

## CHAPTER TWO

### SCIENTIFIC DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

However, in the nineteenth century culture gained an entirely scientific usage with the development of sciences such as micro-biology. The Oxford English Dictionary records the use of "culture" in 1884 to refer to the preparation of populations of bacteria in controlled laboratory conditions. The impact of this usage communicated a sense of investigating human society in an entirely objective scientific manner.

Encounters with non-industrial cultures led to the theories of Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and the more fruitful theories of cultural evolution of Lewis H. Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor. Morgan's work led him to generalize about world culture rather than individual cultures. Tylor's work led him to propose a theory for the evolution of religion from animism and polytheism to monotheism. Both of them shared three assumptions. Contemporary societies can be classified as more "primitive" or more "civilized", there are a fixed number of stages from "primitive" to "civilized" and all societies progress through these stages in the same sequence, but at different rates. There is an underlying justification for the colonization and conquest of less technologically powerful societies, which regards the industrialised urban societies as the result of beneficial progress. These assumptions were extremely powerful and can still be seen in the notion that prehistoric human society passed from a hunter gathering stage to nomadism to pastoral cultures and finally permanent settlements based on agriculture. However, Tylor's significant contribution to Cultural Studies was in redefining culture as a diverse set of activities characteristic of all human societies. This definition partially avoided the value-laden polemics of Arnold and enabled anthropologists to gain insight into the cultures of non-industrialized societies.

The assumptions derived from the biological sciences were that societies could be studied in isolation and that their assumed "primitiveness" allowed a "pure" scientific approach. Of course, such assumptions went hand in hand with notions of cultural evolution from primitive to sophisticated societies and with the rise of nation states. The scientific use of culture and the practice of examining one micro-organism at a time and thus a single set of variables supported ideas of national language and national culture being distinct from those of other nation states. The study of culture was intimately linked with political and social developments in western industrialized countries.

In the twentieth century the assumptions about what was meant by culture were challenged, firstly by the German-born American anthropologist, Franz Boas (1858-1942). His contribution to the study of culture was in his rejection of popular evolutionary approaches to the study of culture, which held that societies progress through a set of hierarchic technological and cultural stages, with Western-European culture at the summit. After studying native American culture he argued that culture developed historically through the interactions of groups of people and the diffusion of ideas and that consequently there was no progress towards "higher" cultural forms. He also introduced the ideology of cultural relativism claiming that cultures cannot be objectively regarded as higher or lower, or better or more correct, but that all humans see the world in terms of their own culture and judge it according to their own culturally acquired norms. For Boas the object of anthropology was to understand the way in which culture conditioned people to understand and interact with the world in different ways, and to do this it was necessary to gain an understanding of the language and cultural practices of the people studied. Boas's field work with native American Cultures also points to a pre-occupation by American anthropology with native American cultures, perhaps they are geographically easy of access, but also perhaps indicating a collective anxiety over the fate of these cultures under the onslaught of the expansion and territorial appropriations stimulated by manifest destiny.

from *The Mind of Primitive Man*

Anthropology has reached that point of development where the careful investigation of facts shakes our firm belief in the far-reaching theories that have been built up. The complexity of each phenomenon dawns on our minds, and makes us desirous of proceeding more cautiously. Heretofore we have seen the features common to all human thought. Now we begin to see their differences. We recognize that these are no less important than their similarities, and the value of detailed studies becomes apparent. Our aim has not changed, but our method must change. We are still searching for the laws that govern the growth of human culture, of human thought; but we recognize the fact that before we seek for what is common to all culture, we must analyze each culture by careful and exact methods, as the geologist analyzes the succession and order of deposits, as the biologist examines the forms of living matter. We see that the growth of human culture manifests itself in the growth of each special culture. Thus we have come to understand that before we can build up the theory of the growth of all human culture, we must know the growth of cultures that we find here and there among the most primitive tribes of the Arctic, of the deserts of Australia, and of the impenetrable forests of South America; and the progress of the civilization of antiquity and of our own times. We must, so far as we can, reconstruct the actual history of mankind, before we can hope to discover the laws underlying that history.

It is clear, from these considerations, that the three methods of classifying mankind—that according to physical characters, according to language, and according to culture—all reflect the historical development of races from different standpoints; and that the results of the three classifications are not comparable, because the historical facts do not affect the three classes of phenomena equally. A consideration of all these classes of facts is needed when we endeavour to reconstruct the early history of the races of mankind.

Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups. The mere enumerations of these various aspects of life, however, does not constitute culture. It is more, for its elements are not independent, they have a structure...

Boas introduced the concept of cultural relativism, which remains a fundamental principle underlying cultural studies.

Civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes."

There is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man. A close connection between race and personality has never been established.

Its power to make us understand the roots from which our civilization has sprung, that it impresses us with the relative value of all forms of culture, and thus serves as a check to an exaggerated valuation of the standpoint of our own period, which we are only too liable to consider the ultimate goal of human evolution, thus depriving ourselves of the benefits to be gained from the teachings of other cultures and hindering an objective criticism of our own work.

In later life *The Mind of Primitive Man* was banned in Nazi Germany and later burnt. Boas devoted the last part of his career to lecturing on the nature of racial differences and the America convincing the American public of the dangers of Nazi Germany. His influence was enormous with a direct effect on the science of anthropology and indirectly on Cultural Studies in ensuring that it contains a powerful anthropological strand. A number of great American anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Margaret Mead, and W.E. B di Bois spread his work across the United States. Boas died at Columbia University in the arms of the great French anthropologist and philosopher Claude Levi-Strauss following a stroke.

Two strands in definitions of culture can be distinguished which are eloquently summarised by Max Weber. The first strand, pursued by Matthew Arnold, imposes a value system on the notion of culture and the second relies on empirical investigation and the understanding that such values are relative, differing from culture to culture.

from *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* 1904

We have designated as "cultural sciences" those disciplines which analyze the phenomena of life in terms of their cultural significance. The significance of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot however be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws (*Gesetzesbegriffen*), however perfect it may be, since the significance of cultural events presupposes a value orientation towards these events. The concept of culture is a value concept. Empirical reality becomes "culture" to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value relevance. Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values.

The focus of attention on reality under the guidance of values which lend it significance and the selection and ordering of the phenomena which are thus affected in the light of their cultural significance is entirely different from the analysis of reality in terms of laws and general concepts.

Weber's insight points towards later debates in Cultural Studies theory about concepts of objectivity and subjectivity, particularly when structuralist theory led to reformulations of Culture Studies in the 1970s. Not only do the researchers own subjectivities have to be taken into account, but also their actual impact on the culture they are investigating. Moreover, the consciousness of members of the culture under investigation have to be considered. Do they abstract a notion of culture from the lives they pursue and how do their notions of culture affect their responses to investigation?

These considerations have led to a number of theoretical attitudes which determine the various approaches to Cultural Studies.

Here are some general definitions taken from **Hofstede's Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind**.

- Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.
- Culture is the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people.
- Culture is communication, communication is culture.

- Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior; that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or more briefly, behaviour through social learning.
- A culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.
- Culture is symbolic communication. Some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The meanings of the symbols are learnt and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions.
- Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their manifestation in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action.
- Culture is the sum of total of the learned behaviour of a group of people which is generally considered to be their tradition and transmitted from generation to generation.
- Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.

All of these are relevant to Cultural Studies, but are not complete in themselves. An underlying concept in contemporary Cultural Studies is **Cultural Relativism**.

Cultural studies researchers understand that different cultural groups think, feel, and act differently. There are no scientific standards for considering one group as superior or inferior to another. When we study differences in culture among groups and societies we adopt a position of cultural relativism. It does not mean we can describe ourselves or our society as normal.

There are four characteristics involved in a relativist approach, symbolic composition, systematic patterning, learned transmission, and societal grounding.

### **Symbolic Composition**

The fundamental element culture is the culture trait. Traits assume many forms varying from material artifacts (tools, house structures, art works) to behavioural regularities (family relationships, economic exchanges and legal sanctions)- to abstract concepts and beliefs. All of these manifestations share one feature in common; they are symbols and as such express meaning.

A symbol is understood as an expression that stands for or represents something else, usually a condition in the real world. The use of words in a language provides the most obvious example. Words stand for perceived entities and states. Words as symbols, however are different from the objects they represent and have special qualities, which is why they are so useful to us. One important characteristic is that they bear no relation to what they represent and are thus arbitrary.

While words provide a familiar example, all cultural elements, including material artifacts, have a symbolic character. Art and ceremonial objects have obvious symbolic meanings and are created to represent them. Tools and technologies are less obviously symbolic, but also involve representations. They are manufactured from a conceptual plan to bring about a desired state different from them in form. Technology also gives us a means to transform a symbolic world to a material one.

### **Systematic Patterning**

Cultural elements as symbols assume their meanings in relationship to other symbols within a broader context of a meaning system. To interpret a symbol Cultural Studies researchers

must investigate how elements interrelate and the presence of unifying principles that connect symbols to form larger patterns and cultural wholes. Cultural traits and patterns must be understood in terms of the logic of the culture and the integration of cultural elements according to internally consistent themes and principles. This position is holistic and maintains that individual culture traits cannot be understood in isolation.

### **Learned Transmission**

Culture traits and cultural patterns include language, technology, institutions, beliefs, and values and are transmitted across generations and maintain their continuity through learning, technically termed enculturation. Thus learning abilities and intelligence are essential for all human groups and have replaced the role of biologically based genetic transmission of instincts which are dominant in most other animal species. However there is an important relationship between biology and culture.

Human biology has affected the development of culture, since symbolic and learning abilities depend upon the physical composition of the brain and other anatomical adaptations, such as vocal structures which can produce speech or manual abilities that can manufacture tools. These biological features support a general capacity for culture among all humans and explains universal characteristics, such as language learning. However, biological factors do not determine specific cultural traits, such as the ability to speak English or Slovak. All children are genetically programmed to learn languages through a fixed series of stages, but will acquire a specific language only through patient instruction. Biology determines our general capacity for culture and is responsible for some cultural universals. There are traits that appear in some form in every culture in the world. However, cultural variation between peoples is due to learned traditions and not to innate or genetic propensities.

The replacement of genetic transmission of behaviour by learning in the course of human evolution has had an effect on our biological heritage. We adapt to our environment through cultural strategies rather than genetic predispositions. Consequently, human groups have spread to every part of the world and survived great differences in climate and diet without great anatomical changes. The result has been that physical difference between peoples, who have developed over millions of years in thousands of diverse ecosystems, is very superficial. Cultural differences, however, are profound, limitless and form a fascinating subject matter for cultural research.

### **Societal Grounding**

Culture can be observed only in the form of personal behaviour but can be abstracted from an individual's actions and attributed to the social groups to which they belong. Consequently researchers do not emphasize the importance of individual responsibility and creativity and focus on the common denominator of collective identity and symbols. Society defines and constrains our behaviour in many unperceived ways. The social aspect of culture is dependent on communication through symbols and this requires an individual use commonly understood conventions.

We most consciously experience social forces in the form of legal sanctions, which are themselves culturally based, but group norms limit our behaviour in a wider range of circumstances. There is no law that says that I must communicate with you in English, but I am impelled to do so by the fact that we are engaged in a social relationship that requires mutual understanding and an educational environment one of whose purposes is to encourage you to become an expert user of English. Under special circumstances, we might use another language or engage a translator. However, the only result of using my own personal language would be a failure in communication.

So far we have defined a general philosophical approach of cultural relativism and identified the four characteristics consequent upon such an approach. However, other philosophical approaches have blended with the relativist position to produce a number of different methodologies.

The value-based approach emerging from Matthew Arnold's essay views culture as refinement, moral or intellectual development and the human attainment of "perfection." This was modified, especially by British cultural theorists such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams so that culture was regarded as a product, for example, "material" culture or "popular culture" versus "high" culture or "folk" culture.

A variation on the value-based approach is that based on notions of hegemony derived from the writings of, for example, Antonio Gramsci. This is critical of existing society and claims that culture functions as an ideology that produces or is based upon a type of false consciousness and works to oppress a group of people. This approach examines the power relationships within a society and how mass culture operates to maintain existing power relationships. Sub-cultures are often examined in how they resist existing power structures and also how they can be integrated into society as products and their identity turned into a commodity.

A further approach has emerged from Post-Modernism which regards culture as being produced by history the interpretation of which is constantly challenged. There is never a complete picture as there is a constant emergence of gaps in the perceiver / researcher's knowledge so that both an account of a culture and the culture itself is challenged and temporal.

A final relativist approach ignores any attempt to relate to "a big picture" and defines culture as whatever is shared by a particular group. This has led to an exploration of sub-cultures in contemporary post-industrial society.

### KEY VOCABULARY

Approaches - Value Functional	Power	Relativist Post-Modern	Process Group	Structural
Culture - material	popular	folk		
Communication - Cultural	Cross-cultural	Intercultural	International	
Concepts - Hegemony in-group	Race out-group	Ethnicity	Subculture/Co-culture	
Processes - symbolic composition	systematic patterning		learned transmission	
	societal grounding			

### MAIN POINTS

- Cultural evolution classified societies as more "primitive" or more "civilized." There are a fixed number of stages from "primitive" to "civilized" and all societies progress through these stages in the same sequence, but at different rates.
- Boas introduced the concept of cultural relativism, which remains a fundamental principle underlying cultural studies.
- Max Weber argued that concepts of value could never be separated from the analysis of culture.

## SEMINAR EXERCISES

Match these concepts with these definitions of culture:

**Value**                    **Power**                    **Relativist**                    **Process**                    **Structural**  
**Functional**                    **Post-Modern**                    **Group**

1. Culture begins with the way that religious beliefs, communal rituals, or shared traditions are produced through systems of meaning, through structures of power....It is impossible to think of culture as a finite and self-sufficient body of contents, customs, and traditions.

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2. Culture is the moral and social passion for doing good. It is the study and pursuit of perfection, and this perfection is the growth and predominance of humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality.

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3. Culture is simply a way of talking about collective identities.

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4. Culture is synonymous with civilization, and therefore only the civilized have culture. Culture, as a guidance system, leads us to notice important differences between humans and other phenomena that get directed.

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5. Culture is . . . clearly derived from what people do. . . It is this complex of ongoing activity that establishes and portrays structure of organization.

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6. The culture of everyday life is a culture of concrete practices which embody and perform differences. These embodied differences are a site of struggle between the measured individuals that constitute social discipline, and the popularity-produced differences that fill and extend the spaces and power of the people

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7. The culture of a people consists not only of its concrete creations—tools, buildings, and so on are its “material culture”—but of all the patterns of interaction, all the formal and informal rules of behavior which have become traditional in the relations between social groups.

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8. The term culture is multi-discursive; it can be mobilized in a number of different discourses. This means you cannot import a fixed definition into any and every context and expect it to make sense.

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## READING

Barker, Chris. The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies. London: Sage Publications, 2004, pp175-7.

Boas, Franz. The Mind of Primitive Man. New York: Macmillan, 1938.

Hofstede, Geert. Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Weber, Max. The Methodology of the Social Sciences. New York: The Free Press, 1949.

See also these web sources

[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global\\_pad\\_-\\_what\\_is\\_culture.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global_pad_-_what_is_culture.pdf)

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