

## The Culture of Capitalism

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Culture is one of the more complicated words we will be dealing with. One of the problems we encounter is that there are a number of different meanings attached to the term. We think of culture two ways: one in terms of aesthetic matters (relative to the arts) and also as a concept used by anthropologists to describe a people's way of life. There are something like a hundred different definitions of culture used by anthropologists, so I understand.

The word "culture" comes from the Latin *cultus*, which means "care" and from the French *colere* which means "to till" as in "till the ground." There are a number of words associated with culture. For example, there is the term "cult" which suggests something religious or sacred. We are continually amazed at the power cults have to shape people's behavior, to brainwash them—to turn intelligent and educated people into fanatics. Here we are dealing with the power of charismatic personalities and of groups over individuals. If cults can exercise enormous power over individuals and groups of people, can't we say that cultures also can do the same thing, though not to as extreme a degree, generally speaking.

There is also the term "cultivated," which means either growing something or, in the realm of aesthetics and the arts, sophisticated taste. Just as plants only exist because they are cared for by some cultivator, over a period of time, so people's taste and cultivation only are developed by education and training. It takes time to develop a refined sensibility, to become discriminating, to appreciate texts that are difficult and complex and not immediately satisfying.

Bacteriologists also speak about cultures, but they use the term to describe the bacteria that are grown in Petri dishes if they are given suitable media (sources of nourishment). This matter of bacteria growing in media may be an important metaphor for us: just as bacteria need media to grow into culture, so do human beings need cultures to survive and develop themselves. We don't do it all on our own—even though there is much talk of individualism (a concept we learn from our cultures) and the so-called self-made man and woman.

In the chart below I show the interesting parallels:

Bacteriology	Sociology/Anthropology
Bacteria	Humans
Grow in media	Affected by media
Form cultures	Form cultures

Of course we are much more complex than bacteria; in truth, each of us form a kind of medium for countless kinds of bacteria that inhabit our mouths and various other parts of our bodies. Bacteriology involves the cultivation and study of micro-organisms (bacteria) in prepared nutrients and the study of media (what is often called cultural criticism nowadays) involves the study of individuals and groups in a predominantly, but not completely, mass-mediated culture. Not all culture is mass mediated.

Let me offer a typical anthropological definition of culture. This one is quite old but it is useful because it covers most of the bases. It is by Henry Pratt Fairchild and appeared in his *Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences* (1967:80):

A collective name for all behavior patterns socially acquired and transmitted by means of symbols; hence a name for all the distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool-making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion, but also the material instruments or artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc.

Let's consider some of the topics Fairchild mentions.

*Behavior Patterns.* We are talking about codes and patterns of behavior here that are found in groups of people.

*Socially Acquired.* We are taught these behavior patterns as we grow up in a family in some geographical location and are profoundly affected by the family we are born into, its religion, and all kinds of other matters.

*Transmitted by Means of Symbols.* This refers to language and works of art, both of which have a profound impact on our psyches and our consciousness. It also can be understood to refer to communication of all kinds and involving all media: spoken words, facial expression, mass mediated, and so on.