Smashing the Petri Dish: Abbreviated Inquiry Into Abandoning the Concept of Culture

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The following are questions I have recently asked myself:

Why abandon culture? There are countless reasons to begin to challenge, seriously realign our relationship with, and perhaps abandon the concept of *culture* — the historic, contemporary, and projected assemblage of social dynamics and features by which we define ourselves and which collectively frame us as social groupings. Culture contains the all-tofamiliar civilized notions of expectations, projections, customs, taboos, values, morality, and rituals, as well as being anthropocentric in nature, and in general, limited as it defines the human condition of a place, time, and context only in terms of human relationships or how we use other *things*. The human-animal, unrestrained by such an understanding of reality, and in tune with applicable concerns of connected subsistence and curious play, needs not for culture as something to belong to or to be guided

by. Instead, they are what they are, a composition of all they are connected to, yet unique unto themselves. And if relationships are fluid, unbounded by artificial concepts, and based on mutual desire, than what use or need is there for culture, except to define and confine these relationships. It might be proposed then, that our search for liberation may fall outside the parameters of the concept of culture, and in fact, may be in contradiction with its very existence. Culture, whether ethnic, religious, national, tribal, pop, alternative, or counter, acts as a definer rather than minimalizer of the borders within and between ourselves, each other, and the rest of life.

Can we challenge the current basis of our relationships to each other? For many, to abandon culture seems a project too daunting, shocking, and counter to what we may have always believed. But when we talk of undoing the entirety of civilization, are there questions too colossal to ask and material too compact to cut through? To dispute culture itself, and the physicality of its politicized manifestation, society, is to question civilization's very premise, that we are controlled and manipulated by external forces that have an agenda ultimately incompatible with that of the individual, regardless of their desires (although there may be illusory moments of adaptability). Whether there are direct lines drawn to individuals or groups in power, or the rigid formation of patterns and textures over time, culture controls. It must, or it ceases to exist. Culture can be viewed as the summation of who we are as social beings, or the parameters we live within. Both are unsatisfactory for one attempting an uncivilized and unrestrained existence. If we are to live entirely different, than what seems foundational and what binds all of this (civilization) must be unglued. The imprint must be erased. The structures must be shattered, so as to open up the space for our unimpeded wild selves to roam.

Is there an intrinsic element of cultivation that leads to the formation of rigid socialization? The cultivation of crops and tillage of the earth created a different context in which we

each other, and the world around us. We can trade the abstraction, symbolic, efficiency, control, and completeness of superimposed culture for the connected, direct, dynamic, openness of unalienated existence.

The choice really is ours.

be inspired by the way the Kaluli tribe of the Papuan Plateau perceive and interact with the world. For instance, they do not hear singular sounds in the rainforest, but instead an interlocking soundscape they call dulugu ganalan, or "lifting-up-over sounding"; millions of simultaneous sound cycles, starting and ending at different points. People's voices layer and play off of this reality, as drums, axes, and singing blend together in rhythms and patterns creating an instinctual vocabulary understood by the group.

So what might living outside of culture look like? To start with, it would be free from moral and social frameworks that limit our freedom to explore, experience, and connect. We would still be "bound" by certain biological and geographical limitations, but not those determined by any experts or leaders. Instead we would experience directly these limitations, and along with shared experiences with others, develop our own unique understandings. Collective experience would not fit into any prearranged formation or contain any unified meaning. It would be the infinite intersections of support and divergence that make up the rest of what we call life. Rather than thinking in cultural terms, perhaps we can look at other social animals for inspiration. Flocks, herds, and packs can be contemplated for their manifestations and dynamics of living patterns. Instinctual rather than intellectual in motivation and stable yet flexible in an organic manner, rather than enforced or altered through mechanistic and projected means. Is this not closer to how humans live(d) outside of civilization?

Can we smash the petri dish and abandon the stifling concept of culture for an unobstructed reality? If we are content with the role of microorganisms in a prepared nutrient media or the product of such cultivation, then life as part of a culture is acceptable, even desirable and beneficial. If we are not satisfied as bacteria, segments of tissues, or fungi in a scientist's test tube or observation dish, then we need to begin to seriously review how we relate to, coordinate, and view ourselves,

dwell then that of the human-animal in a pre-civilized context. With the domination of the land, stratification of society, accumulation of power, creation of economy, and religious mystification of the world, culture takes root as an all-encompassing means of control. To put it simply, when there are things to keep in order, an orderly society is preferable. With this comes the standardization of society, the suggestion of values, the implementation of codes, and the enforcement of regulations, be they physical, intellectual, or spiritual. Overt force is always adjacent (at least the allegation of it), but to convince people they are a part of an abstract grouping, and that it is superior to any other, cultural identity is a much more effective means of control. And, to convince them of their need to view contrary or deviant inclinations of the belief system as an Other, also sets the ground for the defending of culture. The abstraction of unmediated relationships might be where we start to see concepts of culture as necessary. Before (or outside this perspective) what purpose would it serve?

What about the process of domestication is inevitable in culture? Development of humans as individuals and societies in general through education, discipline, and training, seems to require obedience to societal norms, recognized largely as cultural. The goal, as with any other form of domestication, is to obtain a uniform and productive crop or yield in as efficient means as possible. Individuality and fluidity are seen as hazards to be reigned in or plowed under. Possibly, depending on how bumper a crop that season, or how much power the domesticator has accumulated, some unruly weeds are allowed to exist on the periphery, but even they are still largely controlled, if only due to the proximity to the disciplined ones.

Are socialization and control implicit in the perpetuation and acceptance of culture? Culture attempts to express and prescribe meaning to our world. This meaning is typically, and I would argue inevitably, used to obtain and maintain power and control. Culture regularly has both a conservative and pro-

gressive character to it. Both securing society and pushing it forward stability and innovation. Traditional cultural values which sustain the contemporary aims of a society's influence and momentum are often supported while the proposed future for that society is often portrayed as intrinsic trajectories for that culture. The tension between them keeps things moving. At any particular stage of advancement in a civilization, the characteristic features of such a stage are described as its culture. So that what is described as permanent, is never so, and that which is promoted as temporary is often an illusion of change. The bottom line is, the path of a society, and the cultural aspects of it, are quite arbitrary, yet presented as predetermined. To not be acquiescent in this set-up places one, for all practical purposes, outside of cultural reality. But the rejection of culture is certainly not a rejection of social interaction. The isolated human, rarely a healthy, connected, and successfully functioning being (by any standards), is typically the product of extreme alienation and trauma. Anti-social behavior, as a specific description, is relative to the context of the society, but it describes more of a disconnect from the ability to interact then a rejection of that society's values. One can be positively a social being (and possibly they must be) and still attempt to dismantle that society and its social characteristics, especially if their processes of social interaction are from outside that society. As interaction and relations removed from the alienated and mediated civilized methods tend to be more direct, fluid, and intuitive, without the clunky dominating, and often insincere methods we are instilled with, it seems key to any sort of positive alternative.

Ever notice the "cult" in culture? Socially, there is great pressure, from authoritarianism to tension between "civilians", to create a mindless following that is pervasive throughout society. There develops an affiliation of accomplices who adopt complete and societal belief systems or faiths. Those who move too close to the margins are regarded and handled as outsiders,

which strictly maintains the definitions applied to a culture. In addition, the progressive linearity of cultural enlightenment and refinement through intellectual and aesthetic training occurs at all levels, from fashion to philosophy. Details and motivations of our actions that are obtained, recorded, and remembered through vastly different perceptions and bias perspectives, acquired through a cultural context and individual views, are filtered, averaged, and distilled to create a prevalent, repeated response system.

But what about primitive people and useful traditions? There is probably more from the past that we have carelessly discarded than we have critically shed, especially concerning earth-based peoples from gatherer hunters to horticulturists to pre-technological agriculturists and homesteaders (in my opinion, there is less to appreciate as we move onward in domestication, but from where we are located in history, there is still some value in critically assessing small-scale cultivators for some useful aspects). Examining the dynamics and methods of these various types of groupings for everything from food procurement to social organization (not that they aren't inevitably linked) will reveal a great diversity between peoples and the strategies and patterns that have developed, and typically, unfortunately, formed into a culture. This investigation can also reveal common threads in how situations, needs, and problems are dealt with, which we can filter through our own unique and communal desires and contexts to apply to our lives, without adopting cultural parameters and definitions. Techniques are valuable, cultural explanations are useless, unless they reveal a relationship between things that can be utilized without socializing.

Life contains some underlying stability of circumstance, yet within it is an infinite and intricate shifting, fracturing, and supporting over time. A never-ending improvisation of reinforcing and interfering, but never repeating. Even the seemingly firmly structured parts are composed of limitless variables. We might