

Working with Key Concepts in Cultural Studies: Culture

Culture vs. Nature

"cultura"/"cultus" in Roman antiquity denoted agricultural fosterage ("cultura agri") as well as religious care of the supernatural ("cultus decorum") (cf. Ort. 19).

In early modern terminology, "culture" or "cultur" underwent a semantic expansion, now also used to denote the cultivation of mind, faculties and manners and the improvement by education and training as a normative imperative. Thus the term often functioned as an opposition of the concept of "nature", as an uncultivated state of being.

Culture vs. Civilization

The dominant understanding of "culture" was normatively narrowed down in the 18th century. Particularly in Germany (with Kant's concept of "Kultur"), it was now used to denote those actions and objects which refined morality and inner, organic education (cf. Ort. 21). This formative quality of culture was understood to be different from "civilization" / "Zivilisierung", which meant an improvement of outer decency and manners. This conception of culture was also used in the 19th century.

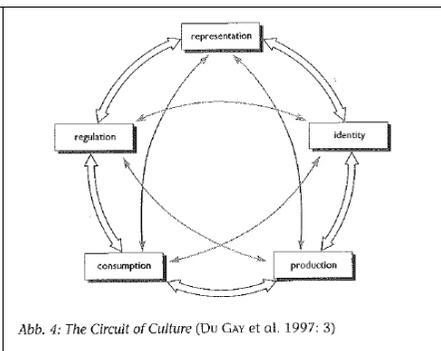
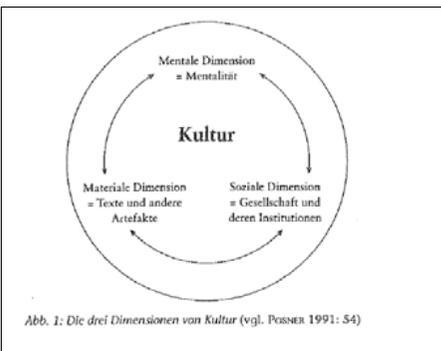
- *Culture, the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world.* (1873 M. Arnold Lit. & Dogma Pref. p. xiii) (OED)

However, a less normative and more descriptive concept of culture also began circulating in the 19th century, in anthropological and ethnological discourses

- *Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.* (Tylor 1.)

Still, apart from definitions like these, attempts at conceptualizing "culture" remained highly normative far into the 20th century.

Theoretical Approaches from the late 19th Century to the Present: From a Normative to a Descriptive Perspective



Theory / Dates	Representatives	Key Concepts and Questions	Wider Social Issues	Normative Approaches	
Culture with capital "C" 1860s -1880s	Matthew Arnold	Culture as a way to perfecting/improve the populace; literary education; culture vs. democracy; mass culture as low culture	Perceived decline of contemporary life, Culture as a stabilizing force in society, a remedy		
Frankfurt School Since 1920	Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Macuse, Jürgen Habermas	Critical theory; critique of mass culture (as anti-enlightening) and capitalism; immanent criticism	Mass culture, capitalism, culture industry, cultural imperialism		
High and Low Culture 1930s	F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot	Elite culture; aesthetic quality; judgments on value, beauty, form; high culture vs. mass culture as low culture	Mass culture vs. high culture		
1950-1960s First wave British Cultural Studies	Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Edward P. Thompson, Richard Hebdige	cultural materialism (Williams); culture of ordinary people; working class culture (Hoggart); mass culture = a whole way of life, structures of feeling (Williams), a class conflict, whole way of struggle (Thompson); mass culture/low culture as equivalent to high culture; mainstream vs. subcultures (Hebdige)	Tensions btw. old UK working class culture and new mass-produced culture from USA;		
Birmingham School 1963/1964-1990s	Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, later: John Fiske	constructivism, representation, identity, power, media culture, popular culture; encoding-decoding-model	Intellectual upheaval across Europe, increasing class differences in UK	Descriptive Approaches	
The Cultural Turn					
Cultural Semiotics/Cultural, Material and Social Anthropology 1970s-	Charles S. Peirce, Ernst Cassirer, Clifford Geertz, Roland Posner	Culture as a readable text, as a "web of significance" (Geertz); Posner: three dimensions of culture: material, social, and mental	Cultural Turn in the humanities and the social sciences		
Circuit of Culture 1997	Paul du Gay	Culture as text, discursive construction of meaning	Increasing dissemination and significance of popular culture, increased globalization		

Sources

Chris Barker. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. Los Angeles et al.: Sage, 2012. Print.
 Claus-Michael Ort. "Kulturbegriffe und Kulturtheorien." *Konzepte der Kulturwissenschaften*. Eds. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning eds. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003. 19-38. Print.
 Roy Sommer. "Grundkurs Cultural Studies." Barcelona: Klett, 2006. Print.
 Edward Tylor. 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons. Print.
 "Culture." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. (11 April 2012).