Culture at the Crossroads
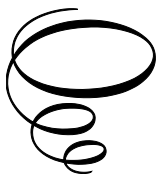
Culture at the Crossroads:

From Epistemological Meanderings to Interdisciplinary Praxis

Edited by

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On a personal plane, the editors would like to thank their dear family members for their sustained belief in their creativity and their constant support and encouragement. Asma expresses unconditional love and gratitude to her mother and dedicates this work to the spirit of her father. Samira dedicates her work on this volume to her mother.

Introduction

Of Culture's Historical Meanderings: Notes toward an Interdisciplinary Poetics

Asma Hichri and Samira Mechri

> The history that gave rise to the relative autonomy of culture, and to the ideological illusions regarding that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And this whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as a progressive revelation of the inadequacy of culture, as a march toward culture's self-abolition. Culture is the terrain of the quest for lost unity. In the course of this quest, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.
> [Culture] is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.
> —Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Culture is undoubtedly a controversial subject that has had a considerable impact on contemporary academic thought. Tracing the socio-historical meanderings of this concept is thus no easy task. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams admits that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1985, 87). The complexity of the concept results from "its intricate historical development" and its rootedness "in several distinct intellectual disciplines," which are often "incompatible" (1985, 87). In attempting to define the concept, Chris Jenks also argues that "culture is an incredibly difficult idea" that "embraces a range of topics, processes, differences, and even paradoxes," which are difficult to resolve, hence its interdisciplinarity and resistance to any singular definition or designation (2003, 1). Yet one cannot refrain from exploring culture's standard—as well as nonstandard—definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines culture as "the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively." Culture also refers to "the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society." In eliciting the etymology of the word, the dictionary also states that "in late

Middle English the sense was 'cultivation of the soil' and from this arose 'cultivation (of the mind, faculties, or manners')," thereby denying culture's innate or natural character.

Rooting culture in politeness, education and intellectual refinement, Harry Levin highlights this connection between culture and husbandry, arguing that "the word culture itself was still close enough to the soil so that it could designate a process rather than a product," hence English writers' "metaphorical" extension of the word to the "training of the intellect" (Levin 1965, 1). Citing a few examples of the figurative use of the term, Levin states that Thomas Hobbes, who equated the education of children with "the culture of their minds" in his *Leviathan*, referred to culture as the "training of the body" (Levin 1965, 1). From this association with husbandry, the meaning of culture has been extended and "sublimated to the point where the concept could be defined, by the Oxford editors, as nothing less than 'the intellectual side of civilization'" (1).

This semantic dimension is concurrent with the definition and etymology of the term *adab* in Arabic. As Issa J. Boullata implicitly claims in his introduction to Ibn Abd Rabbih's *The Unique Necklace: Al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*, culture is synonymous with *adab*, a term that is "understood in modern times to specifically mean literature," but whose significance included in former times

> all that a well-informed person had to know in order to pass in society as a cultured and refined individual. This meaning evolved over the years to reach this connotation, but it started with the basic idea that *adab* was the socially accepted ethical and moral quality of an urbane and courteous person. An intellectual content rooted in the learning of the period was gradually added later on to this quality, particularly *belles lettres* in the form of elegant prose and verse that was as much entertaining as it was morally educational. This included poetry, pleasant anecdotes, proverbs, historical accounts, general knowledge, wise maxims, and even practical philosophy. (Boullata 2006, xiv)

This explanation proves quite illuminating to an understanding of the epistemology of culture. Associating culture with ethical, educational, and belletristic refinement, the definition implicitly provided by *Ibn Abd Rabbih* (860-940) eschews the dichotomy between cultured and uncultured, a predominant view in Classical Western society where civilization denoted being endowed with certain qualities that distinguished the individual or group from the mass or more lowly state of being typified as "barbarian" (Jenks 2003, 5). As made clear in the titles of *The Unique Necklace*'s individual chapters, *adab* is resonant with the cultivation of the spirit, but

not with the civilization of other—presumably less civilised, or less human—cultures or communities. Indeed, an exhaustive definition of culture significantly extends beyond courtesy and civility to cover the political domains of "rulership and authority," "warfare," "orations," "Caliphs, their histories and their battles," as well as the social arena of etiquette, gifting, food and drink, mourning rituals, and proverbs. Additionally, culture is concerned with the anthropological and psychological examination of the nature of humans, the sociological study of lunatics, misers, and parasites, the religious study of asceticism and sermonizing, as well as the artistic study of poetry, prosody, song, and witticism.[1]

A few centuries later, Tunisian Arab historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun identified culture with civilization (or *umran*), human history and social organization. In *The Muqaddimah*, he defines civilization as "savagery and sociability, group feelings, and the different ways by which one group of human beings achieves superiority over another" ([1967] 2005, 89). Additionally, he associates civilization "with royal authority and the dynasties that result (in this manner) and with the various ranks that exist within them" as well as "with the different kinds of gainful occupations and ways of making a living" (89). Intesrestingly, Ibn Khadun roots *umran* in humans' intellectual potential and achievements, more specifically in "the sciences and crafts that human beings pursue as part of their activities and efforts," and "all the other institutions that originate in civilization through its very nature" (89). He thus provides a holistic approach to civilization, equating it with *ḥaḍârah*, or "sedentary culture," a highly developed stage of refinement that represents all the diverse accomplishments of the society from various forms of authority to crafts and industries, and from food, furniture, and architecture to habits of mind and customs (229).

Nevertheless, Ibn Khaldun was critical of the culture of his age—or *ḥaḍârah* (26), the Arabic equivalent to urban civilization. In fact, when Arabs reached "the stage of sedentary culture, of luxury and refinement in food, drink, clothing," and exhibited "perfection" in "their gala days, banquets, and wedding nights," they "surpassed the limit," as Ibn Khaldun points out (230). He therefore draws attention to the hedonistic and lavish lifestyle of Arab rulers, which would later lead to the collapse of the civilization once it reached its apogee. In this particular context, Ibn Khaldun roots civilization in a given nation's material possessions and territorial expansion, arguing that "sedentary culture is the consequence of luxury; luxury is the consequence of wealth and prosperity; and wealth and prosperity are the consequences of royal authority" which is exhibited in the "territorial possessions" that a particular dynasty has acquired (232).

It is worth noting, however, that Ibn Khaldun manifested anti-utilitarian views much earlier than Matthew Arnold, whose elitist undertaking shaped nineteenth-century criticism but did not diverge much from the Medieval Arab-Muslim sociologist's philosophy of culture.

In Western theory, this elitist view of culture was mainly influenced by Arnoldian criticism in the nineteenth century, and later, in modern times, by the writings of such cultural theorists as F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. For Arnold, culture is the "best that has been thought and said in the world" ([1869] 2006, 5). It has "its origin in the love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection*" (34). Arnold's culture is "possessed by the scientific passion, as well as by the passion of doing good" (34), just as Leavis's culture is "the discerning appreciation of art and literature," which only a small intellectual minority can possess, and upon whom depends the "fine living" and "distinction of spirit of the race" (Leavis 1930, 3-4). Similarly, Eliot's cultural orthodoxy glances down at mass culture, identifies culture with religion, and totally ignores science. Such claims have not gone uncontested by social scientists such as William Graham Sumner, who goes as far as to claim that Arnold is a dilettante who merely "stole" culture and attuned it to his "own favourite forms and amounts of attainments" ([1919] 2007, 425). In response to Arnold's definition of culture, Sumner argues:

> Mr. Arnold, the great apostle . . . of culture, tried to analyze it and he found it to consist of sweetness and light. To my mind, that is like saying that coffee is milk and sugar. The stuff of culture is all left out of it. So, in the practice of those who accept this notion culture comes to represent only an external smoothness and roundness of outline without regard to intrinsic qualities. ([1919] 2007, 425)

Dismissing aestheticized definitions of culture, Sumner rather regards it as "the result of training, which brings into intelligent activity all the best powers of mind and body." In order for it to be attained, "such a culture needs no "literary statement or mental conception of what it is," nor does it necessarily require "reading any number of books" (426). On the contrary, culture is acquired through "continual application of literary acquisitions to practice and it requires a continual correction of mental conceptions by observation of things as they are" (426). Culture is not a state; it is a process based on empirical observation and application. Additionally, culture is grounded in "literary and scientific activity," which Sumner points out, are practiced "for gain, for professional success, for immediate pleasure," or self-gratification (429). Such a culture is motivated by "interest," of which it is the secondary result. Had this pragmatic motive

been "removed," Sumner concludes, "culture becomes flaccid and falls into dilettantism" (429).

Such radical statements by a social scientist whose methods were thoroughly empirical are probably unsurprising. It is worth noting, however, that Arnoldian elitism, which has often associated culture with knowledge, "greatness" of mind ([1869] 2006, 38), "sweetness, and light" (40) had already been predicted and criticised by eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. In an avant-garde step towards cultural relativism, Herder asserts that the very thought of a superior European culture is "a blatant insult to the majesty of nature" (1969, 311), a concept from which it etymologically derives (Eagleton 1). In addition to destabilizing the duality of culture and knowledge, Herder draws attention to the elusiveness of any attempt to define culture, as he states that "nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods" (1969, 24).

Bringing to the fore the intricacies of the concept, postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman attempts a thorough survey and taxonomy of its definitions and its various theoretical peregrinations over the centuries. In *Culture as Praxis* (1973), he argues that culture has been apprehended as a hierarchical, differential, and generic concept. As a hierarchical concept, culture was conceived of as "a detachable part of a human being, a possession" ([1973] 1999, 5). Drawing attention at once to the commodification and performativity of culture, Bauman sustains that culture becomes "simultaneously the defining 'essence' and the descriptive 'existential feature' of the human creature," that which distinguishes the human from the natural. Yet, in Bauman's thought, it is precisely this unique quality that compelled Western man "to the agonizing precariousness of a dual, Janus-faced identity;" for "he is a personality, but he also has a personality." The individual is, in Bauman's words, an actor performing an identity, but he also becomes a product of that performance, "created and creating at the same time" ([1973] 1999, 5). In Bauman's materialist reading, culture becomes a mere "possession," which "can be acquired or squandered, manipulated and transformed, shaped and framed." In the same vein, "the quality of a human being can be shaped and framed; but it can be also left unattended, raw and coarse, like fallow land, abandoned and growing wild" (Bauman [1973] 1999, 6).

The commodification of culture as performance and possession to a great extent echoes Ernest Gellner's concept of "bobility," which not only draws attention to the conflation of culture with nobility, but also highlights its artificiality and its entanglement with class and power. For Gellner,

> bobility is a conceptual device by which the privileged class . . . acquires some of the prestige of certain virtues respected in that society, without the inconvenience of needing to practice it, thanks to the fact that the same word is applied either to practitioners of those virtues or to occupiers of favoured positions. It is, at the same time, a manner of reinforcing the appeal of those virtues, by associating them, through the use of the same appellation, with prestige and power. (Gellner [1973] 2003, 38)

As revealed in this definition, Gellner's parodic concept "bobility" not only captures the irony inherent in the hypocrisy of a privileged class that professes nobility and virtue while displaying none, but also questions the significance of titles and "favoured positions" in their entanglement with power and social standing and their failure to reflect high ethical and cultural standards in their holders. Through underlining "the internal logical incoherence of the concept—an incoherence which, indeed, is socially functional" Gellner unveils the absurdity of the cultural values "bobility" purports to defend (38). Confirming the "precariousness of a dual, Janus-faced identity," Gellner's bobility, much like Bauman's hierarchical view of culture, reveals the ideological underpinnings of a concept that can be manipulated and exploited, much in the same way "the quality of a human being" can be fashioned and refashioned, or, "like fallow land," remain "unattended, raw and coarse" (Bauman [1973] 1999, 6). This last statement by Bauman, however, brings us back to the notion of cultivation that the French have associated culture with, thereby confirming anthropologists' entrapment in an oversimplified hierarchical *Weltanschauung* that confounds culture with civilization.

Concurrent with this argument is also Bauman's classification of culture as a differential concept, whereby he draws attention to the way culture was used "to account for the apparent differences between communities of people" ([1973] 1999, 13). Such divergences, Bauman admits, were known even to the Greeks "who did encounter 'other peoples' and were poignantly conscious of their distinctiveness" (13). To account for such distinctiveness, Bauman resorts to cultural anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber's "depth-surface dichotomy of *ethos-eidos*" ([1973] 1999, 88). In this model, the *eidos* of a culture refers to "its appearance, its phenomena, all that about it which can be described explicitly," while its *ethos* denotes its "hidden, deeper reality" i.e. "the total quality'' of culture, which represents "what would constitute disposition or character in an individual" as well as the "ideals and values that dominate the culture and so tend to control the type of behaviour of its members" (cited in Bauman [1973] 1999, 88).

However coherent Bauman's argument seems, it fails to perceive the "hidden, deeper reality" of this dichotomy. For the mere reference to the Greeks' encounter with "other peoples" is tricky. In this respect, Aristotle's statements about slavery and the expediency of the master-slave relationship reveal the interdependence between the hierarchical and differential models, while also pointing out their unseen dimensions as well as the pretexts by which some cultures have sought to subjugate others. Most importantly, Aristotle's argument "that some should rule and others be ruled" and that "from the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule" because for the former "slavery is both expedient and just" (1999, 8) already points out an overlooked facet of Bauman's hierarchical model. Although Bauman highlights the selectivity of this model, arguing that there is no room for a discussion of cultures "in the plural," his critique overlooks the reductionism and essentialism of Aristotle's appreciation of culture. Bauman's claim that hierarchical culture "makes sense only if denoted straightforwardly as *the culture*," and that "there is an ideal nature of the human being," which this culture strives to attain is nothing but an apology for a discriminatory *weltanschauung* that rules out any pluralist interpretation ([1973] 1999, 7).

The third component of Bauman's taxonomy is the generic notion, which rather than pitting refined and coarse ways of life against each other (the hierarchical model), or stressing the dichotomy between the lifestyles of disparate human groups (the differential model), highlights "the dichotomy of the human and the natural world," or "the distinction between '*actus hominis*' (what happens to man) and '*actus humani*' (what man does)." Situating culture within the realm of the human, Bauman's generic concept is concerned with the features that "unite mankind" and distinguish "them from everything else" (Bauman [1973] 1999, 32). In Bauman's thought, drawing this borderline "seems to bear enormous emotional significance to human beings" (30), an argument that Sigmund Freud's definition of culture vindicates.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud deems "cultural all activities and resources which are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them" and "protecting them against the violence. . . of nature" ([1930] 1961, 37). Arguing that these cultural activities represent one "side of civilization," however, Freud states "that power over nature is not the *only* precondition of human happiness," nor is it "the *only* goal of cultural endeavor" (34). Of relevance here is Freud's connection of cultural achievement with the healthy functioning of the human psyche, which draws attention to the need to study culture from a psychoanalytical perspective. In this context, he staunchly asserts that "no feature" can

better "characterize civilization than its esteem and encouragement of man's higher mental activities—his intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements" (41), characteristics that his contemporary, Geza Roheim, unambiguously ascribed to culture. In this context, Roheim argues that the concept inherently encompasses "the sum of all sublimations, all substitutes, or reaction formations, in short, everything in society that inhibits impulses or permits their distorted satisfaction" (1934, 216).

The psychoanalytical dimension of culture—though somewhat limiting in its assumption that the essence of culture and its continuity are based on pleasure and gratification—finds its echo in Georg Simmel's philosophical statements. In his essay, "The Conflict in Modern Culture" (1918), Simmel argues that "we speak of culture whenever life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself—works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws and innumerable others" ([1918] 1971, 375). Rather sociological in nature, however, Simmel's culture "is based on a situation" that can be expressed as "the path of the soul to itself," a process where "the soul is never only what it represents at a given moment, but always 'more,' a higher manifestation of itself" (Simmel [1911] 1998, 116). In this path, "man sees himself as confronting art as well as law, religion as well as technology, science as well as custom. Now he is attracted, now repelled by their contents," at once fused with and estranged by them. Culture is "lodged in the middle of this dualism," as it "comes into being by a meeting of the two elements," namely "the subjective soul and the objective spiritual product" (Simmel [1911] 1998, 117). As such, the meaning of culture "is fulfilled only when man includes in [his own] development something which is extrinsic to him, when the path of the soul leads over values which are not themselves of psychic quality" (Simmel [1911] 1998, 117).

Despite their apparent convergence, however, Simmel's philosophical reflections significantly differ from Freud's psychoanalytical claims. Using culture as a substitute for civilization, Freud not only blurs the boundaries between the two concepts, but he also loses sight of Simmel's arguments with regard to the interaction between individual achievements and "the objective spiritual product" which is extrinsic to the human psyche, namely objective culture. For Simmel, objective culture "designate[s] things in that state of elaboration, development, and perfection which leads the psyche to its own fulfillment or indicates the path to be traversed by individuals or collectivities on the way to a heightened existence," whereas subjective culture denotes "the measure of development of persons thus attained" (1971, 233). By contrast, Freud's conflation of culture with civilization, which clearly echoes the writings of

Karl Marx, Matthew Arnold, and Edward B. Tylor, is further confirmed in his definition of civilization. For Freud, "'civilization' describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes—namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations" (1961a, 36). In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud had already blurred the difference in a more elaborate definition of "human civilization," by which he refers to

> all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts—and I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilization . . . It includes on the one hand all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs, and, on the other hand, all the regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another and especially the distribution of the available wealth. ([1927] 1961b, 6)

It is worth noting that Freud's conflation of culture and civilization is reinforced by a language that uses *kultur* for both.[2] Rather eliciting Bauman's "*actus humani*," Freud's elaborations also implicitly take up Tylor's argument that "culture or civilization . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art. law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" ([1871] 2010, 1).

Tracing the development of the concept of culture and grasping its historical, human, and psychological dimensions indeed attests to its complexity and rich interdisciplinarity. It is worth noting, however, that Bauman's analysis of culture as praxis, despite its deep epistemological purport, somehow falls short of accommodating the major critical perspectives that seek to redefine culture in a constantly changing socio-political environment where cultural norms themselves are reshuffled and redefined. In fact, it was only in his 2011 book, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, that Bauman approaches the concept from a different vantage point, charting its historical meanderings and their role in refashioning our conceptions and appreciations of it.

In this postmodern reflection on culture, Bauman is interested in the historical, rather than theoretical or conceptual, "peregrinations of the concept" (2011, 1), more particularly in how culture has ceased to be a sign of refined taste to become an agent for the preservation of the status quo, or in Franco Moretti's terms, a sign of "the comfort of civilization" (1987, 15). Commenting on "Bourdieu's *Distinction*" and building on his

previously explored taxonomy of culture, Bauman notes how culture exhibited itself, in the past, "as a useful appliance, consciously intended to mark out class differences and to safeguard them" (2011, 5). Acting as "a set of standards and preferences suggested, recommended and imposed on account of their correctness, goodness or beauty," however, "culture had to perform, with equal commitment, two apparently contradictory acts of subterfuge" (5). In distinguishing "high society from low society and the connoisseur of refined tastes from the tasteless, vulgar masses," culture became "as emphatic, severe and uncompromising in its endorsements as in its disapprovals," thereby prescribing what is "desirable and commendable by virtue of being 'how it should be'—familiar and cosy" and what should be, by the same token, "mistrusted and avoided on account of its baseness and hidden menace" (5-6). In this process, Bauman notes, "'culture' entered the modern vocabulary as a declaration of intent; the name of a mission yet to be undertaken"—here Bauman also invokes the metaphor of cultivation of the souls—by "the relatively few educators, called to cultivate souls, and those many who were to be the subject of cultivation; the guardians and the guarded" (7-8). Culture thus instituted a covenant between those who "possessed knowledge" and those who were considered "ignoramuses" (2011, 8). This covenant was "unilaterally endorsed and realized under the exclusive directorship of the newly formed 'educated class'" whose obvious intention "was the education, enlightenment, elevation and ennobling of *le peuple*," a mission that culminated in "the building of a nation, a state, and a nation-state" (8).

The tricky intertwining of these philosophical and "political ambitions," which are part and parcel of an enlightenment project stimulated by "the prospect of colonization of far-flung dominions," made its proselytizing mission flourish on a global scale, thus devising an "evolutionary cultural theory" that elevated the "'developed' world to the status of unquestionable perfection, to be imitated and aspired to . . . by the rest of the globe" (9). Such civilizing efforts, however, seem to have come to a halt with "expeditionary forces" of the empire forced "to return long before they had succeeded in bringing the realities of the life of the native up to the standards espoused in the metropolis" (10). Alluding to the time when Bourdieu collected the data presented in his book, namely the 1960s, a decade known for a wave of decolonization, Bauman points out in this last statement how culture lost both its intent and its position as "a stimulant" to become "a tranquilizer," an agent in the service of the "monotonous reproduction of society and maintenance of system equilibrium, just before the inevitable and fast approaching loss of its position" (11). It was at this "homeostatic stage" that "culture was captured and immobilized, registered

and analyzed, as in a snapshot, in Bourdieu's *Distinction*" (Bauman 2001, 11). What is more interesting here, however, is not Bauman's critique of Bourdieu, but rather his attempt to capture and immobilize, in Bourdieu's spirit, the moment of culture's irredeemable "loss of position" and delve into its origins (11).

As if to fill the gaps in his earlier analysis of culture's functioning as a hierarchical, generic and differential concept, Bauman roots this loss of position in "the transformation of modernity from its 'solid' to its 'liquid' phase," a development his contemporaries prefer to call "'postmodernity', 'late modernity', 'second' or 'hyper' modernity" (11). Bauman justifies the choice of the term liquid by late modernity's "self-propelling" and "obsessive 'modernization', as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long" (11). Though this has been an inherent feature of the postmodern condition, the dissolution of forms of life, Bauman insinuates, is not remedied for by the creation of other, more "solid," stable, or "permanent" forms. No longer functioning as an ideology, culture is rather aimed towards "fulfilling individual needs" (12). The culture of Bauman's liquid modernity is "fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice," as it is no longer designed to serve "the stratifications and divisions of society" (13), but is rather geared towards "acceptance of all tastes with impartiality and without unequivocal preference" (14). Here culture "quickly loses the function of a servant of the self-reproducing social hierarchy" (12), with the implicit caveat that its old Arnoldian "elitism" be turned into "omnivorousness—feeling at home in every cultural milieu, without considering any as a home, let alone the only home" (14).

It is in this same spirit that late 1950s and early 1960s cultural theorists called for a new perspective to the study of culture that no longer viewed it as a yardstick of the development of a nation or community, a cultural turn whose roots should probably be traced back to Herder's avantgarde cultural relativism.[3] Dismissing culture's enlightenment project, which ascribed to Europe the exclusive right to a proselytizing and civilizing mission, "mid-century Marxism and post-1960s conflict theory[4] insisted that culture was more of a guarantor of hierarchy, exploitation, and inequality, and thus saw culture as ideology" (Reed and Alexander 2016, 381), hence the emergence of new forms of culture and taste, definitely less rigid and by no means hierarchical or elitist in nature. The new relativist stance stipulates that "each culture has its own ethical norms and social codes of behavior," which "should be judged only according to the customary standards of that particular culture" (Sassower 2018, 38). "To

appreciate another culture's norms," Raphael Sassower explains in this context (38), "one must shed one's own prejudices (pre-judgments) and go 'native,' immerse oneself in the practices of that culture" (Sassower 2018, 38). In relativizing and contextualizing perceptions and avoiding the "colonialist-like judgment that combines ignorance, arrogance, and intolerance" (Sassower 2018, 38), postmodern sociologists viewed culture as a celebration of human achievement. In fact, "culture in the sense of the arts and fine living" becomes no longer possible precisely at the moment when its elitism prevents "a group or people" from attaining "its political emancipation; and when an imperialist power is forced to come to terms with the way of life of those it subjugates" (Eagleton 2000, 29).

The move away from the equation of culture with civilization and its unavoidably imperialist resonance—which Bauman describes as a loss of position—was announced with the publication of Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958). Hoggart's celebration of working-class culture and Williams's definition of culture as a "whole way of life" ([1958] 1960, XIV) paved the way for the emergence of cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field concerned with "practices, institutions, and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life, and habitual forms of conduct" (Bennett 1998, 28). In this context, cultural studies calls for a changed perception of culture, from one that defines it in semantic terms to one that sees it as a way of transforming both mental and physical behavior and as a system of beliefs where human personalities and human social systems would be possible only in their mutual coordination; for "without culture, neither human personalities nor human social systems would be possible" (Parsons et al. 2001, 16).

Most importantly, cultural studies requires the integration of a plurality of theories and approaches in order to establish "connections" between diverse "forms of power" such as "gender, race, class, colonialism" and "develop ways of thinking about culture and power" that can be used "in the pursuit of change" (Barker 2002, 4). As such, culture is conceived of as a space where "the social gravity of power is organized in both the circulation and use of representations and in the material experiences that shape the everyday life" (Giroux 1996, 15). It is therefore undeniable that the birth of this pluralist discipline, along with the creation of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964, ushered in a new cultural sensibility that transcended culture's old-fashioned elitist poetics. Furthermore, the decline of multiculturalism, the ever-shifting "semantics of culture" (Levin 1965, 1), and the gradual displacement of the multicultural by the transnational have made any attempt at defining or

"studying" culture infelicitous, if not anachronistic. Any "traditional theory of culture," however "well tested in case of stable, isolated, relatively small populations, economically simple and self-contained," has become "hopeless in the face of cultures on the move" (Bauman [1973] 1999, xix). As Bauman admits, "cultures become inter-dependent, they penetrate each other, none is a world in its own right; each one has a hybrid and heterogeneous status, none is monolithic, and all are intrinsically diversified;" hence the urgent need for an interdisciplinarity that confronts and explores the simultaneity and plurality of this new "cultural *mélange*" (Bauman [1973] 1999, xix).

Out of this concoction of disciplines and approaches, cultural studies theorists offered alternative definitions of culture, each of which tried to highlight some of its intricacies. In *Resistance through Rituals*, *Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (1975), Clarke et. al define culture as "the forms in which groups 'handle' the raw material of their social and material existence." Additionally, "'culture' is the practice which realises or objectivates group-life in meaningful shape and form" ([1975] 2003, 10). It is thus clear that culture is a binding force that consolidates the unity of a social group and its collective identity. In this context, Clarke et al. argue that "the 'culture' of a group" is its own "peculiar and distinctive 'way of life'" as well as its "values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life" ([1975] 2003, 10). Furthermore, culture is actuated by "the 'maps of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members," and which "are not simply carried around in the head" but rather "objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a 'social individual'" (Clarke et. al [1975] 2003, 10). As such, "existing cultural patterns form a sort of historical reservoir—a pre-constituted 'field of possibilities'"—that each group "take[s] up, transform[s], develop[s]," thus allowing culture to be "reproduced and transmitted" ([1975] 2003, 11).

In this respect. cultural studies has ushered in a new cultural sensibility where culture is viewed not simply as the fruit of human endeavour, "the distinctive achievements of human groups, including . . . language, tool making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals, and religion" (Fairchild 1967, 80), but also as the sum of mores, values and beliefs that both unite and distinguish individuals and disparate social groups. In this context, the project of cultural studies is to "reinsert culture into the practical everyday life of people, into the whole way of life, into the totality of the social formation" (Grossberg 2010, 203). Dismissing more boldly than ever the elitist Arnoldian sensibility, cultural studies construes

culture as a reclaiming of the popular and the everyday in a conjuncture where the popular has become a hegemonic struggle that seeks to "reconstitute 'the people' and rearticulate their political positions" (Grossberg, 2010, 210).

Advocating a rather semiotic concept of culture, Clifford Geertz argues that "culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly-that is, thickly-described" (1973, 14). Additionally, Geertz associates culture with the production of "meanings embodied in symbols," noting that it is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, 89). Similarly, Stuart Hall relates culture to individuals' way of making sense of the world, stating that "culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings . . . between the members of a society or group" (Hall 1997, 2).

In the same vein, Reed and Alexander's sociological definition of culture takes up the communicative, contextual, as well as symbolic dimensions. As such

> culture refers to the symbolic element of social life, which has been variously conceptualized, identified, and studied: signifiers and their signifieds, gestures and their interpretation, intended and unintended meanings, written discourse and effective speech, situational framing and scientific paradigms, and moral and political ideals. Concretely, culture refers to those social objects and activities which are primarily or exclusively symbolic in their intent or social function, such as art, music, and sports. Analytically, culture refers to the symbolic and ideational element of any social action, social relationship, or historical pattern. (Reed and Alexander 2006, 111-112)

If Reed and Alexander emphasise the ideational hermeneutics of culture which assigns a symbolic dimension to any social or political action and to different forms of aesthetic and artistic expressions, then Peter Jackson underscores the spatial dimension inherent in the study of culture. As a cultural geographer voicing an interest in cultural studies and social theory, Jackson adopts a geocritical approach that emphasizes "the plurality of cultures and the multiplicity of landscapes with which those cultures are associated" (2003, 1). In his *Maps of Meaning*, he insinuates that employing an all-encompassing definition of culture where relations of hegemony and power are both created and contested entails studying culture in the plural. Indeed, a broader study of culture should look at "the cultures of socially marginal groups as well as at the dominant, national

culture of the élite," and should rather be "interested in popular culture as well as in vernacular or folk styles; in the urban as well as the rural; in contemporary landscapes as well as relict features of the past" (2003, xi). Jackson thus suggests a fresh lens from which to study culture in its entanglement with the politics of time, space, and power (xi). Pointing out cultural studies theorists' use of spatial metaphors to highlight culture's entanglement with spatial politics, Jackson employs a geocritical metaphor that captures "the symbolic and ideational element[s]" of culture (Reed and Alexander 2006, 112), arguing that "cultures are *maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible" (Jackson 2003, 2). Like any cartographic image, these "'maps of meaning' codify knowledge and represent it symbolically" (2003, 186). However, they are also "ideological instruments in the sense that they project a preferred reading of the material world, with prevailing social relations mirrored in the depiction of physical space" (Jackson 2003, 186). Nevertheless, as no dominant reading remains unchallenged, these "cultural maps" are equally open to multiple readings (Jackson 2003, 186). Out of this social *mélange*, culture becomes more of a site of hegemonic struggle between social groups over existence, power, and identity. In this respect, James Clifford argues that "'culture' is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings" ready for consumption and interpretation. For Clifford, "culture is contested, temporal, and emergent" (1986, 19), which implicitly suggests a rather anti-teleological conjunctural analysis of the concept.[5]

From culture's various epistemological permeations, it becomes clear that this concept is a politically and ideologically contested territory "on which takes place a continual struggle over meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups" (Storey 2006, xvii). Discussing culture from a geocritical perspective therefore necessarily invokes the notion of geopolitics and cultural geography, where "geography" denotes "a geo-graphing, a form of '[re]writing the earth' that necessarily involves culture, discourse and power/knowledge" (Tuathail and Toal 2005, 65). This claim echoes Hall's argument that the cultural field is irrevocably fraught with the struggle for power, hence his interest in popular culture. Articulating resistance to authority and officialdom, popular culture is, in Hall's terms, a space where the struggle "for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall 1981, 239).

Building on this political concept but reinforcing its spatial and socio-economic dimensions, Henri A. Giroux supplements Hall's discussion of the popular and the hegemonic with his concept of fugitive cultures. Reflecting on his personal experience as a youth born in an inner city, Giroux argues that "fugitive culture" designates less a "rigid cultural formation" than "a conflicting and dynamic set of experiences rooted in a working-class youth culture marked by flows and uncertain interventions into daily life" (1996, 9). Deploying a spatial metaphor, Giroux describes himself and members of his community as "border crossers" who "had to learn to negotiate the power, violence, and cruelty of the dominant culture through their own lived histories, restricted languages, and narrow cultural experiences" and who lived "almost exclusively on the margins of a life that was not of [their] choosing" (1996, 9). Giroux thus reemphasizes the idea of contest over power and hegemony while also reasserting the conjunctural geographic configuration of any conception of culture, whether dominant, fugitive, marginal, or popular.

Ben Highmore's view on cultural studies rather diverges from what theorists of the discipline suggest about it. In *Michel de Certeau: Analysing Culture* (2006), he argues that tracing the birth of cultural studies back to Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* and Williams's *Culture and Society* "is hardly adequate for telling the larger story of how culture (as social life, as complex representations) became something to study in the first place" (15). In this context, he suggests that the birth of culture as field of study has "a history that stretches back to colonial contact and conquest" (2006, 15). Relying on Michel de Certeau's seminal work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he states that "to study this history one has to map ethnology as it expands and mutates across the centuries from the discovery of the New World to the present day" (2006, 15). "Perhaps the single most important enterprise of the human sciences," ethnology is, for Highmore,

> the business of writing human culture, a writing of culture in which the ordinary, the everyday, is simultaneously both inscribed and excised. It is cultural studies as a general and central project of Western culture (in particular), and of the world in general when its powerful groups coalesce and write about other, less powerful groups. (2006, 15)

In this writing, Highmore explains, quoting de Certeau,

> the "ordinary" culture of the other falls on the side of orality and heterogeneity. Such culture is ordered and normalized in the act of writing. . . [It] is remaindered as 'the Indian, the past, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World' is transformed: "invented," "repressed," "changed" by a

writing located elsewhere (the West, the Academy, the State, etc.). (2006, 16)

As a consistent object of de Certeau's attention, the process of "combining repression (erasure) with power (inscription)," whereby "ordinary" culture is othered and circumscribed, operates much in the same way today in the media re-presentations of everyday life (2006, 17). As Highmore points out, "the forms of attention given to everyday life expand enormously: from the varied academic attention it receives" in sociology and anthropology and other "cultural studies courses dedicated" to "popular culture" such as "sport, reading, media studies" to "the massive expansion of the media's interest in the ordinary" (17). However, such inscription of the everyday aims to represent "the ordinary," a space probably so hybrid and heterogeneous, in a "clean and proper" manner, thus creating a "cultural theory" that "remainder[s] the very object it seeks to retain" (2006, 17).

Highmore suggests this new context for cultural studies, arguing that recognizing cultural studies' "structural complicity with colonial ethnology" constitutes the larger ground upon which cultural workers can "make less complicit studies of culture, to allow other voices to be heard" (2006, 18). To capture De Certeau's "methodological imagination" (1) and apply it to cultural studies, Highmore returns to historiography, "more particularly the problem of writing history from 'subjugated standpoints'" (20). This results in a dilemma that is both ethical and epistemological, for knowing "how to write about what is least present (what de Certeau called the 'zones of silence')" intertwines "with the obligation to listen to" silenced voices. Historiographic work thus involves "writing about material that archival practices" deemed unworthy of "retention," because the "subjugated lives" it records "are precisely those lives that fill the courtrooms, the medical wards, and so on, but have no literary production of their own" and thus do not belong to mainstream culture (20).

This claim both validates and contradicts Highmore's later statements in his book *Culture*, published ten years later. In enumerating the meanings of the word culture as listed in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles*, he states:

It could include works deemed worthy by those who claimed they had refined taste. Thus, it wasn't until the middle of the industrial revolution that you had the association of culture with books and other artefacts. Finally, in the mid and late nineteenth century it expands again to include the achievements of a particular society at a particular stage (meaning six) – for instance, Renaissance culture or the culture of the Enlightenment. And then finally (for my dictionary) it opened up again to include all the

"distinctive customs, achievements, products, outlook, etc., of a society or group; the way of life of a society or group." (Highmore 2016, 2)

In fact, the dictionary's association of culture with the intellectual and artistic *zeitgeist* symptomatic of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the printing industry is quite limiting. Moreover, dating the last meaning of culture—where culture is synonymous with refined taste and the "distinctive achievements" of a society or community—back to the late and mid-nineteenth century, when landmarks of Arab culture, such as *The Unique Necklace*, written a few centuries earlier, had already accommodated these various meanings and dimensions, makes the definition quite anachronistic and Eurocentric. While calling for an ethnological and historiographic methodological imagination, cultural theorists still need to eschew the ethnocentric lens from which they have always approached culture and its interdisciplinary intricacies.

Culture's various meanderings across disciplines, ideologies and discourses, while hailed by some, suggest that culture has undergone "nothing less than a transmogrification" (Grossberg 2010, 177). In the 1960s, this interdisciplinary spirit was promoted by cultural studies and well-articulated in the vision and work of the Birmingham center, as Grossberg notes. Assuming that "human existence could only be understood relationally" and "that cultural studies was bound to transgress the boundaries between disciplines"—an approach inherent in a "discomfort with the "disciplinary organization of knowledge," cultural workers then tried to "occupy the middle ground . . . to open up possibilities, to see multiplicities instead of simple difference" (16). In this process, they have diligently tried to eschew the "hyperinflation of (small) disciplines" and "analytic categories, where notions like culture, communication, performance, cartography, or rhetoric increasingly" claim prevalence and centrality (18-19). Ironically, cultural studies' commitment to contextuality, relationality (20), and interdisciplinarity is not without costs. It is this very logic that later leads to its dispersal among disciplines, mainly the humanities and the social sciences, "especially anthropology, each taking a particular aspect or definition of culture for granted" (2010, 184) and domesticating culture to its aims and theoretical framework. As Grossberg rightly argues, "the modern concept of culture" is a mere "rearticulation" of its etymological association with agriculture, or "the tending of natural growth, a practice of domestication" to which the very concept was subjected by various disciplines (2010, 184). It is probably for this reason, Grossberg explains, that in academia, "no single discipline was given responsibility for culture (in the way sociology became the study of society, or political science the study of the state)" (184).

With this metamorphosis, one can no longer assume "that culture is the 'same' thing, or that our existing theories of culture are adequate to the changing ways culture operates in the contemporary conjuncture," let alone conceive of culture as a site "in which people live their experience of historical transformation," or—in Hall's spirit— articulate resistance, a fundamental role it used to play in the postwar years (Grossberg 2010, 179-80). For this concept is now contested, assailed, and transformed by various competing discourses. The challenge was posed, especially in the postwar context, largely by the ever-expanding status and power of science, and more specifically, by the growing perception that the hard or so-called bench sciences provided the only valid ways of knowing (Grossberg 2010, 45). As such, culture was caught "in the midst of an epistemological crisis, one partly of our (intellectuals') own making." Such a crisis, Grossberg notes, "is not limited to the institutions of higher education, or to the corporatization, capitalization, and deprofessionalization of the academy" (2010, 46). In fact, if cultural scientists are disquieted by the extent to which "funding trumps ideas" then what is more unsettling here is the "forms of corporatization that universities seem to be appropriating." Due to such corporatization, Grossberg explains, "the very notion, meaning, and value of education seem to be at best uncertain and at worst under attack" (46). In fact, the value of knowledge itself is contested, since it is up to this corporatized, economic scientism to determine "what counts as knowledge and evidence" in the first place (47).

As culture "matters less," or matters in ways we have not fathomed or charted, Grossberg admits, the "locus" of change is "relocating into economics as the new dominant," since the complexity of people's "lived realities and their experiences of those realities goes through the economic in the first instance, however inseparable they may be from the cultural" (Grossberg 2010, 180). Turning culture's intellectual enterprise into an economic one, the new corporatized scientism seeks to "redefine the very meaning of knowledge," thereby "reconstruct[ing] the loci of 'intellectual' authority" (46). In a conjuncture where cultural apathy prevails, and where culture and the humanities in general are being critiqued for "their growing irrelevance, elitism, and esotericism" (45), one should probably be wary of discrediting intellectual disciplines and reducing them to the status of ideology or subjectivism, lest such agnotological logic would trump culture and knowledge and promote a culture of misinformation, post-truth and induced ignorance. It is worth noting, however, that Grossberg's diagnosis of cultural studies' predicament is not final. On the contrary, what he laments as a loss of meaning and authority is vindicated by Frederick Jameson as a

an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorised sense. ([1991] 2003, 48)

Though thoroughly divergent in perspective, Jameson's diagnosis is not radically different from Grossberg's. While revealing the extent to which culture is claimed by various discourses, both views raise the same unsettling question, namely how cultural workers can "continue to develop contextual tools appropriate to [the] conjuncture" in which culture is embroiled (2010, 211).

This volume is a collection of essays that explore the interfaces of culture and power from politico-religious, linguistic, legal and historiographic perspectives. Aware that interdisciplinarity is at one culture's blessing and *hubris*, this endeavour suggests a holistic view of culture that enacts its dialectical entanglement with power, nationality, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity, the contributors explore culture's manifestations in different socio-economic but also political, theoretical, and discursive contexts. Bearing in mind all the twisting paths of a cognitive, artistic, intellectual, anthropological, and sociological concept, researchers in different disciplines try to reconceptualize cultural politics as well as the culture of politics in diverse aspects of contemporary social life as well as various academic disciplines. Some chapters in this volume seek to relocate culture and cultural studies within academia and analyse the epistemological relationship between culture and education. Others are focused on how the new socio-political challenges that have swept the MENA region in recent years have informed and revitalized our perception, performance and apprehension of culture. Comprising theoretical and critical contributions in the fields of history, religion, philosophy, anthropology, politics, pedagogy, linguistics, and literature, these brilliant discussions invite a reappraisal of the value of culture in our social, legal, political, but also academic realities.

In the first chapter, titled "Citizenship and Religion: The Tunisian Jewish Community," Khadija Arfaoui examines the status and changing socio-political situation of Tunisian Jewry in recent times. The chapter starts with a survey of the history of Tunisian Jewry, namely the range of challenges that were bound to affect their culture and identity in the twentieth century and in recent decades, from their mass departure after World War II and the creation of the State of Israel to the wave of intolerance they faced after January 2011 with the rise of Islamism. More particularly, Arfaoui is interested in highlighting the role of Tunisian