

Commentary

Response to Shank and Hulsether

Albert E. Stone

Here is a pair of rich and thought-provoking essays. Thirty pages each and many references and footnotes show how much one needs to know and to weigh when theorizing about our field today. Culture concepts and culture studies are both plural categories, interrelated and necessarily problematic. To prove useful in our lives as teachers, scholars, and citizens we need to remember that culture is change as well as continuity in human and supra-human relationships. These papers offer conceptual itineraries around this terrain. The map's main features are not just "Culture and Society" but also "Religions" and "Marxist Critiques of Capitalism."

Exploration today might profitably start with prepositions as propositions. For me, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* was an early introduction that even now might help us unravel—or retriangle—relationships. *Christ and Culture*, *Christ as Culture*, *Christ within Culture*, *Christ beyond Culture*, even *Christ beneath Culture* are Niebuhrian terms for ties and paradoxes. Hulsether's paper may encourage Americanists to substitute "Religions" for "Christ" in tracking possible permutations. Shank's argument for the homology of British Culture Studies and American Culture Studies may also make space for some to substitute "Marxist Belief" for "Christ" in transactions of *and*, *as*, *within*, *beyond*, *beneath*. In any case, both nouns and prepositions interact, as in Geertz's familiar (and doubtless overly Parsonsian) formula: "Society's forms are culture's substance."

That formula, too, is problematic. This leads me to itemize some familiar dimensions of our topic that, as Shank and Hulsether show, argue complexity and contradiction.

1) Culture, like Civilization, is an historical term from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. It's impossible to divorce either from elite thought and art, or to deny some separation from economic and demotic social spheres;

2) Culture gets redefined (and separations papered over) in late nineteenth-century anthropological theories, by Taylor and others, about cultures as whole ways of life. This conceptual breakthrough is inevitably linked to the other great shifts in modern consciousness—evolution, modes of economic production, the unconscious, relativity, even nowadays, postmodern language theory.

3) Culture as both concept and field then becomes charged in Britain and the United States as ideological and political tools. Egalitarian democracy, diversity, tolerant awareness of the other are inevitable implications of our study today. These are, of course, conflicted values on campuses, in classrooms and legislative halls, on the media, and at the Smithsonian.

4) Finally, culture study and concepts are, in present-day America, academic issues bearing upon decisions about department, program, appointments, curricula, etc. Interdisciplinarity—even multi-disciplinarity—is an ideal often asserted but seldom realized. Shank's paper reminds me (as does Mechling's remark earlier about business in or out of the curriculum) that economics and political science have been largely unrepresented, in my experience at Yale, Emory, and Iowa, on American Studies staffs and hence curricula.

Culture and society, both/and rather than either/or thinking, mind as matter and matter as mind, tangible and imaginary realities, fiction as fact and history as fiction, self as subject and object—these are the paradoxical generalizations about which Shank and Hulsether both speculate. I've learned much from both about "the said" and "speech acts" in cultural experience. Silences and gaps, too, are essential to our common discourse. Shank in particular helps me see from a British Marxist perspective that base-superstructure determinisms are really false reductionisms. He shows convincingly that consciousness is both defined by and in essential ways free of economic forces. I also welcome Shank's short list of exemplary texts. For one thing, I agree that Janice Radway's is in Geertz's terms an apt example of generalizing widely within so-called "little" cases like romance readers and their networks, while floating larger issues of reading, gender, and identity formations in adulthood. I am, nevertheless, bothered less by her case's confinement to white, middle class, heterosexual, suburban subjects than by her confession that she interviewed neither husbands nor children; nor did she interrogate closely how her women's actual behavior might have been changed

by devouring Kathleen Woodwiss. *Reading the Romance*, therefore, isn't fully "thick description" ethnography. Even feminist students, I've found, grasp this.

Hulsether helps me articulate more coherently my own religious consciousness—surely one that as an Episcopalian and Americanist is doubly both/and thinking and behavior. He also underlines the relative absence of religion in our American Studies courses and history textbooks. Hulsether's bridge between Christ and/as/within/above/beyond/against culture is music. In my own case my bridges have used race, the legacy of slavery, and autobiography to show how religions and their publics have participated in and shaped American and Afro-American culture. Hulsether likewise stresses, as did Richard Horwitz, the necessity of humor, surprise, playfulness, and incongruity as essential qualities for good culture theorists and students. On this important but often forgotten point, I'm relieved to note that humor, irony, and both/and consciousness in cultural analysis opens an important space for our old friend, literature. Facing Shank's impressive familiarity with British Culture Studies texts, I found myself finding an escape hatch in David Lodge's *Nice Work*. This witty and sympathetic novel contrasts the worlds of a pretty young literary theorist at Rummage University and that of a harried Managing Director of a filthy factory three miles away. Rummage both is and isn't Birmingham after all, and that's one advantage fiction enjoys as cultural tool.

I will now conclude with some personal reflections on what these meaty essays manage to marginalize or leave out of their analyses. First, I'm a bit surprised to hear more about Geertz and Gregory Bateson, two admirably inclusive social scientists who examine subjectivity, consciousness, and the self-reflexive in both micro- and macro-analyses of cultures. Geertz is particularly acute in showing the inside and outside of behavior, speech and "the said" of all social interactions. The Mind unifying or connecting all levels of life—human, biological, even inanimate and cosmic—is Bateson's signal insight. Might not these familiar gurus contribute to our discussions? What little I'm learning about process philosophy and theology suggests that Bateson in particular may be the Stephen Hawkins of culture studies.

Next, the mention of Gordon Kelly's nice essay on "Literature and History" pleases me, not only because Kelly is an Iowa PhD, but more seriously because he reconnects literature, history, and society very fruitfully *via* children's books and their reading formations. Until yesterday, no one here made more than passing reference to children. Doris Friedensohn did so, and her gender may just tell us something about silences. For me, a base line of the theory and practice of American culture studies is childhood seen across historical time. "The polarity Big-Small," Erik Erikson wrote in 1963 in *Childhood and Society*, "is the first in an inventory of existential opposition such as Male and Female, Ruler and Ruled, Owner and Owned, Light Skin and Dark, over all of which emancipatory struggles are now raging both politically and psychologically." Recently rereading Erikson, I was struck anew by how easily we forget major voices uttering truly

basic truths. Both childhood in the life cycle and ego psychology's insights into that stage's legacy of conflicts and possible resolutions in later life remain important sources of interdisciplinary questioning and hypothesizing." The observer who has learned to observe himself teaches the observed to become self-observant," is a useful motto Erikson has bequeathed us. Indeed, the final chapter of *Childhood and Society*, "Beyond Anxiety," reminds us that anxiety, fear, dread, conflicted emotions, and ideological affiliations are basic elements of American social and personal experience and theoretical studies thereof.

This brings me to a final comment. Our conference's topic and terrain is perhaps too often failed to put everything in historical frameworks. Much of what we've discussed about our own and other modern cultures has been framed by historians as occurring in the Nuclear Age. Hiroshima as fact and symbol is a brute and pervasive reality defining all our lives. For me, the Bomb represents America's special and the globe's key historical event, speaking secularly. Moreover, the Dun Commission in 1950 drew the decisive conclusion from this fact. "The culture of our age is war, and the culture *is* war." Threats of other Holocaust and chances of human cultural survival are still problematic; they give rise to the fear, anxiety, avoidance, psychic numbing, rosy dreams, children's nightmares, and survival narratives that are fundamental expressions of contemporary consciousness. America's fifty-year delay in articulating this awareness, and the incompleteness of its confrontation by children, women, and especially older men, remains a vital issue in our common experience and in my own work. Surely, all aspects of society and culture are affected by this historical situation. Music, religion, political and economic ideologies, as well as literature right down to the illustrated children's books Gordon Kelly respects as much as he does mass entertainment and multimedia—each realm Shank and Hulsether discuss can be connected to each by the Bomb and the emotions its mushroom cloud have settled over our lives. Little wonder, then, that some of us recognize its absence for our weekend's discourse.

To this silence I can only conclude by mentioning a recent and, to me, rewarding demonstration by a cultural theorist and American Studies critic. Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Duke, 1995) is too rich to summarize adequately here. Nadel's discussion connects political and private experiences into a cultural complex built around George Kennan's famous essay in *Foreign Affairs* using the term and offering the policy of containment." I have undertaken to examine some of the ways," he writes, "in which large, multifarious, national policies become part of the cultural agenda of a citizenry. . . . We know such a process occurred, and I believe that its means was a rampant performance of narratives in such a variety of sites and forms as to create the illusion that national narratives were knowable and unquestionable realities." Nadel then argues his case for a Cold War culture by means of a wide yet admittedly incomplete array of stories. These show that political and military containment of the Soviet Union provided, at least for the

first two decades of the era, a model and justification for containment in other areas—atomic secrecy, sexual license, gender and racial roles, artistic expression. In the process, Hersey's *Hiroshima*, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Hollywood movies like *The Ten Commandments*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and James Bond, *Playboy* magazine, and a string of more critical (postmodern, in Nadel's terminology) stories like *Catch 22*, *Dr. Strangelove*, black fiction, and Joan Didion's *Democracy*, all are reread in order to show the scope of containment culture. Then, after merely mentioning the Cuban Missile Crisis, he discusses the proliferation of counter-stories undermining Kennan and national culture consensus. Thus I find three persuasive reasons for admiring this book. It's grounded in an inescapable historical fact: Hiroshima and the dropping of the first atomic bomb. Nadel then grounds his cultural analysis in what L.O. Monk calls "configurational thinking,"—that is the vital process of making and sharing stories. Narratives, therefore, unite author and subject, for Nadel cheerfully acknowledges the limits of his own "fiction" as he traces the spread of other fabricated stories *and* the rise of postmodernist theory and practice, in texts that deconstruct their own authority. Nadel's title provides an apt note on which to close. Are not all our subjects and approaches to them versions of *containment cultures*?