

1 The Myth of Cultural Integration*

The conceptualization of culture is extraordinary in two respects. It has displayed the weakest analytical development of any key concept in sociology and it has played the most wildly vacillating role within sociological theory.

(1) At the *descriptive* level, the notion of 'culture' remains inordinately vague despite little dispute that it is indeed a core concept. In every way 'culture' is the poor relation of 'structure'. Definition of the former has not undergone an elaboration equivalent to that of the latter. Consequently there is no ready fund of analytical terms for designating the components of the cultural realm corresponding to those which delineate parts of the structural domain (roles, organizations, institutions, systems, etc.). Methodologically, such is the poverty of conceptualization that there are as yet no 'units' for describing culture: essentially cultures are still 'grasped', in contrast to structures which are now 'analysed'. Basically the notion of cultures *being* structured is uncommonly rare outside of structuralism: instead of different 'cultural structures' there are endless 'cultural differences'.

(2) At the *explanatory* level the status of culture oscillates between that of a supremely independent variable, the superordinate power in society and, with a large sweep of the pendulum, a position of supine dependence on other social institutions. Hence, in various sociological theories, culture swings from being the prime mover (credited with engulfing and orchestrating the entire social structure) to the opposite extreme where it is reduced to a mere epiphenomenon (charged only with providing an ideational representation of structure).

Culture and agency

Together, this descriptive vagueness and these theoretical vagaries, mean that culture occupies no clear place in sociological analysis. What culture is and what culture does are issues bogged down in a conceptual morass from which no adequate sociology of culture has been able to emerge. Obviously such a state of affairs begs for explanation and I believe that the reason for it is embedded in the generic assumptions of an all-pervasive 'Myth of Cultural Integration'. This Myth embodies 'one of the most deep-seated fallacies in social science. . . the . . . assumption of a high degree of consistency in the interpretations produced by societal units'.¹ Yet it projected an image of culture which proved so powerful that it scored the retina, leaving a perpetual after-image, which distorted subsequent perception.

Originating at the descriptive level, the Myth created an archetype of culture(s) as the perfectly woven and all-enmeshing web, the intricate construction of which only added to its strength. Today, instead of analogy, one would simply say that the Myth portrayed culture as the perfectly integrated system, in which every element was interdependent with every other – the ultimate exemplar of compact and coherent organization. Held in thrall by this archetype, theorists of various persuasions concerned themselves only with *how* to accommodate it in their theories; there was no questioning of whether it should be given house-room. Their problem was to find a place *for* the Myth since the Myth itself was not problematic. In turn, the Myth derived power and durability precisely *because* it was endorsed by schools of sociological thought which were otherwise hostile to one another.

That the same theorists who were in bitter dispute over the extent of structural integration (institutional complementarity or contradiction) could simultaneously agree on the subject of *cultural* integration, only buttressed this mythology. Moreover, the fact that they produced differing versions of the Myth helped to insulate its core premise from scrutiny: the *existence* of cultural integration could never be at issue in a debate on the rival mechanisms held to be responsible for it. Thus profound differences over *how* cultural unity was achieved only served to reinforce a fundamentalist accord on the generic nature of cultural coherence.

The most proximate and powerful origins of the Myth are undoubtedly the heritage of anthropology. Despite definitional wrangling over the term 'culture', there was substantial concord among anthropologists about its main property – strong and coherent patterning. This central notion of culture as an integrated

The Myth of Cultural Integration

whole,² grounded in German historicism (*Historismus*), echoes down the decades. Malinowski's conceptualization of 'an individual culture as a coherent whole'³ reverberates through Ruth Benedict's 'cultural patterns',⁴ Meyer Shapiro's 'cultural style'⁵ and Kroeber's 'ethos of total culture patterns',⁶ to resurface in Mary Douglas's notion of 'one single, symbolically consistent universe'.⁷ Two features of this heritage should be underlined. On the one hand its strong aesthetic rather than analytical orientation, which led to an endorsement of "artistic" hermeneutics as the method for grasping the inner sense of cultural wholes'.⁸ On the other hand this approach, based on the intuitive understanding of cultural configurations, entailed a crucial prejudgement, namely an insistence that coherence was there to be found, that is a mental closure against the discovery of cultural inconsistencies.⁹

This *a priori* assumption, that there always was a discoverable coherence in culture and this total reliance on inspirational grasp as the method for discovering it, spilt over to soak the most diverse varieties of sociological theory. The Myth surfaced intact in Functionalist thought, transmitted by Sorokin. His insistence on the internal logic of culture, which would be apprehended by sweeping up a mountain of cultural fragments the inner coherence of which could then be intuitively deciphered, was finally enshrined in the Parsonian central-value system – that *a prioristic* guarantor of further societal integration. If Parsons had taken on board and given pride of place to a notion of an overt and readily detectable cultural system (being somewhat more analytical in his attempt to grasp it through his 'pattern variables'), linguistic structuralism did the reverse. It accepted incoherence as being the surface characteristic of overt and seemingly unconnected cultural symbols but then revealed their underlying structuration by a hidden code – again grasped intuitively, by some form of deciphering or interpolation, though always lacking any external context of justification.

Finally, the Myth received monumental reinforcement by its adoption into Western humanistic Marxism. The notion of 'hegemonic culture' and its offspring, the 'dominant-ideology' thesis, embodied the same assumption about cultural coherence: certainly it was inspired by sectional interests, generally it distorted the nature of reality and undoubtedly the consensus it generated was the product of manipulation, but nevertheless mystification and misguidedness did not deny it the basic property of coherence shared equally by the Parsonian normative system. Significantly the

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now-familiar reliance on aesthetic grasp dominated Marxist methodology here, as evidenced by the growing preoccupation of Euro-Marxists with literary criticism¹⁰ with laying bare the ideological impregnation of works of art, by a kind of ‘class decoding’ which had distinct affinities with the enterprise of linguistic structuralism.

The conventional anthropological approach to culture in fact contained two distinct strands within the concept:

- The notion of a *cultural pattern* with an underlying unity and a fundamental coherence.
- The notion of *uniform action*, identified with the above and stemming from it to produce social homogeneity.

In other words, to view culture as ‘a community of shared meanings’ meant eliding the community with the meanings. In so doing a vital analytical distinction was obfuscated and this was to have far-reaching consequences when the Myth was transmitted to sociology. For the Myth contains a basic analytical confusion between two elements which are both logically and sociologically distinct. Teasing them out involves separating the two strands above which were tautly intertwined in the anthropological image.

What remain inextricably confounded in the Myth of cultural consistency are

- *Logical consistency*, that is the degree of internal compatibility between the components of culture (however these two terms are defined).
- *Causal consensus*, that is the degree of social uniformity produced by the imposition of culture (again however these two terms are defined) by one set of people on another.

The former concerns *the consistency* of our attempts to impose ideational order on experiential chaos; the latter concerns the *success* of attempts to order other people. Logical consistency is a property of the world of ideas; causal consensus is a property of people.

The main proposition advanced here is that the two are logically and empirically distinct, hence they can vary independently of one another. Thus it is perfectly conceivable that any social unit, from a community to a civilization, could be found the principal ideational elements (knowledge, belief, norms, language, mythology, etc.) of which do indeed display considerable logical consistency – that is, the components are consistent not contradictory – yet the same social unit may be low on causal consensus. For example, this may be especially true where the ‘culture’ in all its logical coherence

The Myth of Cultural Integration

is the prerogative of an elite (priesthood, caste, intelligentsia, estate or ruling class). Because of this, the non-elites may behave differently (absence of social uniformity), given that they only have access to more restricted ideas.

Restricted access may give rise to defective or divergent syntheses of the cultural stock resulting in schism through the differential accentuation of the cultural elements received. Furthermore, such action is the joint product of the notions inculcated and the response to enforced inculcation. Unlike the elite, these actors are not responding to the power of precept alone but also to preceptual power. Power relations are the causal element in cultural consensus building and, far from unproblematically guaranteeing behavioural conformity, they can provoke anything from ritualistic acceptance to outright rejection of the culture imposed.

It should be noted that these cases where high logical coherence is accompanied by low causally induced consensus do not depend upon the existence of cultural alternatives within the social unit in question. Although these are generally extremely important in amplifying the lack of social uniformity, their presence is not a necessary pre-condition for the independent variation of logical coherence and causal consensus in the cultural realm. In brief, this distinction can be sustained *even if* we uncritically accept the existence of a single, unified central-value system or cultural scheme.

Equally the opposite situation can be found in society: causal consensus may be high while logical consistency is low. Again there is nothing inconceivable about a social unit the members of which display considerable cultural accord in their basic values, interpretations and language, yet the Cultural System itself is riven with inconsistencies. Successful imposition does not require high coherence of the cultural package imposed. Partly this is because humankind does not necessarily notice inconsistency or unexceptionally find it intolerable (individually we all give house-room to incompatible mental furnishings through intellectual idleness, patches of ignorance, nostalgia or closing the emotional shutters). Again, more important in empirical terms, are the power relations implicated in imposition. Whether we are talking about parental socialization of political indoctrination, the success achieved may reflect coercion rather than conviction. As in the glaring case of German Fascism, considerable behavioural uniformity can co-exist with *both* substantial doctrinal inconsistencies and significant mental reservations in the population.

Thus my basic proposition is that it is essential to distinguish

Culture and agency

logical consistency from causal cohesion in order to gain an analytical grip on the cultural components and upon Socio-Cultural dynamics. This distinction would closely parallel that between System integration and social integration,¹¹ made by Lockwood, in the structural domain. Indeed, much of the following argument seeks not merely to bring the analysis of culture on a par with that of structure but also to suggest that the two can be analysed in very similar generic terms. In line with this conviction, what has so far been discussed as the logical consistency of culture will henceforth be referred to as Cultural System integration. Similarly causal cohesion will now be termed Socio-Cultural integration. As in the structural field, so here the point of this distinction is to improve our explanatory purchase on cultural statics and dynamics.

Lockwood rightly argued that neither element alone provided the sufficient condition for structural change. On the one hand, System integration could be low but unless its contradictions were actualized and amplified by sectional social groups they could be contained and stasis would persist because of this high social integration. Alternatively, group antagonism could be profound (low social integration) without leading to significant change in society, unless it was linked to Systemic contradictions. Obviously the cultural parallels require a detailed specification, which will follow later, but for the moment the key point is that in both structural and cultural fields the analysis of stability and change depends on making such analytical distinctions.

The error underlying the Myth of Cultural Integration was that it elided this crucial distinction: the basic deficiency of the anthropological heritage, as appropriated in sociology, was that it resisted making any analytical distinctions at all. The net effect of this insistence on cultural compactness was that it precluded any theory of cultural development springing from internal dynamics. Logically the component parts of any complex have to be accorded some autonomy if they are to interact and to change (or actively to maintain) one another, or the state of the whole. Yet this is precisely what the image of a coherent pattern, a uniform style or an all-pervading ethos effectively denied. Consequently *internal* dynamics were surrendered to external ones – the forces for development were located anywhere other than within the Cultural System itself. At their most sociological they were pictured as diffusing inwards from the exterior; at their least, as giant mirrors of individual psychology¹² the traits of which were independent of their cultural context.

The Myth of Cultural Integration

However, the interest of this Myth for sociology does not concern its genesis, maintenance and vitality in the history of thought, but instead relates to its analytical premises and consequences. Its ever-green quality is mainly of significance in protecting and protracting these. Thus I now want to link three things together over time, but the linkage to be accentuated between them concerns conceptual continuity. (Obviously this is mirrored in the history of ideas but it is not their chronology which will be traced here.)

- The genesis of the Myth of Cultural Integration in anthropology.
- Sociological support for the Myth.
- The weak analytical development of a sociology of culture.

My main argument is that the current theoretical deficiencies in the sociological analysis of culture are directly attributable to the conflation of Cultural System integration with Socio-Cultural integration – a confusion of the two which could be found within the anthropological heritage but which was intensified by the Myth of Cultural Integration in all its subsequent sociological manifestations. Consequently the premisses and implications enshrined in the Myth must be disentangled and demolished before culture can assume a proper place in sociological analysis.

The origins of the Myth

(1) The image of cultural coherence is grounded in traditional society. It is most persuasive where traditionalism prevails, largely because the enduring enruttedness of primitive society can immediately be taken as exemplifying the force of cultural consistency. (This logical leap is far too precipitous and requires close re-inspection.) Almost automatically, however, the durability of routine was attributed to its enmeshment in an all-pervasive perfectly integrated Cultural System which had imposed itself as the printed circuit of the primitive mind. Thus, in the classic statement about compact coherence among the Azande we should note that Evans-Pritchard in fact elides the cultural, structural and personality systems:

In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.¹³

Not only was this taken as the epitome of the primitive Cultural System by many social theorists but certain anthropologists also

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sponsored the extension of such imagery beyond traditional society. Thus it percolated up the centuries of the 'stages' of social development; a seepage undoubtedly encouraged by a neglect of the interregnum, that vast tract representing the greater part of human history which fell between the increasingly popular dichotomies of primitive and modern, undeveloped and developed, traditional and scientific societies. Thus in 1924 we find Edward Sapir generalizing the Myth from one side of the gap to the other; both sides displayed cultural coherence and so, by extension, did the phrases and forms in between:

A genuine culture is perfectly conceivable in any type or stage of civilization . . . It is merely inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory . . . It is a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless, in which no important part of the general functioning brings with it a sense of frustration, of misdirected or unsympathetic effort.¹⁴

Hence the 'anthropological image', with its co-insistence upon a complete interdependence (every strand depending on every other) and an inherent harmony of the whole Cultural System (balanced, self-satisfactory) passed into sociology. And this despite the existence of at least one school of thought which had consistently repudiated the association of interdependence with harmony – the Marxist tradition accentuating contradictions between interdependent parts and their disruptive social potential.¹⁵

(2) But before moving on to the sociological inheritance it is important to enter certain severe objections to the conception of cultural integration where it originated – in relation to primitive society. First, it is a strange tribute to the influence of German Historicism and Romanticism that something like Zande culture, which Evans-Pritchard himself called 'a thing of shreds and patches'¹⁶ should have become the supreme exemplar of coherent integration. As Gellner comments, it is

ironical that this culture of shreds and patches, incorporating at least 20 culturally alien groups and speaking at least 8 diverse languages in what is but part of its total territory, should have come to have been systematically invoked, by philosophers making facile and superficial use of anthropology, as an illustration of the quite erroneous view that cultures are islands unto themselves, *whose supposedly coherent internal norms of what is real and what is not real may not be challenged*¹⁷. (my emphasis)

The irony is compounded if it is recalled that the famous passage about the tightly interwoven cultural strands which completely

The Myth of Cultural Integration

enmesh the Zande population is immediately qualified in the text: 'Nevertheless' (a caveat perhaps so large as to swamp the initial proposition) Zande 'beliefs are not absolutely set but are variable and fluctuating to allow for different situations and to permit empirical observations and even doubts'.¹⁸

Evans-Pritchard himself attempts to save his argument from this obvious objection by introducing the notion of a kind of moving cultural equilibrium whereby the Azande 'adapt themselves without undue difficulty to new conditions of life',¹⁹ adaptation preserving coherence. This theme of course echoes down the corridors of later Functionalist thought. But given that he has acceded to the presence of doubts and to the importing or implanting of external influences, why should we assume that these are unproblematically reintegrated into a new form of cultural coherence?

In fact, the assumption has not been acceded to universally. The work of certain later anthropologists has questioned this view of Cultural System integration as generic to primitive societies. There is, for example, Edmund Leach's record of Burmese tribesmen alternating between two quite incompatible visions of their society.²⁰ There are the frequent instances of frontier dwellers who literally and linguistically bestride two different (thus potentially inconsistent) cultures, and there is the well-documented effect of exogamy in marriage rules which enforces exposure to and incorporation of cultural differences to varying degrees. These are simply a few examples of the occurrence of cultural pluralism and the accompanying incursion of inconsistencies. Usually, however, these have been deprived of cultural significance through an easy acceptance of adaptive reintegration but, as Gellner argues, the implications of this view are unacceptably unrealistic. It presumes that 'there can be no syncretism, no doctrinal pluralism, no deep treason, no dramatic conversion or doctrinal oscillation, no holding of alternative belief systems up one's sleeve, ready for the opportune moment of betrayal'.²¹ It denies the readiness of opportunistic gurus, ambitious younger sons or disgruntled minorities to capitalize on cultural ambiguities and discontinuities which would advance their ambitions. If the standard view does not give us the noble savage it leaves us with the primitive cultural dope, unable to exploit the intricacies of his own *Lebenswelt*.

(3) Yet if it is indeed the case that pluralism is common, inconsistency is pervasive and syncretism is general practice, why has the

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image of high Cultural System integration possessed such staying power? Why, too, has there been the complementary and stubborn resistance to assigning cultural inconsistencies any importance in mainstream social theory? Two reasons are usually given to account for this situation by those who, like me, see perversity and prejudice in its perpetuation. Both reasons are rooted in the debate about the nature of the so-called primitive mind. Although they themselves are mutually opposed, they jointly repulse the notion of cultural inconsistencies and their social importance.

On the one hand the long-lasting school of thought which has endorsed some concept of a 'savage mind' has enshrined the notion of a mentality which is constituted entirely differently from our own. No amount of information or instruction would alter its basic difference in constitution, its (romanticized or regrettable) fusion with nature, which, in turn, repudiates clear distinctions between the mundane and the spiritual, the animate and the inanimate, the self and others or other things. What is crucial in this generic concept of a 'savage mind' is that it is one where the rules of identity and contradiction do not operate. For from this perspective these are not 'the' rules, they are 'our' rules, part of a wholly different mentality. Consequently the reactions which *we* might expect towards inconsistency and incoherence are predicated upon *our* own mental constitution. Hence cultural discontinuities are theoretically discounted from this point of view which holds them unimportant because the 'savage mind' discountenances them. It cannot act on what it does not sense. For us to accord theoretical significance to unsensed contradictions would be an unwarranted act of cultural importation, to proponents of this kind of theory.

I have no interest here in debating the demerits of this 'booming buzzing confusion' portrayal of primitive mentality except on one point. Since a substantial amount of evidence indicates that the perceptual discrimination of primitive people in everyday and experimental settings is just as acute as that of their investigators, and that their linguistic capacities for differentiation in various areas (snow, cattle, kin) may well exceed that of the anthropologist, there are no grounds on which to *presume* that the cultural inconsistencies we perceive and could/would act on, *must necessarily* remain inert to the 'savage mind' and therefore *will be of no significance* in primitive society. What I am more concerned to stress is the odd affinity in this connection shared by those holding a diametrically opposed view of primitive mentality.

Ironically, the harshest opponents of the 'pre-logical mind'