

Cultural evolution. From sociological traditions to new theoretical perspectives

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Abstract

This essay proposes a theoretical framework useful for the redefinition of the boundaries of analysis of the sociology of culture, and specifically in the evolution of cultural systems in relation to changes and readjustments of the social order. This idea, in these terms, is certainly nothing new, but, in this case, the element of innovation will be defined from a perspective that interprets the concept of adaptive cumulatively not only as the definition of a changing “grammar” which manages to respond on a very short timescale in evolutionary terms, under changing new socio-ecological pressures. It also utilises a model which is the result of a strong synergy between highly diverse scientific traditions. This last point could provide an important explanatory scaffolding.

Keywords: system, culture, scaffolding, relation, collective dimension

Riassunto

Il saggio presentato ha lo scopo di indicare una proposta teorica utile a ridefinire i confini di analisi della sociologia della cultura e, in particolare, nell’evoluzione dei sistemi culturali in relazione a cambiamenti e riassetamenti di ordine sociale. L’idea, posta in questi termini, non è certamente nuova ma, in questo caso, l’elemento di innovazione verrebbe determinato a partire da una prospettiva che interpreta il concetto di cumulatività adattativa non solo come la definizione di una “grammatica” mutevole che riesce a rispondere in tempi “evolutivi” molto brevi, a pressioni socio-ecologiche sempre nuove, ma anche dalla determinazione di un modello frutto di una forte sinergia tra tradizioni scientifiche molto diversificate. Questo ultimo punto potrebbe costituire un importante *scaffolding* esplicativo.

Parole chiave: sistema, cultura, scaffolding, relazione, dimensione collettiva

What is Human Culture?

Human culture is probably one of the most powerful and versatile adaptive systems. The word “culture”, refers in sociological terms to a set of practices, behaviours, languages and technologies typical to particular groups of people (large or small). The concept of culture has exercised an important influence in sociological tradition; the Chicago School, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in particular, have highlighted a “psychological” dimension of culture that acts as a mediator within another “mediation”, or that which is produced by the process of socialisation, in which social actors operate as bearers of their own cultural heritage. On this topic, Thomas and Znaniecki states (1918:17-18):

In contrast with this study of the various present civilized societies, the lines along which most of the purely scientific sociological work has been done up to the present—that is, ethnography of primitive societies and social history—have a secondary, though by no means a negligible importance. Their relation to social practice is only mediate; they can help the practitioner to solve actual: cultural problems only to the degree that they help the scientist to understand actual cultural life; they are auxiliary, and their own scientific value will increase with the progress of the main sphere of studies. In all the endeavors to understand and interpret the past and the savage we must use, consciously or not, our knowledge of our civilized present life, which remains always a basis of comparison, whether the past and the primitive are conceived as analogous with, or as different from, the present and the civilized. The less objective and critical our knowledge of the present, the more subjective and unmethodical is our interpretation of the past and the primitive; unable to see the relative and limited character of the culture within which we live, we unconsciously bend every unfamiliar phenomenon to the limitations of our own social personality. A really objective understanding of history and ethnography can therefore be expected only as a result of a methodical knowledge of present cultural societies.

Within the same sociological tradition, the relationship created by individual/environment, the identity/culture interaction (Thomas, 1921) assumes great importance. In the tradition of the French School of sociology (although, as is well known, the methodological approach is different, aimed as it is at analysis, in particular at the function of collective representation and the origins of

social symbolism), the cultural dimension acquires a symbolic value, both objective and institutional. However, by introducing the concepts of “collective representation” and “individual representation”, Émile Durkheim posits a still-current fundamental aspect for studies, involving the analysis of cultural processes. Culture, or collective representation, is “located” within social contexts, and at the same time highlights the dichotomy of psychology and morals. However, while Durkheim on one hand emphasises the collective dimension of the resultant culture, indeed of a continuing co-operation and interaction between social agents; on the other hand, he is aware that culture is intrinsically “stable”, causing it to transcend the individual. Durkheim states (1912/1995:435-436):

[...] Defined in that way, the nature of the concept bespeaks its origins. It is common to all because it is the work of the community. It does not bear the imprint of any individual intellect, since it is fashioned by a single intellect in which all the others meet, and to which they come, as it were, for nourishment. If it has greater stability than sensations or images, that is so because collective representations are more stable than individual ones; for while the individual is sensitive to even slight changes in his internal or external environment, only quite weighty events can succeed in changing the mental equilibrium of society. Whenever we are in the presence of a *type* of thought or action that presses uniformly on individual intellects or wills, that pressure on the individual reveals the intervention of the collectivity. [...] It is beyond doubt that speech, and hence the system of concepts it translates, is the product of a collective elaboration. What it expresses is the manner in which society as a whole conceives the objects of experience. The notions corresponding to the various elements of language are therefore collective representations.

However, as opportunely noted by Loredana Sciolla (2002:33), it would be incorrect to believe that Durkheim recognises culture as having an “autonomous ontological status”. At several points in his work, Durkheim reiterates the importance of the individual. In a seemingly diriment passage (Durkheim 1995 [1912]:347)

On the one hand, the individual gets the best part of himself from society all that gives him a distinctive character and place among other beings, his intellectual and moral culture. Let language, sciences, arts, and moral beliefs be taken from man,

and he falls to the rank of animality; therefore the distinctive attributes of human nature come to us from society. On the other hand, however, society exists and lives only in and through individuals. Let the idea of society be extinguished in individual minds, let the beliefs, traditions, and aspirations of the collectivity be felt and shared by individuals no longer, and the society will die.

The German sociological tradition, although characterised by a less homogenous methodological structure than other schools of sociology as mentioned above, is represented by Georg Simmel and Max Weber as its principal protagonists. Although the discussion of the analysis of cognitive processes and the theories of “social action”, in particular the idiographic perspective and analysis of the dynamics of the objectification of culture, constitute a formidable corpus, which defines fascinating lines, both theoretical and empirical. For the purposes of this essay, the interest lies in a crucial point of the Weberian theoretical framework which emphasises the relationships between individuals as “interpretative anchors” for the agents involved in the processes of socialisation. These dynamics guide the actions of agents with multi-directional influential processes, which, in fact, constitute a true system of meaning. Weber (1956/1978:215) states that:

The scope of determination of social relationships and cultural phenomena by virtue of domination is considerably broader than appears at first sight. [...]The rule by parents and the school, however, extends far beyond the determination of such cultural patterns, which are perhaps only apparently formal to the formation of the young, and hence of human beings generally.

For Weber, humans are cultural beings, and the essence of culture is reified from the interaction between intentional agents.

Obviously, although this brief list is indebted to a vast literature, that which emerges and which is common to all the sociological traditions is that a central role is attributed not only to the study of culture, but also to that of defining the level of “relations” through which culture is shared, understood and changed.

Culture as an adaptive system

The study of culture means the analysis of the agents that produce, transmit and change it. Many authors, including Tomasello (1999), support the reasonable idea that our cognitive

mechanisms are determining tools for cultural learning. As we have seen, Max Weber emphasises the importance of institutions (e.g. school, family) in the same way, if in divergent terms. Tomasello notes that the ability to recognise other social agents as intentional agents is based on processes of appropriation of a specific culture in children. More precisely, he writes (Tomasello, 1999:77-78):

The human understanding of conspecifics as intentional agents is thus a cognitive ability that emanates both from humans' identification with conspecifics, emerging very early in infancy and unique to the species, and from the intentional organization of their own sensory-motor actions, shared with other primates and emerging at around eight to nine months of age. [...] This uniquely human form of social understanding has many profound effects on the way human children interact with adults and one another. In the current context the most important of these effects is that it opens the child to the uniquely human forms of cultural inheritance.

Therefore, biological heredity stands alongside cultural heritage, which, for Pierre Bourdieu, represents the *habitus* by which children take possession of the dominant culture (*doxa*).

Another train of thought has the appropriation of culture beginning in a pre-linguistic phase (Meltzoff, 1988a, 1988b), highlighting that babies are already able to correctly determine the scope of adults' actions at fourteen months, by learning through imitation. Many experimental studies have been conducted on pre-linguistic conceptual skills which postulate the existence of bio-cognitive foundations of thought processes as separate from the socio-cultural representations of individuals. In this way, ethnographic evidence supports the proposition that certain thought processes are modular (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994), and that specific *types* of conceptualisations may be found in all humans and all cultures. The characteristics analysed are those related to the understanding people have of the perception of a solid object, to the morphology of organisms and to human actions, based on three distinct cognitive mechanisms: *folk*-biology, *folk*-physics and *folk*-psychology. According to many scholars, these mechanisms are innate, that is they form part of the phylogenetic endowment that create the ability to learn, and which, therefore, cannot be identified as culturally learned skills (Atran, 1994; Spelke, 1988).

A number of psychologists, anthropologists and linguists have discussed the idea that individuals belonging to diverse cultures may perceive the world through unmeasurable categories. Along these lines Needham hypothesised (1963) that the theoretical framework of Durkheim and Mauss could be insufficient to support the argument that the variability of classification systems is

linked to social structure. In the same vein, beginning with the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis” of linguistic relativity, Brown & Lenneberg (1954) denounce the universality of “natural logic”, based on an argument constructed on two assumptions: the linguistic relativism whereby languages relate to objects in different ways. A linguistic determinism by which, however, *linguistic types* determine the way we think. However, commencing with the affirmation of the biological paradigms as influenced by Chomsky, linguistic relativism has been roundly criticised, with a prevailing tendency towards lines of research inclined to theorise specific, universal mental models that operate behind the scenes and cause different linguistic expressions.

Conclusions

The theories presented above support the existence of *categorical schemes* particular to the human mind, which offer the opportunity to build *natural genres*, i.e. forms of categorisation that allow the construction of inferences, despite not possessing a conceptual theory or model. The most recent research on the relationship between culture and cognition primarily addresses this identification of universal *rules*. However, this research has moved in the direction of linguistic relativism (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). It is important to note that the investigations of anthropology and cognitive psychology use a model less dependent on linguistic analysis (Boyer, 1993).

Although inconclusive, this framework forms part of a much broader research project which will systematically address certain crucial points related to cultural evolution and its relationship with the interaction between intentional agents. As demonstrated, after a few months, infants are to all intents and purposes themselves cultural agents immersed in systems of meaning typical to their cultures (*habitus*), which they siphon through more or less institutionalised forms of co-operation and participation. This is a crucial point, because immersion in a network of meaning in which the perspective of others is most important allows them to take possession not only of knowledge but also of methods of interpretation intrinsically linked to the bio-techno-symbolic nature of Man.

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