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## Seeking for the Definition of “Culture”: Current Concerns and their Implications. A Comment on Gustav Jahoda’s Article “Critical Reflections on some Recent Definitions of “Culture””

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**Abstract** This article takes as a starting point the critical analysis of attempts to define “culture”, offered by Jahoda in 2012. Basing on the observed proliferation of various, often contradicting, definitions of “culture” (for instance, trying to refer to its both internal and external aspects), Jahoda arrives at the conclusion that attempts to define the concept of “culture” are vain and useless and it is quite practicable simply to use the term without seeking to define it. We find it hard to agree with this statement. Elaborating on Jahoda reflections and drawing on the recent debates in social sciences, cultural studies and philosophy, we argue that seeking for the definition of culture is necessary in the context of contemporary development of social and humanitarian knowledge. Moreover, we claim that the debates about culture indicate the need for a large-scale methodological reorganization of the social and humanitarian sciences, in response to the novel ontological congruence between internal and external, the fundamental “ontological shift”, “reversing the poles” of the human-related reality. The human individual becomes its core element and pivot. Other “objects”, “external” in relation to the individual (for instance, social structures and institutions), undergo such massive and rapid changes that grow progressively fuzzy and sometimes even less “real”, comparing to the individual. The “inner” nature of the individual also transforms: from being “subjected” to think, act and feel according to certain external conditions, an individual becomes an Actor, who is empowered to change the environment following his purposive plans, desires and visions.

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## Introduction

The importance of the theme of culture is continuously growing in contemporary discourse of social sciences and humanities. It was not by haphazard that a special domain seceded in the last decades bearing the label of Cultural Studies. As Jaan Valsiner notes, the popularity of the term “Culture” is not hampered by its uncertainty: “Reasons for that increasing popularity of a vague label are to be found beyond the boundaries of science — in the ‘culture stress’ experienced by local communities due to in-migration of ‘others’ and temporary (or not so temporary) out-migration of ‘our own’” (Valsiner 2009, p. 8).

Culture abides the common core of modern socio-humanitarian discourse. However, “Culture is in some sense a magic word — positive in connotations but hard to pinpoint in any science that attempts to use it as its core term” (p Valsiner 2009, p. 10).

The paper by Gustav Jahoda (2012) clearly shows the diversity of the possible interpretations of the word “culture” in contemporary literature, moreover, the incompatibility of several interpretations. As he rightly notices, the supposed location of culture is variously said to be only in the mind or both in the mind and in the material world created by humans or external only. The same “incompatibility” issue appears when culture is treated as a “variable” by some authors, while others maintain that such approach entails a misconception of what constitutes culture itself (Jahoda 2012, p.299).

Finally, Jahoda arrives at the conclusion: “In sum, the concept of “culture” is probably indispensable, yet ... much of the time it is quite practicable and defensible simply to use the term without seeking to define it. However, if either for a theoretical or empirical reason clarification is essential, then the author should explain the specific manner in which she employs the term “culture” in that particular context.” (Jahoda 2012, p.300).

We find it hard to agree with this statement. Will the discussion about culture then not become akin the dispute between six blind men of Indostan about an elephant - to which they approached from different sides, so that each one could investigate just one particular part of the animal (the tusk, the trunk, the knee, the ear)? In their dispute “Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!” (Saxe 1963: 135), – because none of them conceived the elephant as it appears in its integrity, and each came to a false conclusion regarding what the elephant is: the latter is not akin a wall, a spear, a fan or a rope....

The present article takes issue with the question underlying the fact that, on the one hand, culture is so actively discussed in both academic circles and beyond (Valsiner 2009, Valsiner et al. 2016), and, on the other hand, there is such a confusion in academic community with definitions of culture itself (Jahoda 2012). The question we address is “why”? Why one of the central (at least, in terms of popularity) notions of the human civilization in the late 20th – early twenty-first century has become simultaneously, on the one hand, commonly accepted as absolutely essential and, on the other hand, so differently and controversially defined by various parties?

It may seem that the answer lies on the surface. There are continuous claims that differences in definitions result naturally from the epistemic, methodological and theoretical faults between fields of knowledge (for instance, humanitarian and natural sciences), disciplines (for example, sociology and anthropology) or sub-disciplines (like between cognitive psychology and cross-cultural psychology) (see Sorokin 2017, 2018; Mironenko and Sorokin 2015).

There are also long standing debates concerning the political contestability of culture (Francese 2009), which hampers attempts for academic definition. For example, culture may be seen contested as the phenomenon staying in the center of current struggles between different political ideologies (for instance, colonial and de-colonial) (Grosfoguel 2007).

Recognizing the relevance of these arguments, we will try to go further in our explorations. We will argue that the observed confusion in definitions of culture together with its rapidly increasing popularity in international Academy and beyond - is not the result of the processes, taking place solely inside the Academic world or in political sphere. It is a much bigger issue, having its roots in the fundamental ontological shift, transforming the objects of research of practically all social and humanitarian disciplines.

The further discussion is divided in three parts. In the first part, we describe the core elements of the ontological shift we have indicated. In the second part, we explain how does it relate to the “problem of culture” and what does it mean for the continuously growing but never-ending debates about the proper definition of culture. In the third part, we propose a direction, which may be helpful to solve the outlined problem.

## **The Ontological Shift: “Reversing the POLES” of Reality**

We claim the fundamental transformation that “reverses the poles” of the whole human-related reality in the late XX – early XXI century. In the center of this transformation is the shift in ontological standing of a human being. There are two central interconnected dimensions of this shift.

First, a human being becomes the core element and the pivot of reality – observable, measurable, active and fundamentally real. At the same time, other objects, “external” in relation to individual, are subjected to such rapidly increasing rates of changes (often unpredictable) - that grow progressively fuzzy, obscured, liquid, thus, less comprehensible, and sometimes even less “real” (see Bauman 2013; Lash 2009; Urry 2016; Mironenko and Sorokin 2015; Frank and Meyer 2002; Meyer 2010). Amongst these “external” objects are social institutes, structures (including even states) and all what Emile Durkheim called “social facts”, as well as material artefacts of various kinds. It should be noted that the formulated “ontological shift” implying the principally new status of individual “Actorhood” (Meyer 2010) must not be conflated with “ontological individualism”, which postulates that social facts supervene on, or are exhaustively grounded by, facts about individual people, while social facts are still recognized as measurable and observable specific entities (see more Epstein 2014).

Consequently, all social and humanitarian disciplines as well as relating academic communities that continue trying to grasp these constantly emerging, disappearing and elusive “external” aspects of reality with their usual theoretical and methodological

frameworks (as if nothing has fundamentally changed in the core ontological statuses), experience serious difficulties (Lash 2009; Urry 2016). These difficulties may be called “existential” because they not only question the concrete research objects (traditionally thought of as inevitably “real” and “hard”), but also implicitly undermine the basic ontological foundations of the relating directions of thought (for instance, all types and manifestations of positivism across social and humanitarian knowledge).

Second, the “inner” nature of a human being has also radically changed. From an entity “subjected” to think, act and feel according to certain conditions, prescriptions, collective representations, laws and all other “social facts”<sup>1</sup>, – a human being fundamentally changes. He becomes an Actor (Frank and Meyer 2002; Meyer 2010) who is empowered to create, destroy and change the external reality following his purposive plans, desires and visions. The concept of Actorhood is a landmark in contemporary development of social and humanitarian disciplines, for here scholars turn to the Subjekt as the center of theoretical models of society.

The most distinctive feature of this novel mode of existence is the newly emerged and expanding Actorhood, as the ultimate legitimate vehicle of transformations in social, political, economic and all other sorts of human-related reality (Frank and Meyer 2002). Actorhood becomes “expanded” (Meyer 2010) because it finds grounds not in any sort of observable concrete regulations, stimulus and sanctions (emphasized within rational choice theory and functionalist approaches in social sciences) – but in “extrasocial cosmos”, surpassing the actual and immediate “social context”. This “extrasocial cosmos” empowers individual to transform the reality according to purposefully and freely chosen identities – rather than making him obey to the existing rules (Frank and Meyer 2002). This is what makes middle-class activists in New York protest against deforestation in the Amazon. This is what makes companies compete with each other in terms of not the business profits or the market value – but in terms of the most anti-discriminative human resources policies (Bromley and Sharkey 2017). This is what makes increasing share of population all over the globe continue seeking higher and higher levels of education independently of the conditions of labor market in the particular locations (for instance, whether labor market demands professionals in the concrete field or not?) (Meyer 2010; Kruecken and Drori 2009).

Of course, attempts to explain these and many other “inconsistencies” observed in recent decades all over the globe basing on the logics of self-interested rational action or functional role of a particular institution for a “societal whole” – are not scarce (Perrow 2009; Roberts 2007). However, as literature claims – they all fail (Meyer and Bromley 2013; Kruecken and Drori 2009). Actorhood is perhaps the only valid explanation.

Obviously, the second dimension of the outlined ontological shift closely connects with the first, – as it is precisely the “Actorhood” of individual what undermines the ontological status of the external environment by making it amenable to the purposive transformational action of individual. The recent claims concerning the nature of higher psychological functions, “related to” but not “determined by”, physiological and genetic levels (Valsiner et al. 2016, p.V), is another argument for the principal ontological status of individual Actorhood.

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<sup>1</sup> No matter how social facts are comprehended – in a Durkheimian style (seen as special kind of reality, irreducible to individuals) or in Weberian vein (seen as products of institutionalized individual social actions) (Pope et al. 1975).



When making this claim concerning ontological shift, we draw on recent proposals within new institutionalism theory in sociology (Meyer 2010; Meyer and Frank 2002). However, applying this theory to the problem of “culture definition”, we not only expand the new intuitionist thought beyond sociology. We also critically revise and elaborate the central theoretical arguments of new institutionalists further, by postulating disagreement with their central claim that Actorhood – is a “social construction” (Krucker and Drori, 2009: 10–11). On the contrary, we argue, that individual holding empowered Actorhood – is the opposite to the “construction” as he himself becomes the creator and “constructor” of the entire external world, which was previously seen as an entity of primary value, shaping individual.

### **The Connections between the “Ontological Shift” and the “Problem of Culture”**

How does the outlined ontological shift relate to the “problem of culture” and what does it mean for the never-ending debates about the proper definition of culture?

One of the most obvious and triggering issues with culture – is that it is “located” somewhere in-between the “inner” world of the individual and the “external” world (or simultaneously in both). Unsurprisingly, the “internal-external” dimension has central role in the analytical scheme for exploring various definitions of culture suggested by Jahoda (2012). Indeed, after reasonable and brief criticism of the “external” definitions of culture, Jahoda puts main effort in analyzing those approaches that see culture as “internal or both, internal and external” (2012). The apparent logical difficulties in trying to see culture as both internal and external phenomenon – is the key to understanding its central role in comprehending the outlined above “ontological shift” and the relating consequences to all the social and humanitarian disciplines as well as to their objects of study.

Despite drastic differences between epistemological, methodological and theoretical foundations of various well-established social and humanitarian disciplines (see Sorokin 2017, 2018), they all seem equally unprepared to exploring the reality with full account of the outlined “ontological shift”. Even those disciplines, which from the very beginning declared their focus on the individual (psychology, anthropology and various behaviorist and cognitive sciences) – elaborated their toolboxes implicitly keeping in mind the traditional distinction between, on the one hand, “hard” and “real” “external” world, and, on the other hand, soft, changing and flexible individual with his “internal” subjectivity. This is not their fault: the vision of external environment as “hard” and “real” – is the fundamental feature of the entire human civilization of the last centuries (especially, in the West, where contemporary science mainstream originated from).

Thus, all these disciplines face obvious difficulties (if not to say “crisis”) when the “poles” in the coordinate system are “reversed”. The “external” reality is changing so rapidly that floats away from the hard-made methodologies of positivist, quantitative social science (observed dissatisfaction with traditional research in social structures in sociology and the loud declarations of the “liquid”, “unpredictable” society by Bauman (2013), Urry (2016), Lash (2009) and others would be the best example). It may be not easy to accept, but implicit assumptions about the “external” reality typical of

psychologists, anthropologists and various behaviorists and cognitive scientists – are very close to that of the most orthodox sociologists, believing that somewhere “out there” (beyond the individual) exist “real” social structures, and institutes, exerting obvious and straight influence on each and every individual.

If there is something “out there” in contemporary rapidly changing unpredictable world, it is definitely not the rigid structures or strictly obliging institutions. Then what is it? When an individual becomes an Actor, purposefully creating the world around himself, then what is the ontological status of the external environment? This is possibly the most interesting question for the coming decades for the social and humanitarian knowledge.

Traditional well-established disciplines do not seem prepared to deal with this question. The problem - is not only the lack of inter-disciplinarily. Arguably, the old-hat vision of “internal-external” dimension of reality (what current confusion with definitions of “culture” in contemporary social and humanitarian knowledge clearly demonstrates) – is the central issue. The implicit dominating ontological assumptions in the mainstream of social, anthropological, psychological and other sciences make them largely helpless in the face of this new challenge.

The problem of “culture” with its core in “internal-external” ontological dimension – is more like the story about Helio-centric vs Geo-centric visions of the world, which took place centuries ago. Indeed, at first, the scheme carefully elaborated by Ptolemy was better at actual empirical testing than the picture drawn by Copernicus. However, Copernicus appeared right in the end, as future proved, basing on improved technological devices for astronomical observations (Gingerich 1993).

The “dream-team” of well-established disciplines, which has been dealing with “culture” for centuries basing on the traditional vision of “internal-external” dimension of reality – would not be helpful in the case of the new reality. However, unlike astronomers of the past, we have to begin radical transformation of social and humanitarian knowledge not waiting for the new telescope to be invented to give us clear guidelines for renovating the knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in.

Thus, the “problem of culture” in the current academic and larger societal discourses – is not a simple, single and small misunderstanding in the beautiful and correct in all other respects scientific comprehension of the world that contemporary academic communities and society in general could cheerfully celebrate.

## **What should Be Done? The Essential Role of “Culture” in the Search for Renovation of Social and Humanitarian Knowledge**

The most promising path for trying to grasp the reality with the full account of its “ontological shift” – could, in our opinion, be the direction, which breaks with the implicit assumptions of traditional disciplinary thinking. Say, Cultural Studies – a field, that has already given birth to sound claims towards “anti-disciplinarity” (Claycomb and Riedner 2010; Nelson 2013). The development of this field may reflect the growing dissatisfaction with the products of mainstream disciplinary thinking in all the traditional “major” disciplines – as well as failures in practical implementation of the relating products.



If external reality is becoming subjected to fundamental transformations by purposeful individual Actorhood – than the ontological status of this reality changes. What previously was named “structure”, “institutions”, “civilization” (seen as reality of “primary level” compared to individual) – now is increasingly often named “culture”, which is inextricably grounded in individual conscious.

This novel ontological congruence between internal and external, which many in Academy and beyond feel – is what the current debates about the definition of “culture” brilliantly illustrate. It is also symptomatic that culture increasingly becomes a “problem” rather than a simple “phenomenon”. It reflects not only scientific but also practical need for the principal change in the entire social and humanitarian knowledge in order to cope with reality effectively (see Valsiner 2009).

To lead the epistemic, theoretical and methodological innovations in order to deal with reality in the face of ontological shift – is, in our view, the core mission of current debates about culture definition.

Culture manifests itself as a part of “external” reality: as artefacts and cities, and as forms of social organization and institutions. Culture is also a characteristic of the “inner” psychic reality of people, individuals and communities, a psychic phenomenon.

The “ontological shift” explicated above, has made the borders between the “inner” and “outer” pervious, so that these are merged in the unity of internalization of the external and externalization of the internal. To recognize this unity as a real ontological phenomenon (and not a mere abstract intellectual scheme) is essential.

Scientific analysis begins with mapping the object, the part of reality under consideration (Mironenko 2017). For “normal” sciences, mapping the object is not a problem, because their field is the solely objective reality.

For culture, the empirical definition is not so apparent, because of the multidimensionality of the phenomenon. Most importantly, as has been argued above, the nature of culture goes principally beyond the reach of the established mainstream methodologies in all the major disciplines and inter-disciplinary projects (sociology, psychology, anthropology, behaviorist and cognitive sciences, etc.). However, cooperation between different fields of knowledge and disciplines is essential for grasping the new ontological reality.

Will there be possible any progress in conceiving culture in contemporary science if a researcher would limit his understanding of that complex multidimensional phenomenon only to the one side of reality that he is exploring (for example, solely to its “internal” or “external” manifestations)? If the blind man, who touched and felt the ear of the elephant, had some idea of what an elephant was in general, would this not have contributed to the greater productivity of his approach?

To ensure the interaction of researchers and interdisciplinary links, it is necessary to remember to what reality the phenomenon we are studying relates. Thus, it is necessary to develop a holistic empirical scientific definition of culture, which will provide the basis for general inter- and trans- disciplinary discourse. This joint work requires a broad discussion with full account of the outlined above ontological shift. The essential point for culture adequate understanding today, in our opinion, is to grasp the internal-external dimension of culture in their integrity. Is such a definition possible? We believe that it is.

## **Conclusion: The Diversity and Unity of Cultural Phenomena: Overcoming the Internal-External Fault for Comprehensive Understanding**

As Jahoda clearly shows, the core problem with defining culture is the lack of an apparent ground, on which all the diverse manifestations of culture would fit together and form a single entity. It may seem highly questionable, if there is anything in the empirical reality, which integrates all these different fragments and aspects together – making an ontologically holistic single “thing” (which also should have clear borders, separating it from other parts of reality)? The lack of this apparent basis for integrity may allow one to argue that “culture” does not have a distinctive ontological status.

However, the outlined “ontological shift” prevents us from this line of thinking. Claims about the definite ontological status of “culture” might have been problematic half a century ago – in the era of “strong” States, Religions and Corporations guiding the “weak” individual through the externally determined paths in rigid structures, prescribing what one may wish and how can it be achieved.

Now things have changed; the ontological shift “reversed the poles” of human related reality. The empowered individual Actorhood rules over material, spiritual and other possible sorts of environment, shaping the solid ground for the new and definitely distinctive ontological phenomenon.

Does the principle change in the nature of the empirical reality (which stands in the center of the outlined “ontological shift”), means the impossibility of empirical definition for the core resulting phenomenon – “culture”? We believe, no. Such definition is not only possible – it is necessary – however, it requires new methodological grounds.

We do not undertake to affirm what these new methodological grounds should be. However, we suggest to begin this quest by a starting definition, which would pinpoint the most essential characteristics of culture that current scientific apparatus is able to grasp: culture is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses processes, products and results of human activity, material and spiritual, transmitted from generation to generation in a non-biological way.

Culture includes material objects: artifacts, ranging from planetary scale to jewelry. There are also spiritual, non-material components: languages, literature, art, science, etc. Culture also includes processes: external - social, ranging from individual to collective modes of behavior (for instance, relating to constantly emerging and changing customs and traditions); and internal - individually-psychic. In the XXIst century, all these are aspects operate as parts of one whole, integrated on the grounds of individual Actorhood as an ontological phenomenon marking the newly shaped reality.

This definition, primarily, points to the integrity and unity of all manifestations attributable to culture, in all their diversity, material and spiritual, products and processes. They are inextricably linked to each other and cannot be adequately understood without considering their links with each other and in the context of the whole phenomenon.

The suggested definition also allows distinguishing culture from other phenomena, delineating the boundary of cultural phenomena: they are generated by human activity.

The circle of cultural phenomena is very wide, it grows and expands in geometric progression in the course of human history, however, it is not all-embracing. Not everything in the universe is transfigured by human activity, and in human beings themselves there is not only nurture but nature also.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the authors.

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