

CHAPTER THREE

The Concept of Culture in Sociology: Knowledge Base II

We saw in the last chapter that by the middle of the 20th century anthropologists influenced by Franz Boas and sociologists influenced by Talcott Parsons were in agreement on certain key points. One was that cultures are formal, objectively describable systems of meaning, and another was that these meanings really matter — that is, cultures shape behavior as well as reflect it. They were also agreed that cultures are what certain social groups have, not what they are or how they function. However, the discourse of both disciplines changed during the 1960s and 70s. Anthropologists began to factor into their ethnographies a group's social, economic, and political arrangements as well as the standpoint from which they themselves, as members of dominant cultural groups, observe, report, and theorize about cultures other than their own. Sociologists, already well aware of the importance of social positions and hierarchies of wealth and political power, found it convenient to soften if not erase the standard anthropological distinction between cultures and social groups as they struggled to make sense of the increasingly visible conflicts between classes, ethnic groups, and other sorts of social collectives such as the abled and disabled. As multiculturalist educators LaBelle and Ward (1996) have explained, the term *culture* “evolved from its use in anthropology as a way to characterize the lifeways of a racial and ethnic population whose existence could be carved off and made independent from other groups, to a more general term implying some sharing of identity, goals, and status” (p. 28). The theme of culture as an identity marker now pervades the sociological literature on culture and, in consequence, shapes much of the theoretical and applied literature of multicultural education. It also shapes everyday discourse, where the quite different concepts of *culture* and *group* are often conflated, such that for many “*culture* means a group of people possessing some common understandings and characteristics” (ibid.)¹ Certainly it is characteristic of cultural groups that their members have something important in common, and further specification may not be necessary: their commonality could be (or better, could *include*) an ideology, ethnic identity, experience of oppression, or a way of life. However, to go on to call the groups themselves “cultures” is misleading. To identify a group as a culture may accord it and its members a certain respect, but without some indication as to just which features one is respecting this seems to be an empty gesture.

LaBelle and Ward are right in thinking that the notion of culture as an identity marker has framed the analytic discourse of scholars in the social sciences and educational theory, but it is only one of several analytic frames within which sociology's ongoing conversation about culture

¹ “In more contemporary views of culture, almost any group of people who come together to fulfill any purpose can be said to have the potential of developing a culture. In this latter case, *culture* means a group of people possessing some common understandings and characteristics.... It is this more contemporary view of culture which gives rise to the term's use as a reference to many different groups, from those characterized by occupational pursuits to the disabled, gays, lesbians, women, students, and so on” (LaBelle & Ward, 1996, p. 28). Arguments for the contrary view can be found throughout anthropology (e.g., Bodley, 1976; Goodenough, 1971) and sociology (e.g., Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Gans, 1974 [1991]).

proceeds. It is clearly evident in sociological studies of American ethnic groups, especially groups that have historically been treated unequally and for the most part quite harshly. However, we should keep in mind that sociologists became interested in de facto ethnic groups long before ethnicity became an identity marker or any other sort of theme in its own right, if only because the concept of ethnicity was originally associated with lower class status and marginality. (The idea that even a mainstream group such as Anglo-Americans or European Americans should be considered an ethnic group is a relatively recent insight, thanks largely to Henry Giroux [1997].) How ethnic groups interact with each other and with the Anglo-American mainstream has been a subject of inquiry since the 1920's, and it seems safe to say that much of the discipline of sociology was shaped, in America at least, by the ways in which social theorists and policy makers conduct their studies of minority interest groups. As we will see in the following chapters, these ways have also formed an important part of the conceptual foundations of the literature of multicultural education.

From Classical to Modern Sociology

During the classical period of sociology, marked by 19th and early 20th century thinkers such as Marx, Comte, Spencer, Weber, and Durkheim, the concepts of culture and society were not separated from each other. Like Tylor, most of the early sociologists thought of culture as a relatively undifferentiated, common sense equivalent to civilization and hence correlative with society as they knew it.² This is not to say that they actually claimed culture and society are identical, but simply that they felt no need to seal the two domains off from each other. It was only in the 1920s that American sociologists (though not the anthropologists) began to distinguish society and culture as separate concepts, even though they did so in quite different ways and often without setting the two terms in clear contrast with each other.³ In this chapter I will follow the common practice of distinguishing three major schools within the discipline: Conflict Theory, Structural Functionalism, and Symbolic Interactionism.⁴ However, readers with backgrounds in sociology already know that it is much easier to divide Gaul into three parts than it is to draw a sharp line separating these three sociological approaches to culture and the social order, even only as a heuristic device. Each approach has its own variants, all of which have tended over the years to borrow from the others in important respects. Many contemporary scholars who work within one or another of

² Max Weber is the exception here. As we will see, his definition of culture is much more philosophically nuanced than Tylor's, which is not surprising considering Weber's belief that our social life is shaped by morally charged and explicitly metaphysical worldviews such as the Protestant work ethic.

³ The brief survey of sociologists' use of the term "culture" around the 1920's provided by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952 [Vintage edition], pp. 292 ff.) remains the best short historical account of this period.

⁴ Two examples of widely used introductory sociology texts that organize the discipline in this way are Jonathan Turner's *Sociology: The Science of Human Organization* (latest date?), now in its ?th edition, and D. Stanley Eitzen and Maxine Zinn's *In Conflict and Order* (2007), now in its 11th edition. **KEEP?**

these models have intellectual debts to the same classical figures in the discipline, though the debts themselves are different. Most importantly, the three models all have correlates in the literature of multicultural education. Before getting into their details, though, let us consider thumbnail sketches of the development of each of these three sociological approaches to culture. Then we will be more able to appreciate the important differences in their more mature understandings of culture and society as well as their significance as part of the knowledge base for multiculturalist educators.

Omitted: The rest of this section, which correlates the approaches to culture taken by the three major forms of mainstream sociology with their “founding fathers” (Marx, Durkheim, and Darwin)

Modern Sociology: Traversing the 20th Century

Modern Conflict Theory: Interests vs. Interests. The basic premise of social conflict theory can be traced back to the very beginnings of modern political philosophy, when Machiavelli and Hobbes explained human behavior in terms of self-interest and understood the social order as legalized coercion. In the 19th century Marx developed this early view of social life in several important ways, including a clarification of the concept of property and its dynamics of social stratification, i.e., the division of society into different class levels. He also showed that class conflict includes struggles not only for material resources but also for political power and the intellectual resources for acquiring or retaining power, which at various times he called “intellectual production” and “ideology.”

The philosophical literature on the issues raised by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Marx is voluminous. But in the present context, these references are important not so much as intellectual history as because they help us appreciate the close conceptual connection between the three key ideas of *conflict*, *coercion*, and *domination*. The central paradigm of social conflict theory is not that of a fair contest between well-matched competitors as in a Super Bowl or World Series. Quite to the contrary. The paradigm here is that of a stronger group’s striving to preserve its existing dominance in spite of a discontented and potentially rebellious weaker group’s efforts reduce, undermine, eliminate, or even reverse that dominance. The stronger group, precisely because it is stronger, has resources not available to the weaker group, and to understand this conflict one must understand what those resources are and how they work. Marx understood this paradigm as property conflict, but it was Weber who first spelled out its *cultural* dimension. He broadened conflict theory by showing that within a society there are many different forms of conflict and, consequently, multiple class divisions and a corresponding multiplicity of ways in which dominant and subordinate groups organize themselves, define their own interests, and strategize against each other.⁵

In other words, what is at stake in intergroup struggles for and against dominance are not only material resources – property in the wide sense of that term – but also the

⁵ For details see Collins, 1974, pp. 56-57.

intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual resources that constitute culture. “Empirical reality becomes ‘culture’ to us,” Weber wrote, “because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas” (1949 [1904], p. 76). That is, a group’s sense of its own interests produces and is produced by its members’ feelings of what is most valuable and, consequently, most meaningful. This linkage of value, culture, and meaning is the point of Weber’s famous definition of culture as that which gives our lives “meaning”:

FD4.1 Culture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance. (Ibid., p. 81)

As he went on to explain in the somewhat abstruse informal definition (ID4.1) that immediately follows his formal definition of culture, the point of FD4.1 is that culture not only includes values but is itself an overarching value-concept, the importance of which is derived from we might call the objective fact of human subjectivity. There is no view from nowhere from which culture can be understood. It is only because we human beings – including those who share a culture as well as those who study it – are able take a local point of view on the world’s otherwise “meaningless infinity” that certain social phenomena can be bundled together as “our” or “their” culture. Or as Weber put it when he went on to explain why the perspective-taking definition of culture presented in FD4.1 is itself a “logical-formal fact”:

ID4.1 This is the purely logical-formal fact which is involved when we speak of the logically necessary rootedness of all historical entities in “evaluative ideas.” The transcendental presupposition of every cultural science lies not in our finding a certain culture or any “culture” in general to be valuable but rather in the fact that we are cultural beings, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate [i.e., evaluative] attitude towards the world and to lend it significance.

[Social events] are cultural phenomena only because and only insofar as their existence and the form which they historically assume touch directly or indirectly on our cultural interests. ... All knowledge of cultural reality, as may be seen, is always knowledge from particular points of view. (Ibid, italics omitted)

Weber’s famous metaphor for culture’s meaning-making process is that of the switchman in a rail yard. Like Marx, he believed that people’s conduct is ultimately motivated by concrete human interests, not abstract ideas. However, unlike Marx he did not believe that the intellectual dimension of society – the so-called superstructure – was simply a by-product of the more basic forces of economic production – the infrastructure. He insisted that ideas have created relatively coherent world-images and that these images in turn “have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (Ibid., p. 90). The “meaning and significance” that Weber identified with culture did not constitute for him a sufficient condition for social change, but he apparently believed they were its necessary conditions and that they operate independently of other social forces. Even so, it is important to recognize that Weber offered no theory of society as such but only an analysis of “social life.” For him

there was no Spencerian⁶ superorganic entity of the sort that holistic anthropologists like Kroeber or structural functionalists like Parsons had in mind when they used terms like “society” and “social order” (or “culture,” for that matter). There were only contingently related social forces, with no master dialectic within which the opposition between these forces played itself out. In short, Weber believed the task of the sociologist was to examine the relationships between these forces in the context of particular socio-historical processes and thereby account for the emergence of specific world views such as the Protestant work ethic.⁷

The first conflict theorists to undertake this task in a systematic way were the Chicago School sociologists of the 1920s. A second wave, drawing more consciously on Marx’s conception of ideology, emerged in the late 1950s, but for our purposes the most important was the third wave of conflict sociologists, who in the 1960s revisited the Chicago School’s original themes of assimilation and ethnicity. We will consider momentarily how the idea of “culture” rode these waves, but first we should take a closer look at the relationship between it and what is surely classical sociology’s most important concept. This is the concept of *structure*, which operates in very different ways in conflict sociology and structural functionalism.

Simply put, in conflict sociology “structure” means class structure, and in structural functionalist sociology it means organic unity. This way of putting it may be a bit misleading, since for many people “class” simply means economic status, such as the status of being a poor worker or a wealthy owner-employer. But if the idea of class is expanded to include other forms of status such as education or professional prestige or even skin color, these short definitions work fairly well. (Remember, the Latin word *status* literally means the “standing” that someone has with respect to others, i.e., one’s place in a pecking order.) Another way, though, is to say that the conflict theorist understands structure as *stratification* whereas the structural functionalist understands it as *system*, in which different but complementary parts contribute in their own ways to keep the corporate entity running smoothly, be it a society, biological organism, symphony, or whatever. Whether the opposing groups are defined in terms of culture, property, gender, or some other distinguishing feature, the important thing for conflict theorists is that one group is higher, i.e., dominant, and the other(s) lower. It is of course likely that within each group there will be a large complex of internal relationships, but these relationships are of only secondary interest to a conflict theorist. To a structural functionalist, though, internal relationships are of primary interest, since they can provide the group with the stability it needs to survive and flourish. In a nutshell, then, the point is that conflict sociology examines structure (stratification) but not functionality (organic unity) since – by their shared definition of conflict – conflicting groups (classes) don’t work together to constitute a single, relatively harmonious whole. They are not

⁶ [This note probably should be moved to preceding chapter.] The term “superorganic” was introduced in the 19th century by Herbert Spencer in the first chapter of his *Principles of Sociology* (1876), which argued that although human societies were not biological organisms they had, like biological entities, the emergent property of being constituted by the interaction of lower-order components, be they cells and organisms or individual human beings. A good philosophical account of the concept of an “emergent property” in contemporary social theory is provided in Phillips, 1976.

⁷ “The specificity of the links between ideas and social life can be highlighted by pointing to the fact that there is no larger or more all-encompassing theoretical structure in Weber’s writings into which these two terms ‘fit’” (Schroeder, 1992, p. 7; see also Frisby & Sayer, 1986, pp. 67-72).

understood as playing complementary roles in a larger drama.⁸

To return now to the Chicago School of the 1920s...

Omitted: The rest of this section, which includes the “three waves” of conflict theory: the Chicago School, the Marxian approach of Dahendorf and Mills, and the assimilationist approach of Gordon and Glaser

The Ascent and Decline of Structural Functionalism. Thanks largely to Durkheim’s influence, by the middle of the 1930s the social order had become an object of study in its own right within American and British sociology. It was no longer a dimension of culture but rather a self-standing albeit complex concept whose component concepts were divided into what Durkheim (2001 [1912]) had called “collective relationships” and “collective representations.” For the sociologists who came after him, Durkheim’s distinction gave rise to a parallel distinction between two types of groups. The first type, which was studied by Radcliffe-Brown, comprises groups of *activities*, i.e., institutionalized arrangements such as the legal system or the economic system. The second, which is associated with Parsons, covers groups of *people*, i.e., collectives such as the middle class or ethnic groups. In either case, the theorist’s primary mode of understanding could be structural or functional. Radcliffe-Brown was primarily concerned with identifying the structural relationships that existed between existing social institutions whereas Parsons was more interested in process: he took structures more or less for granted but wanted to know how they functioned, i.e., how by working in concert they held a society together. True to their respective disciplines, neither theorist was very interested in how the institutions or structures actually came about: they had their differences but they were not historians.

Omitted: Discussion of the “three waves” of social functionalism: Radcliffe-Brown’s social equilibrium, Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism, and the “neofunctionalism” of a loose group of sociologists who emphasize human agency and expressive symbolism within a post-Parsonian model of social structures

⁸ To illustrate this point we might imagine how these sociologists would examine a territorial struggle between two states with very different political structures. Suppose one state is an industrialized liberal democracy, and the other an agrarian monarchy. The conflict theorist would look first at the territorial issue between them, and would not be interested in their internal features such as industrialization or governmental institutions unless they were relevant to the inter-state conflict. (Is the disputed territory good farmland? Revered as the monarch’s childhood home? Etc.) The structural functionalist, on the other hand, would want to know more about the nature and degree of interaction within each state, say between industrial production and political participation or between farming and family hierarchies. The inter-state territorial conflict would be important for the structural functionalist only if it were somehow a by-product of the deep differences in their respective internal principles of organization and ways of life. (Is the disputed territory an important agricultural resource? Does its population have important technological skills? Etc.)

The Microsociology of Symbolic Interactionism. For non-sociologists the term “symbolic interactionism” may seem even more opaque than “structural functionalism,” but to insiders it is very descriptive. It was coined in 1937 by Herbert Blumer,⁹ who turned the pragmatist philosophy of his mentor George Herbert Mead into a new sociological theory, one which reaffirmed Weber’s much neglected focus on human meaning (Mead, 1934). For Mead the interpersonal behaviors of individuals were cognitively rich — no suggestions here of lurking automatons — and highly adaptive responses to their social environments. Blumer adapted Mead’s general philosophical approach for what he considered its fully scientific but utterly unique goal of understanding social processes in terms of the subjective meanings they have for individual human beings in their everyday lives. There are other representatives of this view — in addition to Mead one thinks here of the influential German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) as well as Erving Goffman (1958), Harold Garfinkle (1967), and their successors¹⁰ — but Blumer’s sociological application of Mead’s philosophy of human interaction is still the most prominent version of the theory even though Blumer’s name is not as familiar to non-specialists as theirs are.

This approach is called “interactionism” because it begins with easily observable exchanges between concrete individuals such as you and me, i.e., our face-to-face interactions, rather than with impersonal structural relationships supposed to exist within or between social institutions such as the legal system, schools, family lineages, voting practices, or property. Although these exchanges are between real people, they are not idiosyncratic, mysterious, or otherwise unanalyzable, but rather are organized, patterned, and recognizably purposeful. What makes our personal interactions interesting for sociological theory is, first of all, that they cannot be understood apart from the understandings that we have of our own situations and, in consequence, our interpretation of the actions and events we produce (or will produce) in the course of dealing with our situations. But they are even more interesting for a second reason. In symbolic interaction theory the face-to-face interactions that scholarly investigators observe are understood by them in the same way that the real-life participants understand them, namely in terms of the participants’ own definitions of their respective situations. Consequently, interactionist theorists place far less importance than functionalists do on cross-situational norms, beliefs, and values: they look instead at the way real-life participants are constantly readjusting their responses to each other as well as to their new understandings of their continually changing situations.

To give a simple example: When I ask you how you are doing today, I expect a stock reply such as “Fine, and how about you?” and am ready to say back to you something equally brief and cheerful. But as a normal adult speaker I am also more or less ready to hear a novel reply, such as “Not so good. My dog died yesterday,” in which case a whole new situation is created for which I must rapidly calculate what I should then say to you and what you will probably go on to say back to me. The point here is

⁹ “The term ‘symbolic interactionism’ is a somewhat barbaric neologism that I coined in an offhand way in an article written in *Man and Society* [1937] The term somehow caught on and is now in general use” (Blumer, 1969, p. 1n).

¹⁰ Later sociologists working with what might be called the classic symbolic interactionist model include **Howard Becker, John Kituse, Malcolm Spector, and Randall Collins**, to name just a few.

that I am more or less “always already ready” for the unexpected. The whole idea of interaction between humans is that although there are determinate patterns and hence predictability, there is also the indeterminate possibility of *novelty*. Like the paradox about the weather being constantly inconstant, part of the pattern of human interactions is that they break their own patterns. Because interactionists appreciate this patterned patternlessness, they do not conceive social life in terms of socialization mechanisms (as do structural functionalists) or in terms of power plays between groups (as do conflict theorists), but rather in terms of negotiations between members of society that construct temporary alliances, accommodations, and other sorts of one-on-one relationships. These relationships are understood on all sides as inherently subject to change even though the social framework within which those relationships are constructed and reconstructed remains relatively stable.

But why is this approach called “*symbolic interactionism*”? Here we come to the part of the theory that is most relevant to our concern with the concept of culture. As the example shows, symbolic interactionism is centered on our need to adjust our behaviors and responses to others’ behaviors and responses. But these adjustments are not push-pull sorts of reaction, as when a piece of litmus paper turns color if dipped into acid or when a dog salivates at the smell of meat or the sound of Pavlov’s bell. In social situations my response to you comes after I have *interpreted* your actions, which is to say after I have represented them to myself in some sort of symbolic form. My symbols can be graphic and metaphorical (I compare a co-worker to a bull in a china shop) or abstractly categorical and verbal (I say my supervisor is “very authoritarian”), but they are always meaningful — they make sense to me and also, in principle at least, to everyone else, including any onlooking symbolic interactionist who might be sizing up my behavior. Much of this adjusting is anticipatory, in the sense that I stand “more or less ready” to deal with a variety of as yet merely possible responses from others, including you. My ability to think of the world mediately (i.e., via symbols) as well as immediately, is, in effect, my power of imagination. Thanks to this power I can construct and rehearse alternative responses before I act, and can imagine you doing the same thing vis-à-vis my own actions (also imagined) toward you. In sum, symbolic interactionism sees members of society as creative *agents* who construct, or better co-construct, shared meanings that convert their common environment into a social world. This approach is, therefore, militantly opposed to the determinist view, itself a crude caricature of structural functionalism, according to which (1) human beings are utterly passive and, supposedly, (2) the only agency worth considering is the power that norms, beliefs, values, and other sorts of symbols have for socializing people so that they play the roles needed to sustain the existing social order.

Mead’s emphasis on agency fits well into most philosophical theories of human nature according to which people are simultaneously autonomous and socially embedded. (Remember, he was first and foremost a philosopher.) But what does it do for the symbolic interactionist concept of culture, and how is it reflected in the literature of multicultural education? Mead’s answer to this question, especially in his *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), was that culture is essentially the received repertoire of meanings carried by the public symbols that individuals use to communicate and interact with each other. These meanings are themselves subject to revision in that they are filtered through the prior experiences of those concrete individuals who use the designated symbols. Mead’s

view was, therefore, quite different from the top-down view of cultural symbols held by Durkheim and the structural functionalists who followed him, according to which culture supplies ready-made symbols designating the objective meanings needed for holding society together. For Mead conventional meanings were only first drafts, as it were, which individuals revise as needed in order to make sense of their own experiences and actions as well as to interpret the communicative behaviors of the other persons with whom they are interacting.

Omitted: The rest of the discussion of symbolic interactionism, which ends with a transition to the cultural studies movement that is the final approach to culture considered in this chapter

The Cultural Studies Approach to Social Interaction. Blumer's influence on American sociology, first at Chicago and then at Berkeley, was considerable even though his was not the only sociological reconstruction of Mead's philosophical pragmatism (role theory was another; see Collins, 1994). However, about the same time that Blumer wrote the passages just cited, another interactionist account of culture was emerging, first in Britain under the title "cultural studies" and later in the United States under the title "critical multiculturalism." In its early, exclusively British phase sociologists and humanities scholars jointly revisited the relationship between culture and social interaction and, working independently of American symbolic interactionists, arrived at many of the same conclusions regarding symbol production. The origins of the cultural studies movement are usually traced back to the late 1950s when the Welsh social and literary critic Raymond Williams (1958; see also Williams, 1982) introduced what was then a novel historical analysis of the word "culture." He reached back to the 19th century in order to contrast and then reconcile its two dominant conceptions of culture: Tylor's famous definition of culture as the "way of life" of an entire society, and Matthew Arnold's equally famous definition of it as "the best that had been thought and known" by the intellectual and aesthetic leaders of a society.¹¹

At this point the reader might wonder just what a discussion of the literary aspects of culture is doing in a chapter on its sociological definitions. The answer to this question takes us back once again to the contrast between society and culture. Recall that Marx formulated it as the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure, paralleling his distinction between production and ideology. Although cultural studies began as a form of literary criticism, it quickly evolved into a species of sociology thanks to its interest in this distinction and related socioeconomic issues. Thus in 1981 Williams, never one to limit himself to a single definition of culture or anything else, redefined culture in symbolic interactionist terms as

FD4.9 the signifying system through which... a social order is communicated, reproduced and explored. (1981,p. 13)

¹¹ Tylor's definition was discussed at length in the previous chapter. Arnold's definition is a central theme in classical literary criticism, such as T.S. Eliot's *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1949) and F. R. Leavis's *Culture and Environment* (1933; with Denys Thompson).

Two decades later his student Terry Eagleton expanded Williams's idea in what serves as its informal definition:

ID4.9 Behind this definition lurks a structuralist sense of the *active* character of signification, which fits with Williams's proto-post-Marxist insistence that culture is constitutive of other social processes, rather than merely reflecting or representing them. This sort of formulation has the advantage of being specific enough to mean something ("signifying"), but broad enough to be non-elitist. It could take in both Voltaire and vodka ads. (Eagleton 2000, pp. 33-34)

Disciplinary purists might prefer to call cultural studies a mongrel discipline, but its preoccupation with the relationship between culture and social interaction put it squarely in the middle of academic sociology as practiced then and now on both sides of the Atlantic. For instance, at an international conference on the sociology of culture held in 1988 at Bremen, Germany, the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow reviewed attempts by British cultural studies scholars to reconstruct the infrastructure-superstructure distinction by balancing the classical Marxist view that economic structures determine ideology (i.e., culture) with the classical aesthetics view represented by Arnold that a society is shaped by its art. Culture, they argued, was a determinant as well as a product of socioeconomic relations thanks to its textual character and the inner logic of its texts. More specifically, Wuthnow argued that thanks to Williams and his followers at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,¹² "sociology has gone beyond such general [classical Marxist] assertions mainly by specifying more detailed conceptions of social structure and suggesting relations between these contextual factors and various attitudinal or ideological dispositions" (Wuthnow, 1992, p.168). Socioeconomic structures and culture are interactive, not because they have some mysterious material causal influence on each other or because of some equally mysterious historical dynamic but because social contexts are incorporated into cultural objects and practices, and because these objects and practices have their impact on society precisely because people understand them as *texts*.

To be meaningful a text must have an internal structure or "inner logic," the most basic level of which is simply the function of a symbol to point at something beyond itself, which is to say its *referentiality*. Beginning with this basic principle that texts are inherently referential, Wuthnow eventually concluded that sociologists have much to learn from literary theorists. What he said by way of developing this point goes beyond the neo-Marxist views associated with the Birmingham Center, and applies equally well to the more centrist views of American cultural studies theorists who understood culture in terms of taste rather than ideology. "A sociological theory of culture must," he insisted, "for this reason, demonstrate greater awareness of textual construction itself: of genre, methods of objectification, voice, dialogue, interpolation and interpellation, textual authority, redundancy, embedding, parallels, and contrasts" (ibid).

¹² The list includes Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Stuart Hall, and several others whose names often appear in the British literature on multiculturalism well as (though much less often) in the American literature.

In itself the idea of culture as text was neither new nor exclusively British. As we saw in the last chapter, in the United States during the 1960s Clifford Geertz developed the same idea in scholarly articles that were reprinted in his well-known *Interpretation of Culture*. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) made a similar point a few years later in the course of arguing for a methodology that examined various expressions of a people's behavior in order to understand the "cultural logic" of their social practice. But to this basic idea of culture as text Williams and those British sociologists who later continued his project added a second, an idea that still dominates current work in cultural studies and justifies including it under the rubric of symbolic interaction. This is the three-sided idea that cultures arise in specific, interactive social settings, that a group's cultural objects reflect its social setting, and that this relationship is found in the indirect interpersonal exchanges characteristic of large groups as well as in direct interactions between a handful of individuals. Picking up on this idea Eagleton (1976) refined Williams's own refinement of Marx's distinction between infrastructure and superstructure by expanding the very notion of production. His critical insight, quickly embraced by his Birmingham colleagues, was that although the social environment of any group of human beings is shaped primarily by its mode(s) of production – so far this is perfectly orthodox Marxism – economic production is only one of these modes. Literary production and cultural production in general are also very important: like economic production they are not simple organic unities, nor are they mere jumbles of disconnected coincidences and unintended consequences. They are what the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) called "articulated" processes, in which opposing tendencies and loose ends exist and operate alongside harmonious systems that have well-oiled components and subfunctions.

In other words, what is brought together in the course of producing a car or an entire automotive industry, a novel or a new literary genre, a clothing style or a whole way of life, does not form a well-integrated whole or a smoothly running system. Mapping these articulations in society at large as well as in the literary and art worlds was the task that Eagleton and his fellow cultural studies theorists set for themselves. However, "mapping" is not the best word here. Drawing on their skills at literary analysis, they took as the paradigmatic mode of production not cartography but authorship, which is of course the obverse or flip side of their decision to treat cultural products as texts. This approach dominated their otherwise quite varied treatments of culture: like all texts, a culture – or an object or practice within that culture – is shaped by the social relations in play when it was produced, especially the social relations in contest at the time. *Hamlet* could not have been written in the French medieval court of Louis I, any more than the world stock market crash of 1929 could have taken place in Imperial Rome. Furthermore, the social conditions of Elizabethan England channeled not only Shakespeare's imagination but also his conceptions of the makeup of his audience and the ways in which he could reach them. For him there were no oversized masks in Greek amphitheaters or declamations in Nordic mead halls, no paperback anthologies or internet web sites, no films or DVDs. Shakespeare knew quite well that his principal access to the public was through the Globe Theatre and word of mouth in the streets of London.

Even so, the cultural studies theorists were quite aware that social conditions do not by themselves bring into being either social or literary texts. Authors are individual human agents but they are never islands. In cultural studies the underlying assumption is

an extension (usually unacknowledged) of the symbolic interactionist thesis that authorship is always some sort of co-authorship, not in the obvious sense of formal collaboration but in the background sense typically acknowledged in book prefaces. A given text is the outcome of an ongoing conversation with other persons, some of whom are close friends and others distant but nonetheless real influences on the way one writes about the world.

To summarize so far, we may say that sometime in the middle or late 1980s the British cultural studies theorists (and later their American counterparts, as we will see momentarily) no longer thought of culture as a code that rules the social lives of individuals and/or the structures of society as a whole, analogous to a professional code of conduct, a genetic code, or even a translation code. They believed instead that their new conception of culture as an assemblage of texts called for a new methodology. Unlike cognitive anthropologists such as Goodenough or semiotic anthropologists such as Geertz these scholars did not try to discern a cultural code by means of field observation and ethnographic analysis, and unlike positivist sociologists they did not try to “read off” any such code from statistical data about behavioral patterns, values, attitudes, preferences, religious beliefs, or political engagements. Instead they examined the ways in which cultural symbols, objects and practices are *produced* by group activities – typically, the social interactions of middle-sized groups such as members of a given profession but sometimes those of larger groups such as the members of a socio-economic class or the audiences reached by the mass media.

Williams himself refused to give a definitive definition of culture, and instead made the frequently quoted comment that it is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1983, p. 87). It may be for this reason that clear and distinct definitions of culture are hard to find within the literature of this movement. But the mainstream sociologists in America who took the cultural studies movement seriously were more bold. Two lengthy reviews of the cultural studies movement were published in sociology journals in 1988 (Wuthnow and Witten, 1988; Blau, 1988; see also Blau, 1989), and two years later a special symposium entitled “The Many Facets of Culture Symbols and Social Life: The Growth of Cultural Studies” was featured in the prestigious journal *Contemporary Sociology*. In his editorial introduction to that symposium Richard Peterson (1990) supplied useful formal and informal definitions of culture as seen through the lens of cultural studies. Even though he retained the metaphor of “encoding” he regarded the cultural code not as an impersonal social fact but rather as something that real people produce and use:

FD4.10 In this perspective culture represents the symbols that people use to encode and convey various forms of information: knowledge, power, authority, affect, merit, beauty, and virtue. Such symbolic elements also serve individuals and groups to identify those of like kind and to mark distinctions from others. (Peterson, 1990, p. 498)

The core idea of FD4.10 is twofold: (1) symbols are things that people use to house meanings in the course of interacting with each other and (2) these housings are produced for this purpose by the people themselves. The symbols that constitute a culture are conventions, not natural signs, which is to say that they are socially constructed and

not simply lying around waiting to be discovered. The uses that people make of symbols are manifold, but they all have something to do with a group's social interaction. A calculus class begins by constructing a meaning for the symbol Δ , flags and badges are designed to symbolize power and authority, certain kinds of presents are given as tokens of affection whereas others are rewards, and so on. One of the most important uses of symbols is to delimit and maintain the group itself, as FD4.10 also states. Then, in what serves as his informal definition of culture, Peterson went on to show how this usage, i.e., the conception of culture as product, is manifested in the research agenda of cultural studies:

ID4.10 Scholars employing this usage of culture focus on how such symbolic codes are produced, what they teach, and how they are used in the competition between classes and collectivities ranging in size from nations to scientific research laboratories. (Ibid.)

The focus within the cultural studies movement on the production and use of symbolic codes, described by Peterson in ID4.10, has been widened by the work that some of its representatives have done on the related topic of cultural *consumption*. Over the last three or four decades this has become a major research area within the cultural studies sector of sociology. Here the emphasis is on how and why different groups select different cultural objects and practices or, more grandly put, it is on the "aesthetic" of specific social groups. Interest in this topic has been especially strong in the United States, where sociologists of culture revised the concept of a "subculture" to reflect differences in tastes rather than in economic class. This was hardly a new idea. As we saw above it had been a major theme in conflict theory, especially Gordon's work on assimilation. However, it remained for symbolic interactionists such as Howard Becker (1986; Becker & McCall, 190) and like-minded sociologists such as Herbert Gans (1974 [1991]) or, in England, Dick Hebdige (1979) to distinguish between subcultures and "subsocieties," and thereby overcome the virtually ubiquitous tendency in postwar sociology to reify and homogenize the concept of a subculture.

To appreciate the importance of this move a little background is needed. Until the 1970s the standard sociological strategy for identifying a subculture was to draw a logical circle around a group of people and then collect case studies or survey data in hopes of drawing general conclusions about the group, such as the nature, degree, and sources of its "deviancy" from the larger population. Most of the selection criteria used were straightforward, easily accessible demographic data such as age or gender, but two of the most important criteria, class and race, were much more complex and problematic. Although the most significant studies of subcultures used multiple criteria, e.g., young black males or poor Puerto Rican families, multiplying the criteria only compacted the target group without de-reifying its corresponding subculture. However, all this changed when attention shifted from social indices to cultural consumption, which is to say from objective groupings to subjective tastes.

Gans's distinction between "taste cultures" and "taste publics" provides a good entry into this rather tangled literature. After insisting that highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow cultures all count as cultures (he actually distinguished five such levels), Gans observed that at each level individual human beings are consuming — and hence creating

a demand for — not only useful material goods and services such as cars but also supervenient symbols that have strong aesthetic value. For instance, people buy cars that are not only sensible but also richly gratifying because of their pleasing lines, intimations of prestige or sexual prowess, associations with famous personalities, and so on. When such aesthetic qualities overlie its utilitarian values, a useful commodity like a car can also function as a symbol and hence be a cultural object. Gans's term "taste culture" referred to a congeries of similar cultural objects; a "taste public" was the collection of people who are attracted to these objects. To these terms I would add a third, "cultural style," which the educator-anthropologist John Ogbu and other social theorists sometimes use when they have in mind the cultural practices (rather than cultural objects) that define what Gans called a taste culture.

Unlike Williams and others in England who celebrated "working class culture" as the taste culture most directly associated with the moral ideal of human solidarity, American theorists like Gans were less interested in class or other political issues, partly because the historical correlation between affluence and high culture had not been so tight in the United States, partly because they saw cultural production and consumption as two sides of a free market economy rather than the hegemony of a ruling class, and perhaps — but only perhaps — also because it may have been easier in America to navigate between social classes as well as between cultural orientations. For instance, it is supposedly more common in the United States to have friends from very different social classes, for a single person to have equally robust highbrow and lowbrow musical tastes, and so on. For these and perhaps other reasons having to do with the different histories of the two nations, the American cultural studies theorists seem to have been more interested in preserving respect for diversity than in privileging working class culture, though one makes such generalizations very cautiously (but see the essays on "cultivating differences" in Lamont and Fournier's [1991] volume by that name). Although they generally agree that some taste cultures are more comprehensive than others and hence more likely to expand the interest-horizons of members of the corresponding taste public, they believe that all taste cultures do in fact provide genuine gratification and should be respected accordingly. Gans calls this normative claim "aesthetic pluralism" (p. 171). Not surprisingly, this ideal if not the phrase itself is a regular theme in the literature of the "culture wars" (refs) as well as the more general literature of multicultural education. However — again not surprisingly — it is a vigorously contested ideal, owing to what it says or fails to say about cultural hegemony and social critique.

The comparison in the preceding paragraph between American and British cultural studies theorists is, admittedly, a rather tenuous generalization. There is no lack of contemporary American theorists who follow the British agenda, according to which cultural studies is directly engaged with the political dimensions and effects of popular culture. As Ben Aggers explains in the final chapter of his aptly named *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory* (1991), "The Birmingham school offers the best single example of a theoretically sophisticated cultural studies that manages to address popular cultural works and practices using structural understandings afforded by comprehensive social theories" (p. 178). The theorists he has in mind are primarily those inspired by the aforementioned (?) Frankfurt school of critical theory, according to which seemingly self-standing, apolitical cultural practices and symbols are co-opted or "colonized" by the

socioeconomic system in order to preserve existing structures of dominance and oppression. A favorite example used by cultural studies theorists who draw on critical theory is the way women are represented in the media, according to which the feminist ideal is to be “attractive” (in the most literal sense of that term) to men, which is to say to be willing participants in the social structure of male domination. Other, often much more subtle uses of cultural symbols that maintain the status quo are found across the spectrum of “high” and “low” cultures. Or better, they are *produced* across that spectrum, so that what Gans called a taste cultures are regarded not as innocent, each-to-one’s-own sorts of preference but rather – to speak more bluntly than culture theorists usually do – as thinly disguised brainwashing.

What are we to think of such claims? Is the critical theory version of cultural studies fundamentally paranoid or at least oblivious to the “aesthetic values” inherent in popular as well as classical culture? Do the productions of the so-called culture industry reflect intrinsically wholesome tastes of the consuming public or do they rather create corrosive desires, attitudes, and beliefs that ensure continued acceptance on all sides of unjust social structures? I will let readers answer these questions for themselves, but it should be obvious that these are not abstruse sociological or philosophical issues of little interest to educators. They are the heart and soul of the important branch of education known as critical multiculturalism, to which we will return in the final chapter. For now, suffice it to say that here again we are confronted with two classic conundrums of sociology: (1) *the question of agency* (Are we the creators or the creations of our social order?) and (2) *the relationship between culture and society* (Do our beliefs, values, and other symbols shape the way we organize our public lives or are they shaped by it?). It is easy to say in each case that there are always instances of feedback and reciprocity between the alternatives, but the question of emphasis remains. My own view, to which I will return in the final chapter, is that there is no once-and-for-all answer to either conundrum. The answers are always local: in some times and places agency is strong and culture shapes society, whereas in other times and places the reverse is true. Whether there can be cases in which agency is strong but culture is a mere echo or tool of the socioeconomic order (or vice versa) is less clear, but I see no reason why the relation between agency and structure or that between culture and society must be the same everywhere and for everyone.

Conclusion

By now it should be clear that the primacy which symbolic interactionism assigned to individual agency made it a much different sociological model of culture than the other two featured in this chapter. Their difference was in methodology as well as in scale and political relevance. Symbolic interaction became acceptable as a form of social theory when sociologists accustomed to dealing with large social structures eventually unbent and admitted this approach into their discipline under the category “microsociology,” on the grounds that even a pair of interlocutors can be considered a group, especially when the conversation in question is seen as part of a larger, society-wide symbol system. They also accepted related approaches from outside their disciplines such as ethnomethodology, cognitive frame theory, critical theory, and various forms of cultural

studies. It is in fact fair to say that just as in the 1970s and 80s conflict theorists and structural functionalists began to incorporate important parts of each other's paradigms, as the 20th century wound down these sociologists also began to make room in their respective approaches for important parts of the social interactionist paradigm.

The contemporary scene is even more deeply nondenominational. Although one still finds introductory sociology courses and textbooks that divide the discipline into the three conceptual models featured in this chapter, the borders of those models are now much more porous and conceptual traffic across the borders is increasingly commonplace. Over the last few decades conflict theorists expanded the notion of conflict beyond the early conception of class conflict as founded on economic issues, and now often use functionalist language to account for the inner solidarity of groups – especially ethnic groups – standing in opposition to each other. Structural functionalists have also loosened up. They still tend to privilege the role of values as the determinants of culture and as bonding agents that hold together the various institutions of society, but neo-functionalists now insist that values are more often the by-products of unexpected social events rather than their causes. To make this point, they take an interactionist approach to symbol-making and cultural production that is often indistinguishable from the approaches taken by scholars who explicitly identify themselves with the symbolic interactionist tradition. But here again theory has widened its scope, and the distinction between micro- and macrosociology is blurred. The work of even the most orthodox modern-day symbolic interactionists shows they are much more cognizant than their predecessors were of the larger social context within which individuals create and negotiate the meanings of symbols, even though most of their empirical research continues to focus on small group interactions rather than large-scale phenomena such as demographic changes or opinion surveys.

In short, the three main sociological traditions have opened their borders in ways that would probably have been unthinkable to their respective founders. Furthermore, several new approaches – it is too early to call them traditions – have emerged over the last two or three decades. Of these the most relevant to multiculturalists is the cultural studies approach described above. It is so widely eclectic and so diverse in its methods of inquiry that it is sometimes hard to be sure it can be called sociology. But like the three classical forms of sociology we have reviewed in this chapter, cultural studies addresses questions of agency, the relationship between society and culture, and most fundamentally, the very use of symbols as vehicles of meaning.

The borders between the social sciences are also much more open textured these days. This is especially true of sociology and anthropology, and even more especially true of their respective approaches to culture. The very idea of a distinctively sociological definition of culture — distinct, that is, from anthropological definitions — is problematic to say the least, in spite of Parsons's attempt to separate the two disciplines. Many sociologists begin their discussions of culture by citing classical anthropological definitions, such as the open-ended “complex whole” definition formulated by Tylor or the more careful and tighter “patterns transmitted by symbols” formulation by Kroeber and Kluckhohn. Parsons himself did not hesitate to draw from the work of Boasian anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir, as well as that of non-Boasians such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, in order to develop his paradigm of holistic structures. In the latter part of the 20th century anthropologists returned the compliment,

with Geertz and other interpretative anthropologists such as David Schneider picking up and running with Parsons's semiotic conception of culture. Also (to Geertz's dismay) Ward Goodenough and cognitive anthropologists such as Bradd Shore picked up Mead's interactionist conception.

But in spite of all this interpenetration, there is still a basic difference between the ways sociologists and anthropologists talk about culture. Part of the difference is historical, by which I mean not that anthropologists are interested in history and sociologists are not (though that is often the case), but rather that the history of anthropology is much different than that of sociology. Anthropology came of age in an era when so-called primitive cultures were accessible through careful field research but not so heavily influenced by western ways as to call into question the ethnographies generated by that research. Until recently the peoples studied were "out there," relatively small in number, politically and economically stable, and supposedly uniform in the sense of having only one overall culture within which a handful of subcultures could function without contesting the authority of the main culture. Whatever social or cultural complexity existed was, to put it mildly, not considered problematic by either the observers in their pith helmets or the respondents in their loincloths. Furthermore, the boundaries of the culture coincided with the geographical boundaries within which the cultural groups lived. Every culture had its own postal code, so to speak.

As time went on, cultural research became much more challenging for anthropologists, partly because they had become more sophisticated and more ambitious and partly because the world they studied had changed. They turned their attention to the cultural features of more complex societies: diasporic peoples, colonized and partly westernized groups, religiously diverse groups, and — perhaps most difficult of all — the societies and subsocieties within which the anthropologists themselves had come of age. And then, to make matters even more complicated, the very concept of culture was called into question by members of their own guild.

None of this happened in sociology. Although sociologists do not always limit their inquiries to their own societies, sociological forays into "the bush" are rare, and there is little that is exotic much less incommensurable in the groups these scholars investigate or the data they collect. True, with increased industrialization came new areas of inquiry for sociologists, especially as social and economic institutions became more international. Also, as political structures developed — here one thinks of the Civil Rights struggles in the United States — society changed and with the change came new questions for sociologists. But except for the aforementioned challenge that interactionist theory has posed to determinist conceptions of agency (or better, non-agency), sociology has not called into question its basic conception of society as an observer-independent object of scholarly investigation. Nor has it seriously revised its view of culture as a symbol set of values, beliefs, and norms, since even the most revisionary symbolic interactionist is willing to think of culture in these terms as long as it is understood that individuals can shape and reshape the meanings housed by these symbols.

What does all this mean for multicultural educators or preservice education students who are trying to find their way through the forest of theoretical and practical literature on multiculturalism? Here are a few answers to this question, though there are surely more.

First of all, it really does matter in a very deep way just how a book or article about multicultural education defines culture. If the definition comes out of a sociological tradition, as did most of the definitions in the early stage of multicultural education that identified itself as Cultural Pluralism, then there is reason to expect that institutional structure is being emphasized over human agency. Whether this emphasis is appropriate is something the reader must decide, but to make such a decision it is first necessary to be aware that the book or article contains such an issue. Even though the author may not thematize the issue or be clear where he or she stands on it, a critical reader needs to see what message is being sent or, even more fundamentally, whether there is really any message at all.

Also (this is still part of the first point) the reader must be prepared for surprises. A multicultural education author might draw references from the classical sociological tradition but bend over backwards to resist any tendency to privilege structure over agency. Such resistance could be influenced by the third sociological conception discussed above even if (maybe for reasons clear only to a wise editor) the definitions the author formulates actually represent one or both of the first two traditions. Or perhaps he or she has drawn from both sociological and anthropological literature and is trying to weave together several quite different conceptions of culture. Whatever the case, the multicultural education author may have written a very good book or a very bad one but, before deciding that question, the reader should understand what in fact the author was trying to do.

Secondly, the way an author defines culture should have something to do with the way he or she understands the basic agenda of multicultural education. If there is no connection, it is not a good book, but that situation is much different from one where there is a connection to an agenda that the reader does not recognize or does not agree with. For instance, if culture is defined in terms of its historical dimension — customs, sacred rituals, etc. — it is reasonable to assume that the author believes that the point of multicultural education is to develop a horizon within which the literature, folkways, and religious traditions of other cultural groups can be understood and respected. If culture is defined in terms of conflict and oppression, the author probably has a justice-oriented conception of multicultural education. If culture is defined in terms of interpersonal discourse situations, the author may be focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. And so on.

Thirdly, some authors may have misgivings about the very concept of culture, in which case it is hard to predict what they will have to say about multicultural education. However, it would be consistent with such a view for them to weigh in on such contested issues as bicultural identity, stereotyping, and so on. Perhaps they have misgivings not about the concept of culture as such but rather about the tendency of mainstream multiculturalists to focus on cultural traits such as foods and festivals at the expense of social issues, such worries and misgivings are fine as long as the argument is coherent. Unfortunately, as we will see in the next chapter, coherence is not a universal hallmark of professional discussions of multicultural education.