The emergence of the culture concept is best understood as the application of the word ‘culture’ to a complex of ideas which certainly existed before the late nineteenth century but which lacked, until that time, a definitive term to encapsulate all that it conveyed. Conventional wisdom has it that there actually emerged, within a couple of years of each other, two very distinct, almost mutually exclusive concepts of culture in Anglophone thought – the humanist and the anthropological. Although they have more in common than is generally acknowledged, it is the latter manifestation that is the focus of critical attention here because of its emphasis on ‘difference’ and the way in which it has been used to define human communities in the sphere of world politics. It is also an anthropological conception of culture, especially as it developed in American cultural anthropology, that was initially used to counter racist ideas based on biological premises. At the same time, it worked to repudiate the evolutionary frameworks within which the superiority of European societies was often imagined, thereby producing a significant change in thinking about both sameness and difference. But the further development of anthropological ideas about culture, especially in alliance with hermeneutics, produced an insider/outsider dichotomy with profound implications for the way in which ‘culture’ is understood to structure world politics.

**Humanism meets anthropology**

‘Culture’ names an abstract concept and is therefore a heuristic device – a way of thinking about or organizing facts – whose meaning is grasped best by examining the way it is used. Before it was recruited to name certain specific concepts in the human sciences, the word ‘culture’ was
used in English for several hundred years, most commonly in agricultural terms. At first glance, this seems quite unrelated to both the humanist and anthropological connotations. The agricultural sense reflected its origins in the Latin cultura which occurred in the composite term agricul
tura – tilling or cultivation of the soil. But it was also allied to uses denoting training, fostering, and adornment as well as worship and cult (cultus). Cicero spoke of cultura animi – culture of the mind – which he identified with philosophy. Later, it came to signify the cultivation of arts and letters and of the intellect more generally. Raymond Williams notes that, from a relatively early stage, the word was used in English with reference to a process of human development. In Bacon (1605) and Hobbes (1651), for example, there are clear uses relating to the ‘culture of the mind’. In 1779 the Scottish thinker, John Millar, opined that the inhabitants of so many parts of the globe were ‘destitute of culture’. In a travel account published in 1801, the inhabitants of the East Indies are described as ‘ignorant of culture, subsisting only on fruits, covered with the skin of beasts … killing the old men and the infirm who could no longer follow in their excursions’. In 1827 Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary gives meanings for culture with respect to both the act of cultivation, as in tillage, as well as the ‘art of improvement and melioration’ more generally, while the term ‘civilize’ means to ‘reclaim from savageness and barbarity; to instruct in the arts of regular life’. In all these understandings and usages of culture/cultivation, what is commonly featured is a notion of ‘control and organization, refinement and sublimation of nature’. This is also reflected in the fact that the ‘savage’, or ‘natural man’ was defined as such by an apparent lack of ‘civility’, although this was not always viewed in negative terms. In summary, the development of ‘culture’ as an independent noun or as describing an abstract process was by no means a sudden one in English usage.

In 1869 Matthew Arnold set out the clearest statement to date of a humanist conception of culture that was explicitly evaluative and normative. Embodied in intellectual, literary and artistic achievement, culture in Arnold’s famous formulation culminated in ‘a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best of what has been thought and said in the world’. In this sense, culture referred primarily to the cultivation of a body of values, especially those transmitted from the past to the future through artistic and literary works. Thus culture had an organic quality built around a set of core values, not dissimilar to an anthropological conception. In addition, Arnold opposed liberal individualist ideas, believing that values supporting freedom for the masses would allow