

# Wolfgang Welsch 'Transculturality'

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# Culture: some different concepts

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# Culture: complexities of definition

‘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.’

-- **Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London, 1983), p. 87.**

‘[The] term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all. Yet though it is fashionable these days to see nature as derivative of culture, culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. [...] We derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation.’

-- **Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford, 2000), p. 1.**

# ‘Descriptive’ and ‘normative’ concepts

- **‘Descriptive’** concepts of culture *exclude* value judgements. They aim at *objective* and *dispassionate* accounts of our everyday forms (and objects) of life; our interactions with one another; the structures we create and the rules we live by in our communities, regions, and nations, etc.
- **‘Normative’** concepts either *involve* or *imply* value judgments: aesthetic and/or ethical distinctions and scales between what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’, ‘preferable’ and ‘less preferable’, ‘optimal’ and ‘sub-optimal’, and even ‘right’ and ‘wrong’: culture is understood as a site for both the ‘bestowal’ and the ‘withdrawal’ of value (see Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies* (2017), p. 14).
- The distinction between **‘the descriptive’** and **‘the normative’** is never hard and fast: the two frequently overlap with one another.

# Culture as 'husbandry'

- Original sense of 'culture': derives from the Latin 'colere' (cultivating, inhabiting, worshipping, protecting). We can trace an etymological link from the Latin 'colonus' (farmer) to our contemporary usages of the words 'colonization' and 'colonialism': **culture's heavy political baggage!**
- **Agriculture**: culture as the cultivation and breeding of crops and animals.
- Culture in the laboratory: controlled and regulated conditions of growth (e.g. 'cultures' of bacteria).
- Culture as 'care' and 'cultivation' of the self: think of 'Fitnesskultur' and 'Kulturbeutel'.
- After post-structuralism, we tend to think of 'nature' as derived from 'culture'. But 'culture' is etymologically rooted in concepts and ideas of 'nature'. → **What is the relationship between nature and culture?**

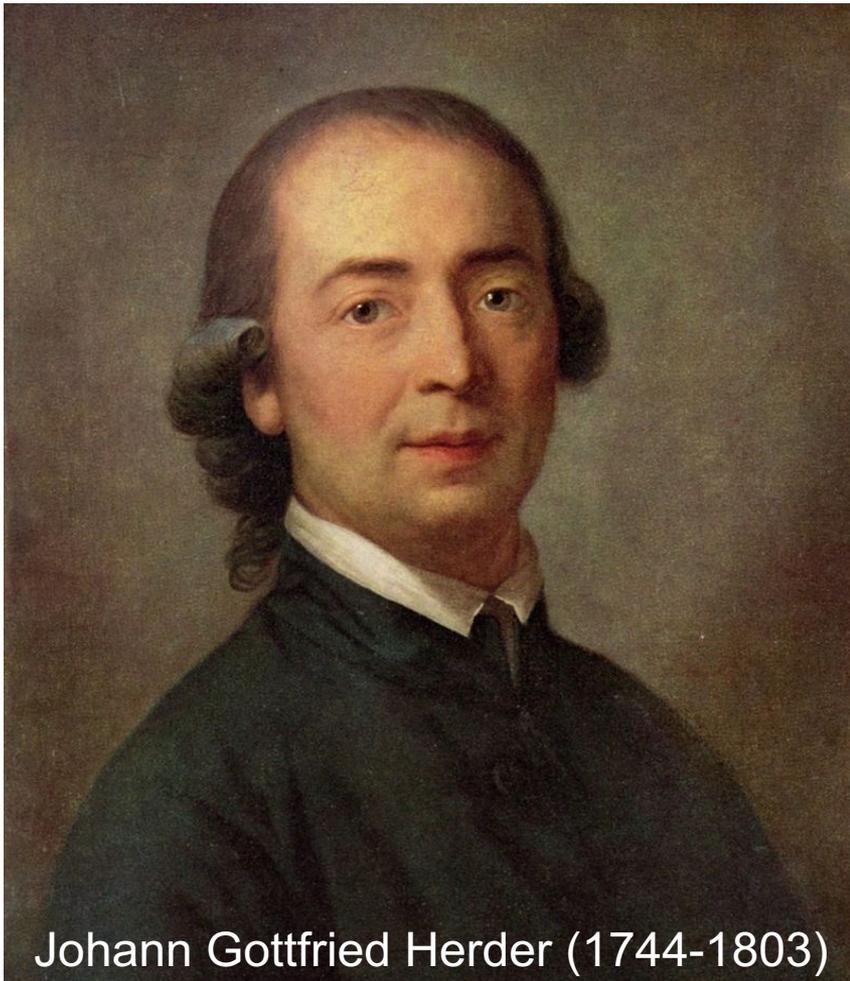
# Development of the concept of culture (C17→)

- Up until C17, 'culture' had not had an absolute usage. It was rather a *relative* expression, relating merely to specific realms or activities in the context of human life. E.g., in antiquity, Cicero had spoken of the “cultura animi” (“care of the spirit”); patristics promoted the “cultura Christiane religionis”; and in the Renaissance, Erasmus or Thomas More pleaded for a “cultura ingenii”: i.e., a culture of the inventive spirit.
- Francis Bacon referred to ‘the culture and manurance [in German, the ‘Düngen’] of human minds’ (1605); Thomas Hobbes spoke of the education of children as a ‘culture of their minds’ (*Leviathan*, 1651).
- In late C17: ‘Culture’ first develops into a *general concept* that encompasses *all* the various manifestations of human existence. This concept first appeared in its explicit form in 1684: the German natural rights philosopher Samuel von Pufendorf denoted ‘culture’ as that summation of human activities through which humans construct and shape their lives as specifically human: **in contrast to that of (other) animals.**

# Emergence of 'Hochkultur' ('high culture')

- Through Pufendorf, 'culture' becomes a collective singular and also an autonomous concept which makes a claim to embrace the *entirety* of a people's, a society's, or a nation's activities.
- Bacon's and Hobbes' value-laden concepts of *culture as cultivation* feed into the notion – between C17 and C18 – that only **certain people** – individuals, groups, and classes – have the capacity to develop “cultured” or “cultivated” minds.
- In C18 and C19 Europe, 'culture' becomes the preserve of the educated 'Bürgertum', the middle classes: culture as a means of political **self-preservation** and **exclusion** of other groups and classes.
- **Bildung**: the *liberation* and *cultivation* of the humanness that is latent and potential in every one of us: a 'self' which, according to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), finds its idealized, collective, and macrocosmic expression in the well-functioning rational State (and vice versa).

# Everyday culture: 'ways of life'



Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803)

'It is necessary, Herder argued, in a decisive innovation, **to speak of "cultures" in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation [and between different nations]**. This sense was widely developed, in the Romantic movement, as an alternative to the orthodox and dominant "*civilization*". It was first used to emphasise national and traditional cultures, including the new concept of "folk-culture".'

**Raymond Williams,**  
***Keywords*, p. 89.**

# Geographical / political cultures



- **Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983):** nation states do not have an inherent, ‘natural’ or organic existence: they are **constructs**.
- Nation states are **imagined** (through a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’); **limited** (excluding ‘others’); and **sovereign** (i.e. central to the mythology of nationalism is that each state should determine its own destiny – cf. ‘Brexit’).
- “[T]he West” is a *historical*, not a geographical construct. [...] [“Western”] cultures are united by one thing: the fact that *they are all different from the Rest*. Similarly, the Rest, though different among themselves, are represented as the same in the sense that *they are all different from the West*.’
- **Stuart Hall, ‘The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power’, in *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, Oxford, 1992), pp. 277-80.**

Boris Johnson, August 2012. Source: BBC

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35633853>)

## A (counter-)example: Taking the knee...



A number of the San Francisco 49ers 'take the knee' during the national anthem before their game against the Arizona Cardinals on 1 October 2017.

Source: <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-again-blasts-nfl-over-players-kneeling-during-anthem/4075852.html>.

# Discussion questions

1. How does Welsch define 'transculturality'? How does he distinguish it from Herder's way of thinking about culture, and how does he distinguish it from 'multiculturalism'?
2. What are the reasons why he sees 'transculturality' as a viable **alternative model** -- to multiculturalism -- for thinking about the ways in which multicultural societies **actually** work?

# Defining 'transculturality'

- A very flexible concept with a number of interlinking definitions. It is a concept which has come to capture the living dynamics of cultural change which occur as highly diverse – contemporary and generally 'Western' – societies have become increasingly globalized.
- It departs from a traditional – yet still very commonly held – conception of cultures as fixed frames, distinct islands, or 'monads' that are distinct & differentiated from one another.
- Traversing concepts of both 'globalization' and 'particularization', it speaks to the increasing – and ongoing – intermixing of cultural identities on both individual and personal levels.

~ **Adapted from Welsch (2001) and Benessaieh (2010).**

# Discussion questions

1. **Are we all transcultural** – and if so, in what ways? Are there differences between generations? Try to find an example from the essay, and two specific examples from your own life.
2. Is there a sense in which Welsch is too optimistic about the possibilities of ‘transculturality’ – especially in the wake of the rise of nativist populism after 2015? Can you give examples of the particular challenges that this idea might face in contemporary politics and society?

# Select bibliography

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**For a wealth of further reading suggestions, please consult the relevant reading lists in the Department's *Handbook. Introduction to British Culture*, ed. by Christa Jansohn et al., 2nd, rev. ed. (2021).**

# Image references

- Slide 8: <https://www.gettyimages.at/fotos/my-body-=-my-decision>
- Slide 9: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35633853>
- Slide 10: <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-again-blasts-nfl-over-players-kneeling-during-anthem/4075852.html>