**Culture**—An indispensable but multi-accented term with a complex and still open history, which in itself expresses the complexity of general human history. At its extremes, culture is used on the one hand, as in its early usage, to refer to organic cultivation, as of soil and crops, or to a biological 'culture' made in the laboratory and so by extension to individual human accomplishment (as in descriptions of a 'cultured gentleman'). On the other, it is used to refer to intellectual and artistic works or practices that, in their very forms and meanings, define human society as socially constructed rather than natural. Sometimes this second meaning is then generalized to produce descriptions of the tenor or 'spirit' of a social group or whole society, period or nation. 'Culture' is therefore used to refer to individual style or character, to a stage of artistic or intellectual development, to the expressive life and traditions of a social group, to a social-historical moment or a broad epoch. We talk about a cultured left foot, about the culture of football, about film culture, African-American or Scottish culture, eighteenth-century or mod culture, or the culture of the 1960s or 1980s.

Perhaps the most profitable way of studying such a mutable term is along the lines of Raymond Williams' account of its European usage over the last three centuries (1976b). Williams suggests that in its 'most widespread use' culture has referred in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the world of the arts (literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre, film). In this sense the term has nevertheless been understood and invariably valued in different ways. In a traditional perspective it is seen as embodied in a selective CANON of works (comprising 'high culture') and valued above commercial or POPULAR artistic forms ('low' or 'MASS culture', to which some might wish to deny any genuine 'artistic' status).

Of underlying and fundamental importance to this view, as to other less traditional perspectives, is the attitude taken towards mass or industrial or, in the twentieth century, advanced consumer society. Debates about culture in this most familiar sense have indeed accompanied and been prompted by the social and economic developments of this period. Culture has therefore been defined in relation to this historical form of society, traditionally once more in terms that see one as opposed to the other. The resulting defence of culture as equivalent or necessary to authentic moral or spiritual values sets art works - pre-eminently a selective tradition of literary texts - against the mechanical and materialist order of industrial society.

So defined, as in the writings of Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot, among others, culture is mobilized to serve a liberal or radical conservative IDEOLOGY. However, a similar defence has also informed the opposition to mass
society of Marxists such as Theodor Adorno and others associated with the Frankfurt School. In both traditions the valued culture is that of a minority or an ELITE, though the authors, artists, genres and individual works may be as different as the Greek classics, the realist novel, and the contemporary AVANT-GARDE.

In a reverse evaluation, the 'popular' culture of punk or jungle or of commercial cinema might be preferred to any of the above. This comprises a radical, contemporary shift of definition and of the terms of valuation. Nevertheless, all these views share the assumption that culture can have an active, shaping influence upon ideas, attitudes and experience. As such, they contrast with the position that sees culture as secondary to and as a reflex of other processes in the society and economy, which are thought to be more fundamental and determining than culture itself. This latter view has been associated with an economistic or 'vulgar' MARXISM but in more refined versions still draws on the Marxist model of (an economic) BASE AND (ideological/cultural) SUPERSTRUCTURE, which most commentators feel it necessary to address.

However complex, therefore, the definition of culture is vital to notions of the objects of study, the methods and aims of a range of academic disciplines (including Philosophy, Linguistics and Education, as well as the more obvious Anthropology, Sociology, Literary, Media and Cultural Studies). Its use and meanings in these contexts may be inconsistent and more or less descriptive or evaluative. However, the study of culture can never be free of assumptions of VALUE or an involvement in meaningful, value-making activity on the part of the researcher or the works or social actors being studied. Perhaps the most influential conception of culture in this academic work, especially in the Humanities and Cultural Studies, has been Raymond Williams' own founding definition of culture as 'a whole way of life of a social group or whole society'.

Work along these lines has developed straightforwardly from neither the liberal-conservative nor Marxist traditions but from a critical engagement with each. Writing in 1981, Williams sees a convergence of the idea of culture as 'a whole way of life' and its association with intellectual and artistic activity. What unites these emphases, he says, is the idea of culture as a signifying system, 'through which necessarily... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' (1981: 13). This thinking has helped inspire a conception of creative work and cultural practice as constituting rather than 'expressing' a given social order, and stimulated new directions in the Sociology of Culture and Cultural Studies as elsewhere. (For a rigorous re-valuation of Williams' and Stuart Hall's role in the formation of Cultural Studies, see Mulhern 2000.) However, it would be false to suggest there is a consensual definition of culture in the contemporary period; even that the idea of culture as a 'whole way of life' is universally accepted. In an early response to Williams, the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson proposed an alternative definition of culture not as a 'whole way of life' but as a 'whole way of struggle' (1961). In a later phase the influence of contemporary feminist, poststructuralist, postmodern and postcolonial
theory has led many to reiterate the critique of earlier notions of minority culture in terms now of their white, western and male-centred bias. In addition, many would raise doubts concerning the homogenizing conception of ‘the whole’ and unified, or the desire for this, in the realm of culture as in other fields. The variant meanings of culture are now more readily understood as the necessary expression of a range of signifying practices across different media and discourses. We are brought therefore to a pluralized and dialogic conception of cultures of dissonance, difference and diversity and to the debates this in turn engenders (Hall in Morley and Chen [eds] 1996; Bhabha 1994).