Ikhtilaf, Journal of Critical Humanities and Social Studies Issue 1- Fall 2017
ISSN 2509-1743 ISSN (Print) 2509-1751
Issue#1, Fall 2017. The environment is us: humanities and the ecological crisis

Disposable Culture? Worse: Disposable *Culture*

Mostafa Shoul

(*Mohammed I University, Oujda, Morocco*)

The present paper addresses the intricate relationship that exists between culture and human basic needs, and the expression of the community's identity that results from this relationship. It first exposes the elusiveness of the word culture and tries to pin it down by considering it part and parcel of the natural environment as well as the biology of its people. Then it touches on culture change and how it is regarded as a very slow process, which makes a given culture seem immutable at least for a long period of time. Then the paper moves to propose that it is exactly culture immutability that build up the identity of people. Overproduction and overconsumption are afterwards introduced as factors of pollution and, more importantly, of accelerating the change rhythm of the components of culture. The paper concludes that finally culture as a whole is affected and may affect in turn the identity of the people.

No one can deny the fact that it is no game to provide a concise and satisfactory definition of 'culture'. J. Rothman (2014) anecdotically reports "something innately funny about Merriam-Webster's announcement." He says that

> "culture" is their 2014 Word of the Year. (...) The word "culture," they [Merriam-Webster's editors] explain, was simply the word that saw the biggest spike in look-ups on their Web site. Confusion about culture was just part of the culture this year. People were desperate to know what "culture" meant.

If Rothman readily acknowledges that 'culture' is a confusing word, Williams, reported by Young (1995:30), admits that "the word 'culture' is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. So complicated, one would bet, that it took Merriam-Webster 6 major definitions in an attempt to delimit it, and in addition, the fourth and fifth definitions, which are closest to the notion the present paper is concerned with, are broken down into two and four sub-definitions, respectively. Furthermore, the term seems to be etymologically fuzzy as "The very word *culture* meant 'place tilled' in Middle English, and the same word goes back to Latin *colere*, 'to inhabit, care for, till, worship' and *cultus*, 'A cult, especially a religious one'." (Edward S. Casey, 1996)

Back in the 1950s, anthropologists, among others, already contended the definition of culture. However, they "have found difficulty in developing a new concept of culture adequate to the needs of modern multi-disciplinary research" (Thompson, 1958:71). Thompson argued that "actually, an adequate theory of culture, accounting satisfactorily for its myriad forms and multiple processes, could not emerge until [some] conditions had been fulfilled" (p.72). Among the conditions Thompson first suggested that "Human culture had to be recognized explicitly as the product and process of human organisms and therefore as a biologically-based phenomenon." She added as a third condition that "This theory of organism had to account not only for the activities of single organisms but also for the activities of groups or communities of organisms in environmental settings: e.g., it had to account for natural ecological arrangements and

communities." The author insisted in the sixth condition that "An integrative, interdisciplinary methodology had to be developed which was adequate to describe and analyze not merely social behavior but a whole culture-in-environment in spatial and temporal perspective, including its ecologic, somatic, sociologic, psychologic and symbolic dimensions." At any rate, Thompson underlines the fact that the societal system--which includes the cultural traditions--of a particular society "has been created in response to the inner and outer needs of a particular group of human organisms in environmental context, viewed in long-range time and space perspective" (p.71).

Of course, needs are of different categories as we can gather from Maslow's (1943) Hiearchy of Needs, but are common to all communities. The most basic of these are what he calls *physiological needs* (that is survival needs as they relate to food, water and shelter), then *safety and security needs* above which he puts *love and belongingness needs*. One can infer that these are also the minimal ground for culture to grow, provided that they are met. In the same vein Casey (1996), apparently drawing on the Latin etymology and elaborating on the definition of 'culture' added that "To be cultural, to have a culture, is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensive to cultivate it— to be responsible for it, to respond to it, to attend to it caringly." This, in addition, plainly implies that for a culture to exist, there should be not only a delimited space but also a considerable amount of time. Speaking of ancient communities, Thompson stated that "cultural time is measured not by years or centuries but by millennia" (p.76).

In any event, whatever the definition given to culture, the fact remains that it is the identity of its community. If we grant Thompson that a community and its culture should be regarded as integrated in their environmental setting, and

> Since the ecological environments of the earth are highly diversified, there is and can be no such phenomenon as a generalized cultural community capable of active existence and reproduction generation after generation in all kinds of environments in which human life is at all possible. Existing communities, as we know them, are all of definite kinds, each kind culturally specialized in some degree for a particular mode of life in a more or less restricted environment (p.74).

If a given community is tagged with a particular culture, and hence is distinguishable thanks to this culture, will the latter cling forever and in an unaffected way to its community? It goes without saying that culture changes. Just like language, one of its integral parts, culture changes under the influence of various factors. Among these, there are social conflicts and technological breakthroughs that originate in the very community, contact between different communities resulting in cultural exchange, and natural conditions such as floods and droughts. However, the change, if there is any, in the community and its traditions and value system is a considerably slow process. Considered from a diachronic viewpoint, the possible succession of changes may be regarded as a smooth continuum. On this matter, Thompson asserts that "Unless the community is wiped out or severed from its original natural environment or a similar one, and sometimes even then, such a system tends to persist with little structural change for centuries, even millennia (e.g., Hopi, Papago)."

The change does not occur easily because habits are deeply ingrained. The idea of the biological roots of habits is sustained by more authors. Thus, E. T. Hall (1966:3), for example, states that "In spite of the fact that cultural systems pattern behavior in radically different ways, they are deeply rooted in biology and physiology." And dealing with proxemics from a cultural approach, he points out, as reported by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970:444), that "As in most vertebrates,

we observe in man distinct territorial behavior. Individiuals maintain distinct distances between themselves and others. Specifically how close we are permitted to approach another person is determined by the various cultural patterns, but some generally valid basic outlines can readily be discerned."

R. Soomer is also reported to have confirmed that "We must expect also that human beings have certain needs for space which are based on an innate disposition and whose fulfillment is necessary for our well-being. It is true that man largely creates his own environment, but its structure is surely in line with his biological constitution" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970:444). A framework has been presented where phylogenetic adaptation has set human social behavior. "These adaptations consist less of rigid behavior patterns and more of innate motivations and learning dispositions" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970:453).

A parallel is drawn between man and animals as far as territoriality is concerned, but in man, Lorenz points out

> the learning dispositions allow a wider range of freedom. Despite a basic similarity, this leads to a multiplicity of cultural modifications of human social behavior, where each culture and subculture developed their rites in diverging ways. Once formed, they are as rigid as phylogenetically developed rites. Just as the phylogenetically evolved rites of animals control the inborn motivations, so cultural rites do this in man, and for this reason they are just as important for an orderly life together in groups (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970:454).

About change Thompson confirms that "Indeed, in ancient, relatively integrated communities the indigenous core value system, mirroring the group's age-old basic ideology regarding the nature of the world and its power dynamics, is rarely affected directly by acculturation pressures. Usually, it is affected, if at all, only indirectly or partially (e.g., Icelanders, Old Saxons, Basques)" (p.74).

Obviously, the world is no longer what it used to be in the old times, and even more recently before the 20th century. Nations and communities are not isolated anymore, nay they are brought closer to each other either in physical contact thanks to transportation facilities or virtually through the media and telecommunications, which preludes increasing cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, what one should keep in mind from Thompson's point of view is that human culture should be time-honored. One would keenly add to such an assertion that perennity is a *sine qua non* for culture to be the community's identity. Though people's mobility has become one of the major characteristics of our technological world, culture shocks are still being experienced by foreign visitors and especially by immigrants. This state of desorientation only translates into sudden awareness of being different, of having an identity that contrasts with the other's. The strong and age-old habits would make the immigrants desperately cling to their identity by perpetuating their ancestral culture on various occasions. If they refrain from displaying their peculiar behavior or clothes, it is most probably to avoid conflictual situations.

If we admit that a culture, a way of life, is the output of the ecological interaction between the community and its environment, a considerable span of time is necessary for this culture to rise, mature then crystallize not into a final form but into a distinguishable and, therefore, distinctive form. In reality, though from a synchronic point of view it may be considered culture in

actuality— that is fully realized—, regarded however as a chronological continuum, it would appear only in potentiality— that is always in the making—, but this very long mutational process cannot be appreciated in just one or even several generations.

Actually, it is this age-old and slow sedimentation of the society's behavioral system, art forms, spiritual ceremonials, values, etc., and their apparent immutability in a given period of time, that characterizes the culture of this period of time. This can be averred by considering basic ways of living on, or sophisticated symbol systems of communities. Thus, before one group of people can settle in a definite and organized way in a particular area, they have to adapt to the new environment. If the environment is very different from the one they come from, their adaptation will take a long time, since it will not be exclusively material (environmental), but also organic (physiological). For example, if for some reason a community settles in a place colder and expectedly less generous than their original one, they have to devise living accommodations with the available stuff, perfect them with time and after trial and error make them the most adequate possible. If nature there is far from being lush, they have to adapt to a meager sustenance (consider, for example, the Eskimos' habitat and nutrition). Conversely, if settlers try to live in a hotter and more arid land, they have to manage otherwise by probably adopting nomadic habits, contenting themselves with little water, etc. In both cases, people have to change their ways of living for safer adaptation, something that will obviously take time and will even affect their physiology. Once they are confident that both foodstuff and dwelling conditions respond to their needs, they will hardly think of substitutes. In the long run, these necessities will be known as local or national cuisine and habitation, and will constitute, along with artifacts, concepts, behaviors, etc., the ingredients of their culture.

So far, we have considered communities of preliterate or tribal type and their basic needs, but what about more sophisticated societies? In fact, they just perpetuate their ancestors' culture, albeit with slight change, as they do with their ancestors' language. Indeed, a language, say French, spoken by the previous generations is maintained by their descendants, and though the present day variety is different from that of Molière's era, both are called French. In the same vein, more material inheritance like handcraft products may last for ages with almost no change. For example, the history of footwear chronicles that shoes, invented about 40,000 years ago as wraparound leather, resembling either sandals or moccasins, underwent no significant transformation until the early Baroque period in Europe. "Up until 1850, shoes were made straight, meaning that there was no differentiation from left and right shoes. As the twentieth century approached, shoemakers improved comfort by making foot-specific shoes" (Picone, 2013).

The history of footgear is a significant example of the culture change curve through time. It shows that the tempo of change has increased only in the modern era, especially as from the 19th century. By and large, this is what happened to all the ingredients of culture, and concomitantly to culture as a whole. If, for instance, we consider costume historically speaking, change did not occur on a regular basis nor in a dramatic way; if it did, it rather reflected the dressing style of a whole epoch. This is precisely what makes us recognize people, at least in paintings, pictures or movies, as belonging to the Middle Ages, the 15th century or the 19th century, for example. Though it is reported that Abul-Hasan Alí Ibn Nafí, alias Ziryab, "revolutionized dress and hair styling"-- if he was not the first to introduce seasonal fashion in Al-Andalus in the 9th century--, the rhythm of change in attire did not accelerate significantly until the 20th century; nevertheless,

stereotypes die hard as we still represent, for example, an English gentleman with a bowler hat and a rolled umbrella.

As a matter of fact, the mass industrialization impulse has propelled the components of culture to proliferate and diversify in shorter periods of time, and this was intensively experienced in the 1960s known for their "cultural turn". Before the popularization of fashion, people used to be dressed in clothes they could keep as long as they were not worn out. More than that, once they outgrew them, they could hand them down to their younger siblings or even to their offspring. Nowadays, though clothes can still resist time, they cannot resist fashion demands and are therefore discarded the following seasonal clothing trend, which makes their salvage by other members of the family fairly improbable.

Furniture, one of the fast standing representatives of culture, also has come to witness more and more fluctuations. In the past, it used to mark a whole era ; thus we can refer to Baroque style, Queen Anne style, Art Nouveau, etc. The outsets of two successive, and generally overlapping, styles were spaced out by an important time period. Nevertheless, such a period was bound to shrink gradually with the approach of the 20th century. Another way to classify different styles is precisely by the time they span. Thus we can hear of the 16th, 17th or the 18th century style, but as we move on, the classification time is reduced to decades. The same holds for household implements such as earthware then porcelain. While at its dawn, pottery characterized whole ages like Paleolithic and Neolithic, etc., then in a more refined form and substance it qualified dynasties like China's Han and Ming. Afterwards, ceramic art styles covered shorter and shorter periods to become nowadays mere passing fads.

Owners of old style pieces of furniture or genuine china had them for lifetimes and their heirs would only be happy and proud to inherit an ancestors' legacy. If hese objects happen to leave the family circle, they will certainly land in antiquary shops where they will be at least monetarily valued. What about most recent products? Modern ready-to-assemble furniture and porcelain are thrown away long before their owner kicks the bucket. Indeed, such mass produced belongings are coldly replaced on the first occasion to move house, and God knows how many families, particularly in North America, change their residences every year. These supplanted machine-made objects become valueless, both pecuniarily and culturally speaking, and will have shelter only in charities and, finally, in the poorest homes if not smashed into junk. The newly designed artifacts will not have lived long enough to be remembered as part of the cultural heritage.

In fact, the unrestrained overproduction-overconsumption cycle has affected all the cultural aspects of society. It is not only a matter of quantitative excess, but also of categorial overabundance. That is, industry redundantly produces seemingly varied models of the same article that outmode one another in a very short time. This applies to a wide variety of things ranging from small gadgets to much bigger household appliances. We are given to believe that such a plethoric and fast-paced production process does not give enough time to the consumer to develop an emotional relationship with the object, something that greatly contributes to its disposal. In this regard, it seems however that owners' attachment to objects is natural and very common.

It is not only an anthropological point of view which asserts that "From the worship of idols to an animistic worldview, various cultures from around the world have long believed that material

objects either contain spirits or possess some kind of special connection to supernatural beings that act on their own accord" (Hiebert), but also a psychological one that explains:

> As an infant gets older, (...) she discovers her independence from other entities, especially her own mother. To ease the anxiety that accompanies this revelation, the infant will often transfer her maternal bond onto a favorite teddy bear or blanket. From our earliest years, then, it appears we enter a process of projecting living qualities onto non-living things (Hiebert).

The relationship between the owner and the object may prove to be more consequential. Jarrett (2013) writes that "As our lives unfold, our things embody our sense of self-hood and identity still further, becoming external receptacles for our memories, relationships and travels." He corroborates such a statement with the results of an experiment from neural perspective when he reports that "Areas of the brain that are known to be involved in thinking about the self also appear to be involved when we create associations between external things and ourselves through ownership." Also, as far as infusing objects with feelings, a neurological phenomenon comes into play; it is a synesthetic "condition that activates certain senses in an individual when he encounters certain stimuli" (Hiebert); for example, when we look at an old photograph showing a familiar person with a musical instrument, our hearing sense is stimulated so that we have the impression to hear the music the person used to play.

All in all "we are emotional creatures" as Hiebert says, and in addition to satisfying our physiological needs we also have to manage our feelings as "our emotions involuntarily attach themselves to all sorts of things, from places we've visited to a pair of earrings grandma left behind after she died to a cup located near the back of the cabinet." What is more, the older we get, the stronger the bond as Jarrett explains: "As with human relationships, the attachments to our things deepen with the passage of time. Elderly people are often surrounded by possessions that have followed them through good times and bad, across continents and back."

In case the possessor loses his/her belongings, s/he can experience a severe emotional shock depending on the importance of his/her attachment to them. From firsthand information, Jarrett confirms that "People whose things are destroyed in a disaster are traumatised, almost as if grieving the loss of their identities." However, there are situations where people voluntarily dispose of things. "This often happens at a key juncture, such as when leaving student life behind, moving home, or during divorce, and can be experienced as a chance for a new start. Old belongings are shed like a carapace, fostering the emergence of a new identity" (Jarrett, 2013).

If we consider now the non-material aspect of culture, we will notice the same evolutionary pattern. In other words, the cultural heritage in the form of music or drama, for example, has been stationary in style for considerable periods in yesteryear; this is by the way what constitutes a part of the nations' folklore, that is traditional or, more precisely, time-honored, knowledge. Thus, every nation or community has its own interpretation of the world encapsulated in myths, legends, sagas, epics, rites, and whatnot. When we hear a Gregorian chant or Homer's Iliad, for instance, we know to what periods of time they refer. Again, as we get closer to the 20th century, succession of different art styles becomes hasty and works of art get obsolete in no time, too. While *Ein Klein Nachtmusik* outlived Mozart, most of the mushrooming modern songs are forgotten before the waning of their pop stars.

Why such a frenzied rhythm of both material and non material pseudo innovations? Knowing that most of the mass generated products are not conceived to satisfy the basic or, according to Maslow's pyramid, deficiency needs of people, markets are then flooded with them for sheer profit. In order to drum up business, enterprises exercise their wits to entice consumers to buy repetitively necessities as well as superfluous objects. Brooks Stevens' declaration about 'planned obsolescence' has been widely circulated in the literature. This American design pioneer referred to programmed obsolescence of products as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary" (see among others Keeble, 2013). Therefore, instead of keeping old things and repairing them if damaged as was habitually done in the past, people are nowadays induced by various forms of persistent advertising to replace their not so old and still functional articles with brand new ones but not necessarily having more useful performance. Profit oriented crusades involve all sectors. This applies to the more or less fragile electronic devices, such as smart phones, as well as to the more robust machinery, like four-wheel drives, both of which being serially issued as almost identical models or submodels, differing only in one or two superfluous gizmos of some sort. One cannot help comparing their production with the release of the multitude of versions of the same computer software. At any rate, it is the same principle.

Obsolescence equally affects intellectual, non material products and works of art. The overflow of 'the latests' from worlwide satellite TV and radio channels, on the Internet or as shared files on one's smart phone oust one another at so a fast pace that they give occasion to informational saturation, inducing thus the consumer to a state of unresponsiveness. Hit parades of songs, for example, as mentioned above, become only fleeting processions of thrown together tunes and snippets of lyrics that are doomed to be forgotten overnight by discotheque enthusiasts.

The overproduction-overconsumption vicious cycle has finally led to the present throw-away way of life, which is now recognized as a full-fledged (sub)culture. As a result, flooding the market with indispensable as well as with useless products has become commonplace, leading to massively dumping refuse and all sorts of trash not only in wasteyards but also right on the sidewalk, ashbins being already overflowing. If one considers only the telecommunication sector, one will be amazed by the official figures and the potential huge amount of garbage that this industry can generate. On this point, Keeble (20XX:34) reports that

> According to Ofcom, the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, states that there are 81.6 million active subscriptions to mobile phones. This includes pay as you go and contract phones. A huge 49% of that figure is dedicated to just contracts (Ofcom, 2011). This 49% equates to 39,984,000 mobile phones that are likely to be replaced by a newer model when the contract is to run out. Contracts last between 12 to 24 months which is a very short time span when you consider any other product like a table or fridge.

Of course the fate of these devices is well known; it is that of all other appliances as in what Chapman (2008:2) gleaned from different sources: "The UK alone sends '1.25 million tonnes' of such electronic waste (e-waste) to landfill each year; waste consisting of fully functioning toasters, refrigerators, mobile phones, vacuum cleaners and a whole host of other DEPs [Domestic Electronic Products] that still function perfectly in a

utilitarian sense; 'each year it is estimated that around 5 million operational TVs hit landfill'."

This snowballing process has affected both material and non-material aspects of culture. In addition to what we may call 'hard' pollution, i.e. litter of all kinds, there parallelly exists what may be termed 'soft' pollution. This is the proliferating non-material facet of culture, which consists of various forms of art, as aforementioned. Not only does this essential part of culture—for which ministries of culture exist in every country—change faster and faster, generating an unmanageable number of ephemeral works of art and compositions, but also produces bulks of transient and, most of the time, worthless material byproducts that contribute to the environmental pollution. Just think, for instance, of the pupils' schoolbags displaying every start of the school year different heroes of the most successful movies or consider the discarded CDs and DVDs of legally and, more often than not, illegally recorded material.

In addition to pollution, programmed obsolescence necessarily leads to the disintegration of the ancestral cultural heritage, which in turn leads to more sequences of short-lived subcultures and possibly countercultures, and their consequent contribution with more unnecessary and polluting spin-offs. In fact, we can witness year in year out the emergence of new waves that are here today and gone tomorrow, nevertheless bringing their specific paraphernalia for consumption: various rap music forms have appeared imposing different garments and behaviors. But are we right to call these trends culture? In any event not in the sense considered here. We construed that culture emanates from biological needs interacting with the environment and takes a long time to mature. A trend like hip hop will not last enough mainly because industry will appropriate, exploit and modify it (obsolescence oblige!) to an unrecognizable form. Besides, we also considered culture the identity of its people, and this identity is not valid only for one age group or a limited time. This identity should normally reflect the specific distinctive traditions of the community. That is why, one would bet, on a ceremonial occasion or holiday a young man will trade his hip hop clothes for a national or, more specifically, traditional costume. Incidently, it is tradition that is threatened by obsolescence. In this regard, Slade, reported by Chapman (2008:29) explains:

> how disposability was in fact a 'necessary condition for America's rejection of tradition and our acceptance of change and impermanence ... [yet] by choosing to support ever-shorter product lives we may well be shortening the future of our way of life as well, with perilous implications for the very near future.

By way of conclusion, there is good ground for positing that if disposable culture prevails, that is if people fully adopt excessive consumption of obsolescent products as a way of life, chances are that the fateful outcome is not only more flow of industrial disposables, but also the transformation of culture itself into a disposable commodity just like any vulgar gadget or, at best, a piece of clothing out of fashion, conducing finally to the potential obliteration of the identity of these people.

References

Chapman, Jonathan A. 2008. "Emotionally Durable Design: Sustaining relationships between users and domestic electronic products". PhD diss., University of Brighton

Hall, Edward T. 1966. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hiebert, Paul. 2014. "A History of Humans Loving Inanimate Objects". https://psmag.com/a-history-of-humans-loving-inanimate-objects-267aea427ea7.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus. 1970. *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Jarrett, Christian. 2013. "The Psychology of Stuff and Things". https:// thepsychologist. bps. org.uk/volume-26/edition-8/psychology-stuff-and-things.

Keeble, Daniel. 2013. "The Culture of Planned Obsolescence in Technology Companies". Bachelor's thesis, Oulu University of Applied Sciences.

Maslow, Abraham H. 1943. "A Theory of Human Motivation". In Psychological Review. Vol 50 N°4, July 1943.

Packard, Vance. 1960. *The Waste Makers*. New York: Van Rees Press.

Picone, Kiri. 2013. "The Fascinating History of Footwear" http://all-that-is-interesting.com/ fascinating-history-footwear.

Rothman, Joshua. 2014. "The meaning of Culture". http://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/meaning-culture

Thompson, Laura. 1958. "The Societal System, Culture and the Community". In *Toward a Unified Theory of Behavior*, edited by Roy R. Grinker, 70-82. Basic Books, Inc.

Young,Robert, J. C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. New York: Routledge.