

Chapter 1

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'culture' and 'masses'

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, honour 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*. 'Honour 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 honour 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

26 POPULAR CULTURE

extended to a process of human development, and this, alongside the original meaning in husbandry, was the main sense until 1C18 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 Readie 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* 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 C18 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. There was at this point an important development in German: the word was borrowed from French, spelled first (1C18) *Cultur* and from C19 *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 C18 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 C18 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**. It was later used to attack what was seen as the 'MECHANICAL' 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. Klemm's *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*, Klemm's 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, theatre 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 Arnold's views. It gathered force in 1C19 and eC20, in association with a comparable hostility to *aesthete* and. 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, 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. [...]

masses

Mass is not only a very common but a very complex word in social description. **The masses**, while less complex, is especially interesting because it is ambivalent: a term of contempt in much conservative thought, but a positive term in much socialist thought.

Terms of contempt for the majority of a people have a long and abundant history. In most early descriptions the significant sense is of *base* or *low*, from the implicit and often explicit physical model of a society arranged in successive stages or layers. This physical model has determined much of the vocabulary of social description; compare *standing*, *status*, *eminence*, *prominence* and the description of social *levels*, *grades*, *estates* and *degrees*. At the same time more particular terms of description of certain 'low' groups have been extended: *plebeian* from Latin *plebs*; *villein* and *boor* from feudal society. COMMON added the sense of 'lowness' to the sense of mutuality, especially in the phrase 'the common people'. *Vulgar* by C16 had lost most of its positive or neutral senses and was becoming a synonym for 'low' or 'base'; a better derived sense was preserved in *vulgate*. *The people* itself became ambiguous, as in C17 arguments which attempted to distinguish the 'better sort' of people from the *meaner* or *basest*. The grand ratifying phrase, *the people*, can still be applied, according to political position, either generally or selectively.

Terms of open political contempt or fear have their own history. In C16 and C17 the key word was *multitude* [...]. Although there was often reference to *the vulgar* and *the rabble*, the really significant noun was *multitude*, often with reinforcing description of numbers in *many-headed*. There were also *base multitude*, *giddy multitude*, *hydra-headed monster'* *multitude* and *headless multitude*. This stress on large numbers is significant when compared with the later development of **mass**,

30 POPULAR CULTURE

though it must always have been an obvious observation that the most evident thing about 'the common people' was that there were so many of them.

Base is an obvious sense, ascribing lowness of social condition and morality. *Idiot* and *giddy* may have originally overlapped, from 'ignorant' and 'foolish' to the earlier sense of *giddy* as 'crazed' (it had signified, originally, possession by a god). But the sense of *giddy* as 'unstable', became historically more important; it is linked with the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus* – the unstable common people, which by 1C17 was being shortened to English *mob*. [...]. The common C16 and C17 *multitude* was steadily replaced, from C18, by *mob*, though with continuing support from the usual battery of *vulgar*, *base*, *common* and *mean*. *Mob* has of course persisted into contemporary usage, but it has been since eC19 much more specific: a particular unruly crowd rather than a general condition. The word that then came through, for the general condition, was **mass**, followed by **the masses**.

Mass had been widely used, in a range of meanings, from C15, from fw *masse*, F and *massa*, L – a body of material that can be moulded or cast [...] and by extension any large body of material. Two significant but alternative senses can be seen developing: (i) something amorphous and indistinguishable; (ii) a dense aggregate. The possible overlaps and variations are obvious. There was the use in *Othello*: 'I remember a masse of things, but nothing distinctly'. There is the significant use in Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, on the edge of a modern meaning: 'like so many atoms contributing jointly to this mass of confusion now before us'. Neutral uses of **mass** were developing in the physical sciences, in painting and in everyday use to indicate bulk. [...] But the social sense can be seen coming through in 1C17 and eC18: 'the Corrupted Mass' (1675); 'the mass of the people' (1711); 'the whole mass of mankind' (1713). But this was still indeterminate, until the period of the French Revolution. Then a particular use was decisive. As Southey observed in 1807: 'the levy in mass, the telegraph and the income-tax are all from France'. Anna Seward had written in 1798: 'our nation has almost risen in mass'. In a period of revolution and open social conflict many of the things that had been said, during the English Revolution, about *the multitude* were now said about **the mass**, and by the 1830s, at latest, **the masses** was becoming a common term, though still sometimes needing a special mark of novelty. A sense of the relation of the term to the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION appears to be evident in Gaskell's 'the steam engine has drawn together the population into dense masses' (*The Manufacturing Population of England*, 6; 1833). Moore in 1837 wrote: 'one of the few proofs of good Taste that 'the masses', as they are called, have yet given', and Carlyle, in 1839: 'men ... to whom millions of living fellow-creatures ... are 'masses', mere 'explosive masses for blowing down Bastilles with', for voting at hustings for *us*'. These two examples neatly illustrate the early divergence of implication. Moore picked up the new word in a cultural context, to indicate 'lowness' or 'vulgarity' as distinct from TASTE. Carlyle was aware of the precise historical reference to the revolutionary *levée en masse* but was also sufficiently aware of the established usage in physical science to carry through the metaphor of explosion. He also, significantly, linked the revolutionary usage, which he condemned as manipulative, with the electoral or parliamentary usage – 'voting at hustings for *us*' – which was given the same manipulative association.

The senses are thus very complex, for there is a persistence of the earlier senses (i) and (ii) of **mass**. Sense (i), of something amorphous and indistinguishable,

persisted especially in the established phrase **in the mass**, as in Rogers (1820): 'we condemn millions in the mass as vindictive'; or Martineau (1832): 'we speak of society as one thing, and regard men in the mass', where what is implied is a failure to make necessary distinctions. Increasingly, however, though less naturally in English than in either French or German, the positive sense (ii), of a dense aggregate, was given direct social significance, as in the directly comparable *solidarity*. It was when the people acted together, 'as one man', that they could effectively change their condition. Here what had been in sense (i) a lack of necessary distinction or discrimination became, from sense (ii), an avoidance of unnecessary division or fragmentation and thus an achievement of unity. Most English radicals continued to use *the people* and its variations – *common people*, *working people*, *ordinary people* – as their primary positive terms, though in 1C19 there was a common contrast between **the masses** and '*the classes*': 'back the masses against the classes' (Gladstone, 1886). **Masses** and its variants – **the broad masses**, **the working masses**, **the toiling masses** – have continued to be specifically used (at times in imperfect translation) in the revolutionary tradition.

In the modern social sense, then, **masses** and **mass** have two distinguishable kinds of implication. **Masses** (i) is the modern word for *many-headed multitude* or *mob*: low, ignorant, unstable. **Masses** (ii) is a description of the same people but now seen as a positive or potentially positive social force. The distinction became critical in many of the derived and associated forms. **Mass meeting**, from mC19, was sense (ii): people came together for some common social purpose (though the derogatory **like a mass meeting** is significant as a reaction). But sense (i), as in 'there are very few original eyes and ears; the great mass see and hear as they are directed by others' (S. Smith, 1803), has come through in C20 in several formations: **mass society**, **mass suggestion**, **mass taste**. Most of these formations have been relatively sophisticated kinds of criticism of DEMOCRACY, which, having become from eC19 an increasingly respectable word, seemed to need, in one kind of thought, this effective alternative. **Mass-democracy** can describe a manipulated political system, but it more often describes a system which is governed by uninstructed or ignorant preferences and opinions: the classical complaint against *democracy* itself. At the same time several of these formations have been influenced by the most popular among them: **mass production**, from USA in the 1920s. This does not really describe the process of *production*, which in fact, as originally on an assembly line, is multiple and serial. What it describes is a process of *consumption*, the **mass market**, where **mass** is a variation of sense (i), *the many-headed multitude* but now a *many-headed multitude* with purchasing power. **Mass market** was contrasted with *quality market*, retaining more of sense (i), but by extension **mass production** came to mean production in large numbers. The deepest difficulty of C20 uses of **mass** is then apparent: that a word which had indicated and which still indicates (both favourably and unfavourably) a solid aggregate now also means a very large number of things or people. The sense of a very large number has on the whole predominated. **Mass communication** and the **mass media** are by comparison with all previous systems not directed at **masses** (persons assembled) but at numerically very large yet in individual homes relatively isolated members of audiences. Several senses are fused but also confused: the large numbers reached (*the many-headed multitude* or *the majority of the people*); the mode adopted (*manipulative* or *popular*); the

32 POPULAR CULTURE

assumed taste (*vulgar* or *ordinary*); the resulting relationship (*alienated and abstract* or a *new kind of social communication*).

The most piquant element of the **mass** and **masses** complex, in contemporary usage, is its actively opposite social implications. To be engaged in **mass work**, to belong to **mass organizations**, to value **mass meetings** and **mass movements**, to live wholly in the service of **the masses**: these are the phrases of an active revolutionary tradition. But to study **mass taste**, to use the **mass media**, to control a **mass market**, to engage in **mass observation**, to understand **mass psychology** or **mass opinion**: these are the phrases of a wholly opposite social and political tendency. Some part of the revolutionary usage can be understood from the fact that in certain social conditions revolutionary intellectuals or revolutionary parties do not come from *the people*, and then see 'them', beyond themselves, as **masses** with whom and for whom they must work: **masses as** object or **mass** as material to be worked on. But the active history of the *levée en masse* has been at least as influential. In the opposite tendency, **mass** and **masses** moved away from the older simplicities of contempt [...]. The C20 formations are mainly ways of dealing with large numbers of people, on the whole indiscriminately perceived but crucial to several operations in politics, in commerce and in culture. The **mass** is assumed and then often, ironically, divided into parts again: *upper* or *lower* ends of the **mass market**; the *better kind* of **mass entertainment**. **Mass society** would then be a society organized or perceived in such ways; but, as a final complication, **mass society** has also been used, with some relation to its earlier conservative context, as a new term in radical and even revolutionary criticism. **Mass society**, **massification** (usually with strong reference to the **mass media**) are seen as modes of disarming or incorporating the *working class*, the *proletariat*, **the masses**: that is to say, they are new modes of alienation and control, which prevent and are designed to prevent the development of an authentic *popular* consciousness. It is thus? possible to visualize, or at least hope for, a **mass uprising** against **mass society**, or a **mass protest** against the **mass media**, or **mass organization** against **massification**. The distinction that is being made, or attempted, in these contrasting political uses, is between **the masses** as the SUBJECT and **the masses** as the *object* of social action.

It is in the end not surprising that this should be so. In most of its uses **masses** is a cant word, but the problems of large societies and of collective action and reaction to which, usually confusingly, it and its derivatives and associates are addressed, are real enough and have to be continually spoken about.