THEORY OF CULTURE

Dr. Christina Dokou

CLASS NOTES 2021-22

**WHAT IS CULTURE?**

* **Attempting to define**
	+ Elements of geography—history—values—politics—ideology—social relations—religion---education—law—technology—institutions—art…etc
* C/c: society, civilization
* The problem of studying culture:
1. Individual too limited to encompass the multitude of sciences/approaches needed to comprehend even the smallest phenomenon
2. Individual part of culture, sharing its prejudices, limitations, leanings
3. Culture is never homogenous (conflicting trends, ideologies, currents, groups of people), and is always changing in subtle and unexpected ways (constant negotiation)
* **A Genealogy of Definitions (form and/or origins):**
* Plato (5th-4th century BCE): The removal from the Ideal🡪Natural🡪Civic; culture as flawed “copy”, but also a way to remedy the flawed nature of citizens through enlightened supervision (philosopher-king and watchmen)
* Matthew Arnold (1869, *Culture and Anarchy*): “a study of perfection,” “the best that is known and thought in the world,” “sweetness & light”; the way to educate and ameliorate the lives of the masses, avoiding thus anarchy
* Edward B. Tylor (anthropology,1871): “taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”
* Sigmund Freud (early 20th c.): the origin of neurosis, based on 3 taboos
* Raymond Williams (1958, *Culture and Society, Marxism and Literature*, 1977): “a whole way of living of a people”, dynamic and non-homogenous
* Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology, 1970ies): a structuralist system of binary polarities (*The Raw and the Cooked*)
* Stuart Hall: “patterns of organization,” “cultures” (“subjective science”)
* Stephen Greenblatt : ritualized/fossilized adaptations of struggle VS nature
* Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Dick Hebdige: the semiotic element of all human activities; culture as a grand signifying mechanism
* Michel Foucault: inclusive web of oppressive associations; “truth”🡨power
* Antonio Gramsci: “the manufacture of consent”
* Jacques Derrida: blindness to the absence of metaphysical grounding, violent hierarchies, inherent tensions

**NATURE VS. NURTURE: HOW IS CULTURE CREATED?**

**SIGMUND FREUD**

*The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) introduces “talking cure” (psychoanalysis), modernity

The Structure of the Mind



Conscious (ego, superego), reality principle

Subconscious/Preconscious (superego), area of contact/dreams

Unconscious (id, superego), libido and death drive

The 5 stages of development and the Oedipus complex

“Civilization and the Individual”

*Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

-Culture evolves, has a “mentality” like a human being

1. formed by the ritual murder of our cultural “forefathers”/ “primal father” (*Totem and Taboo*)
2. high culture🡪community superego
3. culture sets up impossible ideal conscience demands (public morals)
4. ethics clash with the aggression of the id, environmental hostility

🡪 compliance with a neurotic, unhappy ego, defenseless against violence, or psychotic rejection of all social rules

🡪 culture as a struggle between Eros and Thanatos: imbalance will lead a society to self-destruct, or be destroyed by other nations

-How can we diagnose cultural neuroses, if culture defines the “normal”?

-Who has the authority to treat cultural neuroses?

(unlike disordered humans, who can be contained, disordered cultures will probably be left unchecked to self-destruct or be destroyed by other nations so as not to cause harm)

**CULTURE CLASH—THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “OTHER”**

**FRAY BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS**

Bishop of Chiapas, author of the *New Laws* (1542) for the protection of the Natives (the first international human rights document), and *A Short History of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), a bedrock text for the creation of the “Black Legend” of conquistador cruelty in the New World

-linguistic politics of the text:

 Meaning and function of the use of “Christian”

 Natives as “children,” “sheep,” fellowman,” “souls,” made to resemble beasts or “monsters”

-shared values: family, valor, honor, mercy, gallantry towards women, nobility: why don’t these help?

-importance of personal testimony: “I know,” “I saw”

-importance of slow-roasting episode: silencing, cannibalism, psychotic dehumanization of the Other

**-does the text eventually respect the autonomy of the different, or is the author a victim of his times?**

**ELLEN SEBRING**

Media artist, theorist, Creative Director of Visualizing Cultures at MIT

**“Civilization & Barbarism: Cartoon Commentary & ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (1898-1902)**

* The role of (economic) imperialism in the creation of Otherness (especially Orientalism)
* End-of-19th century concept of “White Man’s Burden”: “progress” and “civilizing” missions, “Manifest Destiny” dogma

(moral propaganda cover for raw, brutal military-economic takeovers)

* The semiotics of image as popular form of indoctrination/creation of Otherness:
	+ Antithetical pairs of concepts as simple “us vs. them” scenario
	+ Size of figures
	+ coloring
	+ Perspective
	+ Status markers (“schoolteacher” vs “children”)
	+ Use of traditions (Minerva vs the Dragon)

**HIGH Vs LOW CULTURE**

**MAX HORKHEIMER AND THEODOR ADORNO**

Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (“Frankfurt School”)

Marxist cultural criticism

Art/aesthetics as potentially semi-autonomous from politics, though great art is “political”

The cultural critic as an implicated, non-objective scientist:

Complicity with hegemony VS Antonio Gramsci’s organic intellectual

The critic as naysayer: “negative dialectics”

Dialectical view of culture (which contains contradictions)

Not HOW things are, but WHY

The self-destruction of logos

## “The Culture Industry”

-title paradox

-interwoven entertainment systems of mass & constant consumption

-techno- prediction (of “safe”, fake “dreams”), production, MANIPULATION of consumption

-manufacture of consent by authority for authority

🡪 mind control, impoverishment, homogenization, loss of individuality/freedom of choice

“Entertainment politics”:

-amusement as more work, mindless, boring, expensive

-dissatisfaction, so more consumption of (false) fillers of needs

cruel laughter, not happiness;

punishment of difference, not acceptance;

titillation, not profundity;

remote “star system” models, not beauty or inspiration

chance plots, not effort

🡪 loss of tragedy and identity: “the individual is an illusion”

**CULTURE AS TEXT, TEXT AS CULTURE**

# ROLAND BARTHES

French semiotics, from structuralism to post-structuralism

Culture as “text” (dynamic, alive, can be dissected)

Reading the “signs” (symbols, connotations) of cult. images

🡪 3 levels of a symbol (denotation; cultural connotation; textual/field connotation)

## Mythologies

-why this title?

### “Soap powders VS cleaning fluids”

-modern housewife VS “washerwoman”

-“deep” cleansing; “gentle”

-foam

### “Photography and Electoral Appeal”

-appeal of photos VS text:

1. more personal link
2. exemplifies/embodies political agenda (blind imitation)
3. a “perfected” mirror for identification AND separation (awe)
4. blackmail, censure (not VS human, but VS virtues shown)

-positioning of photos (frontal, ¾); why not profile?

-showing family in affluent home: identification of values + desire for wealth

**ALICE WALKER**

-Organic intellectual (poverty, disability, black rights), author, critic

-The 1960s Civil Rights movement: nonviolent resistance but double victimization

-importance of herstory

“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1974)

-Slavery before and after 1863’s Emancipation Proclamation

-C/c Virginia Woolf’s “Shakespeare’s sister”

-effects of repressed spirituality

-hypocrisy of phallogocentrism:

1. saintliness as double slavery
2. womanhood as curse
3. talent as burden

-the case of Phyllis Wheatley (Uncle Tomism VS thwarted genius)

-outlets/safehouses for black female artistry: recipes, gardens, songs, homemaking (quilts etc).

-results of “mothers’” efforts

**CULTURE AND ITS MATERIALS/MATERIALISM**

**RAYMOND WILLIAMS**

Marxist New Left 🡪 U.K. Cultural Materialism

*Culture and Society* (1958): culture as “a whole way of living of a people”

“Dominant, Residual, Emergent” (from *Marxism and Literature*, 1977)

-culture as complex: manifestations and dynamic interactions

-problem with “epochal” categorizations of culture: static, simplistic, dominant

-3 levels of culture (+ archaic)

-clash, co-option, substitution among them



**EDWARD SAID**

Palestinian academic and activist

*Orientalism* (1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004)

“Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals” from *Representation of the Intellectual* (1994)

-why is the intellectual an exile?

1. brain drain
2. “displacement” of cultural critic
3. marginalization of intellectuals in society (difficult “non Bell-curvers” and/or troublesome)
4. exile makes one an organic intellectual of sorts:

-how to think ID in double exile (Armenians, Egyptian Greeks)?

-“global village” even harder (tantalizingly close, one cannot decide to settle “for good”)

-What are the benefits of exile?

1. naysayer as philosopher (Adorno’s negative dialectics)
2. extra sensitivity, original p.o.v.
3. perpetual unsettled position untainted by mass cultural brainwashing
4. creative labor out of pain of exile
5. morality of not being “at home”—ecstasis of feeling “Otherness”

POSITIONALITIES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

**STUART HALL**

Student of R. Wiliams, New Left🡪 initiated UK Cultural Studies

Colonial subject🡪organic intellectual

“Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” (1992)

-Culture as synergy of transient power struggles (“articulation” of “conjectures”) VS static “hegemony”

-Cultural Studies as “a discursive formation”, “a whole set of formations”, many sciences, “self-deconstructive”

 (C/c Mikhail Bakhtin’s polyglossia, heteroglossia, carnivalesque, dialogic)

 “positionalities” unified by a political agenda

 “worldliness” of C.S. (VS Marxist materialism) to

face “tension” of inadequacy of theories

-C.S. critic always “displaced” (inadequate; inside the object of study)

 organic intellectual best for C.S. work:

1. works within historical conjecture
2. engaged to enlighten others (“make a difference”) not just theorize

 4 creative interruptions:

* 1. class (Marxism)
	2. gender (feminism)
	3. race (postcolonialism)
	4. textuality (semiotics, deconstruction)

**MAX WEBER**

“academic” sociologist and capitalism critic

*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)

-Status groups (“subcultures”) inside a larger culture

-the “iron cage”: when efficiency, technology and bureaucracy trap individual

1. Logos not enough to overcome modern culture’s contradictions
2. Franklinean ethic (rich or poor is your choice)
3. More goods and money🡪 less humanity
4. We become the cage (manufacture of consent)

“What Is Politics?” (1918)

-Df. (p.111): “a kind of independent leadership [*manipulation of power*] in action” inside a “state” (i.e., something capable of claiming “monopoly of legitimate use of force” within its territory) or among states

-Why do people obey the state? Pure legitimation:

1. tradition (semi-personal)
2. charisma/grace (personal)
3. legality, rationale (impersonal)

“The Types of Legitimate Domination” (1920)

-Df. of domination:

1. orders obeyed for: i. obedience’s sake, ii. our own interest too
2. involves a staff (apparatchiks), loyal for material, affective, or ideal (legitimation) reasons, which shares in diffusion of power
3. not only one/linear kind operant in social relations

**STEPHEN FENDER**

Professor of American Studies in the UK

Author of *50 Facts…* series

# “The American Difference”

-Df. of American exceptionalism

-Why this belief?

1. first new bourgeois nation
2. in a land unusually rich and wild
3. not real, but IMAGINED quality by Europeans and settlers
4. based on a transformative, elective process of becoming American
5. based on “the collective singular”, *et pluribus unum* of individuals

🡪constitutions only as crisis planners

1. being cut off from Europe bred isolationism, “purity” w/o contagion
2. immigrant descriptions (new, bountiful, old sins erased)
3. Puritans as “different” religiously and politically
4. Rugged/rampant individualism derived from middle-class status of Pilgrims
5. American Dream of a classless, meritocratic society
6. Portable faith, faith in the portable
7. Mass mobility as evolution:

: initiation, transformation, reformation

: terror of captivity narratives

: “redeems” old wrongs (slavery, genocide)

: from “Go West, young man” to Pax Americana, global policeman

**BOHDAN SZKLARSKI**

Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Warsaw, Poland, former Director of the American Studies Centre in Warsaw and current Head of the Leadership Studies program at ASC.

“Why We Love to Hate America”

* Definition of anti-Americanism: a critical stance or hostility against USA that can be domestic as well as foreign
* According to Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane in *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (2007), it takes four major forms:
1. Liberal: criticism of the U.S. for not living up to its ideals (like lagging behind in issues like women’s reproductive rights or racial equality)
2. Social: value conflicts between one’s sense of social order or justice and that of the U.S. (individualist US social structure lacking the cultural/”intellectual” infrastructure of, e.g., free education, healthcare, job protection laws in Scandinavian countries)
3. Sovereign-nationalist: using anti-USA rhetoric for political gain (one’s own nationalist interests—e.g., in Russia or China—conflicting with US policies)
4. Radical: physical violence vs symbols, people or holdings of the USA (ISIS, the Taliban, extreme communists/leftists, terrorism, flag-burning)
* What is anti-Americanism compared to/ an alternative to?

Anti-capitalism

Anti-/alter-globalism

Anti-imperialism

Anti-consumptionist/consumerism

* The U.S. does not engage in enough “soft power” (cultural or financial aid) charm to overturn its hard power (military interventions) negative image, or our own unrealistic expectations of it (a projection of our own inadequacies on the US).
* In fact, is it perhaps a love-hate relationship?

**THE GENDER CREATIVE INTERRUPTION**

**3 waves of feminism:**

1. Late 19th-early 20thcentury women’s suffrage (UK and USA): suffragettes campaigning for basic rights of essentialist/universal category of “woman,” like owning one’s own body, owning property, and voting
2. 1950s-1960s (mostly USA): feminism against patriarchy; distinction of gender and sex (Joan Scott’s definition), diversification (different kinds/needs for women, non-essentialist), technologies of sexual and reproductive rights (the pill, abortion, women’s right to orgasm)
3. 1990, publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*: gender as performative and overriding biological sex; the way to debunk heteronormative gender is to parody it🡪 Gender Studies, Queer Studies

**BETTY FRIEDAN**

2nd wave feminist activist, co-founder of NOW, National Women’s Political Caucus

-“The Problem That Has No Name” from *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

Written after a college graduate reunion survey (1957)

-why nameless?

-sexist cultural brainwashing:

1. prescribed housewife/baby-maker role as only option
2. discouraged from “unfeminine” science or public sector jobs
3. immature sexualization
4. contradictory negative semantics (“man-trap”)
5. suburban conformity
6. techno-material advancement as “golden cage”

-what more do women want?

**ARLIE HOCHSCHILD (1940- )**

Professor of Sociology at the University of California—Berkeley

Work on the social-political value/use of emotions

“Working Women in the Time Bind” (1997)

* Why didn´t a flexible “work-life balance” program work?

a. fear of less money or benefits

b. fear of being considered unfavorably as “loafers”

c. resistance or indifference from upper company echelons

d. cultural devaluation of family/private time versus increased valorization of work time

 🡪 pressure of less time and resources for home lead to “third shift”: struggling to devise solutions for managing the work-home imbalance

 problem made worse by different expectations about “quality time” from parents and children; also different expectations from women as primary home care givers still

* Various “time buying” solutions (summer camp, extended daycare, pre-cooked meals, delivery shopping) don’t really work:
	1. they often become a vicious circle: parents work more to afford those services so they have even less time with their children
	2. problem not with individual households, but larger lack of community volunteer initiative and “underlying social conditions” of “rising power of global capitalism, the relative decline of labor unions, and the erosion of civil society”
* Need for new vision of time management with:

a. the help of technology

b. the political organizing of women and their partners to demand social change.

**POSTCOLONIALISM**

From colonialism (16th-20th centuries) to decolonialization (early 20th century onwards) and postcolonial condition

-Franz Fanon, Blac*k Skin, White Masks* (1952)

-Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)

-Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988)

**AIMÉ CESAIRE**

*-Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 1939

-Taught Fanon in Martinique—Caribbean as hotbed of revolutionary ideas (Haiti, Cuba revolutions; intellectual rebels like Patrick Chamoiseau, Edouard Glissand, Raphael Confiant, Maryse Condé)

-Négritude (1930s) inspired by French poètes maudits (Rimbaud’s style), Harlem Renaissance, activist anthropology-sociology VS bourgeois colonizer Europe: the movement of defining black culture and identity as itself and not in juxtaposition to white culture

“Between Colonizer and Colonized” from *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955)

-Why “between” position?

1. No contact, only “thingification”
2. Price for technology and structures too high (lives, raw wealth, eco-disaster)
3. Creation of a caste of servant-functionaries: corrupt, hypocritical, power-hungry
4. Impossible to return to an idealized “past”
5. Too weak to compete in a global free market with former colonizer
6. Crimes of colonization a “historical accident”—must be overcome

-Proposed solutions today (C/c V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott)

**MICHAEL CHAPMAN**

Professor of English (ret.) Durban University of Technology, Emeritus and Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Fellow of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, and a member of ASSAf. A recipient of the English Academy of Southern Africa Gold Medal and the 2018 recipient of the HSRC Medal for the Social Sciences and Humanities. His publications on the role of literature in cultural and social formation include award-winning *Southern African Literatures* (1996; 2003) and *Art Talk, Politics Talk* (2006).

“Postcolonialism: A Literary Turn”

-Definition(s)

 From the perspective of the formerly a. colonized, b. colonizer

 From the perspective of a. Marxist Materialism or b. Post-structuralism

“…a critique of Western totalising narratives; a revision of the Marxian class project; utilisation of both poststructural enquiry (the displaced linguistic subject) and postmodern pursuit (scepticism of the truth claims of Cartesian individualism); the condition of both nativist longing for independence from the metropolitan power and recognition of the failure of the decolonisation trajectory; a marker for voices of pronouncement by non-resident, 'Third- World' intellectual cadres in 'First- World' universities. More positively from the perspective of the South - if, indeed, postcolonialism, as Robert J. C. Young has it, is a mark of "the West's own undoing" (2001, 65) - there is a focusing of the ethical and imaginative lens on expression, writing, and testimony outside of, or in tangential relation to, the metropolitan centre-space” (7)

-role of literature in what is viewed primarily as an ideological-political project

* literature can pay attention to the individual regardless of origin
* literature as “postcolonized” by hegemonic theory, interpreted only through political-ideological lens
* if “Our investment in the common human enterprise is qualified by our investment in the dignity of our different selves” (10), literature can do that with less paradoxical friction because:

 Much good literature comes from the periphery

 Novelist not a political entity (only), but an artist, a teacher, a human being

 Postcolonial literature predates by far theory

-Goal: A sensitive-to-local-nuances global “community of awareness”, as per Franz Fanon, “a return to what has come to be known as a radical humanitarian tradition” (Chapman 14)

 “What literature might achieve is its own apprehension of otherness” (18)

**GLOBALIZATION**

**-Definition:** The world-wide flows of four types of items:

a. goods, both material (trade) and immaterial (transactions),

b. capital,

c. people and

d. ideas/cultural influences,

**-Occasioned** primarily by economic interests and **enabled** by technologies of mass communication and transportation. In turn, it enables also the global spread of movements, from environmentalism to terrorism

-Its **agents** range from NGOs and global movements to multinational companies and supra-national political formations

-a concrete set of practices AND a tool for subject/worldview formation

-tribal VS national VS global VS glocal

-**Various theorizations (positive or negative)**:

* James Bridges’s (director) *The China Syndrome* (1979)
* Henry Kissinger’s “realpolitik” of U.S. hegemony in the 1960s-70s
* Raymond Aron’s “germ of universal consciousness” (since the 1970s—e.g., global ecology)
* Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” 1985
* Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1992) clash of tribalism vs. globalism
* Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), neoconservatist manifesto
* Samuel P. Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations” (1992)
* George Ritzer’s *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993)
* Naomi Klein’s *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (1999), alter-globalism
* Thomas Friedman’s “triumphant globalization” in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), worldwide infotechnology and commerce
* Stanley Hoffman’s “The Clash of Globalizations” (2002)

**J(OHN) B(OYNTON) PRIESTLEY**

Novelist, playwright, popular BBC broadcaster

“Wrong Ism” (1966)

-3 –isms:

regionalism

nationalism

internationalism

-Which one should matter? Why other two negative?

-How can we reconcile true “world culture” with different regionalisms?

 Open-mindedness, communication, respect

-Priestley’s suggestion: a first attempt at glocalization

**LIAM CONNELL**

Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics, U of Brighton; major voice in globalization and transnationalism

“Global Narratives: Globalisation and Literary Studies” (2004)

-What are the narrative tropes/”textual characteristic[s]” of globalization in literature, “the ways that globalisation has restructured the concept of internationalism, with particular reference to the notion of difference” (Connell 80)?



(Connell 80-81)

-Globalization as textual analysis tool:

* traditionally, incorporation of “ethnic narratives” into western literary-theoretical canon
* “how particular narratives of convergence gesture towards ideas of global salience or worldliness in general” (Connell 81)
	+ Not depicting shared consumption of shared goods, but global-minded patterns of consumption and production throughout the world

-Three examples:

1. Tony Blair’s 9/11 essay: imperialist view of inevitability, development as cultural upgrade
2. Nuruddin Farah’s *Gifts*: peripheral view of development drive as negotiated with awareness of global politics on local level
3. J.M. Coetzee’s *Youth*: the periphery going to the metropolis, a satirical view of convergence and ethnic fetishism.