
Hegeman, Susan. 2012. *The Cultural Return*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 172 pp. Pb.: \$44.95 / £30.95. ISBN: 9780520268982.

In *The Cultural Return*, literary scholar Susan Hegeman tracks the rise and fall of the so-called “cultural turn” across different academic disciplines since the post-war period. After depicting key concept(s) of culture in academia during the previous decades and some examples for culture’s persistent popular ubiquity, the introduction lays out the structure of the book.

The first chapter deals with the cultural turn of the 1980s and ‘90s when a lively debate about the meaning and utility of culture as an analytical concept was fought. Particularly due to its connotations of spatial and historical fixity, an impressive number of academics from across the political spectrum have repudiated the concept. Hegeman systematises five common complaints, which notably came from anthropology and literary studies since that time. She claims to uncover the complaints’ inconsistency and to demonstrate that they rather reflect larger concerns and trends. However, the author does not succeed to contextualise and explicitly explain some quotations, and her arguments in this regard are not fully convincing.

Throughout the following pages, the author argues that the idea of culture is dialectically intertwined with the concept of modernity: it mediates between parts and wholes; between the universal and the particular; the global and the local; the structural and the contingent; between aesthetic and quotidian; and the present and future. Because it is essential to recognise the historical specificity of what those parts and wholes are, in the second chapter Hegeman exemplifies that so-called “mass culture” needs to be relegated to the decades preceding World War II. Only by historicizing various meanings and usages of the concept of culture can its political power be understood. Apart from this not being a new finding, a part of this chapter is a reprint of Hegeman’s article published in 2000.

In the third chapter, the author depicts the rise of the concept of culture from the mid-twentieth century structuralism to the explosion of cultural theories in the ‘80s and ‘90s. She turns to the Cold War era and argues that “culture” became such a keyword because it seemed to offer a conceptual resolution to the central conflicts of that time. Though the concept had its greatest impact in this period, she notes that the pre-war period should not be neglected as a crucial site of the formation of the modern cultural concept. Hegeman demonstrates how the academic discourse has been in dialogue with larger concerns – political, fiscal as well as ideological – of its historical moment. She similarly argues that the recent rise of academic interest in or rather a return to professional ethics, cosmopolitanism, aesthetics and close-reading can be accounted to neo-liberalism, intensified class division and the corporatization of universities.

The subsequent chapter addresses the problem of national and, as an analogy, disciplinary borders. With the turn away from the nation-state, the discipline of American Studies had to reconfigure itself. Hegeman addresses and compares the anthropological rejection of “culture” and the late anxieties in American Studies over the concept of “America”. As America is insufficiently reflective of the postnationalist habitus of American Studies, culture is insufficient for anthropology’s exploration of human diversity. Hegeman

points out that there is not much point in changing names of disciplines or “getting beyond” their subjects, in particular because of the popular rhetoric attached to them. Rather, she calls for a strategical deployment of both “America” and “culture”, possible as spaces of struggle and possibility, in our current times of globalisation.

In the fifth chapter, Hegeman presents one interdisciplinary attempt to develop a conceptual frame for coming to terms with current global realities – the turn towards religion and belief. “Culture” is often allocated to the enlightened “West” whereas “belief” is allocated to “the Other”, to those still outside of “modernity”. She argues for a rejection of this romantic fantasy and for a complex conceptualisation of culture’s relationship to the narrative of modernity.

In the last chapter, Hegeman sums up how culture has historically functioned in a number of registers. She points out the continuing relevance of “culture” as a meaningful concept and category of analysis, and advocates for the acknowledgement of local articulations of culture. It is shown that “culture” is now deployed in international definitions of human rights; thus, there is still a useful and informative relationship between vernacular and technical usage of the term “culture”.

In summary, Hegeman tries to develop a positive and socially progressive idea of culture – a concept that is acceptable and useful for both scholarly research and popular discourse. She finds the calls to dislike or to get beyond culture nonsensical as one cannot wave away several centuries of intellectual history. In the current moment of global change, including mass migrations and terrorism, political, but also vernacular rhetoric about ‘culture’ has become more complex and strident. The author warns the reader that rendering the concept of culture as meaningless might concede cultural determinists, both propagandists and scholars, who then happily shape the discourse. Instead of ceding the discourse to those who use “culture” to explain a host of ills, it is crucial to responsibly intervene into public discourses.

The six chapters following the introduction can be read separately, as the author does not present one main argument, but rather erratic essays approaching the topic from different angles. Although the chapters are well referenced, this reviewer thinks that the author does not fully present her points concisely and convincingly. While some of her thoughts are certainly interesting and original, a lack of definitions and the absence of newer publications on the culture debate, both with regard to theories and policies, make this book less appealing to those who wish to gain a clear understanding and to have an up-to-date overview of the cultural turn(s) in academia and their influence on the public.

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