

Telepolis—Interview on Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s book *The Cultural Distinction*¹

Translated by Sam Putinja and Joseph Fracchia

Mr. Haug, one gets the impression Antonio Gramsci and Bertolt Brecht are the godfathers of many of your expositions on culture.

Yes, as far as 20th century thought is concerned, I probably owe the most important impulses to this dissimilar pair. Brecht and Gramsci, the playwright from Augsburg and the founding chairman of the Italian Communist Party, knew nothing of each other. What nevertheless links them, as if by agreement, are two things: both oriented their respective work philosophically, the politician not less than the bard, and both discovered through Marx their own paths. Both start from Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach and develop elements of a philosophy of praxis. I am convinced that only such a philosophy is suited to do justice to the uniqueness of the cultural. A chapter in my book deals with Gramsci’s “politics of the cultural” as the source of “cultural hegemony”. The thought captured there is so important to me that for a while I vacillated over deriving the title of the book from it. I decided finally on the title “The Cultural Distinction” because one of the intentions of the book is to seek to contest not only the commercialization, but also the over-politicization of culture frequently encountered on the Left.

Yet you approvingly quote Stuart Hall with the phrase, that the password, which opens access to the question of culture, is “Marx”...

Yes, that’s correct. What is interesting, however, is that where Marx speaks about “culture”, he still uses the parlance characteristic of Goethe’s time. In his

¹ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Die kulturelle Unterscheidung, Elemente einer Philosophie des Kulturellen*, Berliner Beiträge zur kritischen Theorie Bd. 12, Hamburg: Argument 2011.

materialist interpretation of history, however, the concept of culture found no place. In my view the reason for this is that the term “culture” in its meaning stamped by cultural history and ethnology indicates a concrete entirety of a specific society at a specific time. Marx explicitly does not speak here about totality, but about the “ensemble of social relations”, which is more open to a variety of compositions. This “ensemble” constitutes for him the historical “reality” of human “essence”.² This we might call “culture”. But at this point Marx has no use for this concept, indeed because he, unlike in everyday parlance, does not connect any “chaotic” notions with it. Rather, he analyses this “ensemble” as consisting of the forces of the species that are historically inherited and always have to be appropriated anew. The social theorist cannot use a pseudonym for society. As much as I concur with him on this, I do believe that we need a philosophical concept of the cultural that helps us cut a swath through the great confusion between the myths of nation and commerce.³

What does culture mean for you and what is meant by “cultural distinction”?

The word “culture” is as familiar as it is opaque. Everyone believes to know what it means. Yet if I follow Wittgenstein’s proposition, that the meaning of a word is its usage, then things become untidy. The GDR maintained a “cultural goods factory” in Leipzig. Its finance ministry conceived “cultural goods” to be Christmas tree ornaments, fireworks, joke novelties and so forth. The Federal Republic of Germany avoids this macabre comicality by remaining silent on cultural content, and by defining cultural goods in section 12 of the VAT

² Cf. Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1976, p. 4.

³ Karl Kraus called it the “Durcheinander zwischen Kyffhäuser und Kaufhäuser”. – “Kaufhäuser” means department store, and “Kyffhäuser” is the name of a mountain inside which legend says the emperor Friedrich I Barbarossa (1123-1190) and his followers sleep until they will finally wake up to save the Reich.

statutes without further ado, as goods, for which the reduced sales tax rate of 7 percent applies. City councils call it cultural policy, when they install flowerbeds around shopping centers. And then there is of course the opera, in which Hamburg competes with Sydney, and the “culture” factor of an investment location is calculated. Meanwhile, certain cultural researchers, as Rolf Linder ridicules, are barely able to save themselves from talk-show invitations to discuss topics ranging from “Easter bunnies via urban legends all the way to the latest tribes of postmodernism”. And then of course, “culture” is that which is not nature, and which “lifts us above beasts”.

This hodgepodge is reminiscent of the “great confusion between Kyffhäuser and Kaufhäuser”. Everyone senses that something “valuable” is meant by the word culture. Yet everyone assigns value differently, and to different things. The “educated” are inclined to the view that only they have culture and that the great masses do not, or are in any event, uncultivated.

*Then does your book title “The Cultural Distinction” allude to Pierre Bourdieu’s “La distinction”?*⁴

Yes, but with the difference that Bourdieu aptly describes the *distinction* as the rather barbarous use of culture, whereas with the “cultural distinction” I mean to determine just what there is to recover from this barbarous usage: not a case of better-than-others, but rather one of becoming-better, like the “second genesis of a human being, that encompasses its entire life” in which Johann Gottfried Herder saw the essence of the cultural process. In my book I devote a separate section to Bourdieu’s exemplary study. In dealing with so-called “cultural goods” he is interested above all with their instrumentalization in social competition over prestige and careers. He demonstrates how the contrast

⁴ Published in English as: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

of educated versus uneducated simultaneously disguises and legitimates societal class conflict. Art and education, which spontaneously offer themselves as anchors for the definition of culture, are questions of class, and, by the way, also questions of gender and age. Patriarchy, wealth and the state maintain them in their possession. Commerce eventually takes over. I want to be on a level where the cultural is property shared by all.

Bourdieu's critique of this cult of "elevated culture" has no doubt also contributed to the fallacy that a "democratic" cultural understanding shouldn't make an evaluative distinction. In the meantime, many cultural commentators simply subsume everything that occurs in a society under "culture".

Into this confusion I interject the question: "What is actually cultural about culture?" If one does not want to approach this question in a cultural-missionary way, then the only remaining possibility is to return to the unseen sources of everyday life, where all people, at least in small traces, continually make a difference in favor of that in which they are not the instrument of outside interests but rather are themselves the point. The valuation belongs to the thing itself. One must not ascribe, but trace it out and illuminate its fate in contestation with commerce, ideology, and daily necessities, and defeats. For that a keen sense is needed for the moments of resistance but also for the contradictions they must withstand.

Is this represented by Holbein's painting The Merchant Georg Gisze from 1532, that adorns your book cover and that you devoted a chapter to?

Yes. A reviewer wondered about the fact that as a Marxist I wanted to "recognize in bourgeois representation only a distinction-less self-realization." But the example deals in no way with bourgeois representation as such. And I consider the reductionist *only* to be just as irrelevant as the assumption that

bourgeois individuals can behave solely instrumentally toward the cultural. My book expects us to recognize the conflict in the phenomenon, as in Hans Holbein's portrait of the German merchant Georg Gisze in London. Bourdieu's agent of distinction puts himself above the others; the agent of cultural differentiation prefers a concrete Something or a How to all other things or modes. The first gears himself to the eyes of the world, the second adjusts the world correctly in his eyes. The two approaches are as different from each other as is instrumental behavior from the praxis of self-purpose. Of course these are ideal types. Holbein's portrait does not depict an ideal type but a person in his contradiction. I ask about the power relations between self-purpose and instrumentalization. With the example of the portraited Georg Gisze I intend to show the predominance of praxis as self-purpose.

That is what I call the cultural distinction. And from this elementary starting point I unfurl the question of the cultural. An excavation is intended, not a transfiguration but a philosophical reflection as a medium of self-enlightenment.

In what manner are ideology, culture and the everyday entwined with each other?

Everything that attracts people, attracts in another manner the social forces, that want to attract people to themselves. This is how local authorities behave to competitively attract corporations to their locations. But, in their own way, this is also how these corporations act, hoping to attract skilled labour-power by means of non-work related incentives or benefits. And in the end this is also how the ideological powers behave, above all the state, which try to harness these forces of attraction. The cultural cannot completely escape the effect of this instrumentalization of culture by the interested parties. All sides claim it for themselves, even if just as a façade. Dieter Bartetzko, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, placed this instrumentalization in a nutshell when he

ascertained, in view of the Greek “debt-tragedy” and the European crisis, that politics and media understand “antiquity solely as the purveyor of slogans. Otherwise they prefer [...] ‘Be nice and hold your tongue.’” This can be quite plainly applied to the cultural. Culture in this sense, is the good face of an evil game. That is why the state and capital fork out some money for it.

Are you saying all cultural funding is cosmetic?

Certainly not all. In one of the many current meanings, culture is that which is rented from commerce, something that seeks protection, invoking the status of cultural exception, the protection of culture here being an analog to the protection of nature. For the hearkened craver, the city or state or even private patrons provide small cultural sanctuaries. One need only take note of the proportions. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* did this very vividly when it reported on the contrast between the art exhibition in the framework of this year’s Biennale in Venice and the investment outlays for artistic objects that were privately exhibited in some palazzo. The clients of this private exhibition owned the yachts anchored outside, the longest of which, belonging to the Russian oligarch Abramovitch, was 100 meters in length.

By the way, I strongly recommend that one say art, when it is art that is meant, and not culture.

Which position does “commodity aesthetics”⁵ take with regard to this development?

In my books on commodity aesthetics and ideology theory I treated the respective material predominantly with analytical concepts. With culture that is not possible because here commodity aesthetics and ideological forces permeate and overdetermine everything. I had to tease out “elements of a philosophy of the cultural”, in order to be able to make out the fronts in this

⁵ See *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 1976.

turmoil. The investigation is carried out on two levels: the sphere of cultural action and its sphere of interaction with commodity aesthetics and ideology. The commodity aesthetic behaves parasitically towards all other forces. It has no conviction, but rather makes use of all convictions provided they can be harnessed to promote sales. It seeks to read desires from people's eyes, in order to give them back as images of gratification, in which commodities are embedded. Indeed, each act of purchase, provided it resulted from a choice between competing offers, formally resembles the cultural distinction. In relation to objects, as well as in interaction with others, we continually decide how to create or realize ourselves. Almost immediately the necessities and hardships of life start weighing heavily on our design. Without constant renewal the cultural moment atrophies, shrivels and shrinks. Besieged by monetary offers, the desire that is expressed in it is satisfied with purchased surrogates. The commodity aesthetic tries to latch itself onto people's elementary act of self-affirmation. It proffers a brand name running shoe as a requisite of identity and an element of a fulfilled lifestyle.

Does this mean for you that brand name running shoes do not belong to culture?

On the contrary, they do belong to it, because what one calls "culture" is a resultant of the involvement of all these forces. The question to pose is about the cultural in culture, since the former gets lost in the latter. With respect to nature Spinoza differentiated between nature as process and nature as the outcome of this process. He called nature in process *natura naturans* and the result of the process *natura naturata*. Accordingly, for me it is important to distinguish culture in *statu nascendi* from the resultant culture at the end of this process in order to reconquer what is cultural in culture. Oddly enough, I was reproached with the charge that for me the cultural is "outside of the social", although I just analyzed it as one of the forces in the social cultural process.

The emerging culture should come into its own, the fluid culture, not the fixed culture ensnared in other existential forces.

What merits do the approaches and research results of the cultural studies theorists have for the modern study of culture?

Whoever mentions cultural studies, must first of all talk about the studies that were undertaken by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. An impulse for its founding came from Raymond Williams who detached the fixation of culture research on so-called higher culture and turned it towards the mode of living. The CCCS achieved its greatest influence under the direction of Stuart Hall. He knew to connect empirical investigation with theoretical groundwork. Fundamental was the engagement with Marx. But the real sense for cultural research, and also incidentally an ideal image of the cultural researcher as an “organic intellectual” of “popular culture”, was developed above all in the engagement with the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci. All this brought me together with Hall at that time on joint projects. He also wrote the preface to the English edition of my *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*.

What role do working-class subcultures (catchword “second culture”) play in modern cultural development?

One discovery was from the study originated at CCCS by Paul Willis published as *Learning to Labor* which appeared in German in 1976 with the title *Spass am Widerstand*, something like “Having fun resisting”. It deals with the subculture of English working-class males, the “lads”, and depicts the dazzling wit with which they withdrew from their exposure to the educational system. This material allows a striking observation of what becomes of the cultural distinction if it does not learn to differentiate between ideological subjugation

and factual instruction in the ability to act culturally. As the lads find themselves repeatedly in the desperate situation of unskilled workers, the smiles disappear from the faces of the former truants. Das Argument press will actually be issuing an improved German translation of Willis's world-famous study, now long out of print, in the fall of 2011.

In the meantime, the triumphal march of Cultural Studies in the USA has certainly broken loose from its theoretical framework that was critical of capitalism, which developed, as Hall said "in earshot of Marx". Unlike Hall, Willis was captured by the success to a certain extent. As with quite a few other representatives of present day Cultural Studies, the claim that the cultural moment could be wrested from the embrace of ideology and the entertainment industry faded away for Willis. I deal in-depth with this affirmative turn in the chapter on "The destinies of the cultural distinction – Protest through consumerism?"

Neoliberalism is not only a specific economic theory and praxis, but also a cultural conflict, in which a particular image of humanity is contested. How does your book strengthen critical capacities in this cultural struggle?

Actually, neoliberalism seized people through their desire for self-activity. Under the banner of private-individualism, it harnessed what I call the do-it-yourself of ideology. At its most extreme, it is tantamount to hijacking the cultural distinction and perverting it into the subject-form of permanent competitors and bargain hunters. Although this is a caricature of cultural self-activity, it is still self-activity.

In your book you connect the rampant cult of fitness with the cult of corporeality and asceticism that was celebrated in Germany after the First World War and that was particularly pronounced in fascism. Could you elaborate on this?

I was able to draw on one of my own historical cultural research projects, which appeared in 1986 entitled “The fascist transformation of the bourgeois subject.” What today is misleadingly discussed under the name of “bio-politic” -- the conditioning of the racial corpus (Volkskörper) for the preparation of an economic people for a national economy -- is developed there on the basis of historical material drawn from among other things, psychiatry and medicine, the self-help literature about personal perfection, but also from the archetypal production of the fine arts. I thus found myself well prepared to quickly investigate the rapidly developing fitness market and the cult reinforced by it. I placed this investigation under the heading “alienated agency” because I see in it a seduced and abducted form of the cultural. Unlike what is often intended, the elementary form of the cultural, what I call the “cultural distinction”, is not simply the positive protagonist of my book. I’m primarily interested in its destinies. In particular I am interested in the pursuits taking place between industry and the subcultures veering away from it. For, as soon as a social group begins to practice and transmit its cultural distinction with creative variations in fashion dress codes, industry is sure to follow. I use the example of youth culture, particularly of jeans culture. I am not interested, as is often suspected, in the denigration of the now inevitable consumption of goods as such, but in the unfriendly takeover of the desire for self-realization that is masked as a courteous service.

How is current cultural development influenced by the mass media and is this influence only to be seen as negative?

Television, the dominant mass medium of the epoch, whose days Siegfried Zielinski rashly thought were numbered, is ambiguous in one respect, thus not only negative. In another respect it is paralyzing. Indeed it overwhelms in many people many forms of possible self-activity. In this respect McLuhan’s thesis

“the medium is the message” holds true. That was often criticized. But on the other hand this medium of circulation is as contradictory as the content which circulates in it. Genre plays no role. It can be discussions or reportage or films. When the rule of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was broken, there was a rapturous release of possibilities that television viewing offered. To pick up on how people at the time talked about their social conditions and social relations and what they thought went wrong was in a surprising way, entertaining. Suddenly the mass media became the media of the masses themselves. When the annexation of the GDR was accomplished, this leisure time, which lasted only a few months, ended and the cultural entertainment industry took over.

Are you not disturbed by the idealist tone that accompanies your definition of the cultural as an end in itself?

On the contrary, I am taking the idealistic notion of art as an end in itself to the historical-materialist roots. Each person treats him- or herself – however marginalized or compromised, displaced or trapped — as an end in itself. Everyone pursues fulfillment in life. The question is simply, in what kind of a society does he/she follow this path and what unexpectedly becomes of him/her. I have Gramsci’s taking up of the ancient Delphic maxim “know yourself” in mind. He invites us to survey the society in which we, so to speak, stumbled into from behind. Without intervening in the social we will not find any coherence. Or, to restate it with the help of Herder’s enigmatic aphorism whose deliberate transgression of German grammar renders it untranslatable: “Sich allein kann kein Mensch leben, wenn er auch wollte”. Literally: “No human being can live himself alone, even if he wanted to.”

On the whole, I try to strike two birds with one stone. To delineate the approach of a historical-materialist theory of culture as well as at the same time

to dialectically negate and thus rescue the impulse of idealism, the moment of freedom and, with it, that of the subject; and to spur the creative aspiration encoded therein. That is why the individuals and groups active in the world are my methodological point of departure. They are, beginning with the fundamental principle, the concretely active ones in the picture. It's about their cultural capacity to act. In this sense, a philosophy of the cultural cannot but be critical.

Interview: Reinhard Jellen