

Making Culture, Changing Society: Anthropology and the Culture Concept

Tony Bennett, University of Western Sydney

Critical engagements with the politics of knowledge have changed significantly as the 'moment of theory' has given way to the 'moment of method'. Rather than being approached abstractly as a matter of the influence of 'ideas', questions concerning the politics of knowledge now more typically concern the impact of 'knowledge assemblages' in which the role of theories and concepts is assessed alongside that of the methods, instruments and devices with which they are entangled. My interest in the relations between 'making culture' and 'changing society' concerns the light that these perspectives throw on the operations of the cultural disciplines. How do their methods and procedures 'make culture' as a set of concepts, instruments and devices? How are different versions of culture, thus understood, mobilised in programs of social change? I shall broach these questions in relation to a formative moment in the history of the concept of culture as a way of life: its development in early twentieth century American anthropology, from the work of Franz Boas through to that of Ruth Benedict. The 'culture concept' associated with this tradition was shaped by the legacies of earlier aesthetic and anthropological definitions of culture and by the material practices of fieldwork among Native Americans. But it was a concept that found its practical application in programs of 'changing society' related to the early stages of American multiculturalism. An understanding of this earlier history of the concept of culture as a way of life complicates the position it has subsequently been accorded within cultural studies.