

Culture, its mode of being: a proposal for reflection following Edward Sapir

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This essay revisits a classic text of anthropology, Edward Sapir's "Culture, genuine and spurious", taking it as a partner for a dialogue and reflection on the notion of culture. In "Culture, genuine and spurious", Sapir is able to deliver a balanced and moderate view of culture while simultaneously eschewing questions of conceptual or theoretical definition. In fact, his argument seems to be articulating not so much what is culture, but how is culture, that is, its mode of being. As a general thesis, this essay follows the orientation and formulation of Sapir's text, as well as other reflections from the author, in order to conceive culture's mode of being as an operative dialectic between individual and group.

KEYWORDS: culture, Edward Sapir, individual and ALEXAgroup, creativity and tradition, anthropological classics.

Cultura, o seu modo de ser: uma proposta de reflexão a partir de Edward Sapir ♦ Este ensaio regressa a um texto clássico da antropologia, "Culture, genuine and spurious" de Edward Sapir, tomando-o como parceiro de diálogo e de reflexão sobre a noção de cultura. Em "Culture, genuine and spurious", Sapir mostra-se capaz de nos entregar uma visão equilibrada e moderada sobre a cultura, evitando, simultaneamente, questões de definição conceptual ou teórica. Em bom rigor, a sua reflexão assenta não sobre o que é a cultura, mas como é a cultura, ou seja, o seu modo de ser. Como tese geral, este ensaio segue a orientação e formulação do texto de Sapir, assim como outras reflexões do autor, de modo a pensar o modo de ser da cultura como a incessante dialética entre indivíduo e grupo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: cultura, Edward Sapir, indivíduo e grupo, criatividade e tradição, clássicos antropológicos.

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REVISITING AN ANCIENT, CLASSIC TEXT, WHETHER 100 OR 1000 YEARS old, is essentially a dialogue with that which the text is meant to articulate, its subject matter. And as with any genuine dialogue, we openly engage with the subject matter under discussion, questioning what is said to us by our interlocutor, but also being challenged by that same interlocutor – and in many cases, we even end up having some of our assumptions and perspectives undermined and transformed. In the case of a dialogue with a classic text, that which operates such a transformation is above all the temporal distance that inevitably opens up between the text and its reader. However, this distance – the contrast between the horizon of the text and that of the reader – is not primarily an obstacle but the very condition and possibility of understanding: one inquires into the same subject matter through a historically different “lens”. Whether by virtue of the forgotten premises that inform old ways of thinking and arguing, or the space of intelligibility suddenly and unexpectedly opened up by an old language, the possibility of taking a classic text as a partner in a dialogue lies not so much in grasping its ideas as ideas of the past, but in embracing them for ourselves, making them, in that very gesture, contemporary again.

However, although it is true that in our personal and daily lives we easily adopt this attitude towards classical epics and novels, the same cannot be said with assertiveness about the discipline of anthropology and the classics that constitute its history. Particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, anthropology has been marked by various attempts to distance itself from and break with its own past; attempts which, to a large extent, seem to have left some deep wounds in anthropology’s relationship with its history. Different authors have already shown how the fundamental reasons behind this attempt to break with the past are based on misrepresentations of the history of the discipline (*e.g.* Lewis 1999, 2014; Rosa 2011, 2019), or start from a misunderstanding of the idea of “science” and what it means within the human sciences (Spiro 1996). In any case, the critiques that underpinned this break with anthropology’s past, as Kohl (2011: 3-4) notes, “destabilised the field’s very foundations. [...] With their critiques of their predecessors’ authoritative styles, today’s anthropologists have also undermined their own authority”.

The present paper’s purpose is not an attempt to assess the relevance and soundness of the criticisms raised against anthropology’s past; rather, it is to promote the opposite direction, making an effort to approach the history of the discipline by taking as an interlocutor for a dialogue a classic text of the anthropological tradition: Edward Sapir’s 1924 essay “Culture, genuine and spurious”. This is not a classic text because it has become undisputed or widely agreed upon, nor because a grand theory of culture is condensed in it. The reason why it is here considered as a classic is because, as Italo Calvino (1999: 8) noted about the nature of the classics, it’s “something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the statues of background noise”. Thus, more

than an exercise in anachronistic criticism or historiographical analysis, the re-reading of “Culture, genuine and spurious” that is developed here attempts to bring out the possibilities of thought opened up both by the subject matter and the perspective that guide the text itself.

In what follows, some features of how Sapir chooses to reflect on the notion of culture are addressed. A careful reading of his argument offers us a particular way of formulating the question which does not simply ask “what is culture”, but “how is culture”, that is, its mode of being: for Sapir, a fundamentally dialectical movement between “group” and “individual”, “tradition” and “creativity”, “past” and “contemporaneity”. As a contrast to a good part of the main contemporary anthropological reflections that are governed by an epistemological paradigm based on the individual, or subject, Sapir’s text allows us to understand that the alternative to the reifying and essentialist perspectives of culture does not involve replacing the primacy of culture with the primacy of the individual. Grounded in a dialogue with Sapir’s text, this paper attempts to formulate a view of culture beyond the dualism of “individual” and “group”, “freedom” and “determinism” – culture is always-already the articulation of the tacit relationship between both domains.

SAPIR AND CULTURE’S MODE OF BEING

In “Culture, genuine and spurious”, Edward Sapir presents us with a perspective on what kind of ‘thing’ is this that we call “culture”. For Sapir, our common understanding of the culture concept exists dispersed across three definitions: (i) a universalistic definition employed by ethnologists and historians of culture, as the material or spiritual elements socially inherited by human beings – a conception that is conflated with the idea of “civilisation”; (ii) a definition centred on the individual, constituted through the contact with the past for the sake of individual improvement – a conception of a humanistic nature; and (iii) a collectivist, or group definition, associated with a set of specific traits, attitudes or manifestations that give a people a particular character – an anthropological conception of an essentialist nature (1949 [1924]: 308-311). For Sapir, “genuine culture” is the articulation between the second and third definitions. It is precisely this articulation that occupies him for the rest of the text.

Anticipating some initial scepticism on the part of the reader about Sapir’s two chosen conceptions of culture, something needs to be clarified. Sapir is aware of the dangers that can arise from both: he makes it clear that the second can lead into snobbery, or cynicism, and that the third must be kept away from being worshiped as “an irreducible psychological fetic” (1949 [1924]: 311) or from an arrogant chauvinism. And perhaps it is because he realises that there is both a propensity for exaggeration and some measure of truth in

both these conceptions that Sapir seeks to present his “genuine culture” as an articulation of the two: one corrects and provides a counterweight to the other.

Accordingly, “genuine culture” comprises the notion of “idealised form”, taken from the second conception of culture, together with the idea of a set of shared features that tends to give a distinctive character to a country or a group, taken from the third conception of culture. According to Sapir, what could characterise a “genuine culture” is by no means related to a specific type of culture or stage of evolution, it has no relation whatsoever to efficiency, nor to its degree of complexity or sophistication (1949 [1924]: 314-317). In other words, that which, according to Sapir’s parameters, would enable a culture to be characterised as genuine is not related to its content or to the particularities that differentiate it from other cultures, but only to the equilibrium between individual and group, or society.

In a “genuine culture” what the individual does is a clear contribution to the common life in society, but it is also a spiritually enriching activity. In this regard, the opposition drawn by Sapir between the “telephone girl” and the “American Indian” (1949 [1924]: 316) exemplifies this issue by presenting two opposing solutions – and leads us to the distinction between “spurious culture” and “genuine culture”. While the economic activity of the telephone girl exists separately from her spiritual needs, the economic activity of the American Indian takes place in interconnection with other activities and with his social life. Thus, the American Indian represents an “incomparably higher solution than our telephone girl”, while the latter, from the point of view of “a solution of the problem of culture [...] is a failure” (1949 [1924]: 316).

From an anthropological standpoint, the issue can be summarised as the relationship between “immediate ends” (food, shelter and clothing) and “remoter ends” (pleasure, rituals, religion). In the modern world, claims Sapir, these two ends are relatively separate: since the fulfilment of the immediate ends does not, in most cases, satisfy spiritual needs, they become disconnected from the remoter ends; and the remoter ends develop in isolation as forms of spiritual refuge or escape. The result, from the psychological point of view, Sapir concludes, is that the immediate ends are no longer regarded as “ends” at all, but as steps in attaining the remoter ends – the pursuit of pleasure or entertainment becomes an end in itself, the main purpose of human life.

The example of the telephone girl and her function and the argument of the autonomisation of remoter ends emerge not only as indicators of a “spurious culture”, but also as expressions of the very spirit of a modernity that dislikes the shadow of its own forms and is taken over by self-criticism. From a historical perspective, this critical view of an eventual state of degeneration of modernity, encapsulated in the adjective “spurious”, has some echoes in Marx’s ideas of “alienation” (*Entfremdung*) and Weber’s “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*) – both of which appear in the tradition of sociological thought as concepts

meant to qualify and criticise the conditions of modernity. A contemporary of Sapir, T. S. Eliot, an unavoidable figure of modern literature to whom we will return later, is another great architect of the critique of modernity that was being formulated in the first decades of the 20th century, as can be seen in his *The Waste Land*, from 1922.

In the case of Sapir's text, however, the question that fuels his critique seems to go a little further than a mere judgement on the singularities of modernity. Let us recall that the core of his argument and what sustains it is not related to the particular content of a culture, but to the way the individual relates to the group. This means that the rhetorical contrast between the American Indian and the telephone girl amounts to much more than a basic romantic nostalgia for the wild human living in a supposed communion with nature. What is at issue in contrasting the American Indian with the telephone girl is fundamentally the level of equilibrium between individual and group that each of the "solutions", as Sapir calls them, can fulfil – culture is, all things considered, no more than a continuous, yet tacit, relationship between the two.

"Culture, genuine and spurious" is regarded as Sapir's second and more complete reply to Alfred Kroeber's "The superorganic" (1917). For Kroeber, culture was not the product of individuals, but something that was superimposed on them and guided their actions – it was an entity independent of the individuals who constituted it. If the individual, from a scientific perspective, could be thought of as a self-contained organism, then culture, because it existed in a domain outside the individual, could be thought of as "superorganic". In this sense, analyses of culture, according to Kroeber, could and should be made without any reference to individual characteristics (such as race, ethnicity or psychological traits), but directed upon this external domain, independent of the individuals who compose it.

In Sapir's eyes, this way of thinking about culture was misplaced, to say the least. In the same year and in the same journal in which Kroeber's text is published, Sapir launches a first reaction to it with the article "Do we need a 'Superorganic'?" (1917), questioning not only the usefulness of the concept of "superorganic", but also the secondary role that Kroeber attributes to the individual in his reflection. However, in that first reply, Sapir formulates his critique by directing it only at Kroeber's article and does not develop an alternative reading of the notion of culture. It is in "Culture, genuine and spurious" that we are presented with a more complete view on this issue.

That which is to be retained from this re-reading, and which we shall endeavour to deal with in two separate points, relates to the two criticisms Sapir had already directed at Kroeber. On the one hand, the scepticism about the idea of the "superorganic" demonstrates an acuteness concerning how something as complex as the notion of culture should be addressed – it is a question of language, of conceptualisation, but above all of perspective. On the other

hand, the criticism concerning the minor role that Kroeber assigns to the individual in the social sciences and history will result, in “Culture, genuine and spurious”, in a much more balanced and cautious reflection on the relationship between individual and society and between past and present.

The first thing to note is the nature of the text itself, that is, the way in which Sapir crafts the argument. On the one hand, the differentiation between “genuine” and “spurious” cultures – which will certainly arouse some suspicion in the contemporary reader who comes across this text – is only used to categorise culture in relation to its level of equilibrium between individual and society. Thus, a spurious culture would eventually be an excessively individualistic culture, where ties to others and to the past are seen as heavy shackles and therefore thought of as something to be eradicated; or a strongly collectivist culture, where there is no room for individual freedom or creativity and the group overrides the individual by default.

On the other hand, when we finish reading the text, we realise that Sapir does not seek to formulate a definition of culture that we can easily extract from the text and then apply to our theories and arguments. What Sapir manages to do in an elegant way with this text is to avoid falling into yet another reification of the idea of culture: instead of telling us what culture is, he simply ponders on its mode of being: how is culture? Thus, culture is not a whole made up of parts, a set or aggregate of symbols, nor a system of signification, but something...

“[...] inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory. It is the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow unified and consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relations to all others. Its is, ideally speaking, a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless, in which no important part of the general functioning brings with it a sense of frustration, of misdirected or unsympathetic effort. It is not a spiritual hybrid of contradictory patches, of water-tight compartments of consciousness that avoid participation in a harmonious synthesis.” (Sapir 1949 [1924]: 314-315)

If a genuine culture “builds itself magnificent houses of worship, it is because of the necessity it feels to symbolize in beautiful stone a religious impulse that is deep and vital”; children’s education does not focus on “what it knows to be of no use or vitality either to them or in its own mature life”; a genuine culture has no relation whatsoever with degrees of social complexity, efficiency or specialisation; and finally, a genuine culture “refuses to consider the individual as a mere cog, as an entity whose sole *raison d’être* lies in his subservience to a collective purpose that he is not conscious of [...]” (Sapir 1949 [1924]: 315).

The rhetoric and language used by Sapir to discuss the idea of culture are undoubtedly peculiar; or, some might say, romantic. In the different statements quoted above (as well as throughout the text) we can see some justification for Sapir's attempt at taking from the idea of culture as individual improvement the notion of "idealised form". What emerges in his characterisation of a "genuine culture" is only an idealisation of the mode of being of an eventual healthy culture. In the end, what is most relevant here is not so much whether or not it is possible to reach this idealised equilibrium that Sapir attributes to a "genuine culture" (even though we can say that it is inherent to the mode of being of culture to aim for a harmonious stage, the truth is that such stage will most likely never arrive). What is noteworthy in Sapir's text is how he chooses to develop his reflection on the idea of culture: his thoroughly humanistic orientation comes to light in his refusal to address culture through conceptual and theoretical artefacts.

It was certainly this feature of the text that led to a somewhat sceptical reception by Sapir's contemporaries – as well as to his reputation as a heterodox boasian. Robert Lowie, for example, is reported to have told Sapir that his thinking was irrelevant to anthropology because it set aside the technical meaning of culture (Darnell 1990: 169). In a few letters exchanged with the sociologist William Ogburn, we witness another instance of how Sapir's text ends up being considered "unscientific":

"I feel that in this article your subjectivity colors your analysis and you almost drift into mysticism. You seem to be struggling to articulate something that you feel emotionally rather than coldly and scientifically." (Letter from Ogburn to Sapir, 31/08/1922, in Darnell 1990: 149)

If by "subjectivity" Ogburn meant that the text reflects, in an essayistic mood, a reflection of the author who wrote it, his remark would not even constitute a criticism. However, this does not seem to be the case. We have a proof of this when Ogburn, in the same letter, agrees with Sapir's view of the idea of "genuine culture", but not with the way he presents it:

"You created a real atmosphere, and the general tone was elegant. I carried away a real feeling for what was genuine and what was spurious. Somewhat the same idea I have often thought of, but in a different language and a different setting. I phrase it this way: To me culture – as the ethnologist used the term – is divided into parts. Now where these variables that make up the whole are correlated positively and with high coefficients [...], we have what I think you mean by genuine culture." (Letter from Ogburn to Sapir, 31/08/1922, in Darnell 1990: 149)

The difference is obvious. Both Ogburn and most boasians of that time were more drawn towards Kroeber's "superorganic" (Darnell 2001: 124) and, as a result, were much more distant from Sapir and his thought. While for Kroeber a definition and outline of the idea of culture was essential to affirm the scientific character of the analysis and consolidate the independence of anthropology from the other sciences, for Sapir, making culture an independent and reified entity where little space was given to the individual was a massive mistake, it was "but a passing phase of our hunger for conventional scientific capsules into which to store our concepts" (Sapir's letter to Ogburn, 14/01/1918, in Darnell 1990: 149).

In short, Sapir had a certain level of frustration with views on culture that left the individual in the background, a frustration that had already become clear in his critique of Kroeber in "Do we need a 'Superorganic?'". As a sequel to this critique, "Culture, genuine and spurious" is an attempt to articulate the relationship between the individual and the group and thus to think about culture. However, Sapir does not limit himself to inverting the argument and replacing the "primacy of culture" with the "primacy of the individual" (something that would only be established, perhaps even under Sapir's indirect influence, with Alfred Irving Hallowell (*e.g.* 1955) and his emphasis on the notion of the self). From his text emerges a balanced and conciliatory view of the relationship between individual and group (or past and present) that not only aims to rescue an equilibrium between the two, but also alerts us to the unenlightening dichotomy that the whole issue drags with it.

Sapir's position is clear: "There is no real opposition, at last analysis, between the concept of a culture of the group and the concept of an individual culture. The two are interdependent" (1949 [1924]: 321). Again, this seems to be a very unproblematic statement for most anthropologists today. Still, we might not have it as clearly in mind as we think – Sapir had it clear in his mind and elaborated on it throughout the rest of the text.

The key issue for Sapir is the relationship between the individual and history, or to that which has been handed down from the past. On the one hand, the "automatic perpetuation of standardized values" from the past is rejected. In other words, the individual's relationship with its culture, or more specifically with the past, is not one of passive acceptance of its values: it is within the domain of individuals to reinterpret history, placing part of themselves and the values of their times in what comes to them from the past. On the other hand, for Sapir, the dialogue that the individual establishes with history is not unidirectional: while it is true that he has some room for applying its own creativity in reformulating what comes from the past, it is equally true that the individual is "helpless" if he does not have within his reach a "cultural heritage to work on", which sustains his spirit and on the basis of which he can effectively be an individual. It is unthinkable that the individual should create a

healthy cultural fabric solely from “his unaided spiritual powers” or “the flush of his personality” (1949 [1924]: 321) – if he does it, his individual expression will eventually “degenerate into social sterility” (1949 [1924]: 324). Creation, Sapir tells us, “is a bending of form to one’s will, not a manufacture of form *ex nihilo*” (1949 [1924]: 321).

This view of a fundamental dialectic between the individual and history, or culture, is also clear in his writings on the nature of language, leading one to wonder whether, in fact, his extensive knowledge of linguistics and the historicity of languages did not shape and influence his view of culture.¹ In “Language as a form of human behaviour” (2008 [1927]) or “Language” (1949 [1933]), for example, Sapir addresses how language always gives us the starting point from which we, as humans, attend to the world; how it informs our behaviour; or how it precedes us, not only historically, of course, but in the way “its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation” (1949 [1933]: 10).

“Language is at one and the same time helping and retarding us in our exploration of experience, and the details of these processes of help and hindrance are deposited in the subtler meanings of different cultures.” (Sapir 1949 [1933]: 11)

In other words, language does not determine us, but is always behind us; it provides us with historically and culturally particular ways of attending to and giving intelligibility to things and the world; and it is always dependent on and derived from its own historicity. Without the forms granted to us by language and culture there would be no individuals.

And as with language (language is, after all, itself part of culture), the individual always/already carries culture within itself as the primordial mode of self-understanding, or individuation. Sapir tells us that, to some extent, the reason why great individual insights and innovations have been possible in certain cultures, at certain times, is due to the fact that those same cultures and individuals have tended to continually reinterpret their past without discarding it altogether (1949 [1924]: 322). The acquisition of that which comes from the past is not a mere act of subservience, nor undertaken for purely

1 Indeed, Sapir’s understanding of the transformation of culture is primarily modelled on the historicity of language in order to give the former greater historical depth. The controversy between Franz Boas and Sapir is related to this issue. Although both subscribed to a diffusionist perspective, Boas saw the process as constituted by borrowings, *i. e.*, a given culture would be the result of a conflation of several different cultural and historical origins. On the other hand, due to the emphasis on the development and historicity of languages, Sapir’s diffusionism was precisely the reverse: various cultures, though distinct in the present, would have a common cultural and historical origin (see Darnell 2001: 47-61).

recreational, mimetic or preservation purposes, but is realised in the individual's own ability to apply a portion of what it has acquired from the past in its own life and undertakings. The individual, Sapir concludes, "in aspiring to culture, fastens upon the accumulated cultural goods of its society, not so much for the sake of the passive pleasure of their acquirement, as for the sake of the stimulus given to the unfolding personality" (1949 [1924]: 324). In short, "the past is of cultural interest only when it is still the present or may yet become the future" (1949 [1924]: 325).

This perspective and the language used by Sapir to reflect on culture, despite not finding sympathisers within anthropologists, have clear echoes in literary and artistic circles. In 1919, in a two-part article entitled "Tradition and individual talent", T.S. Elliot also discusses the work of the poet or artist as an act that emerges from an individual drive and creative freedom of the one who finds in the past not its historicity, but its contemporaneity. Art, for Elliot, needs the past to have meaning and significance and to be able to recreate and reinvent itself. The focus should not be on articulating and forcing contrasts between the artists of the past and those of the present, but on finding in the former the inspiration and the ability to say something profound and meaningful again. This seems to be a view very close to Sapir's – indeed, it seems no coincidence, as we shall see, that in "Culture, genuine and spurious", after the reflections devoted to the relations "individual-group" and "creativity-tradition", Sapir makes a short meditation on art. Looking at T.S. Elliot's words and Sapir's argument, it is perhaps not at all inaccurate to say that the latter's possibility of pushing back against reifying and dualistic anthropological readings of culture is also opened up to him by his background in the humanities and his familiarity with literary and poetic circles (see Handler 1985).

CULTURE: BEYOND DUALISMS

Today we know Sapir primarily as a linguist and anthropologist. However, as we learn from his biography (Darnell 1990), he was first and foremost a humanist. Before turning to anthropology, he studied music, Germanic philology and literature, Latin, Greek, French, Sanskrit and Persian. During his time in Canada, he maintained an intense poetic and literary activity, writing and publishing poetry and literature reviews regularly (Darnell 1990: 6-9, 158-164).² And perhaps it was this proximity to music, art, poetry and languages that endowed him with a particular sensibility – and sobriety – that ends up

2 The first part of "Culture, genuine and spurious" was originally published in 1919 in *The Dial*, an American magazine of literary criticism where celebrated novelists and poets such as William Butler Yeats or T.S. Eliot were published.

colouring the text we are discussing here, allowing us, after all, to consider it as a classic.

Sapir's humanistic disposition, however, is not only to be found in the influence that his classical training in the humanities has on his anthropological thinking. The reverse is also true. In "The musical foundations of verse" (1921), for example, Sapir enters into a poetic-literary theoretical debate about the validity, or sterility, of "free verse" in modern poetry and the dividing line between prose and poetry. In this article, it becomes clear not only how his linguistic training is applied in a literary debate about the (possible) foundations of poetry, but also how his anthropological view of language ultimately influences, albeit implicitly, the direction his argument takes. His knowledge of several languages, including indigenous languages, and his reading of culture under an anthropological-linguistic paradigm allow him to bring to the debate in question a non-scientific view of language that rejects its reification, atomisation and the assignment of metrical or other properties. What we have seen Sapir relinquish in "Culture, genuine and spurious" (a scientific and reified view of culture) is similarly rejected in "The musical foundations of verse". That is, the purely formal and mechanistic perspectives behind debates about the boundaries of poetry should be rejected, in Sapir's understanding, because the criteria used to define categories such as "free verse" or "formal verse", "poetry" or "prose" depend not only on what is conventionalised as "form" at a given time and in a given culture, but above all on a certain inherited and/or shared sensibility that dwells in listeners and that allows them to discern the presence, or absence, of rhythm and musicality (Sapir 1921: 225-226). It is fundamentally a view of poetry that rejects an atomisation and definition of its fundamental units and situates it in the sphere of what is shared, where the poetic tradition, the poet and the reader are historically, gradually and mutually constituted.

At this point, the reader may question the ultimate relevance of Sapir's views on poetry to this essay's argument. However, "The musical foundations of verse" is significant in that it offers yet another window through which to glimpse Sapir's argument in "Culture, genuine and spurious" (see Handler 2007). His view of poetry (and art) as something grounded in that shared space between the past, tradition, convention, the artistic freedom of the poet and the sensibilities of listeners/readers is simply a look at culture through the lens of art. As mentioned above, almost at the end of the article Sapir touches upon the question of art in a large paragraph, loosely defining it as an "authentic expression, in satisfying form, of experience". Discussions about art, Sapir further warns us, are not superficial discussions about the beautiful or the decorative but are a constitutive part of discussions about culture – "[w]hile art lives, it belongs to culture" (1949 [1924]: 327). So perhaps we can look at what Sapir tells us in the realm of poetry and take

it as a significant addition to the argument made in “Culture, genuine and spurious”.

To reflect on culture is to inquire about art and language, about the personal and the shared, about creativity and tradition, about the individual and the group. An inquiry that not only our “scientific capsules” cannot encompass, but that, as Sapir understood, invites us to look with different eyes and to express ourselves with a different language. It is precisely for this reason, and referring again to Ogburn’s criticisms, that the characterisation of Sapir’s text as “unscientific” (Darnell 1990: 149) comes across as little more than a misplaced comment that misses the fundamental purposes and motivations behind the text – a missed shot at a non-existent target. In a letter to Robert Lowie, Sapir writes that he does not see himself as someone of an “unscientific” temperament, but rather with “a scientific spirit but an aesthetic will or craving” (Koerner 1984: 183-184). Perhaps it was such “aesthetic will or craving” that, similar to what we saw in “The musical foundations of verse”, infuses Sapir’s intention to deliver to his readers a non-scientific view of culture. In fact, as anyone can attest, many of Sapir’s linguistic texts have a clear scientific orientation and are couched in a language different from that of “Culture, genuine and spurious”. However, it may be that Sapir’s view of culture as historically more complex and obscure than language (Darnell 1990: 169) has led him to avoid presenting a purely scientific view of culture in this text. Culture is not a thing, is not an entity, and thus it would be inappropriate to attempt to characterise or define it as “a set of traits”, “an aggregate of symbols”, “a system of signification” or something similar, that is, to frame it within a definition. Sapir’s text seeks to avoid, as far as possible, the reification of the culture concept. It is not about identifying the parts that constitute culture, or what it is, and therefore defining it in a logically consistent terminology. Rather, it is about understanding its movement, its mode of being.

It is this mode of being – essentially constituted by a continuous and never-ending dialectic between past and present, individual and society – that seems to be poorly addressed in most reflections that anthropology is producing in contemporary times. While in Sapir’s text we witness a rejection of the reification of culture and the deterministic perspectives that accompany it without opting for none of the two sides of the “individual-society” dualism, it seems rather difficult to find the same concern in anthropology’s main reflections since the last third of the 20th century. In an attempt to move away from “social facts”, “functions”, “structures”, “patterns” and other conceptualisations of essentialising, reifying and deterministic nuances, anthropologists have been readjusting the focus of their inquiries towards the opposite side: the individual. In doing so, the “invention of culture” was declared (Wagner 1975); culture was fragmented into individual voices (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus and Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986); and the very

notion itself was rejected in favour of ethnographies devoted to “the actions of individuals living their particular lives” (Abu-Lughod 1991), or as a resource for, as Rapport (2002b) called it, a new “post-cultural anthropology” devoted to “human psyche in (and as) process”, in other words, to experiences always under construction “by particular individuals in one moment or milieu” and their effects on the individuals themselves (Rapport 2002a: 8-12). Along this path towards the singularity of the individual, the body was also turned into an “indeterminate methodological field” (Csordas 1994), the senses into tools for knowledge production (Howes 2003; Pink 2009) and the anthropologist into an ethnographer of itself (Anderson 2006; Ellis 2004). More recently, within the context of the so-called “ethical turn” in anthropology, attempts have been made to place the individual at the front seat of anthropological theory by conceiving it as a locus of maximum autonomy and freedom in the ethical and moral choices that trouble it (Das 2015; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2010; see also Mattingly 2012).

Rather than looking in detail at the different works mentioned, it is enough to underline what they show us as a whole: namely, anthropology’s historical drift towards a gradual pulverisation and individualisation; the fragmentation of “culture” into a profusion of voices animated by their interests and idiosyncrasies. And it is precisely here – in this epistemological and rhetorical preference for the individual, which constitutes itself as a paradigm, *à la* Kuhn, for a good part of contemporary anthropology (see Santos Alexandre 2023) – that a careful (re)reading of Sapir can throw some light on and open up other possibilities.

A century ago, Sapir already understood that a dualism between individual and culture was not very useful; that to lean to one side or the other was always-already to fail to understand the intrinsically dialogical and historical way in which human cultures operate. And he made this clear in his text; not only from a theoretical point of view, but also in the very language and rhetoric with which he chose to elaborate his argument, thus distancing himself from the jargon and the reifying, objectivist orientations of culture. Sapir’s text thus seems to offer us a possibility of looking at culture in a balanced way and aware of the inadequacy of dichotomies such as “individual-culture” or “freedom-determinism”, which seems to continually compel us to favour one of the two sides. As Sapir noted in a different text (1949 [1932]: 515), culture does have its *locus* in the individual (*i.e.*, it does not exist as a metaphysical entity or order, and therefore, like language, it exists insofar as each individual bears it within itself). However, this does not mean *ipso facto* that the notion of culture should be discarded, as something obsolete, for the sake of the individual and individual differences. If anything, acknowledging the place of the individual within reflections on culture – and this is what Sapir wanted to safeguard – allows us the possibility of conceiving of culture as something that transforms

over time and space (as the result of the spontaneity, creativity or interaction between individuals); and not that its collective dimension is merely a romantic, colonialist or anthropological invention.

That being said, while it is undeniable that cultures are not to be thought of as watertight, self-contained entities (actually, this idea has proved unsustainable since the diachronic approaches of the 19th century diffusionist currents) about which a list of fixed attributes or characteristics can be compiled, it does not follow that there is no difference whatsoever between Australian Aboriginal, Japanese or Classical Greek traditions – differences that can be encompassed under the idea, or notion, of culture. Behind cultural differences, regardless of their specificities and their more or less indefinite and elusive nature, dwell specific historical and institutional developments (sometimes even an encounter between two cultures and the consequent transfer of some tool, technique, custom or philosophy), a canon of literature and its exegesis, a set of artworks and their preservation, philosophical, religious or mythological traditions and their continuous transformation, and sometimes even one or several places that draw it all together. To summarise, there is no doubt that culture is not an objectifiable, self-contained system, an entity, or a whole. But let there also be no doubt that articulated by the thought, works of art and oral or written literature that comprise a given cultural tradition, are different understandings of the world and of human nature, which, when reduced to individualistic and subjectivist interpretations, will immediately lose their social and cultural dimensions and, therefore, lose that which most constitutes their singularity.

To be sure, much has changed in the way anthropology is conceived and practised; but the notion of culture can – and should – continue to have its place in anthropological thinking. Instead of a presentist view, always on the pursuit of the latest theoretical, methodological or political orientations, all we need to do is to look at and attend to the mode of being of culture and make it have a significant weight in our attempts to understand the human condition. Only then will we be able to get closer to an outline of what we really are: beings not determined by history and culture, but always-already historically and culturally orientated and situated. Although not always absolutely explicitly, Sapir was able to understand and to convey in his texts the idea that, in fact, history and culture do not determine how humans act, but are what provides and ensures the very possibilities of human activity.

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