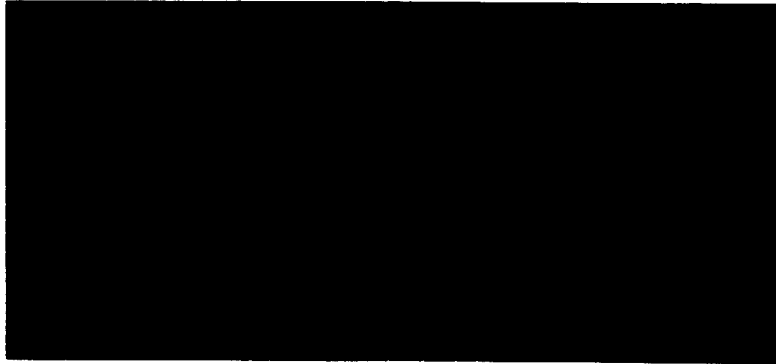




TRANSFORMATIONS
comparative study of social transformations



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CULTURE/POWER/HISTORY

SERIES PROSPECTUS

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We propose to edit a series of books which explore the varieties of relations between the phenomena of "culture," "power," and "history." Perhaps the best way in which to explain the objectives of the series would be to elaborate on the current thinking concerning these three terms, and the modes in which they interpenetrate.

Culture. The notion of culture is currently undergoing some of the most radical rethinking since the early sixties. Within anthropology, where culture was in effect the key symbol of the field, the concept has come under challenge precisely because of new understandings of issues of power and of history. Thus, for example, one of the core dimensions of the concept of culture has been the notion that culture is "shared" by all members of a given society. But as anthropologists have begun to study more complex societies, in which divisions of class, race, and ethnicity are constitutive of the very shapes of these societies, it has become clear that if we speak of culture as shared, we must now always ask "by whom?," and "in what ways?," and "under what conditions?"

This shift has been manifested in several very visible ways. At the level of theory, the concept of culture is being expanded by Foucaultian notions of discourse, and Gramscian notions of hegemony (on this latter point, the works of Raymond Williams have been particularly influential). Both concepts emphasize the degree to which culture is grounded in unequal relations, and is differentially related to people and groups in different social positions. Connected to this point, at the level of empirical work, there has been an explosion of studies, both contemporary and historical, on the cultural worlds of different classes, and the ways in which these cultural worlds interact.

Another core aspect of the culture concept has been that culture is extraordinarily durable. It was considered to be a feature of "traditional society" that their cultures changed extraordinarily slowly, if at all. The virtual absence of historical investigation in anthropology, until recently, has meant that cultural systems have indeed appeared timeless, at least until ruptured by "culture contact." But as anthropologists have begun to adopt, at least partially, a historical perspective, the durability of culture also becomes

highly problematic. In many cases timeless traditions turn out to have been "invented," and not very long ago at that. In other cases long term cultural configurations have indeed been very stable, but we now realize that this is a peculiar state of affairs, requiring very sharp questioning and investigation.

And finally, a central aspect of the culture concept has been that culture is relatively coherent and internally consistent - a "system of symbols," a "structure of relations." Yet an intriguing line of discussion opened up in contemporary critical theory has now posed a major alternative view: culture as multiple discourses that may occasionally come together in large systemic configurations, but that more often coexist within dynamic fields of interaction and conflict.

Perhaps the main point about the current situation is that the anthropologists no longer "own" culture. As the above points indicate, at least some of the critique and transformation of the culture concept derives from the concept being used in creative, and not simply derivative, ways in other fields - in history, philosophy, sociology, and literary criticism, to name only the most obvious cases. Indeed there is now emerging a field called "cultural studies" (associated particularly with Stuart Hall and others in England) which, though (usually) based in sociology departments, draws on literary criticism, social history, and anthropology, to fashion what is emerging as a unique perspective on the culture of power, the culture of resistance, and the politics of cultural production and manipulation. Which brings us to the second term for discussion:

Power. Just as the concept of culture is undergoing fragmentation, expansion, and reconstruction, so are issues of power, domination, and authority. And here too the problematics extend across a wide variety of fields.

One of the lasting goods of the intellectual radicalism of the 1960's - which was also the founding moment of contemporary social history - has been an expanded and more sophisticated understanding of the role and nature of "the political" in social life. This involves a radically de-institutionalized understanding of the political process, in which questions of conformity and opposition, of the potentials for stability and cohesion in the social order, and of the strength or fragility of the dominant value-system, are all displaced from the conventional institutional arena for studying them (i.e., the state and public organizations in the narrower sense) onto a variety of settings previously regarded as "non-political," including the workplace, the street, the deviant or criminal sub-culture, the recreational domain, and above all the family and the home. If the "personal was political" (the specifically feminist contribution to this shift of understanding), then so too was the wider sphere of everyday transactions.

Thus if one direction of social history, perhaps the predominant one, has been to de-politicize the social into a discrete and manageable object for study, another was to invest it precisely with political meanings. Politics was inscribed in the texture of the everyday. The effects of these shifts on the concept of power have been multiplex.

There is first of all the sense that all the relations of everyday life bear a certain stamp of power. As Foucault in particular has made us see, people acting as men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, doctors and patients, priests and penitents, can no longer be regarded simply as performing functionally defined "roles." Rather, these terms define relations in which the parties, whatever else they may do, are constantly negotiating questions of power, authority, and the control of the definitions of reality.

Second, there is the sense that everyday life and culture, in which people implicitly "conform to" or "accept" their situation, should not always be contrasted with dramatic "social movements" in which people question and challenge the status quo. Rather there is the view that, while social movements remain enormously important in understanding large scale transformations, there is much to be learned by attending to (in James Scott's phrase) "everyday forms of resistance."

But this in turn opens the question of the relationship between popular culture - in which people strive to define their identities, their boundaries, their self-respect, their "space," against the established order - and more well defined social movements that claim to represent "the people." Such movements often themselves become removed from everyday experience, their members coming to see popular behavior as something to be educated, improved, or disciplined. At the same time, the people on whose behalf such movements claim to speak often find the language and the mechanics of these movements remote and alienating. The complex and problematic relations between social movements and disorderly popular culture, involving distinctions of class and gender, ethnicity and race, roughness and respectability, are emerging as central to the contemporary problematic.

And finally, the move in social history away from state politics, and toward a focus on the "small people," has often gone too far by dropping the state out of the picture. The redefinition of politics has also applied to concepts of the state, and this too needs to be recaptured. At present much creative effort is seeking to synthesize an understanding of local movements and class culture, on the one hand, and large-scale state dynamics on the other.

Thus "power" is as it were moving around the social space. No longer an exclusive property of "repressive apparatuses," it has invaded our sense of the smallest and most intimate of human relations as well as the largest; it belongs to the weak as well as to the strong; and it is constituted precisely within the relations between official and unofficial agents of social control and cultural production. At the same time there is a major recognition of the degree to which power itself is a cultural construct. The modes of expression of physical force and violence are culturally shaped, while force and violence in turn become cultural symbols, as powerful in their non-execution as in their doing. And of course force in turn is only a tiny part of power, so that much of the problematic of power today is a problematic of knowledge making, universe construction, the social production of feeling and of "reality."

History. One of the most obvious changes in the field of anthropology in recent years is the extent to which the field has been moving in a historical direction. Only slightly less obviously, history has been becoming increasingly anthropological. On both sides some extremely interesting and important work has come out of these shifts, yet we may now recognize that the love affair between the two fields has been relatively uncritical. On the side of anthropology, there was a relatively simple sense that a good narrative account of past events leading up to present facts would virtually exhaust what there is to say on either the events or the facts. On the history side, there was a sense that being anthropological meant studying the more "symbolic" bits of a group's life - rituals, festivals, folklore - or alternatively simply doing "the ethnography of the past." On neither side was there a really serious assault on the question of whether history itself was inherently cultural and culture itself was inherently historical.

We have already indicated the ways in which the culture concept is being historicized. The recognition of the "invented" nature of many traditions; the recognition of cultural constancy and durability as a problem rather than a natural state of affairs; the centrality of the notion of the "constructed" nature of culture in general - all of these points are elements of a growing view that a historical anthropology is not just a narrativized anthropology, not just a matter of giving the present some sort of ancestral pedigree. Rather there is a kind of dislodging of a whole series of assumptions about what culture is and how it works.

But if culture is being historicized, history is being - there is really no verb here - anthropologized? culturized? - in much more profound ways than in earlier efforts. For one thing, there is a developing view that history itself has variable cultural form - that the shape of events, the pace of time, the notion of change and duration, the very question of what is an event - all of these things are not simply objective realities, but are themselves products of cultural assumptions. And second, there is a growing tendency to move culture out of the realm of the exotic custom, the festival, the ritual, etc., and into the center of the historical problematic, or rather to recognize that the rituals and festivals are sites in which larger and more dynamic fields of discourse, larger and more powerful hegemonies, and being constituted, contested, and transformed.

But here the point links up with issues of power. For the point is not simply that some generic form of historian is getting interested in culture, and some generic form of anthropologist is getting interested in history, although that is certainly true to some extent. But if that were all we were considering, then this series would be indistinguishable from any number of other series now springing up on the history/anthropology border. Rather there is a very specific convergence here, and "power," in the broad range of senses discussed earlier, is the point on which that convergence is taking place. Culture as emergent from relations of power and domination; culture as a form of power and domination; culture as a medium in which power is both constituted and resisted; it is around this set of issues that certain anthropologists and historians (as well as fellow travelers in sociology, philosophy, literary criticism, and other fields) are beginning to work out an exciting body of thought. It is within this arena of ideas that this series would hope to capture works in progress, and stimulate work not even yet conceived.

PROGRAM ON THE
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