

INTRODUCTION

“On the whole, it may be only slightly presumptuous to suggest that the social sciences are in danger of abandoning culture entirely as a field of inquiry.”
(Wuthnow, Hunter, Berger & Kurzweil, 1984, p.2)

When the *XVII World Congress of Philosophy* was held in Montréal in 1983, the main theme of the congress was *Philosophy and Culture*. The selection of the theme and the ways in which it was elaborated reflected some recent tendencies in the social sciences and philosophy. From the 1970s onwards we witnessed shifts in meaning concerning ‘culture’ (from ‘social structure’ and ‘culture’ as in ‘primitive culture,’ towards ‘social constructed meanings’) and shifts in meaning concerning ‘theory’ (from ‘scientific theory’ towards ‘interpretative strategies’) leading to a massive shift in meaning concerning ‘culture theory.’

In the early sixties Kroeber & Kluckhohn, having completed a review of hundreds of culture definitions, claimed that one of the main reasons for the meagre theoretical advancing of cultural anthropology in particular and the social sciences in general was the lack of a scientific *theory* of culture. In making this complaint they advocated a very specific idea of what such *theory* should be like:

As yet we have no full theory of culture. We have a fairly well-delineated concept, and it is possible to enumerate conceptual elements embraced within that master concept. But a concept, even an important one, does not constitute a theory. (...) Concepts have a way of coming to a dead end unless they are bound together in a testable theory. In anthropology at present we have plenty of definitions but too little theory. (1963: 357)

According to them theories should be testable. During the seventies we witnessed a firm reaction against this idea of theory and the role it

should play. However, this did not lead to the removal of the word 'theory,' but it altered its meaning altogether. David Scott documents this evolution and circumscribes this new meaning of theory:

By 'theory' (at least what I have been able to make of it) is meant that diverse combination of textual or interpretive (or 'reading') strategies — among them, deconstruction, feminism, genealogy, psychoanalysis, post-Marxism — that, from about the 1970s or so had initiated a challenge to the protocols of a general hermeneutics; the idea of a critical practice that could claim to govern, guide or otherwise interpret other practice from a place outside or beyond it (*i.e.* 'theory' too, but the strong sense of it, and generally associated with the names of Critical Theory and Structuralism).

Theory, in this sense, offered itself as de-disciplinary, as in fact anti-disciplinary, the virtual undoer of disciplinary self-identities. It offered itself as a mobile and nomadic field of critical operations without a proper name, and therefore without a distinctive domain of objects. Indeed what theory went after was precisely the assumption (common to the disciplines and their rage for 'method') of the authentic self-authoring presence of things, of histories, of cultures, of selves, the assumption of stable essences, in short, that could be made to speak themselves once and for all through the transparency of an unequivocal and analytical language. On theory's account there could be no final description, no ultimate perspective which could terminate once and for all the possibility of another word on the matter. (1992: 374-75)

However, not only 'theory,' or, to put it more broadly 'strategies for study' has changed over the past decades. The definition of 'culture' itself, as an object of inquiry, was subject to some drastic changes, giving some the idea that culture is a 'perilous idea' (Wolf, 1994) or something that can mean whatever we use it to mean (Keesing, 1974: 73 note 2). To some, like *e.g.* Orville Lee (1989), this 'conceptual freedom' signals the intellectual poverty of many culture studies, to others, it means an enrichment. One of the recent developments within the domain of the study of culture in which this freedom is gratefully acknowledged is commonly labelled as 'cultural studies.' Culture becomes a medium of a power struggle (Meaghan Morris) that is analyzed from a contextualised and

self-reflective perspective.

These changes in culture theory have fundamentally altered not only cultural anthropology as a discipline but the social sciences in general and a host of other areas of culture study as well. In this issue of *Philosophica* we would like to explore and evaluate the new place and role of 'culture' and 'culture theory' in the social sciences and philosophy. The contributors were invited to reflect upon this theme against the canvas of their own work and discipline either by theoretical analysis of the issue or by means of examples from their own work, or both.

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