

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Concept of Culture in Anthropology: Knowledge Base I

This chapter and the next constitute a dual knowledge base designed to help educators come to grips with the many very different notions of culture that they encounter in the literature of multicultural education. In view of the diversity one finds in other disciplines that deal with culture it would be unreasonable to expect to find in that literature a single notion of culture, and even more unreasonable to expect a truly original meaning for that term. The proper subject matter is education, not culture or for that matter any of the other important load-bearing concepts used by multiculturalists, such as personal identity, cognitive development, and social justice. Such concepts are imported from other disciplines such as philosophy and the social and behavioral sciences, where they have long and complex histories. As is the case with these other imports, culture is a highly contested concept, a fact that education theorists seldom allow for when they use it in their discussions of multicultural issues. It is not enough for them to identify their use of the concept as, say, “the anthropological sense of culture” since within the scholarly discipline of anthropology (which includes various sorts of ethnography) there are many very different uses of the term. The same point holds for the other major forms of social theory that thematize culture, namely sociology and its offspring and close neighbor cultural studies.

Ideally, every textbook or scholarly analysis concerning multicultural education would clearly indicate not only the specific academic discipline from which it draws its conception of culture but also the scholars or schools of thought that have been most influential for its author. In this ideal scenario each book or article would also provide its readers with a short but serious explanation of its source concepts, so that they could appreciate just where the author is coming from and how he or she fits into the larger scene of multicultural education scholarship. Unfortunately, in this literature such acknowledgments and clarifications are rare and seldom go beyond a bit of name dropping, a stylized quotation, and perhaps one or two relatively useless scholarly citations whose main purpose seems to be to reassure readers that the authors have done their homework. We are usually left to ourselves to do the heavy interpretative work needed to appreciate the authors’ own standpoints on culture. Furthermore, even when an author produces an informative definition of culture (with or without reference to its sources), we must also figure out by ourselves just what the this definition of culture has to do with the rest of the book or article under discussion: i.e., how it relates to the author’s main pedagogical or curricular themes, the underlying agenda, and so on.

In Chapter 4 I will show how to interpret multicultural education materials in the light of the major conceptions of culture found in the relevant classical and contemporary social theories. However, for that chapter to make sense it is necessary first to chart the logical geography of the social theories themselves. To this end I have provided the two closely related knowledge bases that make up this chapter (about anthropology) and the next one (about sociology and cultural studies). Both chapters are fairly detailed, but experienced education scholars will recognize that here as in other sorts of knowledge bases the goal is to provide them with a supportive *context*, which means to provide a generous amount of historical and thematic detail. For instance, to properly understand Franz Boas’s holistic view of cultures one should understand why and how his view challenged and eventually surpassed E. B. Tylor’s earlier view of cultures as stages of

civilization as well as how it foreshadowed the structuralist functionalist paradigm of Talcott Parsons. Also, one should understand just what a “holistic view” is, how it differs from, say, a “functional” or “cognitive” view, and – in the case of anthropology – how these various themes appear in the ethnographies produced at the time. Admittedly, these two chapters include a welter of information, and so to move things along I use the device introduced above, of packing this information in the format of Formal and Informal Definitions.

In addition to building adequate historical and thematic contexts for tracking the concept of culture, my anthropology and sociology knowledge bases are meant to provide an interpretative key that will help readers identify the conception of culture on which a given book or article about multicultural education has been constructed. Chapter 4 does just this for a number of such works, but the larger purpose of this book is to enable its readers to do this sort of thing for themselves. To adapt the ancient proverb about teaching someone to fish, the point of these two knowledge base chapters and the interpretive chapter that follows them is not to provide a definitive interpretation of various multiculturalist approaches to culture but rather to give its readers the necessary tools to do their own “cultural fishing.”

### **The Strange Career of Culture: Early Days in Anthropology**

As its etymology shows, the term “culture” originally evoked the notion of *cultivatio*, which itself evokes inherently developmental notions such as growth, maturation, and progress. It was therefore a short step from the original, biological idea of cultivating crops and other sorts of organisms (including the human body, the subject of what used to be called “physical culture”) to the educational idea of developing or “cultivating” a person’s mind or character. The supposedly universal methods and criteria for successful human development were rooted in Europe’s ancient classics and the subsequent Judeo-Christian tradition. However, the term “culture” has its own complex developmental history, or as Michele Moody-Adams (1997) has put it, its own “strange career.” The sense of culture as a transnational set of intellectual, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities stands in sharp contrast to the nationalistic notion of culture identified with the 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1970 [1784-1791]), for whom culture was the expression of the way of life and self-understanding that a community or nation has of itself. Historians of ideas generally refer to the first notion as the (typically French) Enlightenment view of culture and the second as the (typically German) Romantic view, but it is more useful here to contrast Herder’s idea of a people’s “common culture” with Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1903a [1792], 1903 [1793]) more cosmopolitan notion of *Bildung*, the humanistic cultivation of what then counted as human flourishing. During the decades following von Humboldt, the generic notion of cultivation was projected beyond the developmental career of the individual onto the intellectual and political history of the social group. It eventually corresponded fairly closely to the notion of “civilization,” picking up the latter notion’s Hegelian connotation of a dialectical evolution running from an early primitive stage through “barbaric” stages toward an ultimate stage of high civilization that was considered the same for all societies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I say the terms corresponded only “fairly closely” for two reasons. First, civilization is, etymologically speaking, found in the city (*civis*), which suggested to the early anthropologists influenced by E. B. Tylor that

## Anthropology's Founding Father: E. B. Tylor

It was at this point in the history of the concepts of culture and civilization that the modern academic discipline of anthropology was born. The birth occurred when the British founder of anthropology, E. B. Tylor, transformed the concepts of civilization and culture by setting aside the two major developmental paradigms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Hegelian dialectic of spirit or *Geist* (Hegel, 1807) that still flourished in Germany and parts of England, and the more or less orthodox Darwinian models of biological evolution promulgated by Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and others. In the first case, the rejection was only by omission. As a student Tylor had spent several years in Germany and was familiar with German approaches to history, especially that taken by the philosopher-historian-librarian Gustav Klemm in his ten-volume "cultural history" of mankind (1843-52). However, what was central for Tylor was neither Hegel's *Geist* nor Marx's equally abstract construct of economic class, but rather the basics of practical social existence: language, tools, food, family, and so on. This privileging of the practical has outlived Tylor's signature conflation of culture and civilization. Even now, well over a century later, anthropology texts typically introduce the concept of culture by citing the formal definition with which Tylor opened his monumental *Primitive Culture* (1871, p. 1):

FD2.1 Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Ibid.)

To elucidate this formal definition, Tylor immediately followed it up with an informal definition that included a truly momentous goal statement: to equip his readers "for the study of laws of human thought and action." In doing so he showed why it is important to investigate the contents of any culture at all. He must have felt that not everyone would agree with his view that the scientific study of culture, which we must remember was a new idea at that time, is totally different from reading a traveler's journal.

ID2.1 The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes; while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future. (Ibid.)

As this passage shows, Tylor was concerned with the general question of how "the conditions of culture" (note that he does not speak of "cultures") developed in various societies.

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civilizations are later forms of human society and hence higher sorts of culture. Second, non-anthropologists such as Max Weber who were influenced by Karl Marx as well as by Tylor tended to regard civilization as the structure of a society's material life, and culture as the structure of its moral and symbolic life.

Like most social theorists of his time, he cheerily subscribed to a stage-developmental model of change, which has its own suppositions and logic (on the general logic of development, see van Haften and Wren, 1997). In our present context, this means that Tylor understood the task of anthropology (or as he preferred to say, *ethnography*) in terms of a single linear sequence from less to more complexity. As he put it, “By simply placing nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits ... ethnographers are able to set up a rough scale of civilization — a transition from the savage state to our own” (ibid.).

Tylor was not unique in his use of a developmental “scale” to compare societies with each other — by that time evolution had become an extremely popular albeit still contested concept in scholarly circles — but he was definitely unique in his rejection of the then-current notion that *racial* heredity is the motor of cultural change. Tylor spoke of his theory as evolutionary anthropology, but it was *cultural* and not biological evolution that he had in mind.<sup>2</sup> Even so, his evolutionary model had the direct and momentous implication that the peoples of the earth could be ranked according to “its various grades” (ibid.). Since for him Civilization with a capital “C” was a univocal concept, it followed that some societies were simply *more* civilized than others. Furthermore, although in FD2.1 he talks about knowledge and belief as well as custom and art, Tylor’s notion of culture as civilization was focused mainly on relatively noncognitive and seemingly modular behaviors and practices — anthropologists call them cultural “traits” — such as weaving or using bows and arrows, which could be easily passed on or “diffused” from one group to the next.

Tylor himself did not pursue the idea of diffusion, since like most 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists he was primarily concerned with internal, evolutionary explanations — though always with the proviso that what evolved was the practical life and organizational structure of the group, not the genetic structure of individual organisms. However, his immediate successors split into the diffusionist and evolutionist camps, whose respective metaphors were the spatial picture of ever-wider concentric circles (change as geographical movement) and the temporal picture of ever-greater organic complexity (change as historical growth). In either case, though, cultural change was described at the surface level, with little or no reference to the underlying social or cognitive structures specific to those groups. True, Tylor proposed in ID2.1 that cultures be studied in terms of “general principles” of social development by which stages evolve according to “the laws of thought and action,” However, the form and content of these stages were by no means culture-specific. On the contrary: cultural stages were rungs on a universal ladder. Tylor did not claim that all social groups had passed through every stage or rung, but he did think they were all moving upward more or less quickly on the same ladder. Hence he understood the task of anthropology as the search for the general principles (“the uniform action

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<sup>2</sup>Tylor’s notion of cultural evolution, never entirely dead, was reincarnated a century later by Richard Dawkins (1976) and E. O. Wilson (Lumsden and Wilson, 1981) as a quasi-mathematical model analogous to contemporary genetic theory, with “memes” — analogues of genes — as the unit of analysis. The most effective opponent of this view is the well-known geneticist R. C. Lewontin, who claims that science and society inevitably influence each other (Lewontin, 1991). It seems unlikely that this still-continuing debate will affect the literature and practices of multicultural education, owing to its highly technical nature as well as its apparent irrelevance to curricular and instructional issues. However, one never knows in advance how intellectual currents will affect each other or how they will enter into public discourse about society and education.

of uniform causes”) according to which societies moved up the ladder.

We see here the same attitude toward other cultures that was to resurface almost a century later as what multiculturalists now call the cultural deficit model. Just as reform-minded educators of the 1960s believed that minority children have trouble in school not because of their racial constitution but rather because their home cultures do not properly prepare them for academic challenges, so Tylor believed that the “lower races” are lower only because their ways of life were not (yet) suited for the technological, religious, and other sorts of practices associated with “more civilized” peoples. The main differences between Tylor’s view and the cultural deficit model were that (1) the latter focused on individuals (schoolchildren) rather than on the group and still more significantly, and (2) its purpose was to *intervene* — to speed up the children’s developmental clock, so to speak. Tylor had no such focus or purpose. He considered himself a scientist, not an educator or social engineer (like most anthropologists then and now, he had profound misgivings about the effects of religious missionaries in the field). He was interested in understanding the march of civilization, not changing it.

Anticipating the reflexive turn of postmodern ethnographers such as James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), he recognized that changes are introduced into a group’s cultural style when *any* outsider, even an observant ethnographer, comes on the scene.<sup>3</sup> To his great credit, Tylor also realized that the history of any people is full of such intrusions: investigation always revealed that many words, tools, artifacts, and practices of the people under investigation were imported rather than invented, and so in making sense of their data the ethnographers’ first theoretical challenge — after confirming that the observation activities in the field had not significantly distorted the way of life they were studying — was to separate the imports (cultural diffusion) from the inventions (cultural evolution in its strict, nonbiological sense). Having done this, their next challenge was to catalog and compare these inventions with the multitudinous inventions of other peoples in the world, in hopes of establishing which products and practices were not only invented but also universal and, even more to the point, whether these products and practices evolve in the same way everywhere.

However, although Tylor thought of himself as an objective scholar and not a social reformer, one finds in his scholarly work a profoundly moral concern that less civilized people not be written off as terminally barbaric. In this respect he sounds much like the early advocates of the Head Start program, who insisted that every child has the same educational potential, and the same right to the environmental conditions for realizing that potential (see Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Like Tylor, they disconnected race and culture, but they also — again like Tylor — assumed that both race and culture were “facts.” From our current perspective, in which race and culture are both understood as social constructions, this assumption seems naïve (and it was), but we must not shortchange either Tylor or Head Start educators. In both cases they saw through the pretensions of the biological explanation of human behavior that was then firmly in place notwithstanding its manifest and vicious racist implications. It is for this reason that I have ascribed to Tylor a moralistic concern that he probably would disown if he were alive to read

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<sup>3</sup>“It happens unfortunately that but little evidence as to the history of civilization is to be got by direct observation, that is, by contrasting the condition of a low race at different times, so as to see whether its culture has altered in the meanwhile. The contact requisite for such an inspection of a savage tribe by civilized men, has usually had much the same effect as the experiment which an inquisitive child tries upon the root it puts into the ground the day before, by digging it up to see whether it has grown” (Tylor, 1965, p. 159).

these pages. Consider, for instance, how he dealt with this question in one of his earliest scientific works, which bears the formidable title *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865). In a chapter entitled “Growth and Decline of Culture,” Tylor sharply criticized “the late Archbishop Whately,” who had claimed that self-improvement (i.e., cultural evolution, understood at this point exclusively as invention) was impossible for “the lower races.”<sup>4</sup>

To refute Whately, Tylor marshalled ethnographic data, not moral arguments. In the course of doing so he exploited an anthropological remark made by none other than Charles Darwin, to the effect that the practical skills of the Fuegians (people of Tierra del Fuego) had apparently stopped evolving, since even their most ingenious work, the canoe, had not changed over the last 250 years. Commenting on Darwin, Tylor offered the following ethnographical account (hereafter marked as EA)<sup>5</sup> to show that this arrested development is the result of environmental conditions, not limitations inherent in the people themselves:

EA2.1 But it must be noticed, that neither is the wretched hand-to-mouth life of the Fuegians favourable to progress, nor can a bark canoe ten feet long, holding four or five grown persons, beside children, dogs, implements, and weapons, and in which a fire can be kept burning on a hearth in the rough sea off Tierra del Fuego, be without tolerable sea-going qualities. As to workmanship, the modern Fuegian bark canoes are intermediate between the very rude ones of the Australian coast and the highly finished ones of North America, and it does not appear that their build may not be considerably better (or worse) than at the time of the visit of Sarmiento de Gamboa, in the sixteenth century. But the most remarkable thing in the whole matter, is the fact that the Fuegians should have had canoes at all, while coast-tribes across the straits made shift with rafts. This was of course a fact familiar to Mr. Darwin, and in the very next sentence after that quoted above, he actually goes on to ascribe to the Fuegian race the invention of their art of boat-building. “Whilst beholding these savages, one asks, whence have they come? What could have tempted, or what change compelled a tribe of men to leave the fine regions of the north, to travel down the Cordillera or backbone of America, to invent and build canoes, and then to enter on one of the most inhospitable countries within the limits of the globe?” Of this part of Mr. Darwin’s remarks, however, Archbishop Whately did not think it necessary to take notice. (Ibid., p. 162)

I have called this description an “ethnographic account” because that is literally what it is. Unlike sociological studies, which typically look at a small set of variables and a large

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<sup>4</sup>How, one might ask in passing, did Whately think civilization got started in the first place? His answer was simple: by “supernatural revelation.” We must remember that he was an archbishop.

<sup>5</sup>Where appropriate I am attaching short “Ethnographic Accounts” (EAs) such as this one for the convenience of readers unfamiliar with the discipline of anthropology, which attaches great importance to the ethnographic record of on-site investigation, i.e., fieldwork. These little snapshots will, I hope, provide a sense of what classical anthropologists were trying to do and how different their knowledge bases and methodologies were from those of sociologists and educational theorists, for whom attention to concrete details and quasi-narrative interpretation are usually either avoided or at most tolerated in the course of constructing an objective “big picture” based on statistical data. As the concept of culture became increasingly problematic so did the criteria for authentic ethnography.

number of subjects, Tylor's account is relatively detailed and unabashedly interpretative. However, it was not exactly *his* account, since like most of his anthropological data it was drawn from other people's field experiences. Though he had traveled extensively, Tylor was mainly an armchair ethnologist, if only because his comparative method required having information about literally hundreds of different peoples, including those of antiquity, pre-modern Europe, and the newly "discovered" New World. In the tradition of British empiricism, Tylor understood his task to be one of comparing and correlating data that were, quite literally, "givens" (recall that *datum* and *data* are from the Latin verb *dare*, and mean "that which is given"). Travelers, missionaries, occasionally an itinerant anthropologist would send him reports of what they had seen, and Tylor would collate and order this information in hopes of establishing patterns whereby certain features of social evolution such as the practical skills of the Fuegians would emerge. These reports, it hardly needs to be said, did not include what Clifford Geertz (1973), following the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, would later recommend as "thick description" of a culture, which goes below a culture's observable features – artifacts, rituals, social structures, etc. – to describe the intentional features – beliefs, values, preferences, etc. – that are expressed in the public arena.<sup>6</sup>

## The Early Twentieth Century Giants

### Boas and the Boasians

Looking back from today's multicultural perspective, it is not surprising that after Tylor the next major shift in anthropological theory was, in its first phase, the rejection of the implications of 19<sup>th</sup> century views concerning ranking and, in its second phase, the winding down of the whole cultural diffusion versus cultural evolution debate in favor of discussions of patterns versus functions. In the United States, the first reaction came from Franz Boas and his students, which took place from around the turn of the century through the postwar years. (Boas himself died in 1943.) The influence of Boas on anthropology in the United States was profound, which is why he is regarded as the founder of American anthropology. For our purposes, his most important contribution is the way he revised the notion of culture held by Tylor and other British scholars, a revision that can be traced back to his ground-breaking *The Mind of Primitive Man*, published

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<sup>6</sup> Boas himself had an omnibus conception of ethnography amounting to the precept "Write down anything you see" but he was especially keen on recording myths, preferably the founding myths through which peoples understand their own cultures. Later ethnographic practices emphasized "participant observation," in which the ethnographer entered into some aspects of the daily life of the people whose culture was under investigation, the ethnographies could be written "from the native's point of view" with commentary written from the author's own point of view as a supposedly objective observer. As the genre continued to evolve, some ethnographers limited their writings to features that shed light on the way a people's social institutions work, and others speculated about a people's psychological process or linguistic structures. More recently, ethnography has entered a "reflexive" phase in which part of what is reported is the experience of being an interlocutor or even a co-author/collaborator with "native anthropologists" who record their own views of what the visiting anthropologists are up to. As we will see at the end of this chapter, one of the latest forms of anthropology is not only reflexive but deconstructive: ethnologies are now "writing against culture" in order show that every people (a concept now dubious in itself) has so many and such diversified layers of meaning that the concept of culture may have outlived its usefulness.

in 1911 and revised as late as 1938. Unlike those other scholars, Boas understood culture not as civilization but rather as local context, within which a specific group's social life could be meaningful. It was only late in his career that Boas got around to defining culture, probably because the word *Kultur* in his native German was a familiar nontechnical term of indeterminate reference – much as it for English speakers today. But like Macbeth he eventually screwed his courage to the sticking-place, and in a long encyclopedia article he presented a topical definition that at first glance may not seem very different from Tylor's:

FD2.2 Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits. (Boas, 1930, p. 79)

However, unlike Tylor's topical definition, FD2.2 is a genuine taxonomy. It offers a structured and presumably complete list, and the three elements it specifies are constitutive aspects of culture rather than examples of its contents, as is clear from the informal definition that immediately follows:

ID2.2 On account of the heterogeneity of the habits of life it is customary to describe culture from a number of distinct viewpoints: the adjustment of man to surrounding nature; the mutual relations of individual members of a society; and the subjective behavior of man. The adjustment to nature includes the use of natural products for the purpose of nutrition and of obtaining shelter, as well as for less important purposes. The relations between individuals include sexual life and the forms of social conduct; the subjective behavior is manifested in art, religion, ethics and science. These various aspects of cultural life are interrelated and their complete separation in a systematic description gives a warped impression of the character of culture. Nevertheless a full description cannot be given without taking up each aspect of culture separately. (Ibid.)

It should be noted that when this encyclopedia article appeared Boas was 72 years old. His best and most influential years were behind him and the definition of culture it contained was more retrospective than prospective, i.e., more of a clarification of what he had already done than a road map for future fieldwork and ethnographies. Throughout his long career Boas's great strength was in collecting data, not formulating definitions or constructing theoretical models. He crafted three definitions well after he had reshaped the meaning of the term "culture" for himself and his followers by simply using the word with increasing frequency in contexts that left no doubt of his semantic intentions — which certainly did not include any Tylolean desire to represent culture as synonymous with civilization. Not only did Boas regularly use the word "culture" in the plural (whereas Tylor never did), but he wrote highly detailed ethnographic studies of individual groups, always describing their customs in terms of concrete historical contexts rather than as moments in an abstract evolutionary process. Except for the passage just cited, he avoided theoretical statements (leaving that sort of thing to his disciples), preferring to insist on methodological principles that amounted to the now-famous rule that to understand a people's culture one must be a participant observer. Thus he complained in a famous passage that the early anthropological writings such as Tylor's *Primitive Culture* were hopelessly amateurish: "The descriptions of the state of mind of primitive people, such as are given by most



travellers, are,” he grumbled, “too superficial to be used for psychological [and ethnological] investigation....The observers who really entered into the inner life of the people ... are few in number and may be counted at one’s fingers ends.” (Boas, 1894, pp. 318-319).

Probably the best way to understand Boas’s matured, so-called “anthropological concept of culture” is in terms of its opposition to Tylor’s evolutionary concept.<sup>7</sup> For this reason alone (we will see later that there are also other reasons), Boas’s concept can be thought of as the basic template for the social and educational reforms sought by the Cultural Pluralists of the early 1970s. Their educational agenda, like that of Boas and his wide circle of followers, had so much internal diversity that it seems impossible to make a general statement about how these early multiculturalists understood the nature of culture. But it is quite easy to say what they all denied. Culture is *not* a biological (racial) phenomenon, there is *no absolute form* of culture (civilization) that sets a standard for ranking and “improving” the way other people live, and it is *impossible* to understand any component of a culture without understanding its relationship to the culture as a whole. Positive assertions about just how one goes about identifying these components and tracking these relationships, not to mention how one apprehends the cultural “whole,” are harder to come by. These questions have no single answer, as is evident from the internal debates among Boasians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and among multicultural educators in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even so, it is important for today’s multiculturalists to see what sorts of answers have been proposed, not only in their own literature but that of cultural anthropology. Let us return, then, to the story of how Franz Boas transformed the concept of culture.

*Omitted: The rest of the discussion of Boas*

### **From Diffusion to Pattern: Ruth Benedict and Friends**

The question that originally preoccupied Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, and the younger group of Boasians such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead was how beliefs and social practices spread from one culture to the next. As students they painstakingly investigated cultural distribution mechanisms such as diffusion, trade, and conquest, and yet — perhaps because of Boas’s influence, perhaps simply because they discovered so much — they blithely assumed that individual cultures were *aggregations*, mere collections of “shreds and patches.”<sup>8</sup> They hypothesized that the spread of mythologies, taboos, hunting and fishing methods, and other cultural traits was largely regulated by the antecedent living conditions of the tribes who upon encountering these traits adopted them, but for the early Boasians this was speculation enough. To establish their relatively modest hypothesis that cultural traits were learned through

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<sup>7</sup> Since Boas was a transition figure, one can find (especially in his early writings) many instances in which he reverts to the “evolutionary” or “humanist” concept of culture as civilization. The view of Boas is a transition figure is presented quite persuasively in Stocking (1966). However, even at the end of his career Boas was willing to allow the possibility that cultural evolution theories contained some small kernel of truth (see Cook, 1999, ch. 6).

<sup>8</sup> This famous characterization of the way diffusionists viewed cultures (it was drawn from Gilbert and Sullivan) was suggested to Benedict by another student of Boas, Robert Lowery. It is also worth noting *that* Benedict’s own dissertation, written under Boas a decade before her *Patterns of Culture* appeared, was firmly in the diffusionist tradition. On the transformation of her view of culture between 1923 and 1934, see Handler, 1990.

interaction with other people and not biologically inherited, they sought only to trace the lineage of cultures and their observable traits. They did not yet feel a need to provide holistic accounts of *why* any given set of cultural traits came together in the way that they did.<sup>9</sup> But as their research agenda matured, Boas and his followers came to realize that their non-hereditary hypothesis had an important corollary: that the content of each culture could be thought of as a single reality (“a way of life,” said Kroeber) and that this reality was best regarded as a property of the society as a whole rather than of its individual members.

It fell to Kroeber to develop this corollary formally and technically, using the idea of culture as a “superorganic entity.” Though he introduced this idea as early as 1917 its impact was not felt until several other students of Boas, including Benedict and Mead, became dissatisfied with the diffusionist views that assumed each culture was a happy but essentially ad hoc combination of disparate elements. For this and other reasons such as their respect for the dignity and intelligence of their indigenous subjects, they reconsidered the question of just how contingent these configurations of cultural traits really were, coming eventually to regard cultures as integrated wholes rather than jumbles of features that just happened to be mutually compatible. With this seemingly slight change in the ethnologists’ attitude toward the people they studied, the concept of culture was again transformed. A people’s culture was now an organic or aesthetic unity that could not be graded as better or worse than other cultures (though it could be evaluated as more or less well integrated, and so in that sense could be ranked against itself). The classic statement of this view is the formal definition of culture found in Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (1934):

FD2.3 A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. (Ibid., p. 53)

But as with other definitions cited above, it is the informal definition that is most interesting. The pattern mentioned in her formal definition is determined, she goes on to tell us, by the group’s “characteristic purposes,” which were to be inferred from the pattern itself. (Ibid.)

ID2.3 Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behaviour take more and more congruous shape. Taken up by a well-integrated culture, the most ill-assorted acts become characteristic of its peculiar goals, often by the most unlikely metamorphoses. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society. (Ibid.)

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<sup>9</sup>To illustrate this point in simple terms, we may consider three well-dressed gentlemen — Tom, Dick, and Harry — standing on a street corner. The methodological individualist believes this situation is fully accounted for if we trace the chain of events and motives that led each man to this corner: Tom is window shopping for his wife’s birthday, Dick is looking for a taxi because he has an important appointment, Harry is a professional pickpocket looking for victims. A holistic account, in contrast, would go on to explain that this street corner is located in a high-end shopping district and hence attracts affluent shoppers, cruising taxis, and thieves who know how to blend in with their surroundings. In the latter account it is no coincidence that Tom, Dick, and Harry are all standing on the same corner. Each of their stories is part of a more comprehensive narrative.

Benedict's idea of a "characteristic purpose" is that the organizing principle of the cultural whole is for her the organizing principle whereby a cultural whole can be comprehended by an observer or, for that matter, the participants themselves. In terms much like those used in the 1980s and early 1990s by Afrocentric educators and others for whom the main goal of multicultural education programs is to promote "cultural identity"—i.e., to create a special character and sense of solidarity for their own ethnic groups—Benedict insisted that it is "in obedience to this purpose" that a people constructs itself as it does. This is not a blind obedience, nor is the purpose itself necessarily unconscious: Benedict's own ethnographic work consisted in discourse with articulate members of the groups she was studying, the point of which was to tease out the ideas which — precisely because they were *ideas and* not blind noncognitive urges — directed the behavior patterns of the individuals within the group. Hence she was able to say, adapting Plato's view of justice in the *Republic*, that a culture was the personality of its individual members writ large. This thesis runs through her descriptions of the cultures of the Plains Indians and the Pueblos, which are her best-known ethnographic studies. There she brought together her considerable literary and anthropological talents and borrowed Nietzsche's concepts of Dionysian and Apollonian societies to contrast their two ways of life, which were shaped respectively by the ideas of love and knowledge. She used these broad philosophical categories as explanatory constructs for cultural analysis in the grand manner prefigured by the aesthetic idealizations found in such 19th century accounts of "high culture" as Matthew Arnold's treatment of Hellenistic and Hebraic civilizations and other, sometimes explicitly Hegelian descriptions of classical and modern world cultures. Consider her famous ethnographic account of Ramon, who was nostalgic for the old ways of his people:

EA2.3 A chief of the Digger Indians, as the Californians call them, talked to me a great deal about the ways of his people in the old days. He was a Christian and a leader among his people in the planting of peaches and apricots on irrigated land, but when he talked of the shamans who had transformed themselves into bears before his eyes in the bear dance, his hands trembled and his voice broke with excitement. It was an incomparable thing, the power his people had had in the old days. He liked best to talk of the desert foods they had eaten. He brought each uprooted plant lovingly and with an unflinching sense of its importance. In those days his people had eaten "the health of the desert," he said, and knew nothing of the insides of tin cans and the things for sale at butcher shops. It was such innovations that had degraded them in these latter days.

One day, without transition, Ramon broke in upon his descriptions of grinding mesquite and preparing acorn soup. "In the beginning," he said, "God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank their life." I do not know whether the figure occurred in some traditional ritual of his people that I never found, or whether it was his own imagery. It is hard to imagine that he had heard it from the whites he had known at Banning; they were not given to discussing the ethos of different peoples. At any rate, in the mind of this humble Indian the figure of speech was clear and full of meaning. "They all dipped in the water," he continued, "but their cups were different. Our cup is broken now. It has passed away. (Benedict, 1934, p. 33)

The richness of Benedict's description reveals as much if not more of her own narrative

skills as it does those of Ramon. Indeed, it is easy to criticize her for mixing her own views in with Ramon's. (Did he actually *say* he "liked best" to talk of desert foods, or did she infer that preference from the way he spoke? Was it he or Benedict who said canned food "degraded" his people? Whose idea was it that Ramon was a "humble Indian"?) Perhaps some mixing of this sort is inevitable when cultures meet, and not just when scholars write ethnographies. More significant, though, is what happens in her account when the interview stops and the commentary starts. First Benedict applies to Ramon's narrative her general point about cultural integrity, telling us: "These things that had given significance to the life of his people . . . were gone, and with them the shape and meaning of their life." The cup was broken, and could not be repaired, since it "was somehow all of a piece. It had been their own." Then she reconstructs Ramon's personal situation in terms of that general point: the values and ways of thought of the two cultures which he must straddle are incommensurable. "It is a hard fate," she concludes (p. 34).

But hard for whom, we might ask: Ramon the straddler, or Benedict the exegete? In discussing this question almost 60 years after Benedict wrote *Patterns of Culture*, Michael Carrithers (1992) suggests that it was Benedict, not her informant, who was distressed. On the whole, I agree with Carrithers, and will make a similar point in the final chapter with regard to cultural identity. But before we leave Benedict, let us do a little reconstructive ethnography of our own: what is she really saying, and what is there in her own "cultural situation" (i.e., as a member of the Boasian tribe) that leads her to say it this way?

My own answer to these questions is as follows. Although Benedict was theoretically committed to the idea that cultures are incommensurable, she could not coherently sustain that commitment and do serious ethnography at the same time. Obviously, she thought there were *some* commensurabilities between cultures, or she would not have gone out into the field in the first place. Presumably it is on these assumed pockets of commensurability that ethnographers base their hopes to *understand* other cultures — be it by empathy, analogical thinking, or imaginative projection. On the other hand, everything in her professional training and previous field experience made her keenly aware that serious ethnography is hard work, and that failure is always possible because the cultures under investigation are so different from the ethnographer's home culture (though fieldwork in one's own back yard is not easy either). Like Ramon, a Digger Indian who was also a Christian, she too had to "straddle," and knew that this was her own "hard fate." In order to carry out her mission as an ethnographer, she not only accumulated information but also projected her own feelings of discomfort and inadequacy onto Ramon — who for all we know may not have shared her view that his was a hard fate. Whether this is really a productive strategy for any ethnographer is, of course, another question altogether.

Are there similarities between the kind of straddling that must be done in anthropological fieldwork and that done in multicultural education, and if so, can they help us understand the motives underlying Benedict's ethnographic discourse? The answer to both questions is yes, at least if we can correlate her latter-day Boasian view of culture as pattern with the strong, difference-dominated version of cultural pluralism promoted in the early literature of multicultural education. Imagine (the story is not entirely fictional) a story in which an inexperienced white female music teacher in an all-black high school tries to tell her African American teenagers something about the relationship between rap and other forms of music. Then imagine that her normally placid students loudly resist her efforts to tell them about "their music," eventually reducing her to tears. Conclude the story with the principal (a strong cultural pluralist who shares Benedict's relativist epistemology) criticizing her for having failed to

respect the cultural uniqueness of rap: “It’s their thing,” he tells her, implying that her music lesson was an invasion of the students’ collective privacy.

Echoing Benedict, the hypothetical principal and students are saying in effect that the values and ways of thought embodied in black and white music are incommensurable, and that the only respectful way to acknowledge the incommensurability is simply to avoid discussing genres not of one’s own culture. But as the instructional literature of multicultural education shows over and over again (e.g., Purves, 1997), there are many effective ways for teachers to present other cultures to a class, though simply “telling” about those cultures is probably not one of them. A more experienced white teacher would ask her black students to share their understanding of what rap is all about, and then work with them to compare their musical insights with her own insights about “white” music. Incommensurability would be reduced, though perhaps not completely eliminated, as teacher and students “straddle” their respective cultures. In this second story, being a white music teacher in a school might not be such “a hard fate.” Or to go back to the first story, we may hope that as our tear-stained music teacher gains experience and self-knowledge about her own cultural situation, she becomes more successful in treating topics from other cultures. In the same spirit, we may conjecture that as Benedict grew in her own professional role of participant-observer, she became less anxious about the cultural differences between her and her informants, and hence less likely to ascribe to them problems and feelings they did not actually have. The latter conjecture is supported by her later book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), written in the wake of the Second World War to help the American people understand Japanese culture.

Benedict’s conception of culture has probably had a greater influence on the general public, including educators concerned with multiculturalism, than have the theories of any other anthropologist, living or dead (her *Patterns of Culture* was the first anthropology book to be published in paperback). However, she was only one of many in her generation of anthropologists to insist on the internal unity of cultures. Other students of Boas also held that cultures had distinct “patterns,” though they differed as to whether the pattern in question was primarily “phenomenal” (regarding observable features of a culture such as its customs, social institutions, and artifacts) or “ideational” (regarding the beliefs, motives, and other attitudes of the people of that culture). And so it came to pass that in spite of Benedict’s continued popularity with the general public, among anthropologists, sociologists, and other social theorists the strongest and by mid-century most influential version of the Boasian view was Kroeber’s conception of culture as a *superorganic entity*.

Although the term “superorganic” is no longer used, the idea behind it is still relevant to multicultural education in at least three ways, all indirect. The first is that it hardens the holistic notion of culture propounded by Benedict, whose own theorizing in this area (like that of her friend Margaret Mead) asserted that cultures were more than the sum of their parts but did not go on to claim that the *concept* of a cultural whole is irreducible. Today’s multiculturalists<sup>10</sup> do not usually cite Kroeber himself on this point — even Benedict and Mead are usually mentioned only in passing, though their influence on this literature is clear — but at various levels of discourse the literature of multicultural education often continues to reify cultures, talking as though they were “things” one has, social facts, objects of affection, and/or causes that affect

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<sup>10</sup> An important exception who will be discussed in Chapter 4 is the Australian educationist Brian Bullivant (1984, see pp. 2, 116).

other things in the world.

The second way in which the strong Boasian notion of culture as a superorganic entity is relevant to multicultural education is that it emphasizes the influence of culture on psychology rather than the other way around. For instance, although Kroeber was not prepared to abandon the notion of personal agency altogether, he believed that one's personality is profoundly shaped by one's culture, a shaping process that is typically discussed by cultural pluralists under the headings of cultural identity and self-esteem.<sup>11</sup> The third way that the superorganic notion of culture is relevant to multicultural education concerns its emphasis on history. A culture exists before and after individuals are born, grow up, live, and die "in it." Its history is not a chronicle of events ("just one damned thing after another," said the 19th century pundit Elbert Hubbard) but a *story that can be taught*, even to school children from other cultures.

### **Back to Britain: Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown**

At the same time — roughly the interwar years — that the Boasians were insisting that cultures were real things that have the formal unity characteristic of aesthetic patterns, British anthropologists were discovering for themselves the systematic character of culture, or as they preferred to call it, its "functionality." Actually, two competing notions of function were operating in the literature of that time. The first was launched by Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish emigré who was as powerful a personality in England as the German-born Boas was in the United States (and who was generally sympathetic to Boas's work). He understood the functionality of cultures as the way cultural practices shaped and satisfied basic human needs such as hunger and sex, as well as more complex ones like the need to deal with death. Thus he defined culture as

FD2.4 the vast instrumentality through which man achieves his ends (Malinowski, 1941, p.182)

and then cashed out this highly formal definition by listing the needs of the "man" in question — who is understood here as a prototypical individual, not the species itself or the society he lives within. This man has two sets of needs:

ID2.4 both as an animal that must eat, rest, and reproduce; and as the spiritual being who desires to extend his mental horizons, produce works of art, and develop systems of faith. Thus, culture is at the same time the minimum mechanism for the satisfaction of the most elementary needs of man's animal nature, and also an ever-developing, ever-increasing system of new ends, new values, and new creative possibilities. (Ibid.)

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<sup>11</sup> Kroeber himself never quite sorted out the difference between psychological and cultural processes, or the relationship between them. As he grew less convinced by diffusionist accounts of how cultures spread, he became more critical of the psychologism that accompanied those accounts. For instance, he felt his mentor Boas tended to explain the movement of cultural traits in terms of how people *thought* about them, as though a tribe adopted the long bow or some other weapon because it satisfied a felt need on the part of its members for aggressive activity, or a myth took hold because it corresponded to the awe people felt toward their environment or their emotional attachment to ideas they already had about how to live. Kroeber allied himself with Benedict when she described cultures as patterns, but he could not accept her view that culture was personality writ large.

In other words, the overall function of culture was understood by Malinowski and his adherents as a set of specific subfunctions of specific institutions (e.g., funeral rituals), each of which was to be analyzed in relation to the psychological and biological properties of individual men and women. His ethnographies were devoted to showing this relationship, which consists in “the dependence of social organization in a given society upon the ideas, beliefs, and sentiments current there” (1929, p. 140). Malinowski regarded social organization itself as an objective fact, something to be discovered in fieldwork which, when carried out with due care, would leave the ethnographer with not only photographs, transcripts of interviews, and descriptions of discrete behaviors and practices, but also an objective understanding of the social organization and structures of these phenomena. For Malinowski, once the anthropologist had done this ethnological spadework it only remained to establish *which* “ideas, beliefs, and sentiments” underlie these structures. Some of these ideas are the so-called savage views (often “quite unexpected and far-fetched”) about natural processes like sex and reproduction, which Malinowski explored in his studies of the matrilineal society of the Trobriand Islanders. Others are the ideas and desires that the people being studied have concerning the social structures themselves. Consider the account in his famous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) of the seemingly odd way in which the Trobriand people store their yams and other foodstuffs. In contrast to the prevailing view that primitive people have no sense of private ownership, he claimed that the Trobriand Islanders had a very acutely developed sense of *mine* and *thine* with regard to both the necessities of life and its luxuries, and that underlying their concept of ownership was the enduring need for social status.

EA2.4 [Foodstuffs] are not merely regarded by the natives as nourishment, not merely valued because of their utility. They accumulate them not so much because they know that yams can be stored and used for a future date, but also because they like to display their possessions in food. Their yam houses are built so that the quantity of the food can be gauged, and its quality ascertained through the wide interstices between the beams. The yams are so arranged that the best specimens come to the outside and are well visible. Special varieties of yams, which grow up to two metres length, and weigh as much as several kilograms each, are framed in wood and decorated with paint, and hung on the outside of the yam houses. That the right to display food is highly valued can be seen from the fact that in villages where a chief of high rank resides, the commoners’ storehouses have to be closed up with coco-nut leaves, so as not to compete with his.

All this shows that the accumulation of food is not only the result of economic foresight, but also *prompted by the desire of display and enhancement of social prestige through possession of wealth.* (1922, pp. 168-69, italics added)

Malinowski freely admitted that his description of the ideas underlying the Islanders’ accumulation of foodstuffs refers to “the present, actual psychology of the natives” (ibid.). However, he also believed that anthropology should provide a non-individualistic analysis, showing that the social institutions themselves are interrelated, since cultural systems involve totally integrated ways of life.<sup>12</sup> For instance, he stated in his *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*

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<sup>12</sup> “When I speak about ideas underlying accumulation of food stuffs in the Trobriands, I refer to the present, actual psychology of the natives, and I must emphatically declare that I am not offering here any

(1935) that the really difficult task in fieldwork such as his investigations of the Trobriand Islanders was not collecting facts but trying to “systematise them into an organic whole” (ibid., vol. 1, p. 322). For this reason, he believed, as did Benedict and other Boasians, that small changes in a cultural practice could have profound, often very negative, effects throughout the whole cultural system, much as chaos theorists today see small changes causing repercussions on a global scale.

An alternative conception of “function” was developed a little later by another highly influential British anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who rejected Malinowski’s individualistic approach to the function(s) of culture in favor of a more collectivist and more systematic functionalism (see Radcliffe-Brown, 1935[1952]). However, what was interesting for him was not culture itself but rather what he called “social structure,” by which he meant not socioeconomic class (its usual meaning in contemporary social theory) but the entire network of observable and orderly relations that connect people to each other. For this reason, he called his approach “social anthropology” in contrast to the “cultural anthropology” practiced in the United States. Whereas the latter approach was focused on the historical development and contents of particular cultural phenomena, Radcliffe-Brown’s social anthropology aimed at the law-like generality and scientific rigor characteristic of the hard sciences. This sort of anthropology, he claimed, “deals with man’s life in society . . . in exactly the same way that chemistry deals with chemical phenomena” (1930, pp. 3-4).

Radcliffe-Brown was less interested in culture and its contents than in the way institutions worked together to ensure the continued existence of the social group. “We do not observe a ‘culture,’” he claimed, “since that word denotes, not any concrete reality, but an abstraction, and as it is commonly used a vague abstraction” (1940, p. 2). The definition that he did provide for culture was certainly vague enough, though. Culture, he declared, is simply

FD2.5 a mode or process of social integration. (Ibid., p. 3)

However, he explained, the best way to understand culture is not to ask what it is but rather what it does:

ID2.5 By any culture or civilization a certain number, larger or smaller, of human beings are united together into a more or less complex system of social groups by which the social relations of individuals to one another are determined. . . .The function of any element of culture...can only be discovered by considering what part it plays in the social integration of the people in whose culture it is found. (1930, pp. 3-4)

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conjectures about the ‘origins’ or about the ‘history’ of the customs and their psychology, *leaving this to theoretical and comparative research.*” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 169; italics added). As the italicized phrase indicates, Malinowski strongly insisted on a division of labor, with the “field ethnographer” gathering the data and the armchair anthropologist developing the theories. The division he had in mind was not among the scholarly laborers themselves but rather between the two sorts of roles a responsible anthropologist must assume. For Malinowski, the fact that fieldwork involved generalizations (such as about the social structures associated with specific practices) made it all too easy to confound these roles: “Because a statement is very general, it can none the less be a statement of empirical fact. General views must not be mixed up with hypothetical ones. The latter must be banished from field work ; the former cannot receive too much attention” (ibid., p. 168n).



To carry out his scientific project, which as we will see in the next chapter was largely inspired by the French sociologist Emil Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown focused on specific social institutions that provided the context and structure for concrete interpersonal relationships. Unlike the highly detailed and historically oriented descriptions that were the hallmark of the Boasians' ethnographies, his ethnographic accounts were more analytic and moved quickly from general description of supposedly evident social structures to even more general theories of those structures. A good example is his study of exogamous moieties (dual kinship systems, in which a member of one kinship line can only marry a member of the other line) in Australia's New South Wales. He first described analogies between the classifications used in these human systems and certain divisions in the animal kingdom, and then quickly turned to more general questions such as: "What is the principle by which such pairs as eaglehawk and crow, eagle and raven, coyote and wild cat are chosen as representing the moieties of a dual division?" His eventual answer was that within the animal kingdom there are resemblances and differences that mirror social relations that keep the human society in equilibrium, viz., friendship and conflict, solidarity and opposition. Consider this extract from the 1951 Huxley Memorial Lecture that Radcliffe-Brown gave to the Royal Anthropological Institute:

EA2.5 A comparative study therefore reveals to us the fact that the Australian ideas about the eaglehawk and the crow are only a particular instance of a widespread phenomenon. First, these tales interpret the resemblances and differences of animal species in terms of social relationships of friendship and antagonism as they are known in the social life of human beings. Secondly, natural species are placed in pairs of opposites. They can only be so regarded if there is some respect in which they resemble each other. Thus eaglehawk and crow resemble each other in being the two prominent meat-eating birds....

We can now answer the question 'Why eaglehawk and crow?' by saying that these are selected as representing a certain kind of relationship which we may call one of 'opposition'. The Australian idea of what is here called 'opposition' is a particular application of that association by contrariety that is a universal feature of human thinking, so that we think by pairs of contraries, upwards and downwards, strong and weak, black and white. But the Australian conception of 'opposition' combines the idea of a pair of contraries with that of a pair of opponents....After a lengthy comparative study I think I am fully justified in stating a general law, that wherever, in Australia, Melanesia or America, there exists a social structure of exogamous moieties, the moieties are thought of as being in a relation of what is here called 'opposition'. (Radcliffe-Brown, 1951, p. 18-19[?]/1977, p. 60-61)

Because he was not directly interested in the usual contents of culture — historical milestones, customs, art, religion, and worldviews of other sorts — his social anthropology is less relevant than cultural anthropology is to the literature of contemporary multicultural education in the United States. In fact, Radcliffe-Brown's view that culture was simply a component of social structure was relatively short-lived even though he was a formidable figure in the 1930s and 40s in America as well as in England, Canada, and Australia Nevertheless, it had the important effect of forcing the next generation of cultural anthropologists to examine more carefully the relationship between culture and society, as we will see when we take up the

sociological approach to culture known as structural functionalism.

### **The Mid-Century Shifts**

These two forms of functionalism (Malinowski's functionalism of meeting individual needs, and Radcliffe-Brown's functionalism of preserving the collective) do not exhaust the list of functional explanations in social theory, but they were the principal contenders in the debate over cultural functionality that took place in the second quarter of the twentieth century. That debate was followed by a third functionalist model that eventually dominated the discussion on both sides of the Atlantic during the third quarter of the century concerning the determinants of human action. Its author, Talcott Parsons, was a sociologist by profession but his model was a metatheoretical scheme that transcended his own discipline. We will revisit Parsons's metathory in the next chapter because it was just as influential for the next generation of cultural sociologists as it was for their anthropological cousins featured in this chapter.

#### **The First Shift: The Parsonian Makeover**

Parsons proposed to anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists alike a grand synthesis of three interpenetrating domains: culture, society, and personality, the last of which included biological as well as psychological processes. Each domain was represented as a separate subsystem, whose component parts interact to maintain equilibrium within the system as a whole even as it shapes the course of human events. The three subsystems, though irreducible to each other, worked in tandem to determine the choices individual people make as well as those made by collectives. (For this reason Parsons entitled his project a "theory of action.") He believed that each subsystem is made up of "objects" that define the domain in question. In his account of the culture subsystem, in which he reached back to the classical social theories of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, the objects that constituted it were *symbols*. The domain of culture, Parson wrote at the beginning of *The Social System* (1951, p. 2), consists in the "symbolic elements of the cultural tradition," including not only ideas and beliefs, but also expressive symbols and value patterns.

<i>Omitted: The rest of the discussion of Parsons</i>
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#### **The Second Shift: The Cognitive Turn**

Parsons's influence on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology was much greater than it was on psychology, which had already partitioned itself off from the social sciences by the time he carved out the three domains of action theory. Although by mid-century the hybrid subdiscipline now known as social psychology had come into its own (Kurt Lewin's field theory comes to mind here), its representatives had little to say about the personal subjectivity of their subjects and virtually nothing to say about their culture – at least not in those days. Like those laboring in other fields of psychology, the social psychologists of that time understood their

subdiscipline as an inquiry into laws of behavior – including covert behavior – that did not vary across times and cultures. For this reason – and there were undoubtedly other reasons as well – their interest in anthropological research was minimal.

Midcentury anthropologists generally returned the compliment. The subject matter of psychology was of little or no interest to them because they too regarded basic psychological processes as universal, i.e., as culture-neutral, utterly unaffected by time, place, or social context. However, on the anthropological fringe was a small group of linguistically keen culture theorists – in the early 1950s they called themselves “ethnoscience” but they are now considered the original “cognitive anthropologists” – who suspected that some psychological processes might be truly culture specific, especially those concerned with language. Over the next decades their numbers grew, their theories broadened, and by the end of the century what had begun as a minor and quite technical research interest of a few psycholinguistically knowledgeable anthropologists had become one of the most important conceptions of culture in play in anthropology as well as in the literature of multicultural education. Of course all of this happened in stages. Like the (cross-)cultural psychologists<sup>13</sup> on the other side of the aisle, these early cognitive anthropologists bleached the otherness out of their subject matter by assuming that cross-cultural variations in psychological phenomena, though real, could be systematically represented and explained in the investigator’s own idiom without loss or distortion. However, over the next two or three decades views changed in both subdisciplines. Cultural differences began to play a more important role in cultural psychology and in cognitive anthropology. Conversely, psychological processes and structures came to be seen as shaped by culture – i.e., by a society’s shared meanings and practices – and it was finally recognized on all sides that these meanings and practices differed strikingly and profoundly from one cultural group to another. Today the dominant view in both cognitive anthropology and cultural psychology is that cultural and cognitive phenomena are mutually constitutive.<sup>14</sup>

The full story about the coming of age of cognitive anthropology is too complex and, especially in its early period, far too technical to recount here, but its basic plot, stages, and themes can be summarized in a few paragraphs. Like most good stories, it has three parts or stages: a beginning, a middle, and what is not so much an end as a culmination *pro tem*. The first stage consisted in a search for the universal structures of cultural knowledge, modeled on the search for linguistic universals that was also under way at that time, inspired largely by the posthumously published work of the French structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure (1959[1916]). In the middle stage cognitive anthropologists continued to map underlying structures of cultural

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<sup>13</sup> The distinction between cultural and cross-cultural psychology is much sharper now than it was sixty years ago, when universalism was the only game in town for psychologists. Today cross-cultural psychology, also called comparative psychology, typically tries to determine similarities and differences in psychological functioning within two or three specific cultures, while cultural psychology, sometimes called indigenous psychology, aims to understand the general interdependence of mind and culture. Although exceptions abound, the rule of thumb is that cross-cultural psychologists begin with the assumption that basic cognitive processes are universal and then look for counterinstances, whereas cultural psychologists take a relativist position from the outset.

<sup>14</sup> As the cultural psychologist Joan Miller has reported, in the contemporary literature of her discipline “it is assumed that culture and individual behavior cannot be understood in isolation yet are also not reducible to each other. Such a stance contrasts with the tendency particularly in early work in cross-cultural psychology, for culture and psychology to be understood as discrete phenomena, with culture conceptualized as an independent variable that impacts on the dependent variable of individual behavior” (Miller, 1997, p. 88).

knowledge but without the earlier expectation that these structures would turn out to be the same for all peoples. In its still-current third stage cognitive anthropology, firmly established and thriving, continues the search for cognitive structures “in the heads” of the members of a culture but the linguistic model of static deep structures has been replaced with a psycho-neurological connectionist model of schemas or cognitive frames. In what follows I will present a short snapshot of each of these three stages and then discuss at more length the general idea of culture being inside the heads of its participants.

*Omitted: The rest of the discussion of cognitive anthropologists*

### **The Third Shift: The Interpretative Revival**

In the 1950s the most prominent work on cultural symbols and symbol systems was done by the Parsonian structural functionalists at Harvard, but in the following decades symbolization became a leitmotiv in many different kinds of social theory. We have just seen how cognitive anthropologists and cultural psychologists dealt with the question of how cultures differ in the ways their members deal with symbols and ideas, and in the next chapter we will see that many of the same themes were developed in sociology by neo-structuralists and symbolic interactionists. But in the middle of all this ferment stood a few anthropologists who tried to preserve Parsons’s own retrieval of Weber’s insight that cultures – and hence the congeries of symbols that constitute cultures – are best thought of as semiotic systems or “webs” of meaning.

As in the foregoing account of cognitive anthropology it is convenient to divide the story of interpretive anthropology into three stages, but here the timelines are quite different. The first stage is relatively brief (also relatively ignored by commentators) and runs from Geertz’s emergence from Parsons’s Department of Social Relations at Harvard through the middle or later part of the 1960s. The second, extremely well-known stage runs from the later 1960s (which is when several of the important essays reprinted in Geertz’s *Interpretation of Culture* were originally written) through the mid-1980s. From then until now theories of culture inspired by Geertz have proliferated with, as often happens in the aftermath of an intellectual or political revolution, a great deal of not unproductive in-fighting.

*The first stage: Beating the culture drum.* The original roster of those who took or would take the interpretive approach to culture consisted in a few young anthropologists molded at Harvard by Parsons and Kluckhohn, namely Clifford Geertz, his wife Hildred, and David Schneider, who were soon joined by the British anthropologist Victor Turner who shared their interest in symbols but not their Weberian views about the primacy of culture over socioeconomic structures. In the next decades their numbers increased as did the list of labels that were applied to their orientation, including “semiotic,” “symbolic,” “hermeneutic,” and the one I will usually use, “interpretive” anthropology. What also increased over that time – “exploded” would be more accurate – is the number and variety of approaches that these typically brilliant but often unruly revisionists took toward the concept of culture. Hence it seems best to describe this grouping as constituted by what Wittgenstein called family resemblances (see Chapter 1) rather than by necessary and sufficient criteria of membership. However, the

major figure, especially in the first two stages, was Geertz, who achieved the same “Ambassador of Anthropology” status in the public eye that Benedict and Mead had enjoyed in previous

*Omitted: The rest of the discussion of “The First Stage”*

decades.

*The second stage: Interpretation in search of meaning.* During the 1960s Geertz produced two sorts of writing, relatively concrete problem-oriented monographs and philosophical or quasi-philosophical essays about the nature of culture. The monographs dealt with issues in the development debates of that period of decolonization (see Kuper, 1999, pp. 96ff.), the general point of which was that culture – especially its religious dimension – “inflected” the social, political, and economic developments taking place in Indonesia, Morocco, and points in between. In contrast, the essays – the most important of which were reprinted in his famous 1971 publication *The Interpretation of Culture* – took up questions about symbolization, narrative, interpretation, and as just said, the nature of culture. His ideas are summed up in a definition that is probably as widely cited, at least outside the technical anthropological literature, as Tylor’s initial definition of culture (FD2.1) as “that complex whole...”:

FD2.10 The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs,... (Geertz, 1971a, p. 5)

To operationalize this very abstract concept he then reflects on his own discipline of anthropology and asks just what its practitioners do when they study a culture. His answer, which serves as an informal definition by putting flesh on the bare bones of his formal definition, is that the study of culture proceeds by ethnography (so far no surprises) and that the proper subject matter of ethnography is the vast array of symbols or symbolic forms that constitute everyday life, ranging from language and sacred rituals to artifacts and etiquette. These symbols must be understood from the actor’s own point of view, which is an active, purposive point of view full of desires, hopes, needs, and other sorts of intentionality that are, not coincidentally, the stuff out of which great literature is made. Hence Geertz insisted that ethnography, like literary criticism, must be thought of as *interpretation*, which, borrowing from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, he also calls “thick description.” Geertz fleshes out his definition of culture by saying that he takes

ID2.10 the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. (Ibid.)

With this understanding of ethnography as interpretation Geertz commits himself to a much more robustly semiotic conception of culture than anyone else had proposed as of that time. Cultures were to be thought of in the same way as literary works – in fact he identified

cultures as texts – and as such must be understood not by decoding them one symbol at a time but rather by seeing the interplay among them and between the subtexts that constitute what might be called the culture’s intertextuality. Or to make the same point differently, the ethnographer’s business is to explicate for readers the explications that the people raised in the culture make of and for each other. In an extended and amusing though probably unnecessarily baroque illustration of his notion of ethnographic interpretation, he compared it to Ryle’s account of giving a thick description of a wink. Geertz showed that the ethnographer – and by extension any culture theorist worth his or her salt – must go beyond so-called overt culture, i.e. behaviors and artifacts, to the tissue of understandings and intentions that lie beneath them.

*Omitted: The rest of the discussion of “The Second Stage”*

*The third stage: Reflexive/postmodern interpretations.* Geertz’s concept of culture as webs of meaning and his corresponding concept of ethnography as textual interpretation were quickly absorbed not only by anthropologists of the 1970s and 80s but also by historians, literary theorists, political economists, and sociologists, some of whom will be introduced toward the end of the next chapter under the heading of Cultural Studies. Those outside the narrow world of professional anthropology who were charmed by Geertz’s semiotic approach to culture took it as a model for their own research and writing even though they tended to ignore its structural functionalist origins and Weberian underpinnings. The same was often true of those working within anthropology, but the most dramatic manifestations of the interpretive conception of culture were the new methods and increasingly postmodern perspectives that subsequently dominated interpretivist ethnography and the fieldwork it represented.

These changes were already under way in the 1970s but it was in the next decade that anthropologists who had welcomed Geertz’s semiotic approach began to write books and articles criticizing him for not having carried his own ideas far enough. In particular, they called for a greater awareness of just what was happening when ethnographers went into the field and what they were really doing afterwards when they wrote up their accounts. In a word, these not unfriendly critics insisted that interpretivist descriptions of cultures should also include self-referential descriptions of how they were fashioned. For instance, the so-called “native’s point of view” that was reported in most ethnographies (including Geertz’s) was really the view of a *particular* local informant, and this inevitably perspectival report was itself repackaged by the ethnographer at least twice, once while hearing it during the interview session and again in the construction of the written account that reflected the ethnographer’s own understanding of the “native’s” personal understandings of the culture. The epistemology of anthropological research had changed. Fieldwork was no longer observer-neutral observation – or better, it was now clear that it had never been neutral – and ethnography was now seen as including not only the author’s interpretation but also the interpretations made by the informants themselves, who often disagreed with each other on the meaning of certain aspects of their own culture. These subjective aspects were thematized with great fanfare in ethnographies produced by post-Geertzian researchers such as Paul Robinow (1987) and George Marcus (1999), who wrote extensively about the conversations they had had with their informant-collaborators and in doing

so placed on center stage the latter's own voices, preoccupations, and personal histories. The informants were to be understood not only as representatives of their culture but also as "complicit" (Marcus, 1999) with the ethnographer.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the ethnographer's own culture was objectified or, as George Marcus (p.103) once put it, "exoticized" in the process of creating complicity and reducing differences.

Ethnography was therefore reconceived along the lines of a Socratic dialogue rather than a Cartesian meditation. Instead of a solitary thinker transcribing his own intellectual autobiography (or what is almost the same, the received view of things as understood by the author), ethnography was to be a dramatic presentation of the Geertzian sort, in which two or more equally relevant and authoritative interlocutors not only talked about the world and their places in it but also about the talking that was going on among themselves. In the course of their conversations and meta-conversations the personal situations of the actors are disclosed, which is to say that their individual histories and social situations, their emotions, biases, fears, pieties, and most importantly their personal stakes in the issues under discussion are revealed. Of course most conversations, including those between anthropologists and their informants, include much more than self-revelation. Information is exchanged, misinformation is corrected, opinions are challenged – in short, minds are changed. But the governing format within which they are changed is hardly ever a logical deduction, an inductive confirmation of a hypothesis, or a legal argument. It is rather what many philosophers and rhetoricians identify with the ancient concept of "dialectics" and others bring under the more fashionable heading of "postmodernism."

*Omitted: The rest of the discussion of the "The Third Stage"*

### **Conclusion: A Rough and Ready Review**

The strange career of culture is hardly over, but its so-called classical period came to an end a few years before the word "multiculturalism" was born. In the later decades of the twentieth century, cultural anthropologists and sociologists broke away from the holism that flourished under Boas and his American successors, was challenged by the functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown and other British social anthropologists, and then was rehabilitated by Parsons and brought into a temporary alliance with other social sciences in his grand theory of action.

Subsequent developments produced more nuanced conceptions, and I think few would argue today that we should return to the old ways of thinking about culture. It is now generally agreed that culture is transmitted from one generation to the next neither biologically nor by simple diffusion or evolution, but rather semantically. That is, culture is a web of public meanings that are learned in roughly the same inherently social and interactive way in which languages are learned, although the debate continues as to whether culture is best thought of as something between people or inside their heads. Whatever one thinks about that issue, the

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<sup>15</sup> There is an irony here, a kind of performative contradiction. As Lila Abu-Lughod (1999) has noted, for many ethnic groups having a culture of their own is now politically crucial for their efforts to resist the homogenizing forces of globalization, even though these same groups, at the grass roots level as well as in the writings of contemporary postcolonial intellectuals, resist being studied as "specimens" of otherness.

analogy between cultururation and language acquisition is important, not only because language is itself a vehicle for transmitting cultural meanings (as well as being the product of other cultural influences) but also because of the intimate connection between one's (first) language and one's sense of self. Both are "internalized" in ways that go far beyond the simple acquisition of information or behavior patterns. Both shape the way one presents oneself to others. Perhaps most important of all, both culture and language are necessary and sometimes sufficient conditions for giving meaning and importance to life itself and for exposing the fault lines in the societies where we live our lives. However, for better or worse the literature of multicultural education has been deeply influenced by the classical anthropological conceptions of culture, and so anyone who wishes to understand the former literature should also understand something of the latter as well as something about the cognitive, interpretive, and postmodern conceptions that are now common parlance among cultural anthropologists.

As we have seen throughout this chapter and especially in the last few pages, over the last decades anthropology has taken on the job of moral critique, especially critiques of the Eurocentric culture from which anthropology as we usually know it was invented. However, anthropology has been a "moral science" from the outset, when Tylor resisted the racist paradigm of culture that had been in place since the discovery of the New World. The next generation of anthropologists was also motivated by moral concerns: Boasians asserted the equal dignity of otherwise incommensurable cultures and felt it their duty to preserve them in the face of the modern era's looming threats of extinction. Functionalists hoped that their analyses of cultures as structures would secure the moral values and beliefs that hold society together. Then postmodernists, taking a cue from the new humanistic approach associated with the interpretivists but also implicit in much of cognitive anthropology, re-valorized culture as an exercise of human creativity – a collective exercise but one with deeply personal implications for individual dignity and self-efficacy.

To these positive moral dimensions of culture postmodern anthropologists have added a negative moral dimension that maps onto what they consider the central agenda of multicultural education, namely the claim that no culture has the right to oppress another, either intellectually, politically, or economically. For this reason anthropologists such as Terence Turner (1994) and Stam and Showhat (1994) see a convergence of a critical anthropology and critical multiculturalism in which culture is understood as capacity and empowerment. Turner has singled out two features of the anthropological concept of the capacity for culture that he thinks are particularly relevant to the relationship between anthropology and multiculturalism: the inherently social character of culture and its virtually infinite plasticity. "The capacity for culture," he writes, "is not inherent in individuals as such but arises as an aspect of collective social life with its concomitants of cooperative human and social reproduction. Its almost infinite malleability, however, means that there are virtually no limits to the kinds of social groups, networks, or relations that can generate a cultural identity of their own.... The point here is that multiculturalism in this larger theoretical and historical context implicitly becomes a program not merely for the equalization of relations among existing cultural groups and identities but for the liberation and encouragement of the process of creating new ones" (ibid., pp. 422-23).

Finally, as an ending note for this chapter, let us consider another morally nuanced issue, namely, the objective reality of culture. Because of its cross-generational character, American cultural anthropologists (unlike British social anthropologists) have tended to regard culture as an existing fact and not merely a theorist's construct. For many, culture still seems to be a thing



in its own right, a so-called “superorganic entity” or “public text” that exists over and above the social institutions supports and the individual people who receive and transmit it. Supposedly, all of us are born into a culture that is already there and are shaped by it until we die, after which time it still continues to exist. In some cases, they admit, the relationship can be bi-directional: we shape the culture even as it shapes us, although there is much debate over the extent of our ability to create or at least change our culture. This admission goes in the right direction, but not very far. Fortunately, over the last two decades cultural anthropologists have become increasingly sensitive to this and similar issues. Compared to their intellectual forbears, they seem much more aware that the degree and ways in which people can shape their own cultures is itself culture-specific, with some cultures allowing much more room than others do for personal efficacy or “agency” in this and other respects.

In the chapters that follow we will see how these and many of the other points made in the present chapter recur in sociology and then in the literature of multicultural education. However, it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with an observation about the ethical and political significance for multiculturalists of the contrast just mentioned between the American view that culture is a real albeit “superorganic” entity and the British view that it is merely a theorist’s artifice, i.e., an abstraction rather than a reality in its own right. Looking back several decades later on that debate, John Bodley has argued on what are clearly moral grounds that we should adopt an intermediate position. The issue of whether culture is a superorganic entity or an abstraction is serious, he says,

because treating culture as an abstraction may lead one to deny the basic human rights of small-scale societies and ethnic minorities to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of threats from dominant societies. [Hence] I treat culture as an objective reality. I depart from the superorganic approach in that I insist that culture includes its human carriers. At the same time, people can be deprived of their culture against their will. Many humanistic anthropologists would agree that culture is an observable phenomenon, and a people’s unique possession. (Bodley, 1994, p.?)

If Bodley is correct here, and I think he is, then educators as well as anthropologists have a moral imperative to avoid the two extremes of treating culture as merely a theorist’s abstraction and reifying it as a superorganic entity or – to apply the same imperative to more recent trends in anthropology – as a self-standing text. We turn now to the story of how sociologists have attempted to secure this middle ground.