

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE

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### Summary

Culture, not in combinations like agriculture, but as a collective term to describe the institutions of human progress and, as the opposite of nature, is a relatively new metaphorical use of the Latin word which can be traced to the late nineteenth century. Despite attempts to demystify the term “culture” by extending it to all expressions of life of a community, even extending it to “pop”-culture, the term has never lost its aura of exclusivity. The debate about culture in the twentieth century is overshadowed by the work of four seminal thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Each of them has decentered in a particular way the concept of the individual as the basic building block of society. Both biology and anthropology replaced the myths of origin, which can still be traced in their secularized form in Jean Jacques Rousseau and Herder, with the analysis of archaeological finds, with observations about animal behavior in herds, especially about primate behavior, and with observations of distant and often relatively isolated so-called “primitive” cultures. The exact process of the rapid development of human culture from the early palaeolithicum to the present remains unexplained in many details and open for conjectures, especially in view of what we know about the extremely slow pace of evolution across millions of years in other species. To be a human being means to be subjected to norms, to be repressed and a repressor. Every convention, every morality, every justice articulates and suppresses certain drives. It was Freud who developed this view of culture in his quest to understand the unconscious of the human psyche. He has analyzed the mechanism of shifts to which the drives are subjected, and the compensations in which they find a way of emerging as neuroses and sublimations. Towards the end of the twentieth century cultural studies became weary of any simplistic solutions to the woes of the world. We begin to understand that everything

touches everything else, that therefore everything is “contingent” and “coincidental” but not accidental.

## 1. The roots of modernity: Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud

### 1.1. “Culture” - the origins of a Eurocentric metaphor *cultura*

Culture, not in combinations like agriculture, but as a collective term to describe the institutions of human progress and, as the opposite of nature, is, as Fritz Mauthner pointed out, a relatively new metaphorical use of the Latin word which can be traced to the late nineteenth century. Before that the Latin word *cultura* referred to the soil, the plants and to domestic animals. While many of the Romance languages used the word civilization, “culture” - especially in Germany - became a concept which expressed the more emotional (and irrational) aspects of human collective life. As such it was used by conservative theoreticians such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1876-1925), in the programmatic pamphlet of the so-called Conservative Revolution, *Das Dritte Reich* (The Third Reich) (1923), where he argued against Western Liberalism, and in Friedrich Hielscher's book, *Das Reich* (The Empire) (1931), where culture became the mystical feeling of community of an elite. Typically, Kirchner and Michaelis in their *Wörterbuch der Philosophischen Grundbegriffe* (Dictionary of Basic Philosophical Concepts), define civilization as only the first step on the way to culture, and as earlier and lesser than culture. Culture in their definition is the higher form of civilization, a definition which implicitly tries to devalue the French concept *civilisation*. Nature is seen widely as the opposite of that which is made by human beings, thus the opposite of culture, art and education, but also of freedom and morality. Such oppositions can be traced from the stoics with their motto *naturam sequi* (follow nature) to J. J. Rousseau and his demand that education should observe nature and follow its path.

Such conceptualizations of “culture” made it easy to oppose the culture of the Occident to that of the Orient, which was seen as some kind of fairy-tale barbarism, in order to justify a hierarchy of cultures, a way of thinking which was common in Western European thinking since the Fall of Constantinople. This negative image was then transported to the cultures of India and the Far East, and even more so to the cultures of Africa. A few Western thinkers, like Schopenhauer, promoted another image of the “Orient”, and even they have been rightly criticized for their Eurocentrism by thinkers like Eduard Said.

Despite attempts to demystify the term “culture” by extending it to all expressions of life of a community, even extending it to “pop”-culture, the term has never lost its aura of exclusivity. “Culture” still tends to be viewed by many people as a reserve of the “educated” and the “elite”. In his *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Dictionary of Philosophy) Mauthner critically quotes the definition of Lexis, according to whom, “culture is the elevation of man above nature by the development and use of his spiritual and ethical abilities.” Mauthner points out that this definition of the word “culture” in the singular was used to devalue the diverse cultures of the many peoples of this world. Culture in the singular indicates something which everyone ought to have, and which the majority of human beings do not have. It is projected as a goal towards which all should strive, while nobody can say exactly what culture means. Cultures, in the plural,

is what Anthropologists and Sociologists observe in reality. In this sense of the word, human beings never existed in a “state of nature” before civilization and culture: as human beings we are always already part of a culture.

## **1.2. Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as seminal thinkers about culture**

The debate about culture in the twentieth century is overshadowed by the work of four seminal thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Each of them has decentered in a particular way the concept of the individual as the basic building block of society. Darwin has confronted us with the need to explain how culture could evolve out of the biological process. Marx has placed the individual into the context of and dependent on material processes of production, Nietzsche has questioned the roots of our moral and religious behavior, and Freud has discovered the driving forces of our libido and the unconscious as the basis of our cultural behavior. (Another seminal thinker would arguably be Einstein, but his contribution concerns culture only marginally).

All four of these thinkers, in one way or another, are still convinced of the conformity with a (natural) law of all processes, their regularity, and our ability to recognize these laws of natural (and cultural) processes; and all four of them see the positivist natural sciences as the model of research even in the study of cultures and their phenomena. They use these methods to deconstruct the metaphysical assumptions of the idealist philosophy at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century which still attempts to understand the final causes of all being. Controlled observation and experimentation with the help of a large material and intellectual instrumentarium had transformed earlier natural history into an “exact” science, building on the basis of many earlier philosophical exercises of the Greeks and the Arabs. The methodology thus derived seemed to be useful for the analysis of human beings and their cultures as well. The belief that everything could be described in this way from the Big Bang, the original nebulae, the origin of the earth and the development of biological organisms to the development of state, morals, language and culture, was, however, doubted again and again by those who saw the lacunae in the arguments, the often daring speculations which replaced facts and solid theories and where facts were not available.

Nietzsche, for example, widely read in many of the natural sciences of his time and fascinated by Darwin, nevertheless developed critical deconstructions of some of the positivistic conclusions, deconstructions, which served as a model for future poststructuralist and postmodernist thoughts. His idea that values cannot be simply derived from facts, and that the meaning and social function of values can be deciphered and questioned from their genealogies, is just one radical questioning of the assumptions of positivist (but also of metaphysical) systems of thought.

If the idealism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century with their great thinkers, like Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte and Hegel, believed that the consciousness of man could order and improve the world and thus enhanced the self-image of the human species, the four thinkers showed, each in his way, that the human ego was merely a clown who wanted us to believe that he was responsible for everything that happened. But only small children, thus Freud, believed this story. In reality, material causes determine our

behavior: our animal heritage, our unconscious as formed by family and society, the economic conditions, which are the arena of our struggle for survival and the transmitted structures of morality.

## 2. Concepts of culture in biology and anthropology

### 2.1. Darwinism, palaeontology and early human culture

Both biology and anthropology replaced the myths of origin, which can still be traced in their secularized form in Jean Jacques Rousseau and Herder, with the analysis of archaeological finds, with observations about animal behavior in herds, especially about primate behavior, and with observations of distant and often relatively isolated so-called “primitive” cultures. Of course, it is problematic to try to understand human culture from its animal roots, precisely because animals do not have a culture except in the most rudimentary forms (e.g. culturally transmitted eating habits among primates etc.). It is equally questionable to view contemporary “primitive” cultures as similar to those at the origin of human cultures.

The construction of a palaeontology of humans is one of the great biological feats of the first half of the twentieth century. It has fundamentally changed our views about human beings and culture. Around 1900 the documents available about early humans was very restricted, so much so that this lack could be used as an argument against the doctrine of animal descent. One of the first “missing links” to be found was the discovery of Java man (then called *Pithecanthropus erectus*) between 1889 and 1891. In 1908 the discovery of Heidelberg man, much closer to *Homo sapiens*, added another link to the still very sparse chain of descent. Between 1908 and 1909 the rich archaeological and anthropological finds in France added a vast amount of material to the store of our knowledge about early man. Another important discovery before 1924 was the *Neanderthal man*, the creator of the *Moustérien* culture, and the replacement of this early human form by *Homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, the picture which emerged was still very simplified, with *Pithecanthropus* as the “missing link” between animal and human and *Neanderthal man* as *Homo primigenius*, the ur-human, followed by *Homo sapiens*, who was seen to be the carrier of an important culture, preserved in his sculptures and cave paintings.

This seemed to be an evolutionary series, similar to those which palaeontologists had constructed for the evolution of animal species. Darwinism was still infected by the beliefs of the Enlightenment which had been questioned in various forms in Romanticism and Historicism. Since then the optimism about progress in our industrial societies has waned considerably, and the ideology of progress inherent in much early Darwinist thinking has been tempered. (see below 6. *Poststructuralism, Postmodernism, Chaos theory*)

In the 1920s the child’s skull from Taungs in Botswana, was identified as Southern Ape (*Australopithecus*), but it is now seen as a hominid. The remains of Peking man (*Sinanthropus*), discovered between 1927 and 1939, and more remains of Java Man (1936-1939) showed that these early forms were early humans and not truly transitional types. In the same time period, hominids from the upper Tertiary were found in South

Africa and East Africa, thus extending humankind into a more distant past. While one group of anthropologists related the transition to humans to the Ice Age, based on the Darwinist concept that radical changes in climate would increase the struggle for survival, the current view is that hominids must have diverged from apes very early in the Tertiary, at the very latest in the Middle Tertiary. While there are still lacunae in the genealogy of man, the picture is much more complete now with ape forms like *Proconsul* in Africa (Middle Tertiary), the Italian finds of *Oreopithecus bambolii* (discovered in 1862, but recognized as a hominid only in 1949), which extended the hominid field by twelve million years into the past. It seems certain that *Oreopithecus*, of the late Miocene or the earliest Pliocene, was walking upright and was similar to human beings, even if his brain capacity was still very limited. Much of this portrayal, especially as far as the culture of these early humans is concerned, is still very hypothetical.

Scientists today tend to view the *Australopithecus* as early humans rather than as apes. Not only did they use tools, but also their morphology reveals them to be the oldest hominid type. The finds in Makapan (an old lime works in the Western Transvaal), where broken remains of *Australopithecus* were found, also contain remains of antelopes and baboons. These were identified as prey animals hunted by the *Australopithecus* by Raymond A. Dart, who also showed that many of the bone fragments were used as tools. Dart had spoken of a *osteodontokeratic culture* (bone-tooth-horn- culture) of the *Australopithecus* as early as 1951 on the basis of his comparative studies of many fragments found in association with these early humans. The *Australopithecus* were the earliest human form to die out, and it is still uncertain how near they were to what we would recognize as human.

Researchers today tend to understand that all early humans except for the *Australopithecus* should be members of the family *Homo*, including the early Java and China forms, who are no longer seen as located in the transition from animal to man. This change in interpretation has been brought about by early signs of religious cults and artistic performance in prehistoric finds, but also by a re-evaluation of the cultures of so-called “primitive people” or “people close to nature”. This in turn was brought about by the experience of two world wars, conducted by so-called “civilized” peoples, and the discoveries of the unconsciousness along with a new understanding of the imagination and the mythical intellectual world.

Darwinism has had an impact on the beliefs about the perfectibility of human beings. If we are determined by our genes, a belief surfacing strongly again today when the genes of human beings are being “deciphered”, then there is little we can do to “improve” or “perfect” human beings. While the human genes are, of course, subjected to the same genetic mutations observed in other life forms, most mutations are negative. Some critics of our civilization, like Nietzsche, were of the opinion that, because we shield these biologically negative mutations from the fate which they would meet in “nature” and keep them alive “artificially”, we are negatively impacting on the human gene pool. That, of course, begs the question of which changes are positive or negative in the context of human culture, where the combination of culturally highly productive abilities with bodily defects makes such valuations highly questionable. The possibility to manipulate genes, something which current biology might be capable of in a few

years, without a true understanding of the value of “bio-negative” individuals in human society, and without a secure basis for value-judgment in this area, creates potentially horrifying scenarios. The Nazi experiments in eugenics are a strong reminder of the inhumane potential of such attempted interference with the gene pool.

An important theory attempting to explain many features which separate humans from apes, was the foetalization theory of Louis Bolk. Biologists before him had noticed that the head of human beings is much nearer to embryo forms of apes than to their adult forms. Bolk showed that not only the head but other features of human beings show embryo-like forms. He explained this by changes in the hormone equilibrium of humans, and believed that he had found a scientific cause for the genesis of humans.

The realization that human babies are born “too early”, as it were, at the level of an embryo, and that they lack important features, which would ensure their survival in the wild, led Gehlen to postulate that humans are essentially “questionable” beings, with a scanty somatic and instinctive heritage and with few, if any, specialties. This being which is defined by its “lack” has to create a “culture” so as to make up for this “lack”. Gabriel Marcel turns this negative definition into the positive concept of *disponibilité*, the idea that human beings are extremely variable and can be many and various things.

Many anthropologists and palaeontologists today base their scientific assumptions on the theory of neo-Darwinism. However, there are anthropologists, and they do not necessarily subscribe to any religious theory of creationism, who find the theoretical constructs of neo-Darwinism insufficient when it comes to interpreting the origin of the human species. Despite the wealth of new discoveries both of human remains and of human artifacts in the twentieth century, central questions about the origin of humanity remain open: the origin of language, culture, morality and historicity of humanity. Neo-Darwinists admit that human beings have evolved a non-chromosomal process of inheritance by tradition, which, of course, rests on the slow increase of cerebral activity in the animal-human transition field and the slow accumulation of complex psychic functions. The carrier of cultural inheritance is the human group (or later society), which follows other laws than the Mendelian laws of chromosomal inheritance. One of the most significant differences between subhuman and human behavior is the ability to form a tradition which hands on technical and social experiences from generation to generation and accumulates these into a rich treasure of information. How and exactly when this new evolutionary factor entered the biological world is a matter of conjecture and will probably remain a secret forever.

The exact process of the rapid development of human culture from the early palaeolithicum to the present remains unexplained in many details and open for conjectures, especially in view of what we know about the extremely slow pace of evolution across millions of years in other species. While strictly neo-Darwinian explanations insist on the play of mutation, selection, isolation and survival, skeptics do not believe that the secret of culture can be explained in this simple way. Not only the explosive growth of the human species, but also the steep cultural learning curve happened in a relatively short time compared with the billions of years of earth history which now is the horizon of the theory of evolution. It is generally accepted today that apart from those factors which can be recognized in the evolution of plants and animals,

there were additional factors at work in the evolution of human beings: Cross-fertilization between originally separate groups, mixtures by means of the exchange or abduction of women, conquest of one group by another, slavery and adoption, strict separation of certain types by means of social isolation and strict social taboos, which created barriers entirely in the sphere of culture. Human evolution is clearly historical from early on.

We understand the images of early man much better today, and they provide some glimpses into the culture of early man. Comparisons with and recent analyses of Bushman paintings in the context of their myths, stories and songs as preserved by the work of Wilhelm Bleek, his sister in law, Lucy Lloyd, and three bushmen, //Kabbo, /Han-kasso and Dia!kwain, allow us to interpret the images of early *Homo sapiens* in the context of trance dances and healing ceremonies. These night-long healing rituals which are still performed by some remaining bushmen in the Kalahari desert of Botswana create a feeling of community and cathartic release of fear, frustration and anger. Those who take part in them describe the feeling of well-being after such a trance-dance. (see *Foundations and characteristics of culture*)

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Peter Horn** studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992),the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.