

Introduction

According to Raymond Williams (in his very useful *Keywords*, a text that I recommend to all students in Humanities), culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” Nature is another, he says. “Culture” is commonly thought to mark our distinction from “nature:” nature is what human beings can’t escape, “culture” is what we change (using fire to make metals, for example) and how we shape and make meaningful the inescapable natural imperatives, such as procreation and death.

Today, we use culture primarily, I would say, in two plus different ways: (1) the anthropological view that all groups have a set of behaviours and beliefs that govern their way of living together; this view is “neutral” in the sense that it recognizes the coherence of specific groups or cultures. The Aztecs had their worldview, modern Canada has its; we might recoil at the idea of human sacrifice, but such acts made sense within the Aztec worldview and we should at least try to understand it. (2) Writers like Matthew Arnold, in his well-known *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869, thinks of culture as “the best that has been thought and said,” on the basis of which (who gets to choose the best he doesn’t say) many countries, including Canada, construct a curriculum for schools and colleges.

Beyond these two views of culture – as what people in a particular society do and believe, and the *best* aspects of what they create – there are many extrapolations of the term, many of which are reflected in the essays that make up this first edition of *Culture*. Among the implications of these new ways of thinking is the rise of identity forms of culture: Canadian culture is not a single thing but consists of many cultural attachments and identities. People in Canada, and elsewhere, are creating or recalling their own cultural attachments and using them to influence the politics of the larger entity to which they belong. Gender identities and cultures would be an example of this. And there’s the use of the term in regard to “office culture,” for example. Sometimes the term gets stretched beyond usefulness, perhaps, although I wouldn’t be willing to give up on it yet.

The cover page of *Culture* (Cher and Charlie Chaplin, Putin and the Pope, Walt Disney and Drake, Beyoncé and Beethoven, Mandela and Mickey Mouse) and the range of articles within it – progressive and edgy - are worthy in themselves of a cultural-studies-style analysis. The journal as whole shows that culture, although and because it is a contested concept, is useful to young people today; they, like their ancestors, are dealing with the tension between continuity and newness that Raymond Williams and others have highlighted as the key to successful ... well, cultures.

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