Ideas, Ideology, and Interests: On Terry Eagleton's Approach to Culture

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The British literary theorist Terry Eagleton has significantly influenced contemporary debates on culture. This essay provides a reading of his book *The Idea of Culture* (2000), in which Eagleton discusses historical, philosophical and political contexts of notions of "culture" thereby unveiling the political interests inherent to such conceptual constructions. The essay highlights Eagleton's complex understanding of relations between nature and culture as well as his own materialist approach to culture.

Keywords: Culture; History of Ideas; German Idealism; Critical Theory; Ideology

This essay examines some aspects of Terry Eagleton's intellectual engagement with the term "culture." In doing so, the challenge is that Eagleton is by no means interested in conceptualizing a particular notion of culture in a way we are used to defining concepts and elaborate theories. Instead, with *The Idea of Culture* (2000) he provides commentaries on various historical notions of culture as well as on culture theories developed by different authors. Eagleton's aim is to unveil the political interests inherent to such conceptual constructions or mirrored by them, respectively. Yet, the close relationship between notions of culture and ideological phenomena is an issue that has been preoccupying the Marxist thinker, Eagleton, for many years as is reflected in a great part of his oeuvre.[1]

Reading *The Idea of Culture* presupposes profound knowledge of the theoreticians and debates on culture and society throughout the last three hundred years. For a better understanding, Eagleton repeatedly summarizes the ideas as outlined by the individual thinkers, which he seeks to critically discuss. This methodological approach makes his argument more transparent, while it simultaneously facilitates a critical reading of his own

thoughts. However, the purpose of the present article is neither to give a critical interpretation of Eagleton's argument (such an effort would require the precise and lengthy reconstruction of the theories that Eagleton comments on), nor is it to outline a critique of his approach to culture. Indeed, I do support Eagleton's approach—at least regarding two significant points. The first one is related to his argument when addressing the culturalization of nature through work. Here, Aristotle's theory of causality helps to clarify what Eagleton means when stating that "the natural" holds the potential for "the cultural." Secondly, I support Eagleton in his discussion of the notions of "culture" as elaborated in German Idealism. Yet, as we will see, Eagleton is in this regard a bit "too fast," and therefore, I will take recourse to Hegel in order to make Eagleton's argument more plausible.

Indeed, the many lines of Eagleton's comments on the particular theories of culture generate a net of thoughts that deepens our understanding of the term "culture" which, all too often, is used in a rather careless manner. In the following, I will restrict my reading of Eagleton to the first chapter of his book *The Idea of Culture*, entitled "Versions of Culture." In this part, he presents the materialist core of his conceptual approach to culture; the following chapters merely contain exercises.

Nature and Culture, Work and Discipline

Ever since Greek antiquity and Aristotle's causality theory, we tend to conceive of nature as the part of the world based on the principle of motion (or change), whereas culture is understood as everything based on the principle of motion (or change) in the realm of human objects and purposes. A tree grows straight or crooked, either way, it will never become a table; to become a table, a human (agent) has to cut the tree and work upon the wood accordingly.[2] In so far, nature and culture seem to be two clearly distinguishable things. Yet, the word "clear" invites further reflections.

Water is as much a natural material as are gold and wood, but it is not a material suitable for creating a ring or a table. Only some materials hold the proper characteristics for certain (human) purposes. Therefore, it could be said that nature holds the potential for culture; it seems as if nature seeks to go beyond itself, or, in Eagleton's words: "Nature itself produces the means of its own transcendence" (*Culture* 3-4). Obviously, nature and culture refer to one another. Eagleton, at this point, reminds us of Jacques Derrida's notion of "supplement" (*Culture* 4). However, the deconstruction of the binary established between nature and culture does not necessarily lead to the complete disappearance of that opposition; cultural history is not natural history. Thus, it is more important to stress that the deconstruction of the opposition between nature and culture indicates its constant recurrence.

In the first instance, the opposition between nature and culture recurs as we are the "cultivators" of the nature surrounding us. Both the individual and collective needs and drives "call" for satisfaction and require purpose-oriented work upon nature. Yet, work involves time, attention and energy, all of them often directed at other purposes than the immediate satisfaction of particular needs and drives. And this is so because work requires cooperation. In order to avoid any destabilization of cooperative structures, the needs and drives have to be postponed and repressed. Nevertheless, even here we recognize that our own nature seeks transcendence; we would not be able to discipline ourselves if our human nature would not be endowed with the respective potential and ability to do so. At first glance, it might sound confusing when we hear Eagleton's remarks that the word "culture" conceals a theology (*Culture* 6). What he means, to my understanding, is that human nature's

aspiration and ambition toward transcendence involves a kind of desire for salvation. What sounds, in turn, perfectly clear is Eagleton's statement on notions of "culture" as always containing history and politics (ibid.). The establishment, stabilization and transformation of disciplinary regimes results from historical processes and shapes these processes at the same time, and are by that measure necessarily political. Eventually, the process of human cultivation is related to an "ethical pedagogy" (*Culture* 6-7). The purpose of such pedagogy is to avoid coercion. It aims, instead, for the activation of voluntariness.

Culture and the State

Eagleton discusses a second recurrence of the binary opposition of nature and culture in terms of the state. In doing so, he makes reference, among others, to Schiller. The German poet and philosopher contrasts the factual human being with the idea of human perfectibility, which is represented through the ideal state. In Schiller's view, every human being holds, simultaneously, the disposition to perfectibility. The duty of the state is to merge all the diverse courses of human action in order to create a pure and perfect human being (Schiller 10-11). Schiller's notion of *Bildung* refers to a dialectical relationship between an aesthetic education, in the

sense of the individual internalization of moral and ethical values on the one hand, and the modalities of shaping society on the other. Indeed, it is an interesting question in how far ideas of the ideal state, as constructed in the tradition of German Idealism, prove to be "proper", and if not, in how far they correlate with Schiller's notion of culture or *Bildung* (*Culture* 6-7). Alternatively, this issue could be discussed by the aid of Hegel.

Like other thinkers of German Idealism, Hegel assumed the following structural basic characteristic of modernity: As a result of the differentiation of state and society into two different and self-regulating systems of action, notions of nature and of culture appear in new forms. Nature is located within the subject of the "civil society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft)* and in everyone's individual norms, goals and purposes of action in order to satisfy egoistic needs. The bourgeois subject considers the enlightened self as the only valid category. At the beginning, it is the state which "cultivates" the subjects in so far as it performs control and regulates the spontaneity resulting from needs and interests and from the actions needed to satisfy them. In Hegel's thinking, law and morality are means of cultivation. This does not mean that institutions for regulating law and morality would have been

absent before the emergence of capitalist modernity. They were not. However, for Hegel and the German Idealism, those forms of socialization, with their legal-analogue ideas and institutions taken as "culture," were to be considered "pre-forms" and "pre-modern" — an issue that was enthusiastically debated in philosophy of history at that time.

According to Hegel, the understanding of the state as an institution to control and regulate implies that people are capable of going beyond particular needs and interests. This disposition to transcendence constitutes a prerequisite for recognizing ourselves as real human beings and for acknowledging that the human community is organized and ruled by the state and is a necessary condition for real freedom. Only as citizens do we own the capability of reasonable judgment in terms of needs and interests on the one hand, and law, morality, habit and custom, or: *Sittlichkeit* (ethicality/ethical order/ethical life) on the other (Hegel 286-91). The "normal" subject is requested to understand and likewise to accept that, for example, economic competition is much "better" with rather than without a legal framework, considering that unregulated competition tends to endanger lives. For the bourgeois subject, relations to others are predominantly perceived as a neces-

sary precondition to satisfy one's own needs (Hegel 349). However, in so far as such relations are considered to be necessary, it seems again as if nature seeks to transcend itself.

What Hegel can tell us is a history of the cultivation of the bourgeois subject who strives towards an ethical order. Simultaneously, and by the aid of disciplinary power, ethicality organizes the cultivation of the bourgeois subject. To relate back to Eagleton, theology, pedagogy and politics are intertwined in this process. However, Eagleton's choice to exemplify this relationship with Schiller might be grounded in the fact that wherever Hegel speaks of *Sittlichkeit,* Schiller uses the word *Kultur* (culture).

At the end of this argumentative line of notions of culture/ethicality in German Idealism, Eagleton puts a big question mark. To his understanding, the idealistic view might be plausible and justifiable, but, at the same time it is closely entangled with ideology; the state is conceived of as a sphere in which conflicts have been settled without ever politicizing these conflicts. One of the most problematic points in this regard is the idea of relating maturity and temperance to culture, and of rendering cultivation a prerequisite to political participation and decision-making. Subordinating politics to the bourgeois-

liberal notions of "culture" and "humanity" has the tendency to disparage certain forms of politics, in particular, those forms developed to challenge the paternalism resulting from this subordination. One may recall the European colonial rhetoric, which denied the oppressed people in the colonies the right to self-determination as long as these people were not "civilized" sufficiently.

Likewise, women and (other) dispossessed people were denied the right to vote for a long time, a policy which was justified by the argument that these "groups" lack proper cultural capabilities. Against this background, any rhetoric privileging culture to politics must be interpreted as a means of power and political interests, however, it is these political interests that produce "humanity" (*Culture* 7). Eagleton's critical commentary on notions of "culture" and "humanity" echoes Marx's critique of idealistic notions of the political state. Yet, it is remarkable that in the tradition of German Idealism "culture is neither dissociated from society nor wholly at one with it," rather, culture is both "a critique of social life" and "complicit with it" (*Culture* 8). For Eagleton, culture functions like what today would be labeled, hegemony:

"[a mechanism] molding human subjects to the needs of a new kind of pol-

ity, remodeling them from the ground up into docile, moderate, high-minded, peace-loving, uncontentious, disinterested agents of that political order." (ibid.)

Culture operates as if it was a form of critique, "occupying an unregenerate society from within to break down its resistance to the motions of the spirit" (ibid.). To sum up, in line with German Idealism, it is still possible to understand culture in a double sense: Namely, as both a critique as well as an integrative power.

To clarify the logical status of the argument outlined so far: Any epistemological reflection on conceptual tensions and developments tends to appear as rough and as oversimplifying complex historical transformations. Yet, the development from work to self-discipline, and the stabilization of disciplinary regimes in the modern state represent a logical process. But what is Eagleton trying to tell us with this? German Idealism constructed a notion of culture that leaves room for both the critique of power relations and a simultaneous conciliation. However, the more dissonances arose between the German Idealism's conceptualization of state and society on the one hand, and the material reality of state and society on the other, the more obvious the idealistic side of "culture" became. As a result, the moments

of critique and integration began to separate from each another.

Cultivation through Civilization, and Culture as Critique of Modernity

In French and English Enlightenment the term "cultured" referred to a set of pleasing manners and customs as well as morality. This relationship was conceptualized as "civilization," a term borrowed from French language. Civilization was not conceived of as a privilege of a particular nation, but rather as something all human beings are intrinsically capable of learning. At the same time, the notion of civilization was connected to relations of improvement and moving forward to a bourgeois-enlightened world.

This understanding of "cultured"/civilization holds a descriptive element. Manners and customs can be described without outlining normative explanations on how and why individuals and collectives are to follow them. Thus, it is, for example, not a crime but simply a source for disgust and anger if someone belches in public. However, civilization also holds a normative and compulsory element. Rules to regulate human behavior make a sharp distinction between what is proper and what is not, and they are simply justified in so far as their absence would mean barbarism. In addition, proponents of the Enlighten-

ment made a close linkage between civilized sociality and socialization. An individual cannot civilize the self on his/her own terms but needs social interaction. Somehow, there is an imperceptible shift in the notion of culture from the "cultured" or "cultivated" individual to politics and society as agents of cultivation. Both the understanding of civilization as transcending one nation's space and the normativity inherent to the notion of "civil" render the Enlightenment's view an universalistic approach (*Culture* 9).

However, modernity underwent changes, from the pre- and early era of industrialization to colonialism and imperialism. In these transformative processes "civilization" lost its innocent touch—because now it was the "civilized subject," who conquered other territories and subjugated the people of the colonies under the rule of slavery, oppression and exploitation. In other words, the notion of civilization with its normative content lost the power to convince. In order to bolster those normative contents, there was another word needed. "Culture" seemed to be a suitable notion whenever it was necessary to denote a difference from civilization.

Eagleton refers to two specific versions of a critique of civilization that made use of "culture" in the 19th century. One of these versions is the romantic pre-Marxist cri-

tique of industrial capitalism, while the other version is cultural pessimism. As for the latter, its proponents, such as Oswald Spengler, interpreted civilization as increasingly morally and normatively questionable as these transformations resulted in the devaluation of traditions and in degradation and brutalization. "Culture" was conceptualized as an opposition to the materialism inherent to occidental civilization and modernity. At the same time, cultural pessimism rendered culture to be the privilege of those who had not surrendered to the materialist *Zeitgeist*. The individuals were to be distinguished between those who "have culture" and those who "have not." In this way, culture was perceived in terms of individual ownership and became functionalized in sharp opposition to society and the negative course of social change. In this sense, however, culture was de-entangled from national society and politics. Paradoxically, this notion of "culture" is situated very closely with the notions of "cultured" and "civilization" as circulated during the early Enlightenment.

In the very moment when culture became a discursive weapon against modernity (be it embedded in normative-critical statements or be it as any kind of aristocratic refuge from the world), an additional tension arose. Civilization as the process

of permanent modernization holds the promise of an universal answer; civilization can reach everywhere and can be everywhere. "Culture" in contrast, is opposed to civilization and entails the powerful meaning of representing "the particular." Consequently, culture can be pluralized. Eagleton considers Herder as having invented the plural of culture (*Kulturen*). This linguistic creation resulted from some kind of "anti-colonialist penchant for suppressed 'exotic' societies" (*Culture* 12). The paradigm of equality between different nations and their specific cultures (whereby the value of a culture is simply to be a culture) appears to be a refusal of the universalist idea of the Enlightenment, which positioned one's own culture as being superior to those of the oppressed peoples (*Culture* 12-13). From this perspective, Herder opened a door for the romantic idealization of different cultures. In being suspicious of one's own modern culture, with its misguiding universalistic claims and its destructive power, Romantic thought molded the desire for an organic and intact society through projections and specific imaginations of "the other."

However, we know that such acts of projection can be twofold: on the one hand, they are connected to sympathizing with the "noble savages," whereas they serve, on the other hand, to justify political oppression, economic exploitation and cultural dispossession of the so-called "primitives;" sometimes, both discursive strategies are combined with each other. This twofold character of "culture," again, results from the fact that the notion provides both a cipher for criticisms and for legitimatizing or even veiling interests. In this regard, one more time we encounter the unity of the descriptive and normative elements of culture. Without any doubt, we can describe a particular culture as a whole and closed system; in the 19th century, cultures in plural were related (roughly) to (traditional) "ways of life." However, notions of tradition, community, solidarity, etc. which are not eliminable from "way of life" descriptions, embrace normative content. We may approve such content, especially if there is no reason to consider tradition, community or solidarity as essentially "bad." The apparent cultural relativism, which is often ascribed to postmodern thinking, obviously results from the ambiguities of modernity and the pluralization of the notion of culture.

It could be assumed that the pluralization of culture serves the purpose of avoiding cultural discrimination. However, Eagleton seems to see the danger in pluralizing cultures and warns of too much enthusiasm regarding difference. Tolerance comes at a price. Thus, it may be possible to find a culture that attracts us due to its fine social order, and there could be other cultures with social orders that do not harm our taste and political views, and so we deem them acceptable. But "generous pluralism," Eagleton argues, becomes extremely difficult when extended to any "police canteen culture" or to the historically "rich diversity of cultures of torture" (*Culture* 15). In short, to Eagleton's understanding, the pluralization of culture is nothing but formalism. At the same time, pluralization constitutes a contradiction of any positive and normative saturation of "culture."

Specialization: Culture and Art

Apart from both tendencies of culture, as a means of anti-capitalist critique and culture in plural, Eagleton discusses a third approach to culture, which is interesting in any endeavor to understand society: the tendency toward the specialization and narrowing of the notion of culture to mean art (*Culture* 15-16). In the era of Enlightenment, men and women of the bourgeois middle class saw it as compulsory to engage in music, painting and literature; these things were considered "imaginative pursuits" of the enlightened mind, and at the same time, a proof of belonging to those "cultured" persons. But, there was something more than these three fields. In the salon as more or less gen-

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dered space, the bourgeois public or "civil society" debated on what happened in the spheres of religion, science, philosophy, economy and politics, as well as art. However, especially music, painting, literature and other art forms were rendered as criteria for defining whether someone "has culture" or not. From my perspective, Eagleton's remark on the persistence of equating culture with arts is more than necessary. Just looking at terms such as "cultural politician" (Kulturpolitiker) or "minister for cultural affairs" we see that these agents are responsible for public funding and the regulation of art production and circulation. They do not care for philosophers and economists, for weavers, tailors and florists, nor do they pursue debates on the meaning of "culture." What preoccupies Eagleton, are the following questions: If the meaning of culture, "lost," for example, philosophy and science, what does this say about philosophy and science? And if "culture" is stripped of a wide range of fields, and is at the end only confined to a "tiny proportion of men and women" engaging in art activities and thus "producing culture", what does this say about our society? (*Culture* 16)

It seems as if Eagleton is walking the path of the dialectic of Enlightenment. We do have a capitalist economy with obvious destructive effects, and we own the natural sciences and technical disciplines that not only serve to improve the human condition, but are also responsible for the tremendous ecological devastation, the invention of weapons of mass destruction and surveillance technologies. The value of the state of law and of democratic institutions cannot obstruct the view of the rule of bureaucracy and technocracy that has mantled politics. The professionalization that science and philosophy underwent within the process of academic division of labor, as well as the increasing market-based utilization of knowledge production in these fields, lead to a "drying-out" of the channels that connected them to public interests.

Conclusion

The Enlightenment's notion of culture, in the sense of cultivation through civilization in a movement towards progress, clashes with the realities of capitalist modernity based on economic exploitation, colonialism and imperialism. Likewise, the alternative notions of "culture" fail: On the one hand, notions considering "culture" as a critique of modernity entail the risk of undermining the relationship between culture and society. On the other hand, the pluralization of "culture" tends to lose the normative momentum of the notion. This specialization eventually makes "culture" the privilege of "creative" minds. From this perspective, German Idealism has provided a way for reconciling these different notions, as it conceived of "culture" as both a critical and an integrative power. However, this option also fails because idealist imaginations of the political state stand in harsh contrast to the materialization of the state.

What Eagleton teaches us is that we cannot think of "culture" without considering and addressing its conceptual contradictions. This conclusion is, however, not a justification of any kind of intellectual poverty. Rather, it recognizes that the various and contesting notions of culture, as constructed in modernity, represent the material contradictions inherent to capitalist society. Eagleton's offer is a *materialist idea of culture*, which is based on consciousness in terms of those aforementioned contradictions and the reasons supporting them. At the same time, a *materialist cultural theory* also tends to formulate, explicitly or implicitly, a social utopia in so far as the contradictions of "culture" give rise to hope—more precisely, the hope that contradictions can be translated into an impulse for the radical reconfiguration of society (*Culture* 27-28).

Notes

[1] *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), *Ideology*: *An Introduction* (1991), and *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996).

[2] The difference between nature and culture can be exemplified by the aid of Aristotle's theory of causality. Whereas, for example, the production of artifacts involves the efficient or moving cause (agent) and is clearly separated from the formal cause, in natural processes, both principles of causation coincide.

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