

# Cultural Analysis

The founders of sociology all recognized the importance of culture in social life. Emile Durkheim spent nearly fifteen years at the peak of his career investigating the beliefs and rituals of primitive religion in an effort to grasp the symbolic bases of moral community. Max Weber was concerned with problems of culture to an even greater extent. From the Protestant ethic thesis to contributions on rationalization and comparative religions, his work was prominently oriented toward the values and norms that regulate and legitimate social institutions. From a quite different perspective, Karl Marx dealt extensively with ideology and class consciousness, with religion and legitimation, and with the bases of social knowledge. Other contributors—Toennies, Troeltsch, Tocqueville, Spencer, to name a few—were also deeply concerned with the role of culture in society.

The legacy of the classical period has been carried forward in the work of more recent sociologists and social scientists whose interests have also given special consideration to the patterning and functioning of culture. In Talcott Parsons one finds a clear emphasis, deriving particularly from Durkheim and Weber, on the importance of values and norms. Similar interests are prominent in the work of sociologists who came under Parsons's influence: for example, in Neil Smelser's work on collective behavior, in Robert Bellah's sociology of religion, and in Clifford Geertz's essays on the interpretation of cultures. Durkheim's legacy is evident in Kai Erikson's studies of ritual and deviance, in Guy E. Swanson's investigations of the social bases of belief, and in Mary Doug-

las's work on symbolic boundaries and moral order. All these examples demonstrate the importance of culture as an object of sociological inquiry. Weber's legacy has included a number of significant extensions of the Protestant ethic thesis, such as Robert Merton's work on Puritanism and science, Bellah's monograph on Tokugawa religion, and studies of English history such as those of David Little and Michael Walzer, as well as broader applications such as Ernst Troeltsch's work on the varieties of religion and Benjamin Nelson's study of usury. Marx's considerations on culture have been greatly expanded in the work of writers such as Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Jürgen Habermas. In each instance the fundamental role of culture in society has been recognized. To say this without qualification, however, is clearly to misrepresent the field.

Although it is possible to point out specific studies in sociology that have contributed greatly to the understanding of culture, the discipline as a whole has not given particular prominence to the importance of culture. In fact, culture often appears in empirical studies as a vague concept to which relatively superficial attention is given or as an outmoded form of explanation that must be superseded by factors of greater objectivity and significance. Other studies ignore it entirely. These tendencies, of course, are not nearly as pronounced in European sociology, where the linkages between philosophy, social theory, and sociology remain stronger. In American sociology, though, the general tendency toward de-emphasizing culture is well in evidence. Several indications of this tendency are particularly apparent. For example, the once flourishing subfield known as culture and personality has largely receded as a legitimate area of concentration. The personality component has shifted increasingly into the discipline of psychology, while the idea of culture, especially national culture, having a decisive impact on personality has become widely regarded as an arcane concept. Or to take a different example, the sociology of religion—one area in which cultural factors are given much attention—appears to have become increasingly removed from the rest of the discipline. This separation is evident not only in the existence of separate journals and scholarly organizations but also in an obvious dissimilarity between the major concepts and theories that guide research. Major contributions in the sociology of religion dealing with dimensions of belief, sources of conversion, the functioning of rituals and symbols, and modes of religious organization appear to have had virtually no impact on the discipline at large. Other examples could also be mentioned, from the shifting of many of the more cultural aspects of social psychology such as

cognition and attitude formation into psychology and away from sociology, to the tendency evident in recent years in political sociology to de-emphasize the role of political culture.

It is perhaps arguable that political science as a discipline has continued to display greater interest in cultural phenomena than has the discipline of sociology. It is far more apparent that anthropology has retained culture as a more central concept than has sociology. History as well, perhaps as a result of the influence of anthropology, has demonstrated a continuing, if not increasing, interest in culture. Sociology, in contrast, appears to have moved decisively in other directions. Topics such as social stratification, social networks, labor markets, ecological models of organizations, and structural theories of the state have animated the discipline in recent years far more than issues of ritual and symbol, belief and ideology, or meaning and moral order.

To some extent, it has perhaps become an accepted tenet of the discipline that the study of culture should be relegated to that of a rather marginal subspecialty (perhaps called sociology of culture) while the core of the discipline should be concerned with topics that are more genuinely sociological, such as stratification and organizations. Nevertheless, it remains surprising that the study of culture is so little emphasized in American sociology, for in virtually every discipline to which sociology is related culture is regarded with considerable seriousness. Anthropology, in which the study of ritual, symbolism, and even cognition and language continue to have high priority, is again the most obvious example, but the same is true in other related disciplines as well. Work on organizations done outside of sociology has paid increasing attention to the importance of corporate cultures; political science has incorporated a number of new ideas about language and discourse as dramatizations of power; meanwhile, studies of language and discourse have moved in directions that make them much more relevant to the social sciences.

It is of course possible to accentuate general tendencies in the discipline to the point of overlooking major exceptions or underestimating significant countertendencies. The purpose of accentuating these tendencies is neither to disparage the discipline nor to devalue the contributions that have been made, but simply to permit raising the question of what may be needed to advance the sociological study of culture. If all that is acknowledged is that cultural analysis no longer occupies as prominent a place in sociology as it did in the work of Weber or Durkheim, or even of Marx, then the possible reasons for this state of affairs can be explored.

One such possibility is that the changing place of cultural analysis in sociology is simply a function of the growth and substantive specialization of the field into separate subdisciplines. Thus one can trace a variety of specialties from the classical theorists—stratification from Marx, complex organizations from Weber, deviance from Durkheim, and so forth—of which culture is only one. As the discipline has become more diverse, proportionately fewer of its members have been interested in culture, and rightly so. Culture may well continue to draw the attention of specialists in particular enclaves of the discipline but need not penetrate into many other areas of inquiry.

The reason for pointing out this possibility—which by all indications seems an accurate appraisal of events—is, on the one hand, to sharpen the issue on which attention needs to be focused and, on the other hand, to raise a broader question about the study of culture. The sharpening of focus comes from recognizing that the problem raised by many social scientists with interests in culture is not why the topic fails to dominate the field but why relative to other topics it seems to have made frustratingly little advancement. For example, the editors of a well-known collection of essays on the sociology of religion concluded that, after more than a half-century of research and thinking, little had been done to advance significantly beyond the classics (Glock and Hammond, 1973). That assessment may have been overly pessimistic, but few would likely have been willing to draw the same conclusion for fields such as social networks, statistical methods, or complex organizations.<sup>1</sup> The broader question that needs to be raised, however, in view of the increasing differentiation of the field, is whether the study of culture can be most effectively advanced by treating it as a subfield or whether a broader focus should be taken.

Here, clarity is required about a further distinction—that between specialization on the basis of analytic strategy and specialization on the basis of distinctive subject matter. As in scholarly inquiry generally, it appears productive to specialize on the basis of analytic strategy. That is, culture may be chosen as an aspect of social reality on which to focus certain analytic perspectives. For example, a definition that will be used repeatedly in this volume conceives of culture simply as *the symbolic-expressive aspect of social behavior*. However, culture does not appear usefully distinguished as an entirely discrete entity that can be examined in isolation from other social phenomena. To put the issue more clearly, culture cannot be identified as a distinct or well-bounded institution to the same extent that, say, family or religion can be. Rather, it penetrates

all aspects of social life and must, for this reason, be isolated strictly for analytic purposes. This means of course that the study of culture may reasonably be identified as a subfield of sociology, but it is likely to be one whose boundaries spill over into a variety of other subfields, a fact that may in itself be responsible for some of the problems that seem to hinder the development of this area.

Another possibility that needs to be raised in considering the seemingly neglected place of culture relative to other topics in sociology is whether or not significant contributions have in fact been made in this area in recent years. Assessments of this kind are exceedingly difficult to make, but, based on criteria such as awards and citations, contributions to the study of culture have by no means been absent. Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Bellah's *The Broken Covenant*, Erikson's *Everything in Its Path*, and Paul Starr's *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* all treat aspects of culture in significant ways and have been the recipients of major awards. Much-cited books such as Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* or Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis* also deal primarily with culture. These examples suggest that whatever frustrations the study of culture may have experienced in the larger discipline cannot be attributed strictly to more numerous or significant contributions in other areas. More likely causes are two related problems that can only be mentioned in passing at this point: the problem of institutionalizing major contributions so that they become less "works of art" than guidebooks for more ordinary sorts of investigation and the problem of orientations toward the study of culture that continue to separate it from orientations more prevalent in the discipline at large. Both of these problems merit closer attention later in the discussion here.

Related to these issues are also the discipline's quest to be more "scientific" and its dependence on funding agencies. The directions in which sociology has moved in recent years have partly been determined by both these factors. Funding has been readily available from government agencies for research in such areas as stratification, demography, and labor markets; it has been less readily available for studies of culture, except on occasion from private foundations for studies having practical applications. Related to this problem is the fact that, for historic reasons, culture has been more closely identified with the branch of sociology that emphasizes its humanistic elements rather than its scientific aspirations. Culture remains, by many indications, vaguely conceptualized, vaguely approached methodologically, and vaguely associated with value judg-

ments and other sorts of observer bias. As a result, it is often tolerated as a kind of luxury, or perhaps even as a welcome balance of perspective, but is excluded from the more hard-nosed approaches that run closer to the centers of power and funding for the discipline.

These are all matters of considerable dispute, both as to their propriety and as to how consequential they may be for the study of culture. Scholars with different interests and different conceptions of what the discipline should be necessarily differ over their assessments of the role that cultural analysis should play. These disputes are not likely to be resolved, but making explicit some of the problems that currently face the study of culture is a necessary starting point for the considerations that follow. What seems undeniable is that the study of culture has in recent years, despite notable contributions, been neither a highly valued enterprise in the discipline at large nor a field that has been free of internal problems.

At present, some signs are evident that culture is again coming to be recognized as a topic worthy of serious sociological attention. An enormous amount of interest has emerged in the work of European theorists such as Foucault, Habermas, Althusser, Barthes, Lacan, and Luhmann, all of whom have written extensively on ideology, meaning, discourse, and other aspects of culture. Although much of this interest has focused on topics other than culture, the significance of these writers' contributions to the study of culture has not gone unrecognized. The impact of the Durkheimian tradition has been significantly extended into new areas of cultural investigation by studies examining the ritual aspects of organizations, political events, and deviance, as well as inquiries dealing with symbols of civic culture and societal integration. Much ferment has been evident in the sociology of religion, especially in areas that bridge out of institutional religion and make connections with broader dimensions of culture. A number of participant-observer and depth-interview studies have probed issues of meaning and personal worldviews, and some attention has been given to the study of discourse and language. All of these represent promising developments.

## CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

The problems one encounters in investigating culture nevertheless remain immense. One of the most fundamental of these problems arises from the fact that culture continues to have widely different connota-

tions. For some, it consists chiefly of beliefs and attitudes; for others, it represents an objectified ontological system; others take any of a number of positions in between these extremes. The most apparent result of this ambiguity is that scholarly debates often fail to connect with one another. Replications fail to replicate; refutations fail to refute; replies fail to convince; and dismissals typically dismiss too much or too little. More serious, however, is that different conceptions of culture affect how culture is dealt with sociologically, particularly the ways in which investigators go about relating it to social structure. Some define it so narrowly that only social structure seems to matter; others see it as such a constitutive element of social structure that little opportunity is left to investigate systematic relations.

A second set of problems derives from ambiguities surrounding the objectivity or subjectivity of culture and, correlatively, the degree to which culture can or should be approached "scientifically." On the one hand are arguments that stress the essentially *interpretive* character of cultural analysis; on the other hand are perspectives that attempt to place the study of culture on a more solid empirical footing as a research enterprise. The two positions are by no means entirely incompatible with each other. Nevertheless, they greatly exacerbate the difficulties faced in attempting to reach agreement on the nature and purposes of cultural investigations. Adherents of the interpretive model often wish to draw a sharp distinction between cultural analysis and other sociological inquiries. In their view, cultural analysis should give the investigator ample latitude in mixing his or her own values with those of the phenomena observed, should disavow such canons of positivist science as replicability, and should not worry about contributing generalizable or cumulative knowledge. At the other extreme, scholars who may subscribe in principle to some of these ideas nevertheless argue that cultural analysis is all too often impeded by subjectivism, by a failure to employ rigorous methods of data collection and validation, and by a lack of attention to formalization of theories and concepts. Given these differences of orientation, substantive inquiries are frequently judged by widely discrepant standards, and programmatic treatises fail to generate agreement about what constitutes legitimate contributions to the field.<sup>2</sup>

A third, closely related problem is that much of the presumably sociological literature on dimensions of culture in fact consists largely of philosophical debate. Probably more so than in any other subfield in sociology (with the possible exception of theory itself), cultural analysis tends to be dominated by abstract discussions of the nature of culture,

of the sources of knowledge, and of the humanistic purposes to which cultural knowledge might be put. These debates stem of course from the ambiguities already mentioned concerning basic definitions and boundaries of the field. In a favorable sense these debates constitute serious efforts to arrive at some resolution of fundamental questions in the field.<sup>3</sup> More often, though, the literature appears to be dominated by second-order and third-order disputes over the meaning of original texts—debates over Marx's concept of ideology, or Gramsci's interpretation of Marx's concept of ideology, or Althusser's interpretation of Gramsci's interpretation, and so on. For good reasons, it appears, many sociologists have learned to steer clear of books and articles about ideology and related concepts.

Also closely related to the foregoing is a fourth problem, namely, the question of reductionism. Largely as a function of sociology's historical evolution from philosophy and other forms of inquiry, the status of ideas, values, and other cultural concepts remains in doubt. Are they to be regarded as realities *sui generis*, should they be understood as properties of the individual, or should an effort be made to explain them with reference to social factors? The ontological status of most other phenomena in sociology has been, in practice although not in principle, resolved to a much greater extent. It now seems ludicrous, for example, to question the reality of suicide rates or state structures as objects worthy of sociological investigation. The same certainty has not yet emerged with reference to culture. As a result, investigators are typically beset with questions concerning the degree of reduction appropriate in dealing with cultural variables and with criticisms for either explaining away these variables too readily or attributing too much significance to them.

A fifth set of problems stems from the interrelations present in cultural studies between methodological styles and theoretical or metatheoretical assumptions. The use of survey research methods, for example, characteristically implies different assumptions about the nature of culture than does the use of participant-observation or archival methods. Nearly all the methods available to sociologists generally have been employed in cultural inquiries. Few efforts have been made, however, to determine whether the assumptions implicit in one method are appropriate for different methods or levels of investigation. This shortcoming is particularly problematic in the case of cultural variables because assumptions are generally made about the psychological or social psychological status of these variables. Considerable confusion may arise, for instance, in applying models of cultural change suitable to studies of individual conversion



to questions of major cultural change in history. When different methods are employed, debates over the nature of the methods themselves often obscure deeper assumptions that need to be examined.

Finally, problems are also evident, as alluded to earlier, in the tendency to encapsulate cultural inquiries in different substantive areas, such as sociology of religion or sociology of science, rather than including efforts to draw generalizations applicable to a number of different substantive areas. At present, ideas about culture in the sociology of religion, for example, are largely separate from those in sociology of science or in studies of the state. Whatever cross-fertilization that might derive from thinking about ritual or symbolism in a more general sense has been extremely limited. Some progress has been made because of general perspectival formulations, such as those of Berger and Luckmann (1966) or Geertz (1973), but much remains to be done on this front in order to begin developing empirically grounded ideas about culture. This task is of course made all the more difficult by the other ambiguities that continue to prevail in cultural analysis.

Not only are there disagreements about the scope and purposes of cultural analysis; more general issues about how best to advance scholarship in a particular area are always present as well. Possibly the most promising prospect for advancement lies in the contribution of seminal and innovative studies themselves (cf. Mullins, 1973). Such studies not only add substantively to knowledge but also illustrate methods of analysis and encourage others who may aspire to make similar contributions. The problem is that such seminal works are likely to be rare in any field and may in fact be difficult to emulate. As already noted, cultural analysis has been the focus of a number of such works even in recent years, and yet many of these studies have been less than successful in inspiring second and third generations of quality research.

Another option for advancing work in a scholarly field is what Mullins (1973) has called a "program statement," that is, a secondary compilation or theoretical synthesis of the field that serves as a text and guidebook for future research. What program statements sometimes lack in innovativeness or in empirical content they make up for in clarity and integration. These treatises, however, require that a considerable degree of consensus has already been achieved in a field. Otherwise they are likely to represent a single perspective within the field but go only part way toward reconciling internal differences. Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* has in some ways served as a program statement for the study of culture. Its value has been consider-

able in terms of identifying central problems and providing an orienting framework. Its limitations lie in the fact that it is an *orientation* representing only one of several possible ways of approaching the study of culture. A third alternative is to bring together empirical and conceptual essays that combine substantive and programmatic concerns. The weakness of this strategy is that it generally fails to provide the integration of a program statement or the luster of a seminal study. Its strength is that multiple concepts and methods can be explicitly compared. It can serve usefully in fields that are genuinely divided over basic concepts and assumptions.

### SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The present volume is conceived of as an example of this third approach. It consists of a series of *explorations* that address some of the core issues in cultural analysis: the problem of meaning, the nature of moral order, the character and role of ritual in dramatizing moral order, the origins of ideology, its relations to resource environments and moral order, and the role of the state as a source of ideological production and institutionalization. These issues are explored in several ways: by looking at how they have been dealt with in the theoretical literature, by drawing together bits and pieces of inferential evidence, by borrowing approaches from other fields and attempting to determine how much mileage can be gotten from them in the area of culture, and by developing in greater depth several empirical investigations. There is in these explorations a deliberately self-reflective orientation because their intended purpose is not simply that of probing a set of empirical topics but also one of considering alternative approaches to the analysis of culture. There is no attempt here to work these explorations into a single methodological or theoretical perspective. The strategy is instead one of intentionally experimenting with several partially overlapping frameworks in order to assess their strengths, weaknesses, similarities, and differences at the end.

The explorations presented in this volume reflect four primary approaches that, although overlapping, nevertheless seem usefully identified as distinct alternatives. For brevity's sake they can be given the following labels: *subjective*, *structural*, *dramaturgic*, and *institutional*. They are distinguished mainly by the manner in which culture is conceptualized, which in turn has an important bearing on the kinds of variables and relationships selected for analysis. The descriptions of each of

these approaches will immediately show that they are not mutually exclusive; indeed, one may argue that they should be regarded as complementary rather than as competing perspectives. Nevertheless, working with these approaches also shows that particular writers have tended to emphasize one approach or another to the exclusion of the others. Bringing the various approaches together as explicit alternatives, therefore, forces recognition of the similarities and differences.

The *subjective* approach focuses on beliefs and attitudes, opinions and values. Culture is conceived of from the standpoint of the individual. Ideas, moods, motivations, and goals form its components. It is subjective in a dual sense: the fundamental elements of culture are mental constructions, made up or adopted by individuals; they also represent, grow out of, express, or point to the individual's subjective states, such as outlooks or anxieties. The problem of meaning is central in this approach: culture consists of meanings; it represents the individual's interpretations of reality; and it supplies meaning to the individual in the sense of an integrative or affirming worldview.

The subjective view of culture runs through a variety of commonly employed methodological and theoretical perspectives. It is most obvious of course in social psychological studies dealing with attitude formation or with the relations among beliefs, cognition, deprivation, alienation, and so on. Culture is typically conceptualized in subjective terms in survey research studies of public opinion. Studies utilizing participant observation and depth interviews, although differing markedly in theoretical assumptions from many survey research investigations, frequently manifest an equally subjective view of culture. In these contexts culture consists less of an independent layer of reality than of one that has been internalized as part of the individual's worldview. Subjective approaches, however, are often evident in the assumptions underlying broader historical, comparative, or macrosocial investigations as well. In these studies culture may be conceived of as a belief system that is mediated by individuals' experiences. The mechanism by which social structure affects culture, therefore, is the experience of the individual and his or her subjective states.

The subjective approach, as manifested in several different theoretical traditions, appears to be one of the most commonly employed perspectives on culture in sociology, if not in the social sciences generally. Its assumptions and historical roots are examined in some detail in the next chapter. The manner in which this view of culture has been derived in American sociology from the classical theoretical tradition will be

traced, as well as its roots in more recent “neoclassical” theories that have emphasized hermeneutic and phenomenological interpretations. Occasion will also arise to discuss it in Chapters 8 and 9 in the context of considering approaches to the relations between state structures and ideology. Because of its familiarity in sociology, the subjective approach provides a natural starting point. For the same reason, however, it also requires less attention than some of the other approaches that have been less commonly employed. In the context of examining it in the next chapter, we will also consider some of its limitations. These will again be addressed in the concluding chapter in comparing the strengths and weaknesses of all the approaches.

The *structural* approach focuses on patterns and relationships among cultural elements themselves. Its task is conceived of as identifying orderly relations and rules—structures—that give culture coherence and identity. This approach, as the name suggests, is evident primarily in the work of structuralists and poststructuralists. It is, in this sense, a relatively recent addition to sociology, although strong precedent for it can be found among the classical theorists. Its emphasis is on the symbolic boundaries or distinctions evident among cultural elements, the categories of discourse defined by these boundaries, the mechanisms by which these boundaries are maintained or modified, and the underlying rules evident in their construction.

The structural approach differs from the subjective approach in several significant respects. Culture is treated as a more objectified entity. This does not mean that culture is simply “out there,” like an object that can be approached positivistically without any need for interpretation. It does mean, however, that culture is separated analytically from the internal, subjective states of the individual believer. Rather than being associated with the individual, its elements are regarded as relatively autonomous entities. For this reason, different terms are generally employed when discussing culture. Rather than it consisting of attitudes, beliefs, and values, it is characterized by boundaries, categories, and elements. In the structural approach, culture is portrayed as an object amenable to observation. It consists of discourse that can be heard or read or other kinds of gestures, objects, acts, and events that can be seen, recorded, classified, and so forth. It does not consist of or ultimately reflect subjective states of the individual. If information is obtained from individuals, say, in interviews, this material is treated as evidence in its own right—as discourse—instead of being taken as an indicator of deeper feelings or predispositions. The structural approach is also distinguished by its relative lack of

attention to the relations between culture and other factors, whether individual meanings and experiences or broader social conditions. Instead, culture is examined internally, as it were, to determine the nature of its own organization.

Some of the theoretical underpinnings of the structural approach are examined in the next chapter, where “poststructuralist” assumptions (using the term in a nontechnical sense) will be shown to be evident in the work of a variety of recent theorists of culture. Rejecting the strict assumptions of earlier “structuralist” contributions, these writers have laid much of the groundwork for an approach to culture that is distinct from the subjective approach. In Chapter 3 these underpinnings are then extended by applying them to an analysis of the structure of moral codes. The concern of this chapter is with the symbolic boundaries that maintain essential distinctions within moral codes generally and with some of the problems that may arise from ambiguities in these boundaries. Although some relationships with social conditions are implied, the primary focus of this chapter is on culture itself as manifested in the symbolic structure of moral codes. Some empirical examples are considered in this chapter as a basis from which to infer generalizations about moral codes. In the last part of the chapter, an extended example is developed by considering the moral code underlying commitment to behavior in the marketplace. The structural approach is also drawn on to a degree in Chapters 5 and 6 in order to suggest contrasts among ideological systems. Here, however, the structural approach provides only a starting point for broader considerations of the role of resource environments.

The *dramaturgic* approach focuses on the expressive or communicative properties of culture. Rather than being conceived of as a purely (or largely) autonomous entity, culture is now approached in interaction with social structure. Unlike in the subjective approach, culture is said to interact with social structure not as a feature of individual feelings and experience but as an expressive dimension of social relations. Ideology, for example, is pictured as a set of symbols that articulates how social relations should be arranged. More generally, culture becomes identifiable as the symbolic-expressive dimension of social structure. It communicates information about morally binding obligations and is in turn influenced by the structure of these obligations.

This approach is like the structural approach in that culture is defined in a way that makes it more observable than in the subjective approach. Rather than consisting of subjective beliefs and attitudes, it consists of utterances, acts, objects, and events—all of which are observ-

able, even behavioral in a sense. The relations or patterns among these elements remain important, as in the structural approach. But these relations are no longer examined strictly by themselves; they are now examined in conjunction with ideas about the ordering of social life. Of particular importance is the idea that social life requires a dimension of moral order, that is, a set of definitions about what is proper to do and what is reasonable to expect.

The term “dramaturgic” is used to describe this approach because of its emphasis on the capacity of rituals, ideologies, and other symbolic acts to *dramatize* the nature of social relations. It is in these dramatizations that definitions of the situation are communicated.<sup>4</sup> In saying that culture is symbolic-expressive, therefore, this approach tends to focus less on information that is simply and straightforwardly transmitted than on messages that may be implicit in the ways in which social life is arranged, in rituals, and in the choice of words in discourse. Put simply, what is “given off” may be as important as what is “given.”

The dramaturgic approach can be traced historically to Durkheim’s work on primitive ritual. Various interpretations have of course been imposed on this work. In a sense, the presence of structuralist and poststructuralist theories has contributed to a revival of interest in the dramaturgic aspects of Durkheim. Some—Erving Goffman, most notably—have taken this approach in directions dealing more with social interaction itself, but the relevance of dramaturgy for an understanding of culture has also come to be recognized. The symbolic-expressive aspects of ritual in particular have attracted renewed interest among sociologists, as has the idea of moral order.

Some of the theoretical considerations in the next chapter provide a background for subsequent explorations that utilize the dramaturgic approach. In Chapter 4 explicit attention is directed toward the nature and functioning of ritual. The communicative aspects of ritual are emphasized, and an effort is made to demonstrate the “ritual” character of social arrangements more generally. This chapter, building on the discussion of moral codes in Chapter 3, also considers the relations between ritual and moral order and presents an empirical case study that illustrates some of the central aspects of these relations. The case study presented draws on surveys of television viewers’ reactions to the program “Holocaust,” which is examined as a kind of “morality play” with characteristics similar to those observed by Durkheim in his work on ritual. Although the relations between ritual and culture have been dealt with in other ways, the conclusions drawn in Chapter 4 suggest that ritual

may in some ways serve as a prototype of other symbol systems, such as ideology, that also dramatize features of the moral order. In Chapter 5 this implication is carried through in considering the moral basis of ideology. The importance of moral order is again emphasized, and ideology is conceptualized as a set of symbols that communicate something about moral obligations. These considerations are then extended to suggest some of the ways in which uncertainties in moral order may lead to a growth of ideological movements. As an example of this process, special consideration is given to the growth of millenarian movements. Some of these ideas are also applied to the discussion of ideological themes and ideological movements in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Themes such as folk piety, fundamentalism, individualism, and rationality are considered in relation to different kinds of moral order, as are the origins of revitalization movements, ideological reforms, sects, and other kinds of movements.

The *institutional* approach adds further elements beyond those emphasized in the dramaturgic approach. Here culture is regarded not only as a patterned set of elements (as in the structural approach) that expresses something about moral order (as in the dramaturgic approach), but also as consisting of actors and organizations that require resources and, in turn, influence the distribution of resources. Although culture in the dramaturgic approach is, as some writers are fond of asserting, “constitutive” of social life, it is much more so in the institutional approach. Greater attention is given to the fact that culture is not produced or sustained simply by dramatizing moral obligations; instead, it is produced by actors who have special competencies and is perpetuated by organizations that in a sense process resources for the purpose of ritualizing, codifying, and transmitting cultural products. These organizations in turn are likely to develop relations with the state and other sources of power and may also be challenged by movements with access to other pools of social resources.

The contrasts between the institutional and the other three approaches can be illustrated by considering the element of culture that we call science. Were our attention focused primarily on scientific values or on how individuals’ worldviews are influenced by beliefs about science, our research would probably exemplify the subjective approach. Were we interested in the patterns of discourse among scientists that maintain disciplinary boundaries or that deal with anomalous findings, our research would probably exemplify the structural approach.<sup>5</sup> Or, if the ways in which academies of science dramatize rationality or modernity

as a mode of organizing the moral order were of principal interest, it would likely fit most clearly the description given for the dramaturgic approach. In contrast, the institutional approach would conceive of science still as culture, but in terms including not only the ideas produced but also the fact that these ideas are intertwined inextricably with an entire constellation of scientists, scientific organizations, funding sources, and communication networks involved in producing these ideas.

The discussion in Chapter 5 of the moral basis of ideology serves as a transition from the dramaturgic to the institutional approach. Starting with the relations between moral order and ideology, the model developed there suggests, on the one hand, the importance of social resources as factors influencing the character of moral order and, on the other hand, the importance of the tendency for ideological movements to become institutionalized. Chapters 6 and 7 utilize this framework but focus chiefly on the first of these two effects. Chapters 8 and 9 then draw attention explicitly to the production of ideological institutions, in the first case by examining the early development of science and in the second case by examining the processes by which Protestantism became institutionalized. In both cases the institutional approach is contrasted with previous explanations that have relied heavily on the subjectivist approach, and in both cases the role of the state is emphasized.

As indicated by this brief overview, the four approaches—particularly the last three—are explicated in the chapters that follow not as abstract frameworks but by employing them in conceptual and empirical analyses. In the concluding chapter the results of these explorations will be assessed. Points of similarity, difference, overlap, and complementarity will be suggested. Some of the conceptual weaknesses that by then will have become evident will be discussed, and the advantages of the different approaches will be summarized.

A cautionary word about the general epistemological stance from which the following explorations are presented also needs to be added. In much of what follows, emphasis will be given to the problem of rendering culture amenable to empirical investigation. Theories that conceptualize culture in radically subjectivist terms will be criticized, and other perspectives will be explored because of their intent on conceiving of culture as observable behavior. Attention will also be devoted to questions of method, to the marshaling of systematic evidence, and to canons of disclosure and replicability. None of this, however, means that sociologists are being called to return to a naive form of empirical positivism in the study of culture. Nothing could be further from the intent of this volume.



Throughout, the epistemological stance taken in this volume is that of *interpretive sociology*. The very business of sociology is assumed to be one of interpretation, not one of discovering objective facts from some Procrustean bed of empirical reality or of adducing lawful generalizations about the causal ordering of these facts. The hermeneutic circle, and all that it implies about the limitations of positivistic knowledge, is taken for granted. Cultural analysis, like any other branch of sociological inquiry, not only *should* be but *inevitably is*, whether we like it or not, essentially an act of interpretation. Whether the subject of investigation is “culture,” the “state,” the “means of production,” or anything else, that object is itself a cultural construction, subject to the meanings we give it and interpretable in different ways. It could not be otherwise.

The goal of the present volume, therefore, is not to challenge the interpretive perspective but to enhance it. To say that culture must be approached interpretively certainly should not preclude a call to conceive of it in ways that render it more observable or to ask that investigators be more candid in disclosing their methods and assumptions. Cultural analysis remains a matter of interpretation whether we conceive of culture as subjective beliefs or as symbolic acts. But there may be strategic advantages to thinking of it in one way rather than another. As a community of scholars, our goal must always be to promote discourse about our interpretations, not to advance them simply as authoritative pronouncements. Too often, however, interpretive sociology has served as a masquerade for shoddy research and pious opinions. If cultural analysis is to advance not as a departure but as a fulfillment of interpretive sociology at its best, greater attention must be paid to how concepts are conceptualized, operationalized, examined empirically, and interpreted. Advancing this process is the aim of the present discussion.