

# CULTURE



KEY IDEAS

Chris Jenks

ROUTLEDGE



# CULTURE

CHRIS JENKS



London and New York

First published 1993

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Reprinted 1994, 1995

© 1993 Chris Jenks

Typeset in Times by Intype, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Clays Ltd., St Ives PLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-415-07278-6

## The author

**Chris Jenks** has taught undergraduates on courses in communication studies and sociology for a decade, helped to establish and teach a successful masters degree programme in Communication, Culture and Society and taught courses on cultural reproduction. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths' College, University of London. His major publications include *Worlds Apart – Readings for a Sociology of Education* (with Beck, Keddie and Young), *Rationality, Education and the Social Organization of Knowledge*, *The Sociology of Childhood*, *Cultural Reproduction and Durkheim*, *Art and Representation* (with Smith – forthcoming).

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends Malcolm Barnard, Stephen Featherstone, Paul Filmer, Dick Hebdige, Mike Phillipson, John Smith and Dave Walsh, for the ideas they have generated and misconceptions dispelled throughout the years, all of which have contributed to the present state of my thinking. More specifically I offer thanks to Justin Lorentzen and Don Slater for their particular suggestions, advice and recommendations on this book.

Finally, and of special note, I extend my gratitude to Ian Heywood for 'friendship, theorizing and climbing' but also for his scrupulous attention to a previous draft of this manuscript and his continued support.

I would like to hold them collectively responsible for any failures in argument, weaknesses in conceptualization or substantive omissions from this work; however, convention demands that I now exonerate them from all such blame and shoulder it myself.

# Contents

Notes on the author	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
Origins of the concept of 'culture' in philosophy and the literary tradition	6
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
The relation between culture and social structure	25
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
Culture and social action	45
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
Culture and materialism	66
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
Cultural stratification	96
<b>Chapter 6</b>	
Cultural reproduction	116
<b>Chapter 7</b>	
Culture and postmodernism	136

<b>Chapter 8</b>	
<b>Cultural studies: what is it?</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	
<b>Cultural deprivation: a case study in conceptual confusion</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Further reading</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Name index</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Subject index</b>	<b>180</b>

# Introduction

Raymond Williams informs us that 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'<sup>1</sup> and while he is never quite good enough to tell us what the other one, or perhaps two, might be I have no principled, let alone experientially based, reasons to demur on this point. The idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences and even paradoxes such that only a confident and wise person would begin to pontificate about it and perhaps only a fool would attempt to write a book about it – thus I begin. The concept is at least complex and at most so divergent in its various applications as to defy the possibility, or indeed the necessity, of any singular designation. It is nevertheless real in its significations both in everyday language and in its increasingly broad currency within the fashionable discourses of the modern academy.

This last point concerning the contemporary (re)emergence of interest in the conceptualization of culture, particularly within intellectual circles, is perhaps a good one from which to proceed. Every generation, it is rightly supposed, creates new objects, ideas and meanings – such is the nature of social change, for better or worse. However, preceding generations and later the



## 2 Culture

reflexive investigations of historical studies, quite often assert that far from such creations embodying originality they are rather re-involutions of ideas or states of affairs that went before. This is not some crude espousal of a doctrine of eternal returns nor even an argument in support of a theory of the universal properties of social life. What I am recommending is that any such creativity must be understood in relation to its social context. Just so with 'culture'. It has not been invented in the latter part of the twentieth century; however, the contemporary upsurge in interest in the idea of culture must surely tell us something about the times we are living through. Part of my purpose in this account of the concept of culture will be to place it within a history of ideas; part also will be to review and synthesize different arguments and perspectives on the topic, and to look critically at the character and status of some of the modern debates around the issue.

These caveats are meant, in part, as a warning to the reader that within this text it is not my intention to examine just the vanguard of heady exotica in contemporary 'cultural studies'. I am a sociologist and I approach culture as primarily a sociological problem. I also believe that the concept of culture has a history and that it does so in relation to traditions of thought; all of which are, in turn, located in social structures. An investigation of such traditions and their social contexts will take us both far and wide: into the realms of European philosophy, with Kant and Hegel writ large, through the classical theories of sociology and cultural anthropology stemming from the beginning of the century, and up to modern hermeneutics and structuralisms. We will also, of necessity, take in the contributions of Romanticism and literary criticism along with critical aesthetics – all of which have added to the present state of our understanding of and ways of relating to 'culture'. It is my conscious intention to ground the idea of culture in established theory and thus, I anticipate, to demonstrate the origins, the problematics, the desire and the energy that motivates whatever is most contemporary in the ever growing body of books and journals dedicated to the topic. This is no sleight nor denigration of the 'new'. The vigorous emergence of cultural theory over the last decade is both an exciting development within the social sciences, and an interesting topic for those very disciplines. The traditions of thought that I am seeking to honour and reveal are 'living' traditions; they are not presented here as curios or exhibits in a museum.

My projected strategy is not based on a stance of ritualistic

obedience to my tradition but on a serious re-reading of that tradition animated by both criticism and respect. In this way I shall reveal some unexpected resemblances, homologies and resonances between schools of thought usually regarded as radically different if not openly hostile to one another. The newcomer to the field, or indeed the informed reader, will be quite capable of engaging with the most recently published debates and controversies over culture, at some level. My purpose here is to present such readers with a map of our existing territory, and a guide to that map in the form of a classification, or a morphology, of the central concepts and ideas in terms of their meanings, origins and overlaps. Once equipped with such a guide the interested stranger can become familiar, a 'local resident', and thereby embark on a better informed and more critical appreciation of tomorrow's news in the study of culture.

If this work succeeds it should contrive to render its own classification of ideas already outmoded or inappropriate for the emergent theorist. It will also, I trust, have shown this classification as itself a cultural practice involving critical reading, judgement and discernment, and adherence to an intellectual discipline (a symbolic culture).

In a television interview towards the end of 1991 the playwright David Hare referred to 'the idea that is now very popular . . . that Bob Dylan is just as good a poet as Keats'. He went on not to agree with such thinking but to cite it as an instance of a modern populist ideology concerning the equivalence of all cultural products. Hare's position was quite the contrary, indeed he appeared to be rallying the latent elitism within our society that has been silenced by the current overbearing political correctness of a public opinion which, masquerading as democracy, is in fact only the fear, or at worst the inability, to make critical judgements concerning matters of taste and quality. Hare's view was that culture concerned absolute standards, standards which demand the greatest effort and engagement on the part of its creator and its audience. Culture, from this perspective, does not merely entertain, it enriches and uplifts; it embodies a struggle in its inception and in its apprehension which itself involves the maximization or even the extension of human potential. As such, culture is not to be treated lightly; it cannot be released into a pool of generalities or dissolved within a postmodern mood of relativism.

Now, I begin with this instance because of what it points us

towards when we address the concept of culture. Interesting as Hare's views may be, the arguments have been largely prefigured in debates conducted by such eminent figures as Wordsworth and Coleridge, T. S. Eliot and Leavis, and more recently Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart; some of which we shall examine later. However, when Hare made his point public the effect was to reopen a series of strategies for differentiation that exist both within the intellectual field and also the collective consciousness. As John Naughton, critic for the *Observer* put it:

Much to Mr. Hare's surprise this entirely unremarkable judgement caused quite a stir. Men with moustaches and pork-pie hats came up to him in the street and exhorted him to keep up the good work. He became the folk hero among taxi drivers and others who think that the country is going to the dogs. It was, they thought, high time that someone made a stand against the prevailing tide of cultural relativism and its doctrine that whatever turns you on is OK.

The relativists, for their part, regarded Mr. Hare with angry distaste, and muttered into their muesli. The acrid truth he had uttered left an unpleasant stench in their progressive nostrils. It opened up the terrifying prospect of a return to a state in which rigorous value judgements might become the norm, in which people might say that some works of art were better than others rather than being simply more or less 'interesting'.<sup>2</sup>

What we can hear in this quote, distilled through hyperbole, is a whole series of attitudes, or rather, discourses, about identity and difference within society. We can hear social class, nationalism, political allegiance and generation; all in relation to lifestyles and finally all in relation to an implicit theory of cultural value.

Should we say that the argument here revolves around the opposition between absolutism and relativism? This is certainly an important dichotomy in the history and understanding of culture, and one that occurs in the vocabulary of the contributors to this exchange. Or should we say that this binary is only a mask for the true difference at work, which is between elitism and egalitarianism? Though this may be nothing more than an attempt to politicize a debate about standards. Conversely, to ignore such a point could be seen as an attempt to depoliticize an otherwise purely ideological contradiction. This political

dimension would also seem to be an important level of consideration in the understanding of culture. But what if we move to a more analytical level and suggest that the real difference at work is one between evaluation and description, and culture is a concept that fulfils either one of these tasks? Such a position has been maintained in the justification of the differentiation between the two dominant academic uses of the concept 'culture'. What I shall say at this point is that each of these considerations, and others to follow, contributes to our problematic: 'what do we mean by culture?' and 'how is the term used?'

'Man does not have a nature, but a history . . .' (Ortega y Gasset).

## NOTES

[1] R. Williams, *Keywords*, London: Fontana (1976).

[2] *Observer*, 1 December 1991.

# 1

## Origins of the concept of 'culture' in philosophy and the literary tradition

... there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture would not be the clever savages of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* thrown back upon the cruel wisdom of their animal instincts; nor would they be the nature's noblemen of Enlightenment primitivism or even, as classical anthropological theory would imply, intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves. They would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognisable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases.<sup>1</sup>

So what then is this thing called culture? What is this mediation that appears to rob 'man' of his nature and locate his action and practices within an endowment of socially produced symbolic forms? Culture itself, whatever its facticity, is also a concept with a history, some of which we shall try to trace in the chapters that follow. It is hoped that we will not succumb to any one 'origin myth' for, as anthropologists would tell us in relation to primitive cosmologies, such devices only serve to exercise closure, they silence debate and controversy and, usually, justify the existing

rationale for the status quo; nevertheless we will 'dig around' for sources, albeit competing ones.

One compelling account, and one that I shall trade off because it is symbiotic with the upsurge of social theory, is that the idea of 'culture' can be witnessed emerging in the late eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth century as part of, and largely as a reaction to, the massive changes that were occurring in the structure and quality of social life. These changes, at the social, political and personal levels, were both confusing and disorientating; and at least controversial. Such changes, through industrialization and technology, were unprecedented in human experience; they were wildly expansionist, horizons were simply consumed; grossly productive, for good and ill; and both understood and legitimated through an ideology of progress. The social structure was politically volatile, being increasingly and visibly divisive. This was a situation brought about through the new forms of ranking and hierarchy that accompanied the proliferating division of labour, being combined with the density and proximity of populations, through urbanization, and the improved system of communications. In one sense the overall aesthetic quality of life, compared with the previously supposed rural idyll, was threatened by the machine-like excesses of industrial society. There was an increasing gap between the creative and the productive, formulated for materialism by Marx as 'alienation', and for the Romantic-idealist tradition by Carlyle as a loss of the folk purity of a past era. The machine was viewed as devouring the natural character of humankind, a call to be later echoed in the work of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin's 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction', even Marcuse's sense of 'one-dimensionality', and finally the *cri de coeur* of Baudrillard's evocation of postmodernism with its horror of simulacra. Whereas we began with 'culture' mediating between 'man' and Nature, it can now be seen to mediate between 'man' and Machine. This provides us with several available 'meanings' of culture.

Another account looks back to classical society. 'Civilization', deriving from the latin *civis*, is a term descriptive of a state of belonging to a collectivity that embodied certain qualities, albeit self-appointed, which distinguished it from the 'mass' or more lowly state of being typified as that of the 'barbarian'. Such was the Ancient Greek and Roman sense of identification with Nation and State.

In this context the idea of 'culture' is not so much descriptive

as metaphoric and derives, philologically, from the agricultural or horticultural processes of cultivating the soil and bringing fauna and flora into being through growth. The former concept, 'civilization', is descriptive of a kind of stasis, a membership, a belonging, indeed a status once achieved not to be relinquished; the latter, 'culture', is resonant with other ideas of emergence and change, perhaps even transformation. Thus we move to ideas of socialization as 'cultivating' the person, education as 'cultivating' the mind and colonization as 'cultivating' the natives. All of these uses of culture, as process, imply not just a transition but also a goal in the form of 'culture' itself; it is here that hierarchical notions begin to emerge such as the 'cultured person' or 'cultivated groups or individuals' and even the idea of a 'high culture', all of which reduce the metaphoricity of process and begin to coalesce with the original notion of a descriptive state of being not essentially unlike the formative idea of civilization itself. However, we are provided with another set of 'meanings' for culture.

Sociologists and anthropologists have come to account for the concept of culture in a variety of ways. In its most general and pervasive sense it directs us to a consideration of all that which is symbolic: the learned, ideational aspects of human society. In an early sense culture was precisely the collective noun used to define that realm of human being which marked its ontology off from the sphere of the merely natural. To speak of the cultural was to reaffirm a philosophical commitment to the difference and particularity that is 'humankind'. Animals, even the chattering dolphins, 'do' nature, while human beings inevitably transform their world into, and by way of, a series of symbolic representations. The symbolic then satisfies and absorbs the projections of human beings into objects and states of affairs that are different, and it also acts as a mediator between these two provinces. We no longer confront the natural, as if we were continuous with it, as it is supposed that animals do. We now meet with the natural and, indeed, experience it as preformed, through our vocabulary of symbols which are primarily linguistic but increasingly elaborate out into other forms like custom, convention, habit and even artefact. The symbolic representations that constitute human knowing are, in their various groupings, classifications and manifestations, the *cultural*. The very idea of culture therefore generates a concept which, at one level, provides a principle of unification for the peoples of the world;

including those who once have and also those who continue to populate the world through time and across space. Culture then, for early anthropology, was the common domain of the human; it distinguished our behaviour from that of other creatures and it provided a conceptual break with the dominant explanatory resource of biological and, latterly, genetic determinism. From this happy state of egalitarian one-ness through the aegis of culture – the very inspiration for cultural anthropology – the story takes a different turn and we move into accounts of diffusion, stratification, hierarchy and relativism, still clinging to the unrevised central concept of culture. Some of these tributaries and their ramifications we shall explore later in the text.

The dominant European linguistic convention equates 'culture' largely with the idea of 'civilization': they are regarded as synonymous. Both ideas may be used interchangeably with integrity in opposition to notions of that which is vulgar, backward, ignorant or retrogressive. Within the German intellectual tradition, to which we shall be repeatedly drawn, a different and particular sense of culture emerged that was to assume a dominant place in our everyday understandings. This was the Romantic, elitist, view that culture specified the pinnacle of human achievement. Culture, in this sense, came to specify that which is remarkable in human creative achievement. Rather than encapsulating all human symbolic representation German *Kultur* pointed us exclusively to levels of excellence in fine art, literature, music and individual personal perfection. The main body, or in this formulation, the residue of what we have previously meant as culture, was to be understood in terms of the concept of *Zivilisation*. This distinction, by no means fine, in many ways reflected the dichotomy provided by Kantian philosophy between the realms of 'value' and 'fact', and was generative of two different ways of understanding and relating to the world. These realms were systematically promoted into an antagonism at one level utterly esoteric and of the peculiar interests of philosophers only, but at another level the very grounds of the spurious doctrine of racial superiority that provided an impetus to the Holocaust. We will discuss this divide later in relation to idealism and materialism and cultural stratification, but we might note here that such distinctions also gave rise to the belief that the human spirit (perhaps the *Geist* itself) came under successive threat with the advent and advance of modernity and the inexorable process of material development which, it was supposed, gave rise to an increasingly



anonymous and amorphous urban mass society; thus linking with our initial argument. The impersonal, yet evil, forces of standardization, industrialization and technologies of mass production became the analytic target for the Romantic neo-Marxist criticism of the Frankfurt School within their theories of aesthetics, mass communication and mass society, and also in the early sociology of culture propounded by Norbet Elias with his ideas of the 'civilizing process'.

Within the confines of British and American social theory the concept of culture has been understood in a far more pluralist sense and applied, until relatively recently, on a far more sparing basis. Although culture is a familiar term within our tradition and can be employed to summon up holistic appraisals of the ways of life of a people, their beliefs, rituals and customs, it is not most common. We social scientists are rather more accustomed to mobilizing such batteries of understanding into 'action sets'. That is, we tend to use more specific concepts like, for example, 'value systems' (even 'central value systems'), 'patterns of belief', 'value orientations' or more critical notions like 'ideologies'. Culture, to British and American social theorists, tends to have been most usefully applied as a concept of differentiation within a collectivity rather than a way of gathering. That is to say that the concept has become artfully employed in, for example, the sociology of knowledge that Mannheim recommends, and also in the spectrum of perspectives on the sociology of deviance – ranging from Parsonian theory through to symbolic interactionism – in the manner of 'subculture'. A subculture is the way of defining and honouring the particular specification and demarcation of special or different interests of a group of people within a larger collectivity. So just as classical sociology in the form of Tönnies or Durkheim, or indeed Comte, had recognized that the composition of the overall collective life emerged through the advance of the division of labour – by dint of the fragile integration through interdependence of a whole series of smaller, internally cohesive, social units – so also does modern social theory by articulating the specific mores of these minor groups, albeit often as 'non-normative' or even 'deviant'. This dispersion of subcultures is at the base of what we might mean by a 'pluralist' view of culture; it is modern and democratic and shies away from all of the excesses of a grand systems theory with all of its incumbent conservative tendencies and its implicit 'oversocialized conception of man'.<sup>2</sup> Such thinking succumbs, however, to the problem of order. With-