

Chapter 1. Introduction

After culture: anthropology as radical metaphysical critique.

Cultures...are individual psychology thrown large upon the screen, given gigantic proportions and a long time span (Benedict 1932: 24).

There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture would not be...clever savages...thrown back upon the cruel wisdom of their animal instincts; nor would they be nature's noblemen of Enlightenment primitivism or even, as classical anthropological theory would imply, intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves. They would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases (Geertz 1973a: 49).

A culture is an aggregate of divergent and contradictory pictures, and each picture is true (Hidetoshi Kato, cited in Kotkin 1992: 10).

Culture is like gravity: you do not experience it until you jump six feet in the air... The essence of culture is not what is visible on the surface. It is the shared ways groups of people understand and interpret the world. So the fact that we can all listen to Walkmans and eat hamburgers tells us that there are some novel products that can be sold on a universal message, but it does not tell us what eating hamburgers or listening to Walkmans means in different cultures (Trompenaars 1993: 6, 3).

I was inspired to build a project of that sort in Indonesia, only more complete and more perfect, adapted to fit the situation and developments in Indonesia, both materially and spiritually (Mrs. Soeharto on Disneyland as the inspiration for the cultural project of Taman Mini ("Beautiful Indonesia" in miniature) cited in Pemberton 1994a: 241).



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Does the idea of culture serve a serious intellectual purpose any more? This might seem a curious remark, because culture seems to be everywhere these days. People speak of the culture of business, the market place, of technology, of the workplace, of almost any group of people. Even the construction industry has it. Down the road from where I live, local builders have erected a large notice board: ‘Care is Our Culture’. Where countries used to be identified with particular, often dominant, cultures, they now turn out to be compound entities: multi-cultures spawning sub-cultures. Every year tourists spend billions of dollars flying to experience, photograph and take home bits of other cultures. Difference is sanitized and marketed as culture. As we increasingly come to recognize the presence of culture by such visible, consumable indices, modern mass media become implicated in the existence and proliferation of culture in complex ways. Is culture therefore not more important, and therefore more urgently in need of study, than ever? On the other hand, do we need to imagine more to culture than the everyday ‘how we do things around here’ (cf. Roberts 1999: 16-29)? Is there more than the selective recollection of past practices, the way people have happened to have done things on particular occasions?¹ What is the urge for supplementarity – for a ‘something more than’ – which invoking culture so often appeals to?

If you stop and think about it, there is something distinctly odd about the whole idea of culture. At first sight though it seems a thoroughly admirable notion. It promises to articulate the range and diversity of human thought and action throughout history everywhere in the world into a single comprehensible, portable and transactable concept. It supersedes earlier

¹ By way of a parallel, for over a hundred years European scientists were convinced that a mysterious substance, phlogiston, was what made matter burn until Lavoisier showed it was merely the presence of oxygen in the air. He was guillotined during the French Revolution, partly for his scepticism.

I would like to thank Richard Fox and Ron Inden for invaluable comments on previous drafts of this Introduction.

and invidious ways of distinguishing humans, such as by religion or race,² which have been turned so destructively in the course of history against other human beings. Culture by contrast is democratic: we all have it and, in principle at least, nobody's is inherently superior to anyone else's. Now, although it may describe someone's customs or way of life, culture is also a Grand Explanatory Concept. On the accounts of the proponents of culture themselves (e.g. Geertz 1973a, 1973b; Sahlins 1976a), it not only ranks up there with Nature, Society, Humankind and even Mind itself, but indeed encompasses all these. For culture, embodied in language and other symbols, is the condition for the possibility of thinking itself and so sets limits to the knowable world. As Wittgenstein put it 'the limits of *language*...mean the limits of *my world*' (1961: 115 [5.62]). Finally culture is a peculiarly cultural idea. Many American human scientists find it quite self-evident; their British colleagues are sceptical; while the French manage for the most part to get along fine without it at all.

If you reflect for a moment, you get the sense that important questions go begging. If it is so self-evident, what exactly then *is* culture? In 1952 Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) noted a hundred and sixty four different definitions. Since then culture has become still more complex and vague. As Raymond Williams remarked:

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is partly so because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible ways (1983: 87).

Are the apparently protean claims of culture really though much more than a play on a mass of partly contingent, historically accumulated connotations of the word in European languages? Asking 'what is culture?' invites an often endless deferral to related ideas. However, to argue 'the explanation of all these phenomena is X, but don't ask me what X is' ceases to be very convincing after a time.

Nonetheless the question 'what is culture?' has been the subject of interminable debate, for over half a century by anthropologists and more

² Race reappears regularly in the sort of inferences people make from genetics. The project to 'map' the entire DNA structure of human beings has given the old argument of explanation by reference to nature as against culture (Wilson 1975; Sahlins 1976b) the semblance of a new lease of life. As Schwartz (1997) noted however, such genetic fundamentalism is the linear successor to Idealism.

recently, among others, by cultural studies' scholars. Explanatory recourse to culture is arguably far more historically and 'culturally' specific or else specious than we usually care to admit (Foucault 1970, 1972a; Clifford 1988a; McGrane 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991; Fabian 1991a; Herbert 1991; Kahn 1995). And, if culture is so 'culturally' specific a concept, does it not run the risk of being either tautological or vacuous?

At this point the suspicion dawns that perhaps we have been asking the wrong questions and so keep giving ourselves the wrong – or simply nonsensical – answers. What sort of concept is culture? If ideas have histories, how does this affect culture? What happens if we stop asking the conventional questions of the order of 'what is culture and how does it work?' and ask instead 'how, and under what circumstances, have people invoked the notion of culture?'. Other questions then follow. For instance 'how have scholars actually set about studying culture?' And 'what is excluded by a recourse to culture?' As soon as culture is no longer an innocent and transparent way of understanding the world of human action, we may need to ask what appeal to culture does to the world of those doing the understanding and attribution – not to mention those being understood and attributed with it.

The Argument

When questioning a concept like culture, which is used in so many different senses, the argument necessarily takes twists and turns. So let me outline briefly what I am trying to say. 'What is?' questions about culture invite an endless and barren debate. At best you land up – following cultural studies – treating culture as essentially contested, not just intellectually but politically. Culture is still however largely defined semiotically, as a system of signs or symbols, which represent – something.³ The result is to stress, and often to reify, the 'something', instead of looking at representing as a situated act of transformation (you represent something *as* something else). So the question becomes: 'under what circumstances do people represent something *as* cultural?' As the

³ Popular as it is, this representational model involves all sorts of questionable assumptions. It presumes a dichotomy of mind over matter (mind represents matter and itself, but not *vice versa*). It assumes objects or states as pre-given, to which symbols somehow refer. It privileges the enunciator's interpretation over others. The chapters below address different aspects of the problem.

Another way of phrasing the issue is to stress meaning: symbols mean something. This merely defers the problem of culture, because meaning is a hopelessly obscure, and arguably unnecessary, notion (Hobart 1982a).

possibilities are virtually inexhaustible, in effect culture as a coherent concept explodes.

There is a counter-argument, which runs roughly as follows. Your argument is itself cultural: culture contains the possibility of its own critique. I trace briefly the background to this encompassing account of culture, which takes the central concept of German Idealism, *Geist* or Mind, and relativizes it as Culture. This ‘strong’ account of culture may be coherent, but it is total. It is closed, self-confirming and begs such questions as who decides what counts as culture and when? The dangers become apparent when we look at what has actually been involved in some of the most famous cultural analyses in anthropology. Invoking culture then emerges as an act of closure and power, a point I develop by considering how culture is used just in one setting: broadcasts on Balinese television. Culture then is a way of articulating events and practices by invoking a particular set of presuppositions. The effect is to hierarchize or disarticulate other ways of appreciating what is going on, articulated using more or less different presuppositions.

At this point there is a good case for letting go of the idea of culture altogether in favour of the notion of practice, which does not assume such a degree of articulation. As practices are situated, diverse and changing, how can we talk about them intelligibly though? Any thought or action presupposes prior thoughts and actions. A study of the presuppositions people have actually made – what I shall call metaphysics – is therefore a way of analyzing practice. As you cannot assume what presuppositions people have actually made in any particular situation, such a study involves a degree of radical indeterminacy, and so limits on the knowledge of academic experts. Whereas culture invites us to share in the fantasy of exclusive insight into the minds of others, metaphysics more humbly invites us into an open and unending dialogue with those we work with.

Culture and Cultural Studies

A newcomer has appeared on the scene, which announces culture as its object of study. Rather than present yet another anthropological or sociological rerun of a very old debate, let us see what they have made of the notion in cultural studies. As it breaks with the mostly synthetic and idealist American accounts of culture, the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is interesting, not least because its starting point in late Marxism would seem to be quite different.

The presiding figure at the Centre, Stuart Hall, has offered different definitions on different occasions. Writing about the theoretical background to cultural studies, Hall starts from the work of Raymond Williams. Culture is no longer, as Matthew Arnold had it, ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ (1932: 6), but include ‘the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences’ (Hall 1986: 35, summarizing Williams 1981). Note how agency is allocated and the covert rationalism. Note also that experience, far from being, as Foucault noted (1982, 1984, 1986a, 1986b), a necessary adjunct of the modern notion of the subject, is taken as unproblematic. Hall goes on to cite Williams with approval as bringing culture closer to anthropological ideas of culture as social practices, while managing to distance himself from the British culture-as-bits-and-pieces tendency.

Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change (Williams 1961: 55; also cited in Hall 1986: 35).

Communication *is* culture. There are such things as meanings and these are shared. Community is nothing more than representation in its doubled version as the act of producing and the products. Where this culminates is in cheerful assertions by cultural studies’ writers like Agger that ‘at a deeper level, we *are* popular culture’ (1992: 6). Representations become their own objects. They conclude their logical fate by becoming simulacra.⁴

For Williams then culture was the sum of the interrelationship threaded through all social practices, both correspondences and discontinuities, discernible through distinctive patterns (Hall [1980] 1986: 36; Williams 1981: 61-3). However Hall refreshingly recognized that culture is at best a concept essentially contested between different paradigms, which he identified as English culturalism (from Arnold through Leavis) and French structuralism (following Lévi-Strauss). He defined

‘culture’ as *both* the meanings and values which arise among distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to

⁴ The process by which Baudrillard argues that representation produces simulacra is discussed in Chapter 5.

the conditions of existence; *and* as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied (1986: 39).

Culture is both meanings and their expression in practice. There is a distinctive asymmetrical dualism here. There are groups, classes, relationships to conditions of production and power on the one hand; and meanings and values on the other. Culture as superstructure is based, but refracts back, upon infrastructure.

Understanding is expressed and embodied in practices to be interpreted by the analyst. Reflective thinking, on this account, is not itself a practice. Hall takes the relationship between ideal and material forces as a dialectical one between social being and social consciousness (1986: 39). Culture here is close to ideology, which represents the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence (Althusser 1984). Cultural studies aims to intervene, if not remove distortions in consciousness, show them publicly for what they are. Culture no longer serves, as for Parsons and Geertz (see below), to integrate society, but emerges as a site of conflict.

Hall’s account is more theoretically nuanced than its predecessors’. He tends to avoid defining culture substantively, but depicts it instead as a site of convergent interests (1986: 35), so nicely putting academic practices as part of the issue. The fact is that no single, unproblematic definition of ‘culture’ is to be found here. The concept remains a complex one notably for what – and who – it excludes, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea. This ‘richness’ is an area of continuing tension and difficulty in the field (Hall 1986: 35). A strength of this critical cultural studies is the range and quality of some of the research it has encouraged. Yet, as an account of culture, it is in many ways the obverse, if preferable, face of a familiar coin. There remains a dichotomy between being and consciousness. Dialectic, for all its practitioners’ disclaimers, requires essences, otherwise antithesis is impossible. As Bakhtin warned, dialectics is a highly idealized notion extrapolated from dialogue as a practice (1986a).

Hall concludes

cultural studies has drawn attention to itself, not just because of its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development, but because it holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension (1996a: 272).

For these reasons, with its offshoot media studies, the best cultural studies' debates may well recommend themselves to scholars in Asia, Africa and Latin America as a way of addressing a whole range of issues from commodification and consumerism to popular culture and the role of the mass media in contemporary society. There are problems however. Cultural studies remains a set of theoretical arguments and has not really led to the emergence of a new kind of critical ethnography. In fact it remains worryingly free of discussion about how you bring critical insights into the actual business of inquiring of people and about practices.⁵ For this reason, cultural studies always runs the risk of degenerating into a hermetic, textual exercise for metropolitan intellectuals. Crucially, it threatens to become an élitist game, which ignores the critical thinking of those whose culture it is to begin with.⁶

What is at stake is put with disarming explicitness by Agger.

I conceive of cultural studies in its best sense as an activity of critical theory that directly decodes the hegemonizing messages of the culture industry permeating every nook and cranny of lived experience... Cultural studies is extremely seductive for those of us who grew up with television and the mass movies and recognize their powers of distortion, deception and suggestion (1992: 5-6).

Ordinary people remain incapable effectively of realizing the forms of hegemony to which they are subject, but require cultural studies' experts to identify them. When working on culture,

you have to recognize that you will always be working in an area of displacement. There is something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures (Hall 1996b: 271).

⁵ Paul Willis, one of the original members of the Birmingham Centre, has made this point to me on a number of occasions. Interestingly he considers media studies in effect the ethnographic project of media studies. Ethnography is often much more interventionist than the images of neutral – or even sympathetic – representation suggest. Fabian has described it as confrontation (1991b) and elsewhere I have argued that it involves interrogation (1996). Interrogation is not just the Baconian method of rigorous inquiry but, as Foucault noted (1977), a set of disciplinary practices for investigation, examination and torture.

⁶ Stuart Hall assures me that this marginalization was the result of slippage in intellectual practice and that my insistence on the centrality of the critical thinking of the subjects of study is what was at the heart of the original cultural studies' agenda. The problem of writing yet another theoretical critique of culture is that I am aware I run the risk of engaging in such an intellectual exercise myself.

What chance does the ordinary person in the street have, if the cunning of culture requires the wits of the world's finest thinkers to reveal its secrets and displacements?

Now an aim of cultural studies is often 'intervention analysis', that is it sets out not just to explicate of how culture and media work, but to change people's understanding and so make them more active subjects. That is the constitutive presupposition, which justifies the existence of cultural studies in the first place. There are problems however. Who decides the conditions under which readers, viewers, participants in culture become – or are identifiable as – active? And how do you know? We are back to the impenetrable question of how you know what people, as readers or audiences, are making of what is going on? The implicit assumption is that the emancipated subject of culture will look very like the enlightened analyst. There is also an implicit realist premise at work here. What sense does it make to speak of television or films distorting or deceiving without a presupposition that there is a reality there to be truly and accurately represented in whatever medium?⁷

Anthropologists and cultural studies' specialists tend equally to fall into the trap of representationism (Goodman 1968) with their stress on culture as semiotic or symbolic (e.g. Geertz 1980; Milner 1994). The problem is not simply splitting the world (matter) and its representation (mind), and then worrying about how they correspond (Hall 1997; cf. Hobart 1982a). As problematic is the idea that culture consists of messages to be decoded – inadequately by viewers, correctly by intellectuals – a theme made famous by Hall (1980). We are back to the very old and tired model of communication, which glorifies and universalizes practices introduced with the telegraph wire. It is as if nothing had happened before or since. As Bakhtin noted however,

semiotics deals primarily with the transmission of ready-made communication using a ready-made code. But in live speech, strictly speaking, communication is first created in the process of transmission and there is, in essence, no code... Context and code. A context is

⁷ One aim of this book is to argue against the kinds of realism and idealism, which set up a dichotomy between the world and mind. A key issue then becomes how mind is able accurately to represent the world (in realism) or to understand itself (in idealism). By contrast I take it that such a (Cartesian) hierarchization of the knower over the known is unhelpful in the human sciences, where 'reality transcends the knower' (Inden 1986: 402, cited in Chapter 5 below). Some of the problems of idealism I address below. My objections to realism and objectivism owe much the work of Collingwood (1939, 1945, 1992); Quine 1953a, 1953b, 1960; Goodman (1972, 1978); as well as Bernstein 1983; Bhaskar 1979; Fabian 1991b; and Rorty 1980.

potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is deliberately established, killed context (1986b: 147).

Directly against culture-as-message-to-be-decoded, the shift in critical media studies, which deals directly with the issue, has been away from codes towards an ethnographically sensitive appreciation of context (e.g. Morley 1986; Radway 1988). In other words, there is a move from a representational model of human engagement with the world to one that stresses situated practice. Practice ceases here to be a synonym for social process, what social actors do, but is given ontological priority and becomes a problematic object of study.

Two or three questions I have about culture

In the previous section, I have argued that cultural studies does not have a simple answer to the question ‘what is culture?’ The strength of cultural studies is that it treats the concept not just as problematic, but as political. How useful then is it at all to ask ‘What is?’ questions of culture? These are difficult to answer without reifying, hypostatizing or essentializing the object of inquiry. As a result, culture tends to land up as an abstract substance.⁸ Anyway arguably, as human scientists, we are as much interested, not in what something is ultimately supposed to be, but in how people have thought it to be and acted towards it under particular circumstances. There is no reason our own working concepts should be immune to our constitutive intellectual presuppositions. Doing so changes the sorts of questions we ask.

Instead of asking ‘What is culture?’ then, perhaps we should be asking: ‘When is culture?’⁹ ‘How have people invoked culture, to what ends and under what circumstances?’ Culture is an articulating notion, which is widely used by intellectuals to frame things. On such an approach, academics therefore cease to be privileged knowing subjects, but their own intellectual practices become the object of scrutiny. So first I shall consider how culture came to have such articulatory power. If the question is when and how culture is invoked, then we need to study its situated usage. So I

⁸ On substantialism, see Collingwood 1946: 42-45. As he noted, such substances are commonly mental. An obvious example is Mind, a substance that often overlaps with culture.

⁹ A good way of avoiding reifying is to ask not ‘what is...?’, but ‘when is...?’ Goodman does the same with art, by asking when something is art? (1978: 57-70).

shall examine how the New Order régime in Indonesia has appealed to culture as an articulating idea.

Instead of accepting their idealizations of cultural methods of research, how do anthropologists actually go about studying culture? What do they take as the object of study? How do they relate to it? And how do they infer culture from the object? Once again, I shall draw upon anthropological work on Indonesia. It so happens that one of the most celebrated anthropological exponents of culture, Clifford Geertz, has done most of his analyses on Indonesian materials. So just how *do* you do a cultural analysis?

Third, what is not culture? What is it that is opposed, or antagonistic, to culture? On all but a lunatically encompassing account of culture, there must be something else in the world, to which culture relates either as a competing or antagonistic set of processes or as an alternative explanatory frame of reference. Put another way, what is it that culture keeps at bay? What threatens the world if culture falters? What is displaced, silenced, denied in an appeal to culture?

Introducing culture

First, though, how have anthropologists imagined culture? What sort of object of study is it? I shall address this question by reviewing the work of the leading advocate of an interpretive theory of culture, Clifford Geertz – a theory coincidentally developed largely on Indonesian materials. As Geertz has famously remarked

what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to (1973c: 9)

Cultural analysis is then heterogeneous and hierarchical. Before we have even begun the analysis and interpretation, our raw materials involve scholars' interpretations of the interpretations of their lives by the subjects of study.

What exactly then is the relationship between the anthropologist's and the participants' interpretations on this account?¹⁰ The question is important because cultural analysis claims to be able to access the 'native's

¹⁰ The study of culture in some form concerns language and literature specialists and cultural studies' scholars, for instance, as much as it does anthropologists. The theoretical problems of culture are similar however.

point of view' more sensitively, profoundly and authentically than other approaches. Immediately we encounter problems. Reviewing Geertz's cultural analysis, *Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight* (1973d), Vincent Crapanzano noted the degree of condensation necessary to such a cultural analysis. It requires blurring the relationship between Geertz's and Balinese villagers' subjectivities (Crapanzano 1986: 70). It assumes that 'a whole people share a single subjectivity' (1986: 74), irrespective of differences of gender, class, age, experience of temperament; and, without any evidence, attributing 'to the Balinese all sorts of experiences, meanings, intentions, motivations, dispositions, and understandings' (1986: 72). Crapanzano concludes:

Despite his phenomenological-hermeneutic pretensions, there is in fact in "Deep Play" no understanding of the native from the native's point of view. There is only the constructed understanding of the constructed native's constructed point of view... His constructions of constructions of constructions appear to be little more than projections, or at least blurrings, of his point of view, his subjectivity, with that of the native, or, more accurately, of the constructed native (1986: 74).

As the rest of the present book argues, these charges against cultural analysis, and culture itself, are well founded and may be extended further. The criticisms are the more serious in that they are directed not at weak points, which are inevitable in any approach, but at some of the most celebrated, and supposedly definitive, examples of cultural analysis at its best.

Even this short review indicates grave problems. For a start, cultural analysis does not necessarily provide understanding of how people themselves understand the world about them. Cultural interpretation, it seems, runs the risk of systematically substituting the analyst's interpretations for the participants', while claiming to found the analysis on the latter's authenticity. Further, cultural analysis may easily become not a description or investigation of, or commentary on, other people's thought but, disturbingly, the projection of the scholar's own categories, concerns and current interests onto the subjects of study. How though, crucially, are we to judge the degree of projection or displacement scholars engage in when attributing culture to people? Of what kind are they? What sort of consequences do they have for our understanding, or rather misunderstanding? How are we to address such projections and displacements? Can we counter them? If so, who is best able to do so, and how?

To begin to answer these questions, we have at least briefly to start by asking what sort of constructions or interpretations the study of culture entails. As these involve two quite distinct, but overlapping, sets of intellectual practices – the subjects' and the analyst's – what is the relationship between them?

What kind of object is culture?

What then is culture as an object of study or analytical concept? Is it something immediately apprehensible? Is it an attribute of, or principle, which informs actions and thoughts? Even as people's habits, customs or traditions, it is neither self-evident nor unmediated, but must be inferred from possible evidence by criteria, partly if not wholly, extrinsic to the people in question. This is commonly achieved by recourse to an academic arsenal of abstract ordering notions like products, patterns, rules, ideals, symbols or learning. Are these culture? Or is culture the principle, proclivity, drive, imperative or whatever, which informs these processes, principles or interpretations? And how total, differentiated or coherent must such a concept be? Is culture ultimately accessible? Or is it an abstraction, inferable only through its manifestations? Or is it, as I would argue, a frame of reference, one way of taking the world under a particular description (Goodman 1978)?¹¹ And can you generalize about culture independent of the particular circumstances and purposes of an inquiry? In order to avoid losing sight of the argument as a whole, I shall outline the main possibilities first.

Scholars have embraced each of these possibilities, or indeed more than one at the same time (see Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952), in large part precisely because they like to generalize across different practices of

¹¹ I take it that coherence and difference are inextricably linked with intellectual practices of describing and representing the world, not objective features of it. As Goodman noted, coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world: the significant question is not whether the world is coherent, but whether our account is (1972: 24).

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds (1978: 2-3).

For this reason, I argue that we need to consider practices of differentiation, rather than the identification or representation of fully determined differences in the world. To the extent that cultural studies is concerned with the political implications of cultural differences, these differences are inseparable from cultural studies itself as a mode of inquiry.

inquiry. The result is that culture is terminally ambiguous in much usage. It is interpretable simultaneously as the proximate object of study (customs etc.) or as an abstract, relational object of study (patterns etc.). Again it is equally often treated as a mode of human activity (thinking or structuring) and so recursively of inquiry (interpreting that thinking). Most important, culture is imagined as a totality. As such it takes two forms. It may be treated as a set of working assumptions, used to circumscribe and define what kind of thing is under investigation in the first place, a frame of reference, a means of closure. Alternatively, culture may be *a priori*, that is it is prior to, and constitutive of, experience and knowledge themselves. Customs and thinking then tend to emerge as the phenomena, as manifestations of an abstract, but all embracing, reality or noumenon. No wonder culture seems to be everywhere!

‘What then is culture?’ has at least three different kinds of answer. As a frame of reference, paradigm (Kuhn 1970; cf. Masterman 1970), *a* (but not *the*) way the world is (Goodman 1972), it has a history and changes with usage and critical thinking. By contrast, as a transcendental reality, it determines the nature and limits of thought itself. Both possibilities make culture to a significant degree a philosophical issue – or, more precisely, a metaphysical one, in the sense of being about the absolute presuppositions of thought (Collingwood 1940). To the extent that culture is a potential object of study rather than a presupposition of study, it is a distinctive one. However, it is difficult to see how culture could be both the presupposition and the object of study without a degree of circularity. And it is precisely that circularity, which seems to me to bedevil much writing about culture.

The circularity stems, Foucault argued, from the fact that the knowing subject is its own object of study. There are no controls to prevent a limitless, and vacuous, expansion of pseudo-knowledge. The problem arises because Man

is a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible... man is also the locus of misunderstanding – of misunderstanding that constantly exposes his thought to the risk of being swamped by his own being, and also enables him to recover his integrity on the basis of what eludes him (1970: 318, 323)¹²

12 Foucault’s intellectual opponent, Habermas, states clearly the problem Foucault formulated. The human sciences

analyzed the human being as the being that relates itself to objectivations engendered by itself, the speaking and labouring creature. Inasmuch as psychology, sociology and political science on the one hand, and the cultural

Arguments about culture are cultural. And in what it seeks to exclude and suppress, culture hints at its own 'constitutive outside' (Laclau 1990a: 9-41 following Staten 1986: 15-19), that which refuses to be tamed, rational, coherent, productive – the unconscious.¹³

Even as customs or ways of doing things, culture involves multiple extrapolations or serial interpretations. What the ethnographer notices to start with is the product of years of disciplinary training, closure and pre-interpretation. Then she has to note this down, record, memorize, transcribe or translate parts of her shifting field of attention. She then has to talk the results through with 'informants', decide of what events or actions are actually instances and compare them with what she knows. Then just think of all the stages through which writing goes – organizing the field notes, early and later drafts of seminar papers and articles – before a custom appears to the world in print as a custom, let alone culture as their organizing principle. Two points follow. Custom is a concept of a fourth or fifth order of extrapolation and interpretation, 'and "culture" a concept so 'meta-' in its removal from any possible social action that it is best not thought about at all' (Hobart 1996: 9-10).¹⁴ Also, focusing on culture as an object or concept marginalizes the practices by means of which we research, interpret and do whatever it is we do.

sciences and humanities on the other, got involved with object domains for which subjectivity (in the sense of the relation to self of experiencing, acting and speaking human beings) is constitutive, they found themselves in the wake of the will to knowledge, on the escape route of a boundless productive increase in knowledge... The human sciences are and remain pseudo-sciences because they do not see through the compulsion of a problematic doubling of the self-relating subject: they are not in a position to acknowledge the structurally generated will to self-knowledge and self-reification – and thus they are also unable to free themselves from the power that drives them (1987a: 264-5).

Foucault's language (1970) is powerful. Culture is at once about, while busily denying it, compulsion, power, narcissism. We start to see what culture silences.

13 The cultural venture, the celebration of the workings of human Mind, collapses because discovering its own limits threaten the whole venture.

Man has not been able to describe himself as a configuration...without thought at the same time discovering, both in itself and outside itself, an element of darkness, an apparently inert density in which it is embedded, an unthought which it contains entirely, yet in which it is also caught.' (Foucault 1970: 326).

¹⁴ The weak version of culturalism, which argues that you can have custom and structuring concepts like rules, symbols etc., without being committed to culture as transcendental, fails to explain what it is that makes the diversity into a single coherent object of inquiry, or how you would know it to begin with.

Strong, weak and no culture

Arguments about culture become very confused about what sort of object it is and are potentially circular. There are other major problems. We have to translate other people's interpretations, themselves made under particular circumstances, into widely readable, academically approved interpretive formats. But what is assumed in translation and choosing between possible translational schemes (Quine 1960)? And on what grounds are we to assume there is commensurability between participants' and anthropologists' interpretations (Feyerabend 1975)?¹⁵ Unless we can guarantee, or at least be reasonably assured, of unalterable comparability, understanding other people becomes a remarkably difficult and fraught enterprise – which, after seven years' fieldwork in Bali, is precisely what I happen to think it is.

What form commensurability takes depends on whether culture is imagined as a seamless whole or as a thing of shreds and patches.¹⁶ On a

¹⁵ Work in the philosophy of science has linked the issue of translation to the problem of the relationship between theory and facts. How you can tell if words in different languages refer to the same thing can be treated as part of the more general problem of how theories refer to facts? Quine (1960) argued that theory is underdetermined by facts. That is: facts are not strong enough to determine a single true theory about them. There are always several theories, which can, one way or another, reasonably adequately account for any set of facts. Feyerabend's objection was that in principle proponents of competing, and radically different, theories could not agree upon the terms of the statement of an experiment designed to prove a case one way or another. For Quine therefore, there are always several alternative theories or, for language, translation manuals. For Feyerabend, existing theories are always incommensurable, because there is no way of deciding between them in the last resort. As Hacking noted, the two positions seem antithetical at one point.

Quine told us that translation is too easy, for there are too many translations between languages or theories for 'sameness of meaning' to have any bite. Knowledge consists in the fabric of sentences itself, not in what those sentences mean. Feyerabend reaches a parallel conclusion from the opposite direction. Translation, he teaches, is too hard, and one must master the theory as it stands, not translate it into another (1975: 179).

I would argue that the respective arguments are less incompatible than Hacking suggests. Both recognize the lack of fit between theory and facts, and that there is always more than one theory for any set of facts. And, as Mary Hesse pointed out (1978), you need additional criteria to choose between theories in the absence of any way of deciding the matter in principle. To the extent that there is incompatibility between the two arguments, I would follow Quine.

¹⁶ I would argue that there are no grounds to think that there is any essential coherence or coherent essence to culture isolable from the innumerable circumstances of it being invoked as a concept, whether by experts or others. Some definitions, like Malinowski's, appear to take this on board. Culture comprises inherited artefacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values [as well as] social organization (1931: 621, my

strong reading, culture is internally consistent because it is the product of cultural reasoning. That does not mean that the world or the variety of possible human behaviour is necessarily consistent. On the contrary, they are the raw material upon which cultural reason works to produce coherence. It is a powerful approach; and it has duly been worked out at some length. That there may be moments of coherence is hardly surprising. If you are living in a society, it would be very odd – and tiring – not to be able to anticipate, take for granted and then ignore much of what you do. The problem is that, unless you spell out the cultural logic unambiguously and systematically, it is not clear what, if anything, you have shown. You also have to explain, if it is not binding on all members of society at all times, why not (without recourse to categories like madness, Foucault 1967). For this reason, if you wish to keep the notion of culture as coherent, it is best done not by declaring it to be necessary, the case for alternatives unthinkable, but to take culture as one possible frame of reference for the critical analysis of a problem. The problem and our understanding of culture change of course as a result of the analysis. The sort of problem at stake is the degree and kind of consistency and coherence in people's thinking on particular occasions. It leaves translation and interpreting other people's interpretations problematic.

The alternative is, if culture is simply that congeries of customs a people happen to engage in at any time, then there need in fact be no general answer. The problem of this tack is that you cannot generalize about a society, let alone its culture in a broad sense. In fact culture becomes inapplicable because you have no criteria by which to determine that the actions you identify are adequate instances of their kind, let alone of some more general culture. In whose terms do you determine consistency? For

parentheses). The result is a shopping list, the items of which have little in common except being inheritable, a singularly loose criterion. Malinowski's psychological functionalism required him to omit from Tylor's famous earlier definition ('Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society', 1871: 1) complex synthesizing terms like knowledge, which awkwardly refuse to go away (1931: 621ff.) and would have required him to recognize supra-individual processes (which he was determined not to do, see 1931: 623).

What might appear as commendable, even positivistic, caution against imputing abstract mental states and capacities turns out to be nothing of the sort. Malinowski cheerfully presupposed culture to be coherent: 'Culture is a well organized unity divided into two fundamental aspects – a body of artefacts and a system of customs' (1931: 623). Not only did he reiterate a thorough-going mind-body dichotomy, but he took coherence, even unity, to be self-evident and neatly buried whatever principle was presumed to inform that unity. As a result, we are presented with a definition of culture as the products, without recognition of the practices of which they were the products.

this reason, the ragbag theory of culture seems to me incoherent. It leads however to a more radical thesis.

Taken further the ragbag argument dispenses with culture altogether in almost all the senses outlined above. Customs may not be coherent or compatible with one another by any given set of criteria. More important, we need not presuppose the intellectual practices of scholars are necessarily commensurable either. The degree and kind – indeed occasions – of compatibility would become a major problem, which would have to be addressed instance by instance, and would require a great deal of work. Any results would be provisional, because there is no guarantee that how people do things or think about them will remain the same, nor even that everyone will think the same in the first place. On the contrary, understandings are likely to change – the faster for being thought about!¹⁷ It is not a vision for generalists, nor for armchair theorists. And it requires an unnerving ability to live with provisionality, rupture and uncertainty.

There are several conventional answers to the general problem of commensurability. Most consist in postulating *a priori* conditions of thought, which are postulated as being part of human nature (see Chapter 2) like structure (Lévi-Strauss 1970), the capacity for symbolization (Geertz 1973c, 1973a; White 1949), a shared intersubjectivity (Chapter 6).¹⁸ Another version is that we are dealing with the necessary conditions of thought itself (Chapter 3) like reason (Hollis 1970, 1982) or knowledge (Chapter 4). Recourse to culture is peculiar in that its proponents usually manage to appeal to all of these to a different degree on different occasions.¹⁹ Cynically, of course, ‘culture’ in many senses is supposed to be increasingly globalized, as academic and Euro-American popular ideas of culture become imposed, packaged with aid programmes and marketed as desirable as commodities, in music, films and television programmes.²⁰

¹⁷ As Collingwood elegantly remarked: ‘if the human mind comes to understand itself better, it thereby comes to operate in new and different ways’ (1946: 85). I consider the implications of such arguments in detail especially in chapters 2, 5, 6 & 7.

¹⁸ The position is put clearly by Clifford Geertz.

The doctrine of the psychic unity of mankind, which so far as I am aware, is today not seriously questioned by any reputable anthropologist... asserts that there are no essential differences in the fundamental thought process among the various living races of man (1973b: 62)

The problem is that, if culture intervenes, it becomes hard to separate mind from the history of human practice. So you cannot use the psychic unity argument to postulate universals of thinking without claiming mind to be somehow prior to culture.

¹⁹ This should be evident if you read carefully Geertz (1973e, 1983b) or (1976a, 1999).

²⁰ The localization of global terms and trends is a well developed theme, not least for Indonesia (e.g. Vickers 1996; Rubinstein & Connor 1999). For some reason, no one seems

Culture, the story runs, provides a common template, because humans the world over feel the need to order the world about them through the use of signs and symbols, which have meaning because humans share a common subjectivity (although this differs in its culturally specific expression). We can know what others mean when they symbolize because, in the end, however diverse the forms of knowledge, it is grounded in a common rationality. This book takes issue with each of these assumptions. In each case the question arises: who gets to decide what human nature, reason, knowledge and so forth are? Because culture is so hierarchical a concept, and depends so overwhelmingly on the concentration of knowledge remotely from those being known (Fabian 1983), it works amazingly effectively to exclude almost entirely the subjects of study. It is also reactionary and nostalgic

Perhaps contrary to its popular image, cultural anthropology has been a science, not of emergence, but of disappearance. Culture, inasmuch as it served as anthropology's guiding concept, has always been an idea *post factum* [after the event], a notion oriented towards the past (to 'custom' and 'tradition'), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideogeme at worst (when it was used optimistically to explain away as 'variation' what in many cases was the result of discrimination and violence) (Fabian 1991c: 192, parentheses mine).²¹

Before Indonesians – or indeed scholars anywhere – embrace culture as a working concept, it might be wise to consider first what it entails.

From meaning to Mind to practice: meaning

It is not by accident that culture has an extraordinarily wide fan of connotations and perilous circularity. Rather these have arisen from often only partly acknowledged ideas on which culture draws. A brief review is necessary before we can move on to consider ways in which people have invoked culture.

to have considered the possibility of the process working the other way round. In other words, increasing recognition of the scale of regional and local diversification makes a degree of globalization appear imperative.

²¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all parentheses and stresses in quotations are from the original.

In its more encompassing sense, culture is widely defined as semiotic or semantic.

The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973c: 5).

The symbol is 'the origin and basis of human behaviour'... In all its dimensions, including the social and the material, human existence is symbolically constituted, which is to say culturally ordered... White used to say that no ape could appreciate the difference between holy water and distilled water – because there isn't any, chemically (Sahlins 1999: 400, citing Leslie White 1949: 22-39).²²

What is distinctive about humans is not just how they have ordered the world around them symbolically, but how they reflect upon it.

Consider the extent to which these statements about culture echo an earlier source.

What is it which makes it possible for us to have [a] distinct, focussed awareness of things, where animals remain caught in the dream-like, melodic flow of experience? It is language that makes this possible. Hence language must be probed from an entirely different point of view. It is not just a set of signs which have meaning in virtue of referring to something, it is the necessary vehicle of a certain form of consciousness, which is characteristically human (Taylor 1975: 19, my parentheses).

Charles Taylor was writing about Herder and his ideas of reflection (*Besonnenheit*) as part of laying out the background of German Romanticism and Idealism (here Herder) necessary to understand the work of Hegel.²³ We also have an inkling as to what culture keeps at bay: the

²² Note the need to make absolute distinctions. Perhaps the question should be: when, to whom and on what occasions did people consider water to be holy. Muslim Javanese do not share Hindu Balinese ideas about the attributes of *tirtha*.

²³ Geertz's first teaching assignment was the German Romantics, including notably Herder (Hildred Geertz, personal communication). Geertz follows Herder in other interesting ways, for instance, his insistence on the inseparability of thought and feeling (Geertz 1966: 4-5).

My own understanding of this argument, which culminates in the work of Hegel, is that human thinking and being is always mediated and inseparable from some medium. This is the theoretical justification, if you need one, of my interest in media studies.

possibility that humans are not always so unequivocally distinct from animals as intellectuals like to imagine.

The more sophisticated proponents of culture like Sahlins and Geertz are however sensitive to being accused of Idealism.

As for the charge of ‘idealism’ that an insistence on the meaningful appears to invite, this, it seems to me, must take its ground in precisely the kind of preanthropological, presymbolic epistemology of subject/object relations whose transcendence was the historical condition of a concept of culture. To return to this language now would be to rob the concept of its determinate properties. It would reduce the problem of culture to the terms of the endemic Western antinomy of a worldless subject confronting a thoughtless object (Sahlins 1976a: ix-x).

Geertz specifies the risk and how to avoid it.

Culture is most effectively treated, the argument goes, purely as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, ‘in its own terms’), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way – according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles on which it is based... Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior – or, more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation (1973c: 17).

This statement is remarkable in some ways because, in practice if not in theory, the work of Geertz himself, and followers like Boon, are notable precisely for stressing the relationship between core symbols, largely detached from social action.

Mind

There are several implicit points at issue here, which we need to follow through. They relate to the impact of German Idealism on ideas of culture in a weird and wonderful mix of Kant and Hegel, with a sprinkle of assorted others.²⁴ The first aspect is traces of Kantianism, for instance in assumptions about the unity of the subject and the nature of phenomena.

²⁴ There are, of course, direct connections between the German Idealism and the genealogy of anthropology stemming from Boas. As Bunzl has pointed out, a key

By transcendental argument [Kant] showed that the subject of experience has to be a unity, that of the 'I think' which must potentially accompany all my representations; and that the necessary connections which Hume wanted to deny the phenomenal world must necessarily inhabit it, for they form its indispensable structure... Thus the Kantian world of experience was distinguished from the ultimate reality. It took its shape from the subject, from the shape of our minds, and these structures could be explored by transcendental argument; but by the very fact that its shape was partly given by us, it could allow us to conclude nothing about the shape of things as they were in themselves (Taylor 1975: 30-31, my parentheses).

On a cultural reading, the unity of the subject of experience remains as a substrate, otherwise we cannot generalize about the psychic unity of humankind. However now this psychic unity is at once transcended by culture²⁵ and left intact. Culture defines the conditions of representation and the connections in the phenomenal world through which objects of knowledge are produced, while humans all share the same capacities for perception, ratiocination and signification.

Culture does more than that though. It provides a way of penetrating through appearances, gestures, words and symbols to their meaning. To understand this, we need to appreciate how this argument develops from Kant, who

thought that what makes nature nature, what gives it the peculiarities by which we recognize it as nature, is the fact of its being phenomenon, that is, the fact of its being looked at from outside, from the point of view of a spectator. If we could get inside the phenomena, and relive their inner life in our own minds, their natural characteristics would, he thought, disappear: we should now be apprehending them as things in themselves, and in so doing we should discover that their inner reality is mind (Collingwood 1946: 96).

Once again, if we substitute 'culture' for the universal, thinking subject, we come close to a statement of what cultural anthropology is about. It is to

mediating figure is Dilthey (1996: 27), who was instrumental in disseminating the distinction between natural sciences and sciences of mind (aka culture).

²⁵ Durkheim makes a similar anti-Kantian argument in *The elementary forms of the religious life*, where he argues for the fundamentally *social* nature of the categories of thought.

see beyond appearances (travelogues, stereotypes, ideology) to appreciate the native point of view in all its lustrous richness.²⁶

We can now start to appreciate why on the stronger reading culture is more than behaviour patterns, or even the models which inform them, and also understand what Geertz was arguing when he wrote:

Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity – an essential condition of it (1973a: 46).

Once again we are in the world of German Mind:

man as a living being is not radically different from other animals, but at the same time he is not just an animal plus reason, he is a quite new totality... In order to come to clarity man has to work his way with effort and struggle through the various stages of lesser, more distorted consciousness. He starts as a primitive being and has to acquire culture and understanding painfully and slowly...this transformation over time involves more than the ascent up a hierarchy of modes of consciousness... Human history is thus also the ascent up a ladder of cultural forms (Taylor 1975: 83, 85).

Culture is the means by which humans work themselves from animality into (self) consciousness. And cultural anthropology is reflection on that process. There is a linear evolutionary model here (see the title of Geertz's 1973 article, 'The growth of culture and the evolution of mind'). Cultural anthropology is itself part of the growth of consciousness and helps to explain why Americans and Europeans study, say, Javanese or Balinese; but so few Balinese or Javanese study Europeans or Americans.

What is it however that motivates this search for consciousness? It is Mind, what Hegel called *Geist* (which is why I have taken my citations from Taylor's work on Hegel). Just as Mind has higher self-expression and awareness than individuals and 'posits its own embodiment' in human beings as its vehicles (Taylor 1975: 92, 103), so does culture. Culture is for

²⁶ Geertz is appropriately cautious about the naïvely literal version of getting inside someone else's head. 'The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to' (1983c: 58). Geertz's phrase is typically ambiguous. The implication is that we should work with people's commentaries on their lives. However in Geertz's own analyses, as Crapanzano noted, what we get is Geertz's privileged reading of inscribed actions, so resuscitating a fairly old fashioned version of the native point of view.

many purposes the modern term for Mind or *Geist*.²⁷ Why Sahlins wrote of the concept of culture transcending subject/object relations becomes horribly clear. At last we are in a position to understand what a special kind of substance it is. Like Mind it is self-positing, but can only manifest itself through humans in action. In trying to break free from the universalism of Hegelian Mind, cultural anthropologists, especially the Americans, overlooked the need to come to terms with German Idealism, which is not a good starting point for an empirical inquiry into human difference. No wonder culture seems such a many-splendoured thing. Many of us however would not wish to accept its presuppositions or implications.

Practice

To understand culture then, we need to look at German ideas of mind as at once the subject and the object of study. So far I have gone along with the prevailing assumption that culture is a theoretical object, which determines the sorts of practices needed to investigate it. Let us consider the reverse: the sorts of practices anthropologists came to engage in required a totalized theoretical object, culture.²⁸ James Clifford made the case nicely (although I suspect this is not quite the reading he was thinking of), when he analyzed the conditions for the emergence of ethnography as a professional inquiry from the earlier work of missionaries and administrators. The suitably heroic ethnographer had to be set apart from these other, mere ordinary observers, who had lived there for years, knew the language and so forth. It required an appeal to an interesting kind of authoritative scientific knowledge, which could be applied relatively fast and without a mastery of language, history or the variability of what people actually did. This complexity of action was reduced to culture, which ‘was construed as an ensemble of characteristic behaviours, ceremonies, and gestures susceptible to recording by a trained onlooker’ (1988b: 31).

The professional ethnographer was trained in the latest analytical techniques and modes of scientific explanation. This conferred an advantage over amateurs in the field; the professional could claim to get

²⁷ My ideas about culture have been worked out over the years in conversations with Ron Inden, who, perhaps not coincidentally, has been a colleague of Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins and David Schneider, three of the most forceful advocates of strong culturalism.

²⁸ Considering that anthropologists’ object of study is practice, they are often surprisingly slow to appreciate the significance of the disjunctures between their own theory and practice.

to *the heart of a culture* more quickly, grasping its *essential* institutions and structures (Clifford 1988: 30a; italics mine).

People had therefore to be imaginable as an object of study, culture, effectively reducible to a few essential features.

A key problem therefore was how drastically to simplify and ignore what was not easily recordable, using ‘powerful theoretical abstractions’ to select ‘data that would yield a central armature or structure of culture’ (1988b: 31).

Since culture, seen as a complex whole, was always too much to master in a short research span, the new ethnographer intended to focus thematically on particular institutions. The aim was not to contribute to a complete inventory or description of custom but rather to get at the whole through one or more of its parts... In the predominantly synecdochic rhetorical stance of the new ethnography, parts were assumed to be microcosms or analogies of wholes (Clifford 1988b: 31).²⁹

These wholes in turn have to be imagined as fairly stable and synchronically studiable. To be possible, professional ethnography required an extraordinarily closed and holistic notion of culture, as without it the ethnographer had no idea how what she recorded related to anything else, or what had happened before. It was a brilliant way of articulating a problem, even if it effectively disarticulated those whose lives it depicted.

This diversion leaves us in a position to suggest alternatives. Ideas are linked to practices and have histories. That is why this book is titled *After culture* not *Against culture*. The cultural turn in its time was a very important step beyond the confines of structure, function and its other antecedents. However culture has no better claim to immortality than its equally ambitious predecessors. In the practice of the professionals, culture emerges as ethnocentric and hierarchical. It is above all American scholars (and their disciples) who understand culture and how to infer its mysterious workings. There is also a timelessness about culture, which is curious granted the historicity of its Hegelian ancestry. So great are the powers of Mind and Culture, that the timelessness which is systematically attributed to Bali is largely a projection of our own ideas of culture onto the subjects of study, who are largely powerless to resist (cf. Chapter 6). The adoption of culture as a working concept by Indonesian scholars, for example, is

²⁹ Richard Fox pointed out to me that this whole process works on similar lines to the hermeneutic circle (on which see Chapter 5).

therefore a potentially tragic instance of hegemony, in which people enthusiastically sign up to the conditions of their own domination.

What happens if we dispense with culture as an *a priori* assumption of totality, a transcendent entity or principle? We could then inquire into the circumstances under which different people claim to demonstrate coherence or fracture according to different kinds of criteria without circularity. Culture has been so widely invoked as transcendent though that I prefer to avoid the notion. Sahlins was quite right to complain that weaker-minded uses of ‘discourse’ fall into the same traps and worse (1999: 410). However we could follow Foucault in his recognition that it was not possible to defend *discours* as a grand notion (archaeology) and his shift to the analysis of practices. These practices turn out to be of two kinds. There are the practices by which humans make themselves and others into subjects, objects, agents, patients or instruments. There are other practices in which they comment on practices (and on commentative practices) themselves. We lose little at this stage by dispensing with culture altogether and leaving it problematic – a problem to be investigated – quite how, under what circumstances and according to whom practices do, or do not, cohere or assume the semblance of structure.

Appropriately Geertz himself stumbled over a useful way of rephrasing the problem. He remarked, you will recall, that cultural forms find their articulation in social action (1973a: 17). Removing the totalizing and timelessness, culture is more or less simply articulation as social action. As Stuart Hall remarked,

In England, the term has a nice double meaning because ‘articulate’ means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to one another, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of a connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’ (1996b: 141).³⁰

³⁰ In the piece in question, Hall takes issue with the later work of Laclau, from whose work on rethinking Gramsci he derived the notion. Whereas Hall turns articulation into a neat modification of excessively rigid notions of ideology and social or political conditions, Laclau makes articulation part of a theory of radical contingency, in which

The crucial point here is that culture is nothing more than a powerful articulation – mind you one so powerful that, with its allied concepts, it defined the modern world (Foucault 1970). To note how pervasive the idea of culture has become is at once to recognize the extent to which it has become hegemonic, but at the same time to observe its descent into triviality (Sahlins 1999: 403), as it collapses under its own antagonisms (see Laclau & Mouffe 1986: 93-148). Any articulation is in response to some other, prior articulation (as culture is against race or religion), which it aims to disarticulate. So the more powerful and pervasive articulations around culture, the greater the danger that they are disarticulating other ways of thinking about the world and engaging with it. The full force of Crapanzano's critique of Geertz' cultural analysis now becomes clear. In place of understanding of subjects in their own terms, we have multiple constructed understandings, blurrings and projection. Culture threatens irrevocably to disarticulate the subjects of its inquiry.

Cultural analysis as practice

Reviewing culture as practices of articulation requires us to rethink what it is that anthropologists do. This becomes imperative, because anthropologists may disarticulate the people they imagine themselves to be interpreting with accuracy, sensitivity, insight or whatever. I shall draw again on the work of Clifford Geertz, because in print he is more sensitive than most culturalists to the problems of extrapolating from ethnography and his main work is on Indonesia, where I have also worked. Now Geertz's ideal statement of his approach has much to commend it. It is grounded in the detailed analysis of social action, not what goes on in people's heads, it recognizes differences between the participants' and the anthropologist's frames of reference, and includes people's reflexive commentary on their own practices. Crapanzano argued however that there is a serious disjuncture between what Geertz claimed his research showed and the means by which Geertz evidently reached his conclusions. So we need to consider what cultural analysis actually involves.

hegemony consists in the unstable attempts to articulate structure, society, politics, which are continually being undermined by their own antagonisms (1990a). My idea of articulation, society and the subject stand much closer to Laclau's, not least because I have learned a great deal from him.

For this purpose, I shall use the example of Geertz's fullest and perhaps best study, *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (1980).³¹ Considering that by his own account Geertz specializes in cultural analysis, it is striking that the first three substantive chapters are fairly orthodox political-economic history. The cultural analysis, which is the centre point of the book, occupies only just over twenty pages (with extensive endnotes). Elsewhere Geertz has justified this split approach. In its search for deep meaning, there is

the danger that cultural analysis...will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life – with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained – and the biological necessities on which those surfaces rest (1973c: 30).

In other words, far from culture being total in any strong sense, its relationship to infrastructure seems to be more about ideological consistency or closure. Strategically Geertz's position avoids bringing him into conflict with the big guns in politics, economics or natural science departments, but it reduces culture to a supplement, not an alternative, to the dominant interest groups in much university life.³²

The thesis of *Negara* is striking. Balinese politics was about theatrical spectacle, not power. 'Power served pomp, not pomp power' (1980: 13). Whose idea of theatre is this? The implication is that we shall have revealed to us the singular – and quite different – ways in which Balinese articulated their lives by theatricalizing the calculating logic and brutalities of power. Nothing, unfortunately, could be further from the case. Geertz so unreflectively adopts an unspecified 'Western' image of theatre that he never even considers whether Balinese might have other ideas (which they do, Chapter 7). This is remarkable because the year before *Negara* was published, Alton Becker had written an important piece arguing that Javanese theatre worked according to presuppositions about space, time, action etc., which differed sharply from Aristotelian principles (1979). It is the more remarkable in that, apparently without realizing the implications, elsewhere Geertz (1983a: 31-32) argued Becker's piece exemplified his own cultural method!

³¹ My comments hold in general terms for Geertz's other analyses of Balinese culture, as the chapters which follow show.

³² Geertz is apparently quite confident that his method will reveal not just the underlying realities, but the relations between them. Cultural analysis, properly done, takes us beyond phenomena to noumena.

Nor is this the only instance. In *Deep Play* (1973d), Geertz likewise used an image from an English Utilitarian philosopher to explain the meaning of Balinese cockfighting to the participants. On this account, not only does cultural analysis fail to engage with people's own categories or commentaries, it fails to imagine they might even have any. Far from culture being a more sensitive concept with which to engage with other people's thoughts, actions and reflections, it is a surrogate, a means of suturing and a simulacrum, because it gives the appearance of engagement, while neatly not doing so. We gain a chilling insight into what cultural analysis is about. Geertz has admitted that he did not speak Balinese (1991); and Sahlins's analysis of how Hawai'ians think (1995) is about people dead long before he was born. The beauty of culture is that you do not have to speak the language, ever meet, speak to, engage, or even be remotely contemporaneous, with your subjects in order to understand them. We start to see what it is that culture negates: it is the very real possibility that other people act in and think about the world in ways which are uncomfortable or threatening to middle class European and American academics.

Contemporary conceptions of culture are semiotic we are repeatedly told. And cultural analysis depends crucially upon both a theory of symbols and a theory of interpretation. As I review both in detail below, I shall merely note some general points. For a start, none of the leading culturalists, as far as I know, seriously considers the possibility that their subjects of study might have their own, distinctive semiotic and interpretive theories or developed theoretical practices. In Chapter 5, I argue that Balinese indeed do and that this requires us to revise how we set about our analyses. Now Geertz's method is to lay out the relevant symbols and then draw comparative conclusions. It assumes signs or symbols are both the necessary and sufficient conditions for action, and so explanation. The approach presupposes that people are the passive subjects of their collective representations. You begin to wonder why culturalists should go to such lengths to deny the potential autonomy of their subjects. What are they frightened of?

The constitutive moment of cultural analysis is interpreting the meaning of other people's words and actions. In this lies the genius of the cultural method. So what is it? In his most sustained analysis to date, of the great symbols of state ritual in *Negara*, Geertz simply cites at length my old teacher, Hooykaas, who was a traditional Dutch philologist, writing about texts, not about social action of which he confessed to knowing or caring little. As I argue in Chapter 5, cultural analysis, it would seem, may be

nothing more than old-fashioned philology with the scholarly *caveats* taken out.

It would seem that symbols, meaning and interpretation are not neutral instruments, but affect or even constitute their object of study. In the chapters which follow, I therefore consider the issues in some detail. One feature of the interpretation of symbols stands out though. The approach implies that there is a secret meaning not known to ordinary people, which the analyst, with his superior knowledge, is able to reveal to us as readers. Apart from making us collusive in this endeavour, cultural analysis reinscribes hierarchical differences in knowledge (see Chapter 4). What sort of post-colonial period are we in, if people are being made if anything more dependent upon Americans and Europeans for knowledge and understanding about themselves (Chapter 5)?³³ And why should people of different backgrounds and religions be obliged to use an interpretive method, originally explicitly designed to address certain Christian concerns? Do Muslim or Hindu Indonesians, for instance, feel entirely happy with this?

Cultural analysis as a set of intellectual practices starts to look then as if it is more closely linked than its promotional claims suggest with perpetuating (an increasingly American) hegemony. It also helps to bring about closure around the familiar and the disarticulation of a whole range of alternative ways of thinking, which cultural analysis ensures we shall never know about. What then are the politics of cultural analysis? This is too large a topic to explore in detail here. I would simply note that, in his analysis of the political presuppositions of Geertz's work, Pecora should conclude that, for all the seeming liberalness of Geertz's stance, in fact it presupposed a surprisingly conservative right-wing political position (1989). To the extent that Geertz has had an impact upon scholarly thinking and policy making in Indonesia, it might be worthwhile to take the time seriously to consider quite what the entailments of adopting anything

³³ Ron Inden argued similar dangers for Orientalism, aka Area Studies. The knowledge of the Orientalist is, therefore, privileged in relation to that of the Orientals and invariably places itself in a relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the easterners. It has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enabled the Orientalist and his countrymen to gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule, and punish in the East. Now it authorizes the area studies specialist and his colleagues in government to aid and advise, develop and modernize, arm and stabilize the countries of the so-called Third World. In many respects the intellectual activities of the Orientalist have even produced...the very Orient which it constructed in its discourse (1986: 408).

approaching a Geertzian notion of culture before adopting it.³⁴ While it would be simplistic to conclude that the proselytization of culture is just part of the process of late twentieth century American hegemonizing of the world, it certainly does not get in the way of so doing.

Invoking culture

Under the New Order régime of Soeharto, arts and culture came to be used in a distinctive way. Melani Budianta, for instance, noted two widespread features:

The first is the glorification of cultural heritage, based on an essentialist notion of culture as ideal values to be excavated from the archaeological past and to be sanctified and preserved as a normative structure. Within the sanctification of ideal norms is the preservation of traditional art forms as the highest artistic expressions of the nation. The second is the commodification of arts and culture with an additional bonus. By reducing arts and culture to marketable goods, it represses the function of art to voice social criticism, to be the conscience of the nation, that is its 'subversive' potentials (2000: 116).

As a deeply nostalgic notion, culture is at its best when safely dead, buried, then resurrected under controlled conditions. Significantly archaeological metaphors are constitutive of Geertz's analysis of culture (Chapter 2 below).

If we give up the search for the essential meaning of culture, the issue of the ways in which people have invoked culture becomes important. How then has culture been imagined or claimed to be, under what circumstances, to what ends? Evidently generalizations about culture serve their own purposes and, as I tried to show, academics are certainly not exempt from critical inquiry into their intellectual practices. To ask about the sorts of recourse to culture, it is necessary to become much more specific. So I shall examine briefly the kinds of appeal to culture made in Indonesia in the nineteen nineties. That is still far too broad. As I have been working since 1990 on television in Bali, I shall draw on this research to consider the ways in which culture has been alluded to. The aim of the project was to record and research into programmes about Balinese 'culture' broadcast

³⁴ My realization of the potential importance of Geertz's work in framing New Order ideas of development and culture grew out of conversations with Professor Gusti Ngurah Bagus, who first suggested to me that I write this book.

nationally and from the provincial station of state television (TVRI).³⁵ If culture has any coherence, surely we should find it here.

Culture has been turned into a key articulatory notion in Indonesia under the New Order régime of President Soeharto. Potential differences of religion, language, ethnicity, local law and ‘customs’, and class have been rigorously moulded into ‘culture’. Each region has its own distinctive dress, arts, crafts, ceremonies, food, which together form its culture, *kebudayaan*, from the root *budaya*, a neologism from *budi*, mind, reason, character and *daya*, energy, capacity.³⁶ Culture is instantiated in endless forms, from the dress of television announcers to arts’ festivals and spatialized in ‘Beautiful Indonesia’ in Miniature (Taman Mini ‘Indonesia Indah’) built as Mme Soeharto’s vision of an Indonesian Disneyland, which was that

the park’s centrepiece was to be an 8.4 hectare pond with little islands representing the archipelago. Mini would also include ‘ancient monuments’, representative ‘religious buildings’, a 1000-room hotel and shopping centre (of ‘international standards’), recreation facilities, an artificial waterfall, a revolving theatre, and an immense outdoor performance arena. Particular importance and one hectare of land each would be given to twenty six display houses representing the ‘genuine customary architectural styles’ of each of Indonesia’s provinces. A central audience hall of Central Javanese aristocratic design would be used for large ‘traditional’ (*tradisional*) ceremonies. And all of this could be appreciated in its Mini completeness from an aerial cable car (Pemberton 1994a: 242-43, see the opening quotation).

As Pemberton notes, culture became central to the politics of the period, which was

³⁵ The project is collaborative between STSI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia) The Academy of Performing Arts, Denpasar and SOAS, and I am grateful to its two directors from 1990 onwards, Professor Madé Bandem and Professor Wayan Dibia, for their help and active support. With permission from TVRI Denpasar, the project has recently digitized one hundred and fifty hours of materials from the project, covering all the genres of broadcast programmes from different kinds of theatre, to documentaries, programmes on development, chat shows and even daily English language broadcasts for tourists. I draw on some of these materials in the analysis below.

³⁶ I am grateful to the late Professor Khaidir Anwar for pointing out to me the probably derivation of the term. As etymologizing is a social practice, we need to look to the uses of *budaya*, not to some originary meaning.

For a good account of how religion (*agama*), custom (*adat*) and culture (*kebudayaan*) have been linked in official discourse in Bali, see Picard 1990, 1996.

founded upon explicit reference to ‘traditional values’ (*nilai-nilai tradisional*), ‘cultural inheritance’ (*warisan kebudayaan*), ‘ritual events’ (*upacara*), and similar New Order expressions that bear an acute sense of social stability. Indeed one of the most distinctive features of New Order rule is the remarkable extent to which a rhetoric of culture enframes political will, delineates horizons of power (1994b: 9).

Pemberton continues:

In light of the unnerving convergence between anthropological disciplinary interests in culture and repressive interests like those manifested under New Order conditions, such an effect [the production of a knowledge called culture] necessarily has numerous implications... My intention here is not to indict the discipline of anthropology as a uniquely pernicious field of modern knowledge – one could scan, for example, departments of history, sociology, linguistics, musicology, and cultural studies for similar culturalist assumptions – but to recognize in anthropology a particularly appropriate site for exploring these implications (1994b: 9-10, square parentheses mine).

Having neatly shown the kind of grave abuses to which culture lends itself – and having steered up to the frightening appreciation that anthropology, cultural studies and others, and the New Order share a common vision of culture – Pemberton refuses to develop his insight and to reflect critically on what the overlap says about anthropology. His conclusion is less that a madhouse is a good site to study madness, but that you have to be mad to study madness. Pemberton touches on what Foucault (1970) identified as the inescapable and fatal philosophical flaw of the human sciences – their inherent circularity – and embraces it.³⁷

Some (non)senses of culture

What forms do recourse to culture on Balinese television in the 1990s take? Working through the transcriptions of the whole range of

³⁷ Margaret Wiener is more percipient when she notes that the New Order required a notion of culture, which was not timeless, because it had to allow the kind of engineering – or suturing – they envisaged as necessary to articulate development with a nostalgic view of custom (1999: 64).

The trick is to perform the transformative work of development – much of which is aimed at everyday practices – without disturbing the peace or losing those elements of “Eastern” culture (as constructed in the colonial era) that authorities regard as essential to national welfare (1999: 63).

broadcasts in the project's archives, I would crudely distinguish at least fifteen kinds of usage.

1. *Language (dance, crafts) as culture* – This kind of metonymic link was clearest in educational broadcasts on Balinese language, culture being at once communication and the product of communication. There were other metonymic links, most obviously Balinese culture being identified with dance and crafts. The New Order régime plugged its cultural credentials (in part to distract attention from some of its nastier military activities) by promoting Bali as culture and sending Balinese dance troupes overseas, to the point that Balinese dancers have probably become the best known icon of Indonesia.
2. *Culture as something to be conserved* – A repeated theme is that Balinese culture is under threat and in danger of deterioration. In one 'Developing Regions' (*Daerah Membangun*) programme called 'Cultural Reserve' (*Cagar Budaya*), Bali was compared to a nature reserve and its culture a resource to be exploited. However, in so doing, it was liable to disappear and would be in need of regeneration.
3. *Culture as heritage* – Another popular theme is culture as what is inherited from one's forebears, tradition, approved ways of doing things.
4. *Culture as a living organism* – Culture is also something which lives (so also 'cultural life' or 'the life of culture', *kehidupan kebudayaan*, e.g. in a programme called 'Culture, custom, religion', *budaya adat agama*). It has roots. Villages, rather than towns, are often referred to as the points where it grows and flourishes.
5. *Culture as potential* – On a number of occasions, culture was listed as a potential (*potensi*) along with the natural beauty and skill at carving.
6. *Culture as capital* – This was perhaps the most frequently used image. Actors in plays spoke of the king's duty being to increase culture, the richness of tradition, the basis of cultural tourism, the need to increase the creativity of Balinese culture or to produce more of it and something to enjoy. The adjectives attributed to culture here are spatial, quantifiable and tangible. Culture is high, thick (Geertz will doubtless be pleased to learn), large and you can – and should if possible – have more of it. Culture in Indonesian, as in English, is something you have and can possess. Bourdieu's symbolic capital has gone native (e.g. 1984)
7. *Culture as pre-modern* – Bali is a cultural museum. What brings people on jumbo jets to five star international hotels is the fact that its culture is not (yet) part of the modern world.
8. *Culture as civilization, being civilized* – This is a common usage. Significantly it is often used evaluatively. Mutual assistance and co-operation is *budaya*, corruption is not.
9. *Culture as aesthetics* – To be cultured is to be aesthetic. Once again the arts in Bali exemplify this.
10. *Culture as discipline* – Culture is something you learn in a disciplined fashion, and the learning itself is cultural. Culture induces an attitude of, and should be

the object of, respect. More prosaically, there are exhortations to cultivate (*membudayakan*) a clean and healthy lifestyle.

11. *Culture as influence* – Indonesians in general, and Balinese especially, have to beware of foreign cultures. They bring with them influence, which is invariably imagined as a bad thing, as it seduces Balinese away from their own culture, especially in tourist centres like Kuta.
12. *Culture as an analytical category* – Culture is a means to know the life of a people, what they are really about behind physical appearances. Play was made on the etymology of *budaya* from *budi* and *daya*. The phrase *sosial-budaya*, social and cultural, recognized customs, was often used, mostly in a relatively neutral sense.
13. *Culture as euphemism* – Culture is a synonym or, better, euphemism for religion (*agama*) and race, and the successor to *adat istiadat*, customs and tradition. *Adat* was an articulatory notion used by the Dutch to categorize and explain Indonesians, as in *adatrecht*, customary law. There are a number of references to *agama*, *adat istiadat* and *budaya* forming an indissoluble unity, usually when they do not and when antagonisms threaten to become obvious.
14. *Culture as art* – Balinese culture is manifest above all in the arts, dancing, theatre, painting, sculpture and so on. Perhaps the most common conjunction is *seni budaya*, cultural arts, culture as art. It is something you learn and Bali's unique resource.
15. *Culture as antagonistic* – Culture works through interaction. And the richness of Balinese culture is due to its contacts with others over the centuries. However, if the terms of the relationship are not balanced, then culture turns into influence and exposes the ease with which dialogue becomes antagonism. The relationship of national culture, or Javanese culture as the dominant one, to regional cultures is deeply problematic and the subject of endless suturing on television, often through a play on the different senses noted above, in which culture-as-capital often emerged.

A striking feature of this list is the extent to which the various representations of culture overlap with academic usage, for instance with Williams's historical definitions (: 87-93) or Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) review of earlier anthropological usage. This is not however because of the incredible percipience and applicability of culture as a concept. On the contrary, Indonesians seem at times to articulate themselves using imported ideas. Whatever foreignness is these days in a supposedly post-colonial and global world,³⁸ I find it increasingly hard to justify the role of expatriate anthropologist to myself. Oddly, the sort of intervention analysis proposed by scholars like John Hartley (1992) provides some ground, however fraught and contentious. I can at least see the point in contributing to public discussion in Indonesia and elsewhere

³⁸ For a good critical review of the often utopian claims about globalization, see Hirst & Thompson 1996.

about the part which culture and the media arguably play and have played in Indonesia.

Enunciating culture

The range of uses of culture leaves room for different nuances. How these are combined in public speaking or in the mass media is interesting. In Bali one of the definitive articulatory moments is the annual Arts' Festival, *Pésta Seni*, at which culture is instantiated in all its manufactured glory. By the 1990s, the Balinese arts' festival had attained some importance as the example upon which all regions should model their production of culture. The President, or Vice-President, senior cabinet ministers and their wives attended the official opening, which was the occasion of public speeches by the Governor, the President or his deputy, and an analysis of the festival's parade, usually by a senior figure from the Academy of Performing Arts. A sense of how culture emerges as an articulating device should be clear from my précis below of the address of the then Vice-President, Tri Sutrisno, to the 1996 Arts' Festival Opening on 8th. June 1996.³⁹ (Sentences in italics are a full translation of references at the start of the speech to culture.)

After a brief prayer to Divinity, the Vice-President welcomed all participants from overseas and urged them to use the opportunity of being in the beautiful island of Bali not only to introduce their own cultural arts (*seni budaya*) but also to become acquainted with Balinese and Indonesian social life, and the diversity of their cultural customs (*adat budaya*), the beauty of the natural panorama, the variety of flora and fauna. The Arts Festival, he said, was an occasion for friendship and co-operation, which was increasingly necessary in an era of economic and informational globalization.

The Arts Festival is one way to construct and develop Balinese cultural arts (seni budaya) and simultaneously a means to promoting tourism⁴⁰. It was also a means of pushing artists to become more creative. So the theme of this Arts Festival was the realization of the national spirit, because in an era of global competition, the country needed to increase society's enthusiasm to develop and improve on the past. Included in development are the nation's arts and culture so as to possess

³⁹ The commentator on the procession was Dr Wayan Dibia, then Deputy Director of STSI. In a fuller analysis I would consider how he spoke about culture which, as might be expected from a distinguished academic and choreographer, was thoughtful and nuanced.

⁴⁰ Pesta Kesenian semacam ini merupakan salah satu wujud upaya pembinaan dan pengembangan seni budaya Bali sekaligus sebagai sarana promosi pariwisata.

*competitive capacity and the highest possible cultural endurance. Ladies and Gentlemen, art is part of the culture (budaya) and civilization of human beings, which is closely connected to creativity, to the will and work striving to the realization of a standard of living, which is better, more orderly and of a higher quality.*⁴¹

He then gave a long account explaining how the arts festival encouraged creativity, productivity and innovation. The production of arts and crafts had great scope for entrepreneurial development (dwelt on at length), but artists were also part of the nation's intellectual wealth, whose work should be protected by copyright. Art promoted health and reduced stress and was an important part of a flourishing nation.

Culture is something all civilized countries have. It is a possession, attribute or skill manifest as the arts and customs, which is part of Indonesia's inherited wealth. Culture however is a key part of the national development effort. Apart from being a treasured tourist asset, it is integral to, and partly constitutive of, the disciplined development of the national spirit (remember the New Order was run by the military) and continued striving towards physical, material and mental improvement. Arts and culture finally emerge contradictorily as both a kind of good to be produced, marketed and sold, and as a necessary and healthy counter-balance in a world increasingly governed by global economic forces. It would be convenient to be able to dismiss Tri Sutrisno's speech as the sort of gobbledegook generated on a daily basis by the New Order. In fact though it is a quite coherent articulation around the idea that the world, especially in a global era, contains disruptive forces, which must be contained by discipline/culture. Unfortunately, the various senses of culture he wove together mostly have impeccable academic antecedents. The problem lies as much with the promiscuity of culture itself as with the New Order.

Anthropology as metaphysical critique

Culture is too powerful an articulation, especially when used by those who are privileged to enunciate (Foucault 1972a: 88-105), like academics, politicians and media figures. I do not see that much is lost at

⁴¹ Termasuk dalam pembangunan seni budaya bangsa agar memiliki daya saing dan ketahanan budaya yang setinggi-tingginya. Saudara-saudara sekalian kesenian adalah bagian dari budaya dan peradaban dari manusia yang erat kaitannya dengan daya cipta rasa karsa, dan karya, menuju ke arah perwujudan taraf kehidupan yang lebih baik, lebih tertib dan lebih berkualitas.

this stage by abandoning the idea altogether in favour of a notion of 'practice'.⁴² To do so leaves the relationship problematic, whether between the various practices people engage in, or between the practices of scholars and our subjects of study. 'Culture' sutures over the incoherences, indeterminacies and the situational nature of practices, as well as questions about who asserts there to be structure, meaning, order, explicability and under what circumstances.

People or groups do not articulate or enunciate in a vacuum. They do so against previous or likely alternative articulations, in a world strewn with the traces of past thinking and what Gramsci called 'the sedimentations' of past practices. Articulation therefore takes place in particular contexts and situations. What is at issue was put nicely by (that widely misarticulated) Oxford philosopher, R.G. Collingwood.⁴³

Whenever anybody states a thought in words, there are a great many more thoughts in his mind than are expressed in his statement. Among these there are some which stand in a peculiar relation to the thought he has stated: they are not merely its context, they are its presuppositions... Logicians have paid a great deal of attention to some kinds of connexion between thoughts, but to other kinds not so much. The theory of presuppositions they have tended to neglect (1940: 21, 23).

What kind of theory deals with presuppositions? And what do they have to do with social action or practices?

In his *Essay on metaphysics*, Collingwood noted that there are two senses of the term, both interestingly first formulated clearly by Aristotle. The first, and familiar, one is 'metaphysics is the science of pure being' (1940: 11), hence popular usage of metaphysics as about highly, indeed irrelevantly, abstract matters.

But the science of pure being would have a subject-matter entirely devoid of peculiarities; a subject-matter, therefore, containing nothing to differentiate it from anything else, or from nothing at all (1940: 14).

⁴² This is not the place to elaborate a full-blown account of practice. Such an account would start not so much with the work of Bourdieu for whom practice is a supplement to a fairly conventional ontology, but would be closer to the work of the later Foucault and of Laclau, where practice replaces notions of structure, culture, the subject and so forth. This evidently requires being able adequately to redescribe explanations in terms of structure, culture etc. in terms of practice.

⁴³ Paul Hirst is interesting on the reasons that Collingwood was so generally and deliberately misunderstood (1985: 43-56). I read Collingwood, as I do the two other key thinkers to whom I am indebted here, Bakhtin and Foucault, as far more pragmatist than is usually recognized.

By contrast, the other sense is that

metaphysics is the science which deals with the presuppositions underlying ordinary science (1940: 11).⁴⁴

Significantly, the presupposition that metaphysics is about pure being or thought distracts attention away from a diametrically opposed kind of study. For

metaphysics is the attempt to find out what absolute presuppositions have been made by this or that person or group of persons, on this or that occasion or group of occasions, in the course of this or that piece of thinking (Collingwood 1940: 47).

The first part of this Introduction has on this account therefore been a review of the presuppositions of cultural anthropologists, that is what they take for granted in their intellectual practices. We have no ground whatsoever for presuming we can leap from what a particular school of anthropologists presupposed at some stage in the development of the discipline to what their highly diverse subjects of study presupposed. And it is precisely this disjuncture which is the subject-matter of metaphysics in Collingwood's sense.

So what is the object of study of metaphysics and what sort of study does it involve? Presuppositions are those ideas that we take so much for granted that we do not even realize we are assuming anything at all. Many presuppositions are relative. That is they are answers to other, prior questions. Some questions elicit the answer that that is simply how things are: these are the absolute presuppositions on which thought anywhere rests. Far from being remote and abstract however, presuppositions are historical questions, that is they are

questions as to what absolute presuppositions have been made on certain occasions... All metaphysical questions are historical questions, and all metaphysical propositions are historical propositions. Every metaphysical question either is simply the question what absolute presuppositions were made on a certain occasion, or is capable of being resolved into a number of such questions (1940: 49).

⁴⁴ Science here is 'a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject matter' and, to avoid circularity, 'ordinary' being what 'is not a constituent part of metaphysics' (1940: 4, 11).

Historical questions are empirical questions because they are about actual practices of asking questions and presupposing. What, if any, is the connection with anthropology?

Anthropology – I refer to cultural, not physical anthropology – is an historical science, where by calling it historical as opposed to naturalistic I mean that its true method is thus to get inside its object or re-create its object inside itself (Collingwood n.d.: 26, cited in Boucher 1992: xxix).

History, anthropology and metaphysics are then part of a distinctive mode of inquiry, which is at once pragmatic and critical. It is through-and-through pragmatic because its object – and its own method – is about practices of thinking about something, and so questioning, answering, presupposing etc.

Collingwood's spatial metaphor may misleadingly suggest the aim is to try to get inside someone's head. Elsewhere, however, Collingwood clarifies what he was trying to say. Such inquiry

does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does... it renounces all attempt to discover what mind *always and everywhere does*, and asks only *what mind has done* on certain definite occasions (1942 [1992]: 61).

To get inside an object of study is therefore the difficult task of thinking about it, using the presuppositions and practices of the people who did the thinking in the first place. As our scholarly inquiries are driven by different concerns and presuppositions, we have subsequently to engage in the intellectual practices of re-enacting the thinking and re-creating the object of study in our own terms. However this does not happen once, but is a continuing process.

Re-enactment, in addition to explaining actions, is the means by which the traditional, and for Collingwood false, distinction between theory and practice, and the mind and its objects can be overcome (Boucher 1992: xxviii-xxix).

As we cannot assume the scholar's and the subjects' presuppositions, including how they go about thinking, are the same, it is also a critical inquiry. This is in a singular and strong of 'critical' as not just being critical of your own presuppositions (insofar as you are able to know these), but also because interrogation of the presuppositions and styles of inquiry of your subjects is likely to require you to rethink your own presuppositions. If you are, say, a historian of Ancient Rome, you do

not become an ancient Roman any more than by working in Bali for years I become a Balinese villager. What is at issue is twofold. First it is how far I have learnt to think about matters they regard as important in the way Balinese I have worked with have thought about them. Second, it is how I rethink such thoughts in terms of current scholarly concerns and how this changes my understanding of the presuppositions involved in my own thinking.

Collingwood was thinking of the problems of historical analysis. Does it work as well however, even in principle, for anthropologists, or cultural or media studies' specialists? How do you work out the presuppositions of the people you are working with when different people – or even the same people on different occasions – seem to make different presuppositions? Do you fall back on the usual anthropological suspects: senior males, well informed informants (Harris 1969), those who are articulate and with time on their hands? And how do you infer what people are presupposing, say, when they are watching theatre or television? Am I not assuming, against what I argued earlier, that it is possible to make determinate statements about presuppositions from practices? The problems are formidable, but we need to beware two epistemological traps, which make the problem seem worse than it is. First, there is a sort of either/or logic. *Either* we can determine absolute what people's presuppositions are, what they think and so on. *Or* we can know nothing at all. Understanding in the human sciences is at best somewhere in between. Second, this argument overlooks the fact that people often spend a great deal of time commenting and reflecting on what they and others say and do, and sometimes change their practice as a result. In other words, in different situations people comment on and make various kinds of determinations about actions and what they presuppose.

Ethnography has probably always been to a significant extent about commentary. Significantly, the kind of ethnography I am advocating would of necessity require you to ask the people you work with at various points whether you have understood them as they understand it.⁴⁵ This is still a gross simplification of the congeries of practices in which you engage – and which your subjects engage in with, or to protect themselves from, you (see Hobart 1996). In arguing for anthropology as radical

⁴⁵ In my later work (discussed in a forthcoming monograph), I have more explicitly distinguished at least three stages of work. The second is returning to interrogate the people I was working with about issues and presuppositions, which arose from my critical reflection. The third is discussing with them drafts of the work to be published based on this, or inviting them to lectures or seminars in Bali where I was presenting work in progress to my Indonesian academic colleagues.

metaphysical critique, I am suggesting several things. First, the idea of an anthropology as a growing body of true knowledge is seriously misplaced (see Chapter 4 below; also Hobart 1993a). Anthropology is best as, or if it is to survive destined to be, a doubly critical inquiry. That is it is at once into the conditions under which other people and the knowing scholarly subjects think and act, and the relationship between them. Second, we cannot assume *a priori* when, to what degree and under what circumstances people will share the presuppositions, interpretations or inferences of their anthropological analysts, nor what the significance of divergence (or convergence) would be. In other words, we have to assume degrees, or even kinds, of radical difference at moments, not as some absolute, but as a precaution against attributing our own ideas to, and so re-hegemonizing, our subjects of study.⁴⁶ Third, such inquiry is not just about what people have done or thought as an object in itself, but also about what they presupposed in so doing, including notably their own critical thinking about what they have done and why.⁴⁷ Such an analysis evidently includes silences: what you do not talk about, possibilities and presuppositions people avoid considering, regard as unthinkable or cannot even apprehend. What this exposition shows though, if anything, is how breathtakingly simplistic it is to amalgamate these divergent and often antagonistic practices under the banner of culture.

When I refer to radical difference or radical metaphysics, I am not therefore postulating essential unchanging divergences. Instead I am drawing attention to the practices through which people – analysts and subjects of study – come to think of themselves as significantly or inherently different. Foucault made the point nicely in *The subject and power*, when he argued that he was trying to write a history of the modes by which in Europe ‘human beings are made subjects’ (1982: 208). The

⁴⁶ While I make use of Quine’s arguments about radical translation (e.g. 1960), I reach rather different conclusions. The sort of critical, dialogic inquiry I am arguing for enables you to ask people about the translational manuals they are using, explicitly or implicitly. So the subjects of study cut down the degree of indeterminacy. It does not follow though that indeterminacy is eliminated. On the contrary, what you have shown is that, asked subsequently about their translational schemes, the people you talked to responded to you in a given way. There are no satisfying and lasting syntheses.

⁴⁷ I hope that it should be clear that this approach is neither positivist nor committed to an empiricist metaphysics (a wildly Rococo assemblage).

As one can ask questions without knowing it, and *a fortiori* without knowing what questions one is asking, so one can make presuppositions without knowing it, and *a fortiori* without knowing what presuppositions one is making (Collingwood 1940: 26). Metaphysical inquiry involves inference, which must always be provisional. There is nothing to say that styles of logic are universal or that we can presume to understand others using our own (Chapter 3).

second of these was ‘dividing practices’, by which humans are differentiated from one another in various ways (for example, the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, knowers and the known). Equally people differentiate themselves by objectivizing themselves as subjects of knowledge. People also learn to themselves into subjects in various ways. In so doing, they are learning to recognize themselves as distinct kinds of subjects, quite different from other kinds of subjects.

Incidentally radical metaphysics may offer a part solution to Foucault’s perceived circularity of the human sciences, and with it the fate of anthropology (and cultural studies).⁴⁸ Insofar as we subsume our subjects under articulatory notions like culture, we commit the kind of vicious circularity I noted earlier. Insofar as they stand apart from, and may be critical of, the knowing scholars’ reflections on themselves, they refuse this subsumption. No wonder those untamed native intellectuals need herding into the corrals of culture, by being befriended and overinterpreted by anthropologists. They threaten the whole edifice. The solution is only in part though, because it is humanities’ and human sciences’ scholars who in the end still articulate these intellectuals to the world.

Taking radical metaphysical inquiry this far creates a serious problem. The more reflective scholars recognize that their arguments are not simply timeless true. Rather they are framed by current paradigms (Kuhn), are part of a process of conjecture and refutation (Popper) or whatever. If not carefully circumscribed however, such arguments threaten to question the authority and authenticity of academia itself. So the developing discourse of ‘western’ academic thinking must constitute the ultimate frame of reference, the yardstick against which all thought must be judged. To relinquish such absolute criteria of judgement would be to imperil the whole edifice of scholarly thought. Without such an *a priori* guarantee, there would be nothing in principle to determine that proper knowledge consists, of necessity, in translating other people’s thinking into the categories of academic thought – rather than, say, *vice versa*, or a

⁴⁸ As Foucault argues at length, it is Kant’s thinking about humans/culture as the subject, object and limiting possibility of knowledge that is central to the project of modernity. It is therefore an anthropological project in a broad sense. Anthropology constitutes perhaps the fundamental arrangement that has governed and controlled the path of philosophical thought from Kant until our own day. This arrangement is essential, since it forms part of our history; but it is disintegrating before our eyes, since we are beginning to recognize and denounce in it, in a critical mode, both a forgetfulness of the opening that made it possible and a stubborn obstacle standing obstinately in the way of an imminent new form of thought (Foucault 1970: 342).

discussion between different ways of thinking. This is why recourse to notions of practice almost always ends up as a strap-on, serving to blunt some of the more glaring deficiencies of categorical thinking.⁴⁹ This is also why Foucault's shift from an archaeology of discourse to a genealogy of micro-practices is far more radical than is often appreciated.

The danger, which understandably concerns most anthropologists, is the dissolution of the unity of their discipline. Not only would we have, for example, Balinese, Maori, Melanesian, Piaroa or Sora accounts of their own actions, but we would have their understandings of anthropologists', 'westerners' or even, as they become more mobile, one another's thinking.⁵⁰ Welcome to a different kind of multicultural world. Against this diversity, academic thinking stands as the bulwark against an imagined confusion and loss of authority.

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality (Foucault 1981: 52).⁵¹

Can we treat anthropological discourse as a language which is either sufficiently neutral or strong as adequately to encompass the diversity? As one of the noted hard-liners himself put it:

Language functions in a variety of ways other than 'referring to objects'. Many objects are simply not there, in any obvious physical sense, to be located: how could one, by this method, establish the equivalences, if they exist, between abstract or negative or hypothetical or religious expressions? Again, many 'objects' are in a sense created by language, by the manner in which its terms carve up the world of experience. Thus the mediating third party is simply not to be found: either it turns out to be an elusive ghost ('reality'), or it is just one further language, with

⁴⁹ Kuhn introduced the practices of scientists under the rubric of paradigms in order to be able to allow for them and so get nearer to history- or 'culture-' free knowledge. Arguably, taking practices seriously leads either towards a position like Feyerabend's conclusion of radical incommensurability (1975) or to the breakdown of the distinction of theory and practice itself, something long urged by Collingwood (see Boucher 1992).

⁵⁰ The work of Margaret Wiener, Anne Salmond, Marilyn Strathern, Joanna Overing and Piers Vitebsky comes to mind. In different ways, each has questioned European and academic assumptions using the thinking of the people they have worked with.

⁵¹ One way of reading *The order of discourse*, Foucault's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, is as a sustained analysis of the twists and turns through which academic discourse sets out to control the confusion arising from the sheer contingency of events – and so the diversity of explanations – through various ritualized procedures.

idiosyncrasies of its own which are as liable to distort in translation as did the original language of the investigator (Gellner 1970: 25).

Anthropological discourse simply adds another language to the Babel.

The obvious alternative, that English is so ‘strong’ a language (Asad 1986) and – by virtue of the sheer investment of capital, effort and thought – anthropological writing in English so dominant as to be unchallengeable is an argument based on power not on critical understanding. What is at issue, once again, is the European hegemony over cultural interpretation. Talal Asad makes it plain what is at issue:

The attribution of implicit meanings to an alien practice *regardless of whether they are acknowledged by its agents* is a characteristic form of theological exercise, with an ancient history (1986: 161).

A genealogical inquiry into anthropology’s claims to authority on the grounds of scientific neutrality throws up interesting ancestors. As Foucault remarked,

we must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity (1981: 67).

A significant feature of metaphysical inquiry is that it is dialogic in the senses used by Bakhtin. That is first that every utterance is dialogic, in that it is a response to another utterance.⁵² Dialogue as an ontological frame of reference replaces abstract totalizing entities like language, symbols, culture and codes (Bakhtin 1984a, 1986b, 1986c; Volosinov 1973), which on this account are terminally misleading.

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of the subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual

⁵² Note Collingwood’s definition of presuppositional thinking. ‘Every statement that anybody ever makes is in answer to a question’ (1940: 23). You can, of course, have dialogues with yourself, as in reflective thinking or when you imagine yourself in someone else’s position.

meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and reinvigorated in renewed form (in a new context) (Bakhtin1986a: 170).

Human action and thought is always open, changing, uncertain, unfinalizable. Not only is it not predictable, it is not even definitively retrodictable.⁵³

The argument of the book⁵⁴

Many anthropologists would protest that this is what they have been doing all along. However studying other people's categories of thought and even showing how they use them to make sense of the world is much weaker than what I have in mind. For a start it is only too compatible with hegemonic and totalizing articulations. If we are to take anthropology as radical metaphysical critique seriously, we have to start with a thorough review of people's presuppositions in practice about such issues as human nature, reason, knowledge, meaning and interpretation, time and history; power, its use and abuse.⁵⁵ Each of the chapters takes up one of these themes. In the last chapter, from a study of Balinese commenting on their own society, I conclude that cultural anthropology has abjectly failed to engage with people's own reflexive thinking. As far as I know, very few anthropologists have addressed such issues in a sustained manner, let alone

⁵³ On this account retrodiction is problematic for two reasons. First, there are always alternative accounts of any set of events, and so problems in determining which is 'true'. Second, the ever-changing contexts of inquiry change what counts as significant or relevant, and so how to understand what happened.

⁵⁴ Ben Anderson used to tell a story about Clifford Geertz. Anderson asked Geertz, when he was collecting his earlier essays for inclusion in *The interpretation of cultures*, how he could resist the temptation to revise them. According to Anderson, Geertz was puzzled and could not think why anything he had written might need changing.

On re-reading the essays below, I felt the urge not just to tinker, but to start all over again. I have resisted this and just added some clarificatory footnotes for Indonesian readers. I am aware that some of the contrasts, which I drew for purposes of exposition, read in retrospect as if the world was neatly split. Balinese tend to emerge with the virtues of being flexible, dynamic and dialogic, if still subjugated; whereas the academy is the antithesis and hegemonic to boot.

⁵⁵ You could call these their basic epistemological and ontological categories. For obvious reasons however, I dispute the dichotomy implicit here between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, which shadows the Cartesian distinction of mind and body. The argument that other people do not have such philosophical categories seems to me to be dangerously misplaced. Metaphysics in this sense is part of all thinking. You cannot walk down a road, switch on a light, give an order to someone or whatever, without presupposing some notion of causation, intention, action, meaning.

consider in detail how people use their presuppositions in practice to articulate the world in different ways. As few seem prepared to take the critical step of considering how such intellectual practices might require us to consider our own.⁵⁶

So, in Chapter 2, I start with the presuppositions about human nature and action, which have been imposed on Balinese and contrast this with some of the ways Balinese talk about themselves and others. When I originally wrote this, many anthropologists were still caught up in the argument between rival determinisms such as structuralism, neo-Marxism and culturalism. By contrast, what struck me was the degree to which social life seemed underdetermined and contingent, both as the participants talked about it and as I encountered it as an anthropologist. Determinations are easy to make after the event.⁵⁷ What interested me was the variety of kinds of determination in which people engaged as a social practice. A consequence of anthropologists' self-distraction with abstract substances like culture is that we have barely begun, for instance, to consider critically the styles of argument which people employ in different circumstances, or the link between style and its strategic consequences.⁵⁸ How you are supposed to gain any serious appreciation of someone else's thinking without considering how they argue with one another remains a mystery to me.

A theme that runs throughout this book is how two overlapping congeries of practices, intellectual and otherwise, engage with one another: the anthropologist's and that of the people we work with. One of the ways in which anthropologists implicitly decide between all sorts of possible ways of describing a state of affairs is by imposing an account of human nature – humans are naturally rule-following, creative, searching for the meaning of life, wealth, power or whatever. Labels like society, structure and culture are often shorthand devices for philosophical positions which presuppose a particular theory of human nature. This ignores

⁵⁶ This is not the same as using ethnographic findings to reflect on European or American society. That is the default, and deeply narcissistic, attitude. It is unclear quite why anthropologists imagine other people should agree to be used so instrumentally to such self-serving ends. Of course, they are rarely asked.

The work of a few scholars whom I know seems to me to avoid these traps and to be particularly stimulating. It includes, for example, Fabian 1990a, 1990b; Overing 1985, 1990; Vitebsky 1993a, 1993b.

⁵⁷ After an important election, pundits are quick to rush into print to explain how the outcome was inevitable, clear to see coming and so on. It contrasts notably with their caution beforehand.

⁵⁸ A notable exception is David Parkin, whose work has consistently bridged this artificial and Cartesian, divide (e.g. 1975, 1976).

Collingwood's point that as we study human nature so it changes (1946: 82-83).⁵⁹

Anthropologists have a bad habit of talking about 'cultural logics' but still presuppose the basic (i.e. classical Greek) laws of thought. In Chapter 3, I examine in detail some Balinese logical practices and show how they are not reducible to 'ours', whatever that is supposed to be.⁶⁰ We have no grounds on which to assume *a priori* that people always engage in the same kind of reasoning practices (Needham 1972: 152-175; 1976). This holds both between and within societies. Now there is often a startling – and usually unacknowledged (cf. Hacking 1982) – disjuncture between academics' ideal conceptions of their reasoning (about which they disagree anyway) and how they reason in practice in different circumstances on different occasions. Insofar as intellectuals in the society being studied accept or even adopt such accounts themselves, arguably they become hegemonic.

The anthropologists' standard defence (when they can even be bothered with one) is that the sorts of peoples they work on do not have coherent or inscribed ideas about reasoning. For places like India, this argument simply does not hold, because there is a long history of formal philosophical thinking about logic. Do Balinese then, as Nigel Barley jokingly suggested my work implied, walk around with logical primers in their hands? Evidently being descendants of a society, which had a philosophical 'tradition', does not mean that ordinary people formally or consciously apply criteria of rationality in their daily lives – nor, for that matter, do academics. It is a question of carefully analyzing how people actually reasoned on different occasions. You can – and people do – reason in consistent and logically acceptable ways without having a history of formal training in philosophy. Balinese, for instance, may use distinctive styles of reasoning, especially when speaking more formally, which replicate the stages of what Karl Potter, referring to the Indian philosophical school, depicted as 'stock Nyaya argument' (1977: 180-81).

Similar arguments apply to the central resource of academia itself: knowledge. The ostensible superiority – and so the justification for the

⁵⁹ Incidentally this piece appears in its full original form for the first time. The previously published version had, significantly given its theme, been bowdlerized to cater to the imagined predilections of North American academic readers.

⁶⁰ Much anthropology seems concerned in fact with using our subjects of study as others against which to create an imaginary coherent subject, the West, 'us' and so forth. Culture, the idea of totality, then stands as a reiterated denial of the fear of fracture, incoherence, contingency.

exclusive exercise or imposition – of ‘western’ knowledge depends significantly upon it being systematic, formal and propositional and above all an abstract substance (not unlike culture). This conception of knowledge stresses ‘knowing that’, at the expense of ‘knowing how’ (Ryle 1949). In Chapter 4 I argue that the idea of knowledge itself is catachretic. That is knowledge as a system, being abstract, must be imagined using metaphors to constitute it as a sort of thing or mental substance. The deployment of different constructions of anthropologists’ own and their subjects’ knowledge has extensive and unrecognized effects. There is a serious disparity between anthropologists’ ideas about knowledge and their intellectual practices on the one hand, and Balinese knowing practices and ideas about knowledge on the other. Reviewing knowledge as constituting a set of practices produced results which surprised even me.

‘As I lay laughing’ attempts to reconsider knowledge as different historically situated kinds of practices. What emerged while I was writing it was just how hidebound and ethnocentric Euro-American academic epistemological practices actually are. They work by hypostatizing actions and events, so creating the sort of ‘capital’, which Bourdieu presumed he had shown to be at work. By contrast I argue that Balinese knowing practices make much use of dialogue. The effect is to make their ‘knowledge’ much more fluid, situational, historically sensitive and capable of addressing change. And, as with other forms of dialogic thinking from Socrates to Freud, the results of such practices seemed to me far at times far more interesting as a method of inquiry, more critical and less predetermining than the mechanical nature of so much academic thinking, hypostatized as it is.

If there is one central constitutive practice of anthropology, it surely must be interpretation. What grounds do we have however, if any, to assume that the people we work with are interpreting one another in ways which are compatible with, or adequate explicable in terms of, the anthropologist’s?

An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us... what stands there is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting (Heidegger 1962: 191-92).

One does not interpret what there is in the signified, but one interprets, fundamentally, *who* has posed the interpretation (Foucault 1990: 66).

What effect do our own presuppositions have on how we interpret? To what extent are we locked into the circularities of pre-understanding? And

what steps do interpreters take to escape this circularity? In Chapter 5, I review some well known interpretive studies of Bali, especially the work of Clifford Geertz and Jim Boon. This chapter and the following one probably highlight the differences in approach between Geertz and myself, and so between a cultural and a pragmatic metaphysical approach, most starkly.

The obvious question is to ask whether it ever crossed the cultural anthropologists' minds to ask about Balinese ideas about signification, semantics and interpretation, whether these differed from their own, and what the implications of possible differences might be? I conclude by outlining some common Balinese semantic practices and consider how an appreciation of these affects an analysis. In short, interpretive anthropologists are writing about one thing; and Balinese thinking and talking about another. And never the twain shall meet, it would seem. So interpretivist claims to tell us what Balinese really mean by what they do are largely empty.

Few topics have been as well worked over in Bali as the purported ideas Balinese have about time and the person. In Chapter 6 I review the debate over the nature of time in Bali and consider the full implications of cultural anthropologists like Geertz projecting onto Balinese what they have difficulty in owning themselves. (Foreigners do much the same when visiting Indonesia as tourists, thereby turning wherever they turn up into caricatures of their own nightmares.) Removing a sense of history from Balinese leaves them as passive subjects of their own collective representations, unable to reflect critically on their own intellectual practices. The effect was to make Balinese dependent on outsiders to be able to think reflectively or critically. The implications of this argument are frightening. Fortunately, I would suggest that in fact Balinese have highly developed practices of historical – and, concomitantly, critical – thinking. It is anthropologists and others who have been at pains to deny this who are in deep trouble of their own making. The effect however is to reproduce a hierarchy by which 'western' scholars emerge as capable of a far higher order of critical and also synthetic thinking and empowered to explain people to themselves in terms which are not their own.⁶¹ Once

⁶¹ In the summer of 1996 Indonesian scholars had the chance to debate many of these issues under the rubric of 'Balinese character'. Jensen and Suryani's monograph, *The Balinese people: a reinvestigation of character*, had been translated into Indonesian and its publication was celebrated by a seminar at Universitas Udayana. After a useful critique of Bateson and Mead's generalizations about Balinese character, sadly Jensen and Suryani fell into precisely the same trap by proposing a new set of stereotypes, which once again made Balinese passive subjects of their own 'character'. In two pieces in the Bali Post

again I would ask Indonesian readers: Is this something to which you could seriously consider subscribing?

In the final chapter, I move away from contrasting anthropologists' and Balinese presuppositions to discuss how Balinese articulate the world about them through theatre. I examine a play performed in the village where I work and which I discussed at length with interested members of the audience and also two of the main actors. From their commentaries it was clear that a central theme was the nature of power and how it should be exercised. The play was set in the pre-colonial period about which Geertz wrote in *Negara*. There is virtually nothing in *Negara* which sheds much light on the depiction of pre-conquest Bali. So we are faced to the conclusion that cultural analysis may imagine a world quite different from that which a number of distinguished Balinese live in and reflect on. A central problem for Geertz is that he insists on interpreting using contemporary American categories. This makes his work appealing and accessible to the readership that presumably matters to him. As Margaret Wiener showed in a thoughtful and scholarly analysis of the fall of the kingdom of Klungkung to the Dutch, Balinese understood what happened in quite different terms from the Dutch, and from Geertz (1995a). In Chapter 7, I analyze in some detail excerpts from the play. In so doing, it becomes clear that the divergences between the categories Geertz uses to comment on Bali and those Balinese use have so little in common that they appear to be referring to two quite different islands called Bali. Far from culture helping us understand other peoples, or them their interrogators, on a review of the evidence from Bali, culture seems designed to inhibit such understanding.

A theme of the book as a whole surfaces yet again in Chapter 7. It is the extent to which people are often articulate intellectuals not just in thinking about what is going on in their own societies, but recursively address more general themes, which may require us to reconsider our own presuppositions. I have made extensive use of the notion of articulation, as developed by Laclau and Hall. While their aims are to link – or, for Laclau, to do away with the distinction between – the material and mental, articulation tends to emerge as a highly abstract idea. By contrast, the actors in the play stress the extent to which articulation is always specific: it takes place under particular conditions for particular purposes. And its success cannot be foretold: it depends on what actually happened. Even

(1996), Nyoman Darma Putra outlined incisive arguments by young Balinese scholars who criticized the authors (one of whom is herself a distinguished Balinese psychiatrist) among other things precisely for attributing an entire people with such passivity and unreflectiveness.

that judgement is always open to re-articulation. In performing before a village audience, the actors are trying to change how people understand the political formation to which they are subject and so, in their own small way, to help to change the polity itself.

If the totalizing concept of culture is palpably flawed, is it adequate to think of culture, following cultural studies, as a site of material, technical, economic, political and social contestation, domination or hegemony? I would argue not. The presuppositions about culture as total tend to creep back in. And a concept of culture as no more than a congeries of practices, which is only given momentary and invariably contested coherence by contingent acts of articulation, is pretty vapid. We might as well then turn our attention to the over-invoked and under-analyzed notion of practice instead.

In conclusion then I would suggest that we have run culture for all it is worth. It is too ambiguous, circular, hegemonic, élitist and indeed ethnocentric a term to retain as a working concept. Its articulations are so powerful that they disarticulate other ways in which people think about their society. In place of the largely timeless, over-coherent world imagined by culture, I take it that theory is always under-determined by facts and that an important part of social life is addressing or making use of the slippage, as people strive to remake themselves and others into agents, subjects or objects. As a long-term ethnographer, I am interested in exploring the extent to which social life is analyzable as a congeries of practices. These include practices of articulating events, actions, persons and practices in antagonistic ways under different circumstances.

Becker once argued (1979) that the subtlety of Javanese shadow theatre derived from a coincidence of several quite different epistemologies. Unfortunately he was unable to hold onto the radicality of his own argument (Hobart 1982b), that a single theatre genre, let alone a single society, could have incommensurable epistemologies and that people could imagine a world sufficiently complex as to make contingency a driving principle. At the very least, anthropology as radical metaphysical critique provides a chance not to think the unthinkable – people are already doing that all over the place⁶² – but to recognize and appreciate what is going on,

⁶² The shift is from the closure of extrapolation to a recognition of the complexity and indeterminacy of practice. The result is a stress as much on how people do things as on the final outcome, product, narrative resolution. This is one reason my interest has shifted to the media and mediation, which cease to be mere instruments in the expression of some transcendent or otherwise inaccessible truth. What I am proposing is not a McLuhanesque

and to pause to think how intellectuals, whose job notionally it is do precisely that, have on the whole so singularly failed to notice what has been going on around them. A preoccupation with culture is significantly to blame. For scholars who have grown bored of rattling round their intellectual cages, metaphysical critique may offer a refreshing change.

reversal of priorities between the medium and the message. That was largely a trick of inverting our conventional hierarchy of message over medium, mind over body.