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Introduction to the Culture and Politics Dossier

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Reflecting on the possible interrelations between culture and politics increasingly requires multidimensional approaches. Insofar as the cultural realm relates in complex ways with the imposed (yet not unquestioned) forms of identification or thought, it can be neither considered the simple result of a structural arrangement nor as a sealed off system of meanings. Particularly in the context of contemporary social diversity, the cultural dimension is demonstrably articulated to conflicts and different political processes that engender a plurality of meanings. Thus, the connection between culture and politics reflects a tense and negotiated relationship between structured power and a dynamic field that incorporates conflicts centered around meanings through which the social order is experienced by agents. Therefore, the associations between politics and culture are assumed by and large to be unstable, given that social meanings are open to varying interpretations, which can imply either a consistent power structure of political instability.

The articles that comprise this dossier point to different directions and approach different subjects, yet they are bound together as exemplars in the sense they reflect such instability when considering the dimensions of politics and culture. Whether through the theoretical analysis involved in reworking the conception of hegemony, or in the reflection on ethno-racial representations in different countries, or in the examination of the narratives and practices in the field of journalism, this selection of articles approach culture as constitutive, as a force that engenders representations that shape conflicts and political practices in a specific direction.

The work of Graziella Moraes analyzes the relationship among national and ethno-racial identities in Brazil and South Africa. Building upon quantitative and qualitative empirical data collected from interviews with black professionals in both countries, her work shows that both national and racial identities are equally important, contradicting the commonplace approach that a nationality trumps race in Brazil, while race trumps nationality in South Africa. The relationship between nation and identity are thus shown in a more nuanced and contrasted light, a fact that is reflected for example in the imprecision of self-identification or the emphasis on miscegenation in Brazil and in an historical narrative based on differences among South Africans.

The debate proposed by Moraes is essential considering that homogeneousness and diversity, respectively, are traits commonly associated to national and ethnic identity. By exposing the differences between a social conception that emphasizes miscegenation and racial similarity and another one that correlates equality and difference, the article shows that such associations are neither obvious nor tension free. Furthermore, the analysis of how Brazilians and South Africans define their identities is all the more relevant considering the need to reflect on the theoretical assumptions of the political strategies and projects that are the object of disputes in these countries.

Considering a special reception of Gramsci's work, Raquel Kirtsch's article demonstrates the link between Cultural Studies and the theses of Brazilian thinker Oliveira Ferreira. On one hand, Raquel argues that Ferreira's thought is in line with the so-called "cultural turn" identified with a substantial part of contemporary social and political theory, turning our gazes to the importance of culture in the understanding of power. On the other hand, she also points out essential differences, especially in the definition of Ferreira's "theory of essential possessions", that, influenced by a reading of Talcott Parsons, reflects a systemic theory of social and political relations.

Beyond this systemic character, the author debates how cultural studies highlight difference first and foremost, thus constituting a markedly counter-institutional anti-systemic theory with post-structural hues. Thus, the emphasis is placed on processes of resistance which, besides being defined by the diversity of priorities and demands, do not necessarily imply the control of central institutions of society, a departure from the institutional concerns expressed by O. Ferreira. Therefore, Kirtsch's article shows how a cultural-political relationship can take different paths, either defining a conception of culture as totality, bound to formal and legal political arrangements, or suggestion that the field is open to adaptation and symbolic reworking.

Suggesting that journalism expresses a situated political position, the article authored by Flávia Biroli indicates another important dimension of the relationship between culture and politics. By analyzing the specificities of the journalistic field, she points out how ordinary utterances, with their own specific practices and assumptions, tend to express the ideal of objectivity when hegemonic. Biroli argues that the fact these ideals are presented as technical guidelines does not preclude their ideological character attached to discourses that reiterate a given normative order and reproduce social conditions.

Biroli approaches journalism as "an administrator of consensus," which based on its own selection of what is debated or published, regulates political and social plurality. What is more, it does so in a way that "deflates" conflicts. The article shows the relevance of reflecting on how a given culture in the journalistic field, grounded on the assumption of objectivity, ultimately defines the limits of legitimacy in the public sphere, whilst excluding from it certain conflicts and claims.

In sum, from standpoints that differ from traditional approaches to political culture in political science, with normative frames that focus on democratic or civil behavior, the analyses in this dossier point to original perspectives in the understanding of the contemporary relationship between culture and politics. Furthermore the articles express how the cultural dimension can be conceived as constitutive of political and social reality, and not a mere reflex of a supposedly more fundamental instance, a theoretical bias that is replicated often in the social sciences. Conceived as an open and dynamic realm, one leaves with the understanding that culture can be a fundamental structuring sphere of political and social relations or a force of domination and reproduction of representations.