

# IN SEARCH OF MISSING PROCESSES

*Orvar Löfgren and Richard Wilk*

This collection of essays\* is out to revitalize discussions about cultural processes of stability and change. Researchers have always been busy developing new analytical concepts, but usually in a piecemeal fashion, as they are needed. This collection reverses the direction, explicitly inventing new processes and reviving some forgotten ones as a means of suggesting what kinds of analysis are needed in a rapidly changing world. Have you ever heard of the cream effect or the power of cultural backdraft? Have you watched the slow process of fossilization or the tactics of cultural stealth? Are you familiar with the need for cultural bracketing? Perhaps you are just waiting for the right word to describe what you have seen.

Conventionally we think of research as discovering something about the way the world works, and then finding an existing label to describe it. But in practice because we think metaphorically, we are always in an oscillation between labels and processes. Often we may be unconscious of the way our metaphors and labels affect our thinking. Here we will make this movement more explicit, by considering the labels directly, and by playing with the reversals, when the labels and metaphors precede and directly affect our observations. We hope this reveals the ways that areas of analysis become stunted because we lack the right vocabulary. We are trying to catch up on the cultural lag when old terminologies don't match new research questions.

We gathered twenty scholars from different fields (European ethnology, anthropology, sociology and archaeology) for a workshop in December 2004 and

asked them to invent (or re-invent) an interesting cultural process, a fresh perspective for analyzing some kind of cultural dynamic. After the workshop we expanded the group and here is the result, 25 essays experimenting with very different approaches and reflecting on overlooked or understudied perspectives. Our aim is not to force 25 new concepts onto the world, but rather to illustrate how different perspectives may enrich cultural analysis and allow a bit of playfulness and experimentation into the process. We are peeking into blind spots, peering around corners, looking under the furniture, and trying to understand how some kinds of social life become visible, while so many others remain unseen. The participants were sent out to invent a process, but luckily (and predictably) their quests took on very different forms. Our project became an experiment in finding different styles of cultural analysis.

In our introduction we will discuss some problems of inventing processes, starting with a historical look at how the tool kit of cultural vocabulary has been transformed over the last century. What kinds of fads and fashions can be observed, what interests become typical academic subjects at different times? We also want to explore the potentials and problems of the metaphors which help some kinds of explanations "make sense" to particular audiences. In what ways do metaphors channel or conserve certain approaches? We want to emphasize that the line between process and condition is blurred in our collection and we think it should stay so. We are as much interested in those processes that maintain



stability, and freeze a status quo, as with dramatic transformations. From the world of changing metaphors we move to a discussion of over- and under-exploited fields in cultural analysis and finally we very briefly introduce the essays.

### Mapping Landscapes of Metaphors

Leafing through old textbooks in anthropology, sociology or European ethnology is sometimes like visiting a graveyard of dead and buried concepts. You encounter words and ideas that are now completely forgotten. Who remembers *dynamic equilibrium*, *replacive integration*, *system homeostasis*, *logic-aesthetic dynamics*, or *acculturative stress*? They were listed in Fred Voget's 1963 review of disciplinary trends on the cutting edge of the anthropology of cultural change.

Concepts come and go, and even reading contemporary textbooks you feel that many of the processes used and defined will soon fade into oblivion, although they seem powerful at the moment. There is a constant wear and tear on terminology that make some concepts tire very rapidly, while other have staying power and/or a high potential for constant revision and eventual recycling. A historical comparison of anthropological textbooks from the 1920s up to the present tells a lot about constant and changing conceptual frameworks. Different theoretical schools had their own favourite sets of processes and keywords. As long as societies were thought of as clearly delineated systems with characteristic patterns and structures, processual thinking was focused on the ways those individual cultural objects interacted with each other, colliding, rebounding or blending. Since cultures were likened to species, machines or nations, the key metaphors were often borrowed from biology, technology or military strategy. Within an evolutionary framework of trees and staircases, cultures ascended, climbed, deteriorated or degenerated. Cultures in contact travelled, spread, clashed, penetrated, merged, or gave submission through acculturation.

Functionalism portrayed cultures as systems or organisms, and used metaphors like growth, equilibrium, and disorder to diagnose function and

dysfunction. More recently we have seen cultural analysis going through several theoretical "turns". The textual trend of the 1980s consciously used concepts from literary theory and discourse analysis to portray culture as "texts" inscribed on bodies and commodities, to be decoded and read by the observer with the right language skills. There was the nomadic trend in the 1990s that emphasized travel and migration metaphors as well as terms which emphasized flux and motion, like displacement and deterritorialization.

Each trend in cultural metaphor production provokes its own opposition, and we can see how the language of mobility, cosmopolitanism and placelessness was countered by "a spatial turn", bringing space and place back into the debate with the help of concepts from cultural geography. These included cultural mapping, mental cartography, earth-writing and all kinds of -scapes (see Falkheimer & Jansson 2006). In a similar manner the poststructuralist reaction against the misplaced concreteness of cultural groups, and the fabrication of the ethnographic present often used graphic tensile and textile metaphors. This was a new cultural world of not only fragments and bricolage but also rifts, threads, weaves, sinews, knots, looms and tangles.

We have no argument with the creative use of metaphor as a means of thinking about the social world. In fact many prominent linguists believe any kind of thought is impossible without metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999). But this knowledge should make us think critically about the metaphors we choose to use, and reflect on their potentials and problems. Metaphors can open up creative new avenues, and help us find pattern and rhythm we had not seen before, but they also have the potential to "frame" particular questions and issues and thereby channel our vision, making some problems invisible, and suppressing questions, in much the way Kuhn saw established research paradigms operating in science. We have trouble seeing things for which we have no mental image or template.

## The Metaphorical Transit System

“Metaphorai” is a sign painted on tramcars in Athens, a motto which should help us remember the importance of knowing when to jump aboard a metaphor and when to get off, as Gregory Bateson (1973) once stressed. We also need to remember that all borrowed terms carry stowaway and unwelcome passengers. Metaphors are seductive, and some have a magic that blinds us. Sometimes we just get carried away.

What does the choice, focus, or invention of processes tell us about the theoretical and methodological landscape at given times, in particular academic settings? Do choices of metaphor reflect strategic alliances between groups and factions? We can learn a great deal from tracking the trajectories and transformations of concepts as they travel between disciplines, areas of study, and generations.

Many different fields have contributed to the large and disorganized historical tool chest of social analysis. Digging through our collection, we find examples drawn from biology (*ecotypes, memes*), gastronomy (*smorgasbord, simmering*), metallurgy (*forged, melting pot*), linguistics (*creolization, grammar*), psychology (*projection, attachment*), physics (*osmosis, entropy*), medicine (*symptoms, diagnosis*), warfare (*guerrilla tactics, manoeuvres*), and even the construction industry (*building, framing*) – just to name a few.

We need to explore the kind of hidden undertones and unwanted baggage that comes along when concepts are transplanted from one arena or discipline to another. Do we borrow some of the legitimacy or stature of a powerful discipline like economics along with their terminology? The flow of metaphor may define a hierarchy of power, or provide a vehicle for more balanced transactions between groups of scholars.

We can illustrate this process by looking at the cultural field of consumption and consumerism, where the metaphorical construction of consumption has had a major impact on the way scholars approach the topic (Wilk 2004). Because the key metaphors for consumption have been “burning” and “eating”, scholars tend to look for prototypical acts

which take raw materials, use them in a destructive way, and leave degraded wastes behind. The whole process is driven by a deeply embodied urge akin to hunger and thirst.

Because of the “eating” metaphor, consumption ends up carrying many of the same moral polarizations of gluttony and starvation, empty and full, health and illness, lean and fat which are so characteristic of discourses about eating food. The metaphor of eating frames the issues of consumption in ways which foreground the acts which are most like burning or eating – burning fossil fuels while driving, for example, while pushing other equally important forms of consumption, such as reading a book or walking the dog, into marginal, atypical categories. Likening consumption to eating also obscures the dividing line between needs and wants, in a way which can be manipulated in various ways by those with different moral and political agendas.

Another metaphorical tradition that has been prominent in discussions of mass consumption is the use of Newtonian physics and hydraulics, for example in discussions of (over-)abundance: overheating, overloading, overflowing, and pressuring. Such metaphors may trap us into a thinking of culture as a kind of liquid in a container which exists in a set quantity, making it a limited good. Excess is then produced through the mechanisms of pushing, swelling, spilling over, and this hydraulic thinking may mislead us into taking for granted that an overflow or elaboration in one cultural field must result in drainage, scarcity or thinning out somewhere else. Pressure must lead to release or destructive explosion.

## The Power of Key Words

Historians and social scientists have turned attention back on themselves, thinking about the history, functions and activities of academia, including the social life of academics. In contrast, they have paid much less attention to the role of language and key words in intellectual movements and programs. They fail to take into account the results of other academic research, in linguistics, anthropology and cognitive sciences, which show that there

is a very close relationship between language and thought.

We believe that language and terminology are generally a conservative influence on creative thinking in social science. It is not hard to find support for this contention. Williams in his famous “Keywords” argued that social science language encodes power relationships, and generally acts in the interests of those who have power and intend to keep it. In doing so he makes a convincing argument that change in the status quo requires the invention of new language, new lexicons, and new terms.

The power of conceptualization is often easier to spot away from home, in other sciences. In medicine, for example, official processes for defining terms and classifications are often out of synch with the latest research. There is generally a considerable lag in the terms for diagnosis and labelling of diseases, or defining what kinds of toxins are dangerous and how levels will be measured. These classifications can exert tremendous power in the real world by slotting particular forms of behaviour into labelled pathologies with recommended treatments. Yet the elements of power are hidden in a maze of committees which operate with little oversight and without public debate. Thus you end up with, for example, an international classification of diseases which makes fine distinctions among various afflictions of affluence, while lumping the diseases of poverty together into many fewer categories. The cultural values of one particular group of people become globally recognized diseases, and the maladies of others are “folk” ailments (Bowker & Star 1999).

In our own world of cultural analysis, we can see many instances where the choice of metaphors for cultural processes has influenced the choice of subjects, the kinds of examples chosen, the moral implications of findings, and even the kinds of fieldwork pursued and forms of presentation. There are always tensions between the language we use and the kinds of things we see and seek to understand. We are not arguing here for a simple model of progressive scientific discovery, where social sciences simply “advance” and leave old sets of ideas and terms lagging behind. Instead we would argue that we live in a world

which is always changing, and that new phenomena are always appearing. It is perfectly understandable that at first we try to fit these new things into existing categories, and we try to stretch the meaning of our existing vocabulary to accommodate them. One lesson from this is that we must allow ourselves to experiment with labels and concepts. When you re-label, all of a sudden you see aspects that were previously hidden. The metaphor is cut loose.

### **Overexploited and Underdeveloped Fields**

An important critique that came out of the workshop concerned what many felt to be the current overemphasis upon processes of speedy renewal, fluidity and hybridity. This is related to what Elizabeth Shove has called “a preoccupation with the explicit, the visible and the dramatic” (2003: 1). During the last decades the use of metaphors from theatre has underlined this preoccupation with “front stage” scripted and intentional cultural processes, using metaphors like performance, plots, scenography, and choreography.

At the same time the postmodern critique in the 1980s and 1990s was a reaction against the old fashioned cultural theory of the superorganic and sociological thinking of cultures as having agency, acting purposively or strategically. Postmodernists attacked the heroic actor as the product of a modernist master script, and emphasized the accidental and liminal, the products of pastiche, and bricolage, using metaphors of flow, flux and flexibility. These more recent concepts focus attention on the parts of the world in constant change, emphasizing processes of cultural fragmentation and individualization. Such processes are undoubtedly an important part of contemporary society, but these concepts can overshadow equally important cultural forces of cohesion, stability and routinization.

Many of the contributions to this volume emphasize the need to explore cultural processes that turn the dramatic, exotic or explicit into inconspicuous elements of the mundane habitus. These processes often carry negative connotation of banalization and trivialization, but they should be seen as a strong undercurrent in everyday life, gaining their power

from their invisibility and their being taken for granted. This space in between choice and habit is a rich terrain that has not been named and is consequently poorly explored. There are classic discussions of routine and habituation in works by Gregory Bateson (1973), Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Michel de Certeau (1984), and more recent studies which emphasize the ambiguities of routines. Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1997: 195ff.), Elizabeth Shove (2003) and Ben Highmore (2004) develop a more nuanced understanding by examining the micro-physics of making and breaking routines and the ways in which they structure everyday life in time and space. Routines are often seen as tools for economizing because they may help actors conserve time and energy by developing their auto-pilot. They can be described as territories of restfulness or security where “you just know what to do,” but they can also be seen as cultural straitjackets that constrain actors, block creativity and stifle change. As habits, they may be seen as obstacles which have to be “broken” and at their worst they blend into the pathologies of addiction and habituation. The lives of routines are much more complex than any simple polarity can capture. Sometimes in the inconspicuous practices of daily life, these small repetitive actions can work to subtly change larger social structures, cultural values, and gendered notions of self and society.

The realm of routinization is closely linked to another underdeveloped one, namely that of *cultural maintenance*. So much that appears to be seamless “inertia” or “stasis” is actually active, requiring huge and often concealed effort. Cultural maintenance includes the activities needed to keep the appearance of order, which we can explore through metaphors of housework and gardening, tending, straightening-up and pruning. Like all maintenance work it tends to be done best when it is noticed least, and those who do it tend to be unrecognized, or even stigmatized and treated as boring plodders (academia provides many examples).

Cultural maintenance can also be a more dramatic battle for order and the aesthetics of symmetry, harmony and logic. This reminds us of the need for more studies of cultural messiness and disorder,

including topics like anachronism, uncoordination, dissonance and clutter. It is easy to forget that far from being “natural” consequences of orderly human activity, messiness of all kinds is usually a human creation, sometimes with clear purpose. Reverting to the theatre metaphors, many of the essays thus advocate a greater interest in the backstage, the prosaic construction of props and preparations rather than the stage itself.

### **From Aisthesis to Zero-making**

The following 25 essays give some examples of underdeveloped themes in contemporary cultural analysis. We have organized them into five sections:

#### *Sensing*

After a long preoccupation with discourse analysis and textual metaphors, social scientists have developed new interest in the kinds of cultural phenomena that are hard to catch and describe in words – fleeting or mixed emotions, sensory and bodily experiences – things felt but not easily verbalized. This section explores the potentials of some sensual approaches. How does *the cream effect* work as a sensory high that comes from adding that little bit of extra? And why is it that *warming* is seen as such an effective way of domesticating the new and alien, making it more cosy, hospitable and authentic? Of all the senses, tactility is most often overlooked. *Aisthesis* is about the ways in which the sense of touch works together with all other senses, whereas *smoothing* is about tidying up cultural messes, cutting corners and flattening experiences.

#### *Ageing*

As we pointed out earlier, there has been ample interest in renewal, innovation and development, but less on the flip side of the coin: disintegration, disappearance and going out of fashion. The papers in this section explore related underexploited themes. *Wasting* deals with the ways in which objects, activities and people are sorted out, redefined as waste or just wasted, while *bracketing* is about putting culture on hold, in waiting and latency. How can different forms for *cultural wear and tear* explain that all of

a sudden a theoretical concept, a ritual or a family car becomes unfashionable, faded or tacky? *Fossilization* is a special variety of cultural ageing. What happens when objects or activities are petrified into social fossils – and can they be brought back to life? *Composting* is the mystical process of mixing cultural stuff and letting it decompose into something which nourishes new developments.

### *Moving*

In the modern world perceptions of movement carry a heavy symbolic load; some are bad, some are good. Good movements often equal change: breaking up, moving on. Usually this is a heavily gendered sphere of male adventure, associated with the fear of being stuck or left behind. Thus a slowing of pace is often associated with stagnation or lack of initiative. The essays in this section deal with temporal movements that are often invisible and are seen as unproductive or disturbing. What if we borrowed the soundscape of the *Doppler effect* to look at our distorted perceptions of past and present, or focused on the kinds of *slow motion* that are often mistaken for inactivity? The dynamics of *sync/unsync* can help us understand the workings of anachronisms. Cultural *stealth* is about knowing when to be invisible and when to make a surprising appearance, whereas *still life* may be a machine that distils events and scenes into a liquid potency.

### *Transforming*

Cultural transformations may evoke images of dramatic metamorphosis, but the drama is often preceded by seemingly trivial routines. Think for example about the hidden work of the left hand that is so important for the magician, who captures our attention by waving his right hand up in the air in order to make us forget what's actually happening. *Zero-making* is the art of wiping the slate clean, producing a fresh start or a cultural discontinuity. Why is *artificialization* so pervasive and popular and what happens when you silence certain experiences and they return as a powerful and surprising *backlash*? The sudden explosion of *backdraft* may teach us to focus on the slow and often invisible build-up be-

hind it. *Customizing* promises the freedom of extreme makeover and individual styling but often turns into new forms of homogenization. *Menuing* helps people make choices through a kind of pre-packaging which is not confined to the restaurant table or the computer screen.

### *Mystifying*

Cultural theory often seems preoccupied with making sense, trying to understand the workings of the world through order and rationality. This section deals with the irrational and mysterious, but also with social practices of imagination and make-believe, fears, dreams and daydreams. *Self-mystification* is about looking with bafflement at the stranger in the mirror, whereas attempts at *camouflage* bring out hidden rules of normality. *Silence* can be both restful and fearful but also ominous, while *sanchismo* is about self-destructive and inexplicable behaviour. Finally, *sleeping* is a nightly mystery – a retreat into a private world full of shared cultural elements.

### **Coda**

Reverting to the world of metaphors, these essays represent a smorgasbord of very different approaches. Botanizing among them you will also be reminded of what's not on the menu. For the curious we have footnoted the original shopping-list we made up before the workshop, just as a reminder of all the alternatives spurned by the authors and the rich potentials of further inventions.<sup>1</sup> There are of course no missing processes out there, just waiting to be discovered. They will surface as creations of a dialogue where ideas of labelling are confronted with analytical perspectives and ethnographic materials. Not a manual of new processes, this collection is meant to stimulate ethnographic experiments and analytical playfulness in the service of serious research. And remember: all research metaphors are tramcars. Know when to step on and step off, waiting for a new one to appear around the corner.

## Notes

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### 1 A check-list for potential cultural processes

#### *Speed and direction*

Fast/slow, (cultural inertia and lag), static/mobile (cultural freezing), flexible/inflexible, one-directional/multi-directional, moving upwards, downwards, backwards, onwards, sideways (evolution, devolution, progress, decline), rerouting

Centripetal and centrifugal forces (integration, disintegration, fragmentation)

Friction, flow, momentum, spin, acceleration, braking

Ageing and rejuvenation (cultural amnesia, recycling)

Vanishing, disappearing, reappearing, haunting

#### *Material characteristics*

Hard/soft (cultural software), sticky, fuzzy, polished,

uneven, dense (cultural condensation)

Temperature, heating up, chilling, freezing, burning, vaporizing

Evaporation, crystallization

Liquidity, viscosity, dilution, concentration

Raw/cooked

#### *Scale, size and weight*

Miniature, Small, Medium, Large and Extra Large cultural phenomena

Expansion, growth, shrinking (cultural downsizing)

Heaviness and weightlessness

Floating and sinking

#### *Combinations*

The spectrum from amalgamation (elements transformed in a way that cannot be reversed) and physical mixes (elements may separate again after a time). Blending, osmosis, dissolving, synergy, solvency/insolvency

#### *Exposure and sensual presence*

Over- or underexposure, hiding, highlighting, vocalizing, visibility/non-visibility, shadowing, haziness,

clear/unclear, tactile, reachable, slippery, ephemeral

Reduction, redundancy, intensive/extensive

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