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CULT 802
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Essay 1: Concepts of Culture in Arnold, Weber, and Marx.

What different concepts of culture emerge from the writings of Marx, Arnold and Weber?

Historical time provides a cognitive framework by which to interpret and synthesize the various concepts of culture that arise in the works of Matthew Arnold, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Distinct definitions and uses of cultural terms distinguish these writings from one another. However, they remain linked by their common articulation of dynamic processes as the means of constituting and isolating those concepts. Moreover, the peculiar tensions in each writer's thought reveal the imperative to read and isolate cultural ideas in temporal terms. In other words, this interpretation of these three thinkers cannot separate culture from history.

Of course, each author approaches the historical dimension of culture in his own way. For Arnold, the tension between cultural traditions and collective behaviors plays out in educational processes. In Weber's writing, spiritual development and social formations find their complicated relationship both expressed and motivated by economic changes. Marx delves into that expression and motivation in greater detail, locating the productive and generative force of economics at the base of cultural relationships. In this way, a historical perspective grounds a critical interpretation of each writer's articulation of culture, without overwhelming their textual arguments in biographical context.

Arnold's essay, *Culture and Anarchy*, admits from the Preface, "it is not easy so to frame one's discourse concerning the operation of culture," and emphasizes "the essential *inwardness* of the operation." [1] He therefore sets out to discover "some motive for culture in the terms of which may lie a real *ambiguity,*" deciding to begin with "the word curiosity." [2] He moves, then, from curiosity as a motive for culture to a definition of the concept itself: "Culture is ... a *study* of perfection. It moves by the *force*, not merely or primarily of the scientific *passion* for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social *passion* for doing good." [3] By establishing a connection between the ontological character of culture and its expression as a human activity, Arnold describes culture as a temporal, historical process - the process of education itself. The effect of that process of acculturation is also "culture," but Arnold's description and

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[1] Arnold, M. *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869: ix-x; emphasis added. Throughout this essay, I refer to the version transcribed online at http://www.authorama.com/culture-and-anarchy-0.html

[2] Arnold: 5-6; emphasis added.

[3] Arnold: 8; emphases added.

deployment of this stable entity takes on a new valence. He argues, "the *use* of culture is that it helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth as but machinery."[4] Arnold thereby establishes both a concrete goal for the continuous historical process of cultural education, that is, its "use," and the constitutive opposition (generative tension; productive contradiction) between the spiritual and the material. Later, Arnold compares the material "machinery" noted above (including wealth) to forces of hatred and confusion, that is, of the anarchy against which culture must be poised in his analysis. Complementarily, he argues that this cultural *pursuit* (again, a dynamic process) of perfection "is the pursuit of sweetness and light," later explaining that sweetness signifies beauty, while light stands for intelligence and reason, including divine will.[5] By placing these (eternal) ideals in the context of the historical movement of time, represented here by the activity of pursuing those ideals, Arnold introduces the temporal urgency of his argument.

Having thus established an irreproachable connection between human reason, spiritual perfection, and historical continuity, Arnold argues that culture, thus defined, stands in mortal peril. "We are in danger of drifting towards anarchy," he writes, citing several reasons that all return to a dangerous individualism pervading every class of society in his nineteenth century England. "We have not the notion, so familiar on the Continent *and to antiquity*, of the State," he continues, reiterating the connection to historically clear parallels to the high culture that he wishes to defend and promote. Specifically, he categorizes the penetration of individualism through the "aristocracy," who rejects " the notion of a State-authority greater than itself," the "middle-class, ... with its maxims of every man for himself in business, every man for himself in religion," and the "working-class ... is naturally the very centre and stronghold of our national idea, that it is man's ideal right and felicity to do as he likes," further describing the latter as "raw and uncultivated." [6] Against this overwhelming assault on the ethical and social values of the culture under threat, Arnold must turn to less ethereal concerns than beauty and goodness.

So, he explains, "we have got a practical benefit out of culture. We have got a much wanted principle, a principle of authority." [7] In this reintroduction of the material (not only idealistic) imperative to maintain culture, he extends his characterization of culture to include a collective (one might even say, national) identity: "our best self," and he continues: "We are in no peril from giving authority to this, because it is the truest friend we all of us can have; and when

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[4] Arnold: 19; emphasis added.
[5] Arnold: 47-48.
[6] Arnold: 55-57; emphases added.
[7] Arnold: 68

anarchy is a danger to us, to this authority we may turn with sure trust." [8] Arnold cements his argument by reconnecting this existential need for order (and therefore culture) to its capacity for spiritual fulfillment: "Our best self inspires faith, and is capable of affording a serious principle of authority." [9] His connection of the spiritual and material elements and effects of culture do not operate, however, in an historical vacuum.

The specifically *classical* oppositions between reason and confusion, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, the collective (best) self and the individual self, in short, between order and anarchy, underscore the historical framework for Arnold's conception of culture. They imply, for example, a link between Arnold's argument and its forerunners in ancient Greek and Roman imperial political philosophy. Further, this historical framework, with its absolute poles of Culture and Anarchy, allow Arnold to place socioeconomic groups on a behavioral gradient. On that basis, for example, he names the aristocratic class Barbarians, the middle class Philistines, and the working class, the Populace. [10]

In other words, Arnold's description of the cultural dimensions of class structure presupposes an historical awareness, because it relies on both an analogy to other, older societies and events, and also to the tension between a given individual's nature by class and by humanity - their potential to change into any given class, regardless of into which class they were born. This last point reveals the particular faith that he places in education as a means of saving culture from anarchy. The temporal (and historically contingent) process of education allows any given individual (he takes himself as an example) to change their socially and economically designated class, and, potentially, to save and preserve culture - not for itself, but for the sake of history.

Given the sheer volume of Marx's writings on history, social philosophy, politics, and class struggle, interpretations of his standpoint on the materialist historiography of culture abound. So, rather than attempt a sweeping generalization on the concept of culture in all of his thought, this analysis focuses on his peculiar use of the term itself, in *The German Ideology*. [11] In fact, the term appears only four times throughout the essay. In three of these, it figures as one level, stage, or degree of "development," that is to say, of capitalist society. This much remains expected; and

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[8]Arnold: 89
[9]Arnold: 91
[1]Arnold: 102-105
[1]Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*, 1845. Multiple Translators. As transcribed at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/index.htm

N.B.: Because this essay uses English translations of Marx's and Weber's German writings, the term "culture" throughout this essay refers specifically to their uses of the term "Kultur," as opposed to its cognates, such as "Zivilisation" (civilization), "Leben" (life), or "Gesellschaft" (society).

yet, the fourth use throws all of these into question, appearing in a list of social characteristics *qua* commodities. That Marx can reconcile an abstract organization of social groups with a contrary notion of culture as an objective and fungible commodity bears close attention.

Turning to the first mention of "culture" in the text, Marx establishes a syntactic relationship between "wealth and culture" in "the contradiction of an existing world" wherein alienation of the labor and subjectivity of humans has "become an 'intolerable' power," rendering "the great mass of humanity 'propertyless'." This use of the term figures wealth and culture as "conditions" of existence. In this way, it implies a definition of culture as an intangible quality of an historically contingent and particular mode of existence, and by extension, a particular (capitalist) mode of production. Leaving aside further implications of the exclusion of other forms of "culture" beyond those made possible by (and "presupposed" by) "a great increase of productive power, a high degree of its development," this appearance of the term "culture" remains a familiar and even comforting figure. [12] Its use in that particular line of argument, in which Marx elaborates the necessary tyranny of capitalist alienation as one precondition for a systemic self-destruction and replacement with a communist mode of production, allows a straightforward reading of the slippery, elusive "culture" to which we are, as contemporary readers, accustomed.

The next emergence of the cultural term follows a similar logic (or, if you like, illogical irruption posing as logic). It comes later, in a less speculative and more historically oriented section of the essay, during which Marx describes "the separation of production and commerce, [and] the formation of a special class of merchants." His analysis of this moment includes a mention of "the stage of culture attained" in a given region, as a determining factor of their "needs" ("cruder or more advanced,") and these as one category of characteristics including communicative capacity, safety, and political conditions, all of which together help determine the "possibilty of commercial communications transcending the immediate neighborhood." [13] In other words, culture in this example forms a single, minor (tertiary or even quadernary) function of the establishment of the division of labour and its effect on turning the movement capital into a means of standardized communication. This implies the well-known account, of Marx's positioning of cultural phenomena as 'superstructural,' relative to a determinative economic 'base.'

The third 'expected' example of Marx's use of the term "culture" appears in a proleptic excursus that argues why only a "contradiction" between "the productive forces" of a group, and

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[1]Marx: I:A:5: "Development of the Productive Forces..."; concluding paragraph. As transcribed at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm

[1]Marx, *The German Ideology*, I:C:2: "Further Division of Labor"; XX paragraph. As transcribed at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01c.htm

their "form of intercourse" with others, rather than any causal effects of such a contradiction, can ever ultimately motivate revolutions. Only those with "a narrow point of view," he writes, "may isolate one of these subsidiary forms [of revolution] and consider it as the basis," thereby positioning a long-term historical perspective as the most objective means by which to understand the movement of capital over time. He goes on to suggest that "individuals who started the revolutions had illusions about their own activity *according to their degree of culture* and the stage of historical development." [14] Although his description of this twofold ideological misconception (cultural and historical) hints at the temporal twist of his own understanding, the meaning of his argument remains clearly tied to a sense of culture as something incidental, rather than central, to the machinations of capital in history.

However, the final example of his use of the term "culture" throws all these previous ones into radical question. In this example, Marx carefully traces the ways in which economic, "productive" forces, rather than physical violence and "conquest," have determined the "driving force of history." He notes that in the barbarian invasion of Rome, the feudal invasion of Gaul, and the Turkish invasion of the Byzantine Empire, economic preconditions (productive forces) laid the groundwork for a relation (of violent force) between the conquerors and the conquered. He then proceeds to describe the interaction of these two groups in each case as mediated by "intercourse" in specifically economic terms, for example, contrasting the "taking" of conquest with the "production" that presupposes a taking of goods.
And here, in a revealing moment, Marx accounts for three commodities produced by a conquered people, and "taken" by a conqueror: "language, culture, and manners." [15] Suddenly, the deployment of "culture" as an example in this argument belies an internal contradiction: the commodity produced by human labor somehow mediates itself, producing its own exchange-value rather than allowing that value to be determined by a subjective "intercourse" between groups. These supposedly superstructural and ephemeral qualities take on, in this sentence, a peculiar historicity and objective character, because they not only stand outside time, as the mediation of ideas through language, culture, and manners, but must also, *at the same time*, have an effect on the structure and economic order itself, contrary to all materialist causality. Perhaps, in that sense, Marx's infrequent use of the specific term "culture" appears to generate its value as a unit of historical analysis; its scarcity drives up its exchange-value.

Like Marx, Weber rarely uses the term "culture" explicitly in his essay on religion and

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[1]MArx: I:D:5: "[5. The Contradiction Between the Productive Forces and the Form of Intercourse as the Basis for Social Revolution]." As transcribed at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm
[1]ibid.

capitalism. When he does, he tends to connect it to capitalism or modernity. However, rather than assigning a conflation of meaning to other, perhaps synonomous, terms, attention to these narrow and infrequent occurrences in his writing provides an interesting point of departure for an understanding of the temporal and economic interpretation of spiritual and social phenomena. An historical perspective elucidates the *Protestant Ethic* itself: the accumulation of wealth described as a moral imperative for individuals, because of the union of religion and economics in a *Spirit of Capitalism*. [16]

For example, towards the end of the first chapter, Weber mentions the "French and Dutch economic cultures" that give rise to the Calvinist communities, which he will examine at length, in the context of a search for religious connections "between the old Protestant spirit and modern capitalistic culture." [17] In the next chapter, he notes that "one's duty in a calling" is "the social ethic of capitalistic culture," and perhaps even its "fundamental basis," even though duty might remain an "irrational element" in capitalism.[18] These adjectival modifiers, "capitalistic" or "economic" cultures, imply a schematic articulation of "culture" itself: in this sense, Weber's "culture" refers merely to the social organization of groups. However, in the next chapter of the essay, he mentions "our specifically worldly modern culture, in the complex interaction of innumerable different historical factors," and then "the historical development of modern culture," to introduce a temporal (rather than an economic) modification of "culture." [19] This deployment of the term in his arguments shows that *the historical context of culture depends upon the movement of capital in time*.

When Weber asks "what concrete aspects of our capitalistic culture can be traced to [religious forces]," he focuses on "points" of correlation between belief and ethics, and on "the general direction" of their mutual influence on "the development of material culture," as the grounds of an analysis of "the historical development of modern culture." [20] In other words, Weber's conception of culture relies on complex temporal metaphors: points, and directionality, refer not only to causality, but to the movement of time and the processes of development that take

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[1]Weber, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905. Throughout, I refer to the translation by Talcott Parsons and Anthony Giddens; transcribed online at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/index.htm .
N.B.: Since that version lacks pagination, I note the URL at which each quote appears, and try to indicate its position in the chapter.
[1]Weber: I, "Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification," end of fourth-to-last paragraph. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch01.htm
[1]Weber: II, "The Spirit of Capitalism," concluding paragraph.
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch02.htm
[1]Weber: III, "Luther's Conception of the Calling," concluding paragraphs.
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch03.htm
[2]ibid.

place within that movement. Weber introduces a further complication to his definition and usage of the term in his discussion of Calvinist asceticism, when he discusses "the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion," and shows how its economic austerity and non-transcendent individuality "provides a basis for a fundamental antagonism to sensuous culture of all kinds." [21] Here again, isolating the cultural term in Weber's thought requires reference to the historical development of spiritual ideas.

He elaborates on that relationship by focusing, in the next chapter, on the historical consciousness of Puritanism. In his use of the cultural term in this section, he deploys the noun three times without a modifying adjective, allowing it to stand on its own. He notes "aspects of culture without any immediate religious value"; "contempt of culture"; and "the culture of the Rennaisance," all in the context of a religious force as it developed and reproduced itself over historical time. [22] This force found its most potent expression, of course, in its economic effects. Weber argues that Puritan asceticism founded the "fundamental element" in "modern capitalism, and not only that but [in] all modern culture [of] rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling ... which can no more be repeated in the course of our cultural development than can the flower of the Athenian culture of antiquity," thus marking its existential contingency on a particular set of historical economic conditions, even while noting its influence on modernity. As he outlines an historical project by means of which "the quantitative cultural significance of ascetic Protestantism in its relation to the other plastic elements of modern culture [could] be estimated," he also returns to the necessity "to investigate how Protestant Asceticism was in turn influenced in its development and its character by the totality of social conditions, especially economic," emphasizing the same contingency. [23]

The tension in Weber's analysis between religious and economic forces must be mediated by the passage of historical time in order to have a recognizable expression in culture. Similarly, the ethical expression of material values, and its contradistinction, the material expression of ethical values, both require a temporal framework for any cultural interpretation of their relationship. Finally, the similarity between Weber's understanding of the economic basis of cultural movements borrows much from Marx's earlier articulation of the economic base to a cultural superstructure, even while it complicates that model by introducing the affective capacity of religious beliefs over time.

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[2]Weber: IV, "The Religous Foundations of Worldly Asceticism," Section A: Calvinism. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch04.htm

[2]Weber: Chapter V, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," various paragraphs roughly in the middle of the section. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch05.htm

[2]Ibid: concluding paragraphs.

This analysis has focused very closely on the particular use of the term "culture" in these three writers' works. This approach can be a detriment to observing larger patterns of thought, and its limits include the fallibility of close reading across translation, as well as the particular historical circumstances from which it has been generated. However, the close reading provided here represents one attempt to think the category of culture as inextricably linked to that of history. An increased awareness of that connection can be of greater use than detriment to scholars of culture, history, and texts alike.