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Cultural Heritage
of East Central Europe
A Historical Outline

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East of the West
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Introduction

The concept of ‘culture’ is a relatively modern invention. It stems from the Latin term *cultura* meaning cultivation. Cicero was the first to use this word in a non-agricultural context. In his *Tusculanae Disputationes* he reflected on the ‘cultivation of the soul’ (*cultura animi*). Later this term was rarely used in this sense but as of the 17th century more and more authors considered culture an intellectual and not an agricultural phenomenon. Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) described culture as a vehicle overcoming natural barbarism. He was followed by German philosophers of culture. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) argued that human creativity was as important as human rationality and called attention to national cultures. The works of German romantic philosophers were mainly focused on the specificity of the German culture, a factor that was to unite divided German statehoods. At the same time, however, Herder and his followers noticed other national cultures, including first of all those of East and Central Europe. It is therefore noteworthy that the early philosophical reflection on culture was closely connected with the specific traditions of East and Central Europeans.

In the 19th century the term ‘culture’ was increasingly applied to a wide spectrum of human behavior both in individual and social terms. The 19th century considerations of culture were also connected with the then ‘clash of civilizations’ of colonial powers and overseas natives. While the German philosophers considered culture close to ‘enlightenment’, leaders of the national struggles within the Habsburg Monarchy thought culture was more of a ‘worldview’ (*Weltanschauung*). In England a poet and essayist

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) used the term ‘culture’ in the sense of human refinement. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) wrote: “Without culture or holiness, which are always the gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce hatred, envy, jealousy, revenge. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect”¹.

The development of modern sociology and anthropology largely contributed to the development of the contemporary notion of culture. Some social scientists used the term ‘culture’ to refer to a universal human capacity. Ellsworth Huntington defined it as “every object, habit, idea, institution and mode of thought or action which man produces or creates and then passes on the others”². In modern social sciences this term is also used as a retroactive way to show the development of individual and social behavior, and comparative social studies pretend to show specificities of national, regional or other local patterns either those practised in everyday life or those performed and recorded in literature, arts or music. A distinction is usually made between physical artifacts created by people and everything else that exists in human communication, for instance language, beliefs, customs, events, etc. Although there is no unique theory of culture, one thing that seems clear is that culture makes humans different from animals.

In a classical handbook of sociology, Jon M. Shepard distinguished ‘cognitive’, ‘material’, and ‘normative’ dimensions of culture³. In the present study material culture will be discussed only marginally, while the cognitive and normative dimensions may be found in what the author considers as the range of national culture: language, religion, science, literature, arts, music and popular forms of creativity and entertainment, such as pop music and sports.

Most 19th century reflections on culture make a distinction between elite ideals called ‘high culture’, which includes science,

¹ Quoted according to: „Culture”, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=culture&searchmode=none (18 November 2014).

² Ellsworth Huntington, *Mainsprings of Civilization*, Dublin: Mentor Books, 1959, p. 19.

³ Jon M. Shepard, *Sociology*, Eagan, Minn.: West Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 61–63.

art, literature and music of the upper social strata, and folklore, which was gradually appreciated as folk culture. To make things more complicated, in mass societies of the 19th and 20th century, a phenomenon of 'mass culture' developed. It included popular manifestations of literary, artistic or musical entertainment. While the folklore frequently animated 'high culture', for instance in music, mass culture was rather a simplified form of both.

A typical dilemma in the study of culture is whether singular or plural should be used. Singular 'culture' would stress the unity of human experience, plural 'cultures' would emphasize differences. Many scholars stress the nation-building role of culture⁴. Nevertheless, since East and Central European nations are a part of a widely understood European culture, singular will be used in this booklet, despite obvious differences in the way an individual and communities are perceived in the region.

What follows is by no means a thorough synthesis of East and Central European culture. This is only a brief summary of cultural traditions of each of the nations with a modest attempt to point at some common features and divergences. Cultural traditions in East Central Europe frequently followed West European accomplishments of 'high culture' but sometimes introduced new values when local folklore was refined. European culture would be much poorer without cultural heritage of East and Central Europe⁵.

⁴ Cf. eg. Oskar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions in European History*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950; *idem*, *Borderlands of Western Civilization. A History of East Central Europe*, New York: Ronald Press Co., 1952; Antonina Kłoskowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni* [National cultures at their roots], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1996, pp. 32–41; Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Central European Culture*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002; Jerzy Kłoczowski (ed.), *Central Europe between East and West*, Lublin: Society of the Institute of East-Central Europe, 2005; *idem*, Hubert Łaszkiwicz (eds.), *East-Central Europe in European Themes and Debates*, Lublin: Society of the Institute of East-Central Europe, 2009; Bohdan Cywiński, *Szańce kultur. Szkice z dziejów narodów Europy Wschodniej* [Bulwarks of culture. Essays in the history of East European nations], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio and Centrum Europejskie Natolin, 2013.

⁵ While working on the subject I was encouraged and helped by several experts. My special thanks go to Doctor Maciej Szymanowski and my colleagues from the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences: Doctors Adam Burakowski, Yuri Halayko and Paweł Ukielski. I would also like to thank Professor Mirosław Filipowicz from Lublin for his constructive review of the text.