

Provisional Programme for an eight lecture course on Cultural Theory (CT)

This is an anthropology course, but not all the leading experts on CT are anthropologists. CT is a subject in itself. A recent count of publications on the topic came up to over 700 items.

Essentially it started as a practice developed for understanding the comparisons we make. Why do some people decide to take a big risk? And why do others decide it is too dangerous? Before CT entered the field the usual explanations were psychological. The answer would depend on whether you are a bold and risk-taking person, or prudent and risk-averse. The psychological answer doesn't take us very far because most of us are risk-averse on some things and risk-taking on others. The CT range of answers depends on how what the other people in the community judge right and wrong, and what influence they exert on us.

To fill in the background of big decisions, we need to start studying the pressures people are putting on each other. CT is a method for assessing the different social environments which affect individual beliefs and influence individual choice. Two dimensions are enough to bring a fine focus to bear on social constraints. One concerns rules and regulations, that is the grid dimension. In some communities, nothing is regulated, no body minds what you do, or eat, or how you dress. They would be ranked at the bottom end of the grid dimension. At the other end you can think of a community (say a convent, or military unit) where everything is done by rule.

The group dimension concerns whether you live in a bounded community, how much of your behaviour is under pressure to conform to group pressures, (often not rules but moral pressures). The central underlying question is about the relation between ideas and values on the one hand, and the form of the society on the other. Ideas and values are institutionalized in rules, (engaged and made 'concrete', as it were). But at the same time, institutions depend heavily on the life in the ideas they capture. If no one in the community believes in them any more, the institution that is upheld by the ideas will fade out. Grid/group theory focuses on this interaction.

Lecture topics

A dozen topics from which experts will be asked to choose, and give a four-line abstract from which list the course will be constructed.

1. Cultural Bias and Global Climate Change
2. Risk and Uncertainty
3. Group Management : The Household Level: effects of diaspora, effects of immigration
4. Management of the Firm: effects of staff turnover; recruitment and training; perceived injustice.
- 5, 6 and 7. The Withdrawn Enclave (strong group boundary, weak grid regulation)
Sectarianism;
Problems of Authority;
internal government; and of external relations
8. Grid and group applied to decision-making in Financial Institutions
9. Terrorism
10. City Planning and the Problem of Traffic
11. Problems of Tyranny in the Community under one Dominant Culture
12. The challenge of Multi-Cultural Society
13. Hierarchies, Ancient and Modern
14. Equality as an Ideal that is bound to deceive

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