Cultural Patterns and Processes in Advanced Placement Human Geography

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Culture is a very complex and difficult concept to explain. The British literary historian Raymond Williams (1958) dedicated an entire book to thinking about the changing meanings of culture through time and its contemporary significance. This complexity of meaning is evident in the field of human geography. Does culture mean that we study the different culture groups of the world in their spatial distribution? Does it mean that we examine the place-particular aspects of high culture such as fine art, classical music, and literature? Is it about the material products of folk cultures that we can see in the landscape? Or, does it mean that we try to understand attachments to place by examining such popular cultural practices as rap music or urban graffiti?

In some ways, we could argue that taking culture seriously in human geography means examining all of these issues: the distribution of culture groups around the world; the material expressions of high, folk, and popular cultures; the less tangible but important aspects of culture that affect people’s attachment to place and cultural identities. In addition, recent debates within the subfield of cultural geography (see, for example, Cosgrove and Jackson 1987) have opened the door to more complexity by recognizing that culture is dynamic, contested (not universally agreed upon), and contingent (reliant on context). How, then, can we go about teaching students in an Advanced Placement (AP) human geography course about the complexity of cultural patterns and processes?

It is important that students first recognize the varied meanings and uses of the concept of culture so that they are aware that knowledge itself changes. For example, the concept of culture changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, shifting from a term that applied to a process of natural or human growth to one that referred to a thing itself—a state of intellectual development. Later in the nineteenth century, culture came to mean an entire way of life. I would start this section of the course, therefore, with a general discussion of what culture could mean, has meant, and how in general geographers have gone about studying it. Until fairly recently, geographers used material culture (house types, barns, fences, commercial buildings) to study culture, but now the study of cultural geography involves archival work, interviews, and participant observation. Hopefully, such an introduction would provide a useful context for students and encourage them to think beyond the more traditional concepts that will be stressed in the course. Traditional concepts in the cultural section of an introductory-level human geography focus on some basic concepts with examples,
but in most cases those basic concepts do not stress the dynamic, contested, and contingent nature of culture. An awareness of the differing meanings of culture and its uses within geography can, however, provide a stimulating and more open-ended context for discussion. Geographer Peter Jackson (1992) provides a compelling case for rejecting a unitary view of culture and for stressing instead its multiplicity, and the ways in which all things cultural are related to the political and the economic. The following should provide ample grounds for an interesting introductory discussion with students.

That the cultural is political follows logically from a rejection of the traditional notion of a unitary view of “culture,” and from a recognition of the plurality of cultures. If cultures are addressed in the plural (high and low, black and white, masculine and feminine, gay and straight, urban and rural) then it is clear that meanings will be contested according to the interests of those involved. (Jackson 1992, 4)

In other words, once one recognizes that many different cultures coexist in one place, an understanding of that place necessitates analyses of the power relationships between those different cultures (i.e., a political analysis as well as a cultural analysis).

**CONCEPTS OF CULTURE**

How do geographers examine and understand cultural concepts and processes? Perhaps the most basic approach of geographers is to look spatially at cultural phenomena (i.e., map in two dimensions cultural traits and cultural complexes to see how they are distributed around the globe and at other scales, and to ask how and why these distributions exist and what they mean). Students could start with a map of a formal culture region (an area inhabited by people who share one or more cultural traits), for example, that of the wheat-producing regions of the world (Figure 1). People in these regions share the common cultural trait of choosing to produce wheat, a trait that often (although certainly not always) leads to other commonalities such as field patterns and house styles. What is revealed in this map; what is hidden? This map is based on the spatial distribution of one culture trait, so what it tells us is that wheat is the primary agricultural product of these areas of the world. It certainly tells us something about the physical geography of these areas, since wheat can only be grown under certain conditions, but that hardly explains the complexity of the pattern revealed here. It tells us something about agricultural practices, but different areas of the world grow and harvest wheat differently. It tells us something about peoples’ food...
tastes, preferences, and traditions, but not entirely since, for example, preferences for wheat in the U.S. are not limited to the wheatbelt as represented on the map. A map of the major consumers of wheat products will probably overlap with this map to some degree, but also differ considerably, since wheat exports and imports result in complex trade patterns throughout the world.

Maps of formal culture regions can also depict more complicated cultural attributes. A combination of traits, a culture complex, can be used to define formal culture regions. Students discuss what can be revealed and hidden through analyzing a map depicting, for example, areas of the world that produce wheat, consume wheat, and use irrigation practices. This sort of investigation relays the concepts of cultural trait (each category constitutes a culture trait), cultural complex (all three together define a cultural complex), and formal culture region, but also suggests the limitations of explanation based on these concepts alone. People living within the formal culture region defined by these three cultural traits may share common livelihood practices, but may differ dramatically in terms of other culture traits (e.g., language or religion) or in terms of their social and political systems.

Similarly, maps indicating functional culture regions (areas delimited in order to function politically, socially, or economically, such as cities, census tracts, or trade areas) can tell us more about some shared cultural attributes (e.g., everyone participating in one form of urban government or shopping at the same retail center), but less about other attributes. Functional regions have nodes (centers of economic, social, or political functions such as a city hall) and most have clearly defined borders. These regions have often been imposed through political fiat and not according to shared cultural traits, and this often leads to sociopolitical conflicts. Many interesting examples of recent ethnic conflicts could be discussed to illustrate problems that often result from the delineation of functional regions that disregard shared cultural traits. The establishment of the state of the Yugoslav Federal Republic in 1945 joined very different religious and ethnic groups into a functional region. When support to sustain this functional region attenuated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, religious and ethnic groups asserted their territorial claims, leading to devastating military conflicts.

Vernacular regions are those defined by the common perception of its inhabitants, such as referring to portions of the American south as Dixie or using uptown to refer to an exclusive residential area of a city. These regions rarely have clearly delineated borders, since they are based on perceptions and not on any easily marked attributes like language or religion. Maps of these regions often reveal how everyday cultural meanings run askew of more formalized culture categories. Students could be asked the regional name of the area they call home. They could then compare that to regions defined formally on the basis of shared cultural traits or functionally on the basis of political or economic usage. This exercise could show not only the importance of culture region to a sense of community and identity, but also the complexity of thinking about how to define culture regions.

Cultural diffusion is a key concept that can lead students to think dynamically and analytically about the descriptive patterns outlined above. How, spatially, have material artifacts, peoples, values, and beliefs moved across space and over time? Geographers have spent considerable time trying to determine the different processes involved in this and have delineated two general categories of diffusion: expansion and relocation. Expansion diffusion refers to the spatial movement of materials, peoples, or ideas from a central core where the concentration remains high, outward in a relatively stable pattern. For example, corn was originally domesticated in Mesoamerica and spread north to North America and south through South America. Relocation diffusion refers to spatial movements that result from relocation: a group of people migrates overseas, leaving their home country behind, and bringing with them their language, religion, house types, and food preferences.

Geographers have augmented their discussion of expansion diffusion by dividing the category into three subcategories: contagious, hierarchical, and stimulus. For example, we might want to understand the diffusion of sushi-eating and sushi restaurants, the diffusion of a disease, or the diffusion of industrialization. All three are examples of expansion diffusion, but the actual processes involved in each are quite different. Diseases tend to spread involuntarily in relatively close areas (before, that is, the widespread use of jet airplanes). Therefore, people living in areas adjacent to the core area of disease will be most affected, and almost everyone will get the disease. Those people will, in turn, spread it to other adjacent areas later in time, and so forth. Such diffusion is known as contagious diffusion. Sushi-eating is quite different; as a trendy and perhaps avant-garde eating choice, it moved from its core in Japan to metropolitan centers around the world, but only a relatively small per-
percentage of the population adopted it. Those people might then invest in a restaurant in a slightly smaller city, and so on. This type of diffusion is known as hierarchical diffusion. The historical diffusion of industrialization illustrates that not all new ideas can be readily adopted by cultures. Industrialization began in England and spread relatively quickly to countries in Western Europe and North America. Yet in many other countries, the social, political, and economic climate simply did not allow industrialization to occur. Nonetheless, the idea of industrialization stimulated changes in the manufacture of products, and eventually these changes led to the adoption of industrial production. This type of diffusion is called stimulus diffusion. To make these concepts more understandable, students might be asked to identify examples of each of these types of diffusion from their own everyday lives and experiences.

It is important that students understand three concepts related to diffusion: time-distance decay, space-time compression, and acculturation. Time-distance decay means that the diffusion or acceptance of an idea usually is delayed with increasing distance from the source of the innovation and with increasing time. Sushi restaurants are just now opening up in smaller cities, particularly those furthest away from main urban centers, while people living in Los Angeles have been dining on raw fish for over a decade. On the other hand, some ideas and trends diffuse so quickly that distance does not seem to matter. Contemporary technology—such as computers and Internet, fax machines, and telephones—has made communication between distant places almost instantaneous. A student living in Vanuatu (a Pacific Island) can learn about the most recent fashion trends by connecting to the Internet and scanning Web sites and chat rooms. The reduction in the time it takes for something to diffuse across space is called space-time compression.

Acculturation happens when two cultures come into contact with each other. Oftentimes the traits of the culture with stronger political and/or economic system will dominate, and the other culture will adapt, or acculturate. It is important to note that this is often not a one-way process, and cultures often adapt to and modify each other. It would be helpful to use historical examples from the colonial period to elaborate. The Spanish "conquest" of the Aztec may seem at first a one-way street, and yet we know that the Spanish adopted/adapted some Aztec traits, such as building styles and materials. Contact with the Aztec also brought considerable change to Spanish culture, notably the introduction of Indian crops to Spanish food systems. Here, the idea of transculturation (a process that refers to a more equal exchange of cultural ideas and ways of living) could be introduced.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

One of the most basic distinctions geographers make when studying culture is that between folk and popular culture, and students need to know how and why that distinction is important. Folk cultures tend to have longstanding traditions that change very slowly through time, if at all, but that tend to show great regional variation. Within the context of the United States, a good example of folk culture is the house types built in colonial times. Each subregion of colonial America had its own distinctive style of housing and barns. A saltbox house was indicative of the New England region, and the shotgun house denoted the plantation South. On the other hand, popular culture tends to change very rapidly in time, but show little variation across space. A map showing the different architectural styles of McDonald’s restaurants in the United States in 2000 would indicate little regional variation, but a time-sequence of such maps would show fairly rapid stylistic change over time. A student could readily date the construction of a McDonald’s restaurant from its architecture: the streamlined style with the famous arches of the 1960s, the mansard roofs of the 1970s and 1980s, the fairly discreet buildings of the 1990s (in many places, zoning has precluded any distinctive styling) (Figure 2).

At a more global scale, two of the more significant ways that cultures are defined and distinguished from each other is through language and religion. It is important for students to have a good general knowledge of the types of languages and religions and the differences between them, the

![Figure 2. The sign on this circa 1997 gas station is so discreet, due to zoning, that it is difficult to identify the brand. Like other forms of popular culture, this style of gas station can be found in any new commercial strip in the United States.]
relationships between different languages and religious groups, and their spatial distributions. In terms of language, geographers have examined the spatial patterning of the major language families, the predominance of one language over others in particular portions of the world, and the relationship of those patterns to political boundaries. Although English may be the dominant language in more countries in the world than any other language, this does not mean it is spoken by the largest number of people: Chinese wins that accolade. In addition, the concept of lingua franca (a language spoken by two different language culture groups in order to communicate, oftentimes for trade) can provide important clues about cultural exchange.

Geographers study religion in a variety of ways. They examine where particular religions originated, their routes of diffusion, general areas of the world where one or another predominates, and areas where different religions come into contact and potential conflict. It is important for students to understand the difference between universalizing religions and ethnic religions. Universalizing religions attempt to appeal to all people and, therefore, are not based on one group of people or one location, while ethnic religions are based on one particular group of people and/or one location in the world. The three largest universalizing religions—Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism—have diffused from their hearths (core areas) to large areas of the world, with each religion following distinctive patterns of diffusion. One of the more interesting diffusion stories is that of Buddhism. Although its present-day distribution through much of east and Southeast Asia would indicate a hearth nearby, Buddhism originated near the border of present-day Nepal and India and only slowly and indirectly made its way to China. On the other hand, Hinduism, the world’s third largest religion, is an ethnic religion, so its adherents are heavily concentrated in one area: India.

Oftentimes the discussion of cultural religious patterns overlaps with that of political/economic patterns, since many religious conflicts are complexly interwoven with political and economic strife, and vice versa. A case study of the Israeli/Palestinian issue and/or debates over the future of Jerusalem might serve to illuminate these complex ties. For example, Jerusalem is considered a holy site for three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and it historically has been under the political control of different religious bodies. Part of what was at stake throughout the Arab-Israeli wars of the 1950s through the 1970s was who had access to those sites and under what circumstances.

The discussion of Jerusalem might also serve to introduce the notion of religious landscapes and sacred space. As a vital part of most cultures, religion is often a primary shaper of landscape. The most obvious religious impact on the land is in the form of buildings expressly built for worship (e.g., mosques, temples, churches). But the effect of religion on a landscape can also be more encompassing, particularly when religion is an important component of a culture’s way of life and of organizing the world. The Navajo Indians organize their entire landscape, from their houses to their field patterns, according to the guidelines of their religious beliefs that seek to bring harmony between the world of the heavens and the world as lived on earth (Figures 3 and 4). So too, the Mormons live in towns that are arranged in a set pattern to re-create their
view of the biblical Holy Land. Within these landscapes, certain spaces are often set apart and are thought to embody special religious meanings—these places are referred to as sacred spaces. For the Navajo, certain places where unexplainable natural events have occurred are considered sacred, while Mormons consider the Temple in the center of their towns as sacred. Political conflicts can occur when two religions lay claim to the sacredness of the same space and therefore want control over it. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is the only remnant of the ancient temple, and hence is a holy, sacred space for Jews. However, the Dome of the Rock is a sacred space for Muslims, and it sits just adjacent to the Wall, on the site of the remains of the temple. Complicated negotiations have yet to resolve the issue.

Teaching about the cultural geographies of ethnicity and gender is difficult: it touches on matters that are politically sensitive and, if presented the wrong way, can reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes. On the other hand, the currency of these matters and their immediate relationship to students’ lives can turn these discussions into forums for critical thinking about cultural difference, place, and identity. It is important to start the discussion with what these terms—ethnicity, race, gender—actually mean and to dispel lingering myths by clarifying that the terms refer to cultural and not biologically fixed categories. Each of these ways of categorizing people has been artificially constructed and the categorizations do not refer to qualities that inhere in people themselves. Gender refers to a culture’s assumptions about the differences between men and women—their characters, the roles they play in society, what they represent. Race and ethnicity are terms devised primarily in the nineteenth century to group people by certain physical and/or cultural attributes, although today we know that there is no physical evidence to support these distinctions. Nevertheless, the terms serve as incredibly important social markers, and each raises interesting geographical questions. For ethnicity and race, the following questions are pertinent: What types of sociopolitical bodies foster ethnic difference and why? How can you recognize ethnic diversity in the landscape? What sort of cultural and/or geopolitical situations lead to ethnic conflicts? How and why do ethnic ghettos and neighborhoods form? Do people defined by a culture as belonging to different races occupy space in different ways? How does racism influence locational decisions within cities and countries and at a global scale? An interesting way to approach these questions might be for students to discuss their own social categories (the ethnic or racial categories into which society has grouped them), to ask if their residential locations were in any way affected by that categorization, and then to ask why or why not. They could also be asked to put together a perceptual map of their social geography, identifying certain areas with particular ethnic or racialized groups of people. They could then be asked to match that map to one based on census data. The point here would be to get students to think about how and why particular neighborhoods and/or areas get associated with certain groups of people (e.g., the connotation of the inner city as a low-income area) and the effect these associations have on urban policy issues.

In discussing gender, the following questions would start important conversations. Do women and men occupy space differently and, if so, why? Why are certain places associated with women and other places associated with men? How does sexism influence the shape and locations of homes, workplaces, cities, and nations? Students could be asked to consider the differences in workspaces for jobs identified as female dominated (e.g., secretaries tend to work in open, easily watched spaces) and jobs identified as male dominated (e.g., executives tend to occupy private, closed spaces). They could be asked to think about how women’s movements and locations in cities are often different from men’s, given that it is usually women who have home and childcare duties. Students could also be asked to identify types of spaces that are generally associated with women and with men, starting at the scale of their own homes and moving to different scales such as the neighborhood, the city, or the nation. The point would be to question the basis and effects of these associations. Students will probably suggest that the interiors of homes tend to be women’s spaces while the outside are men’s spaces (Figure 5). Does this mean that women occupy the interiors and men the exteriors? Or does it mean that qualities we have come to associate with femininity are acted out more inside the home, while those associated with masculinity take place outdoors? What are some of the implications of these associations? Some accessible case studies for teaching about race, racism, and ethnicity within a cultural geographic framework are available in Jackson (1992). Feminist Geographies (Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British
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Figure 5. What assumptions about appropriate gender roles were built into this circa 1957 suburban home?

Geographers 1997) provides numerous and useful case studies for incorporating gender into introductory geography classes.

Environmental Impact of Cultural Attitudes and Practices

Discussions from the questions raised above will most likely already have sparked interest in how different cultures (defined by language, ethnicity, or religion) think about and use the physical environment differently. Navajo and Anglos in the American Southwest live in the same physical environments, yet partly because of their differing views of nature and different ideas about space, each has developed distinctive land-use patterns with differing environmental impacts: Anglos tend to use irrigation to conduct intensive commercial farming, while most Navajos are engaged in extensive sheep-herding. Of course these differing cultural attitudes are not the only explanation for the divergent land-use patterns: Anglos have more political and social power in our society, giving them better access to water resources and to the capital needed to build irrigation systems. So, discussions of the environmental impact of cultural attitudes should temper the conversation by pointing out how culture works in tandem with politics, economics, and society to provide explanations of environmental issues. This conversation could be pursued by introducing the concept of political ecology, a relatively new subfield of human geography that links cultural with political/economic explanations of environmental attitudes and practices. For example, understanding the apparent failure or success of agricultural development projects overseas requires an understanding of indigenous and colonial cultural attitudes about nature as well as an awareness of how the political, economic, and cultural climate has shaped those attitudes and how those attitudes (values, beliefs, meanings attached to nature/place) often serve as focal points for political/economic conflict. Some interesting and user-friendly case studies for teaching can be found in Rocheleau et al. (1996), and Peet and Watts (1996). Wangari et al. (1996), a chapter in Rocheleau et al. (1996), discuss an agroforestry project in a semiarid community in central Kenya and shows that women’s knowledge of plants and a gendered pattern of access to resources was critical in how the community responded to the 1984 drought and subsequent famine. The researchers concluded that it was important to understand and document local, and often gendered, knowledge of resources if development projects were to be successful.

Cultural Landscapes and Cultural Identity

Three-dimensional material forms, called cultural landscapes, are created out of distinctive cultural practices and beliefs and, in turn, come to represent, or symbolize, those cultures. The interstate road network and shopping malls, no less than farmhouses and rural land-use patterns, are constructed from particular cultural values and preferences, and can be seen as intentional or unintentional symbols of those cultures. The range of case studies that could be discussed here is massive. A discussion could start with a description and analysis of what students can see out of their windows and move on to what they can imagine of the Native-American landscape before European contact or to the colonial urban landscapes of New Delhi. Students could describe the landscape that they see out of the classroom window by first discussing its overall pattern as if seen from a plane. If the pattern is primarily a grid, then the conversation could turn to a discussion of the township and range system that surveyed land according to a pre-ordained grid of north-south, east-west lines. Students could then enumerate the types and densities of different landscape elements (e.g., residences, commercial buildings, roads, agricultural patterns, manufacturing buildings) and draw some preliminary conclusions about the culture, economy, and politics of the people who created these patterns. An additional exercise would ask students to visualize what that same landscape looked like before European settlement and how different waves of immigration have shaped different landscapes.
Given the history of cultural geography in the U.S. and its earlier emphasis on rural house types, particularly within North America, an interesting exercise might be to have students identify American folk regions based on rural landscapes and consider why housing is seen as an important indicator of culture.

It is important that students are made aware of how some landscapes have become symbolic of a particular culture or subculture. The white-painted meetinghouse and clustered frame houses surrounding a small greenspace have become emblematic of the colonial New England landscape, and that scene itself symbolizes certain values of American small-town life, such as close-knit community life (Figure 6). The automobile strip dotted with fast-food restaurants and gas stations that encircle most of our urban/suburban areas has come to symbolize to many the commercialization and homogeneity of modern American society. The interesting questions here are how and why certain places/landscapes have been chosen to represent a set of cultural values and the degree to which the culture itself adheres to those values. The stereotypical New England village described above is a particularly potent landscape symbol of American national identity partly because it reflects in space a national mythology of our colonial past—a past that we want to believe was characterized by small-town life and participatory democracy. Useful teaching examples of how to think critically about symbolic landscapes can be found in Foote et al. (1994) and Cosgrove and Daniels (1988). Jackson (1994), a chapter in Foote et al. (1994), discusses the prototypical, or symbolic, American housetype in three very different time periods. For example, the post-WWII ranch house is chosen since it symbolizes the openness and fluidity of the typical American middle-class family during that time period.

Students will benefit from familiarity with how to relate landscapes to the concepts discussed above, that is, what landscapes can tell us about popular/folk culture or about gender, ethnicity, and religion. Again, caution is necessary so that students are aware of the limitations of landscape interpretation for explaining culture, as well as of the limitation of cultural explanations about landscape. As mentioned before, culture is one important variable—but not the only one—in explaining particular landscapes. The urban landscape of New Delhi can tell us some things about the culture of India, such as the importance of Parliament to its national identity, since Parliament sits along the main boulevard. It also tells us about colonialism—of how the English planned the street pattern and the architectural forms of New Delhi to be in distinction to Old Delhi, thereby providing clear material symbols of British rule.

The notion of cultural identity is inherent in almost all of this discussion of landscape, but it does alert us to one relatively ignored aspect: how cultures—particularly minority cultures—use, alter, and manipulate landscapes in order to express their identities. If, generally speaking, cultural landscapes are formed by the dominant culture and express that culture's values, minority cultures (defined by ethnicity, race, or gender) often devise ways to alter that environment to create spaces that represent their identities and/or symbolize their opposition to the dominant culture. Gang-related graffiti does both—sprayed on public monuments or buildings, it actively shows disrespect for the dominant culture; this public display, combined with territorial markings, expresses group adhesion and identity.

Discussions of cultural identity, then, bring us back to thinking about the complexity of culture—to a recognition that it is rarely static or wholly unified. Even though many of the concepts outlined here assume some generalized agreement about the meaning of culture, the advanced students that the AP course will attract should be willing to challenge their minds to see beyond the confines of narrow definitions of culture and to think creatively about culture, cultural differences, and cultural landscapes.

Figure 6. Although it actually dates to the mid-nineteenth century, the New England landscape of white-painted churches sitting atop greenspaces in the centers of villages has become symbolic of our colonial past.
REFERENCES


Appendix A. Resource list.


