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Culture and the Cultural Diamond

*C**ulture*** is one of those words that people use all the time but have trouble defining. Consider the following stories about some of the wildly different things we envision when we talk about culture.

In September 2010 France's Senate voted 246 to 1 to ban women from wearing a full-face veil (niqab or burqa) in public. Many Muslims argue that veiling, which they regard as defending female modesty from intrusive male eyes, is intrinsic to their culture. The minister of justice, on the other hand, says that the ban affirms French cultural values of dignity and equality. Girls growing up under these two cultures may feel torn by the incompatible rules for being a good French citizen and a good Muslim.

On a Friday evening in the college dining hall, a half-dozen students discuss their plans for the weekend. One says she's going to a basketball game, another says he's checking out a hip-hop group playing at a local club, and a third says she's staying in to download some music and watch videos. A fourth mutters, "Study and sleep, just like always, no life," while a fifth counters with "Party!" Then the sixth announces, "Well, guys, you may be wasting the weekend, but *I'm* going to get some culture. Tonight, I'm meeting friends at an art exhibit opening in a gallery downtown, and my girlfriend and I have symphony tickets for tomorrow." His friends start making cracks about him being a culture vulture, while he jokes back about *some people* having more *taste* than other people.

An American conducting business in Tokyo hopes to land a lucrative contract for her firm. When her Japanese counterpart presents his card, she

takes it casually with one hand, glances at it, and sticks it in her pocket. Subsequent relations with her Japanese prospect prove frosty, and her firm loses the contract. "Ah," says an experienced friend, "you lost out because of a cultural misunderstanding. In Japan, the business card is considered an extension of the person; one treats the card with great respect, holding it with two hands and carefully putting it in a safe place. Americans don't think of it that way; for them, the card is just a convenience. You insulted the very person you were trying to court."

Fitness demands hours in the gym and years of self-denial pursuing the six-pack abs and lean musculature of the cultural ideal. The fit body carries a wealth of meanings—sexual attractiveness, discipline, health—but at the same time advertisers urge consumers to purchase this body, in effect, by spending both time and money (e.g., gym membership, personal trainers). One result is that fitness is more available to the affluent than to the poor. As both cultural ideal and cultural commodity, it helps reproduce class and gender inequalities (Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

In an urban mixed-race neighborhood, sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) observes casual street encounters in which African Americans appear uncomfortable when they pass Caucasians walking their dogs, despite the dog walkers' assurances that their pets are friendly. This results from a cultural difference, he concludes:

> In the working-class black subculture, "dogs" does not mean "dogs in the house," but usually connotes dogs tied up outside, guarding the backyard, biting trespassers bent on trouble. Middle-class and white working-class people may keep dogs in their homes, allowing them the run of the house, but many black working-class people I interviewed failed to understand such behavior. When they see a white adult on his knees kissing a dog, the sight may turn their stomachs—one more piece of evidence attesting to the peculiarities of their white neighbors. (222)

All five stories involve culture, but each seems to talk about very different things: national customs (handling business cards), activities considered elitist (attending the symphony), personal practices (going to the gym), and local variations in symbolic meanings (what dogs or veils represent). Together they suggest that culture, though rather hard to pin down, is important to understand. Cultural ignorance or misunderstanding, it seems, can lead to highly undesirable outcomes: lost business, interethnic tension, or an inability to participate in either the comic or the transcendent moments in human experience.

What is this concept called culture that can apply to such a wide variety of situations? Why do notions of culture inflame such intense passions that

huge numbers of people—from sectarians in Mumbai to gang members in Chicago—regularly kill and die for their symbols, their beliefs, and their cultures? Moreover, how can we gain a better understanding of the connections between the concept of culture and the social world? This chapter addresses these questions.

Two Ways of Looking at Culture

When sociologists talk about culture, Richard Peterson (1979) observed, they usually mean one of four things: *norms, values, beliefs,* or *expressive symbols.* Roughly, norms are the way people behave in a given society, values are what they hold dear, beliefs are how they think the universe operates, and expressive symbols are representations, often of social norms, values, and beliefs themselves. In the last decades of the twentieth century, sociologists added a fifth item to the list: *practices.* Culture in this recent view describes people's behavior patterns, not necessarily connected to any particular values or beliefs. We discuss these various meanings later, but for now the point is that even such specialists as cultural sociologists use the word *culture* to stand for a whole range of ideas and objects.

The academic perspectives on culture can be sorted into two schools of thought. It is fair to say that most notions of culture stem from assumptions rooted in either the humanities or the social sciences, particularly anthropology. Although this book presents the social scientific perspective by and large, the distinctiveness of this stance emerges only in comparison with its counterpart in the humanities.

Before we begin, however, we must clarify one thing: Neither "culture" nor "society" exists out there in the real world—only people who work, joke, raise children, love, think, worship, fight, and behave in a wide variety of ways. To speak of culture as one thing and society as another is to make an analytical distinction between two different aspects of human experience. Think of the distinction as such that culture designates the expressive aspect of human existence, whereas society designates the relational (and often practical) aspect. Hugging dogs, paying respect to business cards, working out—these all describe methods for expressing our lives as social beings. The same object or behavior may be analyzed as social (a business card communicates information necessary for economic transactions) or cultural (a business card means something different to a Japanese than to an American). Now, oriented with this rough distinction between the expressive and the relational and with the recognition that both culture and society are abstractions, we may explore the two most influential seedbeds for contemporary thinking about the culture/society relationship.

"The Best That Has Been Thought and Known"

In common usage, the term *culture* often refers to the fine and performing arts or to serious literature, as in the facetious statement of the art-gallery- and symphony-goer, "*I'm* going to get some culture." Culture in this sense, sometimes called "high culture"—as opposed to popular culture, folk culture, or mass culture—carries implications of high social status. The unthinking equation of culture with the arts results from a line of thinking, prominent in those disciplines collectively known as the humanities, whereby culture signifies a locus of superior and universal worth.

In the nineteenth century, many European intellectuals posited an opposition between culture and society or, as they often put it, between culture and civilization. As they used the term, *civilization* referred to the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying social upheavals. Contrasting culture with civilization was, therefore, a protest against Enlightenment thinking, against the belief in progress as an invariable benefit, against the ugly aspects of industrialization, and against what Marx called the "cash nexus" of capitalism whereby everyone and everything seemed evaluated on an economic basis. If civilization meant filthy tenements, factories spewing smoke into the air, and people treated as nothing more than so many replaceable parts, many thoughtful men and women wanted no part of it. They saw culture—entailing the wisest and most beautiful expressions of human effort—as its contrasting pole and the salvation of over-civilized human beings. This dichotomy set the alienating, dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization against the healing, life-enhancing capacities of culture. Typical of this polarizing tendency was the English social philosopher John Stuart Mill's account, in his autobiography, of how his highly rationalized training in logic and economics brought him to a nervous breakdown. Only by reading Wordsworth's poetry, he testified, could he restore his sanity.

The automatic question that arises today occurred to nineteenth-century thinkers as well: How can we believe in culture's extraordinary, redeeming value without this belief turning into a narrow ethnocentrism, a hymn of praise to Western European culture as the summit of human achievement? Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), a British educator and man of letters, answered this question by formulating a universal theory of cultural value ([1869] 1949). Emphasizing culture's potential influence in the social world, he harshly criticized Victorian England for its mindless materialism and its worship of machines and freedom (in other words, industrialization and democracy) without considering the ends to which either should be put. He feared a result of either dull, middle-class Philistinism or social anarchy

produced by rioting workers. The aristocrats, whom Arnold dismissed as "barbarians" too busy hunting foxes to bother defending culture, would provide no help. Only culture could save modern society.

What constituted this salvation of humankind? Culture, Arnold asserted, was "a study of perfection." Culture could make civilization more human by restoring "sweetness and light." Although it is now used pejoratively to convey superficial amiability, Arnold intended the expression *sweetness and light* to refer to beauty and wisdom, respectively. He took the idea of sweetness and light from Jonathan Swift's parable about the spiders versus the bees. Everyone thinks spiders are very industrious, Swift observed, but, in fact, spiders work only for themselves; they spin all those webs just to catch their own dinners. Bees, on the other hand, more properly admirable, unselfishly produce benefits for others: honey and the wax used in making candles or, in other words, sweetness and light. Arnold appropriated the more socially productive of Swift's two creatures in his definition of culture. Like the honey and candles that come from bees, the beauty and wisdom that culture provides come from (1) awareness of and sensitivity to "the best that has been thought and known" in art, literature, history, and philosophy and (2) "a right reason" (an open-minded, flexible, tolerant intelligence).

How does culture work? Arnold, the educator, saw culture in terms of its educational potential. He maintained that culture enables people to relate knowledge, including science and technology, to conduct and beauty. Civilization potentially relates harmoniously with knowledge, beauty, conduct, and social relations—a Greco-Roman view—and culture can bring about this harmony. Culture is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It can cure the social ills of unrestrained materialism and self-satisfied Philistinism by teaching people how to live and conveying moral ideas. In a sense, Arnold believed, culture can be the humanizing agent that moderates the more destructive impacts of modernization.

Arnold's conception of culture holds that it addresses a different set of issues from those addressed by logic or science. Surprisingly, German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), whom we shall encounter often in this book, took the same view. In his essay "Science as a Vocation," Weber laid out the limits of what science *cannot* do to set up his arguments about what science *can* do. The limits are what interest us here. What meaning for our lives can science offer? Weber suggested none (1946:143, 153):

> Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" . . . Science today is a "vocation" organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and

knowledge of interrelated facts. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.

To answer Tolstoi's question and find a meaning for their lives, Weber asserted, human beings must look to prophets and philosophers, to religion and ideas. Most generally, they must turn to culture.

Weber was a scientist and Arnold a man of letters, but both emphasized the separation of culture from everyday life in modern society and its ability to influence human behavior. This way of looking at culture is traditionally associated with the humanities (although contemporary humanities disciplines are more critical). The traditional humanities viewpoint

- evaluates some cultures and cultural works as better than others; it believes culture has to do with perfection. Deriving from a root word meaning "cultivation," as in agriculture, this sense of culture entails the cultivation of the human mind and sensibility.
- assumes that culture opposes the prevailing norms of the social order, or "civilization." Harmony between culture and society is possible but rarely achieved.
- fears that culture is fragile, that it can be "lost" or debilitated or estranged from socioeconomic life. Culture must be carefully preserved, through educational institutions, for example, and in cultural archives such as libraries and museums.
- invests culture with the aura of the sacred and ineffable, thus removing it from everyday existence. This separation is often symbolically accentuated: Bronze lions, for example, guard the entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago (and many libraries and museums elsewhere). Because of its extraordinary quality, culture makes no sense if we consider only its economic, political, or social dimensions.

It is important to recognize this "traditional humanities viewpoint" as an ideal type, with contradictions and complexities smoothed away for the sake of comparison. Moreover, it describes a rarified "high culture" definition that few contemporary humanities departments would endorse. Nevertheless, this understanding of culture lies deep in most people's thinking. Consider, for example, the revulsion much of the world feels over looters ransacking treasures from the art museums and archeological digs of Iraq. Observers are horrified that looting, and the illicit market for rarities that supports it, reduces something precious and sacred to a mere commodity and in so doing decimates the cultural heritage—"the best that has been thought and known"—of the Iraqi people. Such a value-laden view of culture can often be seen as elitist, but at the same time it is widely held.

"That Complex Whole"

During the nineteenth century, the new disciplines of anthropology and sociology simultaneously advocated a very different way of thinking about culture than that put forth by Matthew Arnold. An early statement of this position came from the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who reacted strongly against the smugness of European culture at the end of the eighteenth century. Fascinated by traditional folk verse and the poetry of the Old Testament, Herder regarded such oral literature as spontaneous products of innate human creativity that sharply contrasted with the more artificial literary output of an educated elite. If all humanity comprised natural poets, how absurd to think that the European educated classes had somehow cornered the market on the "best that has been thought and known." Or, as Herder put it:

> Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature. (Williams 1976:79)

Herder argued that we must speak of cultures, not simply culture, for the obvious reason that nations, and communities within or across nations, have their own, equally meritorious cultures.

This view of culture as a given society's way of life was introduced to English anthropology by E. B. Tylor, who dismissed the whole culture-versus-civilization debate out of hand in his book *Primitive Culture* ([1871] 1958:1): "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This wide-ranging anthropological definition of culture has dominated the social sciences, including contemporary sociology, ever since. Sociologist Peter Berger (1969), for example, defines culture as "the totality of man's products," both material and immaterial. Indeed, Berger argued that even society itself is "nothing but part and parcel of non-material culture" (6–7). Although social scientists don't all agree to quite so expansive a definition, they don't agree on much else about culture either. Back in the 1950s when two anthropologists counted the different definitions of culture used in the social sciences, they came up with more than 160 distinct meanings (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952).

Viewing culture as a people's entire way of life avoids the ethnocentrism and elitism that the humanities-based definition falls prey to, but such an

all-encompassing definition lacks the precision desired in the social sciences. A recent trend leans toward cutting the culture concept down to size and characterizing the object of analysis. Wuthnow and Witten (1988), for example, suggest that sociologists should distinguish between implicit and explicit culture. Sometimes, we regard culture as a tangible social construction, "a kind of symbolic good or commodity that is explicitly produced" (50), as in the case of a fit body or a veil worn by a Muslim woman. At other times, we see culture more abstractly as an "implicit feature of social life . . . a prefiguration or ground of social relations" (50), as in the cultural ground whereby Japanese and Americans handle business cards in different ways or American blacks and whites act differently around dogs. This distinction proves useful, not because either kind of culture is conceptually superior but because it can act as a preliminary classification in sorting out the many definitions of culture with which sociologists must deal. Implicit culture is hard to study, of course; in fact, it's hard to spot in the first place. We will consider ways for sociologists to pin down this elusive concept, but, for now, the point is to recognize these two sorts of culture: explicit, expressive, symbolic forms on the one hand and implicit grounding for action on the other. (Sometimes, the former is seen as the domain of "the sociology of culture," whereas the latter falls under "cultural sociology," but this terminological distinction is not uniformly adopted.)

Unlike the old-school humanists, social scientists of various schools of thought tend to see harmony, not opposition, between culture and society. The two most influential social scientific theories of the twentieth century—functionalism and Marxism—regard the fit as a close one. Functionalism, the branch of social theory that assumes a social institution usually serves some specific function necessary for the well-being of the collectivity, identifies culture with the values that direct the social, political, and economic levels of a social system. In the functionalist perspective, a fit exists between culture and society because any misfit would be dysfunctional. Robert Merton (1938), for example, once suggested that American culture places a high value on economic success. When people lack the practical means to attain the goal of success, he said, they experience severe strain, often turning to criminal behavior as a result. For most people in America and in any culture that functions smoothly, the goals given by the culture and the means for attaining these goals work in harmony. Coming from the opposite direction politically, Marxists also see a close fit between social structure and culture, but they reverse the direction of influence—from social structure to culture, not the other way around. In their view, cultural products, implicit or explicit, rest on an economic foundation. Both functionalism and Marxism are discussed in Chapter 2; for now, note that they share what we might call the "close-fit assumption."

As an example of this assumption, consider Peter Berger's (1969) analysis of culture as formed through externalization, objectification, and internalization. Berger suggests that human beings project their own experience onto the outside world (externalization), then regard these projections as independent (objectification), and finally incorporate these projections into their psychological consciousness (internalization). We can easily think of cases that seem to illustrate Berger's model. Let's take the fact that human reproduction involves two sexes. Many religious belief systems might be said to externalize the dualism of biological reproduction into dual powers, such as the Manichean worldview of an eternal war between good and evil or the Chinese dualities of yin and yang. Such dualities, based on direct experience, become objectified and exist in the culture independent of any human thinker. Entire cosmologies of contending forces of good and evil thereby grow around the male/female dichotomy. These cosmologies, in turn, become internalized, influencing human thought and practice. Thus, Christians imagine good and evil fighting within the soul—an angel whispering in one ear, a devil in the other—whereas Chinese medicine centers on the perceived need for a yin and yang balance in the body itself.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:89) defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Geertz's influential formulation is more precise than the entire-way-of-life social science definitions because it focuses on symbols and the behavior that derives from symbolically expressed ways of thinking and feeling. This definition captures what most sociologists currently mean when they use the term *culture*. To recapitulate, the social science standpoint

- avoids evaluation in favor of relativism. As two sociologists once put it, "The scientific rhetoric, tight-lipped and non-normative, brooks no invidious distinctions" (Jaeger and Selznick 1964:654). We may make evaluations in terms of culture's impact on the social order but not of the cultural phenomenon itself.
- assumes a close linkage between culture and society. In some schools of thought, one tends to determine the other, whereas others stress the mutual adjustments that take place between culture and social structure.
- emphasizes the persistence and durability of culture, rather than its fragility. Culture, seen more as an activity than as something that needs preserving in an archive, is not what lies in the museum guarded by those bronze lions; instead, it is the ways museum-goers (and everyone else) live their lives.
- assumes that culture can be studied empirically like anything else. Social scientists do not regard culture as sacred or fundamentally different from other human products and activities.

Again, this is a simplification to emphasize the contrast between the two standpoints. And again, many twenty-first-century social scientists would reject such aspects of this view as the close-fit assumption (Swidler 2001). If we go back to the example of looting in the Middle East, the social science approach would focus less on the "treasures" being destroyed and more on the practices of the people in the area. It would posit that in a time of upheaval, people respond in ways consistent with their cultural grounding. Thus, in Iraq they would point out that (1) virtually all looters are men (in Middle Eastern cultures, women appear less in public); (2) they wear the same checked masks as the Palestinian fighters (a style distinctive to this part of the world); (3) they openly offer the looted objects for sale (practices common to a trading bazaar culture); and (4) the armed guards stand by (the demands of locality and possible kinship outweigh those of job description). In such an analysis, the social scientist takes no moral position on the activity in question but instead attempts to understand the behavior on its own cultural terms.

One might well respond to the distinction we have been setting between the traditional humanities and the social scientific approaches, saying, "Look, there are advantages to both points of view. In the case of radical Islam, for instance, to understand why some Muslims are eager to die for their religion, it helps to see that their adherents regard their religious beliefs as 'the best that has been thought and known' and thus extraordinarily valuable. At the same time, an understanding of the political and economic contexts—the links between religion on the one hand and Middle Eastern social structure on the other—is necessary to comprehend and explain the recurring explosions of sectarian violence. So, why not try to understand culture by approaching it from both directions?"

Why not, indeed? In this book, although our object is a specifically sociological understanding of culture, we try to incorporate the insights of both traditions. We begin to do so by envisioning the culture/society connection in terms of "cultural objects" located in a "cultural diamond."

Connections: The Links Between Culture and Society

We have been looking at various definitions of culture, from the most restrictive (high art; "the best that has been thought and known") to the most expansive (the totality of humanity's material and nonmaterial products). We have seen that the word and the concept, especially as employed in the social sciences, take many shapes and that, therefore, any discussion of culture must

begin with a definition. Here, then, is our working definition: Culture refers to the expressive side of human life—in other words, to behavior, objects, and ideas that appear to express, or to stand for, something else. This is the case whether we are talking about explicit or implicit culture. Such a working definition is not evaluative or focused on "the best"; nor is it the most expansive definition, for it restricts culture to the meaningful.

Geertz, and Weber before him, took culture to involve meaning, and in this book, we follow their example. Thus, we could talk about a community in terms of its culture: its jokes and slang; its conventions, stereotypes, typical practices, and common knowledge; and its symbols that represent and guide the thinking, feeling, and behavior of its members. Or, we could talk about that community in terms of social structure: its network of relationships among members, its institutions, and its economic and political life. The community's culture influences its social structure, and vice versa; indeed, the two are intertwined and have been separated only for purposes of analysis. To understand the community, the sociologist must understand both.

We need to do more, however, than simply define culture and indicate how to distinguish it analytically from social structure. We need a way to conceptualize how culture and the social world come together or, in other words, how people in social contexts create meaning. To draw on both the humanities and social science views for our analysis of culture and to examine cultural phenomena and their relation to social life, we need a conceptual framework and conceptual tools, such as the cultural object.

The Cultural Object

A cultural object may be defined as shared significance embodied in form (Griswold 1986). In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. A cultural object, moreover, tells a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body. Examples range widely. A religious doctrine, a YouTube video, a belief that women are more sensitive than men, a Shakespearean sonnet, a hairstyle such as Rastafarian dreadlocks or the Manchu queue, a habit of saying "God bless you" when somebody sneezes, or a quilt made by hand or by robots—any and all of these can be cultural objects. Each tells a story. Notice that the status of the cultural object results from an analytic decision that we make as observers; it is not built into the object itself. If we think of the quilt as a product in a department store's inventory or something to warm our feet in bed and not in terms of its meaning, the quilt is not a cultural object. But when we consider it in terms of its story—how it expresses women collectively piecing together

scraps to produce an object of beauty and utility—the quilt becomes a meaningful cultural object and may be analyzed as such.

In this book, we talk equally of "cultural objects" and "culture," so it is important to keep the terms straight. Specifying a cultural object is a way of grasping some part of the broader system we refer to as culture and holding up that part for analysis. One might compare this distinction to how we would go about studying a marsh. We would need to analyze the soil, the water, the climate, and the specific forms of animal and plant life found there (e.g., the leopard frog) in order to understand how the ecosystem works as a whole. On the other hand, if we were primarily interested in a particular species of frog, our study would concentrate on it, with the marsh as a biological context. Analogizing to our terms, the cultural object is the leopard frog, and the culture is the marsh.

In attempting to understand the connections between a society and its culture, it seems to make sense to start the analysis with a close examination of cultural objects, those smaller parts of the interrelated, larger system. Here, we follow the lead of the humanities: Culture *is* in a world apart, at least for analytical purposes. Literary critics, art historians, and others in the humanities usually focus on a work of art as a self-referential universe possessing structure and meaning. This practice seems sound for examining cultural objects in our wider social sciences definition. We start, therefore, by paying close attention to the cultural object itself. This does not imply an "art for art's sake" (or culture for culture's sake) rejection of the external world and how it impinges on the cultural object but simply means we first take the cultural object as evidence about itself. In other words, we start with the cultural object, though we certainly don't end there.

Consider the homely case of bread. Plain old bread, traditionally the food of subsistence for people who can afford nothing better, has lately taken on a certain élan. Bakers in upscale communities have worked on improving the quality of American bread by introducing international baking techniques and new ingredients. Boutique bakeries have become so successful that they have forced industry giants such as Pepperidge Farm to compete on their level. Americans raised on plain white bread now munch on Italian focaccia, seven-grain pita, and sourdough baguettes that would amaze the French. New types of bread incorporating nine different stone-ground grains or hand-wrought into breadsticks receive fulsome tribute as being "first rate, handsomely crisp of crust and, yes, downright sexy" (Fabricant 1992). Bread, sexy?

Think of bread not simply as food or a commodity but as a cultural object. Americans and Europeans eat a lot of bread, but they don't pay a great deal of attention to it. Bread is basic, fundamental, at the foundation

of the nutrition pyramid (yawn). Practical and boring though it may be, bread can be expressive as well. The post–World War II baby boom generation, for example, grew up on soft, spongy white bread like Wonder Bread. The "wonder" lay in the technology—Wonder Bread was infused with vitamins to "grow strong bodies in 12 ways"—and although it didn't have an especially memorable flavor, baby boomers who spread it with concoctions such as peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff thought it tasted just fine. It seemed to express a child's view of the good life. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, that same baby boom generation rejected white bread, just as it rejected much else from mainstream American culture; defying the conventions they grew up with, these young people turned eating whole-grain bread into a political statement, one that expressed a repudiation of American capitalism, technology, and homogeneity.

Not only can bread be expressive; a moment's reflection reminds us that it is steeped in tradition. The Bible abounds in references to bread: It is the staff of life, it is unleavened during Passover, it is miraculously multiplied along with the fishes, and it should be cast upon the waters. In the Christian communion, it even embodies the Divine. During the first centuries of Islam, white bread symbolized a lack of discipline to the Arabs; a manuscript illustration shows a man enjoying a self-indulgent meal of roast kid, wine, and white bread (Tannahill 1973:173). In the European ethnic heritage that shaped many American institutions, bread connotes security, love, frugality, and family—even life itself.

We further recognize that bread, though ubiquitous in American kitchens, is by no means universal. Human beings eat different grains in different places: Many Chinese depend on rice, Senegalese on millet, and Mexicans on corn. In some of these countries, eating bread signifies being Westernized or modern, and it can become a political issue. In Nigeria, which enjoyed a period of oil-based wealth during the 1970s, the middle class developed a taste for bread made from imported flour and a distaste for local starches, such as yam and cassava. White bread connotes affluence and modernity for twentieth-century Nigerians just as it did for eighteenth-century Europeans. In the poorer "oil bust" years beginning in the 1980s, however, taxes on imports plus government advocacy of using locally produced foods attempted to shift Nigerian consumer tastes back to West African traditional starches. The battle has not been altogether successful, however, and the streets of Lagos teem with young hawkers of high-priced spongy white bread, something like our old friend Wonder Bread.

So, bread is basic, fundamental, and boring—but it is also biblically sanctioned, expressive, symbolic of European heritage or the good life, and even sexy. It is as much a part of a cultural system—whether we think of the local

cultural system (the latest gustatory trends) or the global cultural system (the meaning of white bread in Nigeria)—as the more obviously "cultural" artifacts, such as television or ballet. Bread, then, is clearly a cultural object. Cultural objects compose part of a larger cultural system that we may want to analyze. How do the myriad components in this system mesh together? To look at the bigger picture of culture in society, we need one more analytical tool.

The Cultural Diamond

Cultural objects are made by human beings, a fact intrinsic to all of the various definitions—culture is "the best that has been thought and known" *by human beings* (Arnold); culture is the "meanings embodied in symbols" *through which human beings* communicate and pass on knowledge and attitudes (Geertz); culture is the externalization, objectification, and internalization *of human experience* (Berger)—and is the basis for the familiar distinction between culture and nature. Therefore, we may regard all cultural objects as having creators. These creators may be the people who first articulate and communicate an idea, the artists who fashion a form, or the inventors of a new game or new lingo. Any particular object may have a single creator, such as the author of a novel, or multiple creators, such as all of the people listed in the credits at the beginning of a movie.

Other people besides their creators experience cultural objects, of course. If a poet sings her odes in the wilderness with no one to hear or record, if a hermit invents a revolutionary new theology but keeps it to himself, if a radio program is broadcast but a technical malfunction prevents anyone from hearing it, these present potential but not actual cultural objects. Only when such objects become public, when they enter the circuit of human discourse, do they enter the culture and become cultural objects. Therefore, all cultural objects must have people who receive them, people who hear, read, understand, think about, enact, participate in, and remember them. We might call these people the object's audience, although that term is a bit misleading; the people who actually experience the object may differ from the intended or original audience, and far from being a passive audience, cultural receivers are active meaning makers.

Both cultural objects and the people who create and receive them are not floating freely but are anchored in a particular context. We can call this the social world, by which we mean the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns and exigencies that occur at any particular point in time. Cultural sociology centers, first and foremost, on the relationship between cultural objects and the social world. This even-handed attention to both the

cultural and the social is one of the things that differentiate cultural sociology from cultural studies, which focuses more heavily on the cultural side. A second difference is methodological: cultural sociology, as a social science, depends more heavily on empirical methods and the analysis of evidence, whereas cultural studies is more purely interpretive. That said, there is considerable overlap between the two fields. (A good discussion of this distinction is in Inglis, Blaikie, and Wagner-Pacifici (2007).

We have identified four elements: creators, cultural objects, recipients, and the social world. Let us first arrange these four in the shape of a diamond and then draw a line connecting each element to every other one. Doing this creates what I call a cultural diamond (a diamond in the two-dimensional sense of a baseball diamond), which looks like Figure 1.1.

Our cultural diamond features four points and six links. We cannot call it a *theory* of culture, because it says nothing about how the points relate. Nor can we call it a *model* of culture in the strict sense, because it does not indicate cause and effect; in the cultural diamond, violence in the popular culture (e.g., gangsta rap) could be seen as "causing" violence in the social world, but the reverse could equally be the case. Instead, the

Figure 1.1   The Cultural Diamond
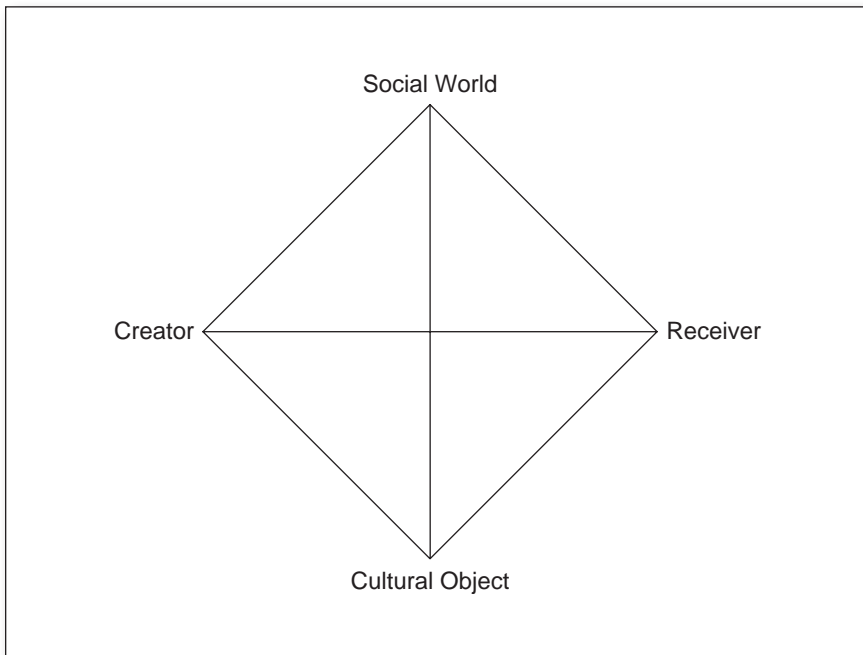
cultural diamond is an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world. It does not say what the relationship between any of the points should be, only that there *is* a relationship. Moreover, the texture of that relationship lies as much in the links as in the four points.

Therefore, a complete understanding of a given cultural object requires understanding all four points and six links. Return to the example of bread, a cultural object of widespread but not universal meaningfulness. To understand bread in West Hollywood and Lagos, we would have to know about the producers (the growers, bakers, importers, trendsetting chefs and restaurant owners, and government bureaucrats setting import controls) and the consumers (the population and its demographic characteristics—how many children pack lunches, how many working couples eat out, how an aging and increasingly thrifty population gratifies its tastes for luxury, and how the African public has come to associate white bread with prosperity). We would need to understand linkages—the media connections advertising products to consumers, for example, or the system of distribution whereby Nigerian teenage boys acquire fresh bread to hawk on the highways. Only after investigating such points and connections can we feel confident that we understand the relationship—a specifically cultural relationship—that exists between bread and the society in which it is made and eaten. In Carey's (1989) terms, we end up understanding bread not as the transmission of a foodstuff but as a ritual that can bind or sometimes divide people.

The same proves true for any aspect of culture that we isolate and analyze as a cultural object: We need to identify the characteristics of the object and how it is like some other objects in the culture and unlike others. We need to consider who created (made, formed, said) it and who received (heard, saw, believed) it. We need to think about the various linkages; for example, on the social world/creator link, how in this society do some types of people get to create this type of cultural object and others do not? (For example, think about how women have often been excluded from creating certain kinds of cultural objects.) On the cultural object/audience link, how do some cultural objects reach an audience and others do not? (For example, think about all of the poems that never get published or all of the plays that never get produced.) Once we understand the specific points and links in the diamond, we can say that we have a sociological understanding of that cultural object. Moreover, once we sense how that cultural object fits into its context, we are on our way to understanding the culture as a whole.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we learned the variety of uses for the term *culture* and how the term applies to ephemeral, even trivial, aspects of experience and to deeply held values for which people are willing to die. We compared the humanities' approach to culture with that of the social sciences and suggested that a full understanding of the relationship between culture and society must employ the insights of both perspectives. We suggested an approach to the sociological analysis of culture that uses the conceptual tools of the cultural object and the cultural diamond as a schema for organizing our thinking and investigation.

In the following chapters, we apply the cultural diamond schema to the complex web of connections between cultures and societies. The chapters are organized following the diamond: In Chapter 2, we concentrate on the meanings found in cultural objects (the social world/cultural object link); in Chapter 3, we examine creators of cultural objects (the diamond's left point); and in Chapter 4, we focus on systems of production (the links between creators, receivers, and cultural objects) and receivers or audiences themselves (the right point). In Chapters 5 and 6, we turn to two applications of sociologically informed cultural analysis: social problems and organizational transactions. In Chapter 7, we look at culture and politics, and in Chapter 8 we consider the relationship of culture and community in the global, postmodern, wired world of the new millennium.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Find an example of the word *culture* used in a magazine or newspaper. What are the cultural objects at issue? Is the writer using an implicit definition of culture more in line with the traditional humanities approach or the social science approach? What are the consequences of this definition for what the text is saying, and how would the message vary with a different definition?

2. Ask your friends and family what culture means to them. What are the significant similarities and differences in their understanding(s) of the word? Does age, gender, race, class, or place of residence shape their answers?

3. The cultural diamond was developed for the analysis of cultural objects such as works of literature or art. How well does it work for other types of objects such as religious beliefs, laws, customs, or rituals? Think of an example of such a cultural object; how could you apply the diamond? What insights might be gained from this type of analysis?

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Grazian, David. 2010. *Mix It Up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*. New York: Norton. Grazian takes a lively yet intellectually sophisticated look at the cultural world we live in, especially the urban, young, media-saturated world. His analyses of twenty-first century popular culture will provoke both debate and a surge of new examples of the sociological principles they illustrate.

Spillman, Lyn, ed. 2002. *Cultural Sociology*. Malden, MA, & Oxford, UK: Blackwell. This wide-ranging reader offers samples of some of the most important theoretical statements and empirical work in the field.

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press. A Marxian literary critic, Williams gives the history of a number of terms that are important in the social sciences, including *culture*, and shows how such terms are by no means innocent of class-based assumptions.

The following are three books on the relationship between culture and community. You might read any of these with such questions in mind as "What has shaped the culture of this particular community?" and "What impact does this community's culture have on its residents?"

Anderson, Elijah. 2011. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. New York: Norton. Anderson offers a vivid and sociologically penetrating ethnographic tour of Center City, Philadelphia, and the public spaces—zones the streetwise urbanites recognize to be under a "cosmopolitan canopy"—where different races mingle under a (temporary and fragile) respite from racial tensions.

Bell, Michael Mayerfield. 1995. *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Country Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Bell dissected the culture of an English village, whose residents work actively and self-consciously to maintain their rural culture even as they get drawn into the urban economy.

Klinenberg, Eric. 2002. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Klinenberg compared two Chicago neighborhoods' responses to a heat wave, showing that despite their comparable poverty, one had a robust culture that enabled its residents to care for each other during a crisis while the other did not.