

The Concept of 'Culture' and 'Environment' in Urban Cultural Geography

Jeongman Lee*

도시문화지리학에 있어서 '문화'와 '환경'의 개념

이 정 만*

Abstract : There are certain polemics regarding what kind of approach is most appropriate in the study of urban culture. The tension seems to come from the misunderstanding of each other. A major source of the misunderstanding is different usage of the term 'culture'. The term 'culture' may be interpreted either as way of life (fig. 1), system of meaning (fig. 2), the fourth structural condition (fig. 3), sophisticated taste (fig. 4), a superstructure of intellect and arts (fig. 5), biological supporting system (fig. 6), or all encompassing conditions (fig. 7). Whatever definition is taken for the term 'culture', there is a parallel definition of 'environment' for each stance (figures 1 - 7). What kind of definition is adopted matters because each of them is deeply rooted in different perspectives and focuses it, however, seems impossible to completely deny or disprove the utility of any of the stances. Thus, we may have to accept the diversity of definitions and consider 'urban cultural geography' as a basket in which diverse concepts and perspectives are collected and nurtured.

Key Words : Culture, Environment, Usage, Urban Cultural Geography

요약 : '문화'라는 용어는 생활양식(그림 1), 해석체계(그림 2), 제 4의 구조(그림 3), 세련된 취향(그림 4), 지식과 예술의 상부구조(그림 5), 생물학적 지지 구조(그림 6), 또는 인간의 모든 조건들(그림 7) 등으로 정의될 수 있다. 문화라는 용어를 어떻게 정의하든 각각의 정의에는 이와 연관된 '환경'에 대한 정의가 전제되어 있다. 어떠한 정의를 채택하는가 하는 것은 각각의 정의를 토대로 하는 관점이나 연구주체의 정당화에 중요한 역할을 한다.

그러나 이렇듯 다양한 정의 가운데 하나가 최선이라는 것을 입증하거나 다른 정의가 부적절하다는 것을 증명하는 것은 불가능해 보인다. 따라서 도시문화지리학 분야에 있어서 '문화'나 '환경'이라는 개념이 각각 '이것이 어야 한다'라고 주장하기 보다는 각각 다루는 주제나 연구자의 관점에 따라 다양한 개념이 유용할 수 있다고 인정하는 태도를 가지는 게 필요하다.

주요어 문화, 환경, 용법, 도시문화지리학

1. Introduction

Science or knowledge requires direct or indirect communication through which other person's ideas and informations are transmitted, developed, and accumulated. If, however, major terms are misunderstood by the listeners or readers, confusion arises. In cultural geography, a great emphasis is being placed upon understanding the

city or the human life in cities as more and more people become residents of(post-) modern cities. As the emphasis shifts from the rural to the urban, the complexity of the city and urban life as well as the trend of globalization demands geographers to tackle with very diverse things, institutions, relations and images. Accordingly, the tools and focuses of research became diverse and multifaceted.

* Professor(Ph.D). Dept. of Geography, Seoul National University, Korea

In the process of this diversification and expansion of cultural geographical horizon, scholars with different focuses, theoretical bases and/or backgrounds have used the term 'culture' profusely. There are also certain polemics regarding which approach or definition is correct¹⁾. The tension between the groups with different traditions or theoretical backgrounds stems in significant part, in my opinion, from misunderstandings of each other which, in turn, derive from different usage of shared terms, especially the term 'culture.' As the concept of 'culture' has been closely related to the term 'environment' in cultural geographical tradition, I'd like to discuss the different usages of the terms 'culture' and 'environment' and the relationship between the two concepts in order to cast some light to the cause of unwarranted tensions hoping for mutual understanding and cooperation.

2. Confusion in the Usage of the Term 'Environment'

The word 'Environment' is defined in *the American Heritage Dictionary*(1985, Second College Edition) as follows:

1. The circumstances of conditions that surround one; surroundings. 2. The total of circumstances surrounding an organism or group of organisms, esp.: a. The combination of external or extrinsic physical conditions that affect and influence the growth and development of organisms. b. The complex of social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community. 3. An artistic or theatrical work that surrounds or involves the audience.

As seen above, the term 'environment' has several different usages. A physical geographer or a biologist may, however, get confused or upset to see the expressions like 'social environment' or 'natural environment.' It is because the person

takes for granted the definition of environment as defined above in 2a, i.e. nature. If one takes this definition, 'social environment' is a wrong expression because environment should be physical and the concept of 'social environment' is illogical. The expression of 'natural environment' is also unacceptable because it is unnecessary to add 'natural' to the word 'environment' which already means nature.

On the other hand, a cultural geographer or an anthropologist using the term 'social environment' may not understand the denial of the usage because the person is using the term 'environment' with the definition of 2b of the dictionary meaning 'social conditions.' This different usage of the term 'environment,' of course does not happen by accident. It probably comes from the difference of traditions and focuses of the writer and the reader. The word itself, however, is only one and same. Only the meanings each person attaches to it differ. Once the two persons understand and accept that the same word is used differently and with good reason, the confusion and even antagonism may be removed or significantly reduced.

3. Confusion in the Usage of the Term 'Culture'

The word 'culture' is defined in *the American Heritage Dictionary*(1985, Second College Edition) as follows:

n. 1. The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population. 2. A style of social and artistic expression peculiar to a society or class. 3. Intellectual and artistic activity, and the works produced by it. 4. The act of developing the social, moral, and intellectual faculties through education. 5. A high degree of taste and refinement formed by aesthetic and

intellectual training. 6. The development of the body through special training: *physical culture*. 7. The cultivation of the soil; tillage. 8. The breeding of animals or growing of plants, esp. to produce improved stock. 9. *Biol.* a. The growing of microorganisms in a nutrient medium. b. Such a growth or colony, as of bacteria. c. Medium (sense 6.b.). -*fr.v.* 1. To cultivate; till. 2. To develop (microorganisms or tissues, for example) in a culture medium. [ME, cultivation < OFr. < Lat. *cultura* < *cultus*. see CULTIVATE.]

The term 'culture' has many usages as seen above. Defining 'culture' has been so difficult and problematic that many scholars, notably anthropologists such as Tylor, Kroeber, and White, made great efforts to define 'culture' as they see it appropriate²⁾. It indicates that defining 'culture' is not only difficult but also important. It is because achieving hegemony in the definition or usage also means achieving justification and hegemony for the perspective or theory based on the definition accepted. There has never been a clear winner in this polemics, because each camp usually had sophisticated logic and strengths. The shift of power was achieved only when either one of the definitions was adopted by new scholars, which takes a long time. The shift itself, however, is not permanent. There have been oscillations, modifications, and compromises.

In cultural geographical sphere, the term 'culture' is being used in many different ways as many geographers with different perspectives and training became interested in culture. When a scholar uses the expression, 'cultural politics,' another scholar may get upset because the latter has used the term with the meaning 1 above, i.e. 'way of life' which includes politics or political institution. On the other hand the former might be using the term with the definition 2 above in mind. The latter would not tolerate the usage because accepting the expression should cause confusion or incongruence and might result in an identity crisis

regarding what a cultural geographer does. The former uses the term 'culture' as separate from politics (although it may be related to politics), whereas the latter has used the term 'culture' as 'all encompassing whole way of life', of which politics or political aspects is/are only a part. As in the case of anthropology, the contest for the hegemony in defining key concepts would not produce a clear winner immediately. The multifarious definitions will survive for a long time but the shift of dominance may occur probably with some modifications and compromises.

4. Relationship between the Concepts, 'Culture' and 'Environment'

The term 'culture' has long been used in geography in connection with the term 'nature' or 'environment.' To Carl Sauer, culture is meaningless and non-existent without nature. As shown in figure 1, culture, to Sauer, is 'the whole way of life' and culture is formed and changed as the result of 'man'-'nature' interaction, which had always been the focus of his research. As his primary interest was 'man'-'nature' interaction, he did not care too much about what the product of the interaction might be called³⁾. It is perhaps true that he did not have to worry about the definition of culture because he and his 'Berkeley school of geography' (unlike Kroeber and his students) held firm grip in American cultural geography until he died in 1975. Duncan, in 1980, contested his concept of culture labeling it as 'superorganic' but it was only after Sauer's death⁴⁾. Even this belated

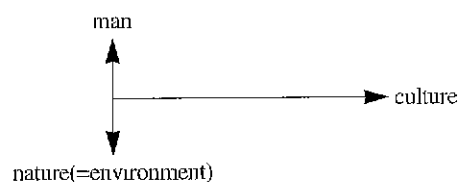


Figure 1. Sauerian concept of culture

critic on Sauer's concept of culture was defended by his followers. Sauer did not talk too much about the influence of culture on 'man' because 'man' is always a 'culture bearing existence' to him. Accordingly, when he talked about human modification of environment, it also meant human cultural modification. He did not make much effort to differentiate between 'nature' and 'environment,' because 'nature' and 'environment' were interchangeable terms to him.

Sauer's conceptualization of culture and 'nature,' however, exposes a significant problem in that the influence of socio-economic conditions on 'man' tends to be neglected in this kind of conceptualization because his primary emphasis was on human(=cultural) modification of 'nature' and not on socio-economic influence on 'man.' This emphasis on 'man'-'nature' relation and neglect in socio-economic conditions of 'man' becomes more problematic as contemporary 'cultural' geographers attempt to deal with the globally networked city and the life in the city.

The term 'culture' became increasingly popular in recent times and many scholars of different fields from anthropology, sociology to literary critic use the term with different connotations(Figures 2-5). In each usage of the term 'culture' there usually is a connected usage(or definition) of the term 'environment.' The concept of culture as 'system of meaning' has gained many adherents especially in anthropology(Figure 2)⁵⁾. Here, 'culture' became abstracted very far and exists(in non-material forms) only in the communication or symbolization process. This kind of definition, however, leaves us

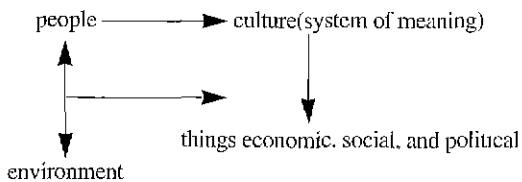


Figure 2. Culture as system of meaning

with the problem that we lose a convenient term covering arts, sports, games, rituals, etc. which are not economic, social, nor political in this framework of conceptualization

There is another wide-spread usage of the term 'culture', in which 'culture' is considered the 'fourth' element that interacts with person(s) as 'environment as structure' (see Figure 3). It is 'fourth' because the social, economic, and political precedes in order of importance as structures (=environments) restraining human agency and, at the same time, being constantly modified and reproduced by the human agency. This kind of conceptualization is quite popular amongst sociologists and other scholars enchanted with Giddens's structuration theory emphasizing 'agency-structure' interaction. Although Giddens classifies structures quite differently, his structuration theory does not collide with this kind of conceptualization⁶⁾. This concept of culture gives trouble to the scholars who are keen to physical and biological aspects of human being in that it does not allow much room to consider biological and physical environments. It presents another dilemma to the students of culture in that culture can be interpreted as the 'residual,' meaning the 'left-over' of the social, economic, and political. Although culture is treated importantly in this perspective, there always is a danger(if one cares about the title, 'cultural' geographer) that the 'realm of culture' becomes increasingly smaller as more and more parts of the 'cultural' become incorporated into the other three categories.

Karl Marx does not seem to have paid too much attention to culture as such. It seems that Marx attached most of the meanings

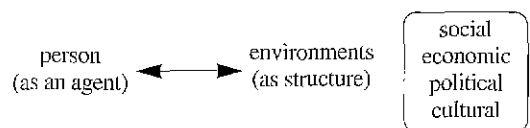


Figure 3. Culture as the fourth element(= 'residual')

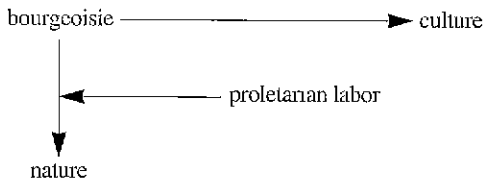


Figure 4. Marxian view of capitalistic culture

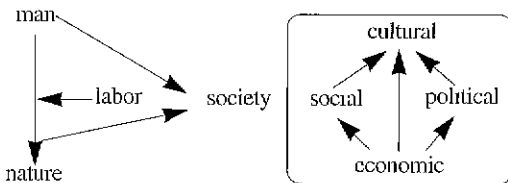


Figure 5. Marxian view of culture

anthropologists confer upon the term 'culture' to his 'social.' He rarely used the term 'culture' but, when he used it, it was close to the definitions 3 and 5 of the Dictionary of American Heritage introduced in this paper. Marx used the term 'culture' and 'cultural' primarily in relation to alienation that the proletariat are alienated from the means of production, products, and other people losing the opportunity to enjoy or achieve 'culture.' To Marx, the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat of surplus value and consumes the immorally accumulated wealth for the pleasure of themselves creating and maintaining the bourgeois culture which should be overturned completely(Figure 4)7). In his imagined socialist state, the 'cultural'(of proletariat) forms a superstructure based on the 'economic,' 'social,' and 'political.'(Figure 5). Marx had good mastery of natural sciences of the time and gave much emphasis on the human dependence on 'nature.' He, however, seldom used the term 'environment'(at least in the English edition of *Capital*) and preferred the expressions like 'social conditions.' Marx did not emphasize nature(=environment) perhaps because he regarded nature only as resources in contrast to the extraordinary meaning he gave to labor.

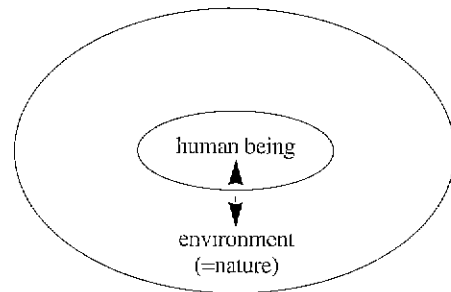


Figure 6. Biological model of human ecosystem

There is yet another way of seeing environment. Human being is simply a biological organism surrounded by environment(=nature) and makes its livelihood by it in this biological model of human ecosystem(Figure 6)8). Human being and the environment interact and form an ecosystem together. It is obvious that this kind of pure biological interpretation of human being does not provide a sufficient room for the analysis of complex urban life.

5. What 'Environment' and 'Culture' for Urban Cultural Geography?

There is a growing number of geographers interested in 'urban cultural geography.' It seems that many geographers found gold in 'culture' and rush to find the gold mines. There, however, is a strong tension especially between 'traditional cultural geographers' and 'new cultural geographers' behind the apparent thriving of the 'cultural' The contest for the hegemony in defining 'cultural' seems to be one of the major sources of the tension. Defining 'cultural' is very much related to defining 'environment' as shown above. The contest is not an easy game for any side, because definition can seldom be disproved. It is hard for any side to surrender because what is at stake is not just the definition but the hegemony of perspective, set of methodology, related terms, and most

importantly identity which is related to self-respect, motivation, and even survival. It seems to me that the differences in the meaning of a term arise from where one puts emphasis on or gives primary concern to.

If there should be no clear winner in the near future, the confusion resulting from different usages of the words 'culture' and 'environment' will continue. I can think of three possible solutions. The first and most realistic solution is accepting multiple concepts of 'culture' and 'environment' and co-existing. As long as one person does not

use the same term with significantly different meanings in one writing or speech, it won't be too difficult. The second solution is to reach a consensus. 'Berkeley school' seem to prefer the concepts shown in Figures 1 and 3(preferred by some new generation Berkeley geographers), whereas the 'new' cultural geographers take the positions shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. If there is a possibility of convergence, it is through the path of the conceptualization shown in Figure 3. The third possibility is an invention of yet another conceptualization into which most contesting

*Organic Agents: Humans, Animals, Plants, Societies,...
 **Purpose of Organic Existence: Biological Reproduction, Procurement of Food, Happiness,...

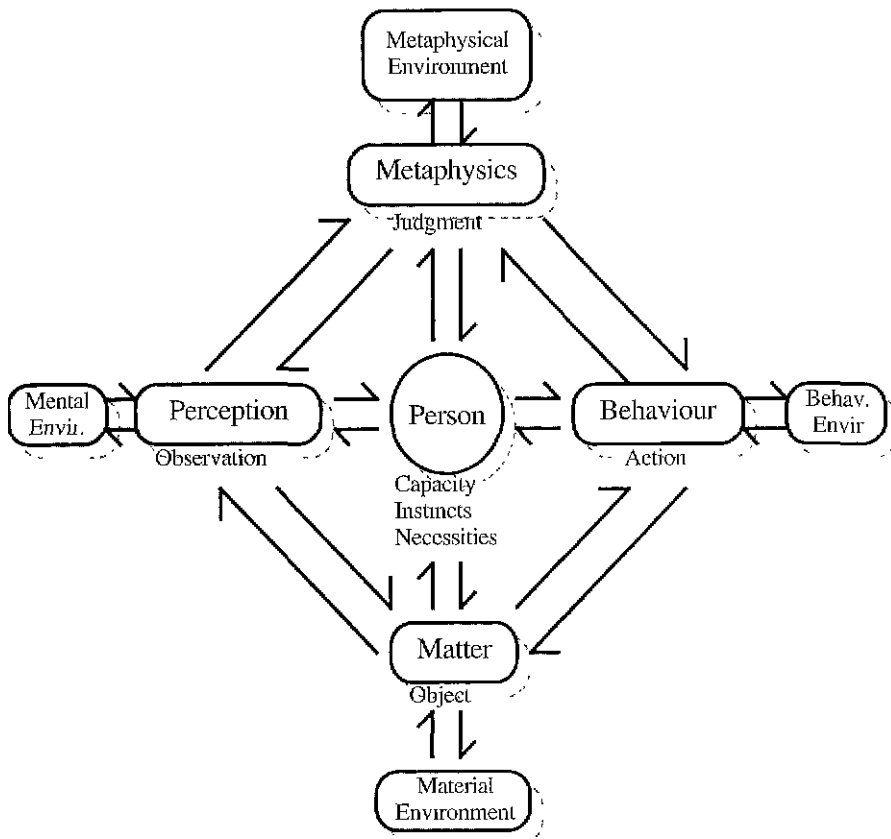


Figure 7. A Conceptual Structure of the Human Ecosystem

* Dotted lines represent another person's ecosystem. The relation between the front and the back systems is a social relationship.

positions can be incorporated. The author has formulated a conceptual framework (Figure 7) which started from Sauerian concept (Figure 1), then was fused into the human ecosystem model (Figure 6), and finally was amalgamated with Giddens's idea of structuration theory (Figure 3)⁹⁾. It, however, is not a fully tested perspective and may need to be modified or even discarded.

Notes

- 1) See, for example, Peter Jackson, 1989, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*. Chapter One, "The heritage of cultural geography," pp. 9-24. Price, M. & Lewis, M., 1993, "The Reinvention of Cultural Geography," *AAAG*, 83(1), pp.1-17.
- 2) For a review of the history of defining culture, especially, in anthropology, see Milton Singer, 1980, "the concept of culture," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, pp.527-543
- 3) Although Carl Sauer wrote many articles and books, what he has pursued is quite clearly expressed albeit in casual manner, in James Parsons, ed. "Now This Matter of Cultural Geography: Notes from Carl Sauer's Last Seminar at Berkeley," in Martin Kenzer, ed., *Carl O. Sauer. A Tribute*, 1987, pp. 153-163. His inclination toward 'man-nature' relationship is explicit throughout the book. *Land and Life* (Leighly, ed. 1963), a collection of Sauer's writings
- 4) Sauer died in 1975. James Duncan (1980) criticized Carl Sauer and his Berkeley students for reifying culture and giving an almighty explanatory power to the invisible, mere concept culture
- 5) As Leslie White explained in his book, *The Concept of Culture* (1973), many anthropologists believe that symbolization makes a human being different from 'animals.' In recent years, culture as system of meaning became a popular definition of culture in anthropology.
- 6) Although Anthony Giddens, in his book *Sociology* (1989), defined culture as 'whole way of life,' his usage of the term culture in the same book reveals that he clearly distinguishes culture and society. He also assigns separate chapters for politics, education, economic activities, etc. Giddens molded out three major structures, i.e. signification, domination and legitimation. These three structures do not exactly match with the social, economic, or political. His usage of the term culture revealed in his writings shows that he considers culture as related to but distinctive from the social, economic, and political.
- 7) For example Karl Marx wrote under the subtitle 'Alienated Labour' in his manuscript (1844) of *Economics*, "It [=labour] produces culture [for the rich], but also imbecility and cretinism for the worker." (Mc Lellan, ed., p 80) In this usage we can see that he viewed culture as something luxurious wrongfully monopolized by the bourgeoisie.
- 8) Although the diagrams do not exactly match each other, Odum's diagram in the book *Basic Ecology* (E. Odum, 1983, 492) shows that his basic perspective is that of figure 6 in this article
- 9) Figure 7 is reproduced from the Ph.D. dissertation of the author (Jeongman Lee, 1991; 9).

Bibliography

- Duncan, J., 1980, "The Superorganic in American Cultural Geography," *AAAG*, Vol. 70, No. 2, pp. 181-198.
- Foote, K. et al., eds., 1994, *Re-Reading Cultural Geography*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Giddens, A., 1989, *Sociology*, London: Polity Press.
- Gregory, D., 1994, "Structuration Theory," in Johnston, R. J., ed, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 3rd ed., pp. 600-603.
- Hawley, A., 1950, *Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure*, New York: The Ronald Press Co.
- Jackson, P., 1989, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*, London: Unwin Hyman Ltd.
- Kuhn, T., 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second ed., Enlarged, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, Jeongman, 1991, "The Generation of Sacrifice: Modernization and Korean Farmers," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Leighly, J., ed., 1963, *Land and Life: A Selection from*

- the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, Berkeley: University Of California Press.
- Marx, K., 1967, *Capital: Volume 1, A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, New York: International Publishers.
- McLellan, D., 1977, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Odum, E., 1983, *Basic Ecology*, New York: Saunders College Publishing.
- Parsons, J. ed., 1987, "Now This Matter of Cultural Geography: Notes from Carl Sauer's Last Seminar at Berkeley," in Martin Kenzer, ed., *Carl O. Sauer: A Tribute*, Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, pp. 153-163.
- Price, M. & Lewis, M., 1993, "The Reinvention of Cultural Geography," *AAAG*, Vol. 83, No. 1, pp. 1-17.
- Said, E., 1993, *Culture and Imperialism*, Alfred A. Knopf Co.
- Singer, M., 1980, " the concept of culture," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, The Macmillan Co. & Free Press, Vol. 3, pp. 527-543.
- White, L., 1973, *The Concept of Culture*, Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co.