Prof. Dr. Wolfgang MüllerFunk

Cultural Theory, PhD seminar 2019/20 Masaryk Univerzitá Brno, 18. 10. 2019, 10 a. m. – 2 p.m.

1.  „Culture"

1.1. Etymology. Culture/culture

The word culture derives from the Latin word 'colere', which means cultivating and cultivating, it has a rural connotation und works on the binary opposition nature-culture.

1.2. Culture vs. Civilisation

1.3. Some definitions:

    1.3.1.  "[…] the whole way of life of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also ist culture." "Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living." (T. S. Eliot)

    1.3.2.  Cultural patterns ... give meaning to social and psychological reality, i. Embodied in ideas, by focusing on this reality while at the same time realigning it to oneself.   The concept of culture that is essentially a semiotic one.  Following Max Weber man is a being entangled in self-woven meaning-webs, regarding culture as that web. It is a historically transmitted system of meanings that appear in symbolic form, a system of outdated ideas expressed in symbolic forms, a system by which people communicate, maintain and develop their knowledge of life and its attitude to life. (C. Geertz)

    1.3.3.  a battleground" ( Edward Said, Orientalism)

    1.3.4.  „ [...] culture is (as a minimum) a binary semiotic structure, and one which at the same time functions as an indissoluble unit." ( Y.L. Lotman, Universe of the Mind. A semiotic Theory of Culture)

    1.3.5.  an "ensemble  of narratives" (Wolfgang Müller- Funk, Die Kultur und ihre Narrative)

    1.3.6.  Culture is one of the most complicated words in English language (Raymond Williams)

    1.3.7.  "The French and English terms 'civilization' may refer to political or economic, religious or technical, moral or social facts. The German term 'culture' basically refers to spiritual, artistic, religious facts, and it has a strong tendency, between facts of this kind on the one hand, and the political, economic and social facts on the other, a strong dividing wall to draw. "(Norbert Elias, On the Process of Civilization)

1.4. A new understanding of culture

    1.4.1.  Culture as a symbolism (semiotic, narrative, creating meaning, including practical life, more than the traditional field of the arts.

    1.4.2.  Thesis Nr.1 : Ne concepts of culture are linked with media and linguistic turn.

    1.4.3.  Thesis Nr. 2 : New concepts od culture suggests that  culture is not an innocent counterpart of politics. They argue that power and power relations are in-written into 'culture'

1.5. Cultural studies, cultural analysis, ‚Kulturwissenschaften‘

1.6. Chris Jenks und Wolfgang Müller-Funk

    1.6.1.  Jenks´ historical model. Jenks makes a difference between

    • an emphatic one that sees culture as positive, even superior, and sees Jenks at work in the literary modern age, from Romanticism to the elite conception of the Frankfurt School: culture as a form of intellectual development and personality formation. In this context, Jenks refers above all to the concept of education in German idealism and German classical music.

    • A practically oriented, physical and collective term related to the notion of civilization and bearing a (sociobiological) anthropological component, inspired by Darwinism since the second half of the 19th century. In it terms such as degeneration and progress (including race) play a significant role. Jenks associates this concept of culture critically with (British) imperialism.

    • A descriptive term that describes culture as a concrete category, as a particular social field (Bourdieu), as a limited sphere in a society that is exclusive, particular and differentiated and in which there is a trained specialist. This sphere essentially corresponds to the area of classical art culture, which today is extended by various pop and subcultures and possibly by the media sector.

    • A social term that understands culture as the totality of lifestyles (whole way of life) in which the execution of life comes into play. Jenks describes this concept of culture as pluralistic: according to the author, it corresponds with a democratic society.

    1.6.2.  Müller-Funk´s  typological model

        • A holistic understanding of culture (all human activities of a given collective identity are seen as culture, Culture as a fix space, continuity and homogeneity)

        • An ubiquitarian understanding of culture (culture is everywhere, in all areas of a society as a symbolism and a practice)

        • An exclusive understanding of culture (as a specific field within a differentiated society)

    Question: To what extent one can find similarities between the two models?

2.  Culture, power and discourse: Michel Foucault

2.1. Some important books

2.2.  Foucault as influencer (Said, Butler)

2.3. A programmatic text: Foucault´s inaugural lecture "The order of the discourse" (1970)

2.4. Foucault´s understanding of 'discourse':

    • The discourse is a cultural rule. 'Discourse'comes from the Latin word 'discurrere'. The discourse is linguistic, but it is not identical with language, it includes the act of presentation and the manifestation of speech.

    • The discourse contains an obligation, even coercion. There is a compulsion  and a need to speak. Speech is not voluntary; it takes place under institutional pressure.

    • The discourse is a centering power to which the individual is subjected. The word subject becomes here a contrary meaning. The subject is not seen as free as it is the case in German Idealism, but someone that is under control and power of the regime of the discourse. The discourse precedes man.

2.5. Foucaults understanding of language:
  • Language  is not a sheer relevation of desire but also of prevention and ligation.
  • Language is not a simple 'medium' or an 'instrument' that communicates rule and power but is itself  a central power.
  • Language is not a neutral pheniomenon but it organiszes 'things' and 'objects'.
2.6. Three levels of discourse and epistemic systems
  • The level of legitimate objects of understanding and cognition. (What are legitimate objects?)
  • The level of function and of the position of the epistemic subject (who has a legitimating to speak about?)
  • The level of material, technical and instrumental 'investments' (Which means are permitted or required?)
2.7.Procedures of discourses
    2.7.1.  External exclusion: Restriction and shortage of allowed statements(What can be said?)
      • General ban (censorship, political correctness)
      • Specific and situational bans.
      • Ban of all forms of speaking that is seen as nonsense
      • The wish for truth (Nietzsche)
    2.7.2.  Internal exclusions: Restriction and shortage of events
      • Commentary (you must say something for the first time which has been said so often before)
      • Author as an instance of the discourse
      • Discipline (the realm of the acceptable objects, permissible methodology, relevant definitions, a corpus of true sentences).
    2.7.3.  Regulation: Restriction and shortage of subjects who are allowed to speak.
      • Accepting certain rituals of a discourse.
      • Being member of a discourse-group
      • Obligations to an exclusive discourse which forbids to be a member ofe another one.
 3.   Cultural semiotics: Roland Barthes
3.1.Some general words about linguistic and semiotic turn
3.2. The background of the 'Mythologies'
3.3. From traditional concepts to myth and mythology to a semiotic understanding
    3.3.1.  Mythology als misunderstanding of culture and nature
    3.3.2.  Myth as a linguistical and semiotic system
    3.3.3.  Modern mythology as an object of ideological critique on the bourgeois world.
    3.3.4.  The essay as a medium for a critical intervention.
3.4. The topics in Barthes´work.
3.5.A broad understanding of culture (fashion, consumerism, eating, everyday life, media, film,  arts
3.6. Examples: Striptease and Citroen DS 19.
3.7. Some more thesis on modern mythology:
    3.7.1.  Myth has not an object, not an idea, not a categorical issue, but is a form. It is a medium of making significance. It is a communication system including a narrative matrix.
    3.7.2.  Myth is inter-medial.

3.7.3. Myth is a semiotic system.

3.7.4. Myth is a secondary system.

• The Rose

• The photo of an African soldier in French uniform in the context of the colonial war in Algeria.