

James Hunter

An Alternative View of Culture and Cultural Change in Eleven Propositions

Seven Propositions on Culture

1. Culture is a system of truth claims and moral obligations.

These truth claims and moral demands do not exist as a set of propositions... They are embedded within narratives that often have overlapping themes... Most of what really counts, in terms of what shapes us and directs us, we are not aware of; it operates far below what most of us are capable of consciously grasping.

2. Culture is a product of history.

Culture is highly resistant and durable over time; it's less an invention of the will and more a slow product of history; the relationship of a culture to its history makes it "lumbering and erratic at the same time"

3. Culture is intrinsically dialectical.

Two forms of this dialectic: 1—ideas and institutions 2—individuals and institutions

4. Culture is a resource, and, as such, a form of power.

(Ex: a winner of a Nobel Prize in literature has more symbolic capital than a romance novelist; The New York Times has more symbolic capital than The Dallas Morning News; Yale University has more symbolic capital than Bob Jones Univ.)

Accumulating symbolic capital translates into a form of power and influence in terms of credibility and the power to define reality.

5. Cultural production and symbolic capital are stratified in a fairly rigid structure of "center" and "periphery."

With cultural capital, it's quality not quantity that matters. (Ex: USA Today may sell more newspapers than The New York Times but the latter is at the center of cultural production.)

6. Culture is generated within networks.

The key actor in history is not individual genius but rather the network and the new institutions that are created out of those networks

7. Culture is neither autonomous nor fully coherent.

Because one cannot separate culture from its institutional spheres, culture is never fully autonomous. Given the tensions and internal antagonism of perspectives within culture, it can never be fully coherent.

Ideas Sometimes Have Consequences: Four Propositions on Cultural Change

8. Cultures change from the top down, rarely from the bottom up

Cultural change is most enduring when it penetrates the structure of our imagination, frameworks of knowledge and discussion, the perception of everyday reality.

9. Change is typically initiated by elites who are outside of the centermost positions of prestige

Foxes and Lions: Lions are at the center of power and crave social stability. Foxes seek to subvert and introduce new ideas. Cultural change happens in that tension between lions and foxes. Foxes become the lions and new foxes emerge. The foxes still are in elite institutions, just not the top tier elite institutions.

10. World-changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the institutions they lead overlap

When elite networks from different fields come together in common cause, change results; but not fast.

11. Cultures change, but rarely if ever without a fight

The struggle is never a fair fight, but it is a fight. Conflict is one of the permanent fixtures of cultural change. It is typically through different manifestations of conflict and contest that change in culture is forged.

“Culture is endlessly complex and difficult, and it is highly resistant to our passion to change it, however well intentioned and heroic our efforts may be. But with that said, one thing is clear: Christians will not engage the culture effectively, much less hope to change it, without attention to the factors mentioned here.”