CULTURAL THEORY

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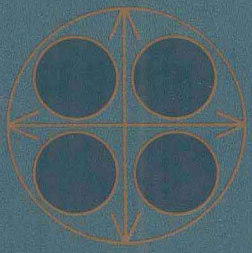

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CULTURAL THEORY

Michael Thompson
Richard Ellis
Aaron Wildavsky

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Political Cultures

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To
Mary Douglas

Preface

The subject of this book is meaning. We are interested in how individuals confer meaning upon situations, events, objects, relationships—in short, their lives. How do people come to believe that physical nature is one way rather than another? How does one view of human nature come to seem more sensible than another? Why are some people alarmed at the use of nuclear energy while others are sanguine about it? Why does the destruction of the tropical rain forests in South America drive some individuals to the brink of despair while leaving others apparently unmoved? This book explores the different perceptual screens through which people interpret or make sense of their world and the social relations that make particular visions of reality seem more or less plausible.

Throughout this book, we use the vocabulary of subjectivity, of social construction, of the interpretation of meaning. These words have, unfortunately, become the almost exclusive province of those who insist that an explanatory social science in search of regularities is impossible. Proponents of hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, critical theory, and the like assert that understanding human beings, because humans confer meaning upon their lives, is inconsistent with theorizing in the spirit of the natural sciences. Understanding human beings is said to be more like textual interpretation (or even art) than it is like a science.

Our view is that this rigid dichotomy between interpretation of meaning and scientific explanation is unjustified. It is true that human beings create meaning. But it is also true that it is possible to make statements of regularities that help in explaining and even predicting (or retrodicting) the human construction of meaning. Subjectivity need not rule out regularity as long as different sorts of people feel subjective in similar ways with regard to similar objects. In this book by way of precept, in prior works by way of demonstration, and in future works by way of comparing rival theories to cultural theory, we hope to maintain against all comers the proposition that social science and the

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interpretation of meaning are not only compatible but essentially also the same subject.

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Richard Ellis
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Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to our teacher and friend Mary Douglas, upon whose pioneering work we build our theoretical edifice. Our gratitude for her inspiration and encouragement in what has become a joint intellectual program does not imply her agreement with what we have done. She will speak for herself. Here we wish to acknowledge her helpful comments on our chapter on Durkheim. We also wish to thank those who are engaged in a similar enterprise for the many things we have learned from them. Their names and works are noted in the bibliography.

At various stages in writing *Cultural Theory,* we solicited the critical comments of numerous colleagues in the social sciences: Gabriel Almond, Robert A. Atkins, Sam Barnes, Jonathan Bendor, Raymond Boudon, Harvey Brooks, Susan Buck, G. A. Cohen, Dennis Coyle, Terry Clark, Robert Dahl, Lewis Dexter, Gus diZerega, Dan Elazar, Jon Elster, Michael Faia, Ernest Haas, Andrew Janos, Robert Klitgaard, Martin Landau, Jan-Erik Lane, Stanley Leiberson, Arend Lijphart, Charles Lindblom, Duncan McRae, Duane Oldfield, Sam Popkin, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Per Selle, Arthur Stinchcombe, Jonathan Turner, Ken Waltz, Joe White, Harold Wilensky, Frederick Wirt, and Sheldon Wolin. This book is better for their advice. Our thanks also go to the Spencer Foundation, which supported this project, and to the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which supported Richard Ellis under its Bradley Fellows Program.

Developing the foundations of a large-scale theory requires the formulation and scrutiny of bedrock premises usually left unexamined. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but as parents and politicians know, it certainly does avoid a lot of argument. When three quite different people set about agreeing on a common set of premises, going further to specify the connections and consequences among them,

that takes a lot of doing. We think this often exhilarating but sometimes painful process of discovery has been worthwhile and that the result is a richer body of theory than each of us could have concocted on his own.

M. T.
R. E.
A. W.

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Sociocultural Viability: An Introduction

It is not our intention to bombard the reader with the myriad definitions of culture that have been tried and discarded, only to reappear without agreement among scholars.[1] Suffice it to say that two families of definitions vie for supremacy. One views culture as composed of values, beliefs, norms, rationalizations, symbols, ideologies, i.e., mental products.[2] The other sees culture as referring to the total way of life of a people, their interpersonal relations as well as their attitudes.[3] Rather than arguing for one definition over the other and vainly trying to pry people apart from their customary usage, we hope to gain clarity by distinguishing three terms—cultural biases, social relations, and ways of life. *Cultural bias* refers to shared values and beliefs. *Social relations* are defined as patterns of interpersonal relations. When we wish to designate a viable combination of social relations and cultural bias we speak of a *way of life.*

Causal priority, in our conception of ways of life, is given neither to cultural bias nor to social relations. Rather each is essential to the other. Relations and biases are reciprocal, interacting, and mutually reinforcing: Adherence to a certain pattern of social relationships generates a distinctive way of looking at the world; adherence to a certain worldview legitimizes a corresponding type of social relations. As in the case of the chicken and the egg, it is sufficient to show that cultural biases and social relations are responsible for one another, without confronting the issue of which came first.[4]

In this book we present a theory of sociocultural viability that explains how ways of life maintain (and fail to maintain) themselves.[5] The problem we have set for ourselves is not one of origins—when and how did ways of life emerge? It is instead a problem of persistence—how, having come into being, does a way of life sustain itself (and change)? How is it that the strength of ways of life waxes and wanes?

The viability of a way of life, we argue, depends upon a mutually supportive relationship between a particular cultural bias and a particular pattern of social relations.[6] These biases and relations cannot be mixed and matched. We call this the *compatibility condition.* A change in the way an individual perceives physical or human nature, for instance, changes the range of behavior an individual can justify engaging in and hence the type of social relations an individual can justify living in. Shared values and beliefs are thus not free to come together in any which way; they are always closely tied to the social relations they help legitimate.

A way of life will remain viable only if it inculcates in its constituent individuals the cultural bias that justifies it. Conversely (for we do not want to assign priority one way or the other), individuals, if they wish to make a way of life for themselves, must negotiate a set of values and beliefs capable of supporting that way of life. Our aim is to show that across a wide range of phenomena—whether ways of attributing blame, interpreting apathy, or perceiving risk—social relations generate preferences and perceptions that in turn sustain those relations. Instead of a social science that begins at the end—assuming values and beliefs—our theory makes why people want what they want and why people perceive the world the way they do into the central subjects of social inquiry.

The need to explain the preferences and perceptions of individuals opens up the need for a functional mode of explanation, i.e., an explanation "in which the consequences of some behavior or social arrangement are essential elements of the causes of that behavior."[7] Functional analysis directs attention to the social restrictions that hedge in the individual and thereby bolster a particular set of social institutions. Ways of life are made viable by classifying certain behaviors as worthy of praise and others as undesirable, or even unthinkable. Although it is individuals who construct, bolster, contest, and discredit ways of life, from the standpoint of any single individual the social world appears largely as a given. We side with Karl Popper's view that "it is to be stressed that this world exists to a large extent autonomously; that it generates its own problems . . . and that its impact on any one of us, even on the most original of creative thinkers, vastly exceeds the impact which any of us can make upon it."[8]

While we insist that ways of life channel the thought and behavior of individuals, we agree with Anthony Giddens that functionalism too often fails to acknowledge that many times an individual knows "a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member."[9] The extent to which individuals are aware of providing support to their way of life depends on their level of

cultural consciousness. Intended functions, in our view, play as important a role as do latent functions in sociocultural viability.

Were it true that functional explanation is defective in principle, rather than only in past practice, our theory would collapse. We have to show, therefore, that it is only the singers, not the song itself, that are defective. By reviewing in Part 2 the use and abuse of functional explanation by major theorists—from Montesquieu to Merton—we show that functional analysis is indispensable to explaining how social life coheres. (After all, if a social system is not generating ways of behaving in the world, ways that sustain that system, how can one account for system maintenance except as a fortuitous occurrence?) The abuses are largely due to attaching functions to society as a whole. By breaking down societies to their constituent ways of life, and tying functions to those ways, we rehabilitate functional explanation.

Supplementing our claim that the viability of ways of life is constrained by the need for congruence between social relations and cultural biases is a second, more ambitious, claim: Five and only five ways of life—hierarchy, egalitarianism, fatalism, individualism, and autonomy—meet these conditions of viability.[10] We call this, rather grandly, our "impossibility theorem."[11]

Although five may seem to some readers an impossibly small number of ways of life, this number more than doubles the amount of conceptual variety available in existing theories of social organization. Part 2 makes good this sweeping claim. Whatever their singular merits may be, and these are considerable, the great social theorists of the past rarely went beyond the development from hierarchy to individualism, thereby leaving out fatalism, egalitarianism, and autonomy. Without these latter three types, theories of social organization lack, as Ross Ashby put it, requisite variety.[12]

Introducing more than two modes of organizing social life makes social change both more difficult and more interesting to explain. If there are just two ways of life, being dislodged from one necessarily means landing in the other. Allowing for changes between five ways of life, we maintain, produces a more powerful and discriminating theory of change.

Change occurs because the five ways of life, though viable, are not entirely impervious to the real world. That human perception is everywhere culturally biased does not mean that people can make the world come out any way they wish. Surprise—the discrepancy between the expected and the actual—is of central importance in dislodging individuals from their way of life. Change occurs when successive events intervene in such a manner as to prevent a way of life from delivering

on the expectations it has generated, thereby prompting individuals to seek more promising alternatives.

At the same time that the five ways of life are in competition for adherents, so too, our theory insists, are they dependent on one another. Each way of life needs each of its rivals, either to make up for its deficiencies, or to exploit, or to define itself against. To destroy the other is to murder the self. Were egalitarians to eliminate hierarchists and individualists, for instance, their lack of a target to be against would remove the justification for their strong group boundary and thus undermine their way of life. Or, to take another example, were individualists ever to rid the world of hierarchy, there would be no extra-market authority to enforce the laws of contract, thus producing the breakdown of the individualists' way of life. If, as we are arguing, each way of life depends upon each of the four rival ways of life for survival, then it follows that for one way of life to exist there must be at least five ways of life in existence. This we refer to as the *requisite variety condition,* that is, there may be more than five ways of life, but there cannot be fewer.

That no way of life can exist alone does not mean that every way of life will be equally represented within a single country at a given point in time. Societies may be constituted so as to countenance certain ways of life and to discourage others. "American exceptionalism," for instance, in bringing individualism and egalitarianism together, has conspired to weaken hierarchy;[13] in Britain, by contrast, hierarchy and individualism have allied in such a way as to largely exclude egalitarianism. We do not mean by this that regimes such as these are in some sort of static equilibrium. On the contrary, we will show that recurrent patterns, such as those that distinguish American and British regimes, are possible only if the ways of life from which they are put together are in relationships of disequilibrium, so that they perpetually change their relative strength without ever settling down to some steady dynamic state. The differences between regimes, therefore, are to be found in the differing configurations of this perpetual dynamic imbalance between the five ways of life.

The study of culture, however defined, has characteristically emphasized uniqueness. Cultures, in this conception, are as varied as nations, ethnic groups, companies, clubs, any and all collections of people that think a bit differently, employ somewhat different signs, or whose customary practices and/or artifacts have something special about them. French culture is different from British culture is different from American culture; the corporate culture of Audi is different from Ford is different from Toyota; Presbyterian culture is different from Quaker culture is different from Baptist culture; and so on. Anyone who seeks

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