CHAPTER 1

What Is Culture?

Introduction

When you start to study any topic or subject it is always useful to think about how that topic or subject has been defined by others and what questions are raised about the subject in the process of attempting to define it. **Culture** is no exception: Raymond Williams famously asserted that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1976, p. 87). It is undoubtedly one of the central concepts in our understanding of how modern societies work, and for this reason it is worth spending some time considering the different ways in which the term 'culture' has been and is used. In this chapter we want to introduce you to the variety of ways in which the term can be understood and to suggest how the tensions between different meanings have informed current debates about the place of culture in the social sciences and the humanities. We also want to introduce you to a way of understanding culture that is widely accepted and used among contemporary cultural theorists and students of culture. This is not to suggest that the 'true' meaning of culture has finally been defined: because culture is one of the key concepts in our knowledge of societies both past and present, definitions are constantly being developed and refined. We can only make a start in this chapter. You, too, may want to revisit, rethink and develop your understanding of the term as you engage with the material in this book.

It would be useful to begin by noting in a sentence or two what you understand by the term culture. When you have completed this chapter you could look again at your definition and think about whether and how you would change or refine it. It would be useful to continue this exercise at various points in your studies.

1.1

You can continue to explore what is meant by the concept 'culture' by examining a number of statements using the term 'culture'. Look at the following statements and note what you think is meant by 'culture' in each. You could try to suggest an example of culture that would be appropriate in each case:

- There are enormous cultural differences between Europe and Asia.
- She is such a cultured person.
- Pop music is often used by sub-cultures to assert their identity.
- There is a danger that mass culture may destroy the values of our society.
- This course will examine Victorian society and culture.
- Culture is the network of shared meanings in any society.
- McDonalds fosters a distinctive culture based on certain values.

As Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords* (1976), the word culture originally meant the tending or cultivation of something, in particular animals or crops – hence the noun 'agriculture'. From the eighteenth century onwards, this sense of culture as cultivation was particularly associated with the spiritual and moral progress of humanity. Involved in this meaning of culture was the idea of a process, unlike some meanings of the term, which suggest an end product. For example, the term culture is often used to mean actual products, such as opera, concerts, literature, drama and paintings; mass culture is often applied to television, Hollywood, magazines, 'pulp' fiction and newspapers; and the term 'Victorian culture' implies a body of material already available for study. However, as Williams reminds us, from the nineteenth century onwards, with the growth of nation states and the Romantic interest in 'folk art', it became necessary 'to speak of cultures in the plural' in order to distinguish between the particular cultures of different nations, but also 'the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation' (Williams, 1976, p. 89). Moreover, anthropology, as an academic discipline, became established in the early years of the twentieth century, with its sub-branch of cultural anthropology generally understood to be 'the comparative study of preliterate people', in which culture is defined as the whole way of life of a particular society (Kuper and Kuper, 1985, p. 27). As a result, by the twentieth century, there were three broad categories of definition in general usage. Williams identifies these as follows:

- a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development;
- a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general;
- the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (Williams, 1976, p. 90).

What is important for our purposes is not to select one of these definitions as the 'true' meaning of the concept culture, but to begin to think about (a) the ways in which these varied definitions overlap and (b) the points of emphasis that are of interest to contemporary social and cultural theorists. In the following sections we look more closely at the ways in which these different definitions have been expressed and how these have contributed to what is often referred to as 'the contemporary turn to culture' not only in academia, but also in the worlds of business, economics and politics (du Gay et al., 1997, p. 2).

The 'culture and civilization' debate

You should now read the following extract from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) by Matthew Arnold. Arnold (1822–88) was an inspector of schools from 1851 to 1887. He was elected Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford in 1857 and is probably best known today as a poet. Among his most anthologized poems are 'The Scholar-Gipsy' (1853) and 'Dover Beach' (1867). As you read, try to answer the following questions:

- What do you think Arnold means when he claims that culture is 'a study of perfection'?
- Why does Arnold believe culture is so important in 'our modern world'?
- What kinds of things do you think would constitute for Arnold 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'?

1.1

I am a Liberal, yet I am a Liberal tempered by experience, reflexion, and renouncement, and I am above all, a believer in culture. Therefore I propose now to try and enquire, in the simple unsystematic way which best suits both my taste and my powers, what culture really is, what good it can do, what is our own special need of it; and I shall seek to find some plain grounds on which a faith in culture – both my own faith in it and the faith of others, – may rest securely . . .

There is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it, – motives eminently such as are called social – come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection: it is *a study of perfection*. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good . . .

If culture, then, is a study of perfection, and of harmonious perfection, general perfection, and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances, – it is clear that culture . . . has a very important function to fulfil for mankind. And this function is particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilisation is . . . mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so . . .

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness and light works to make reason and the will of God prevail. He who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light . . . It is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man, it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the

raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light ... Again and again I have insisted how those are the happy moments of humanity, how those are the marking epochs of people's life, how those are the flowering times for literature and art and all the creative power of genius, when there is a *national* glow of life and thought, when the whole of society is in the fullest measure permeated by thought, sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive. Only it must be *real* thought and *real* beauty; *real* sweetness and *real* light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses. Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgements constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way; but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgements and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely, – nourished, and not bound by them. (Arnold, 1869, Introduction and chapter 1)

'The pursuit of perfection', for Arnold, is a moral, intellectual and spiritual journey 'to make reason and the will of God prevail'. Opportunities to achieve 'perfection' in this sense cannot be restricted to a privileged minority, but must be available to 'the raw and unkindled masses of humanity'. Culture, in the sense of the 'best that has been thought and known', is the conduit through which 'real thought and real beauty' will be given to 'the masses'. In modern industrial society, Arnold believes, it is the duty of those already possessing 'culture' to ensure its transmission to 'the masses' who are in danger of being offered inferior 'intellectual food': for example, 'ordinary popular literature'.

Arnold's view of culture has to be understood in the context of his time. Arnold, like other nineteenth-century commentators – for example, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris – believed that mechanization, urbanization and *laissez-faire* economics would inevitably lead to a morally bankrupt society that would eventually collapse into anarchy. The 1867 Reform Act, which extended the franchise to urban working-class males, was further cause for anxiety: granting political power to an uneducated, undeferential mass of urban dwellers could, it was believed, hasten the anarchy that commentators, such as Arnold, feared. Culture offered through education – remember Arnold was a schools inspector as well as professor of poetry – is the solution because, for Arnold, it generates both a moral and spiritual aspiration to know 'the best that has been known and thought in the world'. For Arnold, to be 'cultured' means having a familiarity with that body of knowledge – philosophy, literature, painting, music – which, for him, constitutes the 'best'. In *Culture and Anarchy* culture understood as a process of humanization becomes conflated with the products through which humanization will be achieved.

1.2

- Can you suggest any ways in which Arnold's view of culture was a progressive view?
- Use a general history of Victorianism to find out more about the ideas of Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris. For example, *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain: Victorian Britain, Volume 9*, edited by Boris Ford, would be a useful source. For a more detailed account try the relevant chapters in Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*.
- Arnold sees 'culture' and 'anarchy' as two opposing concepts. The question, as he sets it, is *either* culture *or* anarchy. How do you respond to this? What might be the political effects of this way of thinking? You could return to this when you read the extract from Said later in the chapter.

The idea that 'the best that has been known and thought' should be available to all and not simply to an educated elite is potentially democratic in that it implies a widening of access to certain forms of culture. Art galleries, theatre, opera, museums and 'great' literature should be available and accessible to all, and not the preserve of the rich or powerful. In this sense a 'cultured' person is educated and knowledgeable about history, literature, art and philosophy, with the corollary that such knowledge is both civilizing and humanizing. However, you might want to question the claim that culture, in this sense, teaches humane values: some Nazi leaders, as we know, enjoyed and understood art, literature and music. Equally, it is worth noting that the Arnoldian perspective on culture is a restrictive one. It limits the meaning of culture to scholarship and the arts: 'high' culture as opposed to 'popular' or 'mass' culture; Shakespeare but not *EastEnders*. Nevertheless, Arnold's belief in the beneficial aspects of certain forms of culture was highly influential in determining policies towards education and the arts until the 1950s, and traces still persist today in discussions about what forms of culture society should value and support. For example, the debate about a national curriculum in British schools has, from time to time, invoked an Arnoldian view of the humanizing effects of teaching 'high' culture (see chapter 7).

1.3

In order to explore further the consequences of defining 'culture' along the lines taken by Arnold, try the following activities.

1 Make a list of those products or activities which would and would not count as 'culture' according to Arnold. We have started you off.

Would count	*Would not count*
• Production of *Hamlet*	TV soap opera
• Sculpture	Knitting
• Paintings	Wallpaper designs

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2 Can you identify any common elements amongst the items on each list? If there are commonalities do these suggest why some things might count as culture and others not?
3 Look out for articles in newspapers or magazines which seem to you to offer an Arnoldian perspective, particularly with regard to the arts or education.
4 Try to construct a set of criteria for deciding what is 'the best that has been thought and known'. Note down any problems you have in arriving at a set of criteria.

Now read the following account written by an adult education student in the 1930s.

1.2

I am a worker – a trade unionist, and for years a W.E.A. student with an ardent desire to learn. Three years ago I felt the need for advancing my education, and being interested in Literature, I attended my first W.E.A class, the subject of which was 'The Modern Novel'. As I had read all the books of Edgar Wallace, Ethel M. Dell and Rafael Sabatini.[1] I felt a very superior person, a person who could hold his own in a discussion. After two hours of hearing a lecturer, who took for granted that each member of the class was well-versed in Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, I left the room dazed. Vague references to Freud and Behaviourism ran riot in my brain in bewildering confusion. The revelation of my colossal ignorance so stunned me that I did not even know how or where to begin. Moreover, the discussion afterwards gave me such a feeling of humiliation that I daren't even ask the lecturer for advice. My first impulse was to stop going to the classes, but curiosity conquered me; so for the first year I became an interested but dumb student. By making mistakes in written work, I began to learn and I continued to learn in the same way. But, you may ask, 'Why don't you help swell the ranks of the class by introducing new members?' This is my answer. 'Because I do not want them to experience what I experienced. I do not want to choke them by bringing them into an environment of middle class. (Cited in Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p. 41)

1.4

What are the writer's feelings about encountering 'culture'? Why does he or she feel this way? Do you recognize any aspects of this account in your own experience? Does this writer's experience suggest difficulties with Arnold's project 'to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere'?

[1] Three popular writers of the period: for example, Wallace wrote detective fiction and Dell wrote romantic fiction.

The 'mass culture' debate

An extension of Arnold's thesis on culture was the debate about 'mass culture' that gathered momentum in the 1920s and 1930s and continued throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Developing technologies in the early twentieth century made possible a wider range of media through which communication was possible – cinema, radio, television, equipment for listening to music, newspapers, magazines and commercially produced fiction – with, as a result of compulsory universal education, an increasingly literate audience or readership. The growth of a mass media producing cultural products for a growing market of consumers created concern among those who believed in the civilizing effects of 'high' art. Arnold's fear that 'people will try to indoctrinate the masses' was one response to the spread of a so-called 'mass culture', particularly in the context of the growth of totalitarian states in, for example, Germany and Russia. Others, like F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, both academics in the English Literature Department at the University of Cambridge in the 1930s and 1940s, condemned the preference of the majority of the population for the products of the mass media. In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, published in 1932, Q. D. Leavis referred to the reading of popular fiction as 'a drug addiction' which could lead to 'a habit of fantasying [which] will lead to maladjustment in actual life' (pp. 152, 54). F. R. Leavis, in his book *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, attacked cinemas for offering films that 'involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals' (Leavis, 1930, p. 10). For cultural critics like the Leavises the concept of culture implied a distinction between culture and mass culture, an opposition in which the term 'mass culture' signified an inferior and debased form of culture (often associated with the USA and American influence).

In the years following the Second World War, as Cold War ideologies established themselves, intellectuals in the USA continued this debate in relation to concerns about 'the enemies within' American society. Mass culture, it was feared, produced fertile ground for the growth of 'unamerican' ideologies (in particular, communism) and threatened the liberalism and pluralism on which it was believed an enduring political and cultural consensus had been built. This apparent consensus was to collapse with the rise of the black civil rights movement and the countercultures of the late 1960s and 1970s (Storey, 1993, pp. 33–4). Now read the following extract from an influential essay by the American critic, Dwight Macdonald written in the 1950s. This essay is part of an anthology published in 1957, *Mass Culture: the Popular Arts in America*, edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, which attacked what they saw as the dehumanizing effects of mass culture. As you read bear in mind the following questions and at the end note down your responses:

- What does Macdonald see as the differences between 'folk art' and 'mass culture'?
- What does Macdonald see as the dangers of 'mass culture'?
- What does Macdonald see as the characteristics of 'the mass man'?

1.3

Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of *kitsch*, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule – in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains . . . Folk art was the people's own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal part of their masters; High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination . . .

For the masses in historical time are what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities – indeed, they are not related to each other at all, but only to something distant, abstract, nonhuman: a football game or bargain sale in the case of a crowd, a system of industrial production, a party or a State in the case of the masses. The mass man is a solitary atom, uniform with and undifferentiated from thousands and millions of other atoms who go to make up 'the lonely crowd' as David Reisman well calls American society. A folk or a people, however, is a community, i.e., a group of individuals linked to each other by common interests, work, traditions, values, and sentiments. (Macdonald, 1957, p. 60)

For those, like Macdonald, who bemoaned the stultifying and manipulative effects of a commercially produced culture, individuals in modern industrial society were perceived as fragmented, atomized and alienated from a sense of community which had once bestowed identity and belonging. In the same year that Macdonald's essay was published (1957), Richard Hoggart, a Senior Staff Tutor in Literature in the Department of Adult Education at Hull University, published *The Uses of Literacy*, in which he argued that the urban working-class cultures of his youth were being destroyed by an Americanized mass-produced culture. Hoggart was born in Leeds in 1918 and spent his childhood in the working-class areas of that city. He gained scholarships to secondary school and later to the University of Leeds, where he gained a first class honours degree in English literature. In the 1960s, Hoggart established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and was its first director.

1.4

I suggested earlier that it would be a mistake to regard the cultural struggle now going on as a straight fight between, say, what *The Times* and the picture-dailies respectively represent. To wish that a majority of the population will ever read *The Times* is to wish that human beings were constitutionally different, and is to fall into an intellectual snobbery. The ability to read the decent

weeklies is not a *sine qua non* of the good life. It seems unlikely at any time, and is certainly not likely in any period which those of us now alive are likely to know that a majority in any class will have strongly intellectual pursuits. There are other ways of being in the truth. The strongest objection to the more trivial popular entertainments is not that they prevent their readers from becoming highbrow, but that they make it harder for people without an intellectual bent to become wise in their own way . . .

Most mass-entertainments are in the end what D. H. Lawrence described as 'anti-life'. They are full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions . . . they tend towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral levelling, and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. These productions belong to a vicarious spectators' world; they offer nothing which can really grip the brain or heart. They assist a gradual drying-up of the more positive, the fuller, the more co-operative kinds of enjoyment, in which one gains much by giving much. They have intolerable pretensions; and pander to the wish to have things both ways, to do as we want and accept no consequences. A handful of such productions reaches daily the great majority of the population; their effect is both widespread and uniform. (Hoggart, 1957, pp. 281–3)

1.5

- What is your response to Macdonald's belief that people are 'passive consumers' of the products offered by a mass media? Think about how you and others known to you respond to TV programmes, what you read in the newspapers, what you see at the cinema. What about readers of the tabloid newspapers? What about those who appear on television game shows? Are they 'passive consumers'?
- Does Hoggart see the people he is discussing as 'passive consumers'? If so, are there any differences between his view and Macdonald's? If not, how would you describe his attitude to 'the great majority of the population'?

You may have thought that Hoggart is more optimistic than Macdonald. Hoggart appears to allow that, despite the fragmentation of modern urban life, 'people without an intellectual bent' can 'become wise in their own way' if they can remain untainted by the blandishments of 'mass culture', whereas for Macdonald the 'large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings' appear already doomed to 'a narcotized acceptance of Mass Culture' (Macdonald, 1957, p. 73). The idea that the mass of population in modern society consumes passively, accepting without question the diet of ideas, images, stereotypes offered by the mass media, needs to be questioned, and we shall return to this in more detail in later chapters (see chapters 7 and 9). For now it is worth noting that, while Hoggart is concerned about the possibly enervating effects of a mass culture on the British working class, he does allow them wisdom and intelligence. Macdonald, on the other hand, appears to have little faith that people have any resources to resist their positioning as the 'passive dupes' of an all encompassing

mass media. In order to appreciate more fully the similarities and differences between the two arguments you should consider these extracts in context by reading more widely in the books from which they are taken.

Although Hoggart follows Arnold in a concern for cultural decline and a belief in education as the means of stemming this, he uses a wider concept of culture than cultural critics like the Leavises or Macdonald. For Hoggart, culture is not simply 'the best that has been thought and known' but *all* those activities, practices, artistic and intellectual processes and products that go to make up the culture of a specific group at a particular time. Hoggart argues that the British urban working class developed certain cultural forms through which it could express itself at a particular historical moment (the 1930s), and that these forms were now (in the 1950s) in danger of disappearing. Hoggart's work is justly important because it paved the way for later cultural theorists to study a broader version of culture, which included mass as well as 'high' culture.

Although you are unlikely to encounter ideas about culture in the precise form expressed by Arnold, Macdonald or Hoggart in the work of contemporary cultural theorists, traces of these definitions may persist in general works, in newspaper articles and in general usage. We have introduced you to these ideas because you will find it useful to be able to distinguish these traces from the theories of culture currently employed in the academic study of culture. In the next section we shall begin to consider how theories of culture have developed in recent years. Before you move on you could try the following activities.

1.6

- Use the list of suggested reading for this chapter to find out more about the debates over culture in the early part of the twentieth century. John Storey's *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* would be a useful starting point. We have focused on British and American responses but the debate was carried on with different emphases in other European countries. In chapter 9 we look at the contribution of the Frankfurt School, represented here by the German exiles Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.
- We have, in passing, mentioned the working classes. Are there other groups in society who might have a stake in a particular culture? Do they appear in any of the analyses above?
- Does the term 'mass' adequately describe the population of a society? Make a list of the senses in which the term is used and compare the differences. Whenever you come across the word 'mass' or 'masses' in your reading check it against your list of meanings and think about how it is being used.

Social definitions of culture

Of the three definitions of culture that we quoted in the introduction to this chapter, we have so far been concerned with two:

- a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development;
- the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (Williams, 1976, p. 90).

In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams outlines a theory of culture that attempts to link these two definitions with the third: that is, 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general' (Williams, 1976, p. 90). Williams called this:

> a 'social' definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture. Such analysis will include . . . historical criticism . . . in which intellectual and imaginative works are analysed in relation to particular traditions and societies, but will also include analysis of elements in the way of life that to followers of the other definitions are not 'culture' at all: the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate. (Williams, 1961, p. 57)

Like Richard Hoggart's, Raymond Williams's origins were working class. Williams was born in the Welsh border village of Pandy and his father was a railway signalman. Like Hoggart, Williams gained scholarships, enabling him to continue his education at Abergavenny Grammar School and later at Trinity College, Cambridge. He became Professor of Drama at Cambridge University and is a central figure in the development of ideas about the relationship between culture and society.

Williams's definition above proposes that culture is a system by which meanings and ideas are expressed, not only in 'art and learning', but also in 'ordinary behaviour'. This breaks with Arnold's version of culture as 'the best that has been thought and known', and posits culture as a more inclusive and wider ranging phenomenon. The purpose of cultural analysis, according to Williams, is to clarify and identify the meanings that are expressed in not only 'art and learning', but also 'ordinary behaviour', 'the structure of the family' and the institutions of a society. Now read the following extract from an earlier essay by Williams, first published in 1958.

1.5

The bus stop was outside the cathedral. I had been looking at the Mappa Mundi, with its rivers out of Paradise, and at the chained library, where a party of clergymen had got in easily, but where I had waited an hour and cajoled a verger before I even saw the chains. Now, across the street, a cinema advertised the *Six-Five Special*[2] and a cartoon version of *Gulliver's Travels*. The bus arrived, with a driver and a conductress deeply absorbed in each other. We went out of the city, over the old bridge, and on through the orchards and the green meadows and

[2] A pop music TV programme popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

the fields red under the plough. Ahead were the Black Mountains, and we climbed among them, watching the steep fields end at the grey wall, beyond which the bracken and heather and whin had not yet been driven back. To the east, along the ridge, stood the line of grey Norman castles; to the west, the fortress wall of the mountains. Then, as we still climbed, the rock changed under us. Here, now, was limestone, and the line of the early iron workings along the scarp. The farming valleys, with their scattered white houses, fell away behind. Ahead of us were the narrower valleys: the steel-rolling mill, the gasworks, the grey terraces, the pitheads. The bus stopped, and the driver and conductress got out, still absorbed. They had done this journey so often, and seen all its stages. It is a journey, in fact, that in one form or another we have all made.

I was born and grew up halfway along that bus journey. Where I lived is still a farming valley, though the road through it is being widened and straightened, to carry the heavy lorries to the north. Not far away, my grandfather, and so back through the generations, worked as a farm labourer until he was turned out of his cottage and, in his fifties, became a road man. His sons went at thirteen or fourteen on to the farms, his daughters into service. My father, his third son, left the farm at fifteen to be a boy porter on the railway, and later became a signalman, working in a box in this valley until he died. I went up the road to the village school, where a curtain divided the two classes – Second to eight or nine, First to fourteen. At eleven I went to the local grammar school, and later to Cambridge.

Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start. To grow up in that country was to see the shape of a culture, and its modes of change . . .

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. 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 . . . We use the word culture in . . . 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. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (Williams, 1958a, pp. 5–6)

1.7

1. Why do you think Williams stresses and repeats the phrase 'culture is ordinary'? Can you think of examples from your own knowledge of culture as the ordinary?
2. Make a list of the things Williams identifies as culture. Can you suggest some of the meanings that might be expressed by the cultures he identifies? We have started this off for you, you carry on.

- The cathedral[3] expresses ideas about religion and worship, Christianity, the importance of religion and worship in the past.

[3] The cathedral referred to in Williams's article is Hereford Cathedral.

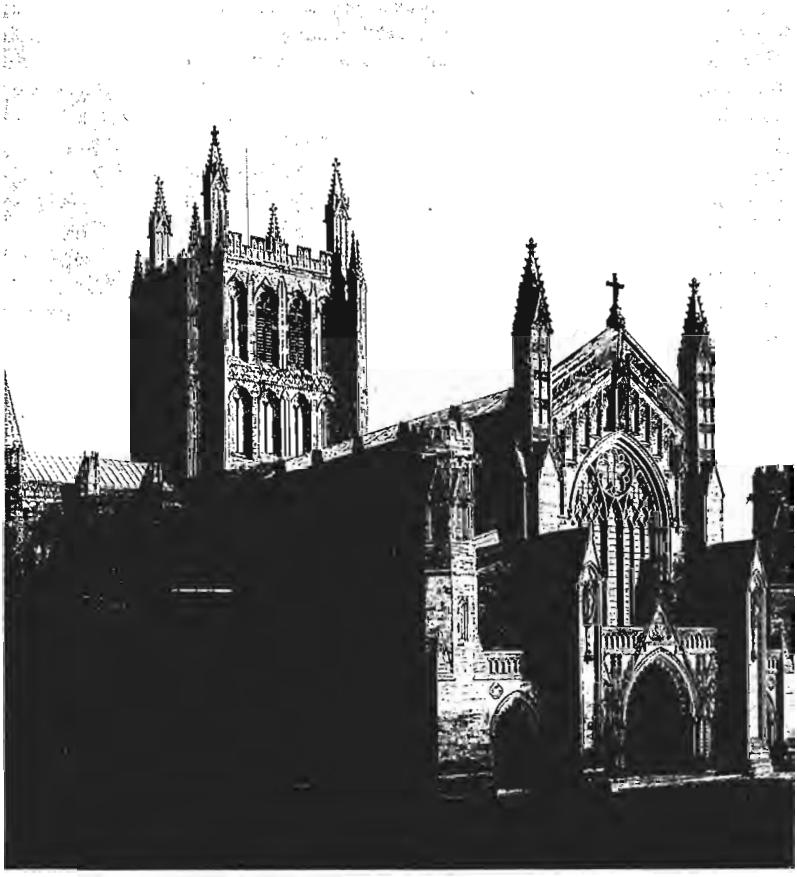

Figure 1.1 Hereford Cathedral

- The steel rolling mill expresses the significance of heavy industry to Britain's economic prosperity now and in the past.
- The Norman castles express . . .
- The life stories . . .
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If we take one example from the list above we can explore further what Williams has in mind when he talks about 'meanings and values'. A cathedral is a large building in which people congregate for an act of worship. If we belong to a

European or Western society, we will probably recognize a cathedral as a specifically Christian house of worship. If we come from a society that has very different kinds of religious buildings we know what it stands for by relating it to similar buildings in our own cultures – temple, mosque etc. We may also understand a cathedral as a place of historic interest: it tells us about the importance of Christianity in society in the past and the ways in which it was practised. Equally, a cathedral can be understood as a work of art. Visitors come from all over the world to study its architecture, to look at its fine art, to appreciate the beauty and craftsmanship of its stained glass windows. A cathedral can also mean a tourist attraction, spawning tea rooms, gift shops, guided tours – a piece of European heritage that can be marketed at home and abroad. Moreover, specific cathedrals may have another layer of local and particular meanings. Think, for example, of Canterbury Cathedral or Sacré Coeur in Paris. You may well be able to think of other meanings that attach themselves to the idea of a cathedral.

The diverse meanings that come to mind when we think or read about cathedrals do not present themselves as intrinsic to the physical presence of the building. We can think about cathedrals, as you are probably doing now, without actually looking at or being present in one. The meanings that attach themselves to physical objects as well as abstract concepts grow out of the ways in which objects or concepts are used by a particular group or society. There was no pre-existent idea of cathedral that preceded the actual design and building of one, although there were strong religious feelings and creative impulses which found their expression in the physical construction of a cathedral. Equally, the ways in which an object or concept may be used can be shaped by the meanings that have grown up around that object or concept. If we take cathedrals as an example, the growth of cathedrals as tourist attractions has come about in part because they have been and are perceived as places of great beauty. An understanding of cathedrals as works of art has led to the practice of making them accessible as places to visit as well as places to worship. You may also have noted that different meanings conflict with and contradict each other. For example, there is surely a tension between understanding a cathedral as a sacred place of worship for the believers of a particular religion and understanding it as a place of beauty that should be accessible to all, or as a marketable tourist attraction. Thinking about this tension and analysing how the tension manifests or resolves itself in actual behaviour and practice can help us to understand the complex relations between religion, the arts, economics and consumerism in secular, contemporary society. The processes by which meanings evolve and interact with behaviour and practice is one that we shall return to throughout this book.

1.8

Try thinking about some of the other forms of culture mentioned by Williams in the way we have discussed cathedrals. Consider the meanings that attach to these. Good examples would be: the cinema, the cluster of industrial images (steel rolling mill, gasworks, terraces, pitheads), the village school, Cambridge University.

In *The Long Revolution*, Williams expands and develops his assertion that 'culture is ordinary'. At the same time, he spells out very clearly the task of cultural analysis. Now read the following extract from chapter 2 of *The Long Revolution*.

1.6

Again, such analysis ranges from an 'ideal' emphasis, the discovery of certain absolute or universal, or at least higher and lower, meanings and values, through the 'documentary' emphasis, in which clarification of a particular way of life is the main end in view, to an emphasis which, from studying particular meanings and values, seeks not so much to compare these, as a way of establishing a scale, but by studying their modes of change to discover certain general 'laws' or 'trends', by which social and cultural development as a whole can be better understood . . .

I think we can best understand this if we think of any similar analysis of a way of life that we ourselves share. For we find here a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour. We are usually most aware of this when we notice the contrasts between generations, who never talk quite 'the same language', or when we read an account of our lives by someone from outside the community, or watch the small differences in style, of speech or behaviour, in someone who has learned our ways yet was not bred in them . . .

The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization . . . I do not mean that the structure of feeling, any more than the social character, is possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community. But I think it is a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communication depends. (Williams, 1961, pp. 42, 48)

Here, Williams is concerned to offer a form of cultural analysis that does not have evaluation or comparison as its function but seeks to 'discover certain general "laws" '. Later in the chapter from which this extract is taken, Williams uses Sophocles' *Antigone* to illustrate his point. Let's take two contemporary examples: an RSC production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a pop concert. The aim of the analysis, according to Williams, would not be to produce a comparison of the two events in which one or other is discovered to be superior. Instead, the task would be to seek out similarities as well as differences in content, form and production, and to relate these to the wider structures of the society or community which produced these performances. In so doing, the analysis might reveal the shared attitudes and values of a particular society, community or group. For example, the cultural analyst might be interested in the links between Hamlet, as cynical outsider and/or tormented rebel, and the similar identities often attributed to pop stars, and might then go on to suggest how these identities function in modern

societies. However, in order for these identities to be recognized, it is necessary for a group or society to share certain, often tacitly understood, values and attitudes – in this case the various connotations of the rebel/loner/misfit figure – what Williams refers to as 'structure of feeling'.

1.9

- Can you think of any values, attitudes in your family, or community, or social group, that could illustrate Williams's 'structure of feeling'?
- Can you widen this to identify examples of structures of feeling in British society, or other societies more generally?

Williams stresses that it is structures of feeling that enable communication. If we did not share certain common understandings of the world, we would find it extremely difficult to communicate. We used the example of the cathedral, in our discussion above, because we were able to assume that most readers would share with us certain ideas about what a cathedral stands for.

Language, of course, is central to any theory of communication: language is the medium through which shared meanings or structures of feeling are communicated. Verbal language is not the only medium of communication; we also use visual, musical and body languages, often in conjunction with words. Recent developments in sociology and cultural studies have developed Williams's emphasis on the links between culture, language and meaning. However, rather than seeing culture (meanings, beliefs, language) as a reflection of economic and social conditions, which Williams tends to do, these have stressed the ways in which culture itself creates, constructs and constitutes social relations (such as those between men and women, children and parents) and economic relations (for example, those between business and the arts or between industry and environmentalism). Moreover, subsequent developments in the disciplinary areas most concerned with the analysis of culture (social sciences, cultural studies, literary studies, history) have begun to ask questions about how meanings are produced, how they are communicated, which meanings are shared and by which groups, what happens when meanings are contested by different groups. One contemporary definition is that culture is 'the production and circulation of meaning' – the processes by which culture is produced and the forms it takes, rather than simply the 'structure of feeling' or 'way of life' it reveals.

> Recent theorists in social theory and cultural studies have put much greater stress on the centrality and the relative autonomy of culture. We cannot just 'read off' culture from society. We need to analyse the role of 'the symbolic' sphere in social life in its own terms . . . This critique gives the production of meaning through language – what is sometimes called *signification* – a privileged place in the analysis of culture. All social practices, recent critics would argue, are organized through meanings – they are *signifying practices* and must therefore be studied by giving greater weight to their cultural dimension. (du Gay et al., 1997, p. 13)

Culture and power

Whether we choose to see culture as 'the production and circulation of meaning' or as 'a particular way of life', we need to consider carefully its place in constructing, sustaining and reproducing structures and relations of power. A 'structure of feeling' – a particular way of seeing the world – has political implications. The ways in which societies or groups see the world have direct results for how members of a particular society or group treat non-members and are themselves treated. For example, a 'structure of feeling' based on certain ideas about the nature and roles of women and men or on concepts of 'racial' difference can produce practices and behaviours which lead to oppression and discrimination. **Discourses** of gender or race – the ways in which sexual and 'racial' differences are defined, talked about, represented visually – create the conditions in which men and women experience their lives. If we see culture as 'the production and circulation of meaning' then culture is a significant site for the formation of discourses by which one social group or community (a sex, 'race', nation or society) legitimates its power over another group or community.

Equally, culture becomes an important place where power, and the meanings that uphold power, can be resisted. We shall explore the concept of discourse further in chapter 3. Now read the following extract from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. It may help you to know that 'the administrative massacre' Said refers to occurred in 1865, when the British Governor of Jamaica, F. J. Eyre, ordered the killing of many black people in Jamaica as a means of 'controlling' social unrest and rioting among Jamaican Blacks. Said's use of the term 'narrative' is close in meaning to the term 'discourse' used above, and very broadly speaking can be taken to mean the stories we tell, the stories we are told, the stories that circulate in a particular culture through literature, art, music. He is, it should also be noted, mainly concerned with those elements of culture that Arnold would have categorized as 'the best that has been thought and known', and has less to say about the narratives or discourses constructed in other forms of culture.

1.7

Introduction

. . . The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and

Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community . . .

Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern, aggressive, mercantile, and brutalizing urban existence. You read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known, and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best lights. In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity . . .

Chapter 2

. . . Most modern readers of Matthew Arnold's anguished poetry, or of his celebrated theory in praise of culture, do not also know that Arnold connected the 'administrative massacre' ordered by Eyre [the British Governor of Jamaica in 1865] with tough British policies towards colonial Eire [Ireland] and strongly approved both; *Culture and Anarchy* is set plumb in the middle of the Hyde Park Riots of 1867, and what Arnold had to say about culture was specifically believed to be a deterrent to rampant disorder – colonial, Irish, domestic, Jamaican, Irishmen and women, and some historians bring up these massacres at 'inappropriate' moments, but most Anglo-American readers of Arnold remain oblivious, see them – if they look at them at all – as irrelevant to the more important cultural theory that Arnold appears to be promoting for all the ages (Said, 1993, pp. xiii, 157–8)

1.10

- Try to express in your own words why Said is critical of Arnold's theory of culture.
- How would you respond to the statement 'culture is civilizing' in the light of Said's argument?
- Can you find or think of any stories or cultural forms which appear to uphold British imperialism? The nineteenth-century novel, old films, travel writing, poetry or news reports could prove illuminating.
- Said states that culture is 'a source of identity': what do you understand him to mean by this?

In chapter 2 we shall explore the relationship between culture and identity further. For now, it is enough that you begin to be aware of how culture ('the production and circulation of meanings') can play a part in constructing a sense of who 'we' are in relation to 'them' – in European imperialism this is the colonial encounter between European and non-European. And the act of writing, as we have done, 'European' and 'non-European' is itself complicit in the production and circulation of certain meanings which legitimate the idea of the European as superior. To identify someone as 'non-European' is to define her or him against the implicit normality of 'European' and to consolidate that 'structure of feeling' in which Europe is represented as the centre of the world, around which other countries and identities place themselves.

You may also have noted that even those who theorize about culture and the purpose of its study are involved in the legitimation of certain ways of understanding and knowing the world. Said argues that Arnold's defence of culture had a political aim that was specific to the historical moment that produced *Culture and Anarchy*. He suggests that sections of Victorian Britain believed that the civilizing effects of 'the best that has been thought and known' would act as a deterrent to the growing unrest among diverse groups, both at home and abroad. This unrest took the form of demands for political and civil rights and/or independent status from Britain: Arnold, Said suggests, was concerned that these democratic demands would threaten social stability and therefore required suppression by political as well as cultural means. Said, himself of Palestinian origin, is committed to rendering visible the repressive and oppressive nature of imperialism, and the ways in which cultural products, particularly the novel, sustain this. Williams, whose ideas we looked at in the previous section, writes from a socialist and Marxist position, in which he seeks to redress the inequalities and injuries of the British class system. Feminist cultural theorists have in mind the particular subordination of women. There is nothing inherently sinister in developing theories from within, or to serve a particular political purpose. Indeed, it could be argued that all academic theories are grounded in struggles over power. Knowledge, Pierre Bourdieu has argued, is part of that 'cultural capital' which, along with financial resources, enables certain groups in society to exert and maintain a privileged position (Bourdieu, 1984; see chapters 7 and 9). In order to challenge dominance and privilege it is necessary to produce 'new' knowledge, as both Said and Williams have done. If you read further in the writings of Williams or Said you will find that both of them make their own political position clear and explicit – the same cannot be said of all theorists. Cultural theories, like all cultural forms, are always related, albeit in complex ways, to the particular historical moment when they are produced and the political climates in which they circulate. As a student of culture you will learn to contextualize the material you encounter, both historically and politically.

The final extract in this chapter is from an essay by the feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner, published in 1974: 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?' Use the following questions as a guide to your reading:

- What is the problem that Ortner identifies as in need of explanation?
- In what senses is the concept of culture used in this extract?

1.8

The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pancultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both these points – the universal fact and the cultural variation – constitute problems to be explained . . .

It is important to sort out the levels of the problem. The confusion can be staggering. For example, depending on which aspect of Chinese culture we look at, we might extrapolate any of several entirely different guesses concerning the status of women in China. In the ideology of Taoism, *yin*, the female principle, and *yang*, the male principle, are given equal weight . . . Hence we might guess that maleness and femaleness are equally valued in the general ideology of Chinese culture. Looking at the social structure, however, we see the strongly emphasized patrilineal descent principle, the importance of sons, and the absolute authority of the father in the family. Thus we might conclude that China is the archetypal patriarchal society. Next, looking at the actual roles played, power and influence wielded, and material contributions made by women in Chinese society – all of which are, upon observation, quite substantial – we would have to say that women are allotted a great deal of (unspoken) status in the system. Or again, we might focus on the fact that a goddess, Kuan Yin, is the central (most worshipped, most depicted) deity in Chinese Buddhism, and we might be tempted to say, as many have tried to say about goddess-worshipping cultures in prehistoric and early historical societies, that China is actually a sort of matriarchy. In short, we must be absolutely clear about *what* we are trying to explain before explaining it (Ortner, 1974, pp. 86–7)

1.11

- Can you list the different aspects of Chinese society and culture that Ortner draws on to make her point?
- Use a similar list to attempt the same exercise with regard to your own society. Do you find a similar range of diverse and contradictory meanings about 'woman in society'?

Ortner, rightly, draws attention to the often contradictory ways in which woman is represented in Chinese culture. At this stage in her analysis she doesn't attempt to connect the 'actual roles' played by women in China to the 'symbolization' of woman in culture, but she does stress the importance of being clear about precisely what is being explained. As students of culture you too should aspire to this kind of clarity. Make sure when you read, write or speak about women, or indeed any other social group, that you are clearly distinguishing between **symbolizations** and lived experience. Beware of assuming that films, TV, novels, paintings, advertisements and newspaper reports offer a direct reflection of the actual roles played and experience lived. In chapter 3 we shall take up further the points just made, by exploring what we mean by representation and how it works to produce meaning.

Conclusions

For now, we hope that this chapter has enabled you to begin thinking about how the concept of culture is defined. The process of definition that you have engaged in here should continue as you read and study. You will, we hope, want to revisit

and refine your understanding of the term culture as an on-going process. You could begin this now by returning to the sentences about culture that you wrote at the very beginning of this chapter. Have your ideas altered? Would you add to or qualify your original statement?