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Zygmunt Bauman

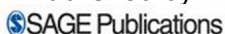
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ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Semiotics and the function of culture

When modern social scientists speak about the "function" of a cultural pattern, norm, custom, or institution, they usually have in mind the satisfying of some individual or collective needs. To decide therefore what *the* function of a sociocultural phenomenon is, means to find some need of a supra-individual whole (T. Parsons, partly also A.R. Radcliffe-Brown) or of a human individual (B. Malinowski) which is met by this phenomenon. The notion of "need", however, by no means belongs to the class of concepts defined through social sciences in a more or less unified way. Still, regardless of notorious disagreements, the common point does exist in assigning the meaning of "need" within the substantial-energetic realm :

1) There is a material system (society, community, human organism) which can remain a system so long as some of its vital variables do not step over certain thresholds;

2) Only inside the space determined by these critical points is there possible some sort of metabolism, on which the very existence of the system depends;

3) Thus we can speak reasonably of a "need of the system" only in relating the concept to those actions which help to keep the system from impinging its critical parameters. Provided that this analytical framework is accepted (and it is accepted, explicitly or tacitly, as an *a priori* background of all current definitions of any importance), the cultural phenomena become related immediately and directly to the realm of energy circulation, their functions being interpreted in this context.

The permanently ordered systems, perpetuating their own structure (and there neutralizing deterministic environmental pressures) exist,

however, through two interacting processes, mutually dependent and complementary. The first process consists in "assimilating" the environment, *e.g.*, in ordering it in a way more and more favorable from the point of view of systemic parameters, the second in "accommodating" the structure of the system itself, *e.g.*, in its continuous re-structuring in order to meet the changing pattern of opportunities. The common denominator of both vital processes — of the very existence of any "self-organizing" system is a continuous effort to shift from a relatively more uniform and amorphous state to a more heterogeneous (*e.g.*, more "structured") state. The degree of "structuralization" of a pattern can be measured by ascertaining the probability of some events and the improbability of some others. Thus, from the point of view of information theory (according to which the transfer of information functions to decrease the level of systemic indeterminacy), the higher the degree of "structuralization", the richer the informative content of the system.

We can interpret culture as the specifically human form of the above-mentioned interrelated processes, one being the assimilatory structuralization directed toward the external environment of human individuals, and the other the accommodative structuralization of the human organism. Looked at in this way, culture, while it is the peculiar trait of humanity, may nevertheless be interpreted as an elaborated form of structuralizing processes developed in lower, precultural animal species: in all species the living process of an organism is based on an isomorphic relationship between behavioral pattern and the structure of what was selected from the external world as the "environment" of the organism. In all species, the "signs" the organism is able to distinguish form the axis of symmetry of the two interacting isomorphic structures. In all species the movement toward "higher" organizational patterns consists of acquiring (phylogenetically or ontogenetically) new abilities to distinguish further meaningful oppositions, and correlating them with some new, functionally differentiated behavioral oppositions. On the other hand, the specifically human, cultural way of meeting this task of "active adaptation" has some apparently specific qualities. According to Piaget, one of the factors decisive in this connection is "intelligence", *e.g.*, the capability of mentally "objectivizing" the world. This new faculty is in its turn closely connected with a specifically human aptitude for construction and use of language, an artificial code with "double articulation" (A. Martinet). The linguistic signs — the bearers of information concerning the structure of extralinguistic reality — can be subjected to transformations and modeling in their own, autonomous sphere, without destroying the "material" reality they are concerned with. Thus mental structures begin to take on some degree of autonomy as "reality" structures. Human beings gain a unique aptitude for "mental experiment"; they can visualize as actual those structures which are only possible or desired. Because of this mental equipment, humans are able to transform, consciously and deliberately, what is amorphous and unpredictable in an ordered, structured, *e.g.*, hetero-

geneous and predictable, system. Exploiting intensively the cognitive aspect of information, culture elaborates particularly its steering, controlling faculty. Reshaping the world into a structure which did not before exist independently, human beings impose limits on an unlimited world and restrict the multitude of abstract possibilities. But in doing this, they also limit, indirectly and unintentionally, the range of those personality structures which can be considered successfully accommodated to a human world structured in just this way. In this frame of reference the assimilatory-accommodative function of culture emerges as a dialectic unity of control and orientation, directed both "outside" and "inside".

I have already mentioned the traditional interpretation of the function of cultural phenomena — which viewed as the human way of adaptation to the environment emphasized the passive, conservative side of the cultural process. The role of the independent variable, of the stimuli-set, was ascribed one-sidedly to environment only, leaving to culture the role of a repetitive response-set built into re-active, not pro-active, organisms.

Now, the function disclosed by a semiotic approach to culture differs from the traditional contention exactly in the same way as a dialectic, assimilatory-accommodative process, based on a double, but internally isomorphic, direction; differs from passive adjustment. Viewed in semiotic perspective, the cultural function appears to consist in *reducing the indeterminacy of the human world*. This function is implemented, first by reducing the probability of some events, and thereby substantially increasing the predictability of the human environment; and, second, by information transfer, that is, by an interpretation of the signals from actual environmental structures. The desirable selection of appropriate behavioral patterns may thus be achieved. The relative autonomy of the mental, conceptual sphere which mediates relationships between the organism and its environment presupposes eventual inconsistency between the two (cognitive and controlling) aspects of culture function; but, ideally, a "well functioning" culture is one in which the continuous correlation between the twin aspects is preserved.

Any assertion concerning the function of an event is incomplete unless we make clear within which frame of reference this function is performed. One of the frames of reference in which functions of culture can be analyzed is that of global population (society), distinguishable from other populations by peculiarity of restrictions imposed by it on the indeterminateness of the world. In this frame we can analyze the societal implements of the assimilatory-accommodative process, that is, the correlation between the structure of the society and the structure of opportunities included in the "outer" environment, the volume of societally available technology (e.g., differentiation of the accumulated stock of the patterns of behavior toward nature), and knowledge (e.g., the stock of discernible meaningful oppositions) concerning actual and possible worlds ("knowledge" in this sense also includes art and ideology). We will be concerned then with the manner of ordering, of assimilating, that part of the natural world

which was chosen as the environment of a given society (landscape transformations, thermostatic intermediary space of dwellings neutralizing weather phenomena, and so on). From the standpoint, however, of the second frame of reference — that of a human individual — what was heretofore looked upon as the accommodative, internal aspect of culture becomes the subject matter of assimilatory efforts. The environment of human individuals is composed primarily of other human beings, who mediate access to the goods the individual must possess to satisfy even his most personal needs. Thus the accommodation of a human individual consists mainly in the gradual achievement of a more or less isomorphic relationship between the structure of individual behavior and the structure of opportunities determined by the way the human environment is organized.

If we now combine both analytical approaches, that is, the societal and the individual, we can see that culture does two things simultaneously. It orders and structures the "life space" of the individual, and is also the means for a mutual adjustment, of the order of individual behavior and the order of this space. Seen from the perspective of the single human being, culture is no more than an elaboration of the basically adaptive propensity of all living organisms to associate particular behavioral patterns with particular stimuli. What is different in the case of *Homo sapiens* is that the role of stimuli is played predominantly by artificial, conventional signs, which are themselves cultural products. With human beings, the structure of the environment and individual structure are not two independent systems of variables; at least they do not have to be. Both are manageable by the same set of structuring tools.

Apart from the function of *discovering* the semiotic structure of reality (the most important one in animals), human culture develops — to an extent unknown elsewhere — the function of "marking" reality with signs, which exists among animals in a very modest germinal form for example in territorial behavior, "pecking order" in birds, stratification of monkey populations, and so forth.

In the case of the "natural" elements of human environment, the problem is one mainly of discovering the meaning of "potential signs", those based principally on causal relationships. As far, however, as the elements produced by humans are concerned, their very existence — not merely their existence "for humans" — depends upon marking reality with signs. The differentiations significant from the point of view of availability of goods are in human society much more numerous than "natural" differentiation of the human bodies; what is, however, most important is that they are completely uncorrelated with the natural differentiation of human beings. To furnish them with an effective controlling power one must introduce into social reality a multitude of signs which have to be artificially created. Just as a spear lengthens the short human arm, so the differentiation of attire and ornament, movements and etiquette, habitat and food complement in different ways the semiotic poverty of the human body. For some of these differentiations, their informative-control-

ling function is the only *raison d'être*. The others perform a double function — their semiotic role interfering with their need-satisfying one — which makes their unambiguous analysis impossible and requires application of two mutually independent frames of reference, as in the cases of nutrition, clothing, or dwelling. However, as Lévi-Strauss indicated in his inaugural address in 1960, tools, garments, or dishes, if seen not just against the background of one single culture, but in the framework of the total human capacity to make cultural choices, can also be looked upon as the poles of some meaningful oppositions thereby indicating selection actually made among the *universum* of potential choices. Thus the semiotic approach to culture is applicable even to this kind of problem.

The diacritical, or differentiating, function of culture finds its expression on two planes. Paradigmatically, it consists in selecting among mutually exchangeable, and thus alternative, events or phenomena. Syntagmatically, it operates in the time dimension — in dividing cyclically repeatable time units into parts differentiated by their semantic content. Using the terms introduced by T. Milewski, we can speak of “distinctional” and “delimitational” functions respectively. As examples of cultural elements performing distinctional functions we can point to, among others, the class, generational, occupational, ethnic, regional, and ecological differentiation of garment, behavioral patterns and symbolic equipment of the human body and its surroundings. Among cultural elements with predominantly delimitational functions the most salient are *rites de passage*, rituals connected with promotion or ennoblement (in the framework of the life cycle), carnival festivities, harvest feasts, and the like (in the annual cycle), and so on. These “interludes” are usually inversions of patterns obligatory in “normal” time (*i.e.*, they are in a “privative” opposition), particularly when they delimit repetitive cycles. That is why, together with their delimiting function, they also perform a distinctional one; that is, while defining inversion of everyday customary pattern as something “abnormal” and exceptional, they by the same token define what is normal. Semiotically, they belong to the same category as those phenomena which are defined in a given society as devotional or delinquent. They are, to some extent, deviations institutionalized and incorporated into a cultural system through their paramount semiotic role.

I have already mentioned the double character of the relationship between cultural signs and social structure. This relationship is at the same time creative and reflexive; the cultural signs simultaneously “structure” the situation in which interaction of human individuals or groups takes place, and render its latent, predetermined structure accessible to the senses. Signs, however, differ from one another according to the relative intensity of their different aspects. Moreover, preponderance of, respectively, the creative or reflexive element is a factor differentiating totalities of the sociocultural systems. Both considerations justify analytical distinctions of two ideal types of constructs :

1) Signs which are primary in relation to their position in the social structure (S_p), and

2) Signs which are secondary or derivative in relation to social position (S_d). By "social position" I mean in this context the place occupied by a human individual in a set of interhuman links, *e.g.*, in the system of mutual dependencies, or in the social structure; this place determines to what extent and under what conditions the goods yielded and distributed in the course of social processes are available to the incumbent.

Now, if between a position P , occupied by an individual in time t , and a class of signs $S_1, S_2, \dots S_n$, there exists the relationship

$$(1) \quad P^t \rightarrow /S_1, S_2 \dots S_n/t^+$$

I shall identify the above-mentioned class of signs by the symbol S_d . If, however, the relationship under analysis takes a different shape,

$$(2) \quad /S_1, S_2, \dots S_n/t^+ \rightarrow P^t$$

I shall use the symbol S_p to designate this class. In other words, the two constructs — the "primary" and "derivative" signs — may be introduced through the following definition :

$$(3) \quad S_p^{t-} \rightarrow P^t \rightarrow S_d^{t+}$$

In case (1), the acquisition and use of signs in their semiotic role is available solely to the current incumbents of position P . Thus S_d signs perform primarily, if not exclusively, a reflexive, informative function; they warn other human beings what the structure of a situation they are confronted with is, and induce them to select an adequate pattern of behavior. S_d signs therefore help the incumbent of position P to protect himself by an appropriate organization of the variety of potential impacts of his environment (provided, of course, that the environment is composed of beings to whom the language in which the signs are coded is sufficiently intelligible). In case (2), the situation is reversed. The path to position P leads through the acquisition of S_p signs on the assumption that these signs are somehow, in an institutionalized way, available to those individuals who are not yet incumbents of position P .

Our two constructs are to some extent correlatives of another distinction widely used by sociologists — that of "ascribed" versus "achieved" position or status. Any ascribed status always implies a class of S_d signs which may be used solely by incumbents of this status. Among the relationships of which status is composed there is also a peculiar social relation (we may call it "private ownership of signs") preventing non-incumbents from acquiring and/or using elements of the S_d class. In a society in which ascribed statuses prevail there is always a marked tendency toward monopolistic ownership of all kinds of cultural signs, and also toward assigning to all cultural elements the role of status-indicating signs. The notorious propensity of estate- and caste-type societies, either slave or feudal, to subject unequivocally all kinds of cultural elements — including

attire, houses, furniture, arms, transport, and etiquette — to ascribed statuses is a well-known example of both tendencies. If there were also, in such societies, signs belonging to the S_p class, their modification was allowed only inside limits determined by the semiotic, differentiating function of S_d . (By the way, these peculiarities of the semiotic function of cultural elements in a "closed" society explain to some extent the cognitive premises of the medieval understanding of development as "perfection inside a type".) Any transgressions of this rule, stemming from progressing market relations and "signs trade", were treated with horror and abhorrence as expressions of spurious mores.

The correspondence between our constructs and the concepts of ascribed and achieved status is nevertheless not complete, since statuses rightly considered to be achieved also correlate with signs which belong, undoubtedly, to the S_d class. In general, a sign S belongs to the S_d in relation to a position (status) P , if S and P correspond unequivocally. Only then does the perception of S allow the conclusion, with a probability factor of 1, that the individual equipped with sign S also occupies position P . This absolute correspondence is attainable usually through forcible elimination of non-incumbents by the class of people who are permitted to manipulate S . All kinds of "closed" military and paramilitary organizations with their uniforms and distinctions provide a good modern example. Nobody can become an army officer just by buying an adequate uniform. Because of this restriction, however, we can assume with confidence that any individual bearing the proper designations is indeed an army officer. In other words, S_d class signs are excluded from free circulation. Among conditions which must be met to permit their use there is included that of being an incumbent of the appropriate position. This is the decisive, distinctive, or even defining, feature of the S_d class.

Wherever signs of the S_d class are on no condition accessible to individuals who are not incumbents of corresponding positions, any sign of this class can perform successfully its semiotic, informative function throughout a practically unlimited period of time, provided the social structure remains unchanged. If the monopoly is really observed, the derivative signs do not "get old", nor do they "wear out" their semiotic qualities. There is nothing in their semiotic situation to stimulate change, substituting new signs for the old ones; in other words, the semiotic stimuli of change are absent. In fact, the semiotic function impedes further cultural changes by setting rigid limits upon acceptable innovation, and by broadening the range of cultural items considered to be rejectable deviations. If, on the other hand, "monopolistic ownership" of signs is for some reason withering away, the number of persons who acquire attractive signs will outgrow, quickly and surely, the absorptive capacity of the corresponding position. Unlike S_d signs, signs belonging to S_p class sooner or later lose the very creative, structuring power which previously made them attractive; they lose it, either because they have become too broadly dispersed and too easily accessible, or because, instead of being indicators of something

rare and peculiar, they have become " norms ". The changeable, dynamic character of S_p signs is firmly rooted, therefore, in the sociosemiotic condition of their class. As long as social differentiation persists, the demand for differentiating signs is always present; but because of the universal availability of signs (universal in the sense that " being an incumbent of position corresponding with given sign " is not a condition necessary to becoming the possessor of this sign) no particular sign can perform its semiotic function for too long a time. Thus the S_p class of signs is the focus of cultural development.

The widely acknowledged classification of historically known cultures into stagnant and dynamic can now be reformulated into the following typology :

- 1) Sociocultural systems, in which rights to signs are derivative from social position;
- 2) Sociocultural systems, in which social position is derivative from possession of signs.

Doing this, we in fact assert hypothetically that the degree of dynamics of any sociocultural system is, among other things, a function of the relationship between a cultural system and the social structure it ministers; namely, it is a function of the relative ratio of signs of the S_d and S_p class. Enforcement of a monopoly on this or that cultural item, artificial restrictions imposed on circulation of cultural elements, always lead to cultural stagnation. Conversely, " democratization " of cultural goods, possibly unlimited access to signs, is in itself a powerful factor of cultural change (contrary to opinions that " uniformistic " trends, concomitant to any culture's becoming a " mass " one, are factors of cultural stagnation).

When a cultural system becomes more " democratic ", two closely-knit processes take place :

- 1) Continuous absorption of new element-signs by the " norm " of the mass culture;
- 2) Continuous supply of new element-signs replacing those absorbed and deprived of their differentiating power. The dialectic interaction of these two processes implies two consequences : a rise of the median " cultural level ", and a broadening of the range of available cultural signs. The natural tendency of a democratic culture is its " openness ", in opposition to the " closing up " propensity of a cultural system based predominantly on S_d signs.

The further consequence of a democratic culture is a tendency toward what may be called " proliferation of codes ". The richness of cultural signs outgrows the systematizing and expressive capacity of any single code. The initial code ramifies, giving birth to a multitude of " professional " codes, which minister information flow inside relatively restricted aggregates of human personalities (in one of their many roles). But the users of any " professional " code also participate through their multifarious social bonds in groups which use other, similarly specialistic codes.

That is why a need is felt for a "universal" code of the medieval Latin type (let me warn against pushing this metaphor too far), into which information expressed in all other codes can be transferred and so made generally intelligible. Maybe the feeling so often expressed by students of the passing scene, that modern culture is "asystemic" and "amorphic" is caused by the fact that this kind of universal code is still lacking. Some societies have attempted to assign this role to monetary signs and their material correlatives. So far these attempts have nowhere achieved anything like complete success; perhaps they cannot because of the notorious lack of isomorphism between a pecuniary system and the majority of "professional" codes, which, unlike monetary codes, are mostly synergetic (in the Benedict-Maslow sense). Instead, we now face the spontaneous growth of a very imperfect substitute for a "universal code": a "quiz-like culture" composed of crumbs of inconsistent codes and of signs cut off from their proper structures and thus deprived of their initial meaning, so that they can be treated one-dimensionally. In spite of all the shortcomings of this "quiz-like code", all contemporaries in some way participate in it, regardless of the heights of mastery they have achieved in their "professional code". Quiz-like dilettantism is an inevitable attribute of the proliferation of codes in an epoch when information has been promoted to the role of the most significant of cultural signs.

The sociocreative power of signs, causing a permanent incompleteness of the social condition the human individual faces, makes each person responsible for determining his own social position. Hence "individuation drive" is a universal motivational necessity (which, because it is universal, leads towards socially levelling effects). Individuation drive is known in all types of societies. In those systems, however, in which predominantly derivative signs limit the range of freedom of creative signs, this drive is expressed in a "perfection inside the type" tendency. We then have manneristic perfectionism instead of innovations; the ingenuity of innovators expends itself in the casuistries of exegetes. The more important conversely creative signs are, the broader is the sociocultural tolerance toward innovation.

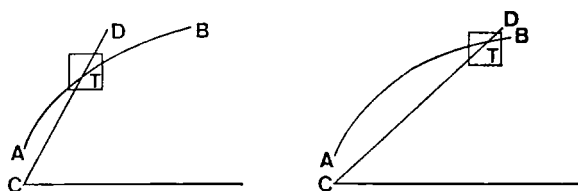
Many psychologists (for example, D.E. Berlyne, K.C. Montgomery, M. Glanzer) have for many years been verifying empirically that novel, unusual, unexpected stimuli have high motivational force for all living organisms. If what is new in a novel stimulus does not deviate too far from what is already known, motivation is positive and finds its expression in so-called "exploratory behavior". If, on the other hand, the structure of the stimulus is too different from what was customary (and therefore expected), there will be negative motivation resulting in anxiety and escape. This phenomenon is quite intelligible in the light of knowledge already accumulated about the ordering and structuring role played by information in the relations between an organism and its environment. Drive psychologists explain it, introducing in the process some hypothetical variables such as "innate approach tendency" (E.B. Holt), "adience"

(D.E. Berlyne), and "lack of the match between the chronic motivation level and the acute activation level induced by transient stimulation" (S.S. Fox).

The fact that the motivational influence of the novel stimulus depends upon the intensity of its "unusuality" nevertheless justifies the following hypotheses :

1) A "novel" stimulus induces in living organisms an ambivalent positive-negative attitude which may be analyzed as a combination of two attitudes, positive and negative, formed in response to two simultaneously acting stimuli of similar character;

2) If so, then the interaction of the two opposite attitudes may be represented graphically by using the same pattern employed by J. Dollard and N.E. Miller in the construction of an analytical model of simultaneous "rewarding" and "punishing" reinforcements :



In both drawings the horizontal axis represents the scale of relative "novelty" of a new stimulus; the curve AB = intensity of positive motivation (impulsion); and CD = intensity of the negative motivation (repulsion). The T fields denote the space in which impulsion and repulsion are more or less equal and the ambiguity of feelings and behavior is particularly intensive. The curve AB, representing intensity of impulsion as a function of stimulus novelty, is in both drawings the same. We can assume that the influence exerted on its shape by sociocultural factors is negligible. If this shape does fluctuate, the fluctuations are influenced rather by idiosyncratic factors, like personality traits, the momentary state of the organism, and so on, which are not submitted directly to pressures of a societal character. Conversely, the line which represents intensity of repulsion as a function of stimulus novelty has in both cases a different slope. This relation, closely connected with type of punishment for deviant behavior, depends apparently upon the sociocultural context in which action takes place. The differences between the two drawings analytically represent the psychocultural factors underlying the notorious divergence between stagnant (position priority) and dynamic (sign priority) cultures.

The foregoing considerations demand closer attention to the role of T fields. The two rectangles represent the realms of cultural taboo, superimposed usually over psychological phenomena of attitudinal ambivalence (*cf.* E.R. Leach). The convergence between anthropological descriptions of taboo phenomena and psychological descriptions of ambi-

valence is indeed striking. The human attitude toward taboo is an intricate mixture of interest and fear, reverence and abhorrence, impulsion and repulsion. The cultural prohibition of objects which arouse attitudes of this kind, enforced and safeguarded by socially controlled removal of these objects to the margin of the accepted cultural field is, from the functional point of view, tantamount to drawing the effective borderlines of unpunishable innovation. Taboos provide landmarks in relation to the field inside which the natural human impulse toward novelty is not acted against. Semiotically then, they perform the function of delimiting signs of permissible cultural variations.

The difference between both drawings consists, in the final analysis, in the shifting position of the T fields on the AB curves. This position depends upon how indulgent toward innovations the given cultural system is. The further to the right the T field falls, the more favorable are conditions for cultural development.

This shift depends, however, on factors located outside the cultural system as such. Whether the cultural signs are creative or derivative in relation to social positions depends upon the relationship between culture, as a semiotic system, and social structure, as an opportunity pattern expressed in the cultural information. Whenever we initiate analysis of cultural stagnation or dynamism, we always arrive at sociocultural problems. Because of the brevity of this paper, however, I could not pay these problems the attention they deserve.

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