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The Culture of Honors

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What is it that we talk or write about when we talk or write about the culture of honors? Almost always we begin with the second term in the phrase, i.e., honors, the enterprise embodied in programs and colleges in which virtually all of the readers of this journal are engaged. If we think at all about the first term, culture, it is almost certainly for no more than a few minutes, if at all, and then move forward to the really important work. As I write this piece, I am at the moment creating a syllabus for a class in the history of culture, to be taught as an honors seminar in the upcoming spring term, and I have been at some pains to define the word “culture” in terms of content and the methods appropriate to its study. I am confident that the task of definition plays an important role in how we think about and discuss the culture of honors, and so this essay begins with some preliminary considerations of the concept of culture.

To get at a precise meaning of culture, a historical sketch is in order. Such a sketch will provide a means to understand how the term came to have the diverse meanings it has acquired today and help to locate an honors culture more precisely. By this means we will take a somewhat different route than we would if we were to seek a standard, dictionary definition, but the journey is worth making. We will end at the same point, but by going via a different route we will see a different landscape and become more aware of the nuances in meaning of the word “culture” and how it came to have the denotations and connotations it now has.

The meanings of culture in the sense that I want to discuss them have evolved from disciplinary and more general discussions during more than a century, and the definitions continue to occupy hotly contested ground. What began as an attempt on the part of a small group of individuals, and later disciplines, to establish a beachhead soon became the site of a major culture war, if readers will forgive the term. Starting in the nineteenth century in both Europe and the United States, scholars tried to define the notion, and it is a good deal more than a linguistic or philological exercise to provide an appropriate context.

The word “culture” derives from the Latin for worship or religion (a binding together), and by the eighteenth century its usage in English was primarily concerned with cultivation of the land or husbandry, as Raymond

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Williams in *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* has brilliantly shown. Its contemporary meanings having to do with the arts of civilization had not yet come into currency. Secondly “culture” became associated with cultivation of the individual, in the sense of refinement of tastes, though no national language dictionary notes this usage as prominent until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt introduced the term into modern discourse in his now famous *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, originally published in 1860, which established him as the founder of cultural history. He strove to write a more complete history of Italy than was the rule in his day, encompassing its cultural productions, including art, religion, and literature, as opposed to the more traditional history writing of the nineteenth century, which was concerned chiefly with politics and military affairs. Burckhardt traced the evolution of modern consciousness and modern culture to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy, where he also found the birth of the spirit of modern individualism, its hallmark. His work established the notion that this period witnessed the shift from a corporate, collectivist medieval society to one informed by a modern concept of personal autonomy.

The new spirit encouraged individual achievement, self-expression, and creativity. Above all, it required strenuous effort on the part of the individual. Of course, Burckhardt realized that not all of Italy, and certainly not every Italian, shared this spirit or benefited from its rebirth, but he believed it fed and characterized the cultural efflorescence that marked the age. His picture of Italian individualism was not rosy; those liberated by the new spirit were free to embark on hubristic political adventures, often with disastrous results, and to trample on those below them in the social and economic order. His was an understanding of the possibilities of the free individual tempered by the realization that excess was not only a possibility but a reality in this new milieu and that freedom might undo the actors in this new type of drama. His inquiry was fearless, not shying away from the negative aspects of the new autonomy or those who availed themselves of its opportunities.

Burckhardt found a ready if somewhat differently inclined audience in Matthew Arnold, the British poet and critic, who published essays along the same lines in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1867 and 1868; these were collected and published under the title *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, and they constitute the next shot in the evolution of the concept of culture. In a disjointed fashion, the inevitable result of a series of separate pieces brought together in a single volume, Arnold largely charted the course that debates on culture were to take for more than a century, at least in English. Arnold advanced the idea that a culture represented the pinnacle of thought and activity of an age,

“the study of perfection [. . . and] the best that has been thought and known . . .” (Arnold 59, 79): in other words, what we now mean by “high culture.” His idea of culture was less fraught with possibilities for excess and more congenial to the wholesome aspects of high culture than was Burckhardt’s. While he was not a Pollyanna, Arnold did not share the starkly realistic outlook of his Swiss contemporary.

Arnold also wrote from a different social and occupational perspective than Burckhardt. While Burckhardt was a university professor who was able to steep himself in the richness of Italian painting from the isolation of an academic position, Arnold was a school inspector with a large family to support. Arnold viewed the contemporary social and political scene with alarm, and he believed it was his mission to rescue Victorian life from the wave of popular democratic reform which threatened to engulf it. His supporters, and there were many, saw things in much the same light while his opponents contended that his arguments were disjointed and often baffling—*Punch* had a field day satirizing him—as well as elitist in his definition of culture as attainable only by the refined, the affluent, and the well educated (Arnold himself had an Oxford degree). Arnold drew a careful distinction between culture and the barbarism he saw overtaking Europe.

The late-nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor offered a conception of culture closer to our own and certainly more comfortable to us, one that serves as a riposte to Arnold’s class-bound notion. Tylor defined culture as the sum of institutions, customs, ideas, and attitudes shared by a social group and which was transmitted from one generation to the next. To temper his remarks and distinguish his ideas from those of the social Darwinism common to his era, Tylor emphasized that this was a social process, not a biological one.

Contemporary notions of culture have developed along the lines of Tylor’s. Today’s major cultural anthropologists stress the shared nature of ideas and practices, whether they are structural-functionalists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, emphasizing social structures like religion, family, education, and occupation, or pattern-process anthropologists who focus on shared cultural patterns. The more modern schools of cultural interpretation—e.g., the anthropological symbolism of Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu or the functional, sociological strain of cultural studies rooted in the study of consumption and pioneered by Marxist scholars—all remain grounded in these earlier views. Universally they share the assumptions that culture is broadly based, that it is plastic, and permeable, that it is an enveloping web, and that it links people in different classes and provides them with a shared identity. It informs everything from the food a cultural group eats to the music and art they commission.

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Of course, nowadays everything has a culture. There is a hockey culture with many practitioners, and among its many practices are no doubt watching hockey games, drinking beer, getting either boisterous when the home team scores or belligerent when the opposition scores or an official makes a bad call, i.e., one that goes against the culture's team. There are also football, soccer (the other football), baseball, and many other sports cultures. If we were interested, we could make fine distinctions between the various athletic cultures and describe the more arcane elements of each; the point is that members of a particular sports culture are recognizable to one another. Examples of other such cultures, which we might call "common-interest" cultures, include antique collectors, racing car enthusiasts, fans of virtually every kind of popular music, tea drinkers, pigeon fanciers, chocoholics. Even corporations have cultures—the list could go on forever.

All of these cultures unite people by some sort of taste or loyalty, either crude or refined, but I think none of them has much in common with what we want to talk about in regard to honors. For two reasons none of the cultures mentioned above helps very much in defining the culture of honors: first, they are not connected in a systematic way to the academy, though adherents of many of them may be members of the academy; and second, none of them has a similarly serious purpose, at least in the eyes of those interested in a culture of honors.

In addition, it is important to understand that discussions of what we commonly call a culture involve at least three distinct kinds of social bonds and organizations. At one end are the **common-interest cultures** noted above, the sports and other cultures that involve allegiance of greater or lesser intensity to a team, social organization, or voluntary activity, often loosely described by sociologists and other social scientists as sub-cultures. The price for entry into these organizations is low in terms of intellectual investment. The second is defined by membership in a community, usually by virtue of birth, ethnicity, residence, occupation, or a similar circumstance. Among these are the culture of Islam, urban culture, and corporate culture—what we might call **identity cultures**. They typically provide a deep sense of belonging for their members, and they specify rules of conduct and requirements for membership in the culture. By their nature, these cultures can be, but are not necessarily, exclusive. A practicing Jew, for instance, cannot simultaneously also be a member of a Christian culture even though, of course, Jews often live in Christian societies; the same is true of observant Muslims residing in Jewish cultures. The third type is voluntary and exacts requirements from its members. Membership in **voluntary cultures** is neither automatic nor open to everyone, and, in contrast to the first type of culture noted above, the price for entry into these cultures is high and the rewards correspondingly great.

These cultures are not exclusionary in the same sense as identity cultures, but they may be “elite.” To some degree, an honors culture partakes in all three of these kinds of groups but resides primarily among the voluntary cultures.

This brief introduction to the history and definitions of culture must necessarily precede the notion of an honors culture that I want to develop. Honors culture might share a good deal with common-interest cultures, for instance, but there are some critical differences, and to arrive at any useful definition of a culture in the context of honors, it is necessary to take pieces from each of the groupings noted above. Similarly, while the culture of honors differs from Burekhardt’s and Arnold’s in terms of its inclusiveness, it also is less open than that of the anthropologists while at the same time it shares some traits of identity cultures.

Let us take the following as a general working definition of culture for the purpose of this essay: a culture is a group of people who pursue a common aim, and for honors this means specifically students and faculty who pursue an academic aim. Honors culture is exclusive or elite to the degree that it admits only those who are committed the culture’s mission, however and by whomever this mission is defined. Clearly it is a body or group with standards for admission. It is inclusive in that it admits anyone—regardless of creed, class, race, gender, or status—who meets the standards for admission and is committed to the kind of intellectual effort required of participants in it. Its adherents often display the same zeal as members of identity cultures in pursuit of their intellectual and academic aims.

It must now be obvious that some of the three cultures I noted above do not possess the same characteristics as honors. Common-interest cultures, for instance, have no requirements for membership and demand nothing substantial from their adherents save some degree of devotion to a team, a food, a cause, or some other center around which the culture forms. These cultures have nothing in the way of fixed, explicit standards. Members of identity cultures are almost always deeply connected to their communities, and typically choice is not a factor in membership since, as a result of birth or some other ineluctable circumstance, one is either in or out. Honors culture falls somewhere between common-interest and identity cultures: like the sports fan, the member of an honors culture chooses to belong, but like the member of an identity culture, the depth of commitment is significant and often lifelong. Honors culture also falls between identity and voluntary cultures: it is not open to everyone, and it makes substantial demands on its members.

In the context of historical views on culture, the province of honors is high culture in the sense that it partakes of a long and well developed history of refinement and values. It regards some subjects as worthier of study than others, or at the very least it holds that, while all subjects may be worth

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studying, they are not all worth studying in the same way: More of this below. Nevertheless, the culture of honors does not regard anything as beyond the bounds of its inquiry.

While the culture of honors is catholic and inclusive, it is also both discriminating and critical. It is open to studying everything, but not necessarily in the same way. For instance, while honors educators might acknowledge that popular music, e.g., Pink, ABBA, and Elvis Presley, are worthy of serious attention, they would probably agree that these groups are not worth exploring in the same way that one would look at Mozart or Bach. I think the same holds for many other fields, and drama is a good example. The plays of the contemporary dramatist Sarah Ruhl (she has won a MacArthur Genius Award), with their sudden, unpredictable twists and turns and their inversions of traditional themes, create an engaging, highly interesting world. For instance, Ruhl's *Eurydice* retells the story of Eurydice and Orpheus from Eurydice's point of view rather than that of Orpheus. In that moment in the famous ascent from the underworld when Orpheus turns to look at her, Ruhl's play has Eurydice call him back; she has made the decision to remain behind with her dead father, and the story is anchored in the deep sadness Ruhl experienced upon the death of her father. Ruhl's version in no way diminishes the power or universality of the story; she has created her own surreal world, and it is easy to imagine that she will one day, probably very shortly, take her place with the most important American dramatists. Nonetheless, it is almost certainly not fruitful to study her plays in quite the same way that one looks at Sophocles, Aeschylus, or Shakespeare, save that they all participate in the same art.

The culture of honors looks at the excellent, whether ancient or contemporary, and it also looks at the quotidian in a serious way; it stands above all for inquiring into the best that has been done and into what has been done in the best way. In the tradition of Burckhardt, the culture of honors above all encourages, indeed demands, fearless questioning, and just as there is no field that escapes its purview, there is likewise no question it fears to ask. It is, above all, a culture of intellectual effort. Everyone who enters it must do so with a commitment to hard work, a spirit of inquiry, and a willingness to ask the hard question, often the uncomfortable question, and to live with the consequences of receiving an unintended or unpleasant answer. In the anthropological sense, it is inclusive in its openness to any member of the academy who meets its academic standards, but it has strict requirements for membership. Only the serious, the committed, and the intellectually energetic need apply. It is elite because it is intentionally discriminating and selective.

No essay that attempted even the poorest definition of an honors culture would be complete without addressing one final element in it: an honors

culture represents the perennial and the best element in academic life. It is a remarkable phenomenon, one that preserves our intellectual and cultural heritage and that welcomes what is new, always seeking the best in both.

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