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Cultural property and culture theory

RICHARD HANDLER

Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, USA

ABSTRACT

Recent work in culture theory has mounted a decisive critique of the reifying tendencies that have been inherent in anthropologists' use of the culture concept. At the same time, cultural-property legislation has proliferated around the globe, leading, ironically, to a bureaucratic celebration of precisely those aspects of culture theory that many anthropologists now mistrust. This article reviews some of the reifying assumptions built in to the notion of cultural property, and examines two historical cases, one at the dawn of the nationalist era, the other at the end of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

cultural property • culture theory • historic preservation • invention of culture • objectification of culture

■ INTRODUCTION

In June of 2000, my mother, Phoebe Handler, died, some eight years after my father, Earl, passed on. Phoebe died as she had wished, instantly, of a heart attack at the end of a full day and having lived her entire life in full



possession of her faculties. It was a shock to me, but not a tragedy. The sad task of dismantling Phoebe's house fell to myself and my only sibling, Michael, an attorney in the small Western Pennsylvania town where my father, an attorney and judge, had lived all his life and to which my mother had moved upon marriage after the Second World War. The 'material culture' of my parents' house was solidly, but unostentatiously, middle class. The center of that material culture assemblage, in my mind, was Phoebe's magnificent Mason and Hamlin grand piano (upon which she had practiced two hours a day as a child and taught generations of children as an adult) and her post-War Danish Modern furniture, in particular a free-form glass coffee table and a birch dining-room table. I could go on at some length inventorying, from memory, the contents of the house, but the argument I wish to make leads me away from such things. For on that sad occasion I experienced personally something I had known, but only theoretically: culture does not reside in material things, it resides in – or better, is ceaselessly emergent from – meaningful human activity. As the great anthropological linguist, Edward Sapir, put it 70 years ago:

The so-called culture of a group of human beings, as it is ordinarily treated by the cultural anthropologist, is essentially a systematic list of all the socially inherited patterns of behavior which may be illustrated in the actual behavior of all or most of the individuals of the group. The true locus, however, of these processes which, when abstracted into a totality, constitute culture is not in a theoretical community of human beings known as society, for the term 'society' is itself a cultural construct which is employed by individuals who stand in significant relations to each other in order to help them in the interpretation of certain aspects of their behavior. The true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions. (Sapir, 1949/1932: 515)

Thus the culture of my parents' home could not be reduced to an inventory of personal property, nor to a 'systematic list' of objects or even activities. Indeed, I was surprised to find how immediately the house and its contents became, in my eyes, shabby and inert after my mother had gone. There is probably a Freudian element to this: as young children, our parents and elders appear in our eyes as all-powerful, and the objects they invest heavily with meanings become almost sacred to us, far more worthy than an outside observer's assessment of their monetary or aesthetic value would suggest. Take away the parental magic, and the objects soon lose their power. But although I took into my current home my parents' dining-room table, there is no way I will ever be able to re-create the culture they brought to it – the elegant yet familiarly informal meals, followed by evenings of Scrabble and bridge. And I can say the same thing about several other objects from their home now in my possession. They serve as

keepsakes, but they can neither bring back the cultural life of my childhood nor even help me to re-create it for my children.

Although these opening remarks may seem self-indulgent in what is intended as a scholarly article, I have begun with this example to dramatize the point that it is impossible to conserve or 'authentically' re-create culture, culture as we live it every day. (Indeed, how many of us can even specify what we do every day? By definition, we are largely unselfconscious about much of what goes on in our lives.) Some such argument as this has been central to much work in culture theory of the past three decades. The titles of a number of heavily-cited books tell the story – the anthropologist Roy Wagner's *The Invention of Culture* (1975), the edited volume of the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and even political scientist Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983, rev. edn, 1991).

The invention-of-tradition literature, for example,¹ worked often in a 'debunking' mode to show that apparently pristine and authentic traditions had been more or less recently invented or renewed, often by ideologically motivated elites (scholars, politicians, social critics) who claimed to be speaking for the peasants, the people, or the nation. Yet the recent invention of particular traditions is less important than the general theoretical point: if you start with a semiotic conception of culture (as in the passage from Sapir and as I will discuss more thoroughly in a moment), you should argue that all spurious traditions are genuine and all genuine traditions are spurious (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). Or, to put it another way, there is no sense in making a distinction between 'genuine' and 'spurious', or 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' cultures and traditions, because all culture exists in the present, and must be enacted and re-enacted or interpreted and re-interpreted in the present by human beings who are all in one way or another 'real' or 'authentic'. Moreover, the link between living cultural traditions and the past is not a physical one, not even in those cases involving cultural property, or physical heritage objects; rather, the link is a semiotic one. We use objects to refer to, or to think about, the past. But those cultural links to the past can exist only in the present and only within present-day semiotic activities. To save or conserve the past, tradition, or heritage is to do something new, today.

Wagner's *The Invention of Culture* is an extended meditation on this theme. Wagner insists that each instantiation of 'culture', or of 'structure', is an invention, a recontextualization that must by definition contain an element of creativity, of innovation. When people act in the world, they are not simply reproducing culture or structure, they are creating it anew, even that part of it which we imagine to be 'conventional':

The contexts of culture are perpetuated and carried forth by . . . being invented *out of each other* and *through each other*. This means that we cannot appeal to the force of something called 'tradition,' or 'education,' or



spiritual guidance to account for cultural continuity, or for that matter cultural change. The symbolic associations that people share . . . , their 'morality,' 'culture,' 'grammar,' or 'customs' . . . are as much dependent upon continual reinvention as the individual idiosyncracies, details, and quirks that they perceive in themselves or in the world around them. (Wagner, 1975: 50-1)

Or, summed up in a pithy metaphor: 'Meaningful expression . . . always moves in a world of cultural illusion, one, moreover, which it continually "lays down" for itself, as a tank lays its own tracks' (Wagner, 1975: 42).

The radical implications of the notion that culture creates itself continuously, through semiotic processes, 'as a tank lays its own tracks', are difficult for most commonsense viewpoints to absorb. The Sapir passage, quoted above, captures some of those implications: 'a' culture does not exist in the real world as a bounded entity, the properties of which can be 'inventoried'. The anthropologist's list of culture traits or cultural property is, as Sapir puts it, an abstraction, or as Levi-Strauss put it a generation later, a 'model' (1963: 279). Indeed, such analytic terms as 'culture' and 'society' are themselves symbols which acting human beings use, as they act, to interpret their actions. Despite metaphors like 'cultural property', which invite us to imagine cultural traits as things, the locus of culture is in symbolic processes, and every time we think about culture or 'model' it, we are creating new culture (even as we think we are merely referring to what's already 'out there'). This is not to say that culture is unreal, or doesn't exist; it merely reorients our thinking about what Sapir called 'the locus' of culture.

But 'location', for us modern Westerners, in any case, is about three-dimensional space, and a fourth dimension, time. Sapir's colleague Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote persuasively about the ways in which the grammars of what he called Standard Average European (SAE) languages spatialize realities that do not exist in space. Semiotic processes are real, they 'happen' in the world, but they do not happen 'in' space such that it is useful to be constrained, as we are by our language habits, to imagine them in three-dimensional terms. As Whorf puts it, 'this has gone so far that we can hardly refer to the simplest nonspatial situation without constant resort to physical metaphors', and he continues with a long list of such expressions – to grasp the thread of an argument, to get straight to the point without wandering, and so on (Whorf, 1956: 146). Whorf made a similar argument about time, another nonspatial dimension of experience that SAE languages objectify, leading us to imagine time as 'blocks', 'chunks', 'gaps' and 'lines'.

This brings me to cultural property, about which I want to make three specific points. First, central to most heritage preservation or cultural property activities is what I will call an objectifying approach: that is, whatever it is that is imagined to be worthy of preservation, it must be imagined in such a fashion that bureaucratic routines can be applied to it.

It is expected that cultural items can be described, bounded, inventoried and, if appropriate, photographed, placed in a museum, or otherwise preserved. The business of objectifying cultural realities does not seem too difficult when the item in question is a discrete physical thing, such as a building (although it turns out, of course, that preserving an historic building, which has existed for many decades or centuries, is not a simple business at all; the first problem one has is to decide to which moment in the building's history it is to be 'restored'). But this objectifying business becomes deeply problematic in cases of nonspatial, semiotic cultural activities. We have, of course, procedures to do this – we can, for example, turn spoken language into written grammars and dictionaries – but the transformations that such 'preservation' entails are momentous.

Second, the business of inventorying and preserving cultural property is never merely a question of objects; it is a question of objects in relationship to posited social identities of varying sorts. In other words, it is never enough to discover, possess, or highlight an object; one must always interpret the object, make a claim about what, socially and culturally, it truly is and/or to whom it 'belongs'. Yet collective identities (even individual identities, for that matter) are never objectively given; like all cultural processes, they exist only in semiotic interactions. Thus, on the one hand, cultural patterns themselves do not exist as neatly delineated objects; on the other hand, the cultural groups that might claim them, or lend an identity to them, similarly have no such objectively bounded existence. We are familiar enough, in the literature on cultural property disputes, with both aspects of the phenomenon. In particular, the question of group identity and collective ownership comes frequently to the fore: who are the rightful present-day 'owners' of artefacts or even human remains preserved from a long-ago world when today's social categories were not yet in existence?

The third point I wish to make about cultural property concerns the expansion of our understanding of the term 'culture'. If we look at the transformation, over the past century or more, of historic preservation efforts into cultural-heritage preservation efforts, we find a gradual increase in the number of categories of objects and activities deemed worthy of preservation. Preservation efforts once focused on discrete objects, monuments and buildings expanded to include ensembles of buildings, landscapes, 'views' and traditions or ways of life. A parallel process of expansion saw a proliferation of social identities with claims to the possession of a culture worthy of respect. Increasingly after the Second World War, as 'civil rights', 'national self-determination' and 'human rights' gave rise to political movements around the globe, previously excluded or despised cultural groups have lain claim to a cultural heritage worth preserving and their heritages have become objects of interest to hegemonic museums, bureaucracies and markets.

We can discuss this two-pronged expansion in terms of the rise of



anthropological conceptions of culture. 'Culture' is one of those 'keywords' that Raymond Williams (1983) found central to modern ideology, but it is not a simple word. There is, first, the 'opera-house' definition of culture, which focuses on art and 'high culture': literature, paintings, 'serious' music and so on. Opera-house, or Arnoldian (after Matthew Arnold's notion of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world') notions of culture prevailed, until very recently, in the humanities disciplines of the modern university (English literature, art history and so on). And this conception of culture lives robustly on in such phrases as 'a highly cultured person' or in the 'arts and culture' section of our newspapers and periodicals.

Anthropological definitions of culture, by contrast, treat all or almost all human activities as equally cultural. Art, literature, and music, in this view, are not even privileged examples of culture, they are merely cultural activities of humans among a world of other sorts of cultural activities, from warfare to economics to children's games. And collectivities are not more or less cultured, as the evolutionary model of savages, barbarians and civilized peoples suggests; rather, all human groups are fully, although very differently, cultured. This position does not require us to deny that some individuals are more skillful than others in the performance of specific activities; nor does it mean that we cannot make judgments about which cultural objects and activities we find more valuable. It does, however, mean that most anthropologists would be unwilling to say that one group of human beings is any less completely or thoroughly or adequately 'cultured' than another.

The ascendance of an anthropological definition of culture in modern discourses has been an important factor in the proliferation of cultural property and heritage preservation activities. Simply put, if you start with an anthropological definition, you can make a claim that any object or activity in the world needs to be treated as cultural property. This has been convenient, to say the least, for many kinds of governmental agencies who must sometimes justify their existence by discovering 'under-served' or 'under-represented' populations; and for welfare-state governments in general (across the political spectrum) whose 'natural' tendency is in any case to expand their activities into all domains of life. I saw this clearly over 20 years ago, when I studied the Cultural Affairs Ministry in Quebec. The gradual expansion of an agency created in the early 1960s with a focus on opera-house art, French language and literature and traditional historical monuments went hand-in-hand with policy papers and strategic plans that drew ever more frequently on anthropological definitions of culture (Handler, 1988: 81–139). I do not wish to posit a cause-and-effect relationship in this case, but it is nonetheless clear that a nationalist movement, or a government agency, which thinks in terms of a total society can make good use of an anthropological conception of culture as a total way of life.

Implicit in my argument is the notion that culture cannot be objectively

discovered, but must be 'constructed' (to use the currently popular jargon term) in specific acts of social interpretation. A great deal of the work that has been done on the construction or invention of culture has focused on the politics of cultural representation, or questions about who has the power and social resources to control processes of cultural objectification. Museums are one arena in which these processes have been much studied. There is, first, the conventional distinction between art museums and natural history museums. Art museums are intended to house what we in the West consider to be our visual-artistic heritage, usually presented in terms of certain chronological and national categories (e.g. nineteenth-century French painting), but also understood to be priceless treasures of world civilization. Natural history museums have often been home to ethnographic collections, which present non-Western others as makers of artefacts or perhaps of 'primitive art' but not of high art. James Clifford has written insightfully on the gradual canonization of primitive artefacts over the past century, and has sketched an 'art-culture' system in which objects move, over time, from Natural History or anthropology museums to art museums (Clifford, 1988: 215–29; and now Jacknis, 2002). More generally, objects move in several directions, over time, as, for example, in the case of high art that falls out of fashion. (Here let me note that a good study of museum 'deaccessioning' processes would be extraordinarily useful.) We should also remember that as racial and ethnic politics shift over time, with categories becoming more or less marked, more or less stigmatized, more or less fashionable, museum collecting practices follow suit. Thus, today there are probably few American history museums that do not contain prominent 'minority' collections, whether those pertaining to African Americans, Native Americans, women, working-class people, or any number of other currently salient groups. And, of course, the narratives of inclusion that are applied by museums to these groups can vary quite a bit. 'Minorities' can be included as a colorful addition to what is imagined as a more or less unchanging mainstream, or as influencing and even constituting, to greater or lesser degrees, that mainstream.

The decisions we make to canonize certain objects as 'culture', or worthy of preservation, always depend on contemporary ideological concerns. Although many museums and culture brokers claim to operate in reference to universal aesthetic values, in my view such universals can never be other than rationalized presentations of historically specific cultural values. A good example of this can be found at the moment of the French Revolution, in the work of one of the first proponents of historic preservation, the Abbe Gregoire. The Abbe Gregoire developed a remarkably modernist approach to cultural preservation, based on his understanding of the relationship between a collective national life and the nation's patrimony. He championed the preservation of all sorts of artefacts, from sculpture and painting to books, monuments, and scientific instruments. He also championed



government sponsorship of creative endeavors, scientific research, and education. But one of the things he is most famous for is his discourse advocating the abolition of patois (regional languages and dialects).

The Abbe Gregoire's position on patois was consistent with his general support for the education and enlightenment of a national citizenry (Sax, 1990: 1162). But his understanding of the role of language in human civilization led him to urge the destruction of regional languages and dialects which, from other perspectives, might well be seen as cultural treasures. The Abbe Gregoire's discourse on patois is not without contradiction, but at its core are two arguments. The first is functional: the Abbe Gregoire thought that a national language is necessary for national unity. In the emerging French democracy that the Abbe envisioned, all citizens should be willing and able to play a role in public affairs. It would be disastrous if the peasantry were barred from taking their public places due to lack of knowledge of French; it would be equally disastrous if public offices became *de facto* the exclusive domain of an elite defined by its possession of the national tongue. In that case, as the Abbe writes: 'Immediately society will be re-infected by an aristocracy; the suffrage will be restricted, cabals will be easier to create and more difficult to destroy, and . . . from two separated classes a hierarchy will be established. Thus, ignorance of [the national] language will compromise social happiness and destroy equality' (Gregoire, 1977: 233).

The Abbe Gregoire's second argument derives from a long tradition (ongoing today!) of thinking about the relationship between language and culture, language and thought. In the French-Revolutionary version of that tradition (Rosenfeld, 2001), the grand universal principles of human freedom and reason have emerged, and are best expressed, in the modern French language. 'In its clear and methodical workings, thought proceeds easily', the Abbe tells us, adding that 'reason' and 'probity' are characteristics of the language itself. And, conversely, peasant dialects do not have those characteristics. At the very least, they do not have a developed terminology for politics; at worst, such dialects are 'gross jargons, without fixed syntax' and the peasants who speak them 'are little accustomed to generalize their ideas' and are deprived of the 'abstract terms' required to do so. The Abbe Gregoire even goes so far as to say that such dialects 'resist translation' (1977: 234).

For these reasons, then, the Abbe Gregoire argues that among the grand educational tasks facing the French nation is the propagation of the national language. I must stress that none of his claims, concerning the superior rationality of the French language, the weaknesses of the dialects, or even the inefficiencies of multilingualism, would be accepted as given by linguistic anthropologists who study such things today. Indeed, one of the strangest of all presuppositions of modern nationalist ideologies is that nation-states are by nature or should by reason be monolingual. But the

point of the present discussion is elsewhere. This quick sketch of the Abbe Gregoire's views on language policy suggests that there is always a politics of selection at work in the elaboration of heritage-preservation and cultural-property policies. Even such a humane visionary as the Abbe Gregoire had noticeable blind spots when it came to cultural heritage. And it is worth noting that one of the great struggles of identity politics from his time to ours has been the struggle over languages. The French state's ongoing efforts, from the 1830s, if not the 1790s, to the present day, to educate all citizens in a standardized national language, too often linked to a policy of restricting the use of other idioms (McDonald, 1989), has been played out in many other nation-states. And the tales of those who have resisted such language policies and policings, from Breton-speakers in France to Native Americans in Canada and the USA, are similar.

Identity politics do not always revolve around language, and there are places in the world where minorities have adopted, either by choice or necessity, a national language without feeling themselves to have disturbed their non-national, minority culture in any significant way. Questions about which objects, sites and traditions contain the essence of a culture, and further questions about the relative worth of that culture (with its associated heritage) vis-à-vis other cultures, are always open to debate. And in the political processes wherein such questions are resolved, cultural practices and objects are redefined and even transformed even as they are, ostensibly, 'preserved'.

A second example, which I want to sketch briefly here, comes from anthropologist Jeffrey Feldman's work on the creation of a Jewish museum in Bologna, Italy. On the surface, the situation is an apparently straightforward one in which a liberal Italian government wants to celebrate multiculturalism as integral to Italian nationhood. To do so, in the late 1980s, the Italian state began a process of devolving power to Italy's regions, a process which included the creation of regional cultural heritage institutes, with one such institute formed in Bologna as the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region. Part of the effort of such regional heritage institutes was 'a newfound tutelary concern for Jewish culture' (Feldman, 2002: 49). And this tutelary concern was not confined to Italy; as Feldman notes, throughout Europe there has been, in the past decade, an increasing governmental interest in Jewish cultural property.

A moment's thought suffices to alert us that European interest in Jewish culture must be related to the recent European past, specifically, to the Holocaust. As Feldman puts it,

in Italy as elsewhere, efforts by state-run museums to collect and display property under the guise of celebrating ethnic cultural heritage have been complicated by the history of more troubling state projects (e.g. slavery, colonialism, fascism) resulting in the misappropriated property and decimated lives of those same ethnic minorities. In Germany, France, Spain,



Poland and elsewhere . . . Jewish culture once expelled, imprisoned and incinerated by the state is now celebrated in countless heritage initiatives valorizing the legacy of Jewish material remains as an important facet of national culture (Feldman, 2002: 12).

More specifically in relation to the Bologna case, the idea to build a Jewish museum came to the fore in 1988, as Italy was commemorating the 50th anniversary of ‘the passage of race laws barring Jews from Italian civil society’ and a 1944 decree in which Mussolini mandated ‘that all property belonging to Jews be confiscated by the Italian state’ (Feldman, 2002: 13). Feldman notes that ‘the discourse of Jewish suffering during the War and . . . the problem of returning Jewish property stolen during the Fascist era, was a constant presence during my fieldwork’ on the creation of the museum (Feldman, 2002: 13). To put it bluntly, for Bolognese Jews, ‘the mere idea of a “public” collection of Jewish art’ and Jewish ritual objects ‘elicited fears that the state had designs once again on the unethical appropriation of Jewish property’ (Feldman, 2002: 14).

And that’s not all. The celebration of Jewish culture as part of a broader celebration of Italian multiculturalism has taken place at the same time that the Italian state has become increasingly concerned about racist, xenophobic, and separatist movements within its own borders. Feldman notes that if one result of American multiculturalism has been NAGPRA, an act of the American government aimed at facilitating the return of cultural property to Native Americans, Italian multiculturalism has entailed a movement of objects in the opposite direction, from ‘minorities’ to the mainstream, all in an attempt to demonstrate Italy’s cultural inclusiveness. Another component of Italian multiculturalism was the ‘redefinition of the Jews in the form of Pope John Paul II’s 1986 visit to the synagogue in Rome’, when for the first time, the Pope used the phrase ‘older brothers’ as opposed to ‘treacherous Jews’ (Feldman, 2002: 41). Around the same time, the Italian government ‘revised the legal status of non-Catholic religions . . . such that Judaism was no longer viewed as a juridical second-class citizen’. Included in this ‘accord’ was a provision to plan for cataloguing and collecting ‘Jewish cultural heritage’ (Feldman, 2002: 39). Finally, Italian Jews themselves in the late 1980s were interested in joining the state in this celebration of Italy’s Jewish heritage as a way to protest against Israeli politics and to distinguish themselves from Israelis (Feldman, 2002: 45–6).

So much for the larger socio-historical setting of a particular process of objectifying and preserving cultural property. Let us turn briefly to the on-the-ground activities that ensued. In 1986, a Jewish-Italian historian published a guidebook to Jewish culture in Italy, taking a region-by-region approach; the work was subsequently republished as a series of books called *Jewish Itineraries* (Feldman, 2002: 42). In 1988, the Cultural Heritage Institute of Emilia-Romagna published a massive volume on *Jewish Culture in Emilia-Romagna*. Local museum exhibitions followed, whence came the

idea for a national museum of Jewish culture and also for the Bologna museum which opened, finally, in 1999. And a market developed for Jewish artefacts, Jewish coffee-table art books, and Jewish film festivals. (The relationship of all this to Roberto Benigni's blockbuster, *Life Is Beautiful*, is another fascinating part of the story, but one that I cannot take up here.)

Most poignant in the entire story, as Feldman stresses, is the fact that the Italian state's collecting of Jewish cultural property proceeded with almost no attention to Jews as contemporary people living ordinary lives in functioning Jewish communities throughout Italy. Time and again Feldman's consultants complained to him that, as one person put it, 'we're not dead . . . but all these museums, they display things as if Jewish culture were dead. Like these museums about your Indians. This gives people the wrong idea. Look, people already think that we're dead. They go to the museum and it's even worse' (Feldman, 2002: 56). It is hardly surprising that, after the Holocaust, people do not expect to find Jews in Italy's regions; nonetheless, it is deeply ironic that the state's multicultural efforts seem to fetishize Jewish cultural property at the expense of Jewish people, even as their ostensible goal is to make Italian society more culturally inclusive.

The end result was that by the time the Bologna museum opened in 1999, it had been forced to redefine itself as a virtual museum, because local Jews had been unwilling to lend or give it the objects it coveted. Museum tours guided visitors past images, video clips and texts, many taken from the itineraries and inventories mentioned above, as well as borrowed from other museums, and all pressed into service to create a particular representation of Jewish culture as property, literally, as objects. But to return from the discussion of this case to the general issue of the relationship between cultural property and culture theory, the important point is that any project of cultural preservation must go forward in specific historical circumstances that will necessarily influence the outcome. It is, once again, impossible to preserve culture, if the terms 'preservation' and 'culture' are taken together to imply that cultural life can be captured and frozen in objects that we think of as 'property'.

Just as anthropological culture theory has had difficulty transcending what we might call, following Sapir, its itemizing, list-making predilections, so, too, has it been difficult for cultural-property laws to come to terms with the semiotic dimension of culture. Franz Boas famously remarked that 'in ethnology all is individuality' (Boas, 1887: 589). In other words, cultural configurations are particular historical products that must be interpreted and translated; but one cannot write social scientific laws that will account for their particularities. Indeed, from a Boasian perspective, such laws themselves, and the anthropologist's work of cultural interpretation, are particular historical products! The same is true for the laws of nation-states, including, of course, those that envision cultural properties and the social identities imagined to pertain to them. Whether the growing



internationalist trend in cultural-property legislation, embodied in various 'world heritage' lists, can come to terms with the necessary particularity of its own claims to universality remains to be seen.

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Note

- 1 Among the constructive criticisms offered by four generous reviewers (anonymous to me) of this article, was the suggestion that the invention-of-tradition literature by no means contains all the good work in culture theory of the past two decades. In particular, I was asked to bring so-called practice theory into the discussion. Let me acknowledge in response that this article is not intended in any way to cover the literature in recent culture theory. But more to the point, I remain an old-fashioned Boasian, and I am unconvinced that all the sound and fury of practice theory provides any analytic advantage unavailable in a Boasian, semiotic conception of culture. True, there have been influential strands of neo-Boasian culture theory (I am thinking of the work of David Schneider, 1968) that opened themselves up to the charge of focusing too exclusively on symbols and ideas, thereby neglecting 'action' or 'practice'. The charge, as I see it, is hollow, because all action is semiotic. To speak of symbols is to speak of 'symboling' (as Leslie White would have said [1949: 39] and since this article has a personal element, let me add that as I opened my copy of *The Science of Culture* to find this reference, I found David Schneider's signature; he had given the book to me in his last years, when he deaccessioned his library, apportioning it among his students). To imagine that a concept of 'symbol' requires a concept of 'action' or 'practice' to 'ground' ideas in 'the real world' is to presuppose an unnecessary mind-body dualism. Given such a dualism, the analyst needs a recipe that adds action to thought, practice to symbol; but I start from the presumption that human action is by definition a symbolic process, and that it is not helpful to try to figure out which components of action are non-symbolic, as if we had some way to apprehend them (or actors had some way to act) irrespective of our symboling faculties and those of the 'actors' (Brightman, 1995). One can make the same argument about the term 'material culture', which is necessary only because people imagine that 'objects' can exist for humans irrespective of culture. In a semiotic conception of human life, that position is absurd; the objects that humans make and apprehend are every bit as cultural as the most ethereal of symbolic constructs (Handler, 2002).

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RICHARD HANDLER is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia. He is the editor of *History of Anthropology* and is completing a book of essays on anthropology, cultural studies and cultural criticism.