Lecture 1

What Is Culture? (Werner Delanoy)

**1.1** Introduction

It is a truth widely acknowledged that scholars in want of a definition of culture state that this is a term most difficult to explain. For Williams, culture ‘is one of the three most complicated words in the English language’ (1984: 87). Williams adds that this complexity results from the term’s ‘intricate historical development in different languages’ (p. 87) and its multiple ‘variations of use’ (p. 92). Building on Williams, Eagleton claims that ‘culture is a multifaceted concept, which makes it hard to run a tightly unified case about it’ (2016: viii). In similar terms, for Hall ‘culture is one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences’ with ‘many different ways of defining it’ (1997a: 2). Yet all these scholars offer definitions by tracking the term’s histories and by pinpointing its different meanings. Following their approach, this article aims to highlight central meanings of the term in both diachronic and synchronic ways.

What further complicates such an endeavour, however, is the explosion of culture-related research since the 1970s, cutting across disciplinary borders and leading to a variety of approaches to, and definitions of culture. Following Clifford’s comment that ‘cultures do not hold still for their portraits’ (1986: 10), the same can be said of the manifold scholarly perspectives informing culture-related research. Thus, any attempt to capture the dynamics of the notions of culture in circulation – both in everyday discourse and in scholarly debates – can only be selective and subject to

limitations. Yet, given the myriad instances in which this term is invoked,

some clarity about what people mean by culture is indispensable for understanding

the motives underlying how the term has been used in past and current debates. This article, therefore, aims to clarify different meanings of the term ‘culture’ and to invite discussion on a polyvalent, highly complex and developing concept.

**1.2** Meanings of ‘Culture’: From the Roman *colere* to the Linguistic Turn

Employing a historical perspective, scholars such as Ort (2003: 19), Posner (2003: 39) and Williams (1984: 87) refer to the Latin verb *colere* as the linguistic and conceptual basis for the modern term ‘culture’. The meanings of *colere* are fourfold: (1) the tending of natural growth (husbandry, agriculture); (2) habitation in an area or place (the term ‘colony’ is a derivative of this meaning); (3) religious worship (*cultus deorum*); and (4) the spiritual, artistic and intellectual education of people (as in Cicero’s *cultura animi* or the Greek concept of *paideia*) (Ort, 2003: 19; Williams, 1984:

87). In the Middle Ages only two of these meanings remain active, namely culture as husbandry (*cultura agri*) and culture as religious worship (*cultus*). In the Renaissance a new meaning becomes important, which links back to the Latin *cultura animi* and the Greek *paideia*’, yet now with a secular emphasis. Culture, here, stands for human development, in the

sense of both self-realization and collective development. In both instances the term designates an open-ended process towards human perfection.

As for self-realization, such development implies moral education and the use of reason and scientific method. In its collective dimension, in line with a heliotropic worldview where great civilizations follow the course of the sun, European culture is seen as the culminating point in the history of civilizations (e.g. Piller, 2011: 20). Moreover, culture is placed

in opposition to nature, whose roughness, savagery and unpredictability need to be tempered and improved upon by human intervention through education and through control over the natural environment

(Ort, 2003: 19).

With the advent of Romanticism, the term culture takes on a new meaning. As a reaction to the excesses of industrialization, the idea of culture is now linked to the wish to go back to a pre-industrial state in which human life was not corrupted by ‘soulless and impoverished’ industrial civilization (Eagleton, 2016: 10). Thus, culture and civilization, which in their meanings have previously been used interchangeably, now become opposite terms, with culture being the privileged concept (e.g. Ort, 2003: 21,

24). A key thinker here is the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who breaks with earlier concepts in various ways. First, he is critical of European colonialism and its claim to cultural superiority (Eagleton, 2016:

77–8, 83; Herder, 1989 [1784–91]: 706). Rather than seeing cultural development as a universal and unilinear process, he speaks of a plurality of cultures, each having the right to exist with its own specific features (Herder, 1989: 298–304). Secondly, these different cultures are constituted by the Romantic concept of an ‘informing spirit’ (Williams, 1983: 11),

which Herder conceives as being the result of a long tradition passed on over many generations (Herder, 1989: 294–335). Thirdly, in the light of the corrupting presence of civilization, Herder suggests a return to an unadulterated folk culture which helps to promote the health and longevity of a nation (Herder, 1989: 573). Fourthly, in current debates Herder is mainly criticized for viewing cultures as homogeneous, closed entities with distinctive world views (Eagleton, 2016: 83; Welsch, 2017: 10–11). However,Herder is not entirely averse to cultural hybridization, as becomes obvious

in his comments on the composite nature of European culture (Herder,1989: 707). Finally, contrary to a Cartesian perspective, Herder prefers intuition and faith over rational speculation (Eagleton, 2016: 81; Herder,1989: part II).

Following Herder’s definition, culture now designates a particular way of life, and, with the rise of nationalism, the term becomes a synonym for national culture. Culture as a way of life is also the concept used by early anthropology. Unlike Herder’s thinking, early anthropology is shaped by the belief in the superiority of European culture(s), as can be seen in the theories of social evolution suggested by Tylor (1903 [1871]) and Morgan (2013 [1851]). Eagleton, therefore, speaks of ‘the unholy alliance between colonial power and 19th century anthropology’ (2016: 131), and Piller adds that this belief in European cultural superiority ‘provided the moral justification for colonialism’ (2011: 21).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, another meaning of culture becomes established, one which is narrower in scope. As suggested by Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, culture, here, stands for ‘the best which has been thought and said’ (1996 [1869]: 6). In the light of this approach, high culture, as defined and practiced by an elite group of artists and intellectuals, is put forward as the force to temper and refine people’s wild impulses and to unite nations riven by conflict (Eagleton, 2016: 118). The notion of culture as the spiritual means for national unification also lies at the heart of Whitman’s poetic and political program. However, in contrast to concepts that stress national homogeneity, Whitman’s notion of *e* *pluribus unum* acknowledges the United States’ great cultural diversity. At the same time, he sees it as the task of the avant-garde poet to create a unifying force to hold the diverse energies together in the face of potential civil-war separation (Erkilla, 1989: 93–4). In contrast to Arnold and Whitman, Karl Marx regards culture as a phenomenon of secondary importance.

For Marx (1867), culture is a superstructure dependent on a society’s economic base, which, depending on the specific constitution of that society, makes certain realizations of culture possible.

In academia, the term culture takes on a further meaning, which by the twentieth century has become the dominant definition. In Williams’ words, culture is defined as ‘the signifying system through which . . . a social order is communicated, experienced and reproduced’ (1983: 12). In other words, culture, here, stands for the language used by humans to give meaning to their lives. According to Ort (2003: 24) and Posner (2003: 39), such a perspective has its founding father in the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1998 [1923–29]), who defined culture as the sum total of a society’s signifying practices. According to Bachmann-Medick (2016: 21–2), another key influence is linguistic philosophy as advocated by Rorty (1967) with its tenet that there is no reality independent of language. Despite the continuing importance of this concept, the strong version of this theory, where language is viewed as ‘the’ dominant force, has been criticized by many scholars who warn against the disregard for non-linguistic influences inherent in such a perspective (e.g. Delanda, 2016: 25; Eagleton, 2016: 42–4; Hall,1997b: 51). For these critics, culture as a signifying system co-shapes reality,yet it is in turn also shaped by non-linguistic factors – which is the view preferred by the author of this text.

There are several sound reasons for advocating a semiotic definition of culture. First, scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the notion of culture as a whole way of life, which in the eyes of Williams (1983: 209) or Eagleton (2016: 3) is too all-encompassing in approach. They argue that such a wide-reaching concept always runs the risk of ignoring or marginalizing economic, political, ecological or technological factors. Secondly, a restrictive definition with the emphasis on high culture can thus be avoided, since signifying practices concern all the discourses in circulation.

Thirdly, essentialist concepts such as culture as the informing spirit of a people can now be discussed as discursive constructions serving particular

purposes.

**Meanings of ‘Culture’: From the Linguistic Turn to the Present Day**

Since around 1970 ‘culture’ has become a widely used term in manifold contexts. In politics, it has served the far right to hide their racism behind insistence on preserving a culture in the face of unbridgeable cultural differences, while disadvantaged groups such as women or gay people have invoked it to fight for their identity-related aims. In business management, intercultural training seminars are offered, which focus on the behavioural dos and don’ts in intercultural business relationships, with the aim of generating sales and profits. In addition, there is a culture industry that imbues almost all goods with symbolic value to influence people’s world views and to instil in them a consumer mentality (Prischnig, 2009: 94).

Finally, with the flourishing of culture studies as a transdisciplinary research field, 1 many new perspectives have been developed, which in scholarly debates have been discussed as different cultural turns (Bachmann-Medick, 2016; Hegeman, 2012).

This wealth of research has considerably increased the scope for culturerelated reflection. However, it has further complicated any attempts to gain an overview of the positions and definitions in circulation and mutation. In their comprehensive 1952 study, Kroeber and Kluckhohn distinguished 150 different definitions of culture. Nowadays, any similar attempt would probably end in a wild goose chase.