

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AS KEYWORD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Institutional culture has become a buzzword in recent discussions of higher education in South Africa. Indeed, as references to it proliferate, there is a growing sense that institutional culture may well be the key to the successful transformation of higher education in South Africa. Or – to frame the matter as forcefully as do many recent analysts – it is simply the massive fact and bulk of institutional culture that may be the main obstacle in the way of the successful transformation of South Africa’s higher education system. So it is that casual reference to institutional culture features in ministerial announcements and the Mission Statements of leading universities; that it is becoming increasingly the focal point of research surveys, articles, and dissertations; and that institutional culture is used to explain or explain away phenomena as different (or as related) as marking and manslaughter.¹

In the currently dominant deployment of the term, institutional culture is used to refer to what is perceived as the overwhelming ‘whiteness’ of higher education in South Africa.² As Dean of Education at Pretoria University – perhaps South Africa’s leading controversialist in higher education matters – Jonathan Jansen put it recently, ‘the last frontier in the quest for social integration and non-racial communities in former white institutions will always be this hard-to-define phenomenon called “institutional culture”’ (Jansen, 2004:1). In this now dominant usage, institutional culture figures as a kind of shorthand term for the powerful currents of racial feeling still active in South African society a decade after formal democratisation. Yet, as Jansen indicates, for all the apparent confidence with which the term is used, there still remains a troubling sense that institutional culture remains ‘a hard to define phenomenon’ (Jansen, 2004: 1), or, in the words of another recent commentator, a ‘slippery notion indeed’ (Ensor, 2002: 285).

The starting point for this chapter is precisely this slipperiness, one that can perhaps best be defined as a certain tension between the term’s immediate appeal, and an underlying uneasiness regarding its precise referent and related conceptual coherence. Why is it that the phrase institutional culture can come so readily to the lips, yet at the same time appear so difficult to pin down, once and for all, in a singular definition?

The method of this analysis is derived from a particular stance within contemporary literary and cultural studies, a stance referred to elsewhere by the same author as that of a ‘critical literacy’. In this sense of the term, ‘critical literacy’ refers to the analysis and interpretation of ideas and representations in the necessarily intricate combination of their historical, theoretical and textual

1 See, for instance, Kader Asmal’s comment on President Mbeki’s meeting with Higher Education Working Group in Pretoria, Thursday 11 December 2003: ‘Among other challenges that lay ahead, said Prof. Asmal, were transformation, curriculum development, and cultural justice. The latter entails building a more inclusive institutional culture that embraced language and cultural diversity among staff and students’ (News@sameansciz.c.za); Erasmus & de Wet (2003); Ismail (2000 and 2002); Jansen (2000); Ndebele (2004); Ruth (n.d.); Steyn & van Zyl (2001); du Toit (1996). The use of closed marking books at UCT, and much of the internal public commentary on the Hahn murder case at UCT where a professor was attacked and killed by a former Ph.D. student also deploy the term.

2 ‘Whiteness’ is a term developed in critical multicultural writing in the USA to designate the blindness of white culture to its own assumptions. In South Africa, the term has notably been picked up by Melissa Steyn, and forms the basis of her study of institutional culture at UCT. Cf also Robinson (n.d.), and, for further details, see below.

dimensions. In this perspective, 'institutional culture' is treated less as an assured or given concept, one with a definite set of easily specifiable contents, and more as a 'keyword', an item of contested vocabulary in a conflictual and disputed social process. In this sense, the very fact that 'institutional culture' is a phrase on the lips of many educationalists may point to the difficulty of the term, as the term names and, by naming, seeks to control a contested reality.³ The term 'keyword', in turn, is taken from the work of the British literary and cultural critic, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) and a brief discussion of his use of it may help to ground the analysis that follows.⁴

Williams has been described as 'the single most important critic of post-war Britain' (Eagleton, 1984: 108). Williams probably did the most of his generation of post-war critics in Britain to emphasize the links between culture and society. Taken as a whole, his work articulated the possibility of extending the powerful analytic tools developed in the study of literature to the broader processes of cultural and political life in ways that are highly relevant to public discourse in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords, first published in 1976, represents something like a central work in Williams's *oeuvre*.⁵ Subtitled a 'vocabulary of culture and society', it extends the discussion of the changing meanings of words and concepts under the pressures of social and political change. While Williams's classic study *Culture and Society 1780-1950* had focused on the shifting senses of words such as industry, democracy, class, art and culture (Williams, 1979: 13), *Keywords* extended the same method of historical semantics to a much broader series of terms, ranging from 'aesthetic' and 'alienation' to 'work' and 'science'. In both books – as in Williams's work as a whole – the guiding principle remains the same. Attention to the fact that 'our vocabulary, the language we use to inquire into and to negotiate our actions, is no secondary factor, but a practical and radical element itself' (Williams, 1979: 323).

A useful starting point for this investigation of institutional culture is Williams's entry on the word 'culture' in his study *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983). Culture, he writes, 'is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1983: 87); and he offers a survey and summary of its various senses and definitions over the past three hundred years. Much of the discussion is generally useful for any careful consideration of institutional culture, but what, in particular, is taken from it is less its content than its form.⁶ For the important stress in Williams's account falls on the fact of this variety, with his noting how 'it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought' (Williams, 1983: 87). 'Faced by [the]

3 A similarly sceptical stance underlies much of Adorno's work. See, for instance, his distrust of what he refers to as the 'harmonistic tendency' in much sociological analysis, what he describes as the 'tendency to explain away the constitutive contradictions on which our society rests, to conjure them out of existence' (Adorno [1968] 2000:7). It may well be that in some senses 'institutional culture' corresponds to this 'harmonistic tendency'. And compare footnote 13 below.

4 For much of this, see Higgins (1999), and, with special reference to Williams's *Keywords*, Higgins (2003). Compare also Christopher Norris's astute comments (Norris, 1997). The recent series *Keywords: For a Different Kind of Globalization*, edited by Nadia Tazi and published in South Africa by Double Storey books may also pay oblique tribute to Williams.

5 References here are taken from the second, revised and expanded edition of 1983.

6 In particular, his attention to the metaphorical shift in the use of the term, from its original meaning as the tending and cultivation of crops, to the 'process of human development', and used with reference to various forms of education, is particularly valuable. Also useful is the attention to Herder's criticism of Euro centrism in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-1791), where he asserts that the 'very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature' (cited Williams, 1983:89). For a useful selection and presentation of key texts representing Enlightenment views of race, including a relevant portion of Herder's study and Immanuel Kant's critical response to it, see Eze (1997), especially pp. 65-78.

complex and still active use of the word', he writes, 'it is easy to react by selecting one "true" or "proper" or "scientific" sense and dismissing other senses as loose or confused' (1983: 91); but, he adds,

In general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complex of senses indicates a complex argument...[and] within this complex argument there are fundamentally opposed as well as effectively overlapping positions...these arguments and questions cannot be resolved by reducing the complexity of actual usage. (1983: 91)

From this densely argued perspective, what makes institutional culture so 'hard to define' is not, in the end, simply the reality it names. It is rather the fact that naming that reality is part and parcel of a series of complex arguments about the future of higher education in South Africa in which there are (in Williams's terms) 'fundamentally opposed as well as effectively overlapping positions'. Rather than seek to settle on a single 'true, proper or scientific' meaning to the term, it is then precisely the 'range and overlap of meanings' at work in the existing uses of institutional culture that form the focus of this investigation. In emphasizing these, one aim in this project is to contest a pervasive mode of writing in higher education discourse. Much current writing tends to deploy a vocabulary that tends to represent change (perhaps in some distantly Hegelian fashion) as an organic process, and this effectively works to naturalize what is better understood as a complex and disputed social action.⁷

This chapter, therefore, examines several stages in what might be called the career of the term, although the sense of career is here less the usual one as progress and natural development to an assured professional outcome, and more the root sense of career as a swerving, shifting, or troping. The first part thus examines the emergence of the term in its (apparently) cognate form of organizational culture in business studies writing in the early 1980s, and some of the dynamics engaged in its first uses in higher education discourse in the mid to late 1980s, while the second looks at two major forms of its deployment in South Africa.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

William G. Tierney was one of the first writers to put the term to work in discussions of higher education management. In his influential article, 'Organizational Culture in Higher Education', he observed that the term organizational culture first emerged in the 1980s 'as a topic of central concern for those who study organizations' (Tierney, 1988: 2). Tierney mentions books, such as William Ouchi's *Theory Z* (1981), Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* (1982), Dale and Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures* and Edgar H. Schein's *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (1985) as standard works in a well-established field (Tierney, 1988: 2). This account focuses particularly on Schein's 1985 study, as it usefully embodies and exemplifies the constitutive contradictions at the heart of much writing on organizational culture.

In general terms, it is important to recognize that the emergence of a new term or idea, such as organizational culture, is always an active response to a changing social and political reality. 'Active response' is stressed, because it is important to understand the term 'response' not as

⁷ For further examples and discussions of this 'pessimism of the will' see Higgins (2000a, 2000b and 2003b).

some passive and automatic registration of a changing reality, but as an active attempt to come to grips with that reality and, by naming it, to work on it. The idea of organizational culture came into focus as a distinct object of analysis in business studies at a very particular economic and ideological moment. This was the moment of crisis of the late 1970s and 1980s in which the perceived pressures of a global economic downturn led to a consequent awareness of, and emphasis on, the fact of increasing levels of global competition.⁸ In particular, for US business, the term came into focus as a way of examining and dealing with the sudden disturbing visibility of Japan as a major competitor in the global economy in areas (electronics, motorcar manufacture) in which the US had previously prided itself on its dominance and superiority. Japan's newly visible success held up an unflattering mirror to what was perceived as the USA's comparative weakness and its increasing lack of competitiveness in many areas of manufacturing (this, at a moment when the economy as a whole was undergoing a major shift from manufacturing to finance as the focus of its interest and activity).⁹

In the immediate post-war period, as America's Occupation Authority helped in the rebuilding of its shattered economy, Japan figured in the US social imaginary as a figure of fun, a mere 'copycat culture' incapable of creativity and innovation, and no threat to US economic dominance.¹⁰ With the suddenness that perhaps characterizes all cultural articulation of economic and political process, all that changed with the recognition in the early 1980s that the Japanese economy had become the third largest in the world (Pascale & Athos, 1981: 20), and of the fact that America was running a particularly large trade deficit with Japan.¹¹ By the 1980s, Japanese business culture became an object of anxious speculation and emulation, disturbing enough to feature in numerous mass cultural narratives, as well as in writing on business studies itself.¹²

Within business studies themselves, organizational culture was the ground of anxious comparison between Japanese and American business practices. In *Theory Z*, William Ouchi shows (to quote the subtitle of this seminal analysis of Japanese business practices) 'how American business can meet the Japanese challenge' (Ouchi, 1981). Ouchi argues that much of Japanese business success came from its different organizational culture, and the ways that culture produced more committed, energetic and innovative employees. In response, a whole series of analysts sought to bring the strengths and weaknesses of US business into focus through a consideration of organizational culture. Abegglen and Stalk argue that Japanese organizational culture, the *kaisha*, 'has gone farther than others to minimize conflicting interests and to integrate each of the members of the group into a whole that works in the common interest' (Abegglen & Stalk, 1985: 182), while Pascale and Athos sought to 'point out how our managerial blind spots [are] related to American culture and society' (Pascale & Athos, 1981: 22). While, in contrast to Ouchi, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman found that '[b]usiness performance in the United States has deteriorated badly at least compared to that of Japan' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: 41), nonetheless the 'excellent companies [in the USA]...had cultures as strong as any Japanese organization' (1982: xxi-xxii). All in all, as Edgar Schein puts it in his landmark study, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, the 'discovery that some Japanese companies could compete

8 For a useful global survey of this moment, see Hobsbawm, 1994, especially Chapter 14 'The Crisis Decades'.

9 As Sir Peter Parker put it, 'Japanese competitiveness has become one of the paramount economic events of the post-war world. Nowadays our mirror on the wall is no longer giving the West the flattering answers of the fairy-tale' (Parker, 1986:vii). I say apparently deepening in the sense that the USA – where the phase of writings on organization culture are strongest – nonetheless remained by far the world's largest economy. For a useful comparison between US and Japanese economies in the period, see Fulcher (2004), especially pages 64-81.

10 For a deft critique of such attitudes at the height of their acceptability, see Philippe K. Dick's alternative-future novel, *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick 1964).

11 Pascale and Athos noted in 1982 that if present trends continued Japan would be the wealthiest country in the world shortly after 2000 (Pascale & Athos, 1982).

12 Eric von Lustbader's Nicholas Linneer's novels trace the rise of Japanese business dominance through the Second World War to the present day, beginning with the best-selling *The Ninja* in 1982; Michael Crichton – ever alert to changing trends and interests – produced *Rising Sun* in 1992, with its Japanese motto 'Business is War' standing as epigraph to the novel (and this was made into a successful film by Ridley Scott in 1994). The success and complex reception of the recent film *Lost in Translation* testifies to an ongoing cultural engagement with the dynamics (however fantasized in these cases) of what business studies named organizational culture.

successfully with their United States counterparts suddenly focused our attention on both national and organizational culture' (Schein, 1985: x).

In practical terms, the new focus on comparative organizational cultures seemed to promise or to offer an extra and crucial dimension in the search for ever-increasing efficiency in a situation of ever-increasing competitiveness. Peters and Waterman have presented one of the most influential cases for the importance of organizational culture. In their view, the idea of organizational culture is useful, because it enabled a challenge to the hitherto single emphasis in managerial theory on the importance of rational planning strategy. While key writers, such as A. D. Chandler, had established the importance of a rational planning strategy to the success of American business in the first half of the twentieth century, the crisis and reconfiguration of the new global economy suggested the need to turn away from received wisdom and to emphasize the equal if not greater importance of a more cultural understanding of business structures and management in the workplace itself.¹³ For Peters and Waterman, the 'rational approach to management misses a lot' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: 30). The idea of the rational 'has come to have a very narrow definition in business analysis', they argue. 'It is the right answer, but it's missing all of that messy human stuff, such as good strategies that do not allow for persistent old habits, implementation barriers, and simple human inconsistencies' (1982: 31).

What Peters and Waterman found – in their investigation of the actual practices of a number of stable and profitable companies – was that efficient cost analysis alone (as argued by figures such as Chandler) could not explain their comparative success. Only something like organizational culture could: the recognition and working with the largely unconscious structures of work and production in the business environment. Once this recognition was in place, the control and management of organizational culture then promised to give a sharpened competitive edge to companies as they operated in an ever more competitive world economy. Organizational culture therefore presented a new dimension to the process of increasing competitiveness and market-share: not simply the product, or better processes of production, but a new dimension of improved management and control.¹⁴

The promise was of a new dimension of improved management, control and efficiency, a deeper penetration of Weberian rationality. But the question arises as to the extent to which it was or could have been fulfilled. The question, in turn, gives rise to what might be called the constitutive contradiction of the literature on organizational culture, one that is not only carried through, but is also even exacerbated in much of the thinking on the role and place of institutional culture in higher education debates.

This constitutive contradiction is perhaps best grasped by paying attention to the ways in which the instrumental promise of the term gives way to a nuanced and inevitable realization of the real difficulties of intervening in the complex reality that organizational culture names. It comes through most strongly in the representation and figuring of the nature and scope of leadership in successful organizations.

¹³ For standard and influential accounts, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962) and his later *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Harvard UP, 1990). Peters and Waterman (1982) credit Chandler with 'the very powerful notion that structure follows strategy...[a] dictum that had the makings of a universal truth' (1982: 4).

¹⁴ In this sense, the idea owed its growth and development to the forces so well-described by Bourdieu, who noted how an 'important part of orthodox sociological discourse owes its immediate social success to the fact that it answers dominant demand which often comes down to a demand for rational instruments for management and domination or to a demand for a "scientific" legitimating of the spontaneous sociology of those in the dominant [group]' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 50-51). Cf. Adorno's comments on the 'harmonistic tendency' in footnote 3 above.

2.1. LEADERSHIP VERSUS CULTURE

Edgar Schein's *Organizational Culture and Leadership – A Dynamic View* (Schein, 1985) – a standard reference point for work in the area – embodies with great force what this chapter calls the constitutive contradiction, which is seen at work in most uses of organizational culture. In large part, this is because of Schein's deliberate foregrounding of the issue of leadership within organizational culture, and the powerful role he ascribes or wishes to give to leadership. Indeed, it is Schein's assertions that 'the unique and essential function of leadership is the manipulation of culture' (Schein 1985: 317), or that the '*only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture*' (1985: 2; emphasis in the original) that are the most cited phrases from his work. These clearly provided a selling point for the book as well as the central rationale for Schein's own consultancy practices. Yet even in these strong formulations of the study's central assertion, there is already a crucial tension or hesitation present in the real differences and tensions between 'create and manage', since to create is to create anew or start afresh, while to manage is usually to work with something that already exists.

In fact, the substance of Schein's study always points to difficulties and contradictions in the idea of leadership that the assertions about it confidently or blandly dismiss. For all the emphasis on the power of leadership to create culture, the emphasis finally falls rather on the difficulties and limits of control, and the consequent need for managing culture, in the more awkward senses of having it to deal with, or putting up with it. 'All cultural definitions emphasize that culture is the product of shared meanings among group members, but the process by which something comes to be shared by a group is still not well understood', he admits (Schein, 1982: 313). He finds a paradox: that 'leaders create cultures, but cultures, in turn, create their next generation of leaders' (*ibid.*). Schein repeats this many times: the 'unique and essential function of leadership is the manipulation of culture' (317) and 'Culture is created in the first instance by the action of leaders; culture is also strengthened and embedded by leaders' (316-17). But there are also serious limits to all of this: 'Do not assume that culture can be manipulated like other matters under the control of managers' (314). Yet the substance of this interesting study is devoted to the largely unconscious aspects of culture, and the difficulty of raising these to awareness. In this process, the leader is caught up as well. The point is that a business needs a therapist to deal with the largely unconscious aspects of organizational culture. The leader may lead; but often in an unconscious and self-contradictory way that can benefit from the insights of a therapeutic advisor.

All in all, Schein's model of the dynamic process, which is organizational culture, is deeply indebted to the US appropriation of psychoanalysis (now generally referred to as 'ego psychology') in which – to recall Freud's words – '*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*': 'where id was, there shall ego be'.¹⁵ This is apparent in Schein's own oft-cited definition of the terms and goals of his work, and how in it, the term culture 'should be reserved for the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate

¹⁵ Freud's famous phrase is taken from the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. (Freud, 1966, *Standard Edition* XXII: 80). It became one of the assertions that the school of Lacan did most to challenge or complicate. For a brief discussion, see Higgins (1990).

unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to a group’s problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration. These come to be taken for granted because they solve those problems repeatedly and reliably’ (Schein, 1982: 6). With its emphasis on the unconscious as ‘learned responses to...survival in an external environment’ and ‘problems of internal integration’, Schein’s account falls squarely within the vocabulary and conceptual world of the ego psychology dominant in the period.

Yet, the past thirty years of work in cultural theory has contested the findings and assumptions of ego psychology as perhaps over-confident or misguided in its assumptions concerning the possibility of a cure or a full taming of the unconscious. From Lacan’s insistence on the illusory nature of any integrative idea of the ego psychology to the labile complexity of recent social theorists, such as Slavoj Zizek, the general trend in cultural analysis has been to point to the need for a much more complex appropriation of psychoanalysis for the understanding of social and political process than US psychology – at least in the 1950s – could dream of.¹⁶ From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that many of Schein’s actual findings in his book tend to undermine rather than substantiate his claims for the power of leadership. In practice, Schein’s attention to the psychodynamics of organizational behaviour – present in the subtitle to the work, ‘Organizational Culture and Leadership – A Dynamic View’ – tends to undermine his (doubtless ideological) commitment to the leadership model, which seems to promise a straightforward implementation of intention. Despite his frequent and repeated emphasis on the power of leadership, a great deal of the substance of his study is taken up with detailing the limits of leadership when dealing with organizational culture. These limits are in part internal: the leader doesn’t know what he wants, and acts in contradictory ways; and partly inter-relational. In the end, the key point that emerges from a careful reading of Schein is one that works against much of his general claims. It is the simple fact that the leader cannot be regarded as being outside the process, and able to use the organization as if it were an instrument of his will; he (as pre-feminist writing has it) is better regarded as one of several interacting elements.

The founding contradiction in Schein’s view of organizational culture – the tension between a desired image of an omnipotent leadership and the messy reality of institutional complexity – is common to most discussions of organizational culture. In the next section of the argument, the question of how much of the same promise and, with it, the same structure of internal contradiction is carried over and reproduced – perhaps even with increasing force, as the term organizational culture is transposed into higher education discourse. Here, it

16 In this, ‘Lacan’s ‘re-reading of Freud’ is of paramount importance, with his findings reaching a much wider public after the publication of his selected writings in 1966 and their translation into English in 1972. It is probably not exaggerated to say that cultural theory and analysis in the last thirty years has been devoted to undermining too over-confident a take on Freud’s slogan. See, for instance, Ragland-Sullivan’s assertion: ‘Lacan’s campaign against ego psychology manifests itself throughout his thought. He naturally opposed the idea that there is a whole self that serves as an agent of strength, synthesis, mastery, integration, and adaptation to realistic norms’ (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986: 119). In many ways, the work of Slovenian cultural and political theorist Slavoj Zizek can be seen as elaborating the implications of Lacan’s rejection of ego psychology for social and ideological theory. Homer puts the point succinctly: ‘We like to think of our society as naturally and harmoniously evolving over time and through the democratic consensus of the people. For Zizek this is not the case: all societies are founded upon a traumatic moment of social conflict and the social ideological fantasy masks this constitutive antagonism’ (Homer, 2005: 113).

gradually takes on the form of the apparently cognate term, institutional culture. Here, 'apparently cognate' is used as a means of referring to the elision of the differences between educational institutions and business organizations operated by neo-liberal thought, noted by several commentators.¹⁷

3. FROM ORGANIZATIONAL TO INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

W. G. Tierney was one of the first scholars to propose the extension of the term 'organizational culture' to cover the work and running of universities as organizations in his essay 'Organizational Culture in Higher Education: Defining the Essentials' (Tierney, 1988). What is striking in his account, as in much of the related writing in which the term organizational culture is taken into higher education debates, is the failure or reluctance to name the external pressures that necessitate the importation of the new term. In this, it is, as has been seen, quite unlike the proponents of the term in business studies, who explicitly justify the need for the new coinage in terms of the threat of Japanese competition. This represents an internalization of external pressures in higher education discourse that perfectly embodies the pressures of hegemonic thinking. For hegemonic thinking is at its most visible when it seeks to make invisible its own enabling or directive presuppositions.

So it is that Tierney describes the aim of his work as seeking 'to provide a working framework to diagnose culture in colleges and universities so that distinct problems can be overcome' (Tierney, 1988: 2); 'to point out how administrators might utilize the concept of culture to help solve specific administrative problems' (1988: 3); but the problems themselves are never discussed as such. All in all, he suggests 'leaders in higher education can benefit from understanding their institutions as cultural entities' (5). Administrators, he writes, 'tend to recognize their organization's culture only when they have transgressed its bounds and severe conflicts or adversarial relationships ensue' (1988: 4); but it is never quite clear just what the content of these conflicts or the stakes in these adversarial relationships are.

In this perspective, and as the vocabulary of diagnosis and problem-solving indicates, the idea of organizational culture is an instrumental and prophylactic one, in ways familiar from Schein's account. The proper understanding of organizational culture is there to prevent or at least smooth over difficulties in managing change in institutions of higher education, and it is the process of managing change that provides the central justifying element for the application of the new term. As will be seen, the detail of the argument belies the instrumental claims made for the concept of institutional culture, in ways that repeat and reduplicate the tensions of Schein's arguments. In Tierney's article, the constitutive contradiction is figured in the very specific place, position and perspective that Tierney wishes to grant to or assume in the successful administrator.

¹⁷ While business organizations are constituted by their role in the production and distribution of economic goods and services to a competitive market, educational institutions are traditionally defined by their role in the production and distribution of cultural capital to a society for the public good. Robert Young (1992) argues the case forcefully. Peters and Waterman cite Selznick on the differences covered up in the substitution of one term for another: 'The term "organization" thus suggests a certain bareness, a lean, no-nonsense system of consciously coordinated activities...An "institution", on the other hand, is much more nearly a natural product of social needs and pressures—a responsive, adaptive organism' (cited in Peters & Waterman, 1982: 98).

This comes through in something like a moment of self-conscious acknowledgement, on Tierney's part, of the metaphorical nature of his whole enterprise. He writes of the anthropological nature of his study of how, in an influential definition, an 'organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it' (Tierney, 1988: 3). '[W]e look at an organization', he writes, 'as a traditional anthropologist would study a particular village or clan' (4).

However, the similarity which this comparison invokes and promotes – that the researcher, and following him or her, the administrator, should stand in relation to his or her organization or institution as an anthropologist stands in relation to a village or clan – conceals at least one major difference, for the administrator or leader to whom Tierney's essay is addressed is himself or herself also a part of the village or clan; likewise, the administrator is a part of, rather than an observer of, the institution. Taken at face value, the position that Tierney establishes for the administrator or leader is, however, less that of the anthropologist than that of the colonizer, since the aim of the cultural understanding is to subordinate the village or tribe to the will of the administrator. What is revealed/concealed in the notion is the way in which the idea of institutional culture is related to questions of power and control in institutions of higher education. This is the unacknowledged centre of the discussion; and it is a centre interestingly at odds with its substance.

For, what is striking in Tierney's account of his research at 'Family State College', is that the best possibilities for positive change and transformation rely on the pre-existing disposition of the organizational culture. It is because Family State College has a pre-existing 'strong organizational culture' (Tierney, 1988: 17), one that enjoys the values of open communication and collegiality, and already respects its constitutive members, assuming that change and growth were experienced there as positive aspects. Something of the same paradox is apparent in the reports of other researchers in this area. To 'effect orderly change in the organization without creating unnecessary conflict' (19), the best thing is to have a pre-existing 'strong organizational culture'.

In this sense, organizational culture is double-sided, and is looked at in two ways or from two different and opposed perspectives. For administrators, organizational culture names the resistance that has to be overcome for successful change to occur, the theoretical premise is that by naming it, it can be overcome more easily. At the same time, a strong organizational culture is one to be desired if conflict is to be avoided. But – or so Tierney's analysis suggests – this aspect or dimension can only be seen from a 'native' perspective, one located within the institution and not (as in his figuration of the problem) from without, from the colonizer's 'anthropological' perspective. This constitutive contradiction – that is observed at work in Schein, and has now been seen again in Tierney – seems, in fact, to be a feature of the whole discourse on organizational culture.

4. INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE(S) IN SOUTH AFRICA

The brief and schematic survey of prior uses of institutional culture sets the scene for a comparative analysis of the term's deployment in South Africa. Comparative analysis is useful, since it helps to establish where there is continuity between local and global uses of the term. Where there are divergences, these are likely to signal new content and emphases within the use of the term.

In fact, many of the changes to the higher education system post-1994 correspond to the changes in higher education imposed worldwide by the new hegemonic 'common sense' of neo-liberalism, and some discussions of institutional culture in South Africa refer directly to these changes, as is seen later in this paper.¹⁸ At the same time, what marks out much discussion of institutional culture in South Africa is the extent to which it is necessarily permeated by the difficult questions presented by racial identities in a post-apartheid, post-colonial society.¹⁹

In the first – and currently dominant – usage, institutional culture names or refers to the perceived 'whiteness' of academic culture, although it is often not clear whether this whiteness is ascribed to 'European' academic culture in general, or to the particular (and various) ecologies of inter-subjective exchanges in campus academic and social life at institutions as different as the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria, or the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University. In the second, respectively, institutional culture names the contested terrain of power and authority between administrators and academics as South Africa adopts and adapts global initiatives in the neo-liberal reform of universities.

4.1. INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AS WHITENESS

The current, dominant sense of the term in South Africa understands the institutional culture of higher education institutions through the lens of 'whiteness critique'. In this perspective, it is argued, institutional culture is – above all – experienced by black staff and students as the overwhelming 'whiteness' of academic culture. 'Whiteness' here refers to the ensemble of cultural and subjective factors that together constitute the unspoken dominance in higher education of Western, European or Anglo-Saxon values and attitudes as these are reproduced and inflected in South Africa. This 'whiteness' is or can be experienced as an alienating and disempowering sense of not being fully recognized in or by the institution, and a consequent impossibility of feeling 'at home' within it. In this regard, all the well-known pressures and dilemmas of African and other post-colonial universities come into play around the now central idea of institutional culture, and help to lend the term its considerable power and resonance in contemporary discussions.²⁰

18 See, for instance, Orr (1997:62): 'the latest policy proposals...tend to give more emphasis to the "demands" of "international competitiveness", conceptualizing human resource development in a narrow "economistic" way'; Subotsky (1997); and Bertelsen (1998:150): 'while the rhetoric of 'transformation' remains plausibly democratic, the change that this language is used to legitimate is essentially market-driven'; and, more generally, Higgins (2000a).

19 For two groundbreaking discussions, which place such questions in their necessarily historical and theoretical context, see Mamdani (1996) and Mbembe (2001).

Attempts to counter this alienation come through in a variety of ways. At the most general levels, some advocate a wholesale process of ‘Africanization’, while others call for the development and implementation of policies of ‘cultural justice’ at the university.²¹ More specifically, a number of research projects in and including the implementation of transformation at universities are now focusing on the ethnic and existential dimensions of institutional culture.²² For the purposes of this submission, Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl’s study, “‘Like that Statue at Jammie Stairs...’: Some student perceptions and experiences of institutional culture at the University of Cape Town in 1999’, may serve as an exemplary account in its characteristic mixture of immediate appeal yet theoretical weakness.

First published by the Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies of Southern Africa in 2001 (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001), the report has done much to establish the idea of ‘whiteness’ as the new referent for institutional culture, or at the very least, as the single most important element of the institutional culture of universities. The study continues to serve as a reference or even starting-point – for many new researchers in the field. In so doing, it embodies both the strengths and the weaknesses of a new usage in which the content of the term comes to refer almost exclusively to the racial dimensions or aspects of university life, with some emphasis on how these factors impact on pedagogic communication.

The core definitions of the report refer to, or confidently assume, the general understanding of institutional culture as ‘the prevailing ethos – the deep-seated set of norms assumptions and values that predominate and pervade most of the environment’ (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: x). Institutional culture is the

“sum total” effects of the values, attitudes, styles of interaction, collective memories - the “way of life” of the university, known by those who work and study in the university environment, through their lived experience. (2001: 20)

As ‘sum total’, institutional culture has the capacity to refer to any and every aspect of experience at university, from parking to policing, from the sites and names of buildings to any and every joke told on campus (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: 27, 28, 42).

At the centre of Steyn and van Zyl’s study is the assertion that ‘whiteness’ stands as the unacknowledged core of UCT’s institutional culture.²³ In the Abstract that heads the document, the claim is that ‘it is clear that in students’ experiences “whiteness” still largely characterizes the institutional culture’ (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: n.p.). In line with this, they argue that the

20 In this regard, Castells’ warning regarding self-destructive conflicts in post-colonial universities may be apposite. In a report to the World Bank Seminar on Higher Education and Development in 1991, Castells had noted that the specificity of university systems in the third world lies in their colonial past. This specificity, he writes, ‘emphasizes their ideological dimension in the first stage of their post-independence period’ (Castells, 2001: 212), and he warns that ‘the contradictions between academic freedom and political militancy, as well as the drive for modernisation and the preservation of cultural identity, have been a fundamental cause for the loss of the best academic talent in most Third World countries’ (213).

21 See, for instance, Chirevo V. Kwenda on cultural justice (Kwenda, 2003), and on Africanization, amongst others, see Seepe’s call to place ‘the African world-view at the centre of analysis’ (Seepe 2000:59) and also (in the same issue of *Perspectives in Education*) Mangcu (2000) and Nekhwevha (2000). A founding reference point is Ajayi *et al.* (1996): *The African Experience with Higher Education*.

22 See, for instance, the work of the University of Western Cape Research Group on Institutional Culture, and notably, Lionel Thaver’s work within that group (Thaver, 2004).

23 And, by extension, that of the other historically white universities in South Africa.

‘institutional culture of UCT has been shaped by a very specific historical cultural positioning, and the worldview which informs this position has been normalised within the UCT environment. To a large extent this cultural milieu has been characterized by “whiteness” (2001:iii). And summarizing their sample of student opinion, they conclude that ‘the assumption is that the white norm fits all’ (37). Not surprisingly, the final conclusions and recommendations suggest that ‘Student testimonies reflect that the university unquestionably subscribes to the ideology of whiteness’ (68). All in all, the ‘perceived lack of attention paid to institutional culture...is experienced both as a symptom and consequence of this culture of whiteness’ (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: 68).

As already argued, ‘whiteness’ is a key term taken from discussions about multiculturalism, largely in the United States. Several references are made in the survey to essays in David Theo Goldberg’s seminal anthology, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Goldberg, 1995) and particular use is made of Peter McLaren’s article, ‘White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism’ (McLaren, 1995).²⁴ Steyn and van Zyl take from McLaren the centrality he gives to the notion of ‘whiteness’ as a pivotal but unacknowledged category in Western society and education.

For McLaren, ‘white culture’s most formidable attribute is its ability to mask itself as a category’ (McLaren, 1995:61). ‘[U]nless we give white students a sense of their own identity as an emergent ethnicity,’ he argues, ‘we naturalize whiteness as a cultural marker against which Otherness is defined’ (1995:59). ‘White groups’, he writes

need to examine their own ethnic histories so that they are less likely to judge their own cultural norms as neutral and universal.... Whiteness does not exist outside of culture but constitutes the prevailing social text in which social norms are made and remade. (McLaren, 1995: 59)

Whiteness, he concludes, ‘has become the invisible norm for how the dominant culture measures its own worth and civility’ (*ibid.*).²⁵

Many of the details of Steyn and van Zyl’s account work to echo and confirm McLaren’s argument. Some students reported feelings of alienation and anomie, and maintained that ‘UCT is Eurocentric in tradition and practice’ (2001: 69). Others believed that ‘the institutional culture would only really change if the white section of the university made a conscious effort to open up to learning, rather than assuming that “others” were the only ones in deficit’ (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: 66).

The central and repeated point – of ‘whiteness’ as the ‘invisible norm’ – offers a powerful new perspective on the institutional cultures of South African universities. The varied testimonies point to the difficulties and possibilities of dealing with this aspect of socially pervasive though often subliminal racism ‘still at work’ ten years after the formal demise of apartheid.²⁶ The findings call for an intensive consciousness-raising exercise around the issue of whiteness similar

²⁴ Franz Fanon’s discussion, (from *Black Skins, White Masks*) ‘The Fact of Blackness’, may be regarded as the starting-point for critiques of ‘whiteness’. ‘The white world,’ he writes, ‘the only honourable one, barred me from all participation’ (Fanon, 1990: 111).

²⁵ The stance is common to most of the contributors in Goldberg’s collection. For the pedagogical implications, see especially Henry A. Giroux’s essay in the collection, ‘Insurgent Multiculturalism and the Promise of Pedagogy’ (Giroux 1995).

in scope to the great consciousness raising around patriarchy enjoined by feminism in the sixties and seventies: a ‘conscious deliberate attempt to examine and question the “normal”’ (2001: 29). This would include, in the first instance, a commitment to education and training around ‘whiteness’ in pedagogical and other sites of inter-subjective exchange on campus. These and other recommendations from the survey continue to serve as useful guidelines for further initiatives, both at UCT and elsewhere.²⁷

At the same time, a number of visible inconsistencies and theoretical difficulties emerge within and from the report’s deployment of institutional culture as whiteness. These have to do with the explanatory centrality apparently assigned to whiteness in its survey and summary of student experience and perception.

The general theoretical problem may well be that of the tension between contrasting ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ strands in sociological analysis; and it comes through in this survey as a problem of translation.²⁸ For while the study as a whole claims that nothing can be achieved ‘without understanding the sense-making of the students themselves’ (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: 2), they acknowledge that students ‘may not always be able to articulate exactly what it is that they experience’ (n.p.). The survey, for instance, claims that most of the students ‘who discussed the issue of UCT’s institutional culture, had a solid grasp of its relation to institutional power – they could identify the centre, and the resultant tension of those on the margins’ (36); but it remains unclear whether the key terms of centre, margins, institutional power and institutional culture are the terms actually used by the students themselves, or the translated terms of the interviewers ascribed to the students. The danger throughout is one of a certain circularity, in which the central explanatory category of ‘whiteness’ is at one point taken as the starting-point of the analysis, but at another is represented as an end result or as a conclusion derived from it. The formulations vary, and seem to embody the always difficult, interpretive transaction that takes place between interviewer and interviewee.²⁹

For a classic ‘objectivist’ sociologist, such as Durkheim, ‘social life must be explained not by the conception of those who participate in it, but by the deep causes which lie outside of consciousness’ (cited in Bourdieu, 1990: 125). No mere survey of opinion, based on personal experiences, would have a chance of getting through to the underlying causes of alienation and anomie in an institutional culture like that of the university. Yet, at the same time, the richness of texture enabled by subjective accounts is a resource no sociologist can ignore, and particularly not one who wishes to locate the dynamics of agency within structural constraint, and to resist

26 For a powerful and probing account of the concept of ‘subliminal racism’, see Kistner (2003).

27 At UCT, see especially the continuing work of the Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies of Southern Africa, and particularly the ongoing work in the Health Sciences Faculty (Ismail, 2002; Erasmus & de Wet, 2002).

28 I leave aside the more problematic dimension of the translation of experience itself in terms of the Freudian concept of transference. This attends to the ways in which the subject’s most apparently spontaneous experiences in the present are in reality strongly influenced by past traumas. As opposed to this repetition, psychoanalysis seeks a working through that allows the analysand to ‘re-experience some portion of his [sic] forgotten life, but must see to it, on the other hand, that the [analysand] retains some degree of aloofness, which will enable him, in spite of everything, to recognise that what appears to be reality is in fact only a repetition of a forgotten past’ (Freud 1966, *Standard Edition* XII: 18-19). Given the psychodynamics of the teaching situation, transference plays a significant role in much student-teacher interaction in both positive (it is, after all, the source of the learning impulse itself) as well as negative.

29 The lack is somewhat surprising given the attention paid precisely to this problem in McLaren’s account, one of the acknowledged sources of the survey. See fn. 37 for further discussion.

the tendency to reduce the respondent in the interview to an object of analysis.³⁰ The middle ground is hard – if not impossible – to find; but a stricter attention to the inevitable complications of the process than is evident in the survey might have yielded less problematic results.³¹

It is for these and other related reasons that many sociologists suggest a control on opinion surveys – including those done by in-depth interview – through two related procedures. The first is in terms of internal coherence, necessitating a very careful scrutiny of the match between data and explanation; the second, is an external check through the comparative application of other explanatory hypotheses, existing elsewhere in the literature.³²

In terms of the survey's internal coherence, two problems emerge. First of all, a certain undermining of the explanatory primacy of whiteness emerges from the report's own attention to significant cultural divisions within the black student body itself, a body assigned an essential unity in the binary oppositions engaged by whiteness critique. Significant divisions are reported between black students from Model C schools and those from poorer schools (often paralleling or reinforcing a divide between those from urban and rural backgrounds). The significant division here between different schooling at primary and secondary levels undermines the cohesiveness of a purely racial categorisation, such as whiteness as the primary explanatory factor in experiences of alienation within higher education; and it may well be that such alienation is perhaps better viewed as part and parcel of structure of racialized rather than racial inequalities.³³

Secondly, there is the uneasy way in which whiteness is joined as a vantage point for critique of institutional culture by questions raised by issues of sexual orientation, gender, and disability. In the report, these come together as simply different aspects of the general power relations at work in the institutional culture of the university; but this again undermines the report's general claim (illustrated above) for the central explanatory role apparently given to whiteness. This is particularly apparent in those moments where a vocabulary of centredness replaces or subsumes that of whiteness, as, for instance, in the Executive Summary that precedes the report proper. This paraphrases the arguments that follow as indicating 'that those who were in subject positionalities [*sic*] that are centred were able to move through the university a great deal more comfortably than those toward the margins' (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001: n.p.) and goes on to explain that 'these centres include: whiteness, Euro-American worldview, English-speaking as mother-tongue, maleness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, (upper) middle-class-ness, South African nationality, urban background, etc.' (*ibid.*).

30 For useful general discussion of these tensions, see, for instance, Giddens (1979), particularly Chapter Two, 'Agency, Structure' as well as Bourdieu (1990a).

31 Bourdieu's useful analysis of the dynamics of the interview situation is particularly useful here. See especially his insistence that 'Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they are and what they do. More precisely, they do not necessarily have access to the core principles of their discontent or their malaise, and, without aiming to mislead, their most spontaneous declarations may express something quite different from what they seem to say' (Bourdieu, 1999: 620). The essay's warnings regarding style and point of view could usefully supplement the current discussion of the Steyn and van Zyl report (1999: 621-26).

32 Giddens, for instance, in his standard account of sociological practice, recommends some form of triangulation to seek to lessen the problems arising from situations in which the influence of the interviewer may be present (Giddens, 1989: 679-683).

33 A finding significantly echoed in much other research. Compare, for instance, Erasmus's comment: on how an essentialist way of working with race is at play in the new division arising among South Africa's youth: apartheid's children versus democracy's children. Many young black people...use a racially dichotomous language in which those who are not seen as 'truly' black are referred to as 'coconuts' – black youth, most likely from Model C schools, who are seen to speak, dress and act like white people; while those seen to inhabit a 'backward blackness' – rural ways of being and/or black youth who seem to be stuck in 'old struggle politics' – are called 'dusty-crusties' (Erasmus, 2005: 27).

In theoretical terms, these inconsistencies suggest that whiteness alone does not play the primary role in institutional culture that the report appears generally to ascribe to it. Whiteness may instead be better regarded as just one (and a secondary or over-determined) factor among others, such as the maleness, heterosexuality, being able-bodied, urban background and/or South African nationality mentioned in the survey. The existence of such internal inconsistencies suggests a strong need for the consideration of alternative explanations, and prime among them, perhaps, Pierre Bourdieu's notable theories of education and social reproduction, for Bourdieu's writings are particularly attuned to the feelings of alienation and anomie at work in education systems. Indeed, the existence of such feelings is held to play a constitutive rather than (as it were) incidental role in social reproduction as a whole.³⁴

Many of the feelings expressed by students in the Steyn and van Zyl report correspond very strongly to the dilemma faced by the working classes and the lower-middle classes in a higher education system geared to the success of the already privileged. For these – in Bourdieu's terms, the 'naturally' distinguished – the institutional culture of higher education poses no problems of adaptation. They 'merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be, that is, naturally distinguished from those who are obliged to struggle for distinction' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 11). In this struggle for distinction (the cultural marker of social and economic privilege), the natural is, of course, the precisely constituted materiality of prior privilege that makes even the most democratic educational structures still a prey to social and economic inequalities. All in all, Steyn and van Zyl's account, in placing its main emphasis on 'whiteness' as racial differentiation, tends to 'background' (in a reverse of the more usual term 'to foreground') the broader issues of reproduction and cultural capital at the heart of Bourdieu's account.³⁵

If, indeed, Bourdieu's insights can help to smooth out several contradictory findings in Steyn and van Zyl's survey, this works to suggest that though race may be an obvious and immediate factor in the experience of alienation and anomie, it may well be a secondary phenomenon in terms of explanation. In other words, race is secondary to the deeper logic of social subordination and reproduction that divides racial groups internally according to the fore of class distinction.³⁶ This, indeed, is the general conclusion of many of the contributors in Goldberg's anthology (and elsewhere), who argue that multiculturalism needs to be attuned to the material conditions of cultural differentiation.³⁷

Certainly, one of the surely unintended consequences of a focus on institutional culture as whiteness is a consequent marginalization of the changes occurring at the interface between

³⁴ See, notably, Bourdieu & Passeron (1990), and Bourdieu (1990a); and, for a powerful 'internal' account, Willis (1977).

³⁵ For a useful survey of staff attitudes towards race at historically white universities – but one whose argument perhaps also calls for the deployment of a concept of cultural capital to strengthen its analytic reach and explanatory power – see Gwele (2002). The survey raises the question – without addressing it directly – of whether differences of *habitus* can be used as evidence for active racism. For a useful explication of the concept of *habitus*, see Bourdieu (1990b: 52-79).

³⁶ For a useful discussion of the complications of class versus racial analysis in South African historiography, see Neville Alexander's essay, 'Race and Class in South African Historiography' (Alexander, 2002). In a frustrated moment, Alexander concludes that 'in the final analysis, it is empirical research that is required to give an approximation of the relationship between race (or gender, or ethnic group, etc.) and class, rather than any reductionist formula derived from abstract models of society' (25). Erasmus's key phrase – 'racialized inequality' – may offer the most useful distinction (Erasmus, 2005).

³⁷ Meanwhile, left-liberal multiculturalism 'emphasizes cultural differences and suggests that the stress on the quality of races smothers those important cultural differences between races that are responsible for different behaviours, values, attitudes, cognitive styles, and social practices' (McLaren, 1995: 51). For McLaren, it tends to 'exoticize "otherness" in a nativist retreat that locates difference in a primeval past of cultural authenticity' (*ibid.*), a retreat that at the same time authorizes a 'populist elitism' in which 'one's own location as an oppressed person is supposed to offer a special authority from which to speak' (52). While not arguing against 'the importance of experience in the formation of political identity' (*ibid.*), McLaren is wary of the ways in which an appeal to experience 'has become the new imprimatur for legitimating the political currency and incontestable validity of one's arguments' (*ibid.*). 'This', he concludes, 'has often resulted in a reverse form of academic elitism' (*ibid.*).

academics and administrators (and beyond these, between the universities and the State). This interface also forms an important aspect, dimension or referent for debate concerning institutional culture, although one somewhat overshadowed by the currently dominant definition discussed above.

4.2. WHOSE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE? ACADEMICS VERSUS ADMINISTRATORS

Although the sense of institutional culture as whiteness is dominant in South African discussions, a second sense is also present and in use, though overshadowed by the first. This second sense aligns itself more directly to overseas debates, and addresses a powerful trend in university systems across the world, as well as in one dimension of what transformation in South African higher education has meant in practice. It understands and defines institutional culture from the standpoint of the newly emerging interests that are usually referred to as the 'new managerialism'.³⁸

From this standpoint, in Bill Readings's succinct characterization, 'the administrator rather than the professor [becomes] the central figure of the University' (Readings, 1996: 3), while the university as a whole is subjected to a 'generalized logic of "accountability" in which the University must pursue "excellence" in all aspects of its functioning' (*ibid.*).³⁹ In this usage, institutional culture refers to the site of a conflict and contest between two different and opposing definitions of the purpose of higher education, definitions that are uneasily conjoined in South African policy.

The first of these – akin to the values of academic freedom embodied in the 'English liberal' view of the university's social function – comes through in the repeated emphasis, in South African policy, on the development of 'critical citizenship', and the need for an educated citizenship for the promotion and development of democracy. A central aim of higher education from this perspective is thus described as 'the socialization of enlightened, responsive and constructively critical citizens' (*Programme for Higher Education Transformation*, 1997: 1). This point of view sees higher education as playing a constitutive role in the development of a democratic society, in a line of thought extending at least as far back as Immanuel Kant's championing of Enlightenment values, and particularly the value of public deliberation, in his seminal essay 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"' (Kant, 1991).⁴⁰

The second is more in line with the State-centred view of higher education promoted by the Afrikaans establishment, but now carried forward in the post-apartheid State, and in line with

38 Though the limits of this may also be becoming apparent. See, for instance, Cath Bargh *et al.*: 'the government has encouraged the belief that the corporate sector provides the most appropriate model of governance for higher education in the age of massification and marketization. The discussion of recent developments in corporate governance suggests that this second assertion should be treated with considerable caution...there is little evidence to suggest that the corporate sector has useful models of governance to offer higher education' (Bargh *et al.*, 1996: 167), and again, the '(perhaps obsessive) focus has been on more effective management, which has been interpreted as an elevation of the managerial interest at the expense of professional perspectives' (168).

39 For useful discussions of this, see Readings (1996), especially pp.21-43.

40 For a useful discussion of Kant's contribution to the formation of the very idea of public opinion, see especially Habermas (1999: 102-117), and also Derrida's informative and provocative discussion, *Mochlos ou le conflit des facultés* (Derrida, 1990). For an interesting recent highlighting of the complexities and antinomies within Kant's position, Kouvelakis (2003, especially pp. 12-23).

neo-liberal policies across the globe.⁴¹ It emphasizes the need to ‘address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy’ (*Programme for Higher Education Transformation*, 1997: 1). From this perspective, education and higher education needs to be carefully controlled and directed, and tailored to the dynamics of the economy. It sees education and higher education as playing a largely instrumental role, and one subordinated to the State’s interpretation of economic needs.

Schein’s statement – that ‘Organizational cultures are created by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leadership may be the creation, the management, and – if and when that may become necessary – the destruction of a culture’ (Schein, 1975: 2) – might well have provided the *mot d’ordre* for many university administrators in the post-94 period. In an interesting attempt to turn the tables, institutional culture became the name for academic culture itself, as the substance of what was being attacked and threatened by the new managerialism.

In a useful survey of post-apartheid South African higher education policy, Gibbon and Kabaki suggest that ‘by 1998, the emphasis [in government policy] had decisively shifted from demands for democratisation to demands for efficiency and effectiveness’ with a consequently important shift in the balance of power between academics and administrators. Research showed that ‘the overwhelming majority of [academic] respondents felt that their relationship with management had been reconfigured in a way that now defined them as subordinate employees rather than colleagues’ (Gibbon & Kabaki, 2002: 217). One of the prime effects of ‘transformation’ was a definite shift from ‘academic self-rule to academic managerialism’ (217), with an increasing salary gap developing between senior managers and senior academics (from a ratio of 2:1 during the late 1980s to a ratio of 4,5: 1 in the late 1990s) (218). In this assessment, the “democratic phase” currently being experienced by South African institutions had long since been superseded in the developed nations by the “managerial phase” (Gibbon & Kabaki, 2002: 216). That this phase represents an attack on rather than a dialogue with and improvement of academic culture – an intuition present implicitly in many responses to the pressures of neo-liberal change – was explicitly stated and argued by Olajide Oloyede.⁴²

Writing in response to managerial changes at the University of Fort Hare, Olajide Oloyede (2002) argues that it is precisely that ‘destruction of a culture’ (championed by Schein) that academic culture is threatened with in South Africa. He sums up his case in the following terms: ‘My main goal is to alert those involved in the transformation of universities to the fact that universities are fragmented into diverse disciplinary cultures and as such are loose and complex organizations. Precisely because of this, management discourse is not sufficient and cannot be the basis for the effective and efficient steering of the university’ (Oloyede, 2002: 118). “False managerialism” tries to force disciplines into the same mould, impose crude accountability and

⁴¹ For a usefully skeptical discussion of the main differences between Afrikaner-authoritarian and English-liberal stances on the question of the university’s relation to the state, see Bunting (2002), while for a clear call for greater state control of the universities than currently exists by the then minister of education, see Asmal (2002).

⁴² For a useful comparative argument, also locating the new managerialism firmly in the imperatives of the post-Reagan neo-liberalism, see C.F.S. Chachage’s unpublished paper, ‘Higher Education Transformation and Academic Exterminism’ (1999). Summing up the changes introduced by the new managerialism, Chachage charges that they amounted to ‘a call for the “market” to dictate biases in universities. Thus, there would be a bias for professional as opposed to liberal faculties and within faculties a bias for the imparting of “technical” skills rather than critical analytical ones’ (4).

over-simplified indicators of performance which are hardly appropriate to academic work' (117). Yet, asserts Oloyede, 'disciplinary values and cultures are critical for any effective steering of the university. This is because in each discipline, there exists a "self-organized" collective control, which tends to take quite different forms from that of official regulation. This is grounded in collegiality.... To this extent, roles, norms, values, beliefs and ideology – generally referred to as "organizational culture" – serve as the essential elements of interaction' (117).

In this deployment, something of a repetition of the dynamics of the term present in the earlier uses of a Schein or a Tierney can be seen. Institutional culture is what has to be controlled or managed by the colonising administrator; it is what has to be defended by the academic worker. The dispute over programmes – perhaps the first concrete point of higher education policy in South Africa that placed administrators and academics in more or less direct conflict – similarly reveals the constitutive contradiction at work within it.⁴³ Institutional culture plays a contradictory role in these debates. As an instrumental concept, it appears to promise successful control over institutions for managers, while for academics resisting imposed change, it refers to the substance of their practical activity as teachers and researchers.

5. CONCLUSION

As Williams has reminded us, and as this brief discussion of different uses of institutional culture has shown, the act of naming involves an agent as well as an object. The instability of the term institutional culture – its capacity to name different things, or to refer to different aspects of the same complex object – arises from the fact that institutional culture looks different, depending on who is seeing it and from where; or, more accurately, who is looking for it and with what purposes in mind. Though a singular name, its referent is best understood as multiple and complex, in ways that most users of it tend to ignore in the passion of their arguments.

As has been argued, the term emerged (as organizational culture) in business studies in the early 1980s as a strongly instrumental one, promising to be able to bring US business culture in line with the perceived success of Japanese business culture. It was to do so by oiling the wheels of management, and restricting unproductive frictions between leadership and workforce. In the later 1980s, although by now as institutional culture, it began to appear in higher education discussions. In its dominant uses overseas, it referred to the restructuring of academic life, its re-centring on the administrator rather than the academic.

It is important to note, in summary, that the more recent writings on organizational culture suggest that in reality, and despite the claims made for it by its prime originators in business

⁴³ In her survey of programme implementation, Ensor's conclusion regarding the success of programmes illustrates the difficult dynamics of institutional culture from any instrumentalist perspective. The National Council on Higher Education had sought to impose from above academic programmes that sought to promote the managerial virtues of 'interdisciplinarity, portability, coherence and responsiveness'. To the question 'has this been achieved?', Ensor's answer is 'unequivocally "no" in respect of portability, but with respect to the others, contingent upon how one defines an academic programme and the descriptors involved' (Ensor, 2002: 287-88). Despite this sugaring of the pill ('contingent upon how one defines an academic programme'), the article makes clear that the response to the perceived imposition of programmes revealed levels of an academic institutional culture still strong enough to resist change when regarded as pedagogically inappropriate. Indeed, as Ensor ultimately concedes, 'the central organizing principle of university undergraduate curricula remains the disciplines. In this sense, contemporary curricula in sciences and humanities look little different from the way they did before academic programme implementation began' (Ensor, 2002:289).

studies, its use as an instrumental concept is extremely limited. This recognition – argued here in terms of the constitutive contradiction at its core – has been increasingly recognized in more recent literature. Against the mythology of strong directive leadership, Simsek and Louis argue that ‘real organizational change requires leadership strategies that emphasizes interpretation of organizational values and meaning rather than emphasize organizational restructuring and administrative control’ (Simsek & Louis, 1994: 690). And, in a point which should but didn’t have much resonance in South Africa, they point out that despite ‘what the strategic management and planning models assume, change is a highly decentralized yet community-based activity. Change that is orchestrated from the top and which reflects the “vision” of subjective realities of an elite group cannot define institution-wide change processes unless it takes into account the alternative competing paradigms that have typically emerged in different parts of the organization’ (Simsek & Louis, 1994: 691). Similarly, Kesar and Eckel write that while ‘[l]eaders might be more successful if they understood the cultures in which they were working (Kesar & Eckel, 2002: 457), they need to recognize that ‘where strategies for change violate cultural norms, change most likely will not occur’ (2002: 456). All in all, as Simsek and Louis suggest, ‘[m]anaging meaning is a considerably more slippery than traditional models of leadership would suggest’ (Simsek & Louis, 1994: 690).⁴⁴

Indeed, it may be that the most substantial result of the study of actual institutional cultures is – paradoxically enough - the undermining of the instrumental promise or lure that the originating theorists insisted the concept held. Rather than serving as a resource for the ‘traditional model’ of top-down authoritarian leadership, the study of institutional cultures tends to promote a very different image of successful leadership from that of the colonist or anthropologist that has been offered. The reality of institutional cultures suggests rather the need for a full recognition of the workings of democracy in action. A strong image of this alternative model of leadership is exemplified in the principles that Nelson Mandela found at work in the village of his youth, Mqhekezweni, where he learned ‘to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion’ (Mandela, 2002: 25). ‘I always remember the regent’s axiom,’ he later recollected. A leader, ‘is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being led from behind’ (25-6).⁴⁵

If much of the overseas’ discussions of institutional culture have focused on the institutional aspects, the main focus of interest in South Africa shifted to its cultural aspects and dimensions. Many discussions here have, above all, emphasized the need for a thorough critique of the dominant whiteness of institutional culture in higher education. However, as has been argued, while the focus of this critique brought some strong feelings to light, these discussions were

⁴⁴ Similarly, the very useful ERIC digest, ‘Organizational Culture and Institutional Transformation’ (2001) sums up and amplifies the same tensions. On the one hand, the idea of OC is intended as an instrumental one: for successful transformation to occur in higher education institutions, ‘it becomes critical to understand and explicate the values and personal meanings that define organizational culture’, and they cite Farmer (1990) in support of the contention that ‘failure to understand the way in which an organization’s culture will interact with various contemplated change strategies thus may mean the failure of the strategies themselves’ (1990: 8). Such a sceptical and warning note rings particularly true with regard to the massive challenges and changes at work in the planning and discussion of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa.

⁴⁵ In its careful attention to the demands of changing habitués, Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* can be regarded as a classic text of moving through very different institutional cultures.

weakened by a tendency to over-unify the category of race. Even the most powerful of these analyses would, in any event, have to take into account Henry Louis Gates's astute point that 'a redistributionist agenda may not even be intelligible with respect to cultural capital [since] once cultural knowledge is redistributed so that it fails to mark a distinction, it loses its value... (Gates, 1995: 206). Following Bourdieu, Gates's hard lesson is that while the currency of cultural capital (and by extension, institutional culture) can change, it is likely to leave intact the structures of distinction that support it. 'What could confer "equity" on "culture" is, Gates argues, unanswerable within a divided and unequal society (ibid.).

In more general terms, it may be that addition, too exclusive an emphasis on whiteness also runs the risk – common to many postcolonial societies – of reaffirming the very racial categories and identities that the new post-colonial orders sought to disperse. In her powerful survey, 'Race and Identity in the Nation', Zimitri Erasmus warns of the dangers of equity policies that in fact 'perpetuate apartheid race categories and race thinking' (Erasmus, 2005: 20). At one and the same time, she recommends, it is important 'to remember and recognize the historical legacies of race and white supremacy and their influence on the present' while also moving away from 'holding onto race as a form of cultural and political armour' (27). 'The challenge before us,' she concludes, 'is to find ways of recognizing race and its continued effects on people's every day lives, in an attempt to work against racial inequality, while at the same time working against practices that perpetuate race thinking' (30).⁴⁶ Acceptance of this challenge is the difficult task that faces those participating in the ongoing debates around institutional culture.

It may be that in the end institutional culture is less of a concept than a representation that screens a number of problems, in both senses of the term. It serves as a surface on which various social contradictions and tensions can be projected, while at the same time, often disguising or translating these into other terms according to the dynamics of displacement.⁴⁷ It is a term that mimes conceptual density, but lacks conceptual force, while its apparently appealing explanatory force is often undermined by its actual contents. From the textual point of view, institutional culture is, of course, an uneasy conjunction of the given (the cultural) and the imposed (the institutional). It perpetually threatens an explanatory redundancy since if culture is understood to be the 'whole way of life' of a society, then any social institution of necessity is part and parcel of the reproduction of that whole way of life.

A more restricted definition of institutional culture as regards higher education may be less immediately grand and satisfying, but in the end more productive. Such a definition would be restricted to the core problem of pedagogical culture and the forms of its transmission, seeking to take into account what is all too often taken for granted: the reality of the uneven distribution of cultural capital. Universities need to develop a more self-conscious pedagogy if the real problems of institutional culture are to be addressed.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ More broadly, Mahmood Mamdani has recently noted, 'Africa's real political challenge is to reform and thus sublate the form of the State that has continued to reproduce race and ethnicity as political identities'; it is 'to create a single political community and citizenship from diverse cultural historical groups and identities' (Mamdani, 2004: 22). In similar mode, Neville Alexander warns against all forms of 'ethnic mobilization', and suggests that the 'real challenge' for South Africa 'lies in moving away from the notion (and the reality) of separate racial, and to some extent also ethnic, groups towards a situation where the multiculturalism of the society can find its expression in the fact of multiple identities of the individual held together by an overarching national identity' (Alexander, 2002: 98). Compare also Charles Taylor's frustrated assertion, after a consideration of the conceptual dynamics of contemporary identity politics, 'There must be something midway between the unauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other. There are other cultures, and we have to live together more and more, both on a world scale and commingled in each individual society' (Taylor, 1995: 101).

⁴⁷ For a useful discussion of such displacement, see Bourdieu *et al.* (1999: 620-621).

⁴⁸ For some of the classic resources in this regard, see Bernstein (1975) and Giroux (1995).

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