



How does culture shape who we are?

Richard: Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Richard Westcott. How does culture shape who we are? That's the subject in the latest in our collaboration between the Bennett School of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse at the Toulouse School of Economics. As ever, we're going to draw on the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex issue. What do we mean by culture? How does it shape the way people think, behave and define themselves? And how does stories, norms, institutions and shared practices help societies cooperate, draw boundaries and change over time? To explore these issues today, we have Tim Whitmarsh from Cambridge University. Tim, start us off. What does your research focus on?

Tim: I work on ancient Greek culture, to use that particularly tricky word, culture, literature and religion over a thousand year period. So I like to look at the big picture narratives, if you like.

Richard: Joining us from the Toulouse School of Economics, we have Cammie Curtin. Cammie, remind us of your main research interests.

Cammie: Yes, so I come from a field called cultural evolution. And in that field, we are interested in a variety of different things. We study where does culture come from? So how is it that cultural traits arise, spread and change over time? And also, how does culture shape how people think and behave? For example, we see a lot of variation in cooperative behaviour. How do we think about people's behaviour around the world, how willing are people to say, don't eat

blood or put on a mask to protect those around them? Thinking of the pandemic we all went through recently. So some of my research asks, you know, how can culture help us explain that variation?

Richard: OK, so both on the spot straight away. Culture is such a common word. You almost never think about it. But how do you define culture? Tim, how would you define culture?

Tim: Well, as I intimated it, I think it's a really tricky word. So there are. I think at least four versions of what culture means. One is high culture, opera and the like. Another is the specifics that create the glue that holds together a given society. Another is a culture as opposed to nature. And then finally, and this is the definition that I'm going to be working with. Culture is a specific set of interactions within a society that are distinguished from, if you like, politics, economic, modes of activity and so forth. So in other words, very ritualised forms of behaviour in the realm of sport, art, theatre, that area of human society that is, as I say, enclosed in a particular ritual frame.

Richard: And Cammie, how would you define it?

Cammie: Yeah, so in my field, we have a pretty specific definition, where culture is really any information that is transmitted socially. So that means learned from other people, rather than being transmitted in DNA from parents to offspring. So that encompasses all kinds of things. It could be beliefs, like, does God exist? Are there multiple gods? It can be customs and traditions, like hair styles, clothing styles, tools, technologies, you know, how to make a bow and arrow, how to prompt engineer or AI agent. But it also encompasses, you know, rules for living with other people. So those would be social norms that are very important in structuring life in societies around the world. So those are standards of behaviour that are shared and enforced within some group. And by enforced, I just mean that if you violate the norm, you're going to face some kind of repercussion, whether that's damage to your reputation, you know, gossip, cold shoulder, or being punished, scolded, fined, put in jail. So culture, it's the socially transmitted information, and it includes all those kinds of traits.

Richard: There's really interesting definitions. And it's sort of getting me thinking, thinking about what I think culture is as well. So, and obviously, we all hear about company cultures now, don't you? Every time you get a new job, you're indoctrinated into the company's culture, aren't you? Cammie, what does the idea of cultural evolution help us to see that we might miss if we think of culture simply as heritage?

Cammie: Yeah, I think if we think of culture simply as heritage, we could miss quite a lot. I think the idea of culture as heritage gives maybe the impression that it's something sort of fluffy or fuzzy, perhaps emotional. Yeah, I mean, I think culture is emotionally important to individuals or families or communities, but not particularly impactful. But in fact, culture is a really powerful force. It's been a critical part of our human story and even our evolutionary trajectory. In fact, it's been really so important for human survival and success that it's even shaped the evolution of our species. So it's made kind of human bodies and minds of our entire species

what they are today. And there are many examples of this. You know, the cultural evolution of increasingly fine tools, for example, is what drove the evolution of our impressive manual dexterity that, you know, is much better than our closest relatives. But I'll focus on the mind since today we're really talking about variation in psychology and behavior. It's thanks to the importance of cultural information for our survival and success that the human mind has actually evolved to be really specialized for learning from other people, for acquiring cultural information. And that includes social norms. So, you know, I think it's really important for us to be able to understand that. And I think evidence suggests that we even have a special sort of psychological package for dealing with social norms. We call it norm psychology. We're particularly attuned to norms. We try to infer them from the social context around us. We are prone to enforcing them, internalizing them, which means they get transformed from these external rules into really internal preferences, heuristics, and biases. So norms can kind of become part of our psychology. And it's because the human mind has really evolved to be plastic in this way and to acquire cultural information, to be shaped by the cultural milieu that we grow up in, to internalize social norms. This really opens the door for cultural variation to give rise to variation in how people think and how people behave.

Richard: Yes, so what kinds of things vary across cultural settings that we might wrongly assume are universal?

Cammie: In terms of behavior, one that I think is so fascinating is romantic kissing. So many people, when they're in a relationship, they're like, oh, I'm going to kiss you. And I'm like, people have assumed that kissing romantically is a universal human behavior. But actually, in many societies, particularly small-scale societies, many mobile hunter-gatherer groups, for example, we just don't observe that behavior. And in fact, there are some interesting anecdotes of first European contact with certain groups when people saw Europeans kissing romantically, finding it totally disgusting. So that's one assumed universal that actually isn't universal in terms of behavior. And then in terms of psychology, again, there are many examples, but one that I'll mention is there's some really fascinating work on how people make moral judgments and how that varies across society. So it was long assumed that humans everywhere take intentions into account when they are judging wrong. So for example, imagine someone picks up a bag that they mistakenly think is their own and they walk away with it. Many people would judge that act to be less bad, less worthy of punishment than if that person had intentionally seen that bag, knew it wasn't theirs, picked it up and, you know, meant to steal it. But there's actually been psychological research across a diverse set of societies, including small-scale societies, hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists. And they found that in some places, people judge those unintentional wrongs to be just as bad as the intentional ones.

Richard: Tim, how did Greek identity change when the Greeks were living with the Roman Empire?

Tim: It's a slow process of integration of the Greek world into the Roman Empire. But what happens really when people become part of the Roman Empire is that the end of the Roman Empire is a time when the elite, at least, concatenate identities. Identities weren't exclusive in

antiquity. You could be many things simultaneously. Greeks tended to put much more emphasis on civic identity. So if you were from Athens or Corinth, that was your primary marker of belonging, if you like. And then the elites, when they started beginning from about the first century BC onwards, and various other groups to be Romans as well, that created an interesting, if you like, cultural hyper-competence. People were aware of the norms of their civic institutions, but they were also aware of the new opportunities of being in an internationally networked world. And this, I think, is absolutely revolutionary. I think it really does mean that a phenomenon like Christianity, for example, could come into being. Christianity, which is a religion that is simultaneously grounded in specific places, there are specific Christian communities in specific cities. But also is international and is networked and is all about, if you like, being part of the international meshwork of Christian communities. So yes, I think these changing modulations of identity, people respond remarkably quickly and remarkably successfully and entrepreneurially to new circumstances.

Richard: That's interesting, because I guess from a distance, I think of the Greek and Roman empires as being similar in many ways, in more ways than they were different. I think of them as being international. And I think of them as being a part of the Christian community. And I think of them as being international and interconnected and so on. But you're saying actually, there were quite significant differences in the way they were set up.

Tim: I think so, yes. I mean, when we talk about Greek empires, we're talking about the imperial world that's created by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century. Now, Alexander conquers a huge territory, but it's never really politically unified. It fragments instantly upon his death into three, four different competing imperial systems that are also themselves unstable. So the Ptolemaic dynasty founded on, centered on Alexandria in Egypt, the Seleucids in Mesopotamia and so forth. These are all competing factions. Now, when Rome begins to be imperial from, let's say, the second century BCE onwards, it learns a lot from its Greek neighbors. So in many ways, it is taking on the same sorts of modes of expression, the same sorts of rhetoric of power, of statuary, of big monumental buildings, and so forth. But Rome is just different. It operates with a different, if you like, social DNA. It has a patron-client relationship at its very heart. That's to say, rich nobles take on board less wealthy people as clients. And it sort of scales this up into an imperial system so that, I mean, some places, yes, are conquered by force, but often the Roman Empire integrates on this patron-client model so that lesser states retain a notional independence, but actually are still, in important ways, obligated to the patron city and so forth. So yes, they emerge in the same ecosystem, and they have many traits in common. But Rome is a much more, the Romans are just better at governing at one level. You know, they've got a more sophisticated, more flexible, and more nuanced system of government than the Greeks. And I think that is not traducing ancient Greeks, because ancient Greeks say that as well.

Richard: Cammie, tell us a bit about your fieldwork in Mexico. You kind of alluded to some of the work you've done, but what did you study and what did it teach you?

Cammie: So yes, I work in an indigenous Zapotec community in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. And a lot of my work to date there has been focused on cooperation and how social

norms and institutions, which I would define, or in cultural evolution, we would define as kind of packages of norms that govern certain domains of life, you know, community organization, the institutions of governance that Tim was talking about in the Roman Empire versus the Greek societies, you know, economic exchange, things like this. Anyways, how social norms and institutions structure cooperation within communities. And I did this in a few different ways. So some of my work is field-based doing ethnography, both qualitative and quantitative ethnography, psychological surveys and behavioral economics games in the field, trying to understand different institutions, in particular, kind of structured cooperative behavior in the community. So one of those institutions is called Gozona, and it's a reciprocal aid institution where villagers will provide support to each other during celebrations, for example, bringing, you know, food, cash, a little coffee, something like that, and also doing labor for the hosts of the celebration. And then that help is reciprocated later. And then the second is sort of a set of traditional political institutions called Usos y Costumbres by which the community self-governs and provides public goods. So the communities in Oaxaca, they're kind of semi-autonomous from the Mexican government. They self-govern. And this involves a lot of community service on the part of villagers. So men, for example, have to serve what are called cargos, which is these unpaid leadership positions where the communal assembly nominates men into these positions each year. And, you know, the norm is that they have to accept the that and give up their wage labor or their subsistence agriculture and take this unpaid position. It's extremely costly. But, you know, it's a social norm. So if you don't do it, you will be punished. You'll be fined. If you repeatedly refuse, the community will cut off the water service to your house. If you repeatedly, repeatedly refuse, you may even be formally expelled from the community. So anyways, in my research, I was kind of trying to understand the psychological and the social underpinnings of the community. And I think that's a really good example of how these institutions and how is it that they that they stabilize cooperation? And also looking across Oaxaca, how does variation in those institutions relate to variation in when people cooperate and whether communities can provision public goods effectively?

Richard: So what's coming across is much less about your personality as an individual, and much more like a sort of set of rules and expectations tied to situations or political setups or the way your society works.

Cammie: It depends. So social norms and institutions like the ones I've been talking about, certainly they can function like these situations, specific rules and expectations. But I wouldn't want to lose sight of the fact that culture can also have really deep and fundamental impacts on kind of ourselves and our personalities, as you mentioned. So, you know, we grow up in a certain cultural milieu, culture can kind of shape who we become, you know, are we patient? How individualistic are we? How obligated do we become? And so I think that's a really good example of how we can shape who we feel to support family members. Do we trust strangers? Are we really distrust strangers? All of these things, these features that we might think of as just elements of ourself, can really be shaped by the cultural milieu that we grew up in.

Richard: Tim, how can ancient literature help us to understand the norms of a society, especially when those texts are not simply just the mirrors of everyday life?

Tim: So that opens up one of the differences that comes across between the two nations of culture that we're operating here. Cammie's working with a much broader one of all of the non-biological aspects that hold together a society. I'm working with this narrower sense of, as I mentioned earlier, these very ritualised forms of behaviour that include literature and art and sport and religion and so forth. So not the entire package. Now, what one sees when one moves towards this narrower world of culture is that it's less about the norms and more about the norms of the society. It's less about the norms and more about the exploring alternatives. The cultural world in this narrower sense is an experimental space. It's a ludic space. It's a space for trying to work out what are the things that worry us in our given society. So to take an example, I mentioned earlier that when Greeks move into the world of the Roman Empire they become part of a centralised system and it's a much more cohesive internationally networked system than it is in the ancient world. So it's much more cohesive internationally networked system than it is in the modern world. So how do people in a context like that, how do they actually process that new awareness of being interconnected? One very successful mode of exploring that and coming to terms with that, which is almost coterminous with the arrival of Augustus and this very centralised world, the emergence of the novel. We do find from the first century CE onwards this extraordinary explosive interest in novels. Novels which are often built around the tension between individual choices that one can make when faced by a particular dilemma and so forth and a providential plot which basically sorts things out at the end, a bit like a Shakespearean comedy. There's this sense that everything's going to end up okay in the end but placed against that, tensed against that, is that sense of the uncertainty of the individual in a world which is not just unpredictable but is likely to involve travel and is likely to involve encounters with all sorts of other people that you've never met before. So as I say I see that tension as a very distinctive expression of what it is to be Greek in the Roman Empire, what it is to be a member of a community that probably feels itself in peril, probably feels that it's being asked new questions but at the same time they're being told that they're part of an umbrella system that will ensure your peace and prosperity for the future.

Richard: Now you've mentioned religion Tim, you've written about religion and atheism in the ancient world. What does ancient Greek and Roman religion tell us about the relationship between belief and public life? Was religion mainly about private faith or was it woven into the social and civic order?

Tim: Well I think before I answer that let me just stress that I mean one of the reasons why we are so lucky to have this huge body of evidence from Greco-Roman antiquity is that it is incredibly rich and textured. And it gives us one of the few opportunities to think through in detail a world which is pre-modern both in the sense of politics and technology and also crucially in the sense of religion. It is largely pre-Christian so I mean there are other cultures like China and India where we can do a similar kind of job but as I say one of the great things about studying the ancient world is that it allows us to see how very sophisticated states organise themselves without the advantages in the heavy and heavy-duty world. So as to your question how do they organise religion differently? The very simple answer is yes Greco-Roman religion is for a start it's polytheistic it has many many gods and many different types of gods the famous Olympian

gods but we have nymphs of rivers and forests and so forth we have abstract personifications of fortune sexual desire and so forth so it's a world which is very much more if you like. There's a lot of fluid in its conception of divinity there are even some accounts of gods dying for example in antiquity and gods can certainly be born in antiquity so a very flexible system and also a system without sacred literature as well sacred scripture so it's much more fluid in that sense as well that there's no set of particular reference points that organise this system and it is more built around forms of public engagement. So sacrifice which is the central act of collectivity in Greek religion is a civic act it's something that the whole community of the the city the polis as the Greeks called it would do together there are very many other forms of religion family religion even forms of personal religion even forms of afterlife religion but yes the primary thing that we tend to think of when we think of Greco-Roman religion is this sort of state religion built around sacrifice and expressions of communal value in civic space.

Richard: Cammie your work shows how local institutions norms and shared obligations can support cooperation in particular communities so what role do repeated practices and expectations play in helping people trust one another and act together?

Cammie: Yeah so I mean thinking about repeated practices I mean we've been on the topic of religion there's some really fascinating work looking at the role of collective ritual in particular on community cohesion and cooperation. So collective rituals I mean these are often key elements of religious practice this includes things like dancing in synchrony or sort of at least moving together to a beat making music together worshipping together processions and both lab experiments and sort of real world studies of actual rituals out there in the world suggest that participating in these kinds of collective rituals can really powerfully bind groups together so you know for a lab study for example imagine you bring in some participants you have them do some kind of task where they move together synchronously and then you have them play a behavioral economics game they are going to cooperate more on that game than if they did some kind of task that did not involve moving together synchronously and there are many studies of you know real life rituals that show similar kinds of effects on how groups function and act together absolutely.

Richard: Can we look a little bit about how culture shifts so Cammie what makes cultural traits endure some of them while others disappear or change?

Cammie: That's a big question and there are lots of answers so one is that some cultural traits are what in cultural evolution we call cultural adaptations so these are traits that actually serve some kind of function they provide some kind of meaningful benefit for example you know knowledge of how to make a useful tool or something like that might be a cultural adaptation these traits are more likely to be transmitted and maintained over time. This is because humans actually have some cognitive biases that seem to push us to pay attention to certain kinds of teachers for example we seem to have biases to pay a little bit more attention to older people successful people people with prestige who often have gotten to be that way because they themselves have acquired some adaptive knowledge or skills so if we preferentially learn from them which research suggests that we do this can help cultural adaptations persist. I would like

to mention of course that these social learning biases as we call them can be a double-edged sword prestige bias social learning for example can lead to things like copycat suicides after a celebrity suicide so it's not to say that this is necessarily good or bad this is just one way that traits can persist. The second one that I'll bring up briefly is norms can be particularly sticky. It's not to say that they don't change obviously they can change and sometimes they change quite quickly in fact but because these are. You know what people believe is quote unquote the right thing to do in a certain setting and crucially they're enforced you know gossip punishment et cetera these can be more enduring than just a simple tradition or custom like you know parting your hair on the side versus the middle or something that people don't really care about and certainly aren't enforcing. I also I do want to be clear and say that you know norms are not necessarily adaptive or quote unquote good either I'm sure we can all think of plenty of examples of social norms that we wish would change some norms are definitively maladaptive I mean I can give a really extreme and clear example of this mortuary rights among the four a people in Papua New Guinea traditionally people actually ritualistically consumed the brains of dead relatives and unfortunately in this case led to an epidemic of a deadly prion disease called crew in that population so you know even specifically maladaptive norms may persist.

Richard: Tim, you've talked a little bit about the how the Greeks adapted when the Roman Empire basically took control so how does the culture survive when political power shifts was it simply that the Greeks could see the opportunities in the new culture was there all the weather aspects of Greek culture that survived despite the Roman Empire being better at some things.

Tim: So I think the answer to that is something to do with this symbiosis of the Roman Empire and Greek culture. The Roman Empire was one of most empires it was heavily extractive it focused a lot of energy on moving people population ideas around and so forth so it was trying to impose often we can visibly see it a kind of mono culture and we have people from antiquity talking often in very celebratory terms about how the Roman Empire has created a culturally unified space so that is likely to you might have thought to erase Greek culture. It raises. But it doesn't seem to erase the Greek culture because of this particular symbiosis between Greek and Roman we were talking earlier about the ways that Romans get a lot of their ideas of empire from their Greek neighbors and in particular their forms of imperial expression in the realm of art and and literature and the like and the most famous work of Roman literature is Virgil's Aeneid which is essentially saying that the Greeks have Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and we're going to now have a Roman version of that which shows that the Romans are better than the Greeks. And so they were doing that kind of thing the whole time playing that particular kind of sibling relationship thing with with Greek culture. So the other point to make is that because of the nature of Alexander's conquest there were huge tracts of the Roman Empire as it now was that were Greek speaking. So it makes sense to go with the flow of the Greek language if you like. So as I say I think the Roman Empire was basically highly destructive when it came to local regional cultures. Of course there were cultures that survived despite it. I mean Druidism for example did survive within the Roman Empire. So there are forms of survival but basically it becomes more difficult to preserve traditional cultures in an imperial system, especially an extractivist taxing system like the Roman one. But it's the specific nature of the interlocking history of Greek and Roman imperial cultures that allows the Greek world to survive.

Plus, I think you were hinting at this a kind of inventiveness and adaptability on the side of Greeks who continue to find new forms of cultural expression that allow them to process their being in the Roman Empire and allow them to see it not simply as a form of humiliation but also as a form of progress.

Richard: Tim debates about the classical past often raise questions about ownership identity and power. When people claim ancient Greek or Roman culture today. What are the risks of treating culture as a possession rather than as something interpreted and reinterpreted over time.

Tim: Yes well this goes back to Cammie's point earlier about the limitations of seeing culture as heritage. In all sorts of ways culture is heritage. I mean if you think about the stewardship of old buildings for example I think it's really important that we take a heritage perspective on the preservation of traces that otherwise would fade from view. Tradition is two things. It is on the one hand. A set of. Shared values that are passed down over time. It is not completely invented. It is something which is that there are aspects of tradition that do persist over time. But there is a strong invented element to it the whole time. We only exist in our own lifetimes. We have only the conjurations of our fellow peers around us to tell us what the past meant and how it signifies now. So in that respect, tradition is always being reinvented. And nobody owns particularly a culture which is two and a half thousand years old. Even modern Greeks. This is a very contested area. Of course modern Greeks have a very particular relationship with the ancient world and they inhabit the same space and there are all sorts of forms of continuation. But it needs to be constantly reinvoked in order to have a sense of continuity with the past. So it's a highly complex and highly problematic area.

Richard: Okay. I'd like to finish by looking ahead into the future. What is the one thing you think societies should understand better about culture over the next decade? Whether in education or public policy, technology, community life or politics? And why? Tim?

Tim: We are living through a very particular moment which rather like the moment that saw the beginning of the age of Augustus is seeing rapid globalisation and the counter reactions to that. The sphere of culture has become extremely important for navigating these moments. I think the populist movements that we've seen which are very much based around the idea of inheritance both genetic inheritance but more specifically cultural inheritance of a sense of strong continuity with the past, these are counter reactions to globalising forces that are knitting us together across national boundaries. And so forth. Seems to me the most urgent thing for us to do over the next 20 years is try to work out how to allow forms of belonging that are not simply international, forms of belonging that are grounded in local communities, how to tense that against more cooperative, to use Cammie's words, forms of behavior, inclusive forms of behavior.

Cammie: Wow, yeah, love your answer, Tim. I'll go a little bit of a different direction. Something I've been thinking about a lot in recent years really is the implications of the sort of research I've been discussing today for development policy actually, like economic development policy,

because policies and programs are often designed by, you know, Western practitioners but then implemented in non-Western settings or, you know, they'll design a program, test it in one place, do a program analysis, this, make sure it works, and then pick it up and try to transplant it somewhere else and just assume that it will work just as well. And often this strategy fails. There are probably many reasons for that. But one factor I think that could be very important is the cultural and psychological fit between the program and the target population. So I can give you a kind of interesting example of this. School building programs sometimes have no impact on female education. So the assumption is if we build a bunch of schools, parents are going to send their kids, and this is going to have positive effects on the education rates of children, boys and girls. But that's not always the case. And there's been some really interesting work in economics that found that the efficacy of school building programs can actually depend quite specifically on local cultural practices. For example, whether or not groups practice bride price. So bride price is a common cultural practice across the world. This is when the groom and his family make some kind of transfer of wealth to the family of the bride at marriage. And in this research, they looked at school building programs in Zambia and Indonesia and found that groups that practice bride price experienced positive impacts on girls education from these school building programs. And this is likely at least partially because educated daughters will get a bigger bride price. So parents had a larger incentive to educate their daughters if that option is available. Where bride price was not practiced, they found the school building programs had no impact on girls education. So practitioners considering this type of program might want to think about adding more incentives to school building programs, for example, if the local population doesn't have this cultural practice. This is just one example of how culture can shape how people respond to policies and programs. And I think moving forward, it's going to be really important to kind of incorporate these insights about cultural, psychological, and behavioral diversity into policy.

Richard: Two brilliant and very thought-provoking answers there to finish on. Thank you both very much. That's all we've got time for on this episode. Thanks to Tim Whitmarsh from Cambridge University and Cammie Curtin from the Toulouse School of Economics for joining us. And thank you for listening to Crossing Channels. As this is the final episode of season five, we'd also like to thank you for joining us throughout the season. We'd love to hear what you think. Your reviews help us shape future episodes and make it easier for new listeners to discover the show. In the meantime, why not explore some of our earlier episodes?