What is Culture?

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Bad news first. "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". [1] It's a word that everyone uses freely, but which is difficult to pin down. We will attempt to define the term nonetheless, and in this attempt, we will follow Raymond Williams, who not only admitted to the complexity of culture, but found a formula that became central to Cultural Studies.

"Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact". [2] What might not seem controversial in our 21st-century everything-goes multiverse was considered a shocking statement in the late 1950s, the time when the first contours of the newly arising field of Cultural Studies took shape. Culture, for most people at the time, was everything but ordinary: Shakespeare, Elgar, opera, Turner, Eliot and the Elgin marbles. The "most widespread use" of the term culture, Williams explains, was that "which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity [...]: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film". [3]

This traditional understanding of culture is what you will still find in the 'arts & culture' section of a newspaper or a magazine; this is the kind of culture your teachers at school probably bored you with. This culture is not ordinary, but extra-ordinary, apparently "the high point of civilization". [4] In this view, culture "is the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy – the 'high culture' of an age". [5]

However, there is a second line of thinking about culture, one that is less interested in artworks, but more in lived experiences and everyday practices. Here, culture "indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, [or] a group". [6] This 'particular way of life' is rooted in "the way, the forms, in which groups 'handle' the raw material of their social and material existence". [7] Thus, other than a 'high culture' which might distance itself from everyday life, this second understanding of culture is much more down to earth, describing the way everyday people manage their lives and give meaning to it:

> The 'culture' of a group [...] is the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of the group [...], the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in *mores* and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. [8]

We use the word 'culture' in this second sense when we speak about Irish culture, business culture or working-class culture. Is this, then, what Williams meant by ordinary culture? Because in some ways, pub culture and club culture, queer culture and Black culture are certainly more ordinary and less highfalutin than opera and ballet, more concerned with 'handling' their social and material existence than trying to transcend it.

Williams' insistence that culture is ordinary, however, cuts both ways. It is, without a doubt, a rebuttal of any idea that culture might be something reserved for a 'cultured' elite which puts bums on theatre seats that ordinary people cannot afford. A more contemporary use of 'culture' consequently includes not only 'high culture', but also "the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, [...] the 'mass culture' or the 'popular culture' of an age". [9] However, rather than simply championing 'popular culture' over a traditional 'high culture', Williams contends that learning and creativity, as much as tradition and communality, are ordinary activities to be found *everywhere*. In Cultural Studies, therefore, we not only include all kinds of cultural artefacts from Shakespeare to drill music, but are especially interested in what people *do* with these artefacts, and what they *mean* to them. Cultural Studies argues that ordinary life is cultured, too, and that high culture is ordinary, too.

Williams insists that *every culture* has *two aspects*: "the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to" and "the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested". [10] Creativity and learning, thus, are ordinary, just as there is creativity in the most ordinary activities:

> These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. [11]

Williams is by no means against the 'arts', but rather claims that learning and creativity are ordinary: open to everyone. If participation in culture is defined as taking part in the transmission, transformation and creation of meanings and values, then all members of a society have a stake in culture. Culture, therefore, is democratic, at least potentially, or rather: ideally; in reality, within the current capitalist conjuncture, both the consumption and production of culture is regulated by the economic, political and social position of those participating. Therefore, as we will see, culture is always tied to questions of *power*.

Williams intervenes in the debate about different definitions of culture not by suggesting yet another, third idea of culture, but by insisting that we have to think of the two existing strands, 'culture as art' and 'culture as society', as "inextricably interwoven": [12]

> we use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. [13]

Williams refuses to accept the separation between art and everyday life that many had propagated. In this sense, Cultural Studies tries "to reinsert culture into the practical everyday life of people, into the totality of a whole way of life". [14] Even more importantly, Cultural Studies is not only interested in these two different ideas or aspects of culture, but especially in the question of how, in our current situation, they are connected, linked: 'their conjunction'. In Cultural Studies, then, "culture is understood *both* as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth". [15]

I guess most of you have some idea of what culture in the sense of 'arts' refers to: artefacts of creative effort. However, it is probably less obvious what an everyday culture is supposed to be, which is made by humans, too, but which also makes them, forms the way we live. In fact, we often tend to think of ourselves as makers, rather than being made, and therefore find it difficult to come to terms with this second sense of culture.

Above all, 'culture as society' binds people together by providing a shared view of the world. As Stuart Hall explains: "To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which would be understood by each other". [16] Without culture, no communication and no sense of community would be possible.

To say that members of a shared culture "interpret the world in roughly the same ways", as Hall put it, means to think of culture as a 'lens' "through which all phenomena are seen", a 'lens' which "determines how these phenomena will be apprehended". [17] Whether you perceive a grasshopper as a plague ruining your harvest, or a snack waiting to be fried and eaten, depends on whether you are a farmer in Montana or a connoisseur in Mexico. And whether your mouth waters when you see a rib-eye steak, or your stomach starts turning inside out, possibly depends on whether you are a vegan or a self-proclaimed 'real man'. Culture informs our perception of the world and invests meaning and value; without culture, a grasshopper would still be the same biological entity, but it would not be categorized as edible or non-edible, deserving protection or not. In short, culture provides "'maps of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members". [18]

As we can see in the example of the grasshopper, culture does not only give meaning to our perception of the world, it also provides us with guidance on how to act in the world, whether, for example, we should eat something or not. In this sense, "culture is the 'blueprint' of human activity. It determines the co-ordinates of social action and productive activity, specifying the behaviors and objects that issue from both". [19] Culture informs us how to act in an appropriate way: it tells you that 'boys don't cry' and that 'girls should be seen, not heard', it tells you that you can 'play hard' when you 'work hard'. Now that doesn't mean that boys won't cry, that girls will never be loud, and that the unemployed can't have fun; it just means that humans who are identified as 'boys' and 'girls' learn that they might be looked at in a strange way when they cry after falling or complain loudly when unsatisfied – and that you end up on the front page of the tabloids when you claim benefits while partying on Mallorca.

> It is thus that each culture establishes its own special vision of the world and thus that it renders the understandings and rules appropriate to one cultural context preposterously

> inappropriate in the next. [...] In sum, culture 'constitutes' the world by investing it with its own particular meanings. [20]

While a guinea pig is a beloved pet in North America, many children love to eat it in parts of South America. Thus, while eating a guinea pig would be 'preposterously inappropriate' in most US households, it would no doubt be 'appropriate' for many families in Peru.

Now, what's that got to do with our first definition of culture as cultural artefacts? In what relation does a painting, a record, a film or a book stand to culture as 'lens' and 'blueprint'? Remember that within Cultural Studies, "we understand the word 'culture' to refer to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give *expressive form* to their social and material life-experience". [21] Culture as art, that is, images, songs, movies, novels, but also games, statues, museums, etc., provide these 'expressive forms'; they can represent, transmit, affirm or challenge the common norms and values of a given culture. A Disney movie might reproduce traditional family values and become a means to transmit certain norms to a new generation; on the other hand, a punk rock record might challenge such norms and open a debate as to whether new values have to be generated.

However, as the 'might' in the last sentence signals, the training that a culture puts us through is no mechanical procedure, but a complex endeavor conditional to specific circumstances. As the 'conjunction' of the two forms or aspects of culture is central to Cultural Studies, we will return to this relation again and again during this introductory course.

Before that, however, we want to talk about origins. How do cultures come into being? Or, more precisely, when did you first realize that you do not simply see the world as it is, but through the 'lens' of (a) culture? When did you first realize that you do not simply act 'naturally', but 'cultured', that is, according to the 'blueprint' of a specific culture? The simple but not so simple answer is that cultures come into being as a consequence of cultural contact. Cultural contact means to identify other (regional, social or historical) modes of living, to compare these modes with one's own, and to distinguish one's own mode of living *as* a culture. [22] Cultural contact is that moment when you're at the food market in Mexico and realize that other people have other ideas of what to do with grasshoppers, and that the way you thought about grasshoppers before must have something to do with the way you grew up, as it does not seem

to be in the nature of the grasshopper to be either delicious or repellent, as much as it does not seem to be a universal human trait to like them or not.

But isn't it a somewhat strange and paradoxical notion to claim that cultures come into being when they meet? How can they meet before they exist? The answer to this question involves the realization that cultures are not simply a given 'way of life', but the result of observing and identifying. Before 'cultures' meet, these 'cultures' are groups of people that have cultivated certain forms of behavior and of seeing the world – however, without knowing that other forms of seeing the world are possible, and therefore without knowing that it is possible to see and do things differently. After 'cultures' have met, these groups of people can *reflect* on the specificity of their way of seeing and doing things. [23]

Gregory Bateson, an American anthropologist, has introduced the term *schismogenesis* to describe the fact that cultures cannot find their identity within themselves, but that they are 'born from a rift', as the Greek etymology of the term suggests (*shkisma* = chasm, cleft, rift + *gignesthai* = being born, produced). [24] *Schismogenesis* is a complicated, ongoing and unending process that involves observing, comparing, distinguishing, identifying, representing, promoting, debating and enforcing attitudes, meanings, norms and values within a specific group, and towards other groups. Culture, consequently, exists only in the plural; cultures are relational: they are never pure, but always informed by the observation of others. For Hall, cultural identities, therefore,

> are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks [...] that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed. [...] The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'. [25]

An example. Say, in the valley where you live, most people drink beer, and only a few drink wine; in fact, it's been this way so long that you never gave much thought to it. However, since your valley recently got into a quarrel with some folks from a neighboring valley about access to water reserves, you realize that lots of beer and little wine is no natural order; in the other

valley, it's the other way around. In order to distance yourself from those pesky neighbors, you declare your valley the valley of strong and honest beer lovers, while those others are just a bunch of lofty 'winers'.

Several things happen here. First of all, you emphasize a difference where many similarities also exist (the neighboring valley is not so different after all: it can grow the ingredients for beer and wine, too). Secondly, you now have to deal with internal differences, as well: if you're the valley of beer, what should happen to the wine lovers in your valley? Should they be convinced to let go of their favorite drink? Will they be accepted as true citizens of the 'valley of beer'? Will they be allowed to keep their land? Will they be forced to work for the rich brewery owners? Will they be marginalized in order to give a unified image? Thirdly, what do you do about the other valley? Do you accept the 'valley of wine' as just another way of life and coexist happily ever after? Or do you somehow fear this other culture as a lurking threat: what if people from your culture start choosing the wine option? And what do you do about the nagging thought that somehow it was the other that gave you your identity? Could there be a valley of beer, if there wasn't a valley of wine?

In most cases we know of, *schismogenesis* does not lead to a peaceful equilibrium, especially when the material situation becomes dire – because of a drought, for example. Now, the wine drinkers in the beer valley might be identified as somewhat of an enemy within: why are they here anyway, wouldn't they be better off with their friends in the other valley? Why are they taking our jobs, flirting with our wives? As they don't represent the official culture, the wine people might start to get less important jobs in administration, in politics and police; eventually, they might have to move to parts of the valley that have worse than average schools and health care, inferior soils and even less rain.

"Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings", Williams argued: "Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning". In order to bring people together, therefore, questions of culture have to be addressed: "The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land". [26] Alas, it doesn't always work that way. Instead of common growth through active debate, encounters are often shaped by constellations of domination and subjugation.

It is not only that, after a while, the winers might find themselves worse off than the beer people in terms of income, education and health care. It is not just that the failure of finding common meanings has also 'written itself into the land', creating different social geographies for the cultures within the valley. What is more: as the books in school and the ads on TV will always only represent beer people as good people, the wine people find it more and more difficult to think about themselves other than through the eyes of the beer people. They will find it increasingly difficult to form a cultural identity which can support their case for recognition and equality.

While cultures are relative in the sense that they form their identity in relation to other cultures, they are not just random collections of meanings, values and appropriate practices, because they remain tied, however loosely, "to their social and material life-experience"; if your valley doesn't support the growth of hops, it is unlikely (though not impossible), you become the valley of beer. However, "social and material life-experiences" do not determine how a culture is represented. Instead, some experiences might be represented more, and in a better light, than others. Consequently, the fight of the winers in the valley of beer for better jobs, better housing and better health care is also a fight over culture and how it is represented. It is a struggle between people put into different classes:

> The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes the forms of a continuous struggle over the distribution of 'cultural power'. We might want, here, to make a distinction between 'culture' and 'ideology'. Dominant and subordinate classes will each have distinct cultures. But when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture experiences itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology. [27]

We will look at how meaning is produced, circulated and received in more detail in the following, third part of this introductory course, as well as at the power structures that determine which meanings become dominant, and which are subordinated.

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed., London: 1983, p. 87.
2. Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", in: *Conviction*, ed. Norman MacKenzie, London: 1958, 74-92, here p. 75.
3. Ibid., p. 90.
4. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., London: 2008, p. 41.
5. Stuart Hall, "Introduction", in: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: 1997, 1-11, here p. 2.
6. Williams, *Keywords*, p. 90.
7. John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson & Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class: A Theoretical Overview", in: *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall & Tony Jefferson, London: 1976, 9-74, here p. 10.
8. Ibid.
9. Hall, "Introduction", p. 2.
10. Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", p. 75.
11. Ibid.
12. Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh Mackay & Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed., Milton Keynes: 2013, p. 7.
13. Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", p. 75-76.
14. Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*, Durham, NC: 1997, p. 16.
15. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula A. Treichler, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction", in: *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula A. Treichler, New York: 1992, 1-16, here p. 5.
16. Hall, "Introduction", p. 2.
17. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington: 1988, p. 73.
18. Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class", p. 10.
19. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, p. 73.
20. Ibid.
21. Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class", p. 10.
22. Cf. Dirk Baecker, *Wozu Kultur?* Berlin: 2001, p. 11-17.
23. Cf. Hartmut Böhme, "Was ist Kulturwissenschaft?", http://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/lehre/kulturwissenschaft.pdf, n. pag. (accessed 6 Nov 2001).
24. Cf. Gregory Bateson, "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis", *Man* 35 (1935), p. 178-183.
25. Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", in: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay, London: 1996, 1-17, here p. 4-5.
26. Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", p. 75.
27. Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class", p. 12.

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