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The Concept of Culture as an Ontological Paradox

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THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

The word *culture* has already had a long life in the social sciences, and its importance in the development of social and cultural anthropology can hardly be disputed. To show the initial relevance of this word in the development of anthropology, Edward B. Tylor's definition, first published in 1871 in his work *Primitive Culture* (Tylor, 1920), is often mentioned. A taxative statement made by Robert Lowie in his 1917 work *Culture and Ethnology* (Lowie, 2008) is another definition that is usually pointed out: culture, he says, is the main subject of ethnology (cf. Kuper, 2000). Today, few anthropologists would embrace such a conclusive definition of the discipline. However, the concept of culture continues to be a fundamental pretext to debate the meaning of the practice of anthropology (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Brightman, 1995; Fabian, 2001; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Kuper, 2000; Rapport, 2003; Rapport and Overing, 2000; Stolcke, 1995; Weiner, 1995). This is not surprising, as the concept of culture has been a powerful lens for viewing what is encompassed in the expression

"human reality." Just like the concept of society, the concept of culture has been and still is a fundamental ontological tool.

Like the majority of words that make up the analytic vocabulary of the social sciences, the word *culture* already had a long semantic history before it turned up in the writings of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists. This history has been told to quite diverse ends and with very different nuances (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963: 11–73; Kuper, 2000; Markus, 1993; Williams, 1976). Similarly, like most of the words in the vocabulary of the social sciences, the word *culture* has been invested with multiple meanings, in researchers' professional practice and outside of it, and it has been handled daily as a euphemistic version of all kinds of ideological fundamentalisms (Stolcke, 1995).

I am going to focus on exploring the analytic profiles of the concept of culture, particularly in social and cultural anthropology. In recent decades, there have been anthropologists who have suggested that the concept of culture be abandoned, arguing that its over-extension in anthropology and the abuses that it has suffered outside of the discipline have turned it into a concept with no analytic

value (Hann, 2001; and, particularly, Kuper, 2000). I will refute these positions here. In order to do this, I will first show that the concept of culture is, in its professional uses, much more precise than it might seem from reading these authors. The truth is that it is a very encompassing concept but, contrary to Adam Kuper's opinion, I maintain that the concept of culture cannot be substituted by concepts such as "knowledge, or belief, or art, or technology, or tradition, or even [...] ideology..." (Kuper, 2000: x). Each of these terms mentions types of cultural action, but none of them includes the more abstract meaning of the concept of culture. As for the idea of abandoning the concept of culture in anthropology because of the abuses it has suffered upon entering ordinary language, it is absurd. After all, I would not expect physicists to abandon their concept of energy even if I hear charlatans and soothsayers use it; so, as an anthropologist, I see no reason to give up the concept of culture unless, of course, there are powerful analytic reasons to do so. And I do not think that there are. On the other hand, it is necessary to critically acknowledge the weight of reification, essentialization, and exotization that the concept of culture has carried within anthropological discourse, particularly in connection with the predicates of otherness in a context of colonial relations (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Fabian, 2001; Stolcke, 1995). But a concept of culture that is restored from the consciousness of these limitations also requires us to consider that these contemporary criticisms may have derived "their cogency and persuasiveness from a strategic and selective retrospective reconstruction of the meaning of the concept in earlier conditions of anthropology" (Brightman, 1995: 510).

The discipline that has worked on the concept of culture with greatest intensity and historical continuity is social and cultural anthropology. However, it is a cliché that definitions of the concept have proliferated in anthropology, and that these definitions do not coincide (Jones, 2007: 365). Consequently, venturing into the ontological

dimensions of the word *culture* does not seem very promising, unless we first delimit as clearly as possible what we want to say with this word. In this chapter, I will follow the strategy of formulating these dimensions after offering a sequence of seven definitions. In presenting this sequence, I am not attempting to offer an exhaustive historical recapitulation, although I am convinced that this sequence of definitions connects, from the first definition ("way of life") to the seventh ("discourse of conventions"), two extremes of a clear scientific progression. That is, I believe that this seventh definition, in relation to the first, is more logically consistent and more empirically adequate, in addition to being later in historical time. By formulating these seven definitions, and coordinating them with a certain amount of bibliography, I only aspire to cover a minimum common denominator of the anthropological concepts of culture, based on a language that is precise and, therefore, easy to challenge. It would be too ambitious to attempt to instigate any universal agreement regarding these definitions, but by formulating them as precisely as possible, I hope at least to offer a corpus of notions that will allow (a) a clear expression of the disagreements, and (b) the construction of a clear position regarding the kind of ontological assumptions the word *culture* contains.

The concept of culture is, historically, at the nucleus of anthropological reflection. That is why it has suffered the essential tensions of the discipline. In 1992, George W. Stocking proclaimed the tension that, in my opinion, has been the most important one: anthropology has been struggling, since its very genesis, in the tension between the *anthropos* and the *ethnos* (Stocking, 1992). That is, it has struggled in the tension between producing knowledge about the human species, *Homo Sapiens*, as the universal *anthropos*, and producing knowledge about each of the local *ethnic* varieties of the species. In parallel, the concept of culture has developed at the very heart of this tension, as a concept that describes the species as a unit, and as

a concept that describes each of its social manifestations differentially. Anthropology's commitment to scientific universalism has thus been affected by a kind of ontological pluralism: what describes the human *being* is diversity in the *ways of being* (one of which is, of course, being a social scientist).

DEFINITION 1: CULTURE IS A FORM OF SOCIAL LIFE

In his semantic review of the word culture, Raymond Williams formulated this definition, among others: "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group, from Herder and [XIXth Century]" (Williams, 1976: 80). This definition is a good starting point, because analysts coincide in pointing to Herder and his romantic emphasis on the diversity of ways of human life as a fundamental precedent in the kind of empirical inquiry that would later take the canonical shape of anthropological field work (Caisson, 1991; Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963; Markus, 1993; Williams, 1976).

By attributing culture to "a people [...] or a group," Raymond Williams offers a very exact image of the kind of logical use that the word has had, and continues to have, in the social sciences and, of course, of the use that Herder himself wanted to give it. As a way of life, culture is, in this sense, a *property* of a social subject. As we advance in the successive definitions in this essay, I will show that this notion of culture is empirically untenable and analytically sterile. If the entire meaning of the notion of culture were contained in this idea of "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group," then we would do well to follow the suggestion of authors like Kuper or Hann: get rid of such a concept definitively.

The main problem of this meaning of the word *culture* stems from the assumption that human beings live in societies that have, each and every one of them, *one* way of life. Thus, the concept of culture constitutes a potent metaphor of social order. This metaphor holds all the traps that the anthropological emphasis on diversity specifically attempts to get around. This concept of culture (a) reifies a social subject, which it (b) interprets as a unit that is isolated from the rest of the social subjects, (c) positing an identity for this social subject that (d) is the identity of all the lesser units that make it up. By involving a concept of society that underlines the substantive dimension as a society of subjects and not the active, processual dimension as socialization among agents (Ramírez Goicoechea, 2007), this concept of culture is reifying, isolating, and homogenizing.

DEFINITION 2: CULTURE IS THE CONVENTIONAL FORM OF HUMAN ACTION

Nevertheless, there is a notion in this first definition that is, in fact, empirically and analytically fertile: the notion of form ("way"). Human action takes on conventional forms.[2] These conventional forms of greeting, speaking, kissing, thinking, eating, working, etc., constitute a broad sphere of our activity as human beings, and the analytic concept of culture points to these forms. It is immediately clear that this concept of conventional form does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with "*one* people, *one* group." Human actions have conventional forms even if these forms are diverse or are carried out by social subjects that are not part of *one* people.

Because the concept of convention is central to my entire line of argument, it would be a good idea to address it here first. Steven Mailloux has offered the following definition, discussing a set of classic contributions: "Conventions refer to shared pratices" (Culler, 1981; Lewis, 2002; Mailloux, 2003: 399; cf. Mailloux, 1982; Putnam, 1981).[3] Since the word *shared* is always problematic, Mailloux has underlined the analytic difference between the traditional and prescriptive aspects of human conventions and the

constituent aspects, that is, conventions as shared exercises for determining the form *in the course* of an action, text, or situation (Mailloux, 2003: 399). As for the way I use the concept of convention in this text, I will highlight two points of emphasis: (a) conventions are generated in communicational practices, and they can be stabilized objectively (be objectified), by intertwining with one another in a diversity of productions: laws, furniture, dialogue, urban planning, roads or air routes, and musical scores. When agents put conventions into practice on a stage of coordinated action (Lewis, 2002), (b) they make use of semiotic resources, such as representations, rules, codes, interpretants, etc., whose existence is embodied in human institutions that are relatively stabilized in social time (Searle, 1997).

Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn were the ones who, in their conceptual review in 1952, emphasized the notion of a conventional form for characterizing the concept of culture: "In the operation of definition [of the concept of culture] one may see in microcosm the essence of the cultural process: the imposition of a conventional form upon the flux of experience" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963: 78). This concept of culture as a conventional form of action presents a double ontological status, also to be found at the root of the way the concept of *practice* developed over the last century. A practice presents an experiential moment that we could call subjective and, when it is carried out, it also presents an objectified moment: the practice produces effects in the world because it intervenes in the world (Bourdieu, 1988, 1990; cf. Turner, 1994). The same thing happens with the concept of culture: culture is the conventional form of action and also the conventional form of the product of this action, that is, of its objectifications, with a meaning close to that given by Franz Boas in this passage in 1916.

An inexperienced basket-maker who does not control the movements of her hands will produce an uneven fabric, the stitches of which will for this reason possess an irregular surface. On the other hand, the expert basket-weaver will have such control over her movements that all the various operations will be performed in an automatic manner; so that the intensity of pull and the manner of twisting that are necessary in these operations will be performed with even intensity. For this reason the stitches will be absolutely regular, and the regularity itself will produce an esthetic effect. (Boas, 1982: 535; see also Stocking, 1996)

DEFINITION 3: CULTURE IS A SET OF CONVENTIONS BY MEANS OF WHICH PEOPLE SHAPE THEIR SOCIAL RELATIONS

Conventional form implies social relation. By means of the concept of convention, the concept of culture makes it possible to distinguish between the objects of the world that are produced without the mediation of social institutions, and the objects of the world that owe their existence to some social institution. This is the difference that the archaeologist perceives between a *geo*fact produced by tectonic pressure, for example, and an *arti*fact, produced by action resulting from social learning: between a stone from a mountain and a piece of pottery.

In order to extract all the analytic potential that this definition holds, we must be mindful of certain nuances and difficulties.

First of all, the very notion of form can operate with different meanings. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, when they referred to this notion in English, used a varied set of words: *form, way, mode, pattern.*

The word 'mode' or 'way' can imply (a) common or shared patterns; (b) sanctions for failure to follow the rules; (c) a manner, a 'how' of behaving; and (d) social 'blueprints' for action. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963: 98)

One of the variants preferred by Alfred Kroeber should be added to these: *configuration* (see, for example, Kroeber, 1951), a word that he and his colleagues used with

a meaning very close to that of the German term *Bildung*, as in the following expression from Max Weber: "Bis in die frühesten politischen *Bildungen* zurück, finden wir ..." [When we go back to the earliest political *configurations*, we find...] (Weber, 1992: 164, emphasis added). This idea of form – a complex way the agents arrange themselves in institutions, and the way the institutions arrange themselves with respect to one another– allowed Weber to talk about ideal institutional types, defined by their properties concerning the configuration of the social relations produced in them.

In this last sense, culture is a set of conventions by means of which people shape their social relations, objectifying them, to some degree, institutionally.

Second, the word "convention," applied to the form of social relations, requires a reflection on the problem of compulsion. Otherwise, all of the problems of reification, insularity, and homogeneity that we tried to clear away earlier come right back. In the social sciences, the tension between compulsion and agency that the concept of convention contains constitutes, without a doubt, a Gordian knot. This knot ties up all the loose ends of the classic dualisms: structure and agency, or structure and structuration (Durkheim, 1982; Giddens, 1984, 1993; Kockelman, 2007).

If the concept of convention is taken to the extreme of understanding it as a *norm* or *rule* of action that is completely shared by a community as a whole, the resulting notion of culture is misleading, because it is homogenizing; but if this concept of convention disappears completely, then describing the majority of human behavior becomes impracticable (Searle, 1997). Anthropologists like Roger Keesing (1982) and social philosophers like Stephen Turner (1994) have alerted us to the inconsistencies derived from the notion of rule in its most compulsive versions. In the analysis of social life, it is as important to highlight the idea that human beings communicate by means of sets of conventions through which they

establish their links, as it is to acknowledge that these conventions are highly variable regarding their degree of compulsion. Thus, conventions can work like traffic rules, like a set of norms dictated by a legislative organism and written down, allowing behavior to be subjected to strict sanctions; but they can also consist of loose orientations for mutual understanding, like turn-taking when people converse (Silverman, 1998), which, by carrying them out, produce a more or less finished community of understanding or, to use a more flexible terminology, a habitat of meaning (Bauman, 1992; Hannerz, 1998: 40).

In this third definition, the expression "a set of conventions" introduces an additional nuance regarding the order or coherence that these conventions maintain among themselves. When I write *set* instead of *system* or *structure*, I am trying to avoid the insular vision of a social whole closed upon itself, in a perfectly structured systematic or systemic order. When he used the word *system*, Clifford Geertz was obliged to add the following explanation: "Systems need not be exhaustively interconnected to the systems. They may be densely interconnected or poorly, but which they are – how rightly integrated they are – is an empirical matter" (Geertz, 1975a: 407). On the other hand, the word *set* is not contradictory with respect to the traditional holism of the concept of culture; and it specifically endows the concept of culture with an entity that we cannot reduce to the most elementary concept of convention: human conventions form complex, irregularly interconnected meshes – cultures. Conventions do not work one by one, but in relation to one another. However, the word *set* really is incompatible with the idea of a completely prefigured whole in social life previous to any analytic purpose. In order to be operative, a holistic concept of culture must deal with an analytically constructed whole, starting out from concrete research problems: a whole that is relative to a universe of problems (Díaz de Rada, 2003).

DEFINITION 4: CULTURE IS A SET OF CONVENTIONS BY MEANS OF WHICH PEOPLE SHAPE THEIR ACTION

Given that social relations must be produced by means of concrete actions and interactions, this fourth definition is just a logical extension of the previous one. Any human action is a process in time. And, although this category of time is not independent of the very way social life is conventionally constructed (Fabian, 1996), we can tentatively accept it as a universal condition of experience: the condition that describes experience as a stream, a continuity in which we still capture discontinuities (Handler, 1984). Any human action is produced in relation to a more static pole, the pole of the *repertories* of conventions at the agent's disposal in his surroundings, and to a more dynamic pole, the pole of the specific implementation of these repertories, in action itself (Cohen, 1982). The metaphor of culture as language is pertinent here. Language, with its dimensions of competence and performance, has often been considered a good analogy for culture (see, for example, Goodenough, 1981). The analogy is, in reality, a synechdochy because, as a special form of human action, the use of language is nothing but a part of the whole of the action (Durbin, 1972).

A frequent error regarding the notion of culture is contained in the idea of causation, as if the repertories of relatively objectified conventions were the causes of human beings' concrete actions. Thus, the conclusion that culture causes or even determines human behavior has been reached (*contra* Keesing, 1982). The idea is, in itself, crude because it does not contemplate the different possible variants of the concept of cause; and, when taken to the extreme of stating that culture is the only cause of behavior, it turns into the kind of reductionism that we call *culturalism*. In logical terms, the problem is quite simple: how can the *form* of a concrete behavior, a property that can be posited about it, *cause* that concrete behavior?

In order to avoid this sterile mess, the fourth definition that I am offering here is explicit regarding the genesis of social action: people are the ones who give shape to their action using culture (that is, the repertory of conventional forms available in their environment). People, not culture, produce action. Endowing culture with the capacity to act is only possible at the cost of personifying culture. It is essential to dismantle this figure of speech in order to eliminate cultural fundamentalism (Rapport, 2003). This kind of fundamentalism can lead us to exonerate a specific person of responsibility for the commission of an act, appealing to the causative force of her culture. That is why it is necessary to repeat: culture does not do anything, it is people who, in every case, do things using culture, intentionally or not.[4] Analogously, language is not what writes this text; I – Ángel – write it, using repertories of communicational and linguistic conventions.

The debate on cultural fundamentalism has become rather lively recently (Rapport, 2003; Stolcke, 1995), but the idea contained in this fourth definition was formulated very precisely as early as 1952, by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, when they criticized Talcott Parsons' culturalism: "[...] Culture is obviously not only a way of behavior, but also a product of human beings. Its cause in the modern sense of the word, equivalent to the Aristotelian efficient cause, is the actions of men – human behavior, in contemporary phraseology (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963: 265)." By writing this text referring to old Aristotle, they were using one of Alfred Kroeber's earlier lines of argument: "In the case of a house the 'material cause' would be its wood; the 'formal,' the plan or design of the building; the 'efficient,' the carpenter; the 'final,' the goal of shelter." (Kroeber, 1948: 410).

If there is any causal relationship between culture and behavior, this relationship – noted Kroeber – would be a formal causality, not an efficient causality. Culture as a set of conventions makes it possible to carry out actions with a form, a design, a plan;

but it is a human being who carries out the actions, following this design or plan more or less in practice (Sperber, 1996: 62–63). This approach leads me to acknowledge, with Todd Jones, that the psychological level is fundamental to comprehending causation in the social sciences (Jones, 2007: 373), but with the warning that agents act in institutional surroundings. This means that the units that shape the analytic language of psychology (motives, rewards, perceptions, memories, individuals) are generally interwoven in spaces of social relationship and in sets of conventions (Harris, 1989; Harré, 1992).[5]

Indicating that "people, not culture, produce action" does not mean that the concept of culture is incompatible with the concept of cause. It is compatible, as I have pointed out, if the concept of cause is understood in its *formal* meaning. Regarding its *efficient* meaning, all that is included in this formula is that the concept of culture cannot be wholly identified with a concept of cause that is independent from the action of concrete human beings. Understood as the conventional form *of* action, the concept of culture is subsidiary to the concept of action. Naturally, the conventional form of a social agent's behavior can be an integral part of the constellation of efficient causes that cause or motivate the behavior of *another* person (or the *later* behavior of that very same person). Nevertheless, these forms of action only come into existence through these actions, never independently from them. Besides, these actions happen in social scenarios, so that "The locus of agency may often rest not in the individuals but rather in their ongoing interactions and the institutions that enable these" (Kockelman, 2007: 382)[6].

THE LIMITS OF CONVENTION

We must admit that authors with anthropological training are tempted toward culturalist reductionism, with Kroeber himself being a militant enthusiast 30 years before he wrote these texts, in a classic piece titled "The superorganic" (Kroeber, 1917). But we must also reflect critically on the predominance of the instrumental paradigm in our vision of the world (Sahlins, 1976; Velasco and Díaz de Rada, 1997; Díaz de Rada, 2007a). This paradigm's first move is to lead us to believe that all knowledge, in order to be valid, must be formulated in causal terms; its second move leads us to reduce all forms of causality to efficient causality. We would not be doing much of a favor to the criticism of culturalist reductionism if we used instrumental reductionism as a tool of epistemological criticism.

This same nuance in formulating the relationship of culture to behavior was highlighted by Clifford Geertz, when he indicated that the concept of culture points toward a form of logical-significant integration, at the heart of which the conventions arrange themselves like a semiotic framework whose coherence does not depend, at least not exclusively, on a causal-functional order (Geertz, 1957: 34; Habermas, 1988).

On the other hand, admitting that culture is a set of conventions by means of which people shape their action requires us to determine the conditions in which human behavior can be described using conventions. In this sense, culture is a partial property of human behavior. The concept of culture helps to describe human behavior in its conventional dimension, but only with the assumption that this conventional dimension does not cover the totality of behavior. Otherwise, the concept of culture imposes a new form of fundamentalism: an outlook that reduces everything that human action contains to a description based on conventions. This consideration of culture as a partial dimension is useful for escaping the traps that have, in recent decades, characterized the radical textualization of action and have been examined under the label – which is, at any rate, not very precise – of *postmodern anthropology* (see, for example, Tyler, 1986, 1992). In addition, considering

culture to be a partial dimension of behavior can help us to reflect on the formation of human conventions on planes of description and analysis that involve elements such as semiotic processes that are not based on conventions (cf. Kockelman, 2007) or neurophysiological processes (Sperber, 1996), among others.

First of all, it is necessary to acknowledge that the communicative and expressive character of human convention, and its arbitrary consistency, cannot be considered sufficient features for describing action in its totality. There are many other features of human action that are not generated from these same constitutive principles. Human action develops in plexuses of symbols, messages, and rules (all of them conventional forms), but also in plexuses of contingencies, regularities, and efficient causes, which are not conventional. Human behavior is built on a gradual semiosis (Eco, 1979; Kockelman, 2007). Some behavior, such as the chaotic movement of a body dizzy with a glucose overload, are located at the lowest threshhold of semiosis. This lower threshhold of semiosis, which presents an evident limit to the cultural interpretation of behavior, shows up when we deal with human processes and products which, like the processes and products of technology, must respond to phenomena in which orders of instrumental causality intervene: just try eating soup with a convex spoon. So it is particularly reasonable to understand culture as a set of conventions that mediate, with more or less functional success, between human action and these orders of instrumental causation (Keesing, 1974). Other behavior, such as a psychoanalyst's psychosomatic interpretation of this dizzy person's behavior, are located at the maximum threshold of semiosis, sometimes due to an erroneous overinterpretation (Eco, 1979, 1994).

This reasoning can also be applied to the strength with which human conventions are codified. Within a purely semiotic interpretation of action, it is one thing to adopt a perspective directed by the concept of the *code*, which tends to underline the most statically structural pole, inscribed in the linguistic system (Saussure, 1985); it is another thing to adopt a perspective directed by the concept of the *interpretant*, which underlines the most dynamically structuring pole and which opens up from the linguistic system as a code of rules to follow toward the general system of action (linguistic and non-linguistic), as a pragmatics of conventions and other semiotic processes being shaped (Peirce, in Hoopes, 1991; Eco, 1979; Kockelman, 2007).[7]

In second place, it is necessary to acknowledge the gradual character of the concept of arbitrariness. Cultural productions establish frameworks which, even though they are conventional, are not therefore entirely modifiable following the free will of each social interpreter. Some of these conventions, such as legal codes, constitute environments of interpretation that frequently operate as empirical limits to agency. Besides, a concrete agent's possibilities of action can become effectively constricted by the complex confluence of different environments of this kind which, taken separately, would not produce this same coercive effect. Based on human conventions, the legal codes that regulate economic transactions are established in complex frameworks of this sort (tax regimes, labor agreements, tariff frameworks, etc.), whose confluence in each specific case of action can regularly provoke movements of capital that do not depend, either solely or fundamentally, on the agents' free acts of interpretation, or even on their immediate knowledge of the situation.

These problems point toward an issue that is of the greatest interest for experts on culture: How can the sets of conventions by means of which the agents give their actions a specific shape be related to plexuses of contingencies and regularities that do not strictly depend on the conventional processing of action (Sperber, 1996: 9)? In a 1974 text, "Theories of culture," Roger Keesing offered some keys for putting together a concept of culture capable of integrating multiple levels

of description: adaptive, cognitive, structural, and symbolic description.

DEFINITION 5: CULTURE IS A *DESCRIPTION* OF THE SET OF CONVENTIONS BY MEANS OF WHICH PEOPLE SHAPE THEIR ACTION

The concept of culture refers to a double reality, and in this aspect it is also analogous to the concept of language. On one hand, "culture" refers to the sets of conventions that social agents use in their life world (*lebenswelt*, Schütz and Luckmann, 1989); on the other hand, "culture" refers to the textual description that the ethnographer carries out when he interprets, from the outside, this life world. And also, as happens in the case of linguistic studies, the relationship between both concepts of culture is complex, because no external interpreter is so external that his capacity to interpret is totally limited, and no internal agent is so internal that her reflexivity about her forms of action is completely limited. Every ethnographer must, to some extent, be native (a "marginal native," in the classic formulation by Freilich, (1970)), and every native is, to some extent, an ethnomethodologist (Garfinkel, 1984).

This double reference of the concept of culture in reality includes a relativist warning. The ethnographer, too, as a human being, lives in his own life world, in which the conventions of interpretaton that he selects as an analytic framework make sense. What this double reference encloses, then, is a criticism of the assumption – both naturalist[8] and positivist – that the natives' cultural reality is there, to be merely transcribed by a cognitively and morally neutral ethnographer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989). This warning does not mean that ethnographers' interpretative description inevitably talks about inexistent realities, as Dan Sperber (1996) suggests. It is simply a warning against ingenuous realism. The objects that are *out there*, the webs of conventions and institutions that social agents produce, end up *represented* in ethnography through an analytic interpretation whose validity is always, as with any scientific reflection, an object of debate.

This double reference of the concept of culture contains, in addition, another problem: what should we understand an internal or native perspective of the culture to mean? Without a proper reflective examination, the idea of native perspective can take us right back to a concept of culture that is excessively intellectual, a reduction of culture to a set of ideal and conscious norms that the social agents apply to their own lived world. When we do not reflexively think about what we want to say by native perspective or native point of view, we run the risk of offering an idealistic reduction of culture. However, this idealistic reduction is not necessary at all in the concept of culture that I am working out here.

We anthropologists have traditionally understood this problem through the categories *emic* and *etic*, taken from the linguist Kenneth Pike (1967). However, we have not always really agreed with him. Emic refers to the internal point of view from which a linguistic system is constructed as a practical system, a system of speech (phon*emics*). Etic refers to the point of view that an external observer (e.g., a linguist) has of this speech system, using his own listening capabilities or certain instruments for capturing and analyzing sound (phon*etics*). Using phonetic analysis, the linguist can notice sound differences that the native speaker does not consider relevant from the classificatory (phonemic) model of sounds he uses to produce his speech.

The concept *etic* contains little ambiguity regarding the propositional character of analytic knowledge.[9] A linguist works basically with her own conscious reflexivity, she works creating ideas, ideas which are usually formulated as verbal propositions. The problems appear when we project this same conscious reflexivity onto the native speakers of the language. Making use of this projection,

Marvin Harris went so far as to maintain that the emic perspective is the ideal perspective that the natives have of their own culture. The debate between Pike and Harris can be found in an excellent edition organized by Thomas N. Headland in 1990: *Emics and Etics. The Insider/Outsider Debate*. In my opinion, Kenneth Pike always maintained an unequivocal position on the issue, which he reiterated clearly in Headland's edition:

> An emic unit, in my view, is a *physical or mental* item or system *treated* by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability. (Pike, 1990: 28, emphasis added)

The order of reality of the *emic* plane is not, then, exclusively a mental order, and much less an ideal propositional order in Pike's view, but rather a practical order (Bourdieu, 1990). And this is the order of reality of culture, if we hold with all the definitions I have offered here, except for this definition 5. It is not that cultural agents consciously consider a unit of behavior to be relevant, but that they "treat it" as if it were. This is also the meaning that Clifford Geertz gave to the expression "from the native's point of view" (Geertz, 1983). Culture, in its first meaning with reference to the native world, is not necessarily a set of conventions already translated as ideas and verbal propositions about the world, but rather a set of conventions put into practice by living in the world.

This concept of culture does not, on its own, impose any kind of idealist reductionism.

DEFINITION 6: CULTURE IS A SET OF CONVENTIONS BY MEANS OF WHICH PEOPLE SHAPE THE RELATIONS THEY MAINTAIN WITH THE CONVENTIONS IN CONCRETE SITUATIONS

When people act in concrete situations, they bring into play a particular form of convention that we can call metaconventions.

These metaconventions operate as markers, by means of which the agents in this situation shape their relationship with the more basic set of conventions that constitutes the tissue of action and of social relation. These second-order conventions can operate as metarules (see, for example, Mailloux, 2003: 403) that allow the connotation of the way the rules can be understood in context, meta-signs (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 262), or any other conventional formats of communication, meaning, and signification.

A young employee, impeccably dressed facing his boss, blandishing his line of argument with certainty and conviction, is doing something more than using his wardrobe or talking in English. He is also expressing, with these markers, a particular relationship to authority and perhaps to the company. When we examine the concept of culture, it is necessary to reflect upon this new dimension, which indicates the evaluative component of any cultural action. In the words of Jean-Claude Passeron: "A culture is as much a system of relationships to the rules as a system of rules" (Passeron, 1983: 22).

Culture operates here as a tool for producing social difference and this difference often translates into hierarchy through additional metaconventional markers. In each social action, the agents ratify or deny the social positions that they occupy in relation to one another, in a specific field of practice. So they formulate and reformulate, in a generally unequal game, the criteria of social distinction when they make their capitals and competencies count in the sphere of differences in capital (cf. Bourdieu, 2007, Díaz de Rada, 2007b).

Here, also, culture offers its two faces of repertory and practice (competency and performance). In its most static, objectified pole, this set of metaconventions comes before concrete action, it frames and labels it (Bateson, 2000), evoking fields of power over which the agents have no direct influential capacity. Concrete social agents in concrete situations already start out from differential positions as far as power goes, that is, as far

as their capacity to produce legitimate social reality that is accepted by others as *reality*. In its most dynamic and situational pole, the agents play at reshaping these positions, with relative success and generally in a very limited way. Because of this, in order to detect the keys to any situational power game, it is necessary to include the frameworks of relation and the markers of relation to the conventions in the analysis, frameworks and markers which tend to be produced somewhere outside of the concrete situation of the game. This is why a microethnography of culture, based solely on the examination of concrete interaction, can hardly reveal the structuring process of social relations in the field of power, or will do so in a deceptive way, if what we are trying to do is to interpret the more stable structural positions that have been objectified for a long time (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Ogbu, 1981). But, on the other hand, we should consider that these objectified frameworks of conventions that (like written legal laws) limit cultural practice in concrete situations, are also necessarily produced in some concrete situation. Otherwise, we are doomed to a mystification of culture, that is, to the illusion that the forms of culture sanctioned by the existing structures of authority and legitimacy have arisen *ex nihilo*. In any of its dimensions, the comprehension of cultural conventions leads us, rationally, to examine the practices of cultural production, not only to study the ways culture is reproduced (De Certeau, 1979; Willis, 1981a, 1981b).

This metaconventional dimension of culture, because it is made up of conventions that are relatively stabilized biographically or historically, presents itself to us as an order that is more real than the order of the first level conventions (definitions 3 and 4) (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This has had important consequences for the concept of culture. In fact, this legitimate (or, more correctly, legitimated) culture has often received and often still receives today, the general denomination of *culture*: culture in the singular form, the culture which represents the

artistic, intellectual, school, and political elite, as well as, following another direction, the culture that represents the customs of a people, revealed in the texts of these same elite groups (Burke, 1994; Velasco, 1990). Similarly, in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, culture has been systematically understood to be *cultural capital* accumulated in the objectifications legitimized by political authority or by the property registry, school certificates, or cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1993, 2007; cf. Grignon and Passeron, 1982).

The concept of culture that I present here is not reduced to this culture in the singular form. This concept takes any set of human conventions as its reference. Every human being is an agent of cultural conventions in any of the meanings that I am offering here, with or without school, with or without property to declare.

DEFINITION 7: CULTURE IS A DISCOURSE OF CONVENTIONS CARRIED OUT IN SOCIAL TIME

In his book *The Structure of Social Action*, Talcott Parsons wrote:

> The culture systems are distinguished from both the others [nature systems and action systems] in that they are *both* non-spatial and atemporal. They consist, as Professor Whitehead says, of *eternal* objects, in the strict sense of the term eternal, of objects not of indefinite duration but to which the category of time is not applicable. They are not involved in "process." (Parsons, 1968: Vol. II, p. 763)

In this text, originally published in 1937, Parsons evokes the superorganic definition of "culture" offered by Kroeber in 1917. In successive reissues of his work, Parsons maintained this point of view and thus ignored all the practical, processual, historical, and dynamic development that the concept of culture was undergoing before his eyes (cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963 [1952]). With his selective comprehension of the concept, Parsons detemporalized the notion of culture,

isolating it from the empirical processes of action.

However, social action takes on a conventional shape when it is put into practice by flesh-and-blood social agents. Today, the concept of culture is unthinkable, at least for anthropologists, outside of time and process, outside of the course of action (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Fabian, 1983, 1996).

> We have thus progressed from a reified through a processual to a discursive understanding of culture. (Baumann, 1999: 139)

Talcott Parsons' vision remains in force to a great extent, however, in the uses given to the concept outside of the sphere of social and cultural anthropology, and it carries with it a powerful argument in favor of reification, with important political consequences. Culture thus becomes a set of conventions (or rather, here, a system or structure), generally ideas, that characterize a society as a whole "eternally." This does away with the work of theoretical reduction that the analyst practices in order to reach this integrated conception of social order (definition 5), and the dissent and, possibly, the conflicts that all human social action entails become clouded. From this perspective, the most consensual profile of the concept of convention is underlined.

Re-situating culture in action means interpreting it as a discourse of conventions in social, biographical, or historical time, in concrete action situations and in concrete contexts of interpretation.[10] We can then detect that, in fact, what is shared in culture is, in any case, a horizon of understanding among social agents, or an assumption that responds to concrete frameworks of legitimacy (Jackman, 1999: 303[11]; Mailloux, 1983). In practice, all social discourse is, to a certain point, dissensual, because all social agents are interpreters of conventions, interpreters equipped to a certain point with the capacity to shape their actions and their social relations. Just like musical discourse, cultural discourse is a series of interpretations that never quite converge. What is

shared is, at its minimum limit, this general metaconvention of coexistence, as well as, in many cases, the general competencies of interpretation, but not necessarily the concrete forms of performance.

> If there is one thing that is true, it is that the truth of the social world is a framework of struggles [...]. The representation of the world is not a datum or its equivalent, a recording, a reflection, but rather the fruit of innumerable actions of *construction* that are always already done and that always need to be redone. (Bourdieu, 2002: 249)

ONTOLOGICAL PARADOX

Because the concept of culture broken down into its parts in these definitions highlights the conventional form of any kind of human action, we may be tempted to conclude that nothing in human reality escapes from culture. This is why the suggestion to unite the words *ontology* and *culture* is not new (Feibleman, 1951; Sperber, 1996; and the recent debate held in Manchester and summarized by Rollason (2008)[12]. However, if it is to have analytic value, the concept of culture requires precision. Culture is a property that we find, in one way or another, in each human action; but, at the same time, it is a very specific property: its conventional form.

The concept of culture incorporates an inevitable ontological paradox: no culture can transcend its own institutional, artificial reality. As human beings, we cannot stop interpreting reality, constructing it, by means of conventional forms, but we can only expand the horizon of our knowledge about the world by acknowledging the limitations that these tissues woven by conventions impose upon us. There are, basically, two kinds of these limitations: the kind of objects susceptible to being posited by culture (the movements of the stars do not incorporate culture, although they do partially incorporate our descriptions of them), and the kind of ways and methods we use to construct our knowledge.

Beyond any anthropocentric illusion, we cannot gain access to all kinds of phenomena through the concept of culture, not even to all kinds of social phenomena, but only to those that are founded on acts of convention. Which does not mean, naturally, that we cannot gain access to these other phenomena by doing without the concept of culture, even only partially or gradually.

In relation to a general concept of ontology, the concept of culture can be useful in several ways, all of them, as has been said, partial.

1   From the native, emic perspective (definition 5), and most especially at the most ideological and conscious pole of human reflexivity, culture tends to give meaning to human experience. This means that it helps human beings, in their concrete life situations, to articulate their experience of conventional order with the experience of everything that transcends that order (Geertz, 1975b, 1975c; Lévi-Strauss, 1985: Chapter I).

2   From the analytic, etic perspective (definition 5), the concept of culture can help us to:

    2.1   Better understand the contribution of human conventions (and of the human capacity to create conventions) to forming links, social plots, and sociality, understood as a formative process (Carrithers, 1992; Ramírez Goicoechea, 2005, 2007).

    2.2   Better understand that, at least insofar as social life is concerned, there are multiple forms of existence (definitions 3 and 4) and multiple reflexive interpretations of these forms (definition 6). We can also manage to better understand that these multiple forms of existence, and these multiple ontologies (Feibleman, 1951), when they come into communicative contact on the social scene, do so as struggles, if not collisions (definition 7); so they are discourses committed to the power of defining reality and to the fight for legitimacy.

Beyond these limits, it is, of course, possible to take on, along with Dan Sperber, an ontological commitment that, by bringing us closer to the way the knowledge of natural sciences is constructed, will lead us to overcome the interpretational indetermination of the *real* existence of cultural objects (Sperber, 1996), or, expressed in his own terms, its presence in the "furniture of the world":

> ... if I am right in claiming that the anthropological vocabulary is interpretive, then anthropological accounts are wonderfully free of ontological commitments. Just as the appropriate use of 'goblin' by an anthropologist tells us nothing regarding the existence of goblins, the appropriate use of 'marriage,' 'sacrifice,' or 'chiefship' does not tell us whether marriages, sacrifices or chiefships are part of the furniture of the world. (Sperber, 1996: 18)

At any rate, Sperber's attempt entails several limitations that it would be worth spelling out and that, as we shall see, take us back once again to the ontological paradox that I stated.

In the first place, Sperber chooses for his attempt a variant of the concept of reality that we must not take for granted. Sperber does not seem satisfied with the possibility that *matrimony*, *sacrifice*, or *chieftainship* are part of the "furniture of the world" specifically as conventional facts, institutional facts (the same way, for example, that the English language is part of this "furniture," to the point that I, Ángel, consider the possibility of being translated into it). Defending the idea that the kind of reality of things such as marriage, sacrifice, chieftainship, or the English language is a conventional kind, in the category of institutional acts (Searle, 1997), does not mean that anthropologists' analytic discourse is destined to talk about unreal things or about things that only come into existence in the "native point of view." It does, however, mean that anthropologists, when dealing with these things, should take into account the relatively local nature of their practical uses and also, to a certain extent, the natives' understanding of these uses. The concept of culture that I am defending here has an explicitly external reference and an explicitly realistic meaning. It is, therefore, a concept that allows empirical and analytic falsation of the descriptions, explanations, and interpretations that anthropologists provide. Culture is *observable* as

a set of conventions that are produced by agents in the course of their action.

The variant of the concept of reality that Sperber chooses is important, and it is no doubt fruitful for the progress of our knowledge about culture, but does not lack additional limitations. Sperber prefers a causal analysis to an interpretative one:

> One might choose as a topic of study these causal chains made up of mental and public representations, and try to explain how the mental states of human organisms may cause them to modify their environment, in particular by producing signs, and how such modifications of their environment may cause a modification of the mental states of other human organisms. (Sperber, 1996: 26)

At the center of his causal system the representations (or, as in the previous text, the signs) can be found. This leads to the second and third limitations.

We can, of course, focus on these representations, but that does not automatically lead to the naturalist vision of culture that the approach promises.[13] It will not do this unless we decide to overlook the important detail that the representation itself, and most especially the sign, is an act of convention whose essential connection, the connection of the significant with what is signified, is not causal, as Sperber himself demonstrated splendidly in his book *Rethinking Symbolism*, making use of the tradition of semiotic studies (Sperber, 1975).

The third limitation of Sperber's approach affects the very concept of representation as the fundamental element of his ontological commitment. It is not only that the kinds of examples of representation that he himself acknowledges having selected – concepts, beliefs, narratives – refer to a form of appropriation that is characteristically individual and not necessarily social (Sperber, 1996: 75); rather, there is another much more relevant problem. All of these kinds of representation refer to a kind of referential reflexivity that circulates fundamentally in a verbal medium. Outside of these kinds of representation, there are all the practical

conventions that, within language and outside of it, are neither verbal nor referential (Díaz de Rada and Cruces, 1994). *Representation*, in the verbal-referential meaning that Sperber gives to this word, is nothing but a special, limited case of the concept of convention (Lewis, 2002: Chapter IV)[14].

Sperber's proposal presents a fourth limitation that already has a long history as a subject of discussion in social and cultural anthropology. His ontological commitment boils down to a project about an epidemiology of cultural representations that makes it possible to construct a map where causal chains can be detected. Distributional models of culture, segmented in sets of characteristics, are nothing new; on the contrary, they are famous. And that is why it is surprising that they are not even mentioned in the bibliography of *Explaining Culture* (Schwartz, 1978 and, above all, Murdock, 1963, 1967). These models have been very fruitful, as Sperber's proposal can be, when the goal is to offer distributions, and, based on the distributions, causal hypotheses (although these hypotheses can also be reached by interpretative paths). But the correlational logic (Murdock, 1937) that is at the root of any epidemiological distributional model does not include the magic wand of causation. A distributional language, taken on its own, continues to be a descriptive language. Even so, this is not the fundamental limitation of these models.

The fundamental limitation is that the features of any culture, for example, the representations, are relevant for human action in contextual configurations, tissues of conventions (definition 3). Thus, the model involved in the word *epidemiology* offers an additional limitation to the one Sperber acknowledges:

> Whereas pathogenic agents such as viruses and bacteria reproduce in the process of transmission and undergo a mutation only occasionally, representations are transformed almost every time they are transmitted, and remain stable only in certain limiting cases. (Sperber, 1996: 25–26)

I agree. But in addition – and this is where a good part of the dilemmas that lead to the ontological paradox I have formulated are to be found – in contrast to a bacteria or a virus, which is individually aggregated to others that are functionally equivalent, a representation (or any other kind of human convention) is what it is precisely because of its relationship to other representations that are not functionally equivalent, in a concrete configuration. When I communicate this text, I use rhetorical, semantic, syntactic, and other conventions along with the person who is reading it. This situation would become even more complicated if the communicational scenario of this text were oral and in person, with the intervention of institutions (i.e., conventional forms) that regulate and constitute this interaction. The relations between all of these conventions (some of which are representations) can hardly be reduced to an elementary aggregation. These conventions are not relevant to anthropological analysis because they go together, but because they adopt certain *forms* together. Of course, we can extract the representations from their configurations, and deal with them individually to distributional or comparative ends, but when we do this we must not ignore the special methodologically provoked mutation that these representations suffer at the very moment when we amputate them from their context (Cruces and Díaz de Rada, 1991; Strathern, 1987, 1992, 2004).

IDENTITY IS NOT CULTURE

With the exception of definition 1, the other six definitions of the concept of culture that I have given in this chapter lead to an important corollary: *culture is a property, an attribute of human action, not of social agents. Culture* must be posited about an action, not about a subject. Because of this, *identity* is not a logical equivalent of *culture*. In light of the definitions that I have presented, the expression *being cultured* would, when applied to people, vaguely indicate having learned a set of competencies for using conventions in concrete social situations. This concept of culture does not territorialize a group of subjects enclosed in the interior of a symbolic frontier, but rather puts them into communication with one antoher or coordinates them in their social environments (Gibson, 1984). These environments would need to have their boundaries marked, in each case, according to concrete theoretical interests (Díaz de Rada, 2003).

We ethnographers and anthropologists have contumaciously denied this concept of culture, by constructing a discourse that is constantly saturated with ethnonyms: the *Nuer*, the *Inuit*, the *Sámit*, the *Maya*; it is not by chance that, for the colonized populations, this imitates the way sociologists characteristically describe subjects in relation to the colonizing nation states: *Spaniards*, the *English*, the *French*, etcetera (Díaz de Rada, 2008). This reifying, essentializing language of social identities took its first serious blow from Fredrik Barth's book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1998 [1969]), in which the concept of ethnic group was constructed as a relational concept, not a territorial one. There had, of course, been previous blows, such as Clyde Mitchell's, in 1956:

> It is impossible to generalize about the operation of these principles [of human asssociation in "tribes"], without reference to the specific social situation in which the interaction takes place. (Mitchell, 1956: 43)

And there were other later blows such as the one given by Ronald Cohen in 1978: "Ethnicity has no existence apart from interethnic relations" (Cohen, 1978: 389).

But, above all, it is the empirical evidence of a world characterized by an unprecedented territorial mobility that has led social anthropologists to a growing realization that, if we need to stay faithful to an identity (and generally territorial) concept of culture, then we had better theorize "beyond culture" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992).

Starting with definition 2, I have offered a set of definitions of the concept of culture

that, remaining faithful to the theoretically productive aspects of the anthropological tradition, is completely independent of the concepts of identity and territoriality. I have done it this way because I feel that the ontological status of the concept of culture must in no way be confused with the ontological status of the notion of identity, if we are to move in the essential tension of the *anthropos* and the *ethnos*. There is no use clinging stubbornly to the use of the word *identity* using attributes such as *multiple, fragmentary*, and *fluid* because, as Brubaker and Cooper have indicated:

> It is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualized as 'identity' at all. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 6)

A concept of culture such as the one I have set forth in these pages, focused on the conventional aspects of human action, on human action as social discourse, is the most adequate vehicle for acquiring ontological commitments "beyond identity" (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000); although these commitments, being paradoxical, may not fully satisfy the desire to achieve a totalizing knowledge.

NOTES

1 This text was translated into English by Nancy Konvalinka. I would like to thank Eugenia Ramírez-Goicoechea, Fernando Monge, and Nancy Konvalinka for their useful comments. The main argument of this chapter is extended in Díaz de Rada (2010), though I have used here a more precise language.

2 The concept of culture that I will discuss here is, on the other hand, compatible with the behavior of other species, at least regarding definitions 2, 3, and 4 (Sapolsky, 2006).

3 This definition only points toward a category of practices that, in the words of Todd Jones, is ambiguous and polysemic, and that he himself, following Lakoff (1987), interprets as a 'radial structure, with a prototypical core meaning': 'What is done' in concrete situations (Jones, 2007: 389 and *passim*).

4 This idea, however, does not resolve the problem of judgment that the legal doctrine of imputability involves. Culture does not exonerate anyone of responsibility for the commission of their actions, but these actions will need to be interpreted, when necessary, in a context or configuration of events and conventions.

5 This same warning always appears whenever the *autonomous speaker* is mentioned in the area of linguistic conventions (Jackman, 1999; cf. Lewis, 2002).

6 Paul Kockelman (2007) has broken down the components of the concept of agency analytically, taking Peirce's semiotic theory as his reference.

7 For an analogous reflection related to the notions of sign and symbol, see Sperber (1975).

8 Regarding this concept of naturalism, see Note 13.

9 For a detailed reflection on the ambiguities of the etic/emic pair of concepts, both in Kenneth Pike and in Marvin Harris, see Aurora González Echevarría, (2009).

10 The concept of *discourse* can incorporate the risk of an excessive textualization or verbal comprehension of culture. This is not the meaning Baumann uses in the preceding quote, nor is it the meaning that I am using here. 'Discourse' should be understood a *course over time*, as a *course* of action, whether occurring on the verbal level or on any other type of enactive level. By using the word 'discourse,' we simply seek to highlight that culture is produced in a *process* of social action.

11 Any adequate examination of a cultural kind, starting with linguistics, must be sensitive to the metaconventional dimension involved in human institutions (definition 6): it is not practice alone that shapes convention, but the political relationship that the agents maintain with the convention, even after they acknowledge its arbitrary nature (cf. Jackman, 1999: 308).

12 When preparing this text, I only had the summary provided by William Rollason. This summary, which includes sketches of the contributions by Michael Carrithers, Matei Candea, Karen Sykes, and Martin Holbraad, has been a source of inspiration to me.

13 In this text, I am using two different concepts of naturalism: the one that Hammersley and Atkinson (1989) use, mentioned in definition 5, and the one Sperber uses here. The first one involves an epistemological attitude that tends to take the natives' (emic) descriptions of reality as valid in ethnographic texts. The second concept involves an epistemological attitude that seeks to incorporate the analytic language of the natural sciences into the analytic language of the cultural sciences.

14 Paul Kockelman also shows, analytically, that the verbal-propositional variant is a specific form of the set of semiotic processes and, within this set, of the processes of forming conventions. Regarding this, see his distinction between the

concepts 'residential agency' and 'propositional agency' (Kockelman, 2007).

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