Culture, Power and Globalization

Trobiand Cricket: Who’s colonizing whom?

Lecture 2
September 16, 2003
A brief history of culture

• Concept of culture from 20th century anthropology
  – Boas: culture as autonomous from biological/racial determination of features
  – Culture as a system of meaning that belongs to "a people," "a tribe" or "a nation"

Adapted from Gupta; Ferguson, eds. (1997)
Culture as "a system of meaning"

- Semiotic system to be deciphered (Sahlins)
- A text to be read (Geertz)
- I.e., an integrated totality, a universe with its own holistic logic

Clifford Geertz analyzed the Balinese cockfight as "deep play"
Culture as order

• Functionalist glue making social cohesion possible (solidarity, Durkheim)

• Domain of shared, intersubjective meanings to make sense of symbolic social action (Weber; Geertz)

• **Note:** all emphasize the shared, the agreed upon, the orderly
Critique (1)

But not a universe unto itself

• Political economic approaches
  – Regional and global forms of connectedness
  – Wolf: a division of "a totality of interconnected processes" into discrete, homogeneous "billiard balls" (e.g., cultures, societies, nations) "threatens to turn names into things" (1982: 3, 6)

"Modern Times"

Cited in Gupta; Ferguson, eds. (1997: 2)
Critique (2)
Many voices, partial representation

• Critique of representation as "bounded, whole" as opposed to a "polyphony of voices" (Marcus 1989)

• Writing culture: partial yet presented as objective; not "I" but "they"

Pablo Picasso with a Picasso
1960s - 70s Critique: Culture and Power

- **Marxist revisions:** rethink culture in terms of class (false consciousness, domination)
- **Feminist revisions:** rethink culture in terms of gender inequalities (public/private culture, etc.)

Sebastio Salgado *The End of Manual Labor* (Bangladesh)
Consequences for globalization

- Culture is a dimension of human activity that tells us about the workings of power in political and economic realms.

- **Active practices of social agents** who reinterpret and appropriate culture (Bourdieu; de Certeau)

- Focus on the partiality, incompleteness of hegemony; the cultural as a contested, contingent political field (Gramsci, Williams, Hall)