The Meaning of “Culture”

By Joshua Rothman|Dec. 26th, 2014

There’s something innately funny about Merriam-Webster’s announcement, earlier this month that “culture” is their 2014 Word of the Year. “Culture” is the “Scary Movie” of words of the year, which, ordinarily, are supposed to reflect culture (“vape,” “selfie”) without actually being “culture.” Merriam-Webster’s editors are at pains to clarify that they weren’t trying to be meta (which, incidentally, would’ve made a great word of the year back in 2000). The word “culture,” they explain, was simply the word that saw the biggest spike in look-ups on their website. Confusion about culture was just part of the culture this year. People were desperate to know what “culture” meant.

It goes without saying that “culture” is a confusing word, this year or any year. Merriam-Webster offers six definitions for it (including the biological one, as in “bacterial culture”). The problem is that “culture” is more than the sum of its definitions. If anything, its value as a word depends on the tension between them. The critic Raymond Williams, in his souped-up dictionary, “Keywords,” writes that “culture” has three divergent meanings: there’s culture as a process of individual enrichment, as when we say that someone is “cultured” (in 1605, Francis Bacon wrote about “the culture and manurance of minds”); culture as a group’s “particular way of life,” as when we talk about French culture, company culture, or multiculturalism; and culture as an activity, pursued by means of the museums, concerts, books, and movies that might be encouraged by a Ministry of Culture (or covered on a blog like this one). These three senses of culture are actually quite different, and, Williams writes, they compete with one another. Each time we use the word “culture,” we incline toward one or another of its aspects: toward the “culture” that’s imbibed through osmosis or the “culture” that’s learned at museums, toward the “culture” that makes you a better a person or the “culture” that just inducts you into a group.

There’s a historical sense, too, in which “culture” is a polemical word. In the nineteenth century, Williams explains, “culture” was often opposed to “civilization.” Civilization, the thinking went, was a homogenizing system of efficient, rational rules, designed to encourage discipline and “progress.” Culture was the opposite: an unpredictable expression of human potential for its own sake. (It’s for this reason that a term like “the culture industry” has an oxymoronic ring.) Today, we don’t often use the word “civilization” — we prefer to talk, more democratically, in terms of culture—but we’re still conflicted. We can’t help but notice how “civilized” life seems both to facilitate culture and to deaden it. Museums make it easy to see art, but they also weigh it down. Rock and roll sounds better in a club than in a concert hall.

These are solid, perennial reasons to look up “culture” in the dictionary. But why did more people than usual look it up this year? The editors at Merriam-Webster decline to speculate. They note, merely, that “the term conveys a kind of academic attention to systematic behavior.” Here’s my theory: more people looked up “culture” this year because it’s become an unsettling word. “Culture” used to be a good thing. Now it’s not. That isn’t to say that American culture has gotten worse. (It has gotten worse in some ways, and better in others.) It’s to say that the word “culture” has taken on a negative cast. The most positive aspect of “culture”—the idea of personal, humane enrichment—now seems especially remote. In its place, the idea of culture as unconscious groupthink is ascendant.

In the postwar decades, “culture” was associated with the quest for personal growth: even if you rejected “establishment” culture, you could turn to “the counterculture.” In the eighties, nineties, and aughts, it was a source of pride: the multiculturalist ethos had us identifying with our cultures. But today, “culture” has a furtive, shady, ridiculous aspect. Often, when we attach the word “culture” to something, it’s to suggest that it has a pervasive, pernicious influence (as in “celebrity culture”). At other times, “culture” is used in an aspirational way
that’s obviously counterfactual: institutions that drone on about their “culture of transparency” or “culture of accountability” often have neither. On all sides, “culture” is used in a trivializing way: there’s no real culture in “coffee culture” (although the coffee at Culture, a coffee shop near my office, is excellent). But, at the same time, it’s hard to imagine applying the word “culture” to even the most bona-fide “cultural institutions.” We don’t say that MOMA fosters “art culture,” because to describe art as a “culture” is, subtly, to denigrate it. In 1954, when the magazine Film Culture was founded, its name made movie lovers sound glamorous. Today, it sounds vaguely condescending.

This year, there was the rise of the powerful term “rape culture.” (It was coined a long time ago, in a 1975 documentary film called “Rape Culture” that focussed, in part, on an organization called Prisoners Against Rape; Ariel Levy, in a recent piece for this magazine, defines it as “a value system in which women are currency, and sex is something that men get—or take—from them.”) The spread of the idea of “rape culture” hasn’t just changed how we think about rape; it’s changed how we think about culture. Among other things, “rape culture” uses the word “culture” in a way that doesn’t involve, on any level, the idea of personal enrichment. Instead, the term’s weight is placed, fully and specifically, on Williams’s other two aspects of culture: on the subterranean, group-defining norms (misogyny, privilege) that encourage violence against women, and on the cultural institutions (movies, fraternities) that propagate those norms. The term works, in part, because of its dissonance. You can’t see the word “culture” next to the word “rape” without revising your ideas about what “culture” means.

No comparable “culture” term has been invoked in relation to the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the other African-Americans killed, recently, in encounters with the police. But those events have also pushed us to think about “culture” as an inhumane, malevolent force. And I suspect that many of us have also been keeping our own inner ledgers, where we track the ways in which “culture” has seemed, more and more, like the kind of thing you’d want “civilization” to overrule.

That’s not to say, necessarily, that music culture or art culture or book culture has gotten worse—or that our collective way of life has gone downhill. It’s our sense of the word “culture” that has grown darker, sharper, more skeptical. But, if words are tools for thinking, then this year “culture” has been used to think about the parts of our society that function poorly. That may even be a sign, in a way, of an improvement in our culture. If our increasingly analytical, sociological way of thinking about “culture” is helping us to improve the culture, that’s a positive development. Confusion over its evolving meaning is a good reason to look up “culture” in the dictionary, but so is an interest in understanding the world and making it better.

All this might make you wonder: Does it even make sense to have a single word, “culture,” with such divergent uses? Maybe not; many people, Williams writes, have called “culture” a “loose or confused” term. It’s possible to imagine a more rational system, in which one word describes the activities of artistic and intellectual life, another —our group identity, and a third our implicit norms and ways of living. Those terms, whatever they might be, would be narrower and simpler—but they’d also be less accurate. They would obscure the overlap between life, art, and politics.

And they’d be less meaningful, too. “Culture” may be pulling itself apart from the inside, but it represents, in its way, a wish. The wish is that a group of people might discover, together, a good way of life; that their good way of life might express itself in their habits, institutions, and activities; and that those, in turn, might help individuals flourish in their own ways. The best culture would be one in which the three meanings of “culture” weren’t at odds with one another. That’s not the culture we have at the moment; our culture is fractured, and so our sense of the word “culture” is, too. But it’s possible to imagine a world in which our collective attitudes and institutions further everyone’s individual growth. Maybe, in such a world, the meaning of “culture” would be more obvious; we wouldn’t have to look it up.