

Culture Theory

by Olivier Serrat

Rationale

Culture theory strengthens the expectation that markets work, not because they are comprised of autonomous individuals who are free of social sanctions but because they are powered by social beings and their distinctive ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge. It can contribute to understanding and promoting development where group relationships predominate and individualism is tempered.

Some needs are common to all people—at all times and in all places. They are the need to make a living, the need for social organization, the need for knowledge and learning, the need for normative and metaphysical expression, and the need for aesthetic manifestation. These nuts and bolts of everyday life work through the co-evolving realms of environment, economy, society, polity, and technology to make up systems of mutual sustainability or (in opposition) mutual vulnerability.

Since people (not economies) are the main object and ultimate purpose of endeavors to progress, a society's culture is not just an instrument of development cooperation: it is its basis. The marriage of economy and environment was overdue and has spawned a world agenda for that purpose. Likewise, the relationship between culture and development should be clarified and deepened in ways that are authentic, indigenous, self-reliant, sovereign, civilized, and creative.



Definition

Culture, defined in its broadest sense, is the totality of a society's distinctive ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge. It exhibits the ways humans interpret their environments.

Applications

Culture theory is a branch of anthropology, semiotics, and other related social science disciplines such as political economy, in particular, but also sociology and communication (to name a few). It seeks to define heuristic concepts of culture. Hence, cultural studies often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class, and gender.¹¹ The potential for application is correspondingly vast—it follows that practitioners of culture theory draw from a diverse array of theories and associated practices and encompass many different approaches, methods, and academic perspectives.²² And so, it remains relatively unstructured as an academic field that needs to move from “Let’s” to “How.” Taking culture into account should mean understanding how cultural dimensions enter utility and production functions of various kinds. In the case of development agencies and their partner countries, new processes of policy analysis and participatory management should surely be devised so that non-economic social sciences become full partners in the decision-making concerning the policy and investment decisions that guide business processes. Much remains to be done.

¹ Increasingly, cultural studies also focus on the interface of information and communication technologies and society.

² For instance, one branch of culture theory places a primary importance on the cultural institutions that are involved in the production, dissemination, and consumption of culture.

Characteristics

Therefore, approaches to cultural studies are likely to range widely. However, Ziauddin Sardar sees that most tend to share the following characteristics

- They aim to examine their subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power.
- They aim to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyze the social and political contexts in which it manifests itself.
- They consider culture as both the object of study and the location of political criticism and action.
- They expose and attempt to reconcile knowledge divides to overcome the split between tacit cultural knowledge and objective (so-called universal) forms of knowledge.
- They are committed to an ethical evaluation of society, and to political action.

Benefits

Culture theory's holistic perspective, englobing the needs common to all people, does not lend itself to easy action. But, culture theory alone pays simultaneous and even attention to these needs and makes possible a focus on the whole and the parts, on contexts and contents, on values and value systems, and on strategic relationships between key variables, countries, blocs of countries, and human beings and the natural environment. And so, it yields conceptual insights and practical benefits and allows informed choices and intelligent decisions to be made about the future. It enables us, for instance, to deal better with complexity and fragmentation—the emphasis is on systems rather than on parts of systems. And it helps to ensure that economies are contextualized properly and pointed in the right direction. For those reasons, among others, they can be constrained and enriched by the larger cultures in which they are located. Consequently, they stop functioning as self-governing entities. Also, by focusing on the totality and innate worth of a given society, culture theory can minimize the ethnocentric bias that results from one's cultural conditioning.

Further Reading

Deborah Eade (Ed.). 2002. *Development and Culture: Selected Essays from Development in Practice*. Oxford: Oxfam GB in association with World Faiths Development Dialogue.

Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington (Eds.). 2001. *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. New York: Basic Books.

Ziauddin Sardar. 2004. *Introducing Cultural Studies*. Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd.

For further information

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