Post-Covid: What is cultural theory useful for?

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Abstract
This short piece explores what cultural theory should learn from the experience of the global pandemic. It argues that the main lesson should not be about how the crisis of the pandemic has been interpreted culturally, but about the deep social and economic inequalities which were foregrounded through the experience of 'getting by' in the pandemic, which positioned people in very different ways. So dramatic have been those inequalities, that any inherited notion of culture as something shared need to be definitively abandoned. This had already been anticipated in Ulf Hannerz's deconstruction of holistic notions of culture three decades ago, but it needs now to be acted on, as we seek to confront honestly the growing inequalities which make the normal order of everyday life possible.

Keywords
cultural theory, culture, contagion, getting by, hidden violence, inequality

Three decades ago, there was a brief fashion for analysing culture as if it were a form of contagion. The idea was that the dissemination of cultural materials in space could be better explained using the models of epidemiology and other natural sciences than by, say, hermeneutics (Sperber, 1996). A popular culture variant of this approach was called 'connectionism' (de Landa, 1994; Plant, 1996).[1] Neither approach caught on – unsurprisingly, because culture always involves not just transmission but *interpretation*. But now that we have been living through a genuine pandemic rather than a fevered moment of theoretical speculation, it seems reasonable to ask: what have we learned about 'culture' during the Covid-19 pandemic?

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For many, the global Covid-19 pandemic has been the most disruptive event in their lifetime. It is not so much a world event, as an *event-world*, which has for many changed the rules of how their routine worlds operate and interconnect with the worlds of others. It has unsettled the bundles of routine actions from which lives were made. The future, no longer a secure domain towards which we can plan, has become hard to think about. We exist in a state of 'horizonlessness' (Couldry and Schneier, 2020). Admittedly, hyperbole about the pandemic experience means little if, as for the world's ever-increasing millions of forced migrants, your *normal* life consists of continual disruption, instability, and impossibility to plan. But the sense of a universal disruption is shared widely enough for it to be worth reflecting upon.

So how should we think about the global pandemic, and its meaning? We are tempted, inexorably, to interpret the pandemic, or, rather, being critical analysts of communication, to deconstruct how the global pandemic has been interpreted by ourselves and others. But what if that is not the most helpful response? What if how the pandemic has been interpreted matters less than how it has been 'lived', that is, *organized* as a differentiated hierarchy of linked practices? Yes, everyone has been struggling to make sense of what is going on during this unprecedented and intensely mediated disruption. But what if our practices of making sense matter much less than our intensely differentiated patterns of making do – of getting by – in reliance on the practices and commitments of others? What if the main lesson for critical thinking from the pandemic turns out to be not what a global crisis means, but how a global crisis *orders* – re-orders – the matrix of segregated practices we call 'living together'? What if the global pandemic has confronted us, in brute reality, with what, as critical analysts, we thought we already knew theoretically: that cultures are not 'wholes', that 'publics' are inherently divided (Ananny, 2021), that democracies are orchestrated conflict, not consensus, and that social order means the strategic management of inequality?

It might seem I am contradicting myself. I began by insisting that epidemiological theories of culture fail because they ignore interpretation, but then argued that it is insufficient to foreground questions of how the pandemic was interpreted. But there is no contradiction. Interpretations often matter, and varieties of interpretation matter a lot, because they complicate holistic ideas of culture that we inherited from traditional anthropology and sociology (Couldry, 2000: ch. 5). It makes no sense therefore to analyse culture as if it was just a mass of organisms that replicate (or don't). But it does not follow that our interpretations of culture are always more important than how our actions 'inside' culture are organized, and how resources are distributed to make such actions possible. When a major world crisis, such as a pandemic or other environmental disaster, deranges normal routines and resource distributions, then it makes sense to look first into *that* transformation before we turn to questions of cultural interpretation. Indeed, looking at practice may tell us more than we expect about culture itself. That is the instinct I will pursue in this short piece.

The hidden violence of 'getting by'

Almost everyone found their everyday lives adjusted by the pandemic: by the cessation of many work, travel, social and consumption routines, by sheer fear and uncertainty. In

what follows, I will not presume to speak of the experience of those who caught Covid-19, especially in its more serious or long-term forms, or who lost close loved ones to the disease: I will focus on the adjustments to ordinary routine that the pandemic forced, grief and major illness never being routine.

People were positioned very differently in terms of their abilities to sustain the costs of such life adjustments. Lockdown meant something fundamentally different, depending on whether you lived alone or with others you loved, in a small room or a house with a garden, in a crowded noisy city or spaced-out in the countryside. Factors which, in normal times, would compensate, in part, for such basic differences were suspended, collapsing any pretence that what 'we' were experiencing as the pandemic was the same thing, even as the rhetoric of 'being in this together' intensified.

When people did live together, the mutual costs of their adjustments were distributed unevenly, not least the cost of maintaining largely unchanged one's work profile and presence, but under radically different conditions across digital platforms. Women bore most of the costs of increased childcare and educational responsibility, among other practical tasks, while still needing to maintain their jobs. Households were very differently positioned in whether they could pass on to others the costs of adjusting to movement restrictions. Those whose jobs remained secure in the pandemic passed on costs to those whose jobs disappeared; those whose jobs could be performed adequately online passed on costs to those whose work required physical presence and face-to-face interaction. These fundamental inequalities in labour markets and the division of labour reinforced basic inequalities in living conditions (housing, reliance on or independence from public transport).

One's chance of 'getting by' was intensely shaped by enduring inequalities of class, gender and race. In the USA, which was already undergoing an intense and separate crisis of racial conflict, the racial parameters of the Covid-19 life-chances lottery (and in parallel the growing environmental crisis) were stark: as Mike Ananny put it recently, 'many saw for the first time how the seeming stability of American public life depends upon layers of racism' (Ananny, 2021, n.p.). In Britain, similar tensions were felt, but in the cultural responses that compensated for them, class difference prevailed. In my own, mainly privileged village, a small army of stuffed models of 'heroes' appeared for a few winter weeks in the centre of the village, representing core service workers, almost all white.

In short, what the pandemic foregrounded and accentuated were the *normal inequalities* on which a sense of 'normal life' had always relied: what we might call the hidden violence of 'getting by'. Critical theory has recognized this violence theoretically for decades. Consider, for example, geographer Doreen Massey's insistence, in response to David Harvey's reading of postmodernity, on the '*power-geometry* of time-space compression' which, beneath our accounts of universal change, drives profound inequalities in mobility and in power over what moves and flows (Massey, 1994: 149). Meanwhile, the whole direction of cultural theory over the past 50 years has foregrounded the tensions disguised within universal accounts of culture, most notably the universalizing discourse which both sustains and disguises the privileges of 'whiteness' (Frankenberg, 1993; Gilroy, 1987).

The pandemic added new dimensions to such everyday violence. When the governments of rich nations, such as the UK, did what (in general terms) one hopes any

responsible government would do – protect the public health of that nation – they did so in ways that exploited huge inequalities of fiscal resource (to buy vaccines and influence their production), resulting in massive inequalities in vaccine rollout that have public health implications for the whole world. But on a global scale, the violence of 'getting by' cannot be hidden: it was controversial from early on, challenged for example by the World Health Organization which signalled the dangers of the Global North's unwillingness to share its vaccine stores with poorer countries.

My point is not that the (hidden or not so hidden) violence of getting by is new or surprising, only that it took a major disruption of everyday life for it to start being registered in daily discussion even if still inadequately, and only because even greater reliance on such inequalities was suddenly necessary. Meanwhile, other more comforting, but in many ways misleading, languages of social integration and solidarity overlaid our awareness of that hidden violence.

What are the implications of this for our understanding of culture?

The hollowness of cultural theory

It was already three decades ago that the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz thoroughly deconstructed any holistic theory of culture. He did this by close attention to how meaning actually flows in society (rather than through some fantastical epidemiology of culture). In his book *Cultural Complexity*, Hannerz (1992) argued that, *because* meanings require interpretation in order to pass between people and because interpretation is open-ended except under extreme conditions, there is no way of knowing in advance what interpretations of a common term, such as 'government' or 'public health', have circulated where in space. Convergent interpretations, from this perspective, are not the expectation, but something that calls for specific explanation. Certainly, institutions exist in society which strive to impose common interpretations (Hannerz calls these 'forms of externalization': 1992: 7), but they are operations of power rather than expressions of any underlying 'natural' commonality.

Hannerz goes further, drawing on his earlier work on the anthropology of cities (1980). Whatever the cultural narratives associated with them, cities are places not of unity, but organized diversity. At the end of *Exploring the City*, Hannerz insists that the cityscape should be studied not as a unity, but for 'how it facilitates some contacts *and obstructs others*' (1980: 305–6, my emphasis). A few years later, Hannerz made a similar point about the supposed unities of globalization. There is a global culture, he remarked, but it 'is marked by an organization of diversity rather than by a replication of uniformity' (1990: 237). In broad terms, such insights have been familiar from geography over decades, but it is Hannerz's next formulation that is the most telling. Reflecting on the diversities of taste, education, income, occupation and knowledge that are basic features of social life, he comments that 'contemporary complex societies systematically build non-sharing into their cultures' (1992: 44).

Hannerz's emphasis on 'the importance of non-sharing' within culture is already radical, as a challenge to the holism of cultural theory, but even more important is that word 'build'. If cultures are '*built*' *through* non-sharing, how did we ever come to think of them holistically? How can narratives of culture which emphasize sharing

over non-sharing ever do more than indirectly reflect underlying inequalities of power, which do so much to shape such non-sharing?

There are of course, in every society, powerful forces which benefit from dominant narratives of culture, especially those narratives which emphasize what is shared rather than not shared. Liberal theories of culture and politics rely on the assumption of an underlying sharing of values which underpin the surface diversities which markets exist to stimulate. Much more critically, Raymond Williams' work (1958) reads as a brilliant attempt, from a marginal position in Britain's divided culture, to salvage a new vision of a possible 'common culture' that respected an emerging working-class 'community of experience' that had been disrespected for so long. Williams' materialism did not allow him to trust in any simple reading of 'culture as a whole way of life', but the legacy of his engagement with that notion persists in our own failure to this day to definitively reject it, in spite of Hannerz's subsequent demolition work.

The result is a theoretical quandary which we must address under the circumstances of the pandemic. Indeed, not just the pandemic, but the other fundamental crises that are being lived simultaneously in many societies: the crisis over male violence against women, the crisis of white violence against other ethnicities, the rebirth of violent populist rhetorics that rely precisely on promoting a 'culture' that *erects* violent boundaries in cultural and social space to salvage an imaginary zone of commonality and sameness. These overlapping crises raise the stakes of repairing cultural theory.

Consider an example of very smart cultural theory from a different era. Anthropologist Richard Wilk, like Hannerz, complicated loose understandings of globalization as homogenizing and instead suggested that it is characterized by 'structures of common difference': 'we are not all becoming the same, but we are portraying, dramatizing, and communicating our differences to each other *in ways that are more widely intelligible* [i.e. to each other]' (Wilk, 1995: 142, emphasis and clarification added). But *are* we any more? Yes, we can recognize globalization in terms of the expanded frames of reference that help make some cultural differences commensurable to each other. But does this help us understand the *lack* today of a ready social language for talking about the deep inequalities that made the pandemic so different for different people; or for addressing the deep problems of commensurability between rival cultural discourses over gender and race. The weakness at the heart of cultural theory, already suggested by Hannerz, is that it fails to address what we generally do not, and cannot, talk to each other about: a failure that is the price of the dramatically more unequal societies and world that, after decades of neoliberal policy, we inhabit.

Where next?

When I think about 'culture' today, this is the seeming break-point that I reach. Thinking comes to a stop when, equipped with only our inherited range of cultural theory, something as large, conflicted and at some level predictable as the global pandemic needs to be understood. Am I saying that, just as everyday life reached an impasse at points during the pandemic, cultural theory has too – the type of impasse that the late Lauren Berlant (2011: 4) described as 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic'? Perhaps.

But we have known the impasse of cultural theory for a long time. Decades ago, James Clifford wrote that 'culture is a deeply compromised term that I cannot yet do without' (Clifford, 1988: 10). Maybe societal conflicts have reached such a point that we must do without this term, or at least fundamentally reinterpret it: understanding culture not as something held in common, but as more or less localized structures *of managed inequality*, that is, at root, structures of force that are managed in part through the sharing, and often non-sharing, of meaning. From this perspective, Williams' work on common culture, which has resonated with me personally for so long, cannot any longer guide us, except as a reminder of what we cannot have, until we achieve societies and a world that are fundamentally more equal.

Post-Covid but while, very probably, the other crises of gender, race and populism remain unresolved, the work of cultural theory is not, I suggest, to theorize about something we call 'culture'. Its work instead lies in asking three questions. What are the conditions for a more direct and honest confrontation with the often-silenced inequalities that shape our lives 'together'? And how can we construct a shared path towards reversing those inequalities – not in theory, but in practice? And, finally, what is the role of the meanings we *do* circulate, share, or challenge within that different practice? Making progress towards answering those questions might help answer what cultural theory is still useful for.

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Notes

1. As an example, Sadie Plant wrote that: 'cultures are parallel distributed processes.… There is no privileged scale: global and molecular cultures act through the middle ground of states, societies, members and things. There is nothing exclusively human about it: cultures emerge from the complex interactions of media, organisms, weather patterns, ecosystems … and bacterial exchanges' (1996: 214).

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