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Review: The Culture of Stopping

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Welzer, H., *The Culture of Stopping*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023. 240 pp. ISBN: 9781509555871, \$25.00.

First published in Germany in 2021, and now available in a translation in English (made by Sharon Howe), Harald Welzer's *the Culture of Stopping* claims it is time to stop (over) producing, (over) consuming, and (over) spoiling goods. A professor at the Flensburg University of Applied Sciences (close to the Danish border), Welzer had previously published a book with a provocative title: *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For* (2012).

Because it is a basic and driving concept, there are countless books around with the term "culture" in their title, either in philosophy, social sciences, or in cultural studies. There are numerous examples: in their republished book *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (1982, 2000), Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy famously gave a straightforward definition of "culture", arguing that culture is, simply put, "the way we do things around here". But there are many other definitions and various interpretations. Culture is a transdisciplinary concept.

While the concepts of "culture" and "nature" are often opposed (at least in the philosophical tradition), Welzer highlights and develops this salient, rich, and multi-semantic concept as he considers "culture" as something that is unconsciously "inside" of each of us: "For the culture we grow into is not something external — it is not only embedded in our infrastructures and institutions, our legal constitution, our school curricula and our traffic regulations, but in our habits, our perceptions and interpretations, our psyche, our selves" (p. 4). According to Welzer, culture is simultaneously an unnoticeable part of ourselves and a constant dimension of our everyday lives; "That is what makes it so difficult to imagine that the culture one belongs to could be heading in the 'wrong' direction" (p. 5). This basic idea, close to the anthropological concept of ethnocentrism, of a given culture subtly heading, unwarily, towards the "wrong direction" reappears all along the four chapters (p. 176).

The Culture of Stopping is divided into four unequal parts: the opening chapter covers half the book (and it is by far the most inspiring), while the final piece is just a few pages long, and that is a major disappointment. As such, the very interesting discussion about the dynamics of “culture” (in Chapter 1) could even lead to a theoretical comparison between “culture” and “ideology”; but one might presume that conceptual articulation will be for another essay. (In fact, the concept of “ideology” does not appear very often here). Less rewarding, the central chapter focuses on twelve case-studies or narratives from “experts of the art of stopping” (p. 111): it explains how a variety of persons (famous or unknown; young, and old, in various professions, from painter to filmmaker) have tried (and sometimes succeeded) to disconnect from our society based on the logics of (over)consumption or, simply said, “doing things normally, just like everybody else”. This is how “Culture” is understood here: like a framework that reproduces our society and way of life. In these twelve respective retellings, we find a reflexive, analytical, investigating dimension by trying to be aware of how to narrate an experience/transition from a distance and this dimension represents the “cultural” dynamics.

Regarding its conceptual framework, *The Culture of Stopping* has some strong philosophical and ethical roots; the author draws from classic German thinkers such as Ernst Bloch, Wittgenstein, Adorno and Horkheimer (p. 30). Welzer’s style is mostly scholarly in the first part, but freer and more eclectic in the last portion, with some passages that are almost like an essay, and written at the first person, using the “I” in a decomplexified manner (pp. 41, 89, 111, 160, 170, 191, 207), even though Polity Press is an academic publisher, usually considered like a University Press. The sources indicated in the endnotes (pp. 214-221) are worth an attentive read and not just an overview: because the author is based in northern Germany, many of the sources are in German language, which brings a welcome conceptual broadening and renewal. Regarding the theoretical framework, I expected more allusions to “The End of Growth” and similar books in that trend; but the author is rather more personal and tries to theorize from what he carefully observes and interprets from everyday life. Not for undergrads, *The Culture of Stopping* might interest doctoral students in search of a model for decomplexified research and writing about how individuals can achieve sustainability.

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