

# Cultural Flesh – Social Metabolism

## The Corporal Nature of Collective Forms

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### Context

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. — The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.) Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their application is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy.

§11 from *Philosophical Investigations*  
by Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001: 6e).

The study of culture<sup>1</sup> is a discipline reaching a critical stage in its development as an academic endeavor. It is impossible to say whether this stage will be one of divergence or convergence with other branches of the social sciences and humanities, but the field is certainly evolving rapidly now at the beginning of the 21st century. As in biological evolution, quick development occurs along a line of genetic mutations. The raw materials (be they *ideas* or *chromosomes*) multiply and beget new forms. In this way, the life sciences provide the first and lesser of two metaphors in the examination of the state of cultural studies: reproduction and mutation. As cultural scientists struggle to categorize

their primary subject as precisely as possible by agreeing upon a definition of the word “culture,” they offer their colleagues, the broader scientific community, and an engaged public a variety of definitions designed (and sometimes contrived) to fit their discrete field – an engineered academic strain, one might say.

As in any moment of accelerated innovation, of dense and frequent mutation such as the contemporary efforts to formulate a definition of the term “culture,” there will be productive and there will be useless growth. In keeping with the evolutionary metaphor above, the intellectual tissue from the discipline of cultural studies is being encouraged to mutate through means both natural and artificial. The growth has yet to be diagnosed as benign or malignant, however. In any case, it is a fact that one of the central tasks of cultural studies today remains the definition of its own jurisdiction<sup>2</sup>, leading to a situation that the German cultural scientist Jürgen Bolten describes as a “culture of culture definition.”<sup>3</sup> (2009). Indeed, the genealogy of the term “culture” itself can be traced back along many lines to singular essentialist formulations in the 18th and 19th century and such explorations have been undertaken many times (cf. Jenks, 2004; Fuchs, 2005; Nelson & Grossberg, 1988). Following the terminological development of “culture” chronologically back again to our own time, though, is an exercise that reveals myriad influences precipitating a variety of claims on the concept itself. In the last generations alone, the exploration of culture has been aligned closely with the relativistic tendencies of postmodern thought and the absence of any claims to genuine sovereignty. And from an academic primordial soup, contemporary researchers have tried to splice to-

gether chains of cultural significance that necessarily correspond only to their own fields of interest: pragmatic neo-essentialists, anglophone “cult studs” from literary backgrounds, and European cultural scientists who seem to approach the fundamental task of the definition of culture with more urgency than their New World counterparts. As all parties undertake their own (and, not insignificantly, *separate*) efforts to define culture, the metaphorical mutation of the term accelerates. What is culture to one group bears a different name to the other. Here we must remind ourselves again of Wittgenstein’s words from the *Philosophical Investigations* above: “what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print.” (2001: 6e).

Meeting the term “culture” in script and print is practically unavoidable in social science texts of all registers. Its “uniform appearance” as a widely-used general term is a trap for the uninitiated and an obsession for devotees. Wittgenstein is the proper starting point for any analysis of the “culture of culture definition” since he reminds us throughout his own philosophical investigations that the problems in our philosophizing can be traced back to language problems. (2001: 19e). A reasonable diagnosis of the state of cultural studies might therefore be that the single term “culture” is a term fatigued from use in a number of both legitimate and illegitimate contexts. If, for example, a *culture* is a narrow category addressing national characteristics (cf. Hall, 1990) while in other sources *culture* is intended to describe the social precipitate from acts of communication (cf. Carey, 1992; Baldwin et al, 2005), then the word obviously defies the demand for consensus that Wittgenstein describes

in paragraph 242 of his work cited above: “If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also...in judgments.” (2001: 88e). Wittgenstein’s call for agreement is, in the narrow examination of culture, obviously unrealistic, but a division within the “uniform appearance” of the term culture is certainly possible. The physiological metaphors of skin, flesh, and their physical extensions illustrate the borders that must be drawn to divide the word “culture” into more meaningful subcategories.

Placing inconsistent definitions of the term as well as its usage in a number of related but separate academic fields in apposition, we recognize a simple problem. The expectation of a kind of terminological symmetry across disciplines becomes absurd, but is itself a fact that is rarely considered due to the insular nature of scientific research. Furthermore, the “common-sense” interpretations of the word “culture” (e.g. art as culture, language as culture, nation as culture) are pervasive and cannot easily be dislodged. In short, too much is demanded of the tiny word “culture,” once famously described by Raymond Williams as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” (1985: 87). It has become impossible to apprehend because the term is pervasive both in daily life and in practically all texts of the social sciences and humanities. The primary focus of a valuable new discipline has therefore been defined into meaninglessness.

## Metaphor

Culture, however, is not simply a residue, it is, as we have already considered, in

progress; it processes and reveals as it structures and contains. Culture is the way of life and the manner of living of a people.

from *Culture* by Chris Jenks (1991: 120).

The most valuable of the recent scholarship dedicated to the description of human culture has emphasized the processual nature of cultures. As an unintentional product of human interaction, culture must be understood through the kinds of analogies and terms more often applied to the study of corporal and environmental systems. That is to say that *organic* models and metaphors will always be the most appropriate when illustrating human behavior and its manifestations (in this case, culture). Unintentionally but inevitably, culture arises as a product of human existence and interaction<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the human body produces its flesh – its physical form – in the absence of conscious effort (unintentionally but inevitably, that is), offering us an apt metaphor for our widely cited but poorly defined subject.

Drawing the borders of culture and delineating what is and what is not a cultural system seems to be a core task of the academics who have contributed to the “culture of culture definition” in its present form. Some insist that culture and language share a common jurisdiction (cf. Fishman, 1972). Others forgo a precise definition and permit “culture” to be intimately connected to national sovereignty (Kymlicka, 1997). Still others attach the word culture to any act of human communication broadening the term to a condition of near universality (Van der Elst, 2003). Surely all of these cultural concepts have certain merits and distinct applications, but they can hardly all be referring to

the same thing. Wittgenstein's "uniform appearance" seems to be a perfect diagnosis and reference to a perpetual desire among cultural scientists to clarify and redefine a term that everyone seems to understand already.

We can, however, use metaphor as a filter through which we can organize the inconsistent interpretations behind the uniform appearance.

As stated above, culture is a natural system; it arises through no conscious initiative, but is vital to human survival as we know it. The same might be said of our own corporal systems. They too are unintentional and essential. Both culture and the flesh of our bodies grow and change over time and do so in separate but important contexts: the individual body ages while the flesh that defines a species evolves and adapts over generations. Gradually, both bodies and cultures grow into new species that former generations would find unrecognizable. Flesh becomes, metaphorically, a certain and specific category of what some individuals would call "culture." In this short survey, we will be more cautious than those individuals, understanding that flesh, in its vitality, mutability, and its intimate connection to its surroundings, can represent only one category of culture. To understand what kind requires the addition of further metaphorical layers.

## Extension

If clothing is an extension of our private skins to store and channel our own heat and energy, housing is a collective means of achieving the same end for the family or the group. Housing as shelter is an extension of our bodily heat-control mechanisms – a collective skin or garment.

Cities are an even further extension of bodily organs to accommodate the needs of large groups.

from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan (1965: 123).

Permitting the initial claim that the natural and intimate nature of flesh can be thought of as an analog to the natural and intimate development of cultures of a certain type, then only the barest and most essential of both realms is accounted for. That is to say, without flesh we cannot exist. It is a fragile system requiring sound metabolism and its perpetuation requires the interaction with other compatible specimens. Likewise, our innate and most personal cultural identity is not chosen (and, significantly, can only be acquired after conditions of reasonable health have been established). This cultural analog to flesh represents one's deepest socialization. It corresponds to what some cultural scientists call a "narrow" definition of culture (cf. Bolten, 1997) and what Klaus Hansen calls the "special collective" (cf. 2009) when referring specifically to national categories. For many, this most intimate of identities is that of the national culture. It is often the most immediate among the many cultures and social systems to which one belongs<sup>5</sup>. But it is not exclusive. No individual leaves himself naked and so easily described by a single set of cultural standards, just as bare flesh is in most cases a poor strategy for survival. The metaphor demonstrates the greatest flaw in the narrow, common-sense models of cultural identity: our basic identity, while significant, is always accompanied by our involvement in complementary social systems. To improve our understanding of "culture," we must therefore be

able to extend our metaphor to accommodate any other legitimate uses of the term. We can say that the flesh of the body corresponds metaphorically to national or religious categories of culture. Indeed, the growth and evolution of the corporal systems closely parallel a category of the fatigued term “culture” that we will refine and narrow to the more specific form called “pioric culture.”<sup>6</sup> In most cases, these prioric cultures will be social systems (i.e. communicative networks of multicollective individuals) in which admission and belonging to the discrete group is not freely chosen and extraction from which is difficult due to social pressure or other barriers either ideological or institutional. Analogous, perhaps to the concept of *primary socialization* (cf. Berger & Luckmann) or the mechanisms of first-language-acquisition, participation in the processes of prioric cultures will typically correspond to the narrowest and most common definitions of culture such as nationality, regional identity, or religious affiliation.

Prioric cultures exist near the center of the network of related cultures and collectives to which an individual belongs (cf. Hansen, 2009), but so far, our analogy of flesh to prioric culture does not account for peripheral identities that are intentionally acquired later in life. To account for them, we need to look to a further interpretation of human systems and indeed a further metaphorical analysis. For a refinement of the flesh/culture analogy we must turn to the sometimes controversial writing of Marshall McLuhan.

While McLuhan’s work in the field of media and technology remains a source of passionate disagreement and debate (as well as frequent misinterpretation, it seems), his un-

derstanding of the tools human beings use in all their forms has a special significance to this study. His definition of the word “medium”<sup>7</sup> allows us to expand our fleshy metaphor for culture to include the other acquired identities of our personal network quite neatly, for example. According to McLuhan, “the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.” (1965: 7). This passage is the key to the quote from McLuhan above. He informs us that media are extensions of our corporal selves – of our very flesh. The shoe extends the bare foot and the wheel extends the foot further. Both are therefore *media* in McLuhan’s description. Returning to the original context with culture as flesh, we might use similar logic to extend our bare bodies – what we now understand to be symbolically linked to the prioric cultures of nation and religion. For McLuhan, the extensions of the skin were obvious in daily life: clothing extends the human flesh protecting it against the elements or offering signals to mates and foes. Another extension will be physical shelter: a house, umbrella, or a fallout shelter. The model is so flexible that we can extend our skin outward to the boundaries of cities or the metal skin of a space station if we choose to. Instead, we will return to the metaphorical understanding of the extension of the flesh in a context of culture and multicollective identity.

Just as McLuhan recognizes that we supplement our physical bodies with various media to aid in our survival as individuals and as a species, so too must we recognize that the flesh

of our prioric culture is subject to conscious extension. It has been a ubiquitous criticism of certain forms of cultural studies that their emphasis is too narrowly placed upon a definition of culture as nation. (cf. Mathews, 2000; Bolten, 1997). To be sure, the comprehension of nation as culture is a pragmatic and frequently effective way to understand cultural processes in daily life. But no individual can be defined by her prioric culture alone just as no individual is judged or understood as a person by his bare flesh alone. We intentionally “extend” our prioric cultures by investing ourselves in what we will hereafter refer to as “deliberate cultures.”

As a man places a cap on his head to shield his bald scalp from the sun, or a figure skater attaches skates to her feet to allow her to glide more easily across ice, all individuals supplement their prioric cultural membership through involvement in deliberate ones. Globalization and the emergence in some parts of the world of what has been called a “lifestyle” society (Miller, 2001) permit multicollective individuals (cf. Hansen, 2009) to align themselves with ever more deliberate cultures. Digital communication facilitates the establishment of new communities of like-minded people who interact to inform and cultivate the social systems they can now access online. The number of deliberate cultures we subscribe to bears little relation to the actual number of hats or glasses we can employ to extend our corporal selves, but the principle is the same as that described by McLuhan. We can describe ourselves in terms of the flesh, but the conclusions drawn from that description will be valid and incomplete until we employ deliberate cultures to extend and complement our prioric cultures. Just as the description of “an Englishman,” “a Jew,”

or “a Chilean” may contain some statements of truth, exceptions to these generalizations will never be hard to find. The dreadlocked, drug-using German reggae fan does not fit well with the American stereotypes regarding people of that nationality, for example. His existence may cause confusion for those who employ a rigid and narrow conception of culture, expecting a young German to conform to preconceived notions of order and arrogant intellectualism. In the example it should be clear that the prioric culture of the Rastafarian German has been somewhat eclipsed by his enthusiastic participation in other cultures that Kant, Beethoven, and perhaps even Einstein were unaware of. Technological advances allow the German youth of today to “extend” his prioric culture in ways that were impossible even two generations ago. His exposure to Caribbean music, fashion trends originating in urban New York and his communal consumption of North African hashish in an Amsterdam bar all contribute to the unique constellation of communicative influences that Hansen terms “multicollectivity.” (cf. 2009). The national origins of these influences are incidental; the communities that cultivate them are deliberate and therefore not necessarily prioric cultures. In our metaphorical context, however, these discrete influences can be seen as the cultural *Extensions of Man* [sic] to paraphrase McLuhan. Our young man is still a German and may conform to the national stereotypes in some way (perhaps in his conscious defiance of them), but he extends this cultural flesh through the process of interaction, integration and contribution to deliberate cultures via social metabolism. The opportunities for extension are limited only by personal tolerance of internal

inconsistency (e.g. the Christian proponent of the death penalty or the self-proclaimed non-conformist wearing sweatshop blue jeans to the protest).

The apparent increase in “body modification” in recent years (cf. Chao in Prelli, 2006; Rush, 2005) is an interesting analog to the simultaneous increase in the availability of previously inaccessible “deliberate cultures” from Facebook communities to foreign esoteric traditions. The popularity of tattoos and non-traditional piercings, for example, are corporal expressions of the expanded marketplace of “new” deliberate cultures. Deepening the relationship through the metaphor of flesh and extension, it becomes clear that individual multicollective opportunity – the extension of individuals’ ability to access and participate in an ever-increasing variety of cultures and collectives – is at once another way to understand “globalization.” At the same time, the alteration and extension of the flesh turns the skin into a vehicle for the trappings of our deliberate collective identities. The inherent and accidental foundation becomes little more than a framework upon which the constellation of multicollectivity is hung. Indeed, quite often these external expressions obscure the flesh altogether or else present it in intentionally appealing or offensive ways – all of which may be seen as the corporal analogs to the increasingly common claims that the nation (and, consistent with our terminology, one species of prioric culture) is an obsolete category (cf. Beck et al). We use our prioric cultures as a stage, therefore, upon which we cultivate our deliberate cultures in the same way that the flesh bears our fashion, jewelry, or ink.

## Distinction

We shift and bedeck and bedrape us /  
thou art noble and nude and antique.  
“Dolores” by A.C. Swinburne (2009: 177).

Culture is a living thing. To describe it one must acknowledge its life and mutability – its impermanence and its malleability. As a young science, cultural studies must seek models to describe dynamic systems rather than static categories. Cultural science should recognize that it is devoted to the description and analysis of *processes* and the practitioners of this discipline must eschew rigid absolutes. Culture is, for example, not our “software” (cf. Hofstede, 2003; Pedersen, 2007; Balkin, 2003) nor an absolute divine gift (cf. Arnold, 1993), nor is it a mere collection of attributes that can be listed and learned (cf. Benedict, 2006). Culture in its broadest sense is the most intimate and organic of our social creations. It is our flesh, our skin, our organs, nourished by a corresponding social metabolism as vital as any corporal system. If it ceases to grow or is deprived of appropriate nutrition, it will die. Individually it is unique, but it is comparable to and compatible with others of its kind. Prioric cultures change slowly (sometimes reluctantly, sometimes involuntarily) as the result of communication with other influences just as the species of organisms evolve according to changes in their environments. And just as human beings are (at least nearly) unique in their ability to extend their flesh through the implementation of certain media, they are likewise able to extend their *prioric cultures* through the adoption of *deliberate cultures*.

The division then of the term “culture” into at least two distinct types does not eliminate

the obstacles in the navigation of the “culture of culture definition.” The separation of these types, however, does facilitate the task in some way. It will be possible, using the distinctions offered above, to recognize that the “culture” that Geert Hofstede describes in his “cultural dimensions” is a description of dimensions of prioric culture. Likewise, the “cultures” that are the preferred domain of a great number of North American scholars – “hip-hop culture” (cf. Price, 2006), “consumer culture” (cf. Miller, 2001), or “suburban culture” (cf. Ross, 2000) to name but a few – may indeed share certain characteristics with their natural prioric analogs, but the subcultures, transnational identities, and microcultures that are prevalent in contemporary cultural studies become rather more comprehensible when they are seen as *deliberate* and distinct from the prioric cultures of religion and nation. The same term, “culture,” cannot be used to describe both conditions without modification.

To be sure, Wittgenstein would not be mollified by the single division of the “uniform appearance” of this fatigued term into two separate but related subcategories. This distinction will do nothing more than halve the amount of work that our tired terms will be forced to undertake. To be sure, there remain many inconsistencies, and the need for further refinement before we can imagine “agreement not only in definitions but also...in judgments.” (Wittgenstein, 2001: 88e). Nonetheless, the introduction of the corporal metaphor into the description of prioric and deliberate cultures does much to distinguish and organize the terminology. Adding McLuhan’s novel understanding of how our flesh is supplemented in reality contributes further to the apprehension of this vital

but elusive term. Through this metaphorical study, then, it should be clear that “culture” as a singular term is inadequate simply because its manifestations are so broad. Seeking corporal parallels to the prioric and deliberate cultures to which we belong (and belong to us), one quickly recognizes that they would include all human bodies, the clothes that present and protect them, the homes in which we live, and, as McLuhan reminds us, the cities in which these bodies live and interact. To try to describe these phenomena with a single term is an absurd task. Dividing the work between the “prioric” and “deliberate,” however, can illustrate the necessary separation between the national/religious/regional primary socialization and the “deliberate” extensions that obscure, aid, or define the flesh.

## Notes

- 1 Known in some places as “cultural studies” and in others as “cultural science”.
- 2 Etymologically an extremely appropriate word in this context since it has become of critical importance to cultural scientists that they are able to say (*dīcere*) exactly where their authority (*jūs*) should lie.
- 3 “eine Kulturbegriffskultur”.
- 4 A corresponding definition or model in support of this statement would not be hard to find in much of the German cultural theory from the last century. Schütz, Luhmann, and Habermas, for example, have all attached communicational conditions to their respective “*Kulturbegriffe*.”
- 5 As evidence of their primacy, consider the most convenient categories for common



stereotypes: crass generalizations regarding others will often settle on the expected national or religious characteristics (e.g. “Americans are fat and uneducated,” “The Japanese are disciplined,” “Muslims are terrorists.”) corresponding here to the cultures into which one is typically born.

- 6 The revival of the seldom-used word “*prioric*” (cf. Oxford English Dictionary) is undertaken with caution and confidence. The term refers to the cultural categories into which one is automatically admitted at birth. This is not to say that the cultural features assigned to the relevant national or religious categories are in any way innate (“*a priori*” in one sense). Instead, the use of *prioric* indicates the immediacy and lack of intention inherent in these cultural systems. The corporal analogy is apt in this respect.
- 7 A term, quite unlike “culture,” that McLuhan redefined in a context of relative consensus regarding its meaning.

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