

The Meaning of Culture

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Thesis Eleven 51 (1997), 37-51

ABSTRACT: The article inquires into the uneasiness of sociological systems theory about culture. Culture alternatively is called the solution to the problem of double contingency (Parsons) and removed from this solution (Luhmann). It is shown that meaning is the more basic term whose description reveals a form rule of social systems which is only patterned, yet not understood by culture. Culture is a memory and control device of society. It may be conceived of as providing the distinction of correct versus incorrect behaviour. But who decides on the correctness or incorrectness of this distinction? Sociological thinking takes off where the cultural and the social are distinguished.

key words: closure, culture, meaning, society, systems

Bracketing culture

Sociological systems theory has always been uneasy about culture. Talcott Parsons had conceived of culture as the system of value-orientation whose generalized symbols of action orientation solved the problem of double contingency in social systems (Parsons/Shils 1951). But already when concluding the famous "truce" between anthropology and sociology concerning the use of the terms culture and social system, respectively, he rather ambivalently accepted culture as a factor which shapes human behaviour by "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems", but compared this to a notion of social system which is interested in "the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities" (Parsons/Kroeber 1958, p. 583). There seems to be something more basic going on with respect to the social which poses problems that may or may not be solved by cultural rules. Without really revising either the notion of the solution of the problem of double contingency or the terms of the truce, Parsons later went on to relegate culture to a distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour (Parsons 1973). Yet he always insisted on the possibility of speaking of the cultural system as that specific aspect of action which is organized around symbols, ideas, beliefs, and other "stable patternings of meaning" (Parsons 1977).

Niklas Luhmann removes culture as the one and only solution to the problem of double contingency (Luhmann 1984, chap. 3). Instead, the problem of ego's selections of behaviour depending on alter's selections, with alter's selections depending in turn on ego's, is solved, if it is solved, by the very fact of a selection which must not be given by culture but can as well be the result of a chance event, a tentative offer, an involuntary gesture. Luhmann therefore asks for a temporal analysis of both the problem and its solution instead of a cultural one. Like Parsons he accepts culture as a token for the distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour, or between correct and incorrect "use of themes", as he would have it, and conceives of culture as the "supply of themes" ready for use in communication situations (Luhmann 1984, p. 163).

Thus, sociological systems theory joins the sociological mainstream which describes culture as "an ongoing argument about rightness of choice" (Douglas 1989, p. 89), high culture being an argument about taste (Bourdieu 1979), low culture being an argument about morals. Culture is a "shared understanding" developed in situations where all orientation relates to how others orientate to the situation (Becker 1982). It combines a well-chosen bias with the social relations that are to be maintained (Thompson/Ellis/Wildavsky 1990). Culture thus is part of the "operation bootstrap" by which social systems emerge as independent from organic and environmental conditions (Parsons 1977, p. 179). It is that part of the operation which settles down as symbols.

Yet, some doubts remain. Parsons never endogenized culture into his conception of a social system. He always kept it distinct from it, thus entertaining a refuge for culture which is just one of four aspects of the action system (the cultural, the social, the organic, the personal), with three of these aspects not to be reduced to the social. Culture is sited outside the social, with art, religion, and science almost as in Dilthey (1959) as part of the cultural not of the social.

Luhmann also treats culture differently from other notions. Yet he seems to have different reasons for doing so. He for instance calls it "one of the worst notions ever invented", having "devastating effects" for religion as well as for art (Luhmann 1995a). He takes great care to describe it as a "historical notion", invented in the 18th century, when culture lost the genitive which it had in ancient times. Culture with the Greeks and Romans had been an expression of care, attention, and worship, as is documented in phrases like *cultura animi*, as Cicero's name for philosophy, or *cultura dolorum* as an expression for the Christian faith. Culture now became an independent sphere of decisively "intellectual" comparisons of human behaviour in different times and regions (Luhmann 1995b; Luhmann 1996a). Culture emerged as the result of the possibility of describing as "interesting" what until then just had been of use or not, be it something beautiful, just, true, lovable, economical, or the opposite.

These comparisons destroyed the sense of articles of faith as well as of works of art. Or rather, they introduced a sense which had nothing to do any more with religious reasons for religion, or artistic reasons for art (since then religion for religion's sake as well as *l'art pour l'art* has been stamped the cultural Fall of Man). To compare articles of faith or works of art among each other amounts to not taking their singularity seriously anymore. Ironically, in becoming aware of this effect, culture compensated it by taking *itself* seriously, by demanding honoring, and by developing notions of comparably incomparable singularity. That finally killed articles of faith and works of art, since by comparing, honouring, and singularizing them one loses all sense of their socially improbable operation, that is, of their production inside a decoupled and embedded system. Of course, to switch from honouring to criticizing, as did cultural criticism, only changes the signature but does not change the general direction of intellectual contempt.

Sociological systems theory brackets culture as a possible candidate for the solution of its most important problem, i.e., the problem of double contingency. Such a bracketing only makes sense when there are different solutions for this problem. And indeed, such a possible track was kept open by Parsons when distinguishing between the social and the cultural, and is undertaken by Luhmann when proposing a temporal instead of a cultural analysis of solutions to the problem of double contingency coming about.

It is culture's stable patternings of meaning barring an analysis of how meaning comes about which sociological systems theory worries about. Sociological theory ought not to stick with the stable patternings but should proceed to an analysis of the meaning which becomes patterned by culture. For Luhmann, radicalizing here on Parsons, there has to be a theory of meaning which explains how stable patternings come about, given the all-pervasive aspect of time passing and events vanishing. That is, on this issue, Luhmann joins Mead and Schütz by insisting on an analysis of meaning well before any analysis of action, let alone culture, becomes possible.

More than any other sociological theory, systems theory does not accept to take anything, be it the world or notions, for granted. Luhmann adds that this is an absurd premise; yet as an absurd premise it avoids the danger of error and moreover forces the theory to reconstruct in its own terms anything it wants to describe (Luhmann 1971).

Meaning as a Form Rule

Meaning for Luhmann, drawing on Husserl, may be defined (if definition there is) as that form of self-overtaxing in social and psychic systems which consists in all concrete meaning always and necessarily referring to possible other meaning. Meaning never stands still. It is

not identical to such or such a sense of something visible or invisible in the world. Instead it is "the surplus of references to other possibilities of action and experiences" (Luhmann 1984, chap. 2). Whatever anything means, it can and does mean something else as well without ever being able to exclude these other possibilities of meaning. Meaning consists not in self-identical meanings of things, but in these identical meanings plus possible other meanings. That is, it consists in other-identical meanings. It is not an indication, let alone an injunction, but an horizon, as phenomenology had to discover to its dismay.

Meaning is the basic stuff social and psychic systems are made of. They are made of meaning, and of nothing but meaning. That is the most astonishing trait of their co-evolutionary emergence (Luhmann 1984, chap. 7). By having recourse to meaning they distinguish themselves from their environment, and from physical, organic, or technical systems in that environment. That means that they do not have access to anything which does not have meaning. They are excluded from the domains of the meaningless and can only hint at these domains by indicating what is happening in their environment. Sure, there are attempts to produce the meaningless, most notably in art, but it makes sense only by having the meaning of pointing to the meaningless.

The notion of meaning is the only notion devoid of difference which sociological systems theory accepts. In systems theory it is only joined in this respect by the notion of a world which is the unity of the distinction between system and environment; and maybe in other theoretical endeavours the notion of meaning is shadowed by the notions of sign and of text, for which equally there is nothing beyond signs and texts. Yet systems theory does not stop here. It accepts a "phenomenological" entry into its analysis only in order to be able to describe what meaning literally is performing for the social and psychic systems it is interested in. It is interested in the distinctions a meaning devoid of difference is able to trigger in social and psychic systems.

Of course the most important effect meaning is bringing about is the endogenic restlessness of psychic and social systems. This restlessness adds to the "operation bootstrap" Parsons was describing, since it is only the systems themselves which can decide on this or that meaning to be chosen in an actual moment, and on other meanings to be relegated to the background. Meaning, as it is, forces the systems to select. And it guarantees that no selection chosen ever is able to destroy other possible meanings. Even negation, as Freud (1925) already noticed, is a way to indicate, and to thereby keep at hand, what is negated.

Thus, meaning is a form rule. There is no way to totalize anymore. Instead, there is a play of infinite substitutions inside a finite, because closed, field of decentered possibilities (Derrida 1970). Luhmann (1984, chap. 2) distinguishes four aspects of this form rule. First, meaning forces the social or psychic system to be aware of complexity. A system is complex insofar as it is not able to link all of its elements to all of its elements at any specific time. It

has to select, and it has to select, knowing—due to meaning—that each selection is a contingent one, and thus a risky one. Any combination of elements not chosen at a specific moment remains possible, even becomes possible exactly by not being chosen (Barel 1979), and can be selected the next time, yet depends not on chance but on the internal constraints of a structurally determined system (Maturana 1979).

Second, meaning forces the system to be self-referential. When realizing, due to meaning, that the system operates through selection, each selection as a selection of the system refers not only to the element selected but to the selector, the system, as well. Moreover, each selection may be taken up again later, thus there is, always due to meaning, some reference to the selection of the selection inherent in any selection. And that again on the one hand turns back the system on itself, and on the other, refers it to other, and other-referential, possibilities.

Third, meaning forces the system to realize its boundaries. Meaning becomes the form of the world since everything has meaning for a system which consists of nothing but meaning. Yet, it is only with respect to meaning-type of systems (i.e., psychic and social ones) that the world has meaning. That is, the boundary they are drawing in the world relates to events or states of the system as well as to events or states of their environment.

Fourth, meaning forces the system to realize its operational closure. The world is infinitely open, yet the social or psychic system can only realize this openness by referring from meaning to meaning. There is no other way to operate. There is no possibility of temporary reproduction by recourse to some technical, physical, or organical apparatus. If these systems do not find the next meaningful event they cease to exist. And any event they find, and rely on in order to reproduce, has meaning. Again, there is nothing meaningless for them. They entertain the notion, due to meaning, that there is something meaningless like the facticity of the world, the sheer existence of social, psychic, and other systems, the shocks of life, or the transcendence of God. But there is no way to account for this meaningless if not by demotivating it, and then remotivating it in terms of meaning. Gilles Deleuze, in his work, chased this as the paradox of meaning (Deleuze 1969).

Luhmann (1984, chap. 2) goes on to describe the restlessness of meaning. Meaning as a form rule of social and psychic systems stimulates, and is stimulated by, certain distinctions which keep it moving, so to speak. The overall distinction of meaning is the distinction of the actual from the possible. Compare this to Jacques Derrida's idea of *différance* as a "forme médiale" always doing and cancelling what it does (Derrida 1968). The distinction of the actual from the possible is responsible for the capacity of meaning to produce information, since all meaning selected selects certain states of the possible out of the range of possible other states. Information can be defined as meaning that surprises. Such a notion of information still pays tribute to information theory (Shannon/Weaver 1949), yet it does away

with the idea of information transmission, since it is the systems which inform themselves by selecting such or such an event or state. Operational closure, as in general systems theory (von Foerster 1981), means informational closure. It is easy to imagine a very intricate communication theory ensuing from such a starting point (Luhmann 1984, chap. 4).

Yet, it is not only information which keeps meaning moving. The more complex social systems become, the more they distinguish between different dimensions of meaning which each rest in some distinction that takes care of a problem by establishing it. There are the factual, the temporal, and the social dimension of meaning. Compare this to Derrida's idea of *différance* opening up the possibilities of temporalisation, of a relationship to the other, and of language (Derrida 1967). And note the peculiarity that there is a special case of social meaning called the social dimension of meaning. Meaning re-enters itself, and nobody knows how psychic systems deal with this. All we can try to do, by becoming aware of our socializing, is to get rid of social determinations and overdeterminations of the psychic (Lacan 1966). Maybe, AIDS is helping us to do so, since that illness is decisive in singling out the factors that socially determine our psyche by not only communicating the fact of death no consciousness is able to conceive of (Sartre 1943), but by at the same time depriving the psyche of the death it is forced to think its own, when relating that death to contagion (Brodkey 1996; Rincken 1996). There is nothing tautological in meaning when you start thinking of it as constituting social as well as psychic systems while at the same time forcing them to realize their operational closure.

Yet even on the social level meaning is de-tautologized by the distinctions the three dimensions of meaning introduce. There is, first of all, the distinction of some determined fact one is relating to from all other possible facts one could as easily, or almost, relate to. Meaning keeps alive the question why one refers to this fact and not to some other fact, why one entertains such and such a theme of conversation and not a different one, and why, if any fact or theme is chosen, one goes on to relate the fact or theme to different ones instead of doing an in-depth analysis. At any moment you have to choose. At any moment you could choose differently. And at any moment you are observed by others who comment on, and vary, your choices.

Then there is the temporal dimension of meaning. The temporal dimension is brought forward by the distinction between before and after. Before having selected a selection the world is different from its state after the selection, since the selection changed it. Yet the selection referred to prior states of the world or may be legitimated by reference to future states viewed from the states before—and therefore has to realize that after the selection the world is a different one with different possible futures and different needs of legitimation. The temporal dimension relates to before and after, to past and future, as selections chosen while impossible to choose. You can only escape this paradox when fleeing into the present,

yet the present consists of moments passing, squeezed by past and future, and delocalized between before and after. Once again one notices the form rule of meaning working, forcing the realization of complexity along with self-reference, boundary, and closure.

Finally, there is the social dimension of meaning. For every selection ego chooses, alter can choose between consent or dissent. For every Yes, there is a No, the restlessness of meaning brought about by the social fact that somebody saying Yes invites others to say No. There is no guarantee for any meaning to be accepted. Rejection is equally probable. And this again sets in play the form rule of meaning. And it decouples the problem of double contingency which has to search for its solution and can only find it inside social systems.

Making Meaning Meaningful

Now, if this is how we are to conceive of the form rule of meaning then how are we to integrate the notion of culture as a performance providing "stable patternings of meaning" (Parsons) into this picture? Luhmann proposes that we think of culture as a gigantic memory of society that constantly overtaxes itself (Luhmann/De Giorgi 1992, pp. 166-168). It is doing nothing but memorizing how meaning condenses into meaning, and tries to keep track of the process of enrichment of each meaning, which by inclusion as well as exclusion incessantly relates to possible other meaning. That means that culture as a memory device is a control device, yet a control device, Luhmann adds with respect to a distinction from the American understanding of "control", which does not constrain causality but rather demonstrates its unconstrainability.

The relationship between meaning and culture, then, is a relationship between a social system overtaxing itself by the form rule of meaning and the memory of this social system equally overtaxing itself by patternings of this meaning which never quite hit the mark. Culture is memory work. Culture means control without being able to control. It is an interpretation by symbols it knows to be incommensurable (Lévi-Strauss 1950).

So how does culture do this memorizing, controlling, and interpreting? One possible explanation is to assume that culture translates meaning which is devoid of difference into a distinction which it uses to build up the memory, to claim control, and to fuel interpretations. Using G. Spencer Brown's form calculus (Spencer Brown 1969) one may describe culture as the re-entry of the distinction of meaning into itself. But how are you to re-enter a distinction devoid of difference into itself? Here we hit upon one of the many difficulties that haunt cultural studies. Culture somehow has to do what cannot be done. It has to refer to a meaning where no reference holds tight. That is why no phenomenological endeavour to describe

culture ever gained any ground. One has to introduce a distinction in order to give meaning a meaning before one can re-enter meaning into meaning.

That probably is why Georg Simmel spoke of the tragedy of culture (Simmel 1911). He introduced the distinction between man and culture, both sides of this distinction, one may suppose, taking part in meaning. The tragedy ensues from man creating a culture which then becomes independent and estranged from him. Another possibility is to use the distinction of culture from society in order to assign to culture the task of looking after the fate of men. If there is any semantics which acknowledges the differences between human beings, their organic and psychic constitution, on the one side, and their social and societal determination, on the other, it surely is the semantic of culture (Malinowski 1944). Culture then would mean to take care of the specifically human aspects of meaning, thereby accepting, and then exploiting, that due to this distinction there are inhuman aspects of meaning as well.

Such a distinction of man from culture, or of culture from society, has the advantage to place culture into the position of a shifter (Jakobson 1971), which assumes its meaning dependent on the context it is used in. Yet the disadvantage is that once one accepts culture as a shifter there is no means to stop that man and society assuming the status of shifters as well. What is man in distinction from culture, or society in distinction from culture, if culture is both created by man and taking care of him in assuming a commission by the society? Culture here becomes a device to switch views, to acknowledge dialectics, to do anthropology and cultural critique, and to cherish cultural pessimism and cultural optimism. All this has been done, and it has been accompanied by cultural philosophy. There are attempts to take up this tradition and to continue cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* by insisting on the epistemological necessity of switching views. Yet the problem remains that culture is devoid of reference since it rests on a notion of meaning which is devoid of difference. Introducing the two references to man and society does not solve the problem but does reveal it.

Therefore we propose to start afresh and to look again at the relationship between meaning and culture. It is not by looking to the phenomenology of meaning that we can get a feeling of what culture is performing. Rather, we have to look at the form rule meaning is forcing upon social systems in order to become aware of the problems which meaning is causing and the possible solutions which culture is providing.

There are four aspects of this form rule (complexity, self-reference, boundary, and closure) accompanied by three dimensions (factual, temporal, and social) which indicate how the form rule may be acted out. All of the four aspects as well as the three dimensions apply to social systems, yet are specifications of a meaning which is employed by psychic systems as well. We propose to pay tribute to the tradition of anthropology by acknowledging the distinction between social systems and psychic systems to be highly relevant to any specification of cul-

ture, yet to leave this distinction aside nevertheless because to speak about psychic systems invites all kinds of mystifications.

Thus we assume the view of cognitive sciences which investigate the dynamics of operationally closed systems and distinguish carefully between organic, neurophysiological, psychic, and social systems, among others (Varela/Coutinho/Dupire/Vaz 1988; Varela 1991). The distinction of psychic systems from social systems provides an understanding of the reality substructure of meaning, reality finally boiling down to a distinction not to be avoided, and thus an understanding of both restlessness and evolution. Yet we do not start theorizing about culture from here, even taking into account that it might be convincing to apply the ancient notion of culture as care, attention, and worship to the relation between psychic systems and social systems.

Due to the form rule of meaning social systems are forced into a complexity and contingency which makes it necessary to take advantage of culture's respect for the inaccessible with regard to a different task. Culture is demanded to provide care, attention, and worship for the social inside the social. And that is exactly what the modern notion of culture deploying regional and historical comparisons provides. Culture provides a self-description of the society in terms of complexity reduced, self-reference indexicalized, boundaries justified, and closure re-opened. It does so by doubling all possible meaning (Luhmann 1995b). Any meaning whatsoever not only is referred to, or not, by societal reproduction but becomes interesting. We have already observed that point. Doing historical research, looking at contemporary artwork, going to the theatre, reading cultural essays, inquiring into the use of knives and forks, interpreting political speeches as cultural artifacts, and so on, all amount to making stories out of networks, which means: maintaining ties where disciplines failed (White 1992, chap. 3).

The doubling of meaning introduces the distinction of meaning making sense from meaning as pure contingency. By doubling meaning, that is by making meaning interesting, one can start to look for other, and comparable meaning. One can look for explanations, for interpretations, for perspectives, for contexts. One can do natural science, social science, and textual science. And indeed, things begin to look meaningful if you provide them with causes, connect them with hidden sense, put them into perspective, and support them with a context. To be sure, they had their meaning already before, else they would not have come into being. Yet now they shimmer.

But what have you done? It is you who doubled the meaning. It is you who introduced causes, sense, perspective, and context. It is you who told the story. What is the connection, if there is any, between your story and the meaning you are relating to? You told a story about yourself, didn't you?

Yet this is exactly what society needs. It needs somebody who tells stories. Stories connect different elements of the society, and thus constrain its complexity with respect to what makes sense. As soon as one starts to call the effect of the thomian catastrophe of dynamically stabilizing monetary economics by entrepreneurial risk-taking "capitalism" you feel much better and you know what to do—be it celebrating or criticizing it. Stories provide a background to the self-referential operations of society, thus maintaining chosen other-references. If you call upon gods, enemies, human bliss, or ecological dangers you are at least able to distinguish between the tautological emptiness of your society and the external references to stay aware of (Tenbruck 1989).

Stories justify the boundaries of a society. That is one message of Mary Douglas' cultural theory. Whether you are a fatalist, a hierarchist, an expansionist or a communitarian, the important point is that you thereby know how to handle surprises (Douglas 1989). Whatever happens, you know why it happened and what will ensue from it. You are prepared since you know the outside of your society and its way to handle the outside. And you notice only events that fit the paradigm.

And finally, stories re-open the closure of the social. By making meaning meaningful they introduce, as Heinz von Foerster would have it, double closure into an operationally closed system (von Foerster 1981, pp. 288-309). The first closure of a system removes one degree of freedom: anything happening inside the system has to obey the condition that any end must be a beginning as well; else the system stops. Of course, a wealth of structures is possible if only this condition of operational closure (Maturana's "organization") is complied with (Maturana/ Varela 1980). The second closure removes a second degree of freedom. Now, any regulation of the operations of the system must be accommodated not only with these operations but with the regulation itself as well, viz. the regulation must self-accommodate. There is a self which is introduced and which serves as an authority on all questions of just how operations are to be reproduced. Note that this authority works separately from, yet possibly seeks contact with, the natural reproduction of the system. It doubles the operations as operations not only reproduced but to be reproduced.

Think of all stories which involve memory and control. They all involve the introduction of a self whose authority is called upon to regulate which further operations were, or are, to be expected. Take the case of the stories which told, and tell, the fate of European nations, and extended the notion of nation to non-European countries as well. A nation is a means of regulating the political, economical, educational, and semantic reproduction of a society, implementing such a regulation by imposing cross-references from the political to the economical, from the semantic to the educational, and from the educational to the political.

Thus the form rule of meaning is translated by culture into memory and control. The operational basis for this is a self-description society is elaborating. Culture means self-

description of the society. As with all memory the main function of this memorizing self-description is to enable forgetting, while assuring that things forgotten may be recalled nevertheless (von Foerster 1969; Luhmann 1996). Of course, culture as self-description applies also to the three dimensions of meaning. Culture regulates, by memory and control, how to speak of which things, which themes to avoid, and how to change themes depending on the social context one is in. Switching themes in a salon means something other than doing the same in a seminar. Putting nation into perspective in a paper like this one means something other than doing the same in a political discussion. Your taste is always with you to judge on the distinctions drawn by the themes brought forward, and to judge them by the way they are brought forward.

Culture is precariously helpful when it comes to the temporal facets of meaning. Since it relies on generalizing and tradition it very much plays down the temporal intricacies of distinctions between before and after. It provides society with a future very much in accordance with its past. It almost blends after and before, past and future, with a present which consists in being faithful to a culture. Perhaps, that is a reason why we encounter so many difficulties when entering into a temporal description of the social.

Culture is perhaps at its best with respect to the social dimension of meaning. Memory and control provide social situations with solutions of its double contingency. Almost automatically and without even noticing one enters a situation, remembers comparable situations, realizes possible means of control, and complies. It is revealing that one can read the wisdom of Indian or Buddhist meditation with respect to the obstacles which hinder us becoming aware of our social conditionings. Add to this the extent to which culture is able to regulate the chances to dissent and consent, and you start to realize the extent to which it indeed controls by memory (both remembering and forgetting). Even the distinction between ego and alter fades into the characteristics of persons known to be known, thereby losing the knowledge of how we all maintain the construction of our selves which consist of both ego and alter.

The Distinction of the Social from the Cultural

Culture thus may be understood as the self-description of a modern society able to programme how it regulates the reproduction of its operations. Yet, this is correct only insofar as the programme does not quite succeed. There is always some meaning outside the meaningful that cannot simply be relegated to the meaningless. The meaningless is there, and it makes sense.

The paradoxical re-entry of the distinction of meaning into the meaning devoid of difference produces a distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless which is not able to take account of all societal reality. There is too much which is meaningless and can no longer be morally attributed to the wrong, or religiously to the evil. Society, as it were, changes its cultural states without being able to tell what it is doing. Culture just memorizes how the last fright has been coped with (Mühlmann 1996). If it has not been coped with, there is no culture. For us, there is no authority available to make sense of the wrong and the evil. As soon as it comes to the Holocaust, our stories fail. They cannot imagine the systems or networks which made it possible, nor can they tell how we recovered from it.

Culture is becoming restless as well. It begins to doubt its tradition, to realize the selectivity of its memory, and to take account of the failure of its control. Culture nowadays consists in not trusting itself. Cultural theory insists on this point (Geertz 1973; MacCannell/MacCannell 1982). Cultural activities in libraries, theatres, cinemas, and concert halls repeat the same point. There is no belief any more in any distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless. Culture is getting back to meaning, and thereby it is losing its reference (which means: it is becoming "postmodern").

I should stop here since that is the actual state of culture and nothing can be said about its fate from here on. Yet, I think that sociological thinking for once may be able to lead a little bit further.

Sociological thinking in cultural theory and systems theory alike always comes back to a seemingly harmless distinction which may prove both able to capture actual cultural trends and to further stimulate thinking about culture. Parsons, Luhmann, and Douglas, even if for different reasons, nevertheless agree in describing the distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour, or use of themes, as the *ultima ratio* of culture. Of course, that is a distinction which depicts the worst of a regulating culture and the best of all traditions we would like to adhere to. Take only American obsessions with "correctness" in order to see how doubt still fuels convictions.

Yet there is another aspect to the distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour which may prove more fruitful. In distinction from distinctions like the meaningful versus the meaningless, one may easily apply the distinction of the correct from the correct to itself. If you re-enter the distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless into itself you either have to call the whole distinction meaningful or the whole distinction meaningless. You end up with meaning, and that is where you started in the first place. If, however, you re-enter the distinction between correct and incorrect into itself, you may either call the whole distinction correct or the whole distinction incorrect. If you call the whole distinction incorrect you draw on a cultural option, do away with cultural theory and re-start doing social theory. You do away, that is, with ambiguous interpretations (meaning as meaningful) and look for references

with respect to which you can undertake an analysis of the social. If, however, you call the whole distinction correct then things become interesting (!) since you now have to set out to develop a theory of culture (distinct from cultural theory) which is able to explain the use of culture in a society. That is—as with the first option— you end up with an analysis of the social.

The main point of this argument of course is that there is no way to decide which of the two options one uses. Whether one calls the distinction of the correct from the incorrect correct or incorrect, both options amount to undertaking a sociological analysis of culture. The only option one indeed gains by looking at the two options is to compare an analysis with respect to ambiguous interpretations to a different analysis which keeps the social and the cultural distinct.

In concluding my argument I think that the search for this third option is the most important reason for the uneasiness of systems theory about culture. It wants to remain capable of analysing self-descriptions of society without thereby losing sight of the distinction between the cultural and the social. I recalled Luhmann's analysis of the form rule of meaning and its possible relation to culture precisely in order to redraw our attention to this distinction.

Let me finish by adding that Harrison C. White's "calculus of uncertainty" makes a similar point by distinguishing social ambage from cultural ambiguity, both of which arise, but differently, from uncertainties with respect to decoupling (systems) and embedding (memory and control) (White 1992, pp. 17-19 and 102-115). There is a trade-off in uncertainties, White maintains, which states that you can only increase cultural uncertainty by keeping social uncertainty constant, and vice versa. The cultural doubt accumulated in our times may be due to social form kept constant.

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