

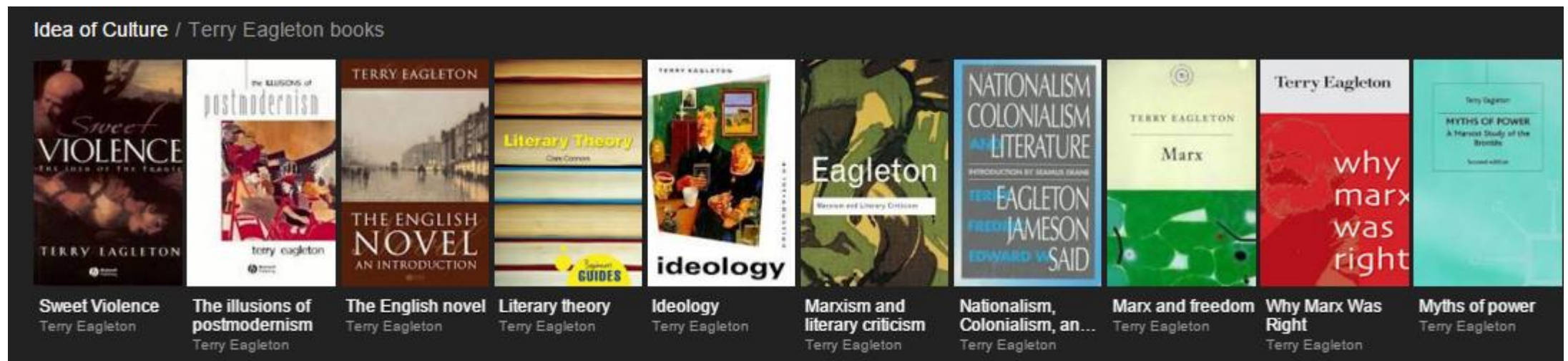
Terry Eagleton 'The Idea of Culture'

Available in E-Book library of TSD
a consideration of Section 1 pp 1-31.

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Terry Eagleton is a highly regarded British literary theorist and critic. He is currently Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University.



Eagleton provides an overview of different definitions for culture

- Culture is etymologically derived from nature – as in the word agriculture.

In this way Eagleton links the idea of culture to the material world and suggest it is what 'we do to the world and what it does to us.' p.2

- If culture is an expression of nature then what is nature?
There is nothing unnatural about New York City and he questions whether tribal people are closer to nature then a modern city dweller. P.4

Eagleton writes, 'The idea of culture, then, signifies a double refusal: of organic determinism on the one hand, and of the autonomy of spirit on the other'. This version of culture Eagleton points out rebuffs both naturalism and idealism. p4



The link between
Culture to Nature
opens up the idea
of culture for all
life forms



- Culture as 'self-culture' – to refine oneself. To overcome one's baser instincts.
 - Eagleton states, 'As self-cultivators, we are clay in our own hands.... priest and sinner in the same body.' p.6

This suggests that there is something lacking in nature, we need to refine ourselves 'out of nature'. p6

Eagleton argues that history and politics are concealed in the word culture as well as theology. Thus culture become a 'kind of ethic pedagogy which will fit us for political citizenship.' p.7

- **Culture as an Ideal**

Here Eagleton states that culture is a 'sort of premature utopia' which a people must live up to, or be able to live up to, before they are able to self-rule.

Eagleton points out that this idea was promoted by Friedrich Schiller who in 1795 linked culture as an expression of refinement at the individual level. He considered that every human being had an ideal form, as Eagleton claims a type of , 'archetype of a human being' which needs to harmonise with the 'unchanging unity of the ideal'.

Eagleton argues that this leads to a hegemony moulding humanity to a desired perfect form.

Note for future seminars, this is a Platonist view of culture, a perfect form that we must all seek to comply too.

Eagleton cites Raymond Williams' ideas on Culture

- **Williams linked culture to civilization**
 - Western civilization thus became the standard for culture defining it as manners and morals – to be civilised.
 - Culture and civilization became linked **to art, theatre, urban living and success materially** – economics and productivity.
 - At the end of the nineteenth century civilization and culture took on an imperialist echo.





In the eighteenth century **Johann Herder** (1744-1803) challenged this view

‘What one nation holds indispensable to the circle of its thoughts... has never entered into the mind of a second, and by a third has been deemed injurious.’

Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, Trans T Churchill, (London, 1802) p 362.

Eagleton points out that Herder's culture is culture as a way of life.



Eagleton argues that taking a **post modern** approach, culture is almost the opposite to civility.

- It can be considered **tribal** rather than **cosmopolitan** and thus take on an organic nature.

Eagleton points out that culture as civilization is rigorously discriminating, **culture as a way of life is not.**



However if culture is a way of life which should be respected, Eagleton asks '**Is all culture good?**'

Is a culture good that discriminates against or even tortures another good? Thus he argues against the idea of culture being a universal good.

Eagleton argues that the current development of culture being associated with **justice for minority groups is a new definition of culture.**

In this way he points out that culture cannot be a **grand narrative** of human self-development.

For him a key component of culture is its **plurality** rather than its intrinsic content.

Eagleton argues that the three 'arms' of culture – that is culture as a way of life, culture as civilization and culture as the arts must blend together.



‘Culture, then, is the unconscious *verso* of the *recto* of civilized life, the taken-for-granted beliefs and predilections which must be dimly present for us to be able to act at all. It is what comes naturally, bred in the bone rather than conceived by the brain.’ p.28

References

Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture* (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000).

Herder, Johann Gottfried, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, Trans T Churchill, (London, 1802)