

Keywords : a vocabulary of culture and society / Raymond Williams;
London: Fontana Press, 1983 (87-93 p.)

CULTURE

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.

The fw is *cultura*, L, from rw *colere*, L. *Colere* had a range of meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect, honor with worship. Some of these meanings eventually separated, though still with occasional overlapping, in the derived nouns. Thus 'inhabit developed through *colonus*, L to *colony*. 'Honor with worship developed through *cultus*, L to *cult*. *Cultura* took on the main meaning of cultivation or tending, including, as in Cicero, *cultura animi*, though with subsidiary medieval meanings of honor and worship (cf. in English culture as 'worship in Caxton (1483)). The French forms of *cultura* were *couture*, OF, which has since developed its own specialized meaning, and later *culture*, which by eC15 had passed into English. The primary meaning was then in husbandry, the tending of natural growth.

Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals. The subsidiary *coulter* -- ploughshare, had travelled by a different linguistic route, from *culter*, L -- ploughshare, *culter*, OE, to the variant English spellings *culter*, *colter*, *coulter* and as late as eC17 culture (Webster, *Duchess of Malfi*, III, ii: 'hot burning cultures). This provided a further basis for the important next stage of meaning, by metaphor. From eC16 the tending of natural growth was extended to process of human development, and this, alongside the original meaning in husbandry, was the main sense until lC18 and eC19. Thus More: 'to the culture and profit of their minds; Bacon: 'the culture and manurance of minds (1605); Hobbes: 'a culture of their minds (1651); Johnson: 'she neglected the culture of her understanding (1759). At various points in this development two crucial changes occurred: first, a degree of habituation to the metaphor, which made the sense of human tending direct; second, an

extension of particular processes to a general process, which the word could abstractly carry. It is of course from the latter development that the independent noun culture began its complicated modern history, but the process of change is so intricate, and the latencies of meaning are at times so close, that it is not possible to give any definite date. Culture as an independent noun, an abstract process or the product of such a process, is not important before 1C18 and is not common before mC19. But the early stages of this development were not sudden. There is an interesting use in Milton, in the second (revised) edition of *The Ready and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660): 'spread much more Knowledge and Civility, yea, Religion, through all parts of the Land, by communicating the natural heat of Government and Culture more distributively to all extreme parts, which now lie num and neglected. Here the metaphorical sense ('natural heat') still appears to be present, and *civility* (cf. CIVILIZATION) is still written where in C19 we would normally expect culture. Yet we can also read 'government and culture in a quite modern sense. Milton, from the tenor of his whole argument, is writing about a general social process, and this is a definite stage of development. In C15 England this general process acquired definite class associations though cultivation and cultivated were more commonly used for this. But there is a letter of 1730 (Bishop of Killala, to Mrs Clayton; cit. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*) which has this clear sense: 'it has not been customary for persons of either birth or culture to breed up their children to the Church. Akenside (*Pleasures of Imagination*, 1744) wrote: '... nor purple state nor culture can bestow. Wordsworth wrote 'where grace of culture hath been utterly unknown (1805), and Jane Austen (*Emma*, 1816) 'every advantage of discipline and culture.

It is thus clear that culture was developing in English towards some of its modern senses before the decisive effects of a new social and intellectual movement. But to follow the development through this movement, in 1C18 and eC19, we have to look also at developments in other languages and especially in German.

In French, until C18, culture was always accompanied by a grammatical form indicating the matter being cultivated, as in the English usage already noted. Its occasional use as an independent noun dates from mC18, rather later than similar occasional uses in English. The independent noun *civilization* also emerged in mC18; its relationship to culture has since been very complicated (cf. CIVILIZATION and discussion below). There was at

this point an important development in German: the word was borrowed from French, spelled first (18th) *Cultur* and from 19th *Kultur*. Its main use was still as a synonym for *civilization*: first in the abstract sense of a general process of becoming 'civilized or 'cultivated; second, in the sense which had already been established for *civilization* by the historians of the Enlightenment, in the popular 18th form of the universal histories, as a description of the secular process of human development. There was then a decisive change of use in Herder. In his unfinished *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784--91) he wrote of *Cultur*: 'nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods. He attacked the assumption of the universal histories that 'civilization or culture -- the historical self-development of humanity -- was what we would now call a unilinear process, leading to the high and dominant point of 18th European culture. Indeed he attacked what he called European subjugation and domination of the four quarters of the globe, and wrote:

Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.

It is then necessary, he argued, in a decisive innovation, to speak of 'cultures in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation. This sense was widely developed, in the Romantic movement, as an alternative to the orthodox and dominant 'civilization. It was first used to emphasize national and traditional cultures, including the new concept of folk-culture (cf. FOLK). It was later used to attack what was seen as the MECHANICAL (q.v.) character of the new civilization then emerging: both for its abstract rationalism and for the 'inhumanity of current Industrial development. It was used to distinguish between 'human and 'material development. Politically, as so often in this period, it veered between radicalism and reaction and very often, in the confusion of major social change, fused elements of both. (It should also be noted, though it adds to the real complication, that the same kind of distinction, especially between 'material and 'spiritual development, was made by von Humboldt and others, until as late as 1900, with a reversal of

the terms, culture being material and *civilization* spiritual. In general, however, the opposite distinction was dominant.)

On the other hand, from the 1840s in Germany, *Kultur* was being used in very much the sense in which *civilization* had been used in C18 universal histories. The decisive innovation is G. F. Klemms *Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit* -- 'General Cultural History of Mankind (1843-52)-- which traced human development from savagery through domestication to freedom. Although the American anthropologist Morgan, tracing comparable stages, used 'Ancient *Society*, with a culmination in *Civilization*, Klemms sense was sustained, and was directly followed in English by Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1870). It is along this line of reference that the dominant sense in modern social sciences has to be traced.

The complexity of the modern development of the word, and of its modern usage, can then be appreciated. We can easily distinguish the sense which depends on a literal continuity of physical process as now in 'sugar-beet culture or, in the specialized physical application in bacteriology since the 1880s, 'germ culture. But once we go beyond the physical reference, we have to recognize three broad active categories of usage. The sources of two of these we have already discussed: (i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, from C18; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general, from Herder and Klemm. But we have also to recognize (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. This seems often now the most widespread use: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theater and film. A Ministry of Culture refers to these specific activities, sometimes with the addition of philosophy, scholarship, history. This use, (iii), is in fact relatively late. It is difficult to date precisely because it is in origin an applied form of sense (i): the idea of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development was applied and effectively transferred to the works and practices which represent and sustain it. But it also developed from the earlier sense of process; cf. 'progressive culture of fine arts, Millar, *Historical View of the English Government*, IV, 314 (1812). In English (i) and (iii) are still close; at times, for internal reasons, they are indistinguishable as in Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1867); while sense (ii) was decisively introduced into English

by Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1870), following Klemm. The decisive development of sense (iii) in English was in 1C19 and eC20.

Faced by this complex and still active history of the word, it is easy to react by selecting one 'true or 'proper or 'scientific sense and dismissing other senses as loose or confused. There is evidence of this reaction even in the excellent study by Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, where usage in North American anthropology is in effect taken as a norm. It is clear that, within a discipline, conceptual usage has to be clarified. But in general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence. It is especially interesting that in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to culture or a culture is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems. This often confuses but even more often conceals the central question of the relations between 'material and 'symbolic production, which in some recent argument -- cf. my own *Culture* -- have always to be related rather than contrasted. Within this complex argument there are fundamentally opposed as well as effectively overlapping positions; there are also, understandably, many unresolved questions and confused answers. But these arguments and questions cannot be resolved by reducing the complexity of actual usage. This point is relevant also to uses of forms of the word in languages other than English, where there is considerable variation. The anthropological use is common in the German, Scandinavian and Slavonic language groups, but it is distinctly subordinate to the senses of art and learning, or of a general process of human development, in Italian and French. Between languages as within a language, the range and complexity of sense and reference indicate both difference of intellectual position and some blurring or overlapping. These variations, of whatever kind, necessarily involve alternative views of the activities, relationships and processes which this complex word indicates. The complexity, that is to say, is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate.

It is necessary to look also at some associated and derived words. Cultivation and cultivated went through the same metaphorical extension from a physical to a social or educational sense in C17, and were especially significant words in C18. Coleridge, making a classical eC19 distinction

between civilization and culture, wrote (1830): 'the permanent distinction, and occasional contrast, between cultivation and civilization. The noun in this sense has effectively disappeared but the adjective is still quite common, especially in relation to manners and tastes. The important adjective cultural appears to date from the 1870s; it became common by the 1890s. The word is only available, in its modern sense, when the independent noun, in the artistic and intellectual or anthropological senses, has become familiar. Hostility to the word culture in English appears to date from the controversy around Arnolds views. It gathered force in 1C19 and eC20, in association with a comparable hostility to *aesthete* and AESTHETIC (q.v.). Its association with class distinction produced the mime-word *culchah*. There was also an area of hostility associated with anti-German feeling, during and after the 1914-18 War, in relation to propaganda about *Kultur*. The central area of hostility has lasted, and one element of it has been emphasized by the recent American phrase culture-vulture. It is significant that virtually all the hostility (with the sole exception of the temporary anti-German association) has been connected with uses involving claims to superior knowledge (cf. the noun INTELLECTUAL), refinement (*culchah*) and distinctions between 'high art (culture) and popular art and entertainment. It thus records a real social history and a very difficult and confused phase of social and cultural development. It is interesting that the steadily extending social and anthropological use of culture and cultural and such formations as sub-culture (the culture of a distinguishable smaller group) has, except in certain areas (notably popular entertainment), either bypassed or effectively diminished the hostility and its associated unease and embarrassment. The recent use of *culturalism*, to indicate a methodological contrast with *structuralism* in social analysis, retains many of the earlier difficulties, and does not always bypass the hostility.

See AESTHETIC, ANTHROPOLOGY, ART, CIVILIZATION, FOLK, DEVELOPMENT, HUMANITY, SCIENCE, WESTERN