of existence and set of rules.

Following the review of definitions of 'culture' by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963), Zelinsky (1973, 70) summarized the superorganic position in this manner:

... culture can be regarded as the structured, traditional set of patterns for behaviour, a code or template for ideas and acts. It is highly specific to each cultural and subcultural group, and survives by transfer *not* through biological means but rather through symbolic means, substantially but not wholly through language. In its ultimate, most essential sense, culture is an image of the world, of oneself and one's community. (Original emphasis)

This is a very complex rendering of the idea of culture, broaching as it does the importance of language and ideology. It also emphasizes the degree to which culture is seen as an attribute of (or attributable to) distinct, bounded, localized social entities. Culture and cultural systems are essential,

finite and internally created: culture is 'an image of the world, of oneself and one's community'.

The 'new cultural geography', of course, begins by explicitly denying the superorganicism exemplified by Zelinsky's programmatic statements.<sup>5</sup> 'New cultural geographers' have sought to move beyond seeing culture as static or so slowly changing as to appear natural and have focused explicitly on theorizing the 'inner workings'<sup>6</sup> or internal structuring of 'culture'. Here I will examine just two of the more influential reformulations of 'culture' in geography: James Duncan's (1990) development of culture as a signifying system and Peter Jackson's (1989) theorization of culture as level, domain, idiom or medium.<sup>7</sup> These definitions are quite different from each other in some respects. Duncan, for example, places much more emphasis on theories of discourse than does Jackson. Yet the definitions also share many affinities, such as understanding 'culture' as a sphere or a realm of social life separable from (but related to) 'economics' or 'politics'. They both also see culture (itself, not just the idea of culture) as socially constructed and always contested. An examination of Duncan's and Jackson's ideas about culture, I think, allows us to begin to see an emerging consensus on how to theorize 'culture' in geography while still understanding that this consensus does not necessarily imply a unity of belief about the total composition of 'culture'. These definitions also well illustrate the degree to which 'culture' remains a reification in geography.

For Duncan (1990, 15–16), culture is a set of signifying systems, though of a 'material and practical nature', which can be seen also as texts 'which lend themselves to multiple readings'. There is a complex politics of reading and interpretation of these texts which themselves can be broken down into various, more local, 'discursive fields'. Culture, then, though material and practical, can be reduced, not to social interaction, as Duncan claimed in 1980, but to language and the politics of language which comprise 'the larger, widely shared, cultural sphere'. The value of this approach to culture, Duncan claims, is that it sees culture as a system 'which is present within all other social systems and which manifests all other systems with itself ...' 'Useful distinctions' are thereby maintained even while avoiding 'habits of separated analysis historically developed within the capitalist order' (Williams 1982, 209, cited in Duncan 1990, 15), such as those between economics, politics, leisure and so forth.

But in Duncan's (1990) formulation it is hard to see, beyond language itself, what culture is. If it is only language, then why a separate concept called 'culture'? If 'culture' is more than – or different from – language, Duncan never directly identifies the constituents of the signifying system that make it culture (as opposed to something else), beyond perhaps claiming (1990, 17) that the landscape is 'one of the central elements in a cultural system, a text, [which] acts as a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored'. As in Zelinsky's (1973) formulation, discourse and symbolism are the essential aspects of either culture or cultural communication. For both authors, culture is transmitted 'through symbolic means, substantially but not wholly through language ...' as Zelinsky (1973) put it. What is translated is never defined, though clearly to these authors something is. The internal structure of culture remains obscure.

A similar problem plagues the conceptualizations of culture offered by Jackson (1989). Culture is seen as a level, medium or idiom but nowhere in his work is there a theoretical discussion of what constitutes these spheres (but see below on what *exemplifies* them). Indeed, Jackson (1989, 180) hints that 'culture' in the end is undefinable, suggesting that 'the stuff of culture ... is elusive, best approached obliquely in terms of the processes through which meanings are constructed, negotiated, and experienced'. Geographers, he claims, should 'concentrate on the "cultural" in an adjectival sense'. But he retains belief in "'culture" itself in more substantive terms', arguing that a revitalized cultural geography would retain an emphasis on culture.<sup>8</sup> Approached obliquely or not, culture seems to exist. It can, Jackson hopes, eventually be specified, mapped, explained and used as explanation, even if it must always be approached obliquely.

In the above passages, Jackson may focus on culture as process but he does not mean to be limited to such a conceptualization. He argues (1989) that we must remember with Williams that 'culture' signifies a 'whole way of life'. Jackson (1993, 208) has therefore recently criticized David Harvey for incorporating 'little discussion of culture as whole ways of life' in his analyses. Within the cultural sphere, Jackson examines the construction and working of 'race' and 'gender', struggle and resistance, the politics of language, discourses of power, modalities of style, class and ideology. How

or why this list of activities and processes constitute "'culture" itself in more substantive terms', however, is never made clear in Jackson's analysis. Or, put differently, it is unclear that 'culture' is anything more than a wide array of social processes which, understandably, he would like to examine in interrelation with each other. As with Duncan, the internal architecture of culture still remains obscured.

Throughout not just Jackson's work but in cultural geography as a whole (both old and new), the specification of 'culture' is usually replaced by a proliferation of examples that presumably (and self-evidently) constitute culture: everyday life, works of art, political resistance, economic formations, religious beliefs, styles of clothing, eating habits, ideologies, ideas, literature, music, popular media and so forth. Culture is everything. Perhaps, then, the term 'culture' is simply a handy shorthand for indicating the range of life that cannot be reduced to economics or politics. Perhaps it is a necessary abstraction for understanding the incredible suite of differences that mark the world. If that is so, then it becomes too chaotic to have use as an analytic tool; it cannot be a medium or level, or even a signifying system to which people refer to make sense of their own and other's lives. Indeed, this in itself argues that 'culture' *per se* does not exist, at least not as an internally structured, coherent realm, level, idiom or thing. Rather, it is simply a list of activities.

As importantly, simply seeing 'culture' as a convenient term for myriad activities we do not know how to classify otherwise, ignores how words like 'culture', in Kenneth Olwig's (1993, 307) words, participate in 'an ongoing "hidden" discourse, underwriting the legitimacy of those who exercise power in society'. Throughout the social sciences, as in everyday discourse, 'culture' is used for analysis; the list of activities is continually solidified as culture; and as an abstraction 'culture' is continually filled with new meanings, solidified as an ontological given. 'Culture' is certainly reified as explanation, given causal force even when, or especially because, no one has been able to specify what 'culture' is. It is precisely because the term 'culture' has no clear referent that it becomes such a useful tool for arraying power, for organizing distinctions in the world. And all of 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 'subcultures' to manoeuvre. This is so because geographers, by and large, are reluctant to give up on culture as an ontological given.

### Culture as infinite regress

Geographers, of course, are not alone in reifying 'culture' as an ontological given. Donna Haraway (1989, 308–9, interpreting Strathern 1987) suggests that 'culture' is a 'modernist' concept that has been 'carved out of an unruly world as an object of knowledge like a modernist work of art – a unit perceived to have its own internal, architectural principles of coherence'. To create this object, modern ethnographers (along with so many others) continually created disjunctions between 'us' and 'them' by valorizing 'the central figure of the fieldworker *entering* a culture' (Strathern 1987, 259, my emphasis; see also Clifford 1986a). Even in an anthropology as critical of ethnocentrism as Malinowski's, a disjunction was created 'between the observer (subject) and the observed (object)' (Strathern 1987, 259) which reinforced – indeed reified – notions of otherness. Culture, this work suggested, was only visible in the dichotomy between the observer/observed (Strathern 1987), and particularly in the process of naming, controlling and rendering sensible those differences. Hence, culture was a concept deployed to stop flux in its tracks, creating stability and 'ways of life' where before there had been change and contest. The idea of culture demanded a mapping of boundaries and edges, the specification of a morphology: culture had to become a bounded object that ultimately differentiated the world.

Newer conceptions of culture have retained a good deal of the objectification and boundary-making that mark the modernist development of the culture concept. Subcultures, counter-cultures, resistant cultures, as well as hegemonic cultures, have all been identified and mapped, even as it is more clearly understood that cultures cannot stand as completely discrete and autonomous units. 'New cultural geographers' and practitioners of cultural studies find it more accurate to speak, therefore, of plural cultures occupying a single location in an attempt to avoid the essentialism inherent in theorizing a singular culture. But the problem of reification is not thereby entirely avoided. For Clifford (1988, 11) 'intervening in an interconnected world, one is always, to varying degrees, "inauthentic"'.

That is, one is always 'caught between cultures'. In the globally interconnected world, he suggests, 'difference or distinctiveness can never be located solely in the continuity of a culture or tradition': difference according to Clifford is constructed in the 'conjunctural' spaces between cultures. 'Identity' in this sense 'is . . . not essential'. Yet even so, cultures exist. To be 'caught between cultures' assumes that cultures and their boundaries can be mapped. Indeed, in order for us to find those conjunctural spaces, someone has to map them. Distinctions have to be made. To be 'caught between cultures' insider/outsider and observer/observed dichotomies must be reinforced, in spite of the best intentions to do away with them. Culture 'itself', then, does not construct difference. Instead, the idea of culture allows us to turn differences into something orderly, mappable and controllable. The very idea allows us to reify transformation and struggle as culture.

As Martin Lewis (1991, 605) has recently written, the 'notion that humankind is divisible into discrete parcels of social relations is increasingly questioned throughout the social sciences', and that 'all of the varied terms used to label the putative constituent units of humankind prove problematic'. Recognizing this, Haraway (1989, 309) wonders how to theorize 'permanently split, problematised, always receding and deferred "objects" of knowledge and practice, including signs, organisms, selves, and cultures'. The question for science, she suggests, is 'What would stable, replicable, cumulative knowledge about non-units look like?' (1989, 309). For Haraway, the answer to this question is not a technical one. It is not a question of method but rather one of 'the structure (or anti-structure) of the "object" allowed to materialise in discourse'. What is its representation? How is that representation constructed? And how are these constructions grounded in the everyday workings of economics and social relations?

The problem with 'culture', as Haraway recognizes, is that it is a victim of infinite regress. That is, if culture is assigned ontological status, then it must be definable in an internally coherent and inclusive manner. Yet when definitions of culture are attempted, theorists invariably find themselves resorting to other (external) concepts and realms, each of which themselves, it turns out, cannot be defined in an internally coherent and inclusive manner (such as level, domain, medium, signifying system). These bedrock terms, always receding as writers try to pin down their definitions, end up

referring to nothing (or everything). They stand as empty (or overfull) abstractions. With each round of definition, the ontological basis of meaning recedes one step further, always just out of grasp, always deferred. They have roots in no worlds, at least not internally. 'Culture' is thus approached obliquely or its internal laws are declared to remain still obscure, in an effort to retain faith in 'culture's' very existence.

Thus, we continue to parcel humanity into discrete, bounded cultures; we continue to insist that culture exists and that it is important. And in this sense 'culture' does come to exist in the world. That is, it exists as a concept that is made real. The infinite regress is stopped in practice. As an abstraction or covering term, whether by ethnographers and geographers or by cultural critics, marketers or geopolitical strategists, it is made to function as explanation. The abstraction of 'culture' is filled with meaning, not internally but externally, in the process of defining and ordering. Bruno Latour (1987, 201) suggests that this project of halting the regress of culture is a process of social struggle:

What are often called 'structure of language', 'taxonomy', 'culture', 'paradigm' or 'society' can all be used to define one another: these are some of the words used to summarise the set of elements that appear to be tied to a claim that is in dispute. These terms always have a very vague definition because it is only *when* there is a dispute, *as long as it lasts*, and *depending* on the strength exerted by dissenters that words such as 'culture', 'paradigm' or 'society' may receive a precise meaning . . . In other words, no one lives in a 'culture', shares a 'paradigm', or belongs to a 'society' *before* he or she clashes with others. (Original emphases)<sup>9</sup>

Examining the production of scientific knowledge, Latour avers that the objects that materialize in scientific discourse begin as unstable 'lists' of activities, possessing no morphology until they have been struggled over and the various wars of attrition against those who would define them otherwise have been won. At that point, these lists are reified; they become reality; they take on form; they appear as if they are natural and stable, at least until the next round of struggles are engaged (Latour 1987; see also D Mitchell 1994). Seen in this way, the term 'culture' becomes a means for representing relations of power. 'Culture' is a representation of 'others' which solidifies only insofar as it can be given objective reality as stasis in social relations.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, it is the idea of culture that becomes

important rather than culture itself. The idea of culture is not what people are doing; rather, it is the way people make sense of what they have done. It is the way their activities are reified *as* culture. The lists of processes and activities that Jackson uses to exemplify culture are important not because they *are* culture but because, through struggle over the power of definition (Western 1981) they *are made* to be 'culture'.

To understand analytically how 'culture' is fashioned, then, one must attend to the processes of the social making of the idea of culture (as opposed to 'culture itself'), yet at the same time one must understand that it is the 'winners' in the clashes who define what culture is and how it gets represented. They implement the idea of culture to represent to themselves the nature of their 'victory'.<sup>11</sup> Culture thus comes to signify artificial distinctiveness where in reality there is always contest and flux. What gets called 'culture' is created through struggles by groups and individuals possessing radically different access to power. To call 'culture' a level or domain, therefore, makes little sense. 'Culture' is rather a very powerful name – powerful because it obscures just what it is meant to identify. Cultural analyses that do not begin from seeing the idea of culture as a structuring imposition, that do not acknowledge the top-down ideological structuring of the concept, reinforce culturalism: the assumption that culture 'independently' exists, that cultural distinctions are necessarily real and rooted in the peoples being analysed,<sup>12</sup> and that culture can be used as explanation. In culturalism culture fashions resistance; culture has geographies (Gregory and Ley 1988); culture differentiates the earth.

'New cultural geographers' have explicitly denied culturalism in their work and criticized it in others (see Jackson 1989; Duncan and Ley 1993). But they are arguing against what could be called a 'strong' form of culturalism which would be better labelled 'cultural determinism'. Here I am suggesting much cultural theory in geography retains a much 'weaker' but no less important form of culturalism: simply the idea that culture exists ontologically rather than as a powerfully implemented idea.

### Abstraction, reification and the ideology of culture

An objection to the way of figuring culture I have outlined above is that as analysts, critics and actors in the everyday world, our ability to abstract and

reify is absolutely essential. So it is. In this paper I have referred to all kinds of abstractions, working at many levels (see Cox and Mair 1989; Sayer 1984), and below, I will call upon highly abstracted notions of political economy, social change in the city and capital. My point is not that abstraction or reification of any sort is either harmful or unnecessary (see Smith and Katz 1993). Rather, following Sayer (1984), distinctions can be made between 'good' (rational or concrete (Lefebvre 1991)) and 'bad' (chaotic and overbroad or too narrow) abstractions. Rational, good or useful abstractions are firmly rooted in specifiable processes and denote an internal coherence. By this test, 'culture' is not rational in that it seeks to cover too much. Culture is everything, so culture cannot work as a useful abstraction except at the most banal levels – as a means of indicating a whole range of life. Or when the abstraction is narrowed, to indicate 'culture' as a sphere, thing, level, medium or idiom, it slips away into meaninglessness; it becomes overly narrow. Either it becomes synonymous with other analytical terms (which may have their own problems) like language, social relations, society or nation (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992), or it becomes reified as a larger-than-life realm and given causative status. This is not to argue that the abstractions we employ must somehow be mimetic: that is impossible (Barnes and Duncan 1992; Duncan 1993). Rather, I am suggesting that for all our abstractions, we need to examine what it is that tethers them to the workings of the 'real' (whether we can truly know that 'real' or not).

Making this move in cultural geography will allow us to ask a crucial question which is too often absent in the 'new cultural geography': who reifies? For the idea of culture has always functioned as ideology. The idea of culture is always an idea that works *for* some set of social actors (even when their definitional work is opposed). The implementation of the idea of culture is a socially intentional process. In a definition that rings familiar when compared to the definitions of culture laid out above (except that active intentionality sits right at the core in a way that it does not in most definitions of 'culture'), Thompson (1984) claims ideology is 'a system of signification which facilitates the pursuit of particular interests'. This system, as its purpose, sustains 'relations of domination' (quoted in Baker 1992, 3).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Alan Baker (1992, 5) has explained, ideologies attempt to 'sanctify an entire life-world by bringing every part into its

compass: hence the emphasis on the sacred and the profane, light and dark, inside and outside, "us" and "them". . . . Ideology, like 'culture', aspires to be everything. Hence ideologies 'are complete systems, fulfilling by nature a globalising function; they also claim to offer an overall representation of society, its past, present and future, integrated into a complete *Weltanschauung*' (Duby 1985, 151, cited in Baker 1992, 5). And, as Timothy Mitchell (1990, 561) argues, this is precisely the work that 'culture' does. 'The distinction between particular practices and their structure or frame' such as is made in culture-as-text or culture-as-realm theories 'is problematic . . . because . . . the apparent existence of such unphysical frameworks or structures is precisely the effect introduced by modern mechanisms of power and it is through this elusive yet powerful effect that modern systems of domination are maintained.' The maintenance of power and domination through the metaphor of culture is exactly what tethers the abstraction of 'culture' (rather than some ontological 'culture') to the everyday world.

In this sense, 'culture' is ideology but an ideology that is not simply 'false consciousness'. Neil Smith's (1990, 15) definition of ideology is helpful here:

Ideology is not simply a set of wrong ideas but a set of ideas rooted in practical experience, albeit the practical experience of a given social class which sees reality from its own perspective, and therefore only in part. Although in this way a partial reflection of reality, the class attempts to universalise its own perception of the world.

Hence, the naming and representation of cultures creates partial, yet globalizing, truths. By localizing social interaction into discrete cultures, and by enclosing some activities as 'cultural' (and therefore an attribute of a people or a realm within which meaning resides), contentious activities are abstracted into the partial truth contained in the idea of culture: namely that there are true and deep differences between people. An emphasis on the idea of culture will allow us to see how these partial truths are universalized or globalized as discourses of culture and how culture is elevated to another level or made into a realm unto itself.

For ethnographers like Clifford (1986b, 25), the recognition of partial truths leads to 'a liberation . . . in recognising that no one can write about others any longer as if they were discrete objects or texts'. But, for this liberation to take hold, we must reject the very notion of an ontological culture: for, as we

have seen, the idea of culture is about reifying partiality into whole truths, about essentializing commonality and difference into a single thing or realm. More importantly, while post-modern ethnographers may not any longer want to speak for or represent 'others', there are plenty who will. Advertisers, politicians, corporate locational experts, marketers, travel promoters, rock stars and all kinds of other social agents are all too happy to continue this essentialization in the name of cultural pluralism (in its progressive and most marketable guise) or outright cultural repression. The idea of culture is constantly implemented, constantly reified, by all manner of agencies. 'Culture' sells, and a reified idea of culture explains in everyday society, no matter how sensitive ethnographers, geographers and other intellectual workers become. That is why the very *idea* of culture must be more thoroughly understood. Otherwise, the power that resides in the ability to deploy this idea will remain mysterious and cultural geographical analysis will remain hampered by an inability to theorize its own object.

### Representing culture in contemporary society

I have so far argued that it is a fallacy to assume that culture has an ontological existence and that by recognizing this fallacy we can get on with the important work of understanding how the idea of culture functions in society. I have argued that if cultural geographers do not begin this task, we will continue to reinforce culturalism whether we intend to or not. And I have argued that by recognizing the emptiness of the abstraction 'culture' we can begin to ask the important questions: who reifies? In whose interest is the idea of culture deployed? What relations of power are maintained by invoking this idea? How does the idea of culture become operationalized and made real through the ability of powerful social actors to halt its infinite regress externally? In short, I suggest that we can begin to see purposefulness and intentionality behind the deployment of ideas that seem so common-sensical.

My purpose in this paper is to make the case for discarding our search for the ontological roots of 'culture' and I think my reasons for doing so are sound. But quite honestly, I am not entirely sure of all the consequences of making this move. Even so, in what follows, I try to show how jettisoning 'culture' (as thing, realm, system, level, sphere, attribute) in favour of focusing on the idea of culture

has important implications for cultural geography: it allows us better to understand the impossibility of dividing the world 'into two neatly opposed realms, a material order on one hand and a separate sphere of meaning or culture on the other' and better to see the 'strategies of power' that reinforce those distinctions anyway (T Mitchell 1990, 546).

Critical approaches to 'race' have examined the 'race relations industry' to show how the idea of is made real 'on the ground' – how ideas about race are reinforced by very clear intellectual and material practices.<sup>14</sup> We can similarly discuss the culture industry (and by now certainly the 'cultural relations industry'), both in academic theorizing and in the fashioning of 'cultural productions'. Writing about contemporary Western capitalist society, Harvey (1989, 346) describes 'cultural life', including the formation of aesthetic judgements, as being deeply bound up in a 'production, marketing, and consumption system'.<sup>15</sup> To generalize this idea, and perhaps to make it more applicable to other times and places, we could suggest that 'cultural life' – or that which eventually gets called 'culture' – is in part the mediation of production and consumption within everyday life. In our own society, this process of mediation entails 'sophisticated divisions of labour' (Harvey 1989, 346) within the various components of the system. The idea of culture arises from within the need to regularize or normalize contradictions between systems of production and consumption – to name and define resistances and strategies, to solidify them and make them knowable in the manner suggested by Latour (1987). In this (perhaps limited) sense, 'culture' is an idea through which the various machinations of the 'political economy' are represented *as* culture. As an idea rooted in particular systems of reproduction, then, the idea of culture becomes a means for judging other societies, other localizations or, of course, for judging factions of *this* society. Judgements about the 'way of life' of other societies are themselves highly structured within particular socio-economic systems.

The 'culture industry' implements and mediates something like a 'political economy of culture' transforming practices, ideas, activities, languages, productions and so forth into a representation of culture, a representation designed to further what Gramsci (1971, 242) called 'social integration'. The culture industry implements designs for making contested political, economic and social practices appear as if they are natural and inevitable parts of society. Focusing on the idea of culture allows us to

theorize these designs, to understand how the idea of culture functions in a differentiated society to naturalize and smooth out differences in the name of a certain social order; how contradictions inherent within the various social systems that govern our lives are subsumed under the realm of 'culture'; how they are figured to be naturalized, slowly changing, rooted in people themselves (see Olwig 1993).

This integration process is quite specifiable. In the localizing strategies of ethnographic research, for example, research designed both to make the 'other' legible and to represent the 'morality' of European audiences in the light of their global (integrated) context, this integrative function has proceeded by reifying the otherness of other peoples, by bringing the 'strange' into the parlours of the 'ordinary' (cf. Strathern 1987). And the medium of these representations has been, though not exclusively, the cash economy (cf. Said 1993). Localization, exoticization, integration: all these are not entirely dictated by, but are certainly historically enmeshed within, an expanding capitalist economy. As Harvey (1989, 344) has put it, the salient fact of contemporary life, is the way in which 'cultural life' 'more and more . . . gets brought within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation'. Harvey is quick to remind readers this does not imply that all activity within the system called cultural is 'reinforced or discarded according to the *post hoc* rationalisations of profit-making'; however, the logic of capital 'has long been implicated in these activities'. Thus, what gets called 'culture' is part and parcel of systems of social reproduction, both at local and more global scales. 'Culture' is represented as part of, or as an archaic 'pristine' remainder in, a globally integrated system of social reproduction. 'Ways of life' are represented as part of this global system, yet their relative autonomy is always assumed. That is, the currency of 'culture' is precisely its ability to integrate by denying connections at some scales and by over-valorizing localism. The value of the idea of culture is that it can represent and reify difference by obfuscating connectedness. 'Culture' makes 'others'. 'Others' do not make 'culture'.<sup>16</sup> The infinite regress of culture is halted by processes of definition and representation, and by differentiation and integration into a dominated world system.

As a flexible ideology, the idea of culture itself must be mediated, reconstructed, transformed. The solidifying of 'culture' is labour intensive. Perhaps this can most clearly be demonstrated by examining processes of cultural mediation in contemporary

cities. To understand these processes of cultural mediation, Sharon Zukin (1991) examines what she calls the 'critical infrastructure' – those workers whose job it is to implement ideas about culture, to solidify culture in place, to produce what gets called 'culture'. These members of the critical infrastructure are the makers of distinctions: art critics, academic critics, newspaper columnists and movie reviewers; but also anthropologists, historians and geographers concerned with describing for wider audiences the various 'others' of the world. Equally important are developers and politicians seeking to make economic or political profit by selling lifestyles and 'community' – the 'us-ness' of place, the aestheticized pleasures of built form and consumption that mark our distinctions from 'them' (see Garreau 1991).<sup>17</sup>

Workers in the critical infrastructure provide the scaffolding upon which 'ways of life' are made and made known. By their activities (predominantly) 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams 1983, 90) are translated into reified culture. In Zukin's (1991) analysis, 'culture' does not begin as a reified entity nor is it a realm, level or 'system of signification' towards which people reach to make sense of their material worlds. Rather, it is a very clear process of demarcation and interpretation: it is a structured system of representation of both people and things. Like the idea of race, the idea of culture is continually invested and reinvested, made real through processes of mediation (cf. Jackson 1987a).

Borrowing the idea of 'cultural capital' from Bourdieu (1984), yet transforming it to show that it is a product of the labour of workers in the critical infrastructure, Zukin (1991, 260) writes that '[c]ultural goods and services truly constitute real capital – so long as they are integrated as commodities in the market-based circulation of capital' (see also Zukin 1991, 310, note 48). The role of the critical infrastructure is to ensure that these products and practices are incorporated into systems of capital circulation and that they become known as emblems of 'culture'. In essence, Zukin (1991, 202) offers a labour theory of cultural change in which certain fractions of classes 'provide an aesthetic critique that facilitates upscale consumption'. 'Producers of critique, they play a critical role in a new organization of consumption' (1991, 203). This, of course, is not an entirely new phenomenon, even if its organization has changed in recent years (cf. Glennie and Thrift 1992), and even if the 1980s

in the US and Europe certainly heightened the visibility of these workers.

The idea of culture is thus thoroughly implicated in the political economy of the contemporary world. As Harvey (1992, 314) insists:

the rationale for making any distinction between base (the economy) and superstructure (culture), if it ever was there, has by now entirely disappeared. Cultural production, both high and low, both supportive and critical of capitalist values, has now become so commodified that it is thoroughly implicated in systems of monetary evaluation and circulation. Under such conditions, the varieties of cultural output are no different from the varieties of Benetton's colors or the famous 57 varieties that Heinz long ago pioneered... Furthermore, all oppositional culture (and there is plenty of it) still has to be expressed in this commodified mode, thus limiting the powers of oppositional movements in important ways.

What sets the present era apart from past eras is the nature of commodification, not the role that 'culture' plays. What Harvey is suggesting is that what gets called 'culture' is thoroughly implicated in the continual reproduction of everyday life. It is inseparable from relations of production and consumption – and of power.

Separating 'base' from 'superstructure' has never made any sense (cf. Jackson 1991), except as an ideological move – and one that not only Marxists make (see also T Mitchell 1990). Indeed, the idea of culture drives an ideological wedge precisely between the workings of economy and the workings of other aspects of social life. 'The best that has been thought and known' (as conservative critics like to define culture), no less than the spiritual qualities, habits and patterns attributed to various 'ways of life', can be made to work in systems of domination and social control to the degree that they are seen as free-floating, hovering somewhere above the material social and economic workings of everyday life.<sup>18</sup>

'Cultural maps', Jackson (1989, 186) has stated, 'are capable of multiple readings' which may indeed be the case. But it is more important that some readings are closed off, that 'culture' is a system of power and an imposition of meaning, as complex and contested as that system may be; it is not a thing, process, sphere or realm in and of itself. As Jackson (1989, 185) also writes, '[m]eanings must always be related to the material world from which they derive'. This is no less true of the meaning of

'culture' itself. It derives from the workings of culture-making classes and it is always highly mediated. It is not something that directly or organically derives from the tastes, distinctions and desires of unitary or universal social groups or societies.

The value of recognizing that culture does not exist is that we can then begin the difficult process of understanding how the idea of culture works in and through social relations of production and reproduction. We can see who constitutes the 'critical infrastructure', who performs the ideological work of reifying 'culture' at any moment. If that seems too limited a goal for cultural geography then it is only because we have allowed ourselves to be mystified by the romance of resistance and dazzled by diversity. By trying to show how oppositional formations are more than they appear, while at the same time trying to minimize the effects of the powerful, we have lost sight of the idea of culture as ideology. We risk abandoning the important political goals of the various 'new' geographies that emerged out of the ferment of the 1960s. The elusive stuff of culture, towards which so much of geography is now turning, is nothing more than its representation *as* culture. And there is plenty of work to be done figuring *that* out.

## Conclusion

Cultural geographers have long tried to define their object of study: first, by referring, at least implicitly, to culture as a superorganic thing and, more recently, by theorizing culture as a terrain, realm, level, domain, medium or system of signification. Both approaches have been hampered by insisting that culture has ontological status: that it truly exists. Yet like 'race', 'culture' is a social imposition on an unruly world. What *does* exist, and very importantly, is the historical development of the *idea* of culture as a means of ordering and defining the world. The idea of culture demands localization; it demands that distinctions be clearly demarcated at the expense of the scalar messiness of social interaction. Culture is an idea that integrates by dividing, even as more and more activities are brought under its sway. Perhaps we could say that 'culture' is the classic 'chaotic concept' (Sayer 1984) but it is really a lot more than that. Through its very complexity, 'culture' serves to obfuscate that which it is meant to name. The power of 'culture' resides in its ability to be used to describe, label or carve out

activities into stable entities, so that they can be named an attribute of a people.

By switching our focus to how the idea of culture functions (and we need to begin again using words as strong as this) to control and order aspects of an unruly (but nonetheless highly structured) world, cultural geographers have an opportunity to develop a thoroughly critical approach to 'culture'. This approach would be critical because it would carefully scrutinize claims made in the name of culture for their relations of power and domination. Freeing culture from its bonds to either superorganicism or newer notions of culture as domain or level of life allows us to see how culturalism operates in social practice. Such a move shows the degree to which 'culture' is an imposition, a social process of naming and definition. It exposes the power of dominant classes but it also allows for the demystification of oppositional movements. Oppositional movements invent strategies and tactics, transform relations, produce artefacts, literature, music and alternative economics. They do not somehow reach into another, cultural realm for their own power. Rather, that power is constructed out of the materials of everyday life, transforming the material practices (spatial and otherwise) through which everyday life proceeds. There is no point in labelling these practices as 'culture' for that serves to cover them under much too large an umbrella: it shields the ability to see how these practices operate.

This suggests a possible agenda for cultural geography.<sup>19</sup> Understanding how powerful groups have historically operationalized the notion of culture by examining, for example, how reference to culture and cultural differences (and their valorization as attributes of people) aid colonization, 'ethnic' war, the production of an 'underclass' will allow us to begin truly to see 'culture's geographies' (Gregory and Ley 1988) – not as some romanticization of oppositional movements nor as an exercise in the celebration of diversity (cf. Price and Lewis 1993), but as real social processes, material representational practices (Said 1993). I have attempted to illustrate one avenue for research along these lines by drawing on Zukin's (1991) notion of the critical infrastructure and by suggesting the role that workers within the critical infrastructure play in the naming of 'culture'. There are numerous other avenues that can be followed and it seems to me that a recognition of the importance of the idea of culture may very well lead to the kind of explosion

of critical research that followed the recognition that 'race' was a social category, not an attribute or essentialized thing. Like 'race', 'culture' in itself possesses no explanatory value (see Jackson 1987a). Our goal, therefore, should be one of figuring out how the idea of culture becomes socially solidified as a thing, realm, attribute or domain.

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## Notes

1. Let me state right now that I realize the phrase 'new cultural geographers' is a broad one that incorporates rather too chaotically a wide-range of scholars working from a myriad of perspectives. There is much in this work that I like and value: Cosgrove's desire to have us see the complexity of landscapes and to understand the history of the idea of landscape; Jackson's call for a thoroughly political geography that doesn't just include but learns to understand the centrality of gender, sexuality and race; Duncan's insistence that representations of landscape are never transparent and that their inherent textuality needs attending to; Daniel's search for a rapprochement between Marxism and cultural studies; and so forth. There are, of course, clear disagreements within this literature and between those who get called 'new cultural geographers'. Yet it is also true that all start from the point that I deny: that the 'cultural' has an ontological existence and a central importance for any reconstituted human geography.
2. Smith and Katz (1993, 75) have suggested that '[s]patial metaphors are problematic in so far as they presume that space is not'. To the degree that this is the case, 'naturalisation of absolute space . . . leads, in turn, to a tendency for such metaphors to become virtually free-floating abstractions, the source of their grounding unacknowledged'. This is precisely the claim I want to make about the 'new' spatial definitions of culture.
3. 'Culture' is certainly a European idea, as has been shown by Cosgrove (1983), Sahlins (1976) and Williams (1983).
4. Superorganicism in cultural geography (particularly in the so-called Berkeley school) has been frequently criticized by the 'new cultural geographers' (see especially Duncan 1980, 1990; Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1989). For a critique of how 'new cultural

- geographers' have interpreted the cultural theories of earlier cultural geographers, see Price and Lewis (1993).
5. Though for many in cultural geography a vague superorganicism still prevails. A recent review of American cultural geography, for example, declared that 'mainstream cultural geography seems satisfied with the superorganic' (Rowntree *et al.* 1989, 212).
  6. Wagner and Mikesell (1962, 5) introduced a collection of readings in cultural geography by declaring that 'the cultural geographer is not concerned with the inner workings of culture'. Both authors later changed their stand on this position. This comment provided an important impetus to Duncan's (1980) critique of superorganicism and the subsequent development of 'new cultural geography'.
  7. Duncan takes his inspiration largely from Williams (1982) and Jackson derives his theorizations from the important work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies as well as from Williams (1977). I focus on Duncan and Jackson because theirs are the most complete and fruitful statements of cultural theory in the 'new cultural geography'.
  8. Note the use of inverted commas here: the degree to which 'culture' is a metaphor or handy term for something else is implicit throughout Jackson's work, and the setting off of 'culture' in such a manner becomes more frequent in his later work (for example, 1991, 1993). Jackson seems to distrust the ability of the term 'culture' to stand for what he wants it to. In this paper I want to bring that distrust to the fore, make it explicit and theorize it, rather than allow it to remain implicit in cultural geography.
  9. As should be clear from my use of this quotation, there are plenty of other abstractions and reifications in the geographical vocabulary that need to be examined to understand their external functioning. I examine 'culture' because it seems to me that it remains the most unexamined of all our terms. Community, politics, economy and society have continually been examined to understand how they work as metaphors for understanding and how their social imposition structures the world. The idea of culture has been less so.
  10. Of course, 'culture' can then become an integral part of continuing struggles – a reified resource of power to further those struggles.
  11. We can broaden Latour's language of contest to incorporate relations of cooperation (or cooptation) and still not lose the power of what he implies. Nor do we have to assume that the 'winners' are omnipotent. It is quite apparent that Latour's formulation incorporates resistance. 'Winners' ability to define culture is limited (and enabled) by the nature of the struggles in which they are engaged, and by the power of others to resist.
  12. Ideas of culture may certainly be internalized by those subject to them, just as ideas of race are frequently internalized by those marked by the racialization process.
  13. Indeed, as a concept culture has always been meant to describe a system in which commonality is greater than the cleavages that exist within the culture (and hence relations of domination must be central). If even the most active definitions of culture did not assume the sublimation of cleavages, then the belief in 'culture itself' would have long ago been thrown out.
  14. My examination of the idea of culture has been inspired by the important work in geography and elsewhere focusing on the material construction of the idea of race (for example, van den Berghe 1967; Miles 1982; Jackson 1987b; S Smith 1989; Cross and Keith 1993; in biology, see Gould 1981; Stephan 1982; Lewontin *et al.* 1984). An important analogy between how the ideas of race and of culture are deployed can be drawn, though of course, the analogy is not exact as ideas of race are much more closely aligned with notions of an essentialized biology than are ideas of culture.
  15. See also Jackson's (1993) commentary on and extension of this idea.
  16. I am not arguing here that resistance is impossible: quite the contrary. Indeed, resistant groups may find it in their interest to develop a language of 'culture' to integrate their own movements, to set an opposition to dominating processes of cultural labelling. But is not a similar process to that which I am describing for dominant classes at work here? In 'counter-cultures' or 'subcultures', are not cleavages of all sorts contentiously subsumed within an overall idea of culture? Jackson (1991, 219, note 6) has recently written that the value of a 'cultural politics' approach to 'culture' as opposed to a view of 'culture as unitary' is that it 'insists on a plurality of cultures, each defined as a "whole way of life", where ideologies are interpreted in relation to the material interests they serve'. This simply begs the question: at what scale can a 'whole way of life' be specified? Certainly, Jackson implies a scale greater than the individual; but then what makes a 'whole way of life'?
  17. Garreau (1991) establishes an important empirical base for thinking about these issues in the context of contemporary American urban areas even as his analysis is culturalist to the core.
  18. For empirical demonstrations of this point see, for example, Cosgrove (1984, 1989); Jackson (1989, 1991, 1993); Ley and Duncan (1993b); and the articles in Gregory and Ley (1988).

19. Much work along the lines I suggest has, of course, already been done. I simply make the point that by focusing on the idea of culture as a constituent in this work will strengthen its critical role.

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