

## The Ontological Concept of Culture as Cultivation

First, in an *ontological* sense, culture is the opposite of nature: everything made and organised by human beings so as to exceed those natural functions that they share with things, plants and animals. Hence, it distinguishes that which exists without human intervention (nature) from what humans create (culture). In this sense, cultural sciences contrast to natural sciences and cultural landscapes to wild nature. This definition of culture as *cultivation* is the oldest of them all. It was gradually transferred from gardening to self-cultivation of the human mind and then of social communities. In this first sense, culture has affinities to concepts like society and civilisation. It can be described as ontological since it relates to basic human existence, to what exists in the world, and to what essentially distinguishes humans from other beings.<sup>1</sup>

This archaic concept contained a wide span of sub-meanings that sometimes developed into other, cognate concepts. The Latin *cultura* with its root in *colere* signified habitation, cultivation, care, shelter, protection and veneration, implying some form of ordering human intervention.<sup>2</sup> In the sense of habitation, it developed to the Latin *colonus* that became the English word *colony*, while its sense of veneration became *cultus* and thus *cult*, leaving to *culture* itself to stand for various forms of cultivation. It has been in use in many European languages at least since the fifteenth century. From the seventeenth century, it was used in a metaphorical sense to describe cultivation not only of the crops of the earth but also of human character, in processes of education, refinement, ethics, style and good manners. Already in classical Roman times, Cicero

had talked about the need to cultivate the soul, and in the Renaissance period, humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam found it at least as essential to tend one's intellect as one's garden. The aura of respectful care was thus transferred to human education. In the seventeenth century, philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and Samuel von Pufendorf based their theories of justice on the human need to break out of the raw natural state by developing culture, and their concept of culture came to apply not just to single individuals but also to whole societies.

Such metaphors were gradually established in ordinary language use, sedimenting from poetic figures to naturalised word meanings. In the decades around year 1800, the concept was further generalised as an autonomous noun that denoted a general process of cultivation resulting in intellectual and spiritual refinement of human individuals and societies. In his seminal work *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant spoke of "an ever advancing culture" that strives for a "mean between higher culture and an undemanding nature" or a "happy combination (in one and the same people) of the law-governed constraint coming from highest culture with the force and rightness of a free nature that feels its own value."<sup>3</sup> Kant thought that among all species, only humans could in this way rise above their animal instincts and through education become "receptive to purposes higher than those that nature itself can provide." Culture here signified the moral essence of the most highly developed creature—humankind, and its determinate capacity to subject all nature—hence "man is the final purpose of creation."<sup>4</sup>

These historical roots indicate that the ontological concept of culture as spiritual cultivation implied quantitative growth as well as qualitative improvement. This was highly suitable to the linear, progress-oriented view on history championed first by the Enlightenment and then by modern industrialism. In this rather general and unspecific sense, culture opposes nature with great overlaps to other keywords like *civilisation* or *society*. *Civilisation* became a common theme from the late seventeenth and in particular the eighteenth century. It then signified a social order, through the same human development that supported culture, but in opposition not so much to any pure state of nature (as with culture) but rather to chaotic and lawless barbarism. Various words for *society* came in use already in the fourteenth century, and gradually—in particular from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century—drifted away from more concrete companies or social gatherings to a more abstract system of institutions and relations that bind together larger groups of people, as

opposed to single individuals. In this manner, culture (vs. nature), civilisation (vs. barbarism) and society (vs. the individual) with different emphases had much in common.

If the distinction between nature and culture in this traditional sense is called ontological, it is because it refers to fundamental existential conditions. This does not imply that it has eternal validity. This polarity was largely a fruit of eighteenth-century thought, which solidified dichotomies such as those between body and mind, matter and spirit or natural organisms and human artefacts. In earlier, religious worldviews, God's firm hand held together body and soul as a coherent totality. René Descartes was early and radical in dichotomising body and mind.<sup>5</sup> Still, this dualism was not yet elaborated into a full polarisation of culture versus nature, since each of them in some way encompassed both mind and body. This link between nature and culture gradually weakened as nature was secularised, lost its divine animation and transformed into a quasi-mechanical system of manipulable things, while the human being stepped forward as the prime "cultivator," whom God had given the exclusive capacity to truly create. Culture with its ingenious artefacts and more or less well-organised mental structures was a human reserve, while nature was reduced to its opposite other. Thus emerged a mutually excluding polarity, even though Kant among others retained an idea that culture once emanated out of nature but has supremely raised above it and may in its glory once create a new and higher synthesis. In a similar sense, Karl Marx too regarded culture ontologically—as emanating from human labour upon nature, giving rise to a progressive growth of productive forces and a corresponding civilising refinement of the total ensemble of human needs.<sup>6</sup>

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Romantics drew far-reaching consequences of the deepening nature/culture divide. In literature, music and landscape painting, nature transformed from a God-given useful beauty framing human activities to something radically other. Wild nature was put in stark contrast to the human sphere and was seen as both frightening and enchanting—it was the most typical "sublime," which in contrast to the simply beautiful hovered on the border to the inexplicable.<sup>7</sup> Already the Kantian concept of the sublime starts with a unique experience of something "absolutely great," a formless, boundless and thus incomprehensible object or event; for instance, an earthquake or some giant scenery which floods and overwhelms the subject. But then, the subject uses human reason to cognitively identify that

sublime experience as a unique totality, thereby incorporating its otherness and reaching a higher level of mastery. When men distinguished their activities from the surrounding nature, the latter became an object of aesthetic and emotional experiences. While natural sciences mapped and controlled nature, it kept its magical character in the fantasy lives and subjective inner experiences of genial artists. Painters such as Caspar David Friedrich depicted the smallness of man before the overwhelming external nature in its scaring but also fascinating might. The same nature could also be the object of projections of inner mental states. The Romantics thus began to spell Nature with capital N—not just God’s creation but an autonomous force, neither divine nor human.

Together, the Enlightenment and Romanticism effected a deep-reaching division of human activities, which, for instance, led Wilhelm Dilthey to strictly separate the exact causal explanations of natural science from the interpretive understandings of the humanities. In face of the fast advance of the hard sciences, such boundary marking was a last resort and shield for protecting humanities as a field of knowledge against the triumphal procession of technocratic reason. This wide gap had its problems, and in England, C.P. Snow soon regretted the bifurcation of modern societies into “two cultures,” where science and technology were radically separated from the arts and humanities.<sup>8</sup> Many then searched for a new and more comprehensive perspective that could reconcile the two, in a development that will be discussed later as it relates to the other concepts of culture.

When in an ontological sense the cultural sphere expanded—through discoveries, population growth, urbanisation, imperialism, industrialisation and other modes of capitalist as well as technological expansion—the sphere of non-human nature correspondingly shrank. External nature was further alienated and exoticised when urbanisation and industrialisation alienated people from the expanses of deserts, seas, mountains and forests, but the more these processes also cultivated such areas, the relation between nature and culture was again transformed. Today there is hardly anywhere on Earth any totally “untouched” nature: human footsteps are found on the moon; satellites circle faraway planets; radio messages reach far into the galaxy; human engineering manipulates the inner structure of cells, molecules and atoms, changing atomic structures as well as the global climate; and genetic technologies have transformed whole species into cultural works. Is there for instance any “nature” left

in Japan, where human culture deliberately or involuntarily has made basic natural resources like water and air radioactive?

From this perspective, *ontological culturalisation* denotes a process of accelerating artificiality that makes nature and history increasingly dependent on human influence. Roughly similar to civilisation, culture here seems to grow faster and faster, in extent as well as importance, relatively its “other,” nature. The whole process of modernisation expresses this trend by rationalising societal institutions and enabling a hitherto unseen accumulation of resources. Urbanised environments are distanced from nature and instead culturally formed by planning practices. Older societies, of course, also gave meaning to surrounding nature, but from hunting and fishing over agriculture to modern industry and late modern communication technologies, all corners of Earth have also physically been rearranged according to human interests. People have always interpreted and made use of nature, but nature was now further also increasingly shaped by human societies.

This ontological culturalisation results in what has been called the *Anthropocene*: the current geological period that started when human activities began to have a significant impact on the global ecosystem. Scientists Eugene F. Stoermer and Paul Crutzen proposed the concept in the 1980s, and it is currently being proposed for adoption as an official geological term.<sup>9</sup> Yet there are divergent bids on when this era actually started. Some point at the impact of agriculture from the Neolithic Revolution more than 12,000 years ago, others place its beginning by the start of industrialism around year 1800, yet others suggest that the first atomic bomb test 16 July 1945 distinctly marked the beginning of an era where human activities left distinct traces in geological sediments. Whenever the precise starting point is placed, the core idea is that human influence has irreversibly grown on climate, ecosystems and biodiversity. On the one hand, this observation urges humans to become aware of their responsibility for—and interdependence on—the ecosphere; on the other hand, the concept itself singles out humankind as a separable agent of these unique geological as well as biospherical changes. It thus may either underpin a kind of posthumanist nature–culture levelling or on the contrary reinforce the idea that humans are different, being the identifiable cause of a whole global era.

Humanity remains a victim of natural catastrophes that can often be seen as the revenge of nature and as proof that there are inescapable limitations of its ability to control and manipulate. Climate changes

simultaneously indicate that several of these “natural” disasters, including the contemporary climate change, are in fact results of human actions rather than purely “natural” events or the expression of a divine will. Today the changing lifestyles of *Homo sapiens* reshape the foundations of the global fate of planet Earth, and the climate threats indicate the risks and paradoxes of the collective force that human societies have unfolded. From nineteenth-century Romanticism until today’s green movements, there has been vivid discussion of how far human societies themselves will be able to deal with—and find remedies for—their own monstrous progress and expansion.

Some may perhaps think that this first way of defining culture is just an old-fashioned historical remnant. This is wrong. There are still occasions when there are good reasons for defining culture in terms of spiritual or material cultivation; for instance, when discussing “cultural heritage” or “cultural landscapes”: a vast complex of human traces left for coming generations.<sup>10</sup> The growing resources for preserving such traces of human history simultaneously contribute to the growth of culture in society, when such things that originally had shifting uses (for instance, tools or buildings) are placed in museums and get an afterlife as just symbolic signs for the past. In this way, traces of the past are meaningful texts, which activates the aesthetic and hermeneutic concepts of culture presented later below. It remains appropriate to think of culture as human cultivation in contrast to nature, but already in the eighteenth century this old, ontological concept of culture became insufficient and in need of supplementation.

Ontological culturalisation is nothing new, as human culture has always interacted with nature, moving its limits further and further away to expand its own reach. Nature in opposite to culture is that which is experienced as existing independently of conscious human action. Long before *Homo sapiens* appeared on Earth, planets encircled the sun, and no societal measures are needed to allow photosynthesis to give life to flowers and trees. However, today a forest, desert, mountain or sea may seem wild and untouched, but virtually all landscape formations, animals and plants on this Earth have since long been affected by human societies. Moreover, all efforts to perceive what may remain of external nature is coloured by inherited social images and ideas. Nature is in lots of ways shaped by human actions, and it is also experienced through symbolic representations that make it hard to draw a precise line between nature and culture in this first, ontological sense.

At the same time as human culture invades the domains of previously untouched nature, the borders between the two starts eroding and their mutual polarity melts down. Human beings are wholly and fully natural beings, and it seems more relevant to perceive culture as an integrated part of nature than as something radically different.<sup>11</sup> Culture always has a material side; for instance, in the form of a growing mass of designed and inhabited landscapes that on one hand further marginalise “untouched nature” and on the other hand itself tends to transform into a “second nature.” Perceiving nature as a separate sphere is an ontological proposition, yet no original condition of human existence, but a product of modern eighteenth-century thought. Nature and culture are indissolubly fused in all human life, and their conceptual separation is a relatively late and labouriously upheld construction, rather than the universal polarity it may suggest.<sup>12</sup> Describing custom as “second nature” shows how flexible this dividing line remains, as people afterwards tend to “naturalise” their own products, whether old cultivation landscapes or synthetic molecules.

Until the Middle Ages, natural disasters were described as God’s punishment, and there was an idea that God spoke to man not just through his book but also through nature’s sign language, which man had to interpret in order to understand God’s will. Sinners were punished by the revenge of nature, and a widespread magical thinking spun close but mystical bonds between nature and culture. Enlightenment, secularisation and industrialisation then demystified nature and transformed it into an either mechanical or sublime external frame around the human world. This interrupted the dialogue between gods and humans, and nature came to be understood as a collection of objective things, which could be studied in order to decipher its own secular and material regularities.

In recent decades, an ecological awareness has recovered the bonds, but in a different manner where the link between Man and God is no longer the absolute centre of the world. Natural disasters are today more typically understood as societal disasters, resulting from the dysfunctional manner in which humans interact with the nature they are themselves an integral part of, thus opening up for self-critical reflection on human responsibility in and for the world.

Already in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno questioned the Enlightenment oppositions between nature and culture and between body and mind, and showed how they were linked to power relations. “In thought, human beings distance

themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered. [...] In the mastery of nature, without which mind does not exist, enslavement to nature persists.”<sup>13</sup> They regarded the “denial of nature in the human being for the sake of mastery over extrahuman nature and over other human beings” as “the core of all civilizing rationality.”<sup>14</sup> In their view, this Enlightenment rationality is the ultimate source of modern culture industry and of fascism, as the mastery over nature must dialectically turn over into the barbarism of a violent return of this repressed nature. Western reason was doomed to self-destruction by its dependence on domination—of others in society as well as of external and internal nature. To them, the Romantic belief in a return to nature was equally problematic: “Nature in itself is neither good, as was believed by the old Romanticism, nor noble, as is asserted by the new.”<sup>15</sup>

The complexities involved in polarising culture against nature become apparent when analysing identities, where the interplay between biological materiality and textual representations is particularly striking. There is a heated debate on race and ethnicity, where the former is sometimes assumed to be genetical and thus natural, while the latter relates to cultural traditions. Distinguishing sharply between biological race and cultural ethnicity may first seem reasonable, but it is actually far from clear which of them is most variable, as both can be seen as cultural constructions.<sup>16</sup> There are really no definite biological races among humans, and the divide is therefore seriously blurred.

Gender discourses likewise sometimes strive to separate what is natural from what depends on cultural differences. Extreme positions tend to reduce one to the other; for instance, when sociobiologists anchor male and female behaviours in genetics or when social constructionists on the contrary suggest that virtually all human behaviour rests on cultural conventions. Others prefer to balance the two sides; for instance, by differentiating between “sex” and “gender.”<sup>17</sup> On one hand genetically inherited bodily traits based on chromosomes and reproductive organs, on the other historically changing and socially varying norms and practices, through which the physical differences are interpreted by using language and other symbolic systems—that is, through cultural practices that try to make biology meaningful.

However, when further scrutinised, such divisions hide tantalizing limitations. An old tradition, for instance, constructs the body as a biological entity anchored in external nature, while the mind’s inner consciousness is the basis for all social and cultural phenomena. Horkheimer



and Adorno clearly problematised such a dichotomy: “Only culture treats the body as a thing that can be owned, only in culture has it been distinguished from mind, the quintessence of power and command, as the object, the dead thing, the *corpus*.”<sup>18</sup> Human bodies are in fact not purely biological organisms but filled with communicative signs, from clothes, hairstyles, makeup and tattoos to all ways in which movements and postures signal social positions and acquired character traits. Bodies are elements not only of physical biotopes but also of sociocultural identities. At the same time, there is no exclusively mental consciousness that does not find embodied expression. All culture and communication must make detours over material things such as sound or light waves, artefacts or bodies. Thoughts are mediated by words spoken by bodily speech organs, and bodies are marked by experiences and desires that can be interpreted by surrounding others. In just so many ways, each human body is always simultaneously material and meaningful, natural and cultural, organism and identity.

These dichotomies are further complicated by the one between heredity and environment, where the former is again mostly conceived as a genetic bodily constitution while the latter is often identified with the contributions of society and culture to what and who a person is. Here, the struggle between radical sociobiologism and constructionism has full force. However, there is also a strong social inheritance, shaped by those rituals and routines that through socialisation and education carry over from generation to generation.<sup>19</sup> Such tenacious heritage can but need not have any biological basis. At the same time, the surrounding environment has social as well as natural components. Environmental influences may thus not just be social but also climatological. The latter can often be quite stable but have in recent times proved a terrifying capacity for changing rapidly, as a result of human interference with global nature, even if physical changes in the environment can also be caused by non-human events. These complexities show that heredity and environment can sometimes be linked to nature and culture, respectively, but that it can be equally relevant to instead contrast sociocultural heritage with the natural environment.

Nature/culture, biological/social, body/mind, external/internal, heredity/environment—these dichotomies tend to be stacked upon each other so as to form one apparently clear-cut divide. Such polarising patterns of conceptual pairs are common in research as well as in politics and everyday life. Yet, this structuring edifice rests upon a strikingly

feeble basis that crumbles as soon as any pair—or the mutual combination of any couple of them—is carefully scrutinised.

Structuralism and semiotics have shown that many cultural practices make meaning by constructing such oppositions between contrasting extremes—that is, by dichotomisation. Categorising is an effective way to orientate in the world. Available symbolic systems invite defining each identifiable phenomenon by how it differs from other phenomena. Identities thus interact with differences, and people tend to not just observe these differences but also lend them normative force. Polarities are not just established and verified but also respected and actively supported in terms of normality, while for instance diffuse ethnicities or gender identities are often depreciated. Hence, polarities turn into hierarchies, where one pole is evaluated as higher or better than its opposite (white above non-white; male above female). To this effect, differences within each pole are neglected while contrasts between phenomena classified as opposite are exaggerated. Thus binary dichotomisation is combined with stereotypisation and hierarchisation, in a potentially dangerous mixture.<sup>20</sup> Critical and cultural theory investigates and systematises such mechanisms of polarising stereotypification, but also deconstructs them and suggests more dynamic and complex relations.

With the opposition between culture and nature, those between male and female or between sex and gender also need to be rethought. Judith Butler has, for instance, argued that there is no natural or biologically given sex, and that both sex and gender are thus socioculturally based, which dissolves the whole dichotomy.<sup>21</sup> The body's sex is not something that precedes gender formation. People shape their reality by discourses that construct the world along gender polarities and normatively prescribe certain ways of being man or woman. Biological sex cannot be understood outside of its representations. It is therefore futile to try to separate sex from gender, nature from culture or bodies from identities—at least both sides must be seen as symbolic (i.e., cultural) constructs. Butler's theory of performativity explains how bodies and sexes/genders are produced by specific social acts between people. The concept of performativity derives from how speech act theory studies dynamic processes of language use in social interaction. Gender and sexuality are created in repeated discourses and practices where a heteronormative and heterosexual "matrix" emerges, which constitute men as men and women as women. Through routinising habits, such repetitive patterns appear as if they were given by nature; hence the illusion that gender

is built around a kernel of biological sex—an illusion that critical gender and cultural analysis must problematise. In this manner, cultural processes give rise not only to interpretations of biological differences but also to the whole sex/gender order itself.

A number of studies by Hillevi Ganetz offer ample illustrations of such mechanisms. Analysing nature programmes on television, she, for instance, found that the “natural” behaviour of animals was generally depicted to conform with dominant norms for human behaviour, in spite of the fact that biological research indicates that most species actually in many ways deviate from those norms.<sup>22</sup> Flocks are depicted as if they were families, males are constructed as leaders and non-heterosexual acts are repressed. In order to make natural phenomena meaningful, they are thus interpreted in cultural terms and forced to confirm human norms. Through a “cultural boomerang,” these cultural reinterpretations of animal behaviours are then used as argument for what is considered “natural” also for humans, in an interpretational spiral with strong ideological functions. This often not a matter of conscious ideology but of what Ganetz calls “gender routines,” deeply seated in everyday habits, and thereby falsely regarded as given by nature. Mediated, cultural representations of nature, formed on the basis of social relations, are used to interpret animal behaviours and then turn their assumed “naturalness” into moral arguments for how humans should also behave “naturally.” While nature is thus given meaning (or “culturalised” in the hermeneutic sense of the word that is to be discussed later), human culture is at the same time naturalised. The boomerang effect is that such normative ideas start among humans, make a wide detour through (representations of) nature, and then return to the human world, charged with the normative power of naturalisation.

However, this mechanism is not the only one behind social norms. Many religious as well as psychological arguments do not use nature as a norm for human behaviour, but instead stress the ontological distinction of human beings compared to animal nature. Such contrasting between humanity and nature has had a dominant position, from the Old Testament of the Bible to modern efforts to master external and internal nature by enlightenment, science and technology. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other Romantics questioned this divide, and since then the discussion has shifted. Some time around 1970 the idea of nature as a guiding rule seems to have gained in force. The ecological crisis made it necessary to have greater respect for nature, and various green movements and

subcultures nourished a new ideal of naturalness, where nature was no longer a passive object of admiration or control, but either (for socio-biologists) a determinant of social practices or (for ecologists) a partner in dialogue.

How to think “better” is a difficult question. Identity orders like those of gender and sexuality are tenacious structures that cannot easily be dismantled by simple decisions. Ganetz reminds of nature’s variational width, where animal lives are immensely multifaceted and therefore cannot legitimate any specific human norms of behaviour. Being “natural” is therefore no valid argument in ethical debates, since all sorts of behaviours can be found in nature, which is not in itself neither good, nor bad, but ethically neutral.

On a fundamental level, it may be asked if humans are so radically different from nature’s all other beings as the ontological concept of culture implies. Whatever humans are, they are *also* animals, organisms of nature. It is impossible to strictly differentiate learned behaviour across generations from genetically inherited dispositions since different kinds of inheritance in practice mingle. Thanks to ontological culturalisation, humans can today manipulate genetic codes, which undermines this nature/culture distinction even further. Part II will return to how Actor-Network Theory and posthumanism seek to dismount the subject-centred divisions between humans, animals and things that once elevated human beings to the crown of creation while reducing animals and nature to passive objects of manipulation.<sup>23</sup> But first, there are other notions of culture that need to be presented.

## NOTES

1. A complicating conceptual aspect that may cause some confusion in relation to the next concept of culture is that “philosophical anthropology” in Kant’s footsteps also asks for what is specifically human.
2. For conceptual history, see Williams (1976/1988), Bennett et al. (2005) or any relevant dictionary.
3. Kant (1790/2003: 188 and 231–232).
4. Kant (1790/2003: 321 and 323).
5. Skirry (2015).
6. Eagleton (2000: 107).
7. Johannisson (1984).
8. Snow (1959/1964).

9. Williams et al. (2011); Davies (2016).
10. Thanks to Christoph Lindner for showing how the humanities continue to focus on culture in the ontological sense of “the creative expression of human activity.”
11. Elias (1991).
12. Bernasconi (2011: 18ff).
13. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002: 31).
14. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002: 42).
15. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002: 211–212).
16. Fornäs (1995: 256–258); Bernasconi (2011: 27ff).
17. Fornäs (1995: 247–256). The sex/gender dichotomy was introduced by the American psychologist Robert Stoller in the 1950s and established within feminist thought by Gayle Rubin (1975).
18. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002: 193).
19. The concept of generation has a vast legacy. For its application to media users, see Bolin (2016).
20. Hall (1992).
21. Butler (1990, 2005, 2015). For a critique against binary oppositions based on that of mind/body, and an effort to instead regard the body as a “threshold or borderline concept” that mediates other conceptual pairs, see also Grosz (1994: 3–24).
22. Ganetz (2004, 2012).
23. Wolfe (2009).

Defending Culture

Conceptual Foundations and Contemporary Debate

Fornas, J.

2017, VIII, 256 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-57809-5