The word culture stands for something that is non-nature; that is in one way or another artificial, an artefact. But what does it mean, actually? Is it merely a question of naming, a totemic game which offers the feeling of a message, without any substance? What differentiates ‘culture’ from ‘nature’?

One answer to this question can be found by taking a look around. I am sitting at my desk and pondering artefacts. What exactly is an artefact? According to Collins dictionary the word artefact means ‘something made or given shape by man’ – as opposed to what has grown or been shaped ‘naturally’. I consider my computer. It is an excellent and very sophisticated example of the human ability to construct; it is a typical artefact. My desk, an artefact in itself, is strewn with pens, paper, two memory sticks, some CDs and DVDs, a coffee cup, a telephone and a mobile phone, my reading glasses, a radio, two rolls of sticky tape, some paper clips, a used battery, a penknife, a ruler with a built-in solar-cell calculator, a bottle of glue, correcting fluid, three books and an eraser.

Everything on my desk seems to have been created by human beings. All the objects are artefacts – apart, of course, from the dust on the surface and the total mess as such. Although in a ‘natural’ state, whatever that may be assumed to mean, there would probably be a lot more dust. I do tidy my desk at times, although not often enough. And the dust would be spread much more evenly over its surface. Indeed, without my intervention this whole messy assembly would not even be there – even the mess is the outcome of my activities. Moreover a clear pattern can be discerned; things have not just fallen there to be deposited on the
desk – there is plenty of space around the keyboard. Even the mess, the chaos, seems to be the unintended outcome of human activities; it offers explicable traces of human activity. This is where an untidy person has been sitting writing.

If I take a look around, what do I see? A room full of bookshelves and books, a few pictures, a tiled stove, a table, chairs – and a palm tree, actually quite a large one. That at least is not an artefact! Although, on the other hand, how can a tree from the African desert end up growing here, close to the polar circle, where the average temperature is now slowly rising above freezing point in the middle of April? Yes, someone grew it, I bought it, and it only has a chance of surviving here because it is in a pot in an artificially warmed room. In this context the palm – the palm as it exists here – is perhaps the most artificial object in the room, needing constant human care in order to survive.

The character of reality does not change particularly when I look out of the window. A few trees, some cars, a mown lawn, an empty beer bottle. In the modern world it is obviously not always so easy to find indisputable non-artefacts, genuine ‘nature’.

Of course, I can see a cloudy sky – which may mean rain is on the way. A bird, perhaps a lark – spring is coming. Here we have examples of nature that is unaffected by mankind – if we disregard the impact of the greenhouse effect on the climate and that larks need cultivated fields to breed. And these natural phenomena also have certain human significance: from my perspective clouds ‘mean’ that rain is likely and the lark ‘predicts the advent of spring’ with its ‘beautiful’ song. From a human perspective not even nature always exists ‘in itself’.

The same applies if we extend our glance to cover other aspects of society. The object of my studies consists of companies or organizations. Organizations are full of artefacts. Paintings and other works of art, computers, printers and networks, trademarks, company logos and symbols, flags and neon signs. In the last decades extensive research efforts in the field of ‘organizational culture’ have been devoted to symbolism and artefacts in organizations. In view of the fact that everything in organizations, indeed even the organization as a whole, consists of artefacts, the research issue involved in this kind of project seems unclear.

Organizations are, it seems, artefacts in themselves, fully and completely. It is not merely that many aspects of organizations – such as ‘hierarchies’ – consist of abstract, hypothetical constructions of the human intellect. Even if we did not include subjective and culturally determined experiences and interpretations of a phenomenon in the concept of ‘artefact’, it is still clear that virtually everything in an