

Why Culture?

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> Upshot • I argue that if we decide to use the term “culture,” we need to be explicit about the problems we hope to solve in doing so. I suggest that Luhmann might have had a good reason to be hesitant to utilize the term.

« 1 » In his article, Raivo Palmaru raises the question, “How do[es] ... culture [emerge] in communication from individual constructions of people?” (§1) My intuitive commentary to his question is a counterquestion: “Well, does it?” Or rather: “How do you know it does?” Or, less intuitively and more academically phrased: “Under which conditions is it viable/helpful/productive to talk about “culture” and its emergence?”

« 2 » Palmaru offers an interesting and inspiring suggestion for an answer to his question. I do not need to repeat it here, and I do not wish to dispute it. In fact, I cannot dispute it because I lack any criterion to judge it. Palmaru’s suggestion certainly is *one* possible way of conceptualizing culture in its relation to communication and individual constructions of people. What I would have liked to learn more about, what I would need to know in order to evaluate Palmaru’s proposal, is *how* I could go on and use his suggestions to solve empirical or theoretical problems.

« 3 » The popular culture and media theorist Christoph Jacke coined the phrase “Culture does not exist, but we need it” (Jacke 2004, see also Schmidt 2002). In my view, this is one of the most compelling statements about culture, and I try to keep always it in mind when thinking about the term. As is so often the case, the noun “culture” all too easily leads us to a manner of speaking that implies that culture “exists.” What follows then, is the (seeming) need to explain a number of questions: How does it emerge? What are its effects? How can we change it? We might call this an essentialist fallacy.

« 4 » I do not know whether culture “exists.” I know that it can be helpful to use

and define the term in specific ways in order to solve specific research questions. There are plenty of suggestions out there defining what culture seemingly “is.” It can be seen as a system of signs and symbols, as a whole way of life, as social memory – you name it. It is never a question of whether they are “right” or “wrong.” They make sense if they help us to do our research, to observe, describe, and analyze, to solve academic or other problems. Different definitions allow us to ask different questions, to solve different problems. Each and every one has its shortcomings and blind spots.

« 5 » Palmaru himself stresses that there is a plethora of books and articles about the relation between culture and communication, yet “the “how” in the relationship [...] is far from obvious” (§1). His answer to this vagueness is to define the relationship. Yet a definition is not an end in itself. Furthermore, to describe a relation implies a specific understanding of the elements that are related. Both go together. Just as it does not make sense to judge a definition to be “true” or “false,” it is not possible to define a relation between two theoretical terms “correctly.” I cannot comment on a suggested model without knowing what it is meant to be used for. Any answer to the question, “How are culture and communication related” needs to be evaluated in the light of the answers to some further questions: What is the problem I need to solve? For which purpose do I want to use the theory/the concepts I am about to design? As a reader, these are the questions I would have liked to ask Palmaru, because I could not identify Palmaru’s implicit answers to these questions.

« 6 » In some passages of his article, Palmaru seems to advocate a rather essentialist perspective on culture, as if he knew its “true” nature: He pleads that we could see culture “in a completely different light” if only “we *comprehended* that culture is a key link in the constant reproduction of the social world” (§40, my emphasis). Later on, Palmaru insists: “Culture *is not* just a phenomenon preserving and maintaining experiences that have proved to be successful, as is often thought.” (§42, my emphasis) I find this to be a somewhat surprising manner of speaking in a constructivist journal. Of course, it is *possible* to define culture as a key link in the reproduction of the social

world and it surely makes sense to do so in the context of a specific theory and in order to solve a specific problem. But I would have expected a constructivist scholar to be more hesitant to announce that culture *is* “a” and that it certainly *is not* “b.” Palmaru himself refers to the criterion of “viability” instead of truth (§84). But at some points, he writes as if what he was saying was a truth, and not a suggestion for a viable solution to a specific problem.

« 7 » In other parts of the text, it seemed to me that Palmaru is primarily interested in the coherence of theory: he has identified an underdefined term or relation, and he wants to set that right. This is a noble endeavour, but a subtle taste of *lart pour lart* remains. Increasingly, as I spend more and more time in academe, I become weary of theoretical discussions for theory’s sake alone. I want to know what I can do with a theory, and I want to judge it according to its viability for solving problems.⁵

« 8 » Furthermore, I am not convinced it is a given that we need the term “culture.” There might have been more than one good reason why Niklas Luhmann was so reluctant to use the term. People who work in the arts as well as people, like myself, who consider themselves as scholars in the study of culture in the broadest sense have a tendency to tacitly assume that the term is important. But we cannot presuppose this and we need to acknowledge that the term has also been used in many problematic ways, and that it can be (and has been) used as a weapon and as a tool to devalue or segregate people or groups. The term “culture” does not necessarily always have a positive connotation. If we as scholars advocate the term, we need to say why and for what purpose, particularly in light of this history.

« 9 » Besides this main argument, I was surprised to read Palmaru’s remarks about “top down” and “bottom up” perspectives in constructivism as if no suggestions to com-

5 | By the way, I believe our current conjuncture offers plenty of problems where a thorough understanding of the term “culture” is of vital importance. But I would like to know which problems the author had in mind when he designed his conception of the term. For a brilliant example of a problem-based approach to the term “culture,” I always eagerly recommend Grossberg (2010).

bine the two perspectives existed. Palmaru references Siegfried J. Schmidt's more recent works, yet he seems to be unaware of (or silently dismisses) Schmidt's seminal work *Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung* (1994), which raises exactly this question: How do cognitive autonomy and social orientation go together? I believe much of what Schmidt had to say about this question in the 1990s is still helpful today and might be worth revisiting. Furthermore, the hiatus between macro- and micro-level perspectives and the struggle to combine the two could be described as one of the challenges for the humanities and social sciences in general. Various important theories try to solve this puzzle – think of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens to name but a few. I find Palmaru's vision of a "social constructivism" (§2) that bridges the macro-micro divide appealing. However, there is a long tradition and a large body of work available in this context that has to be taken into account on this route and that Palmaru does not even mention.

«10» I realize that my commentary might sound a lot more critical than it is meant to be. I have enjoyed reading Palmaru's text, and I believe it offers important insights and a thorough discussion of some of the fundamentals of Luhmann's systems theory in light of some of the classical and canonical and also some of the most inspiring recent constructivist work, among it Mitterer's and Schmidt's. However, I have decided to focus on the questions that I as a reader had in order to provoke the author to address those issues that have remained implicit, too. I am certain Palmaru has a lot to offer in terms of answering these questions, not only as a scholar, but also drawing from his wide-ranging professional experience in diverse contexts. I am keen to hear his response.

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Author's Response: Culture Matters

Raivo Palmaru

> **Upshot** • I draw the attention to the fact that the communication concept of Luhmann's social system theory and that of radical constructivism are not congruent. Also, communication and culture cannot be understood without taking into consideration that they are two sides of the same coin and that both act as reality-generating agents.

«1» First of all, I would like to thank both of the commentators who responded to my article. One of these, Martin Zierold, responded to my question, "How do[es] culture emerge in communication from the individual constructions of people?" with a question "How do you know it does?" He went on to say that he does not want to debate my paper because he lacks criteria for assessing my suggestions. Zierold points out that the issues I discuss are merely "one possible way of conceptualizing culture in its relation to communication and individual constructions of people." He adds, referring to Christoph Jacke, that "culture does not exist, but we need it." I agree that culture is not something that can be put on a table and studied with a magnifying glass. Instead, it is the 18th camel from the Middle Eastern story that helped three mourning brothers fulfil their fathers' last wish. So what I suggest in my article is not the truth of the last instance, but only one possible way of explaining the connection between communication and culture. There are certainly other possibilities that give a completely different view on the connection between culture and communication.

Why culture?

«2» Martin Zierold's question "Under which conditions is it viable/helpful/productive to talk about "culture"?" is a little late, because the topic of culture already achieved a broader breakthrough in social sciences thirty-four years ago. In communication science, connecting culture and communication became as self-evident as walking on two legs after the publication of James

W. Carey's book *Communication as Culture* in 1989. According to Carey, communication does not mean transmitting messages in space as much as the constant construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful world. Carey even compares communication with a religious or magic ritual where a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed, which unites people and strengthens the relation between them (Carey 2009: 15). Therefore, according to Carey, communication is primarily a process of the representation of shared beliefs and the maintenance of society over time.

«3» Nearly twenty years ago, Siegfried J. Schmidt developed cultural constructivism within the framework of radical constructivism (RC) in his seminal work *Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung* (1994). I cannot agree with the implications Zierold draws in his §9, which leave the impression that this book is somehow at odds with Siegfried J. Schmidt's later works. On the contrary, it introduces socio-cultural constructivism and Schmidt relies on the same logic in his later publications. Until 1994, the argumentation of RC relied mainly on the data of natural sciences, primarily biology, neurophysiology, and psychology. However, in *Kognitive Autonomie und Soziale Orientierung* Schmidt introduced cultural arguments. In the 2003 book, *Histories and Discourses*, a new manner of argumentation evolves – discursive self-grounding – which Schmidt also continued in his later works.

«4» However, the abovementioned does not mean that the question "Under which conditions is it viable to talk about culture?" is not legitimate or reasonable. This question may always be asked. The reasons that made me write the target article are primarily related to my empirical studies. For example, I have compared the coverage of different political figures in fifteen media outlets. The main (so far unpublished) finding was that the media evaluated the different individual and collective agents very differently, some in a very negative way and others mainly positively. However, the output of the different media sources studied was astonishingly similar. The main reason for the limited variance of the studied variables seems to be cultural – choices of journalists, the attribution of meaning, and