

**Europe and the Asia-Pacific:  
Culture, Identity and Representations of Region\***

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## Abstract

Issues of culture and identity have been prominent themes in social and political enquiry over the last decade or so. They have become just as conspicuous in political debates outside the academy as well. This has been especially evident in the Asia-Pacific region, especially with respect to relations with Europe and, more generally, 'the West'. For much of the 1990s, the 'Asian values' debate held sway as the major discourse surrounding key developments in the region. From normative issues such as democracy and human rights, to the analysis of the world of business and finance, Asian 'culture' – and therefore values – has been regarded as a major factor in defining the region and its identity. These definitions of region, moreover, have usually taken 'the West' as the major point of contrast.

This paper provides a conceptual overview of some of the issues involved in the politics of cultural representation, highlighting the fact that gross exercises in stereotyping, including self-stereotyping, have plagued many discussions of regionalism and inter-regional relations. It will be argued that social scientists have made their own distinctive contributions to these stereotypes with some promoting theories of relativism and determinism on the one hand, and others resorting to a dogmatic universalism on the other. Both ways of thinking appeal because they present simplifications of a rather messy world and for that reason, among others, are likely to remain attractive to many scholars as well as politicians and policy makers.

## **Introduction**

To say that issues of culture and identity have become prominent themes in social and political enquiry over the last decade or so is something of an understatement. The 'cultural turn' and the rise of identity politics has fed a veritable academic industry across the humanities and social sciences. Debates about these issues have become just as conspicuous in outside the academy as well. Nowhere has this been more in evidence in recent years than in the Asia-Pacific region, especially with respect to relations with Europe and, more generally, 'the West' - an entity that includes not only Europe (or more especially Western Europe), but the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and occasionally Japan as well. For much of the 1990s, the 'Asian values' debate held sway as the major discourse surrounding key developments in the region. From normative issues such as democracy and human rights, to the analysis of the financial scene, Asian 'culture' – and therefore values – has been regarded as a major factor in defining the region and its identity. A similar discourse revolving around the 'Pacific Way', promoted by Pacific Island leaders, featured throughout the same period. These definitions of region, moreover, have usually taken 'the West' – an entity spawned by Western European civilization – as the major point of contrast and as the edifice against which culture, identity and representations of region have most often been constructed in the Asia-Pacific.

The debates have gathered additional importance with the formal establishment in 1996 of the Asia-Europe Meeting process (ASEM). Although motivated primarily by economic factors, ASEM has

acquired other dimensions ranging from security issues to general cultural considerations to the role of civil society. It has also involved the practical politics of regional identity and belonging. On the one side, 'Europe' in the ASEM process consists exclusively of European Union (EU) members. And if its membership is to expand in the future, so too will the identity of Europe and its representation by the EU. On the 'Asian' side, the exclusions are as interesting as the inclusions. For ASEM purposes 'Asia' includes only the countries of Southeast and East Asia. Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific island states are out. So too is the whole of South Asia – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, these latter countries have never been included except very obliquely, in the purview of 'Asian values'. Lying between the two regions, but also not included in either, lies the largest territorial country in the world – Russia – which has ambivalent relations with both 'Europe' and 'Asia' and whose struggles with identity in the post-Cold War era are to some extent being played out in its 'Asian' periphery.

All this has occurred as part and parcel of a process of increasing regionalization. Along with globalization, this phenomenon has gathered pace around the world, with varying degrees of success, in the post-Cold War period. In Western Europe, where regional integration via the EU is deepest, notions of regional identity and culture have been much debated. Indeed, it is often assumed that regardless of the national (and sub-national) cultural diversity evident throughout the region, a common sense of 'Europeanness' nonetheless exists. This is expressed through a set of shared cultural values and concerns revolving around a political identity that is portrayed as modern, rational and secular and which upholds the basic principles underpinning human rights and democracy. How closely the ideal version of European identity matches the reality is another question. The more salient one for the present discussion is: against what is this identity defined? The best-known study on this basic question is, of course, Edward Said's now classic polemic, *Orientalism*.

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (Said [1978] 1995: 1-2).

The terms 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalist' are now commonly used in application to the work of European (and other Western) scholars, from the nineteenth century to the present, who have written about 'the East'. Although Said focused quite specifically on the Middle East in his original work, elaborating especially on the ways in which Islam and the Arab world were represented in grossly stereotypical terms in literary and scholarly works, his critique has been extended much further. The 'Orient' after all extends geographically through the Indian sub-continent and Central Asia through to China and Japan, and much of the region was subject to European (and Russian) colonialism as well. And because the study of Orientalism concerns the power relations inherent in colonialism, including the power to authoritatively represent both self and other and to impact substantially on culture and

identity, it is clearly relevant to broader issues of representation. This is so even though the period of formal colonialism has almost passed.<sup>1</sup> European colonialism is still within living memory of much of the adult population throughout the region, and its legacy will remain for a long time to come in a whole range of institutions and practices. In addition, many see certain aspects of contemporary globalization as the reincarnation of a form of Western colonialism or neo-colonialism.

Intellectual/political critique and resistance has been expressed in any number of ways, especially in the body of contemporary work known as postcolonial studies. It has also been expressed in the closely related phenomenon of 'Occidentalism' which I take to mean, quite simply, the gross homogenizing, essentializing, and stereotyping of Europe (as well as the West in general). The discourse of Occidentalism has emanated from various scholars, politicians, businesspeople and other public figures throughout the Asia-Pacific (and other parts of the non-Western world). However, scholars from within Europe and other parts of the West have also, at times, participated vigorously in its production. Arguably, this has been part and parcel of a critical reflexivity that has sometimes gone a little too far in castigation of the self and over-romanticization of the other. In discussing some of the complex problems involved in any inter-cultural discourse, Richard Bernstein gives some sound intellectual advice:

... we must always strive to avoid a false essentialism when we are trying to understand the traditions to which we belong or those alien traditions that are incommensurable with "our" traditions. For frequently discussions of East-West lapse into such a false essentialism where we are seduced into thinking that there are essential determinate characteristics that distinguish the Western from the Eastern 'mind'. This false essentialism violently distorts the sheer complexity of overlapping traditions that cut across these artificially simplistic global notions (Bernstein 1991: 93).

We are now very much aware, through the work of Said and others, of the extent to which the 'East', in particular, has been subject to this 'false essentialism'. But far less attention has been paid to the false essentialism of Europe and the 'West'. Said himself is actually no less guilty of the crime of essentialism – if it is an intellectual crime<sup>2</sup> – when he speaks sweepingly of 'Western imperialism' and 'European culture'. This is a problem that is liable to attend almost all critical work that deals with national entities let alone whole regions within a comparative framework, especially when attempting to come to grips with culture and identity. And it is not one that can be resolved easily. One way of approaching the problem, perhaps, is to look at how concepts of culture and identity have developed in the realm of intellectual thought, and how these relate to practical manifestations of identity politics and representations of place and space.

### **Culture in the Academy**

Few would dispute that there has been a notable 'cultural turn' throughout virtually the entire range of social science and humanities disciplines in recent years. While cultural anthropology has been around

for some time, the terms cultural geography, cultural history, political culture and cultural politics, not to mention cultural studies, are more recent designations that an increasing number of scholars have been using to describe their approach to scholarship. Peter Burke notes that many scholars who, a decade or so ago would have thought of themselves as literary critics, art historians or historians of science, now prefer to define themselves as cultural historians, working on ‘visual culture’, the ‘science of culture’ and so forth. He adds that in contemporary Britain, and in many other places besides, ‘culture’ has become an everyday term used by people when talking about their community or way of life (Burke 1997: 183). The word, and a variety of meanings associated with it, is constantly deployed by company executives, advertising agencies, consumer researchers, sports promoters, tour operators, fashion journalists, press officers – and the list goes on. As Adam Kuper notes, *everyone* is into culture now (Kuper 1999: 2).

The present period, however, is not the first in which the culture concept has occupied such a prominent position, at least in the world of scholars. In the late 1940s, it was claimed confidently that the ‘culture concept of the anthropologists and sociologists is coming to be regarded as the foundation stone of the social sciences’ (Chase quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963: 30). The contemporary turn to culture, then, may perhaps be seen as more of a ‘comeback’ than a genuinely new development (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 30). Either way, the contemporary interest in culture and identity has resulted, among other things, in the development of a distinctive body of multidisciplinary thought known generally as ‘cultural theory’. As a pluralistic endeavour, cultural theory assumes no single meaning for the term ‘culture’, let alone a single valid methodology for exploring its applications. Nor can it privilege any particular discipline as occupying the high intellectual ground when it comes to ‘studying culture’. This includes anthropology (or more particularly American cultural anthropology) which long ago claimed culture as its master concept, as the quotation above from Chase suggests.

As a consequence of its plurality of possible meanings, and its embracing throughout the humanities and social sciences, the culture concept has something of an omnibus quality (Rundell and Mannell 1998: 19). In a now classic study of the history of the concept, the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified an astonishing variety of applications and understandings that had emerged up until their own time of writing in the early 1950s. For the authors, this variety could nonetheless be reduced to patterns of behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols which, taken together, constitute the distinctive achievement of human collectivities, including their ‘embodiment in artefacts’. Moreover, ‘the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values’ (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963: 357). This is much wider and more inclusive than the elite ‘opera house’ concept of culture to which Matthew Arnold subscribed, and which ‘was something that some societies had (or more exactly some groups in some societies had), while others lacked it’ (Burke 1997: 184-5).

The elite concept stood in marked contrast with other schools of thought on culture. American cultural anthropology, under the strong influence of Franz Boas and his followers, became normatively

committed to the notion that all peoples or groups were equally 'cultured' and that each culture was to be valued on its own terms, and not on those of an allegedly superior European cultural standard. These ideas stood in a direct line of descent from the German Romantic thinker, Johann Herder. The egalitarian Boasian stance contrasted with an earlier school of thought which took an evolutionary approach in which 'lower' to 'higher' cultural forms could be mapped along a progressive continuum. Although British social anthropology also abandoned the evolutionary approach, it remained skeptical of Boasian culturalism. A prominent member of the British school, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, regarded the culture concept as a 'vague abstraction'. More generally, the British school tended to employ the terms 'culturalism' and 'culturalist' as 'damning epithets for any analysis which sought above all to explicate a culture in its own terms' (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 140).

One thing that virtually all anthropological approaches to the study of culture have had in common, however, and which distinguishes them from other approaches, is their focus on representing the 'other'. Barnard and Spencer summarize this point succinctly in arguing that anthropology

remains tied to a model of representing 'other' cultures, different from the anthropologist's own. In contrast, cultural studies has often sought to make visible cultural traditions that are muted, marginal, under-represented or devalued within the society of which the researcher is a part. Alternatively, cultural studies has operated as a system of critical perspectives on the production of knowledge itself, indeed at the most local level of disciplinary boundaries (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 135).

There is insufficient space here to sketch the career of the culture concept as it developed throughout the twentieth century in any more detail. Suffice to say that anthropological conceptions, from the Boasian school through to the structuralist, symbolic/interpretive, poststructural and postmodern, have been enormously influential and have fed into various conceptualizations and reconceptualizations of culture throughout the twentieth century. And together with heterogeneous developments in cultural studies<sup>3</sup>, they have contributed to the 'omnibus quality' of the concept that has made cultural theory the highly pluralistic enterprise that it is today. Pluralistic as it is, there is nonetheless a strand of meaning associated with culture that relates specifically to identity as a collective phenomenon.

### **Culture as Collective Identity**

Whatever else it might mean to the many people who use the term around the world today, whether they speak of political culture, popular culture, food culture, Confucian culture, national culture, cultural heritage or even culture on a grand scale such as 'Western' culture or 'European' culture or 'Asian' culture there is, according to Kuper, a common thread of meaning: 'In its most general sense, culture is simply a way of talking about *collective identities*' (Kuper 1999: 3). This follows a general line of anthropological, multiculturalist and communitarian thinking which deals with groups rather than notions of the individual.

Before pursuing this line of enquiry further it must be noted that the issue of identity itself is scarcely restricted to culture or collectivities. There has been an influential tradition of European thought since at the least the seventeenth century revolving around the notion of *individual* identity. A variety of influences and developments, from the Protestant Reformation, the philosophy of Descartes, the political economy of Adam Smith, the development of notions of natural rights, and the rise of liberalism and capitalism, have fed into this tradition. Indeed, 'individualism' is now very often taken as the definitive value of the entity known as the 'West' of which Western Europe is the original heartland. Moreover, it is individualism and its associated values that are usually used as the major point of contrast between the West (and 'Western culture') and the non-West, the latter obviously including most of the Asia-Pacific. As I have argued elsewhere, commitment to the myth of an 'individualistic West' as opposed to a 'communitarian East' has contributed to the reinforcement of the highly simplistic and misleading dichotomy around which too many discussions of East/West have revolved (Lawson 1996). Edward Friedman also comments some of the most common myths about Western individualism:

The notion of 'the West' ... is so ideologically informed that it blinds people who identify with the category even from understanding themselves. 'Westerners' happily embrace the idea that their purportedly unique blessedness is rooted in a culture that values the individual. But no serious history of democracy focused on matters such as expanding aristocratic rights ... or church-state conflicts, or the need to end religious wars with institutionalized tolerance of the other community does so by highlighting individual values... People in Europe and North America misconstrue themselves and mislead others in presenting themselves as uniquely individualistic (Friedman 2000: 23-24).<sup>4</sup>

One further aspect concerning the 'collectivity' denoted by the term 'the West' that is relevant to the present discussion concerns the extent to which the US is often taken as representative of the whole. This is occasionally remarked on, but so far has scarcely been scrutinized in the context of relations between Europe and the Asia-Pacific and how they are represented. One of the most significant differences is based on the fact that there is a strong tradition of socialism that runs throughout European historical experiences – something that is missing almost completely from the American experience. Moreover, both classic European conservatism as well as socialism, despite their other obvious differences, are founded on versions of communitarianism that distinguish them from liberal individualism. The European socialist legacy is also evident in Australia and New Zealand and, again, this sets these countries (which are also defined as part of 'the West' by virtue of their largely European heritage) apart from the US. Given that parts of Asia have also adopted forms of socialism, or have at least been more hospitable to its values, there is in fact a commonality between Europe and the Asia-Pacific that the US does not share in. Having said that, it remains the case that there are plenty of businesspeople throughout the Asia-Pacific region who feel perfectly comfortable pursuing certain individualistic and capitalist goals and who in this respect are at one with their American counterparts.

To return briefly to the notion of culture as constitutive of identity, it is important to note that this notion is at the heart of the 'politics of recognition', an approach to the study of cultural identity and power relations often associated with multiculturalism as well as feminism – although the bodies of thinking associated with each of these positions can reach strikingly different conclusions with respect to some fundamental aspects of culture and identity. For instance, multiculturalism often takes a strong communitarian stance which can be highly conservative, not to mention oppressive, with respect to the position that women occupy within a given community. But it has an individualistic and universalistic side as well, even though it is not always seen in these terms.

Charles Taylor, one of the best-known philosophic exponents of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition, argues for a 'politics of equal dignity' as a necessary condition for appropriate recognition. This, he says, is based simply 'on the idea that all humans are worthy of equal respect' which is, in turn derived from a notion that there is a 'universal human potential' – a capacity that all humans share (Taylor 1994: 41). For this to be true, then it must be a capacity that individual humans possess regardless of their cultural identity or heritage. But to be consistent, it must also be regardless of their position *within* their cultural group or society. All this is entirely consistent with the notion of universal human rights and the 'Enlightenment project' which we shall come to shortly. However, there has been considerable disagreement between communitarians and multiculturalists on the one hand, and those of a cosmopolitan persuasion on the other. And much of it is to do precisely with the issue of how people are treated *within* groups as well as with whether 'outsiders' have a moral right to criticize intra-group practices.

In another relevant discussion, Preston argues that 'political-cultural identity is a matter of the creative response of groups to the structural circumstances enfolding the collectivity which they inhabit' (Preston 1997: 1). J. Friedman also discerns the role of structures in his discussion of cultural identity and global systemic processes. He says that his work is not about the diffusion of cultural objects, but about the *structure* of the conditions in which such things occur (Friedman 1994: 1). Processes of decolonization, the Cold War, the end of the Cold War and bi-polarity as well as contemporary globalization, regionalization and the reconfiguration of international relations and security alliances are obvious candidates here for significant structures within which cultural (and political) identities become enmeshed. However, in Friedman's subsequent discussion of cultural identity formation in the context of particular structural circumstances, cultural identity still emerges as something possessed by a collectivity – often a politicized one (see Friedman 1994: 88-89).

So once again we are back to a collectivity. Here we must enquire though, what form do these collectivities take? There is no precise answer to this question, for a group or collectivity can exist in as small a group as a nuclear family to something as large as an entire civilization – at least according to some. Samuel Huntington is probably the best-known contemporary proponent of large-scale civilizational identities. His 'clash of civilizations' thesis is based on the notion that, in the post-Cold War era, 'cultural identity is what is meaningful to most people' (Huntington 1996: 20). And identity is



seen as inherently conflictual. Moreover, 'the West' as a civilizational entity is most likely to be joined in conflict with a strategic civilizational conglomeration in the form of an Islamic-Confucian alliance.<sup>5</sup> As it happens, this 'alliance' makes up most of the Asia-Pacific region. However unlikely it is that such an alliance would ever materialize, the images that Huntington's work evoke have resonated throughout the region. It has done so especially among the more conservative political elements for it has provided additional ballast for the 'Asian values' discourse, especially in its depiction of 'the West' as a civilizational entity, which 'performs' its identity in fundamental opposition to 'the East'.

I have so far levelled much of the analysis and critique at exercises in stereotyping, essentializing, dichotomizing and relativizing. One great 'intellectual crime' that I have not touched on so far is that of universalism. Although it is by no means a peculiarly European or Western phenomenon, an all-consuming universalism is nonetheless closely associated with that great 'European project', the Enlightenment. Moreover, universalism has been widely viewed as yet another facet of, if not the major element in, Western hegemony both past and present.

### **Enlightenment Universalism and Hegemony**

The Enlightenment, sometimes also referred to as the 'Age of Reason', is generally regarded as a highly influential intellectual movement that spread throughout Western Europe and America during the eighteenth century and which has left its mark on virtually all aspects of Western scholarship from the humanities and social sciences through to the natural or physical sciences. Since one of the major concerns was to liberate the human mind from the bondage imposed by institutionalized religion and superstition, the Enlightenment presented a profound challenge to the traditional foundations of politics and society in Europe, and with profound implications for how other parts of the world are to be understood as well. As a 'script for the project of modernity', it embodied notions of progress, freedom and universal human rationality and provided the essential underpinnings for the emergence of liberal social, political and economic thought. Four distinct elements have been identified and summarized succinctly as follows: First, *individualism* asserts the primacy of the person against the claims of the social collectivity; second, *universalism* declares the moral unity of the human species and accords a secondary importance to particular historical and cultural forms; third, *egalitarianism* confers on all humans equal moral status; and fourth, *meliorism* affirms the possibility of improving all social and political institutions (Outlaw 1991: 21).<sup>6</sup>

The elements outlined above may seem straightforward enough, but the Enlightenment as such is a far more complex movement of ideas and principles that defies reduction to any unambiguous set of thoughts. The immediate concern here, however, is with universalism. There are several ways of looking at this phenomenon. One focuses on the extent to which it has operated, whether deliberately or not, to enhance European or Western hegemony over almost the entire range of intellectual enterprises including the most basic formulation of ontology and epistemology.

There is, however, another way of perceiving universalism. Clarke says that universalism may also be defined as ‘the search for a single world philosophy, one which brings together and synthesizes the diverse philosophic traditions of East and West’. This synthetic version, in so far as it constitutes a ‘project’, aims to identify a set of basic assumptions that the various traditions have in common in order to develop a global system of thought in which cultural and political reconciliation between nations might be found (Clarke 1999: 119). This resonates with a kind of pluralistic (and idealistic) cosmopolitanism that has been central to the thought of those striving to steer a middle path between a dogmatic universalism and radical and ethically untenable relativism (see Lawson 1998). This has been an especially important theme in the debates over democracy and human rights, and which have been an ongoing source of tension in the politics of inter-regional relations.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a conceptual overview of a number of key issues involved in the politics of cultural representation. I have argued that ‘the West’ has often been taken as the edifice against which culture and identity have been constructed. This has involved gross exercises in stereotyping, including self-stereotyping, that have plagued too many discussions of regionalism and inter-regional relations. Social scientists have made their own distinctive contributions to these stereotypes with some promoting theories of relativism and determinism on the one hand, and others resorting to a dogmatic universalism on the other. Both ways of thinking appeal because they present simplifications of a rather messy world and for that reason, among others, are likely to remain attractive to many scholars as well as politicians and policy makers. A social science worthy of its name, however, must recognize the dangers of such simplifications and the fact that the tensions, contradictions and uncertainties of a pluralistic world cannot be adequately analysed within such a framework.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions remain in the Pacific since France still retains New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Essentialism’ has been defined as: ‘The view that there are essential properties which define what something is, and without which it could not be what it is’ (Edgar and Sedgewick (eds) 1999: 131). A more extensive discussion may be found in Barnard and Spencer (eds) (1996): 188-190). Here, essentialism is described as ‘both a violation of cultural relativism and one of the conceptual besetting sins of anthropology’ With respect to postcolonial searches for identity, it is noted that a ‘critical issue concerns the identification of the social entity *against which* ... essentializing strategies are deployed ...’.

<sup>3</sup> There is no one ‘school’ of cultural studies, although cultural studies as such emerged in tangible form in England in the early 1960s with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. It is now a well-established field of study throughout much of the English-speaking world (especially the US and Australia), with centres also now established in places like Taiwan and Japan.

<sup>4</sup> There are now actually numerous critiques along these and similar lines. For further examples, see some of the contributions to Atlöv and Ngo, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Here, China and most of East Asia are defined rather simplistically as 'Confucian', although this is in accord with many of the stereotypes generated about East Asia – including stereotypes generated by East Asians themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Note that apart from the emphasis on individualism, the other three elements are also classifiable as belonging to the essentials of socialism which is itself a profoundly modernist doctrine dedicated to moral progress along egalitarian lines.

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