

*RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR AUSTRIAN AND
INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

Cultural Studies and Europe
or the Reality of Virtuality

Cultural Concepts

Culture as a notion is multi-coloured and multifarious in the wealth of its meanings. Research literature on the subject reveals hundreds of different definitions. However, that is not necessarily proof of a total lack of unity, but can be seen instead as an expression of the great variety of aspects and factors which constitute culture, or of which approach to culture we take. Thus one can differentiate numerous aspects within the concept of culture, although these are also closely interwoven with one another. In general they represent traditional studies and scientific disciplines:

- the philosophical aspect as defined by basic cultural philosophy
- the theory of science and epistemological aspect: how can we comprehend culture and cultural processes
- the anthropological aspect: cultural anthropology, cultural ecology (culture as an essential aspect of being human)
- the sociological dimension; cultural sociology (social structures as an element of culture)
- the economic aspect, primarily in relation to cross-cultural comparative studies of companies
- the political science aspect; especially development aid policies and theories on globalisation as a basis for discussion of the connections between culture and development
- the semiotic-linguistic aspect: culture as a storehouse of signs for a particular group, as public representations, the linguistic reproduction of culture in discourse
- the philological aspect: literature as a primary form of cultural manifestation
- the psychological aspect: psychology which compares cultures, the cognitive representation of culture
- the aesthetic aspect: studies of the visual arts, theatre and music (art is not to be equated with culture!)
- the historical aspect: cultural heritage, cultural history
- the media studies aspect: media culture in the age of television, video and the Internet.

Most cultural theories, and the concepts of culture they rely on, embrace more than one of these aspects.

This favours or more truly necessitates the elaboration of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and theories. It also advances the cause of cultural studies, which for their part have provided a wide range of definitions of 'culture'.

A meta-theoretical, synthetical method of approach incorporating multiple perspectives allows the elaboration of a range of conceptual characteristics within the notion of 'culture', and as many of these concepts show common features they can be taken to represent a transdisciplinary conceptual nucleus.

Broad, general definitions of culture are offered by Hansen and Sperber in their cultural studies research:

Culture

- The totality of customs, material and intellectual accomplishments and the standardisation of a collective.
- The totality of all public and mental representations which are passed on in a certain community of people as opinions, rules of conduct, communicative meanings etc., and are constantly re-interpreted and thus constituted.

Sahlins offers a highly regarded but narrower definition, which is propagated by UNESCO

- 'total and distinctive way of life of a people or society'.

The etymological perspective is also relevant: in the Latin 'colere' means to cultivate, from which is derived 'cultus', that which is cultivated or fashioned. Exposure in the modern world to languages of various ethnic groups, and associated cultural diversification, has also led to the augmentation of concepts. When subject to historio-scientific examination, their linguistic representations (for instance in German, English, French) demonstrate differing contents. Cross cultural variation can immediately be seen in a comparison of words such as "Kultur" and "Zivilisation" in German, "culture" and "civilisation" in English, and "culture" and "civilisation" in French. However the meaning of these concepts are converging across languages as a result of international scientific contacts, cultural exchange and other information processes. Schools of thought, as with other cultural concepts, are not subject to either territorial or linguistic borders.

Remarks:

Hansen, Klaus P. (1995): Kultur und Kulturwissenschaft. Tübingen/Basel: Francke. S. 15/31.

Acc. to Sperber 1996 in: Budin, Gerhard (1998): Wissenschaftskommunikation im Spannungsfeld zwischen Globalisierung, Technisierung und kultureller Diversität. In: TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften. 5.Nr. WWW: <http://www.inst.at/trans/5Nr/budin.htm>.

Sahlins, Marshall (1995): Introduction. In: Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. o.A.d.O.: World Commission on Culture and Development. S. 21.