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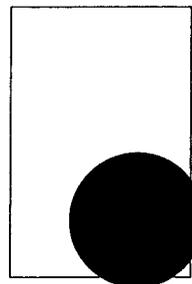
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# Cultural essentialism and cultural anxiety

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## Abstract

'Culturespeak' (Hannerz) is everywhere, but what is 'loose on the streets', says Wikan, is typically an 'old model' of culture, which 'anthropologists have done their share to spread'. Whereas she wants to denounce this model (and reproach anthropologists for endorsing it), we should try to understand how and why, not just culture, but *essentialist* versions of culture have such popular grip; and why anxiety about 'our' culture now seems ubiquitous, permeating much contemporary political and media rhetoric, among both 'majority' and 'minority' populations, and across political and religious spectra. This is a complex issue, and this article is a preliminary study, set mainly within the context of contemporary Europe, of a set of issues that require systematic, local-level, and comparative investigation. Not particularly concerned with anthropology's own internal arguments, the article ends with some pessimistic conclusions about the room for anthropological intervention in contemporary public debates about culture.

## Key Words

anthropology • anxiety • culture • essentialism • ethnicity • multiculturalism • politics  
• racism

## INTRODUCTION

'Culturespeak' (Hannerz, 1999) is everywhere. Marc Augé (1999: 39) remarks that in France 'there has never been more talk of culture: culture as it pertains to the media, young people, immigrants. The intensive use of this word, more or less uncontrolled, is itself a piece of ethnological data'. Unni Wikan (1999: 57), in a trenchant discussion of how a particular conception of culture (she calls it the 'old model') has become 'loose on the streets of Norway', comments '“Culture” has run astray. It is now being used helter-skelter to promote all kinds of special interests. She is discussing multiculturalism in Norway, but her point might apply to multiculturalism elsewhere in Europe or North America, to accounts of culture in development or management studies (Wright, 1998), or to projects of 'European identity' grounded in problematic theories of culture and

community (Shore, 2000). At the same time academic 'culture wars', especially in the USA, have spilled into the pages of journals such *Current Anthropology*, the *JRAI*, and *Social Anthropology*.

As Augé suggests, culture loose on the streets is a social fact of some significance, but what is out and about is, as Wikan argues, typically an 'old model'. In attacking the (mis)use of 'culture' in public discourse about immigrants, Wikan adds (1999: 62): '[This] notion of culture as static, fixed, objective, consensual and uniformly shared by all members of a group is a figment of the mind that anthropologists have done their share to spread.' Whereas Wikan wants to denounce this model – and reproach anthropologists for endorsing it: 'if culture was the problem, then so were anthropologists' (Wikan, 2002: 75) – we should, as Augé implies, try to understand how and why, not just culture, but an *essentialist* version of culture maintains such a popular grip.

By 'cultural essentialism' I mean a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as 'cultural' (and under certain conditions territorial and national) subjects, i.e. bearers of *a* culture, located within a bounded world, which defines them and differentiates them from others. Equally worthy of explanation is that loose on the streets is not just culture, but *anxiety* about culture: 'cultural anxiety'. I use this term with trepidation because of its other connotations: for the record, it has nothing to do with Jungian psychoanalysis (López-Pedraza, 1990), cross-dressing (Garber, 1992), or 'The Institute of Cultural Anxiety'. I refer simply to anxiety about *a* culture and what is happening to it, and not to a culture/society-wide *angst*, akin to 'moral panic', though cultural anxiety in Europe perhaps currently amounts to that. Neither cultural essentialism nor cultural anxiety are new (19th-century Romanticism and 20th-century anti-colonialism *inter alia* articulated the latter), but they now seem ubiquitous, and take many guises, permeating much contemporary political and media rhetoric in Europe among both 'majority' and 'minority' populations, and across political and religious spectra. This article is a preliminary attempt to understand why.

Although mainly concerned with contemporary Europe I note that cultural anxiety is akin to 'culture worry' (Fox and King, 2002), a transatlantic malady afflicting mainly anthropologists. Anthropology's internal debates, seemingly trapped in ever-decreasing circles of argument and counter-argument, with 'culture' well and truly problematized out of existence, are not really my concern, except for two things. First, like the interventions by Wikan (1999) and Turner (1993), they are partly a response to the 'embarrassing overlap' (Hann, 2002: 273) between (some) anthropological usages and those of ethnonationalists and (some) multiculturalists. That is, they intersect with public and popular discourses about culture. Secondly, however, and *pace* Wikan, far from promoting an 'old' vision of culture most anthropologists, and other social and cultural theorists, champion a 'new' version, at complete odds with the 'old'. So far from being essentialist most contemporary anthropological accounts of culture are quite the opposite, to the extent that they are in sharp conflict with the predominant common-sense view (Wikan, 2002: 76–7 now seems to accept this). The result is a philosophical, ideological, and political gap between 'old' and 'new' (see also Trouillot, 2002), and between these and a 'third way' found in discussions about community and identity in institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe. Sahlin's comments:

Irony it is . . . that anthropologists have been to so much trouble of late denying the

existence of cultural boundaries just when so many peoples are being called upon to mark them. Conscious conspicuous boundary-making has been increasing around the world in inverse relation to anthropological notions of its significance. (Sahlins, 1999: 414)

A century ago academic and popular ideas, at any rate popular political ideas, of culture(s) were much closer. This raises difficult questions about how anthropologists, 'experts' on culture, might intervene in debates where protagonists are inevitably talking past each other.

### CULTURE: ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

Back to basics. Adam Kuper's powerful book (1999; see also Kuper, 1992, 1994) is a major overview of the conceptualization of culture in different (national) intellectual traditions which brings out the notion's multiple ambiguities. One, of course, is between 'high' culture, and the anthropological sense of 'culture' as the way of life of a people. In French and Italian there is a further ambiguity, to some extent present in English (see also the *double entendre* in the title of Goody, 1993), relating culture to upbringing, education, and 'cultivation'. When a teacher in Lyons, France said of North Africans, 'They have no culture', I was taken aback. For an anthropologist, to say people 'have no culture' is tantamount to depriving them of their humanity. She did not mean that, but 'only' that they were uneducated (so what could you expect of them?). Similarly, the Australian novelist Richard Flanagan reports that at Oxford, where his tutor routinely referred to him as 'the convict', he was advised that 'Australia had no culture' (*Guardian*, 19 July 2002).

On the other hand, as Kuper points out, in France there was also a close connection between the idea of 'high' culture and *civilization*, understood as 'transnational civilization' (Kuper, 1999: 31; see also Melhuus, 1999: 69). Thus it might be said: 'we' have *civilization*, 'they' merely have culture. This formulation, claims Wikan (1999), like 'ethnic', typifies contemporary discussions of 'minority' cultures, i.e. of regional minorities and minorities of immigrant origin. 'They' are ethnics with 'culture'. Melhuus's critique (1999) rightly takes issue with Wikan on this. Culture-as-way-of-life has become commonplace, especially in social and political discourse around difference and its recognition, and figures increasingly in accounts of both minorities and majorities in ways which reflect the influence of the German conception of *Kultur*; the view that a specific culture *defines a people* (Kuper, 1999: 32ff.), and here the problems begin.

Leaving aside 'high' culture, which only has analytical value when referring to a dominant culture (as in Gellner, 1983: 117), anthropologists routinely distinguish:

- (i) 'Culture' as a characteristic of humanity, which like language undoubtedly exists and is something we all have (hence my reaction to the teacher in Lyons);
- (ii) 'Culture-as-way-of-life' that I have and may share with others;
- (iii) 'A culture' as the property of an identifiable collectivity, and hence *cultures* (plural) consisting of identifiable peoples who are carriers of that culture: 'the specificities of being Norwegian' (Melhuus, 1999: 70; see also Kahn, 1995: ix; Parekh, 2000: 2–3).

Verschueren makes these distinctions clear when he argues: 'the plural form *cultures*

should be avoided . . . Though *culture* is a universal human phenomenon . . . *cultures* do not exist in any real sense of “existence” (Verschuieren, 2001: 40; see also Brumann, 1999).

There are, however, alternative conceptions, visions, doctrines, ideologies, and discourses of a culture. One, shared by many contemporary social scientists and critical theorists in the Anglophone world, is a *dynamic, anti-essentialist* conception that Baumann (1999: 90) refers to it as a ‘processual’ theory, in which cultures and communities are seen as constructed, dialectically from above and below, and in constant flux.<sup>1</sup> Culture is ‘an enactive, enunciatory site’ (Bhabha, 1994: 178), and all cultures, culture bearers, and cultural agents are constantly engaged in creolization. The emphasis is on multiple identities or identifications whose form and content are continuously being negotiated. Questions of ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ are irrelevant, other than as the rhetoric that arises around culture as a site of struggle, or simply as ‘invention’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

This ‘new’ account of culture (Wright, 1998), with theoretical affinities to the anti-essentialism of many feminists and proponents of a gendered perspective in the social sciences, contrasts with Wikan’s ‘old model’ – Baumann (1999) calls it ‘essentialist’, Hann (2002) ‘totalitarian’, I prefer ‘culturalist’ – which stresses that the culture to which I am said or claim to belong defines my essence. Cultures (static, finite and bounded ethnolinguistic blocs labelled ‘French’, ‘Nuer’ and so on) determine individual and collective identities, and the subject’s place in social and political schemas. Cultural membership is thus virtually synonymous with ethnicity (see also Hann, 2002). The principal community attachments which define peoples and their identities are ‘ethnic’; ethnic communities are defined by their cultures (Augé, 1999: 99; Parekh, 2000: 154); and such attachments, identities, and cultures are ‘historic’, ‘rooted’, ‘authentic’, and ‘traditional’. But people(s) may be deprived of their culture, and thence there is a need for ‘cultural conservationism’, a mode of thinking (often present in multiculturalism), in which cultural authenticity must be protected like a rare species. This perspective may also entail a form of biological determinism, with cultural traits and differences seen as ‘bio-cultural’ – ‘fixed, solid almost biological’ (Gilroy, 1987: 39) – and inheritable.<sup>2</sup>

There is an obvious mismatch between these two visions, one intellectual, academic, and postmodern, the other popular, common-sense, and traditional. Nonetheless, Baumann is right to argue that the opposition is not as clear-cut as might appear (Baumann, 1999: 90 ff.), and there is a ‘third way’, which can be detected in the thinking of two influential British writers. Although for Gellner (an anthropologist) culture was a ‘continuing process’ (Gellner, 1987: 168), in writing about nationalism (and in this he is followed by many of those commenting on his theories) he often treated it as the property of a social category, for example, as the way of life, language and so on, of the peasantry which might be appropriated by others and standardized to create the homogeneity which was a prerequisite of modernity. At the same time, ‘the culture in which they have been educated is, for most men, their most precious investment, *the core of their identity*’ (Gellner, 1983: 111, my emphasis). For Parekh (2000: 175), a political scientist, culture ‘has no essence’. It is a ‘historically created system of meaning and significance’ (Parekh, 2000: 143), ‘constantly contested, subject to change . . . its identity . . . never settled, static and free of ambiguity’ (2000: 148), ‘not a passive inheritance but an active process of creating meaning’ (2000: 152–3; later he refers enthusiastically

to Bhabha). In an excellent discussion of Herder, whose ideas were so influential in the formation of the culturalist vision (though see Hann, 2002: 261), Parekh distinguishes between culturalism and naturalism (the view of an unchanging human nature), and distances himself from both (Parekh, 2000: 69–78). Adopting a position close to the theoretical consensus on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on the relationship between language and thought, he concludes that ‘human beings are neither determined by their culture, nor are they transcendental beings whose inner core or basic nature remains wholly unaffected by it’ (Parekh, 2000: 158). Yet they are ‘culturally embedded’ (Parekh, 2000: 10, 69), and cultures are ‘unique human creations that reconstitute and give different meaning and orientation to those properties that all human beings share . . . and give rise to *different kinds of human beings*’ (Parekh, 2000: 122, my emphases). Moreover, ‘membership of a cultural community . . . structures and shapes the individual’s personality’ (Parekh, 2000: 156), offering ‘a sense of rootedness, existential stability, the feeling of belonging to an ongoing community of ancient and misty origin, and ease of communication’ (Parekh, 2000: 162).

This view of culture and identity, with features of ‘old’ and ‘new’, represents a distinctive perspective highly influential in debates about European identity in the EU and Council of Europe, where full-blown essentialist or postmodern visions of culture are notably absent. In this socio-historical, political, legal, modernist, and ‘Sciences Po’ vision, national identities are constructed, not natural, but this is a long and difficult process. They carry great emotional and symbolic weight and are difficult to dislodge. Hence the best policy is to recognize this and use them, and the regional identities of which they are often composed, as building blocks. We all have multiple identities, and there is no reason why these should not be complementary: region and nation and Europe. The Soviet Union failed to create a transnational Soviet identity because it forgot this (Altmann, 2001). Kahn (1995: 8) has a point: ‘Despite . . . taking on board the postcolonial critique, we cannot seem to escape the representation of cultural difference in realist and/or essentialist modes’.

Where is anthropology in this? Wikan (1999, 2002) poses the difficult question, for those wishing to retain it, whether the notion of culture is irredeemably essentialist. Kuper’s 1999 book and earlier articles focus specifically on how a particular conceptualization of culture has dominated anthropology in the USA and has latterly taken the form of ‘an extreme relativism and culturalism, the program of Geertz, but stripped of all reservations’ (Wikan, 1999: 206). Kuper is writing against the background of ancient disputes within Anglophone anthropology between what was previously presented as ‘British-style’ emphasis on social structure (derived from French, and British, structural functionalism), hence ‘social’ anthropology, and ‘American’ style emphasis on culture (derived from German-influenced Boasian ‘cultural’ anthropology). In replying to Kuper’s (1994) earlier formulation of this critique, Sahlins defends the (American) tradition in which he himself operates, and refutes the idea of culture attributed by Kuper and others to older-style American anthropology. ‘It is astonishing’, he argues, ‘to claim that our intellectual ancestors constructed a notion of cultures as rigidly bounded, separated, unchanging, coherent, uniform, totalized and systematic’ (Sahlins, 1999: 404). ‘Ethnography’, he adds (1999: 411) ‘has always known that cultures were never as bounded, self-contained and self-sustaining as postmodernism pretends that modernism pretends’.

Extreme cultural relativism, as in the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with its supposition of linguistic determinism and cultural incommensurability,<sup>3</sup> is undoubtedly a candidate for a charge of cultural essentialism, and any anthropology resting on such propositions might rightfully be placed in the same dock. But dynamic, *dialogic* conceptions of culture avoid the pitfall of incommensurability. Certainly some anthropologists, sometimes, espouse the static, essentialist view of culture, as Wikan claims, but this is not as general or as generalized as she implies, certainly not in the last 40 years. Parekh (2000: 77–8), in listing the ‘fallacies’ in Herder’s thinking (holism, distinctiveness, historicism, closure, ethnicization of culture, cultural determinism, cultural autonomy, treating culture as a ‘self-acting collective agent’, i.e. reification, and ‘dissociat[ing] culture from the wider political and economic structure of society’), adds that they also ‘mar the otherwise excellent works of Durkheim, Malinowski, Ruth Benedict’ (Parekh, 2000: 348). Such fallacies are, of course, those of cultural essentialism. I would add only the belief that culture determines subjectivity and personality, and remind Parekh that *these criticisms are accepted by most contemporary anthropologists* themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving anthropology’s very own culture wars, let me unpack further some of the essentialist foundations of the idea of culture in the ‘old’ model.

### CULTURAL RACISM, FUNDAMENTALISM, ESSENTIALISM

The problem is to account for the popular tenacity of cultural essentialism and the prevalence of cultural anxiety. I argue that although it may be an adjunct of classic, biological racism, as well as of so-called ‘new’ (cultural) racism, or ‘cultural fundamentalism’, cultural essentialism is *sui generis*, a specific idea with a lengthy political and social history in Europe, closely bound up with the construction of the nation and the nation-state as the primary building block of political society, local and global, since the 18th century.

There is a long-standing, often futile, argument about what constitutes racism. Back et al. (2001: 6) make the excellent point that it is best understood as a ‘multiply inflected and changing discourse that organizes and defines human attributes along racial lines that code in an exclusive way the definition of identity, entitlement and belonging’. Suffice to say that although ‘race’ and racism are frequently used in popular and public discourse in the Anglophone world and beyond in looser fashion, classic racism, racism *sensu stricto*, of the kind which emerged strongly in the 19th century to play a large part in 20th-century politics, was grounded in *biological* essentialism and determinism, the idea that human beings could be placed in groups based on physical characteristics, or more deeply, their genetic make-up, and that an individual’s personality and likely behaviour could be read off from that membership. During the 1980s, however, writers in Britain and France detected a so-called ‘new’, ‘cultural’ racism, the name given to the enunciation of difference on cultural grounds (e.g. between British or French and immigrants) of the kind found in public statements by politicians such as Le Pen. Thus, according to Taguieff (1988: 14) ‘racist discourse was “culturalised” . . . abandoning, sometimes ostentatiously, the explicit vocabulary of “race” and “blood”’.

‘Cultural racism’ is often conceived as classic ‘racism in disguise’ (Stolcke, 1995: 4), articulated through a language of essentialized cultural difference (Barker, 1981; Policar, 1990; Seidel, 1986; Taguieff, 1988, 1990; Todorov, 1993). This shift – through which the (new) right re-presented itself in the late 1970s and 1980s, and marshalled a

counter-left consensus with neo-liberalism and nationalism at its core – occurred, it was argued, because it was no longer possible to speak publicly of perceived difference through the language of the ‘old racism’ which events of the 20th century had so discredited. Thus new/cultural racism was a subterfuge, veiled speech, hiding old racism from the public gaze. Those who spoke of cultural difference would, it was implied, have talked about racial difference if free to do so, and indeed did so, in inner circles and esoteric literatures (Seidel, 1986).

Although cultural racism of this sort undeniably exists, more traditional forms of racism are not confined to private worlds nor articulated only in coded speech and, as Gilroy (1987) and others have pointed out, certainly not absent from popular discourse. Back et al. (2001) provide many examples, though emphasizing the difficulties involved in interpreting what happens in practice in everyday life, on the streets, and in soccer grounds, and reading off from it simplistic accounts of hooliganism, racism and fascism. The hostility that exists at street level is in fact sometimes scarcely worth the designation cultural racism or racism *sensu stricto*, if by that we mean beliefs grounded in, and articulated through, theorized accounts of biological difference, as in the eugenics movement, or in intellectualized forms of anti-Semitism. When the five young white men approached the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in south London with ‘Wot, wot, nigger?’, one imagines there was no highly theorized conception of difference in their minds, biological or other, or much else besides murderous intent. As Back et al. (2001: 26) comment, few British soccer ‘hooligans’ begin to comprehend the ideologies and policies of racist groups such as the National Front or the British National Party. This is not to deny that common-sense xenophobia – as we might call it, à la Gramsci ‘common-sense, demotic, popular racism’ (Back et al., 2001: 123–4) – while existing apart from theorized or intellectualized forms, is nonetheless in their shade (see also Wilson, 2002: 226).

Taguieff (1990: 117) has argued that the shift to cultural racism shows that ‘racism can be articulated in terms of race or culture . . . [Racism] does not just biologize the cultural, it acculturates the biological’. Distinguishing between ‘discriminatory’ (the classic form) and ‘communitarian’ racism, he argues that the latter ‘establishes difference or group identity as an absolute . . . The human species is broken down into self-contained, closed totalities. The differentialist imperative is the need to preserve the community as is, or to purify it’. Thus, cultural differences are ‘naturalized’ and rendered ‘totally unbridgeable’ (Policar, 1990: 105).

Todorov (1993: 90–4) puts it slightly differently. Distinguishing between ‘racism’ (practice) and ‘racialism’ (ideology/doctrine), he sees the latter as constituted by five principles: the existence of races, the continuity between physical type and character, the action of the group on the individual, unique hierarchy of values, knowledge-based policies, i.e. the need to act on the other four principles. He then adds that rejection of the first principle may leave the others intact and thus lead to a ‘culturalism that is in other respects very similar to racialism’ (Todorov, 1993: 94). Tracing these developments to 19th-century thinkers such as Renan and Taine whose ideas foreshadow this kind of contemporary thought, he adds:

The term ‘race’, having already outlived its usefulness, will be replaced by the much more appropriate term ‘culture’; declarations of superiority and inferiority . . . will be

set aside in favor of a glorification of difference . . . What will remain unchanged . . . is the rigidity of determinism (cultural rather than physical, now) and the discontinuity of humanity, compartmentalized into cultures that cannot and must not communicate with one another . . . racist behaviors [appeal] to nationalist or culturalist doctrine, or to the 'right to difference'. (Todorov, 1993: 156–7)

This last point refers to debates in France during the 1980s and 1990s (to some degree reflected in Britain) concerning the validity of according ethnic and cultural difference any social or political recognition. Difference, says Silverman, was 'demonized', regarded at the very least as an 'irritant, a stain, a sign of parochialism, backwardness and tradition which needed to be removed in the name of civilization, enlightenment and progress' (Silverman, 1999: 41), and 'any concession to "Anglo-Saxon" concepts of ethnic identity' was considered 'simply a reinforcement of Le Pen's exclusivist brand of cultural nationalism, or . . . an endorsement of the racial policies of Nazi Germany and South African apartheid' (Silverman, 1999: 58). Thus 'respect for difference' pandered to the new right, which had recuperated liberal language for its own purposes (Silverman, 1991: 469, 1999: 47). This is what Taguieff (influential in this debate) meant when he referred to the 'implicit reformulation of "racism" in the vocabulary of difference' (Taguieff, 1988: 336). By 'respecting difference', or recognizing the 'right to difference', the anti-racist *assumes the difference which the racist applauds*. For the left, the language of difference was *ipso facto* racist.

The problem, however, is not *difference*, but elevating it into an absolute, fundamental, humanity-defining trait, and using it as justification for the refusal of mixing: ('mixophobia', Taguieff, 1988: 490, 1990: 120) as when the 'thesis of inassimilability of non-European immigrants and the racist overlapping of biological and cultural arguments are used to promote respect for differences' (Taguieff, 1990: 116–17). Rather as Parekh remarks of Herder that he 'cherishes a cultural plural *world* but not a culturally plural *society*' (Parekh, 2000: 73), Todorov comments: 'Contemporary xenophobia accommodates itself perfectly well to the call for the "right to be different": an entirely consistent relativist may demand that all foreigners go home, so they can live surrounded by their own values' (Todorov, 1993: 60; see also Hannerz, 1999: 398). But this kind of difference recognition is not the same as that which is grounded in non-essentialist forms of acknowledging and respecting differences, e.g. of religious practice. If we do not draw this distinction then we are in danger of throwing the (cultural) baby out with the (racist) bathwater, as Taguieff (1988: 486, 490) himself perhaps accepts.

Where there is a naturalizing or 'biologizing' of culture, 'cultural racism' would indeed seem appropriate. (A *Guardian* headline, 1 March 2002, referring to attacks by Hindus on Muslims read 'India in crisis as race violence spreads', an illustration of the 'racialization' of religion.) But a number of writers have argued that besides cultural racism in the senses defined by Barker, Policar, Taguieff, Todorov, and Wright, there is another, related phenomenon with similar discursive motifs, which is also sometimes called 'cultural racism', but which should be distinguished from it (Wieviorka, 1997: 31). This is 'cultural fundamentalism' (Stolcke, 1995; see also Amselle, 1998: 39 ff.) or 'ethnic absolutism' (Gilroy, 1987: 59). Todorov's 'culturalism' is closer to this form of differentiation than it is to biologized cultural racism.

Stolcke's account of cultural fundamentalism points to the rise of a 'rhetoric of

exclusion and inclusion that emphasizes the distinctiveness of cultural identity, traditions, and heritage among groups and assumes the closure of culture by territory' (Stolcke, 1995: 2). She continues, 'Rather than asserting different endowments of human races, contemporary cultural fundamentalism . . . emphasizes differences of cultural heritage and their incommensurability' (Stolcke, 1995: 4). The idea, found in some anthropological accounts, that differences between cultures are unbridgeable (Taguieff refers to 'incommunicability, incommensurability, and incomparability', 1990: 117; see also Kuper, 1994: 539; Parekh, 2000: 69; Policar, 1990: 104; Wieviorka, 1997: 56, and others), is one of two basic assumptions of cultural fundamentalism. The other is that 'relations between cultures are by "nature" hostile and mutually destructive because it is in human nature to be ethnocentric; different cultures ought, therefore, to be kept apart for their own good' (Stolcke, 1995: 5). I agree with Stolcke that contemporary discourse about immigrants or asylum seekers is not simply disguised racism. Though there may be elements of this, and 'metaphors can certainly be mixed' (Stolcke, 1995: 8), she rightly argues that the emphasis is on 'reifying cultural boundaries and difference' (1995: 12). Moreover, although the discourse of cultural fundamentalism may refer to 'blood' or 'race', it is not merely 'a kind of biological culturalism' (Stolcke, 1995: 5), as Taguieff contends. Differently from classic racism, cultural fundamentalism 'segregates cultures spatially' (Stolcke, 1995: 8), i.e. not hierarchically. They are thus 'alternative doctrines of exclusion' (1995: 7), though the same utterance may contain elements from both discourses, and one might add that Wieviorka's (1995: 38–9) categories of old-style racism ('infra', 'fragmented', 'political' and 'state') also apply to (biologized) cultural racism and to cultural fundamentalism.

A further distinction is needed, however, between cultural fundamentalism and something which is much more general and widespread: cultural essentialism. The former is *grounded in* the latter, but essentialist doctrines do not necessarily give rise to culturalist discourses of the kind to which Stolcke refers. Cultural essentialism is, I repeat, the idea that culture in the anthropological sense determines individual and collective identities. An integral component of some kinds of anthropology (or of anthropology generally at some stages in its history), we may observe cultural essentialism, often accompanied by the language of claims and rights, in situations as diverse as: 'majority' perceptions of 'minority' populations; 'minority' populations' own representations of themselves and others; debates about 'indigenous' peoples, and so on.

That essentialism underpins systems of categorization in multicultural societies is well-documented. Ethnic, cultural, national, and often religious identities and stereotypes are frequently conflated in the labelling of populations, though in different ways. Whereas in Africa, for example, ethnicity is rarely associated with nationality, it is in Europe, and is frequently the basis for the identification of 'others', including migrants: 'Irish', 'Pakistanis', 'Senegalese', 'Moroccans', 'Turks', 'Ugandans', and 'Nigerians'. Though by no means the sole basis of categorization, such ethnicization endows 'other' national categories with essential cultural properties (Pratt, 2002: 38). Theoretically, cultural diversity cannot be reduced to incommensurable and homogeneous entities (Wieviorka, 1997: 56); in practice it happens constantly. Moreover, as Turner remarks in commenting on Stolcke's article, cultural fundamentalism (I would say 'essentialism') is not confined to right-wing xenophobes: 'an often equally fundamentalist [*sic*: essentialist] multiculturalism is becoming the preferred idiom in which minority ethnic and

racial groups are asserting their right to a full and equal role in the same societies' (Stolcke, 1995: 17). Cultural essentialism means demanding the right for Ulster Protestants (or Catholics) to walk down the 'Nationalist Garvaghy Road' in defence of their 'tradition'.

## ESSENTIALISM AND ANXIETY

'If people are doing this thing called bounding and closure and essentialism, should this not be recognized as a real social phenomenon rather than shunned as a terrible mistake?' (Friedman, 2002: 30)

'Deculturation', says Todorov (1993: 251), is a 'misfortune'. The Herderian roots of cultural conservatism are well exposed by Parekh. Herder, he says, saw cultures as 'self-contained wholes that are corrupted by external influences' (Parekh, 2000: 76). For Herder, a culture was 'an "extended family" representing one language, one culture, one people and "one national character", and should at all cost avoid dilution and loss of its internal coherence' (Parekh, 2000: 71). Concern about cultural identity and loss, 'cultural anxiety', is a venerable theme within Europe from the 18th century onwards, especially among minorities in the old imperial systems (Hapsburg, Ottoman, Tsarist). It also occurred among regional minority intellectuals in France, influenced by Romantic dreams of a resurrected Latin culture and society, who rallied to Herder's call: 'National cultures, where are you?' In contemporary Europe, we find it among first and second generation migrants worried about their children's loss of religious and cultural values that families brought with them. But cultural anxiety is something that manifests itself among both minorities *and* majorities.

Currently, the UK is riddled with anxieties, cultural and other, about the inflow of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers ('bogus'), the influence of the EU ('Brussels'), or the USA ('Washington'), and is not alone (e.g. Gullestad (2002) on Norway; Jenkins (2000) on Denmark; and more generally Borneman and Fowler (1997: 488) on the 'anxiety' of Europeanization). Concerning France, Silverman (1999: 47; see also Taguieff, 1990: 120; Wieviorka, 1997: 182–3) writes of 'fears of mixing, miscegenation and hybridity', of the kind expressed by Gobineau, present in contemporary arguments for the 'defence of a European civilization which is threatened today by global capitalism and the incessant mixing of cultures and peoples', e.g. 'McDonaldization' (see also Webb (2001) on Germany). Shore (1997: 171), discussing how threats to European culture, e.g. from American and Japanese 'cultural imperialism', are articulated, comments that while couched in commercial terms, they are 'often combined with xenophobia . . . and fears of foreign contamination', adding how striking it is that 'metaphors of "purity" and "danger" characterize much of the language'. And globally there is Islam, but let us not be fixated by 'Islamophobia', which in any event needs to be historicized. (Todorov (1993: 301) quotes Chateaubriand 200 years ago describing Islam as 'an enemy of civilization, systematically favoring ignorance, despotism, and slavery'.) Nor are these anxieties confined to any particular segment of the right–left political spectrum (e.g. anti-globalization protests). This assessment of the nature and extent of cultural anxiety is, frankly, based less on direct empirical evidence than on a reading of secondary sources, and of contemporary European political and media discourse. Detailed ethnographic

investigation is needed, but if I am correct, how may we account for it? Here I only sketch some suggestions (see also Hannerz, 1999: 402).

As previously implied, I do not believe that cultural essentialism and anxiety should be interpreted as veiled racism: they are not 'race cloaked as "culture"' (Wikan, 2002: 144). Though culturalism does not preclude racism, and *vice versa*, it is not itself racist. Nor is it a form of ideological displacement/false consciousness ('the economy, stupid'), though there may be elements of that too. Often enough, rightly or wrongly, people really are concerned about 'their' culture, and often enough their ideas are grounded in essentialism. *Pace* anthropologists and others who espouse alternative accounts, it might be argued that many people insist on an essentialist reading of culture seeing in it something which represents them in some deep sense and that defines their 'real' selves. As Brumann puts it: 'like it or not, it appears that people – and not only those with power – want bounded culture, and they often want it in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized, and timeless fashion that most of us now reject' (Brumann, 1999: S11). Brumann's point is thought-provoking, but ahistorical: essentialism is not natural or universal. But, then, whence its source? When, where, and how does this consciousness of *a* culture, and of cultures, of 'our' as opposed to 'their' culture, and of 'us' as cultural subjects (*We, The Tikopia*) become significant, especially politically significant?

The contours need to be documented, though we can safely say cultural essentialism is not only a phenomenon of modernity (certainly in Europe it may be found in other epochs, e.g. the *ancien régime*) or of 'contact' (Tikopia?), but its contemporary tenacity and associated anxiety require explanation. The causes are, I believe, complex, operating on many levels. Friedman's explanation of 'trans-X+hybridity+globalization' discourse (Friedman, 2002: 26) as a reflection of the socio-political position of global elites offers one clue. Cultural anxiety could in the long view be seen as a response to 'expanding modernity' (Taylor, 1998: 212). In the immediate conjuncture, however, a more likely source is neoliberal globalization, which has increased uncertainty everywhere. Thus Gullestad (2002: 48) attributes current Norwegian insecurity to changes in the international scene post-Cold War, concerns about the EU, the 'modernization' of the welfare state, and economic restructuring and resizing. In an epoch of 'uprooting' (to use Handlin's term) or 'disembedding' (Giddens), anxiety is unsurprising, but why should this be articulated through culture, and an essentialist version of culture at that?

When Friedman (2002: 32), asks whence 'the straw man of essentialized homogeneity', his answer is intellectual history, and this is also important. In the past two centuries, cultural essentialism, though it did not originate with nationalism, has been strongly bound to it. Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), leaning heavily on Taguieff's 'differentialist racism', see a connection between nationalism and racism, but unless national identity is specifically articulated through a biological/genetic discourse, the significant thing is its close relationship with cultural essentialism (see also Stolcke, 1997: 72). Long-term processes of *nationalization*, nation-building, which fostered a sense of unique, homogeneous, and national cultural identities, constitute 'background noise' (Grillo, 1998: 134) in contemporary Europe, and nationalist, and, yes, racist, versions of *a* culture continue to dominate the popular imaginary. In this context, conjunctural processes such as neoliberal globalization and transnationalism manifestly threaten ways of life and livelihood, and pose difficult questions regarding identity. Although globalization and transnationalism are often celebrated as liberating us from essentialism, by challenging

the idea that 'we' are national cultural subjects, bearers of *a* culture, they actually generate anxiety and conservatism.

Large-scale, long-term processes are a necessary precondition for the generation of contemporary cultural anxiety but they are not sufficient. Ethnography is needed to explain how these processes are refracted through national and local contexts and why a particular politics of culture emerges in specific situations, as in Riccio's (1999) account of anti-immigrant hostility in Rimini, Italy. If, in the USA, anxieties about culture and multiculturalism are bound up with threatened hegemonies, they are also concerned with the long-standing 'American dilemma' around inequalities of race. The 'European dilemma' (Schierup, 1996) shares something of this, but is more closely linked with the trajectory of immigrant minorities, many from former colonies, who often happen to espouse 'other' religions such as Islam. Nationalism and regionalism in the context of an expanding EU are also of manifest significance, and in a British context certainly something needs to be said about class. 'Race', 'nation', 'culture', and 'class' are woven together in complex ways in different intellectual and national political traditions and give rise to different anxieties – or at least different expressions of anxiety – which deserve close attention.

This is a preliminary ground-mapping of a field which requires systematic investigation, not least from a comparative perspective. Let me end, however, with some consideration of where this leaves anthropology.

#### CULTURE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Kuper (1999: x) has concluded that culture, that 'hyper-referential word', should be replaced with more precise terms such as 'knowledge, or belief, or art, or technology, or tradition, or even ideology'. This, if you will, is a fourth vision of culture, and perhaps the concept is now so irrevocably polluted by its associations that, like 'race' for an earlier generation, it should be abandoned as a term of art (see also Trouillot, 2002). Hannerz (1999: 396) calls this 'an ostrich response. The problem will not go away just because a rather small group of academics decides to banish a word from their own vocabulary'.

Although sharing many of the reservations (e.g. Wilson, 2002: 211, 229), like Hannerz, I am not wholly convinced that culture lacks analytical value and should be jettisoned; certainly 'Culture (iii)' has no credibility, but 'Culture (ii)' may still have use. Nonetheless, I concur that, whatever else, culture is an *explicandum*, not an *explicans* (Kuper 1999: xi), and surely less significant as an analytical tool than as an object of analysis, especially when out and about as ideology and practice. Just as anthropology has dispensed with 'race', but not racism, as object of inquiry, so now there is also culturalism, and concern about misuse 'should not prevent us from examining the contradictory roles that essentialist assumptions about differences perceived to be of cultural origin play in both the exercise of power and everyday practices of contestation' (Andrade, 2002: 253).

What room, then, for intervention in the use and abuse of 'culture' in contemporary discourse? Brumann and Sahlins are correct: the disjunction between vernacular, common-sense, and essentialist conceptions of culture which dominate public discourse (as in Norway), and theorized, and intellectualized accounts of academics and functionaries (postmodernist or modernist), with their very different social and political agendas, has never been greater. In the 19th century, especially in middle European

ethnology, there was no real gap; ethnological and ethnonational perspectives were close, the former feeding and justifying the latter (and vice versa). There were hesitations (e.g. Renan), but generally public and scientific discourse converged (see also Silverman, 1999: 42; Todorov, 1993: 147). This is far from the case today. The result is a 'dialogue of the deaf' (Turner, 1993: 411), or perhaps a 'shouting match' (Hannerz, 1999: 399). One response, à la Kuper, is to enter the public debate about culture from *en haut* (Kuper, 1999: 226 ff.). Hannerz himself seeks 'a more persuasive way of talking about contemporary culture which stands a better chance of engaging with at least some of the concerns now underlying cultural fundamentalism' (Hannerz, 1999: 399), and proposes rules for an engagement which would foster a more processual, interactionist, and civic conception of culture. An intercultural dialogue, perhaps, but between the hard of hearing?

Take the reception accorded those parts of the Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000) dealing with 'British' identity. There was a paradigmatic disjunction between what the Report said and what it was represented as saying. Although three-quarters treated employment, housing, education, policing and so on, the media fastened on one small section concerning what might be called 'the difference agenda'. Press and politicians objected to the Report's (real or imagined) discussion of 'Britishness', and the need to 'rethink the national story'. The conservative *Daily Telegraph* (followed by the liberal *Guardian*) saw this as the key issue, and headlined: 'Thinkers who want to consign our island story to history' (10 October 2000), adding: 'The report's suggestion that the word "British" is racist has finally frightened even those ministers who thought they could never go wrong by appeasing such doctrines' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 2000). What the Report actually said was, 'Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations. Whiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, but it is widely understood that Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is racially coded' (Parekh Report, 2000: 38). The 'Executive Summary' argued that the Report raised questions about Britain 'as an imagined community, and about how a genuinely multicultural Britain urgently needs to reimagine itself'. The complex assessment ('reimagining the inescapable changes of the last 30 years'), devised by some of the most sophisticated British academics, in seminar mode, was at such odds with the 'old model' that their arguments were simply incomprehensible.

Wikan's (2002) involvement in the multicultural debate in Norway further illustrates the difficulties and dangers. Whereas Parekh sought to defend multiculturalism through a nuanced view of identity, Wikan went for the jugular, attacking multiculturalism for its essentialism and its (anthropologically-inspired) misuse of culture, posing some difficult and important questions even if her answers were at times misconceived, inconsistent, and open to misinterpretation. She positioned herself as liberal, even neoliberal (there is no such thing as culture, she seemed to be saying, only individuals and their rights), and conservative (stressing the importance of adherence to historic Norwegian 'core values'). Strongly anti-essentialist (Wikan, 2002: 87–8), her own essentialism shines through (e.g. Wikan, 2002: 139). To her dismay, her account of the 'dangerous facts' (Wikan, 2002: 50) of immigration appealed to anti-immigrant sentiment, and she found herself with unwanted political allies (the right-wing Norwegian Progress Party), which reduced her to tears (Wikan, 2002: 8). Despite these difficulties, she claimed

victory: 'Norway is now ready to stand up for human rights, over and above "culture"' (Wikan, 2002: 12). But victory for whom, and at what price?

I am reluctant to end pessimistically, and Wikan's intervention, and more generally the actual role of anthropologists in debates about multiculturalism in Scandinavia and elsewhere, deserve further detailed study, but the limited evidence suggests that prospects for fruitful dialogue are unpromising, and an understanding of the contemporary politics of culture perhaps explains why.

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### Notes

- 1 Among many others, Baumann, 1999; Brumann, 1999; Friedman, 2002; Gellner, 1987; Grillo, 1998; Hannerz, 1987, 1999; Kahn, 1995; Kuper, 1999; Modood, 1998; Parekh, 2000; Shore, 2000; Silverman, 1999; Turner, 1993; Vertovec, 2001; Werbner and Modood, 1997; Wright, 1998.
- 2 Ethnonationalism rests on ahistorical, quasi-biological assumptions. Although believing identities to be rooted in history, ethnonationalists see them as unchanging; the Serbs at the battle of Kosovo in 1389 are the self-same Serbs defending it in 1989.
- 3 'Incommensurability' refers to (i) a cultural and moral relativism which claims there are no grounds to compare/judge one culture against another, one of Herder's legacies (Parekh, 2000: 69; see also Kahn, 1995: 81; Kuper, 1994: 539); (ii) the impossibility of intercultural communication, an idea excoriated by Gellner (1987: 167-8). The former need not entail the latter, nor, as Touraine observes (1997: 292), need it 'lead to the ghetto'.
- 4 Kuper (1999: 208) accepts that contemporary American anthropologists demand that ethnography 'represent a variety of discordant voices, never coming to rest, and never (a favorite term of abuse) "essentializing" a people or a way of life', and agrees they disclaim ideas of natural differences and primordial identities (Kuper, 1999: 239). He nevertheless argues that stressing difference makes it difficult to counter essentialism, and that attempts to evade it by 'mak[ing] identity into a cultural construct' which then 'invests a person with an identity' (Kuper, 1999: 241), end as 'doubly essentialist': 'one has an essential identity, and this derives from the essential character of the collectivity to which one belongs' (Kuper, 1999: 238). Moreover, emphasizing culture makes it 'the only power in the land' (Kuper, 1999: 241), and cultural, as opposed to social claims, the only ones of significance (see also Wikan, 1999).

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