

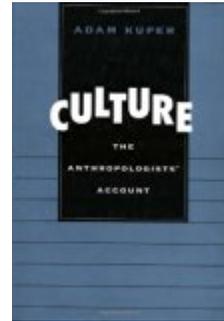
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adam Kuper. *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999. xv + 299 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-17957-8.

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Culture: Some (American) Anthropologists' Accounts

I am quite a fan of Adam Kuper's work and so looked forward to reading his latest book, which takes a critical look at the concept of culture. From the outset I approached it with a great deal of sympathy for Kuper's stated aim – to assess the value and the validity of culture as an analytical concept. He does this through an investigation of the origins of the concept in English, and an examination of various influential (American) cultural theories. He presents the ultimate conclusion to his argument in the preface: that anthropologists would be better off avoiding the 'hyper-referential' word altogether, and instead talk precisely about what we mean - knowledge, belief, art, technology, tradition, or even ideology. Kuper argues that there are 'fundamental epistemological problems' with the concept, and that 'these cannot be solved by tiptoeing around the notion of culture, or by refining definitions' (x-xi).

Kuper's clear, elegant, and sometimes witty prose is, as usual, a pleasure to read. Part One of the book is entitled *Genealogies*, and is made up of two very informative chapters on the history of the word and concept. Chapter One looks at the meaning of the words 'culture' and 'civilization' in French, German and English thought between 1930 and 1958. The idea of genealogies comes from his examination of the works of Febvre, Elias and Williams who trace the development of these concepts in France, Germany and England respectively. In Chapter Two Kuper turns to the New World and a discussion of U.S. anthropologists, with particular attention to the influence of Talcott Parsons. I found Part One particularly enjoy-

able, and would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the origins and development of this key concept. Students in particular might benefit from its insights into how a concept develops over time and is shaped by those who use it.

Part Two is entitled *Experiments*, and in it Kuper turns to the main body of his argument. He chooses three well-known anthropologists to illustrate his main points, each of them representing a particular approach to theorizing culture. Clifford Geertz is chosen as a (presumably) representative proponent of the hermeneutic approach for Chapter Three. Taking up the Parsonian enterprise of separating culture from social structure, Geertz sought to hone and refine the concept of culture. As Kuper points out, Geertz himself saw the redefinition of culture as one of his most 'persistent interests' as an anthropologist (Kuper p. 97-8). Kuper seems somewhat baffled, however, at the extent to which Geertz has been hailed as a theorist of culture. He argues that Geertz's mature work 'does not offer what was promised in the original prospectus' of his earlier work (Kuper p. 118), in spite of the important contributions Geertz has made in other ways. 'Above all, Geertz's message is that culture is the essential element in the definition of human nature, and the dominant force in history. .. Culture rules: indeed, high culture rules' (p. 120, emphasis in original). Ultimately, Kuper accuses Geertz of extreme idealism, and argues that his work is vulnerable to the same criticisms made of ideological theories of history. Kuper laments the absence of sociological concerns in Geertz's

later works, and suggests that it has been left out without sufficient theoretical gains to justify its loss.

So far, so good. Kuper makes a good case against Geertz's approach to culture, and I am in broad agreement with his critique. In Chapter Four, Kuper turns his attention to the work of David Schneider. His portrayal of the man is candid if sometimes unflattering, but he is truly scathing in his treatment of Schneider's work. Again, I am in general agreement of his critique of Schneider's rather extreme form of cultural relativism and his attempt to divorce the study of kinship from its biological foundations. But at this point in the book I found myself wondering why Kuper had chosen these particular theorists, and why he decided to focus in such detail on just three theorists instead of taking a broader perspective in order to establish his argument. It is not too difficult to take issue with someone who has such an extreme stance on culture as Schneider. Why didn't Kuper attempt to critique someone with a more 'mainstream' theory of culture?

The work of Marshall Sahlins is the subject of Chapter Five. Kuper gives a detailed account of Sahlins's intellectual development from the Marx inspired foe of cultural determinism to the Levi-Strauss inspired campaigner against dialectical materialism. According to Kuper, we cannot yet concede Sahlins's claims 'that he has, at last, liberated history from its failure to grasp culture, structuralism from its failure to cope with history, and social theory in general from its false dichotomies between idea and act, culture and social structure, structure and event' (p. 199). Kuper's discussion of Sahlins's work is thoughtful, and his treatment of Sahlins's concept of mythopraxis and his debates with Obeyesekere are particularly interesting. Ultimately, however, Kuper rejects Sahlins, too, for his extreme cultural determinism (and for his tendency to revert to the 'weak' version of the thesis when challenged on this).

Chapter Six is dedicated to the 'Brave New World' of the 1970s and 1980s. The impact of 'Writing Culture' is the initial focus, with its dynamic view of culture and new way of doing anthropology. Much of the rest of the chapter is taken up with considerations of the work of some of the main contributors to that influential volume and its companion *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Clifford's argument that culture is a 'compromised concept' comes in for particular scrutiny. Kuper finds it problematic that Clifford believes we should abandon the presumption that culture is an enduring whole, yet hang on to the concept of culture itself (p. 212). He is also

critical of the postmodern account of history, suggesting it is not as new as it may seem. Instead, he sees it (like Gellner) as a replay of the Enlightenment versus Romanticism debate, placing "Clifford, Marcus and company" in the Romantic camp (p. 220). He attacks postmodern approaches for failures of logic, and for having "a paralyzing effect on the discipline of anthropology" (p. 223), both of which are criticisms I can easily agree with, although I seem to find more of value in the postmodern approach than Kuper.

The final chapter takes us up to the present day, assessing the current state of the discipline in relation to the concept of culture. Kuper begins by summarizing the key points about culture on which most anthropologists would broadly agree. He then poses the question of whether anthropologists, as experts in the field of culture, should enter the fray now that the debate about culture has become political once again, this time in the form of the politics of multiculturalism. In his inimitable style, Kuper makes a rather sarcastic jab at cultural studies and its links to multiculturalist politics in the university. Perhaps more seriously, he criticizes multiculturalism in the United States for its potentially conservative, anti-ideals of the Enlightenment stance on ethnicity and identity. In fact, he argues, the term culture in the hands of multiculturalism has become little more than a politically correct euphemism for race, especially in the U.S. He cites Walter Benn Michaels to back up his argument that the concept of culture is in fact a form of racism, replacing biology as the assumed basis of distinct human groups, but no less essentialist for it. Towards the end of the chapter Kuper dismisses approaches that emphasize the construction of identity and culture on the grounds that this of necessity takes place within existing frameworks and constraints, a position which I find untenable.

I do sympathize with Kuper's project, and am in broad agreement with much of the critique he presents in this book. For my own reasons I have become increasingly sceptical about the uses and utility of the term 'culture'. Like Kuper, whose problems with the term stem at least in part from his experiences of apartheid South Africa, my own reservations about the term arise from my work in Northern Ireland and my attempts to understand the development of a politics of culture in the region. Ultimately, though, I have difficulties with Kuper's argument on two counts: the first has to do with his reasoning for rejecting culture as an analytical tool, particularly his selection of the most extreme examples of cultural theory to make his point. Even using the extremes, the argument he builds does not support his ultimate con-

clusion, the complete rejection of culture as a concept and tool of analysis in anthropology. If he had chosen less extreme or more mainstream cases for consideration, his argument would be even weaker. The second of my grounds for disagreement is his conclusion that we should reject not just the term but the entire concept of culture, which seems to me to be a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. What links his critiques of all of his chosen theorists is a stand against extreme cultural relativism, and extreme forms of cultural determinism. Kuper makes a powerful case for the rejection of these extremes, but I do not see how this necessitates or justifies a complete rejection of the concept of culture as analytically separate from, but intimately related to, social structure.

I have some more minor issues with the book, such as the fact that Kuper's approach is very American in orientation, once the initial discussion of the history of the concept is complete. Perhaps the subtitle to the book should have been 'The American Anthropologists' Ac-

count'. If he wants to make such a radical argument about the fate of our discipline's key concept, it would have been better to consider at the very least the use of the term by some theorists in other English-speaking traditions, such as in Britain.

The greatest strength of *Culture* – and Kuper's work in general – is his skill in examining the development of a concept via the biographies and intellectual histories of influential individuals (a task that he first set for himself in his classic 'Anthropology and Anthropologists'). In spite of my ultimate disagreement with Kuper's overall argument, this is a fine piece of work written in exemplary depth and detail. Agree or disagree, Kuper raises important issues that need to be debated, and he accomplishes this in an enjoyable and accessible manner. I highly recommend it.

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