



TERRY EAGLETON'S "THE IDEA OF CULTURE": "VERSIONS OF CULTURE"ⁱ

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Abstract:

This article explores Terry Eagleton's analysis of culture in the first chapter, "Versions of Culture," from his book "The Idea of Culture". It investigates how Eagleton rejects the fixed definitions of culture and embraces a more inclusive and historical understanding of culture. This article places Eagleton's perspective within the tradition of cultural materialism. It also connects his ideas to theorists like Raymond Williams and Matthew Arnold. Eagleton criticizes elitist views of culture. Instead, he supports a flexible understanding. This view includes both social rules and natural elements. The article also looks at how Eagleton's ideas relate to today's cultural debates, especially the divide between high and popular culture.

Keywords: culture, Terry Eagleton, cultural materialism, Raymond Williams, popular culture

تتناول هذه المقالة تحليل تيري إيجلتون لمفهوم الثقافة في الفصل الأول من كتابه *فكرة الثقافة* تحت عنوان "أنماط الثقافة". يرفض إيجلتون التعريفات الجامدة للثقافة، ويقترح بدلاً منها فهماً أكثر شمولية وتاريخية. يربط هذا البحث أفكار إيجلتون بالمنظور الماركسي وبأعمال ريموند ويليامز وماتيو آرنولد، ويوضح كيف ينتقد الرؤية النخبوية للثقافة ويدعم فهماً مرناً يشمل القواعد الاجتماعية والعناصر الطبيعية. كما يناقش المقالة كيف ترتبط أفكار إيجلتون بالنقاشات الثقافية المعاصرة، خاصة ما يتعلق بالفصل بين الثقافة الرفيعة والثقافة الشعبية.

الثقافة، تيري إيجلتون، المادية الثقافية، ريموند ويليامز، الثقافة الشعبية

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1. Introduction

The concept of culture has been debated for a very long time. Scholars such as Matthew Arnold defined it through art, refinement, and the pursuit of perfection, while scholars like Raymond Williams see it as a presence in everyday life, practices, and social structures. In *The Idea of Culture* (2000), Terry Eagleton goes back to this debate as he challenges elitist and fixed ideas of culture. Instead, he accepts that culture is changeable and has many meanings over time. In his chapter "*Versions of Culture*," Eagleton highlights the different meanings and conflicts within the idea of culture. He shows how history, language, and politics affect its meaning. Influenced by Marxism and Raymond Williams, he sees culture not as something fixed or only for elites. Instead, he sees it as a changing process shaped by society and power. This article looks at Eagleton's main ideas in "*Versions of Culture*." It shows how he challenges fixed definitions of culture. He supports a non-elitist view that is based on real social and material conditions.

Terry Eagleton is a literary critic. His seminal book, *The Idea of Culture*, concentrates on the discussion of the notion of culture. Different critics and scholars provide different interpretations of culture. In this vein, culture does not have a fixed meaning. Instead, it is open to a number of interpretations. This study focuses on Eagleton's first chapter, "*Versions of Culture*." Initially, the focus is on the interplay between culture and nature, highlighting their contradiction as well as affinity. Then emphasis is put on the etymology of culture, accentuating its French and Latin origins. The final point centres on the examination of the modern senses of culture. This paper is concerned with Eagleton's approach to culture and how his non-elitist idea of culture goes hand in hand with Raymond Williams's understanding of culture.

First, the focus is mainly on the interplay between culture and nature. Terry Eagleton provides a Marxist approach to the notion of culture. He notes that culture is "*one of the two or three most complex words in the English language*" (7). This is evocative of Williams's definition of culture in his *Keywords*. For Terry, culture is the outcome of nature. That is to say, culture has its origins in nature. The latter produces culture, and culture strives to change and reproduce nature. In this vein, culture is set into contradistinction to nature. Then the relationship between the two concepts shifts from opposition to affinity. To illustrate, culture becomes synonymous with nature. This is reinforced by the fact that natural objects are permeated with cultural elements and vice versa. In this regard, "*the cultural means we use to transform nature are themselves derived from it*" (Eagleton 8). What is cultural is marked by natural features, and what is natural is characterized by cultural features. This shows that natural elements are deeply embedded in culture.

Second, emphasis is put on the etymology of culture. The French origin of the word culture is *culture*. The latter stands for husbandry or agriculture. This indicates that culture is closely bound up with human activities, including "*labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation*" (Eagleton 7). As for the Latin origin of the word culture *colere*, it stands for "*anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting*" (Eagleton 8). In this vein, culture is not only limited to cultivation and crops. It is also linked to religion

and colonialism. This reinforces the fact that culture does not have a stable meaning. Instead, it is open to an infinite number of interpretations, stressing its resistance to fixity. As for the 'inhabit' meaning of culture, it "*became the Latin colonus, farmer, from which we derive the word 'colony'—so, we could say, colonization rests at the heart of culture, or culture always involves a form of colonization, even in relation to its conventional meaning as the tilling of the soil*" (Young 29). Moreover, culture is also meant to signify regulation (laws) and spontaneous growth (nature) (Eagleton 10). Because culture is synonymous with regulation, it suggests a set of rules and regulations to be followed by members of society. The latter are required to respect and adhere to their culture. At once, culture incarnates rules and regulations. At the same time, it epitomizes nature. Hence, culture "*involves an interplay of the regulated and unregulated*" (Eagleton 10). It is, in this vein, both natural and socially constructed. It is natural because natural elements are deeply rooted in culture. At the same time, it is also socially constructed because it embodies rules and laws. These regulations are undoubtedly constructed by society.

Third, Raymond Williams traces the history of culture, highlighting its modern senses. First, culture stands for civility. That is to say, it is synonymous with civilization as it is defined as "*a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development and progress*" (Eagleton 14). In this connection, culture is closely connected to morals, manners, intellectuality and development. This indicates the shift of culture from what is natural to what is intellectual and spiritual. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, culture underwent a change, accentuating its mobile nature. It shifts from being the synonym of civilization to becoming its antonym. Again, this unveils the problematic and dynamic nature of culture. The opposing relationship between culture and civilization is discussed by the cultural elitist Mathew Arnold in his seminal book *Culture and Anarchy*. For him, culture is set into contradistinction to anarchy. The latter is caused by working-class people. When society tends to civilize the proletariat by formulating a set of rules and laws, the working-class people resort to anarchy. This is a way to defy culture, which is incarnated in laws and regulations. In this regard, "*the opposite of culture, for Matthew Arnold and his disciples, was an anarchy which was engendered by civilization itself*" (Eagleton 16). The nomadic nature of culture is manifested in the shift of the concept from signifying husbandry to referring to civilization. This is reinforced by the transformation of culture from a synonym of civilization into its antithesis. As for the second modern sense of culture, it alludes to culture as "*a distinctive way of life*" (Eagleton 16). This sense of culture is advocated by Herder and Raymond Williams. The latter is a cultural theorist and one of the founders of cultural studies. He stresses that culture is not limited to refined art. Culture also involves mass culture. This shows that he is a non-elitist. This is advocated by Eagleton. The latter is a student of Williams. For him, culture is not only concerned with fine arts. It also concentrates on people's way of life. In contrast, Mathew Arnold, Leavis and Eliot represent elitism. They are elitists as they restrict culture to refined art, excluding its other components. In this regard, culture is an elitist notion for the elitists. This opposes the inclusive and non-elitist understanding of culture advocated by Eagleton and his teacher, Williams. This goes hand in hand with the modern meaning of culture. Currently, the word culture has become more inclusive and comprehensive as

it embraces "that entire range of institutions, artefacts and practices that make up our symbolic universe. In one or another of its meanings, the term will thus embrace: art and religion, science and sport, education and leisure" (Milner and Browitt 5). Raymond Williams is a populist as he endorses the popular common culture. For him, culture is not confined to art and literature, yet it also involves mass culture. This is reinforced by Herder and Eagleton, who back up Williams' standpoint. In this vein, Eagleton is a proponent of Williams and Herder, as he also believes in the problematic nature of culture.

As has been noted, this paper concentrates on the examination of the concept of culture in Terry Eagleton's seminal book *The Idea of Culture*, especially in his chapter "Versions of Culture". Initially, the interplay between culture and nature manifests itself in the contradistinction between the two concepts and then the affinity between them. This affinity is shown in the transformation of culture into a synonym of nature. Then emphasis is placed on the etymology of culture, highlighting the French and Latin origins of the word. Eventually, stress is laid on the modern senses of culture, highlighting culture's shift from being a synonym of civilization to becoming its antonym. The juxtaposition of the elitist understanding of culture with the non-elitist comprehensive idea of culture is highlighted. The different definitions and meanings assigned to culture accentuate its complex nature.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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