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# 1 Locating culture

- What do we mean by culture?
- Why is it studied?
- What sort of things will it involve?

It seems obvious that a book introducing students to cultural geography must start with a definition of what it is about. Obvious, but almost unfeasibly difficult. Defining the word ***culture*** is a complex and difficult task which has produced a range of very different definitions. In some ways 'cultural geography' is easier to grasp than simply trying to define either of its component parts. This is because, despite occasionally sounding the most airy of concepts, this book will argue that 'culture', however defined, can only be approached as embedded in real-life situations, in temporally and spatially specific ways. This book focuses on how cultures work in practice. The philosophy of this book is that this is the contribution of geography – insisting on looking at cultures (plural) as locatable, specific phenomena.

There seem to be two typical reactions to the idea of cultural geography by new students. The first is to think of the different cultures around the globe, to think of the sort of peoples presented in documentaries such as ***Disappearing World.*** In this vision, cultural geography studies the location and spatial variation of cultures; it is a vision of peoples and tribes echoed in ***National Geographic*** magazines and travel stories. The second reaction is to associate culture with the arts, with 'high culture', that is, and is normally followed by a slightly perplexed look as to what geography can have to do with that. Both versions capture only a tiny part of what is dealt with as 'cultural geography'. It has been one of the fastest expanding, and, in my admittedly partisan view, one of the most

**Box 1.1**

### Defining culture

**By the 1950s authors could collect over 150 different definitions of culture in use in academic books. This book is not trying to push a very specific definition. Indeed the different approaches recounted here may imply rather different ideas of what culture is. The guiding principle in this work is that cultures are sets of beliefs or values that give meaning to ways of life and produce (and are reproduced through) material and symbolic forms. In this way I want to avoid two notions especially. The first is a depiction of culture as a sort of 'residual variable' for all those things not accounted for in other fields, the 'remainder' they don't explain. I argue culture is far more central than such accounts allow. Second, the mention of 'way of life' questions how much the individual can pick and choose, while the reproduction of them brings in issues of change over time. The possibility that current societies may actually develop a more 'pick and mix' relationship to culture is something that is developed through the book.**

interesting sub-disciplines in geography over the last fifteen years. The reason is that its subject matter is so wide-ranging both in location, issues raised and the type of material involved. Let me try to show why this is so by starting to locate what cultural geography involves.

## Travellers' tales

The initial assumption of many is that cultural geography is about how different cultures live in different parts of the globe. One of the prime motivations for many students doing geography is a fascination with the diversity of human life. Undoubtedly the diversity of people on the globe is an important starting point but one that needs to be developed further. Different groups are marked out not only by different clothes, ornaments, lifestyles but are also guided by different 'world-views', different priorities, different belief systems, different ways of making sense of the world. Cultural geography thus looks both at the forms of difference, the material culture, of groups but also at the ideas that hold them together, that make them coherent. This means this book will look not only at how cultures are spread over space but also at how cultures make sense of space. This book will thus track the ideas, practices and objects that together form cultures – and how these cultures form identities through which people recognise themselves and others. It will track through a range of scales as it ponders the role of states, empires and nations, firms



and corporations, shops and goods, books and films in creating identities. Cultural geography looks at the way different processes come together in particular places and how those places develop meanings for people. Sometimes we may be looking at processes of a global scale, at other times we might be interested in the ***micro-geography*** of houses, the intimate and personal scale of things that form people's everyday world.

So cultural geography is about the diversity and plurality of life in all its variegated richness; about how the world, spaces and places are interpreted and used by people; and how those places then help to perpetuate that culture. This book will thus have to deal with how ideas and material, practices and places, cultures and space interrelate. You will find no single answer; rather, the chapters show different cases and different approaches people have taken to these issues.

Cultures are not just about exotic faraway peoples, but also about the way we, in the West, do things. It is all too easy to take your own culture as in some sense natural and look at the peculiarities of other groups. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, any culture is a riot of colours and discordant sounds until you learn the rules that guide and make sense of it (Bourdieu 1984). The implication is that every culture has rules that are as arbitrary and surprising as every other. Thus the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins once famously remarked, we call India the land of the sacred cow because some Hindu customs seem strange – this animal is allowed to wander where it wishes, despite being edible it is not eaten, and it defecates wherever it goes. Of course, Marshall Sahlins points out, by the same criteria we could marvel at the UK or the USA as the land of the sacred dog (Sahlins 1976). In this sense cultural geography tends towards a relativistic stance. We must acknowledge the particularity of our own culture and not sit in hasty judgement over other cultures.

## High culture, popular culture and the everyday

If we look around at any society, there are activities whose primary role is symbolic; say, theatre, opera, art, literature or poetry. All of these are generally seen as products or expressions of that society's culture. Indeed we might instantly extend our account to include the libraries, museums, galleries and so forth that allow these forms to exist; that preserve and reproduce them; that make them available to people. Cultural geography must thus include the institutions that keep cultures going. This in itself might take us into surprising corners – into, say, schools where children

are taught the 'great' figures of their culture's history or literature, or maybe the interpretation of different public monuments. But even if we stick to symbolic things we would have to conclude that modem society is just as full of rituals and ceremonies as ones distant or remote from us. British people might have to include the rituals of royalty (the opening of Parliament, the Trooping of the Colours), in the USA the 4th of July, or Bastille Day in France. All these are festivals or rituals sanctioned or promoted by the state, so already cultural geographers might be asking why the state promotes certain rituals, and not others, and what it gets out of them. But culture extends further than just state-sponsored rituals. There are vast numbers of different festivals and rituals supported by different religions and the cultures associated with them; we would have to admit Christmas, Thanksgiving, Passover and Ramadan among many more, as festivals that sustain and reproduce different cultures.

Nor can we stop at religion: culture spreads further into our lives and societies. We might say that Christmas is a religious festival and draws on a Christian culture – but equally for most people it is a family festival that draws on consumer culture. So the role of manufactured goods, mass consumption and so forth would form part of some studies. We would have to say Valentine's Day or Hallowe'en bear even less connection to a sponsoring religion – we have secular and often commercial festivals. We would have to include popular festivals such as Guy Fawkes Night in Britain or Bums' Night in Scotland. However, culture is not confined to festivals and holidays; it pervades everyday life. So we might also include folk culture – looking at indigenous dialects, vernacular architecture and so on. But in the contemporary West the same logic means we need to include 'ordinary' culture, not just historic elements but the everyday. That means we need to think how people assemble meaningful worlds out of mass-produced goods, how they relate to places through films and books, how such cultures are bound up in work and leisure.

One of the things this book will try to illustrate is that cultures are often political and contested – that is, they mean different things to different people in different places. So the state may promote one vision of a 'people' through particular symbolic locations. Other groups might offer alternative symbolic geographies or might attribute very different meanings to the same places. In this way this book will look at how power and meaning are written on to the landscape. How monuments and buildings may be used to try to bind people together, to stress common interests, to proniote group solidarity.



One of the clearest ways in which different cultures have reproduced themselves is through territorial segregation. Such a process can be seen in cities where different gangs mark their territory in graffiti. On a less intense level we can see the same process in supporting different football teams. Whether there are religious connotations such as Celtic versus Rangers, the wearing of team colours and so on suggests this is another smaller set of cultures. The contemporary city may house a vast range of peoples rubbing shoulders, buying different foods, creating festivals and music, forming a dense and variegated cultural mosaic. How these cultures relate over distance, how they bring formerly distant identities and put them together forms a fascinating element of contemporary cultural geographies. Cultural geography must then look at the fragmented juxtaposition of cultural forms and the identities arising from this. We thus need to consider how cities and nations may contain a plurality of cultures. We might term these ***sub-cultures.*** We need only think of the different worlds created through Rave culture and clubbing. These spaces offer a different social milieu, a different set of practices, sustained by a very different geography of venues than that associated with 'official' British culture. We could add to this by looking at how the gay community sustains itself and fosters a sense of identity through the spaces and practices of clubs and shops.

All this indicates we need to see both how particular sites acquire meanings and how places and sites are used by cultures. Let me illustrate this by looking briefly at student culture and how much of this is embedded in particular spaces and geographies. First, it is a geography of bringing people together; second, and symmetrically of separating these people from both the resources and constraints of the areas they come from. For the average fresher in the UK, there is a sudden pressure of new people, new rules of the game, a setting free from strictures of a parental home, yet also a loss of the support that home provided. A process that is supported around a geography of places – the bars and 'student-friendly' pubs where students can meet new people, the halls of residence, the canteens and faculties around which networks of acquaintances can be formed. The student community is stitched together out of these places; it relies on this geography. The provision of single study-bedrooms creates a private space which students control and can personalise, which they can invite people to or retreat into. Places gain meanings, lecture halls obviously are about learning (and possibly sleeping), libraries also are about learning but both also are places to meet people. Students may grow attached to 'their' department or

faculty, maybe enjoy the symbolism of great halls or whatever on graduation. What this suggests is the way particular spaces and geographies are deeply involved in maintaining cultures all the time. And these cultures are not just about overt symbolism, but about the way people live their lives. The example above shows that the material things enabling students to live work and play are all involved in maintaining a culture.

## Economy and culture

It should be clear that the separation of the economy and culture is problematic. In fact it is possibly a hallmark of modem capitalist cultures that they treat the economy as in some way separate from the rest of the culture. But if the two are to be analysed separately how should the relationship between them be seen? The most influential approach, from a number of perspectives, is to look at culture as some sort of clothing, superstructure, barrier to rationality or remainder after the economy has been dealt with. We shall come across these again but I shall introduce them here to warn the reader not to use these as implicit models. The first two models see culture as providing the symbolic face behind which the 'real' economy works. In early Marxist accounts the economy determined social relations that were reflected in particular cultural forms. In the other approaches, culture is treated as that which an economic analysis cannot explain. Thus geographers (and economists) deploy questionnaires to look at optimum-location decisions and, because these do not fully account for location, 'personal preferences' or cultural factors are introduced as a sort of remainder once the economic is accounted for. Likewise, in accounts of indigenous farmers' reactions to agricultural techniques imported from the West, their local culture is portrayed as 'local', peculiar and a barrier to accepting Western progress.

The primacy of 'economic' explanations has to be questioned since it is very easy to reverse the normal accounts. Thus instead of the economy determining cultures we can reverse that. To use Sahlins again, he points out the enormous amount of economic activity that is structured around men wearing trousers and suits and women skirts and dresses (1974). Think, he asks, of the consequences for hundreds of factories if that changed. Likewise we could return to look at food, and trace how changing tastes for food have altered economic systems over and over. Think how much of the Caribbean economy is based around a Western



taste for sugar, or how much of India's has been linked to the taste for tea. Of course thinking in this way does not change the separation of culture and economy it just inverts the relationship. This book will argue that we need to avoid seeing either culture or the economy as determining the other; and indeed in many cases that it is more helpful to see how they interact than to separate them. This will be a central part of Chapters 8 and 9.

## Positioning culture

So far then I have tried to establish that culture cannot be locked away in either distant peoples or in high art. Culture is part of our everyday lives, indeed it is what gives meaning to those lives. I have equally tried to stress how cultures can be seen to change, to be contested. Finally I have tried to show how these cultures are reproduced through a range of forms and practices embedded in spaces. How we might then approach cultures and these spaces is a complex issue. Essentially the rest of this book begins to see how different approaches have developed around these issues. I do not suggest that one approach can be isolated as reigning supreme. They tend to be looking at rather different situations. Chapter 2 opens with a 'traditional' approach to space and culture. It attempts to use 'material culture', artefacts and products, to see how different cultures inhabited different areas creating distinctive ***cultural landscapes.*** Chapter **3** looks more closely at how landscapes may be intentionally shaped by people to carry meanings – looking at the ***iconography*** of places. Landscapes are not solely interpreted through direct contact so Chapter 4 explores what we might call ***literary landscapes*** – the geographies created by books and novels. This chapter thus looks at the relationship of books to places, of how places may be affected by popular books and also how space is used within books to create a textual landscape. Following this, Chapter 5 looks again at the relationship of space and literature, but in this case looks at how popular literature deals with cultural difference. The focus of this chapter is on literature of the imperial period and it looks at how it helped shape Western views of cultures around the globe. Chapter ***6*** takes many of the same approaches and relates them to film and music, looking for continuations and differences in these different media. Chapter 7 takes a slightly different focus on global issues and raises questions about how people relate to places in a globalising world. It introduces ideas of a ***humanist*** geography, where personal meaning is the crucial category for geography

and where a ***sense of place*** and attachment to place may be imperilled in a ***placeless*** world. Chapter 8 takes issue with many of the fears in the previous chapter; it focuses on how people construct meanings through mass-consumed goods, and how they may not be a threat to meaningful places, as it looks at different geographies and spaces of consumption. Both these chapters thus deal with how places can be constructed in ways that deliberately evoke faraway cultures that mediate cultural difference. Chapter 9 turns its attention to spaces of production looking at how different forms of work produce or utilise different cultures of accepted behaviour. Examples are taken from global industries, and the service sector where workers' cultures can be a part of the product. Chapter 10 picks up the themes of global change and cultural difference to pose questions about how culture is used as a basis for nationalism. In the contemporary world it makes an appeal to move away from the association of one culture with an area and rather look at the ***hybrid*** forms springing up as cultures meet. The concluding chapter asks questions about the role of the cultural geographer in all this, suggesting that we should see science and academia as another culture rather than independent of what is being studied.

## Mapping cultural geography

If we have thus far thought about what sort of things cultural geography might study, we need to be aware that this has evolved over time. The chapters thus reflect, in part, the changing dynamics of the sub-discipline. We might call this the historical geography of cultural geography. The metaphor of an intellectual landscape can be helpful. If we think of a disciplinary 'map' we would see the blurred borders and traffic between areas of interest, we would see the traffic and paths leading out into other disciplines. Over time we would see shifting centres of population, shifting cores and peripheral topics. The landscape would be far from static. But we should hesitate before going further with this exercise with two cautionary thoughts. First, the evolution of cultural geography is bound up in wider disciplinary changes and changes in the social sciences and humanities, and also, at a wider scale, with shifts in society in general. This map is thus one tiny fragment that really needs embedding in a larger picture. Second, through the course of this book one of the key points will be that interpretations are linked to specific points of view and are contestable. Charting disciplinary history is no



exception to this rule. What follows must be a necessarily partial view. Perhaps the mapping metaphor is unfortunate, since it suggests some overview of the scene as though we could float free of all baggage and find some perfect viewpoint to see the true outline of events. Floating free like this is impossible. As I write this, I cannot pretend to have either a perfect knowledge or to be detached from the events I talk about. If I was, why would I be spending my time thinking about them? Even with the best will in the world, I cannot give an absolute account. Rather than floating on high we might better think of this as constructing some field sketches as we go by, trying to work out how things fit together. The next comer, the next turn might make us change our ideas all over. Though some may find this a dispiriting thought, this not getting the 'answer', it is, on the contrary, one of the things that makes study in this field so exciting: the field is not dead and fixed, but continually changing.

We might locate the original sparks of cultural geography back in the sixteenth century in the ethnographies of such as Lafitau or Lery, describing the peoples and customs of the New World. We might look at the literary and allegorical fields opened up at the same time by writers such as Rabelais or later by Swift, which used imagined and real travels to map out the cultures of their own societies. The connection of these real and imagined places, and the role of the strange or exotic is something that is now being re-examined and represents an intersection of geography and anthropology from the earliest times. It also connects both disciplines to the European imperialist project with all the problems that leaves for them. It also draws us towards two more commonly thought of landmarks. The concern with race and imperial development marks the work of the German political theorist Ratzel's ***Anthropogeographie*** from the end of the nineteenth century. He used a metaphor – imported from the burgeoning field of Darwinian biology – to suggest we should treat cultures like organisms. He identified cultures with ***Volk,*** or peoples, defined on ethnic and cultural differences. As in Darwin, he saw a struggle to prosper and survive between these cultures and mapped this out territorially as struggle for ***Lebensraum*** ('living space'). Vibrant cultures would expand and come to dominate or displace less 'vital' ones. The connections of this to the projects of imperial expansion and its later borrowing by Nazi ideology form a bleak reminder in our landscape. A school of thought related to this was developed largely in America, especially around Ellen Semple in the first quarter of the twentieth century, known as environmental determinism, which took the territorial units of Ratzel and linked them to basically

climatic conditions. This school looked at how cultures evolved in response to the natural environment through adaptive behaviour (again borrowing the central metaphor from biology). This was, however, not the most powerful influence on cultural geography in the USA. Chapter 2 takes up the story of how these ideas were challenged by Carl Sauer and what came to be the Berkeley school of cultural geography. He suggested a much more nuanced relationship of people and environment not one-way causation or simple biological analogies. Teaching in Berkeley until the 1970s he had a vast influence on cultural geography in the USA. It developed connections with biogeography and material anthropology with a focus on the material culture of peoples. Picking up on the encounter with the New World it led to studies of how people shaped and reshaped the landscape, how cultures travelled and changed, how immigrant peoples set about reshaping the landscape of the Americas and the artefacts that embodied their efforts.

This legacy has come to be the cause of some friction between US and UK geography. First, the rural and historic bias of the work did not reflect urban life and experience. Thus geographers during the 1970s and 1980s such as David Ley or Peter Jackson looked for inspiration instead to the work of urban sociologists such as those of the 'Chicago school'. The latter had reacted to the 'melting pot' of a city that doubled its population in twenty years and brought together people from every part of the US and Europe. In schools their work has been picked out in terms of Burgess's concentric-ring model of the city. This is something of a travesty of the work done by Burgess, Park and others. The bulk of their work was involved in studying the 'urban villages' and sub-cultures that were forming in the city – from Little Italy to Skid Row. From their work cultural geography drew in ideas about the fragmentation of cultures as 'ways of life' and a methodology of 'ethnography', studying people by living among them. A second conflict thus sprang up about how culture itself was seen – with arguments that the Berkeley school still had the 'organic' metaphor found in Ratzel. These issues will be expanded on in Chapter 2. Suffice to say, in British geography especially but also in the US, a series of new approaches developed which looked to the symbolism of cultures.

At the same time, a concern for individuals and their experience was marked by a humanistic school in geography (Chapter 7) which sought to talk not of peoples and folk, but of actual people and ordinary folk as individuals through their lived experiences. It connected with philosophical ideas (called phenomenology, see Chapter 7) and



reinvigorated the idea that geography was an interpretative art. This emerged in part as a response to the rise of quantitative and systematic approaches in geography from the 1960s. Forming something of a fusion of these two strands of thought there emerged perhaps the first new cultural geography drawing on psychology and in particular ideas of behaviourism. This developed into work on decision-making, on to the mental maps people held of the city or world – in short the geography inside people's heads. Of course this rapidly became a criticism that too much was about individuals, not collective cultures, and too much was about ideas not the material world. The relationship of this internal world-view with the outside world became a major field of inquiry on both sides of the Atlantic. Emerging from this were studies on how people related to landscape, looking at perceptual processes as well as material and aesthetic interpretations. Picking up the Berkeley interest in the material landscape we find this coupled with a more interpretive understanding of everyday places. This was later adapted and transformed with studies of the shaping of symbolism in landscape and its representations (see Chapters 3 and 6).

Geography and the social sciences were also changing sharply in the light of decolonisation, the Vietnam War and the rise of Marxist theories. In geography these swept through mostly economic geography which became possibly the centre of human geography through into the 1980s as various ideas of political economic interpretation developed. By the late 1980s though cultural geography in the UK at least was assuming a new and probably unexpected centrality – with a so-called 'cultural turn' spreading out to reformulate not only cultural geography but other sub-disciplines. A reformulated cultural geography was taking up ideas of Marx and humanism in looking at the struggles and contests over interpreting cultures. Alongside these ideas the whole of the human sciences were having to consider a 'post-colonial' critique which asked questions about how much of conventional thinking was still in thrall to ideas that dominated during imperialism – whether such ideas were Eurocentric or fatally flawed. Fundamentally it questioned some of the most stable landmarks of the intellectual landscape and asked whether they fitted in a new pluralistic world. From another direction, by and large French or Continental philosophy (as opposed to Anglophone schools), came a post-structuralist critique of how models of society operated. The ideas of rational and scientific, reductionist accounts of society came under intense scrutiny as did the grand stories of social evolution and economic development. If the intellectual landscape. was

thus shifting, in society at large the categories of class and labour mobilisation seemed to be being supplanted by identity politics. Movements for women's rights, gay rights, civil liberties and indigenous peoples were using ideas of shared identity or sub-cultures. In the UK this inspired the rise of a cultural studies informed by the work of the Chicago school, in the US a cultural studies that was perhaps a little more literary in outlook.

These shifts to paying more attention to people's identities came late to geography, but came with a vengeance. Part of these shifts were summed up in heated debates over postmodernism which criticised the assumptions of conventional geography (the sort that lie behind Peter Haggett's much-reprinted book ***Geography:*** A ***Modern Synthesis,*** for example. Post modem approaches suggested the assumptions of the 'modem' meant that such a synthesis excluded as much as it brought together). Another part of the postmodem challenge to conventional academic work was in heated debates within feminism over the politics of knowledge; another was a challenge to development studies; yet another was a challenge to the narratives of Marxism from within and without. In each case questions were raised about whose rules were being used and whose identities were taken as normal and who was excluded or overlooked. The result was that culture, from being a rather neglected afterthought in most studies, became a central issue.

## Summary

This chapter has suggested that cultural geography must look at things beyond high culture, at lifestyles in the West as much as in remote peoples and at the way spaces are used as well as the distribution of peoples over space. It has suggested that the separation of economic and cultural is often problematic and that it led to a misguided privileging of the economic in much geographical work. The chapter then briefly outlined the development of ideas in cultural geography before suggesting how these would be worked through in the rest of the book.

## Further reading

It will be apparent that different themes running through this book will link to other books in this series of textbooks. Thus chapters 8 and 9 will connect with



issues discussed in the Economic Geography book in this series. The chapter on symbolic landscapes will find echoes in the Historical Geography book. Issues raised about how we interpret cultures in the latter half of this book and especially the conclusion will resonate with ideas in the Theory in Geography book. Ideas in Chapter 5 around imperialist literature will also serve as a background or prelude informing current debates over development studies. Here it is worth suggesting that if you wish to look more generally at issues in cultural geography you might look at journals such as ***Ecumene*** or ***Society and Space*** and see what sort of topics are covered there. Relevant material will also appear in non-geography journals, so if you wish to follow up ideas around film you might look at a journal such as ***Screen*** or for television, ***Media, Culture and Society.*** These sorts of journals will contain papers at the leading edge of ideas so they may be hard to follow at first. More specific ideas of further reading will follow each chapter suggesting key writers or works for particular topics.