

9 Study Questions on Culture: Definitions

Read: Eriksen, The social organisation of cultural distinctiveness, 43-69
Nagel, Constructing culture, 43-54, Deconstructing ethnicity, 60-72
Handler, On having a culture: nationalism and the preservation of Quebec's patrimoine

1. Both Eriksen and Nagel discuss "cultural construction." Discuss this concept.
2. Describe the difference between taking an "instrumentalist" approach to ethnicity and a "primordialist" one. What is your position on this matter?
3. Discuss the differences between ethnicity and social class and why, even though they overlap and correlate in a substantial number of cases, they should be kept distinct as analytic concepts.
4. Discuss Peruvian ethnicity as described by Eriksen on p. 61, including how social class and ethnicity interrelate.
5. Under what circumstances is it all right for an individual or a group to appropriate symbols, images, designs, and the like from another culture (including material objects like antiquities)? Relate Simon Harrison's (Sept. 28) argument to this discussion. Provide one or more examples of symbols/images/practices that should not be appropriated, in your opinion.
6. How should the American flag be displayed? Are there any kinds of display that should be prohibited? Display of the flag changed greatly following 9/11; why, do you suppose?
7. "Habitus thus provides a structure for thinking that can be challenged in situations of social flux, where assumptions become problematic" (Nagel p. 45). Discuss, providing one example.
8. List three examples of symbolic and "expressive" components of culture (Nagel p. 45).
9. Nagel describes the Kansas Kickapoos adopting Anglo patterns of dress, education and religious practices to curtail further interventions from the Anglos because the Kickapoos then appeared acculturated enough to satisfy missionaries and Indian Service officials. Is this a sign of cultural resilience (a successful strategy to protect their culture, adaptation—a healthy sign), or of culture loss (acculturation—unhealthy)?
10. Nagel discusses the representation of indigenous people as rooted. What are the potential problems—from an indigenous perspective—with this seemingly positive characterization?

11. What is your position concerning ethnic tourism? The marketing of Native American art? Native American gaming?
12. “Ethnicity is a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories” (Conzen et al., as cited in Nagel, p. 60). Compare this with the other definitions of ethnicity we have discussed. Compare the concept of ethnicity, defined this way, to nationalism.
13. Discuss the arguments over the notions of “deconstructing ethnicity” and “deconstructing culture.” Discuss native people’s positions (as represented by the authors cited in Nagel). Discuss non-native activists’ and scholars’ positions.
14. A school girl, after a visit to class by Z. G. Standing Bear, said “there aren’t any real Indians left” (Nagel p. 71). What does “real” mean here? What does it mean to you—if you in fact find it meaningful in this context? Include in your discussion Vizenor’s statement, “Well, there isn’t any past. We’re it.”
15. Nagel makes points that are potentially upsetting to activists. Discuss the nature of their concerns.
16. Handler (p. 194) speaks of “the fetishism of material culture that animates governments, citizens, and museum curators alike in their zeal to preserve their ‘heritage.’” What does he mean? What’s a “fetish”?
17. Handler states that “the fundamental assumption of all versions of French-Canadian and Québécois nationalist ideology is that an individuated—that is, bounded and distinctive—nation exists.” (p. 198) Is this how you conceive of “nation”? What kinds of problems arise with this definition?
18. The H.M.C. recommended creating a historical museum as “a temple of national devotion.” Have you visited any historical museums? If so, can they be considered temples of national devotion? Can you suggest an equivalent site of “national devotion” in the U.S.?
19. Preserving Québec’s *patrimoine* was said to be the surest means to “develop the patriotic spirit of a people.” (p. 199) Do you agree? What does *patrimoine* mean?
20. “In sum, what is historical and typical is authentic, truly French-Canadian.” (p. 200) Defend this statement. Contest it.
21. Design a museum of culture (regional, national, ethnic—you decide). What will you include in your museum? What will you exclude? Spell out your criteria for making these decisions.

22. On p. 201 (Handler), someone remarks, “the notion of culture has just taken a step forward.” What was the change? Why was it to be seen as a “step forward?”
23. What were some of the criticisms of the earlier attempts to preserve Québec’s *patrimoine*?
24. What would you do to preserve a historically important neighborhood in Boston, for example in Beacon Hill? What criteria would you use? What justifications for those particular criteria?
25. What does the phrase “concentration camp for culture” refer to (p. 206)? How well does this metaphor work in this situation?
26. Is “authentic” culture found in monuments and objects in museums? In “the ongoing life of ordinary citizens” (p. 207)? In something else?
27. What are museums (buildings, open-air museums like Williamsburg, VA) supposed to *do*, in your opinion?
28. On p. 208 Handler discusses Durkheim’s notion of the “contagiousness of the sacred.” What does this refer to?
29. What should Quebec’s definition of its *patrimoine* be, do you think? Should it include the English speakers living there (or who lived there in the past), and their artifacts and buildings? Should it include the province’s archaeological sites dating back to prehistoric Native American occupation?
30. Handler says the source of the “sacred” (and growing) *patrimoine* is the relationship of patrimonial property to the collective individual, the nation (perceived as a collection of individuals, each of whom replicates, and who together constitute, a collective individual) (p. 210). Is this your notion of “nation”?

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