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# CIVILIZATION ANALYSIS AS A SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE\*

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It is widely believed that comparing civilizations as wholes tends to produce excessively generalized interpretations not sufficiently sensitive to the specificity of the distinguishable elements that make up a particular civilization and to their changes over time. Efforts to comprehend whole civilizations seem to work better with dead civilization than with living ones, less well with that which we know best, least of all with the contemporary West. But is the only alternative to comparing whole civilizations a limitation of attention to one branch of culture, one type of problem, one item of social organization, one historical period?

What seems essential in a human science aware of the existence of civilizations is to orient one's specific problem, whatever it is, to some sort of general conception of civilizational structures, processes, and issues—and to conceive one's own particular problem as, in some sense, a problem of relations among these more general structures, processes, and issues. Not everyone needs to drag an elaborate analytical apparatus into every investigation. And there is clearly more than one way of perceiving what is essential to civilizational structures, processes, and issues. But it ought to be helpful to have an awareness of such an analytical framework in the background of one's mind, at least when one is asking what to look for in one's object of investigation.

## THE SOCIOLOGIES OF CULTURE

In the sociology of culture, five approaches at present compete for domination, each with a distinctive conception of its object of study, each with a valid contribution to make, all with serious limitations.

(1) In the *organizational* approach, the object of study is the social relations of production, distribution, and consumption of culture, the exercise of power within them, their sources of economic support, and the impact of all these conditions on what kind of culture is produced, to whom it is made available, and how and to what effect it is used. The whole cultural enterprise is viewed, in this perspective, as analogous to other productive enterprises, as an element of economic organization not essentially different from the production of automobile tires. It illuminates the social uses of cultural products but not what is essential to art, religion, or

science as distinctive forms of experience or modes of creating coherence. The organizational approach is wholly insensitive to the symbolic frameworks of social life, the histories of meaning buried (or dissolved) in it.

(2) In the *social-systemic* approach (which, in the respects considered important here, includes structural-functionalism as well as the bulk of orthodox Marxist sociology), the object of study of the sociology of culture is the dynamic exchanges between culture as a whole and society as a whole or between particular elements of culture and particular elements of society. "Society" is viewed as the primary producer, but what it produces is incomplete, not sufficiently real in itself and therefore in perpetual need of verification, of judgment, of infusion of significance, or of denial of recognition, by "culture" (or of critical understanding by "consciousness").

What is central to the social-systemic approach is (1) an analytical separation of society and culture, (2) a conception of each as consisting not of individuals and their acts, but of large and artificially stabilized chunks of social and cultural reality—social classes or forms of political organization on the one hand and art styles or types of religion on the other, and (3) an essential need of one for the other, an inevitable, demanding, crucial interdependence. In this perspective, culture assumes a central importance in the understanding of society, far too serious to be left to the humanists alone. But it is only culture in its overall, global characteristics—not the intricate and fluid patterns of its organization, and certainly not its nuances—that is considered to be important. Ultimately, the essentiality of culture reduces itself to a necessary element in the explanation of state or class dynamics (or in the maintenance of solidarity and communal stability).

The social-systemic schools (whether conflict or consensus-oriented) have tended to be really concerned only with those elements of the socio-cultural universe that were defined as important in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions of Anglo-French thought, the Enlightenment and its utilitarian heritage. This has meant that only clearly definable systems (institutions, formal organizations)—but not such entities as modes of sensibility or moral cultures—could become objects of sociological investigation; that their systematicity had to be systematically exaggerated (so that one tended to end up talking about the schemes of things and not about the things as they actually operate or are experienced in the lives of human beings); and that primary attention had to be given to systems which could either be seen as products of choices of individuals

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whose individualities did not matter (thus these systems could neither have any existence outside of such choices nor be related to the particularities of individual feeling, character, and judgment) or which were perceived as mere restraints upon such choices (and thus were felt as possessing no values in themselves, but merely having behavioral consequences).

Whatever social-systemic thought has contributed to the analysis of societies, it does not have a sufficiently differentiated understanding of the complex organization of the cultures of historic societies and civilizations. The capacity to see all essential elements of a culture in their particular configurations and in their intra-cultural connections (as distinguished from their presumed linkages to social structure) has remained undeveloped. Therefore, a distorted understanding of culture arises which, if taken seriously, can have corrupting effects on cultural processes.

(3) In the *culture-critical* movement of the sociology of culture, the primary object of study is culture (or a culture) as a whole; society becomes a cultural project or else a source of energy for the realization of cultural projects, but not very real as it might be independently of the cultural designs read into it by the cultural critic.

The cultural project with which this movement has concerned itself has tended to be the modernizing enterprise of the Western bourgeoisie, and this project has attained a more universal significance for this than for any other school of the sociology of culture. The whole of the so-called Third World has been absorbed by the culture critics entirely as a second-rate argument subsidiary to the critique of the modernizing project, which the culture critics tended to view as unitary and in which they saw Western and bourgeois elements as fused. Yet the criteria by which the bourgeois modernizing project was criticized were themselves largely of Western bourgeois derivation, sometimes flavored by misperceptions of various elements of curiously selected non-Western traditions, as in the school of French ethnography influenced by Surrealism (Clifford, 1982: 539–564).

The culture-critical movement in the sociology of culture has proved to be largely a form of self-expression of Western civilization, best viewed as itself an element within the theoretical framework of “modernization and anti-modernist movements.” This is one of the central theoretical frameworks for understanding civilizational processes,—not only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but as far back as history can reach,—and if the culture critics have dramatically reminded us of this problematic, they have served well.

Whatever substantive contributions the culture critics have made to the sociology of culture tend not to be generalizable beyond the limits of discourse of this school itself, for the simple reason that its contributions are presented as a drama of secularism (sometimes, as in Walter Benjamin, subsuming even

theology to its aims) conceived in an artistic form. Such contributions retain an enviable purity of spirit but remain bound to their own theaters. For better or for worse, they do not dissolve into the stream of thought of the specialized sociologies of either religion or art.

(4) In the purest case of sociological *phenomenology*, the object of study is neither society nor culture as systems with determinate (and historically developing) structures of their own, but the meanings the interpreter attributes to them or which he presumes those he is observing to have perceived in them. Phenomenology studies the presumed perception by “ordinary” social and cultural participants of social and cultural objects rather than the objects themselves, the “intra-psychic” rather than the “objectified” or institutionalized texts; and it is capable in principle of paying attention to the individual and to small groups—at least more so than other schools of the sociology of culture.

Sociological phenomenologists tend to assume that social reality is constituted in the mind of either an individual, usually the interpreter himself (in practice), or of many individuals cooperating, over a short period of time, in the “social construction of reality” (in theory), and that there are no decisive criteria for judging how well “reality” is being “constituted.” Accordingly, there is no intrinsic requirement in the logic of sociological phenomenology that the “reality constructions” built into the statements of sociological analysis be judged by any criteria or against any evidence beyond these statements themselves. No self-proclaimed sociological phenomenologist appears to have used his discipline as a method to check upon his own spontaneous inclinations.

The phenomenological approach can contribute greatly to understanding how a particular interpretation of some element of culture emerges—or acquires credibility—where it had not previously been in evidence. It has much to say (in labeling theory and elsewhere) about the consequences of particular kinds of perceptions in their immediate social settings. But it is less adequate in accounting for the historical persistence, under changing social conditions, of complex cultural forms or for their large-scale social impact, for their activity as forces shaping social settings.

In the study of civilizations, the phenomenological method seems most productive in the initial phases of encounters with strange phenomena, less helpful in facing the primary problems of civilization analysis—that is, in explaining how the diversity of elements of which a civilization is composed fit together, how the balances among them change, how vitality is generated from tensions-in-togetherness. This is perhaps to say that, in civilizational studies, only a *historical* phenomenology is likely to be fruitful beyond the stage of first impressions. It is not accidental that phenomenological methods have been most rewarding in the comparative history of reli-

gions, while in the sociology of art, certainly in its Anglo-American unhistorical version, phenomenology has yielded little beyond a perpetually attractive rhetoric.

(5) The *structuralist* (or semiotic) approach carries the potentiality for a clearer definition both of the inner organization of particular symbolic designs and of their boundaries in time and in space, and the seriousness with which structuralists have sought rigor in understanding the explicit and especially implicit organization of a text is their chief merit.

But structuralists have not yet found a way of relating different kinds of symbolic designs to each other—a predicament from which the assumption that all texts are really variations of the same deep text is, for everyone but the master of the school, an unfruitful escape. The notion of intertextuality may prove to be more helpful, particularly in the study of historical societies and their cultural productions. But a purely structuralist approach reveals little—or does not care at all—about the social sources and social effects of symbolic designs and thus cannot reliably illuminate the processes of sociocultural causation. It does not allow any theoretical significance to the continuous interpretation of texts yielding a wide and shifting range of their perceptions. The structuralist “text no longer has an outside, it has only an inside” (Ricoeur, 1981: 216). The structuralists have so far had little use for comparative studies intended to bring out the distinctiveness of particular, especially non-Western, civilizational traditions. Nevertheless, I would expect structuralism to possess most of a still undeveloped theoretical potentiality, among the dominant schools of the sociology of culture, for advancing comparative civilizational research.

Or perhaps a historical structuralism in tandem—or in a division of labor—with historical phenomenology. The chief concern of sociological phenomenology is comprehension (precise description and, to the extent possible, explanation) of shared qualities in individual experiences and expressions that can be reconstituted as symbolic universes, as inner worlds, as forms of the spiritual life in society. Structuralism is concerned with the taken-for-granted modes of connectedness, differentiation, and movement, the implicit foundations of particular forms of consciousness. The “history of consciousness” (or Foucault’s “archeology of consciousness”) belongs, on general morphological grounds, to the family of structuralist schools broadly conceived.

Historical phenomenology differs from historical structuralism in (a) a less rigorous (in fact) or more fluid (by choice) definition of cultural structures (which tend to be conceived as *psycho*-cultural structures, closely involved with assumptions about the fundamental nature of human psychic needs, rather than cognitive structures for organizing knowledge), (b) greater attentiveness to the engagement of cultural structures in the lives of individuals, and (c) greater concern with processes than with structures.

Historical structuralism has its chief locus in French, historical phenomenology in German social thought.<sup>1</sup>

All schools of the sociology of culture, except for historical phenomenology at its best, seem to be insufficiently attentive to the issue of what a culture in its concrete particularity consists of, to a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions and levels of its actual symbolic organization. Indeed the underdevelopment of such understanding is the single most glaring deficiency in sociology as a whole.

## THE OBJECT OF CIVILIZATIONAL STUDIES

Can a civilizational perspective orient the sociology of culture in more productive directions?<sup>2</sup> Can it, incorporating what is most valuable in the existing approaches, provide an orientation more faithful to the mode of being of its object of investigation and its inherent problematic? We might take a look at what people engaged in civilizational studies have actually been doing, and draw the theoretical implications therefrom for the sociology of culture.

What can be inferred from the content of civilizational studies about their object of study is that it is a *historical text*—not a particular literary work, but a general text, the symbolic organization of an essential component of a civilization. The object of civilizational studies is indelibly marked by historicity and textuality.

A text is a fully developed, sufficient-by-itself symbolic form for capturing the meaning of a particular mass of experience. It is not a newspaper report, a statistical table with comments, or a best-selling exploitation of stereotype and current sensation which does not add, by its structure, any meaning to the events to which it refers. Nor is it an abstract dimension of experience, a code for guiding certain aspects of it, or a schematic generalization, such as one “normally” finds in theoretical sociology. *A text is a “living” effort at a total grasp of a range of experience, capable of surviving, by the strength of its own symbolic organization, beyond the experience from which it arose, and of attracting respect for its perfection of form even from strangers to whom the experience itself remains alien.*<sup>3</sup> The test of the textuality of the text is its ability to speak even to those who do not know what it is to live by it.

A sensuous concreteness, the whiff of a particular totality, and an acceptable claim to preservation in memory: these are qualities inherent to a text, even to an adequate recognition of an implicit text, an outsider’s reconstruction of the meaning of a behavioral universe to its participants. It behooves civilizationists to focus their attention on such texts and to seek to reconstitute them where only fragmentary evidence is available. And the texts produced in the concrete investigations of civilization analysts should not detract from the texts they study.

What civilizationists study is symbolic configurations which individuals and collectivities have drawn from one or another tradition and recreated for

comprehending themselves and their worlds, and for guiding their actions. Symbolic configurations of the civilizational kind do not fully exist at any one point in time. Not only are they historically constituted, but, more important, what a civilizational text signifies at any given time (to a civilization analyst) is signified by both its present construction and the known form of the history of how humanity has experienced and used it since its emergence into texthood (as well as its formative stage and even its anticipated future).<sup>4</sup> In the realm of civilizational phenomena, only trivial texts exist merely as present constructions and not also as forms of their histories. The historical trajectory of my mode of self-understanding is its definitive grounding; the temporary detail, my grasp of the general form, is its ephemeral self-interpretation through my sense of what is adequate and fitting to my times and myself. This is not how civilizations (as yet) understand themselves, but how civilizationists understand them, their distinctive contribution to the self-understanding of civilizations.

The decisive characteristic of a civilizational text is that it is simultaneously a present construction—of the kind that structuralists might investigate—and the form of its history—which structuralism might help to describe more precisely, but which the structuralists themselves tend to ignore. Both “present construction” and “form of history” allow for an empirical spread of interrelated variants looked at, by various participants and observers, from different points of view and interpreted in varying idioms.

Each distinctive perception of a civilizational text adds to the range of deformations against which it must, over time, assert itself. The central concern for a civilizational analyst is not what the text was at the beginning, or what it was intended to be, or what it has meant for most of its perceivers, but what of it has succeeded in resisting the various efforts at its deformation by all who perceived it.

The deformation-resisting core of the text consists of structural relationships among its elements on various levels of its organization. Such structural relationships can be described with a high degree of agreement among those who have studied the text thoroughly (as contrasted to those who have merely received impressions of it), whatever the differences in the theoretical or ideological perspectives of the scholarly researchers, if they talk about the same text and only about it. (Scholarly analysis is contaminated when another text insinuates itself into one’s reading of the text one is presumably analyzing.) Genuine disagreements among textual (or cultural) analysts center on the relative weight of particular elements within the design, the “esoteric” messages contained within its structure, the moral implications intended or actually transmitted to particular groups of receivers, the social uses to which it has been put, its historical and intellectual sources, its degree of dominance in particular settings or the

degree of adherence to it by particular groups at particular times, and finally their more or less demonstrable practical effects. Attention needs to be given in civilizational studies to these questions, but an adequate description of the core structure of a civilizational design is nevertheless the basic—not necessarily the first—step in analyzing it.

The text is sometimes “democratically” understood as the sum total, the overall spread, or its deformations. It may be quite true that behaviorally love or justice—or “public life” or “womanhood”—exist as the sum total of the deformations of their various fundamental designs. Yet it is not the sum total of the deformations, but the needed beauty of the fundamental designs that makes them worth preserving in memory (which is all a civilizationist can do, though it is certainly true that in memories begin responsibilities). To be sure, not only beautiful but also horrifying designs need to be preserved in memory, and, in either case, the designs cannot be sufficiently understood without a perpetual study of their deformations. (The deformations of horrifying designs are intended to make them more appealing.) A thorough grasp of all misunderstandings is a condition for sufficient understanding in all matters sociocultural. Nevertheless, if it comes to a choice between exhaustiveness of coverage (studying all objects of attention and all of their perceptions for their own sake) and aiming at the extraction of the deformation-resisting core of a crucial text, the historian—particularly the “new” historian—might do the former, the civilizationist will press the claims of the second.

We approach these historical texts in a *comparative perspective*. A text is not only what it signifies in the cultural tradition in which it has been conceived. A text ultimately exists for the totality of those capable of understanding it—that is, the human species as a whole. Its meaning is its meaning for the world, and it includes all that which it has come to mean in cultural traditions originally alien to it. Encounters of traditions, like translations, criticisms, and all other operations performed on literary texts, both clarify structural relations and test the permeability of apparent boundaries; perhaps also, in the long run, help determine which deformations the text will, sooner or later, come to reject (or to which it will succumb).

What happens in the course of a translation or “adaptation to local circumstances” (whether of the form of the novel or of Buddhism in China and Japan, of Hinduism in Indonesia, of Christianity in the various parts of Europe and the “New World,” and of Marxism in Russia, China, and Africa), says much about the symbolic designs of the recipient culture. But what happens to a text in its reworking by an interpreter, translator, or adapter to “practice” may also reveal otherwise less visible potentialities—even the shameful secrets—of the text itself and of the tradition which has generated it. The process of interpretation, in the broadest sense, including that



of interpretation of texts by individual or concerted *action*, may even establish certain possibilities of being which exist only in the process of translation from one tradition to another, in the translator's (which in the last two centuries comes close to saying: the modern intellectual's) mode of being.<sup>5</sup>

What are the distinctive aspects of a symbolic organization—the specific character of the elements of which it is composed and their relationships—and particularly what is missing in it (what it excludes is a part of its definition), becomes fully evident only through its comparison with other texts, and through the comparison of the civilizational tradition which has generated it with other civilizational traditions. Three types of comparison are particularly important: (1) different texts presenting a similar type of issue or perception in the diverse manners of different civilizations; (2) ostensibly identical texts differently perceived and used (interpreted or adapted) in several civilizations; (3) texts differing in their structures but performing similar functions in the “symbolic economies” of particular civilizations or national cultures entering into their composition, or in different social settings and in relation to different historical occurrences and processes.

Normally a design can be understood only when it is, explicitly or implicitly, compared with other designs. Analytical trouble arises when the designs are closely correlated with particular analytical languages, and the language of the second design is used as the basis of the comparison. The first design is then described in the manner of speaking implicit in the second design, the second design is not looked at through the way of seeing built into the first design. This has tended to be the case not only in comparative studies, but also in their critiques.<sup>6</sup>

That this does not need to be the case has been shown by Louis Dumont in his comparative studies of the fundamental structures of consciousness of traditional India and the modern West. But what single individual could grasp the essential structures of more than two civilizations by first asking what a deep understanding of one reveals as essential in the other, and then reversing the perspective? And is everything essential about India and the West grasped in the key metaphors of *hierarchy* and *individuality*, immensely instructive and thought-improving as these comparisons have been?

It may well be that the symbolic designs of any tradition can be understood in all their implications, limitations, and potentialities—and, in this sense, attain their full cognitive realization—only when they have been interpreted, in a mutually communicative manner, from the perspectives of all other traditions, particularly those comparable or superior to it in their analytical sophistication. But such multi-perspectival analysis can only be developed over time by ensembles of interresonating scholars representing different traditions not only of inquiry but of historic civilization as well (and different sensibilities too).

Civilization analysis is itself a civilizational text, although its practitioners should be especially sensitive to the need to distinguish what in their (as well as others') perceptions is the expression of their own civilization—or of the civilization which has provided their intellectual equipment—and what are adequate representations of other civilizations. No dominant approach in the sociology of culture has hitherto made much of an issue of the extent to which what it says about “social reality” is a self-expression of one's own civilization, a dialogue between a civilization and its own consciousness.

The comparative method does not require that the comparativist stand in a privileged position of equal distance to the empirical presences of all civilizational traditions. On the contrary, the comparative approach has been most fruitful so far when it has emerged from a deep problem the analyst has experienced within *his own* tradition (and within his own *self*), but which he could not come to grips with adequately without drawing the evidence of other civilizations into account. In sociology, the paradigmatic case remains Max Weber; in the comparative history of religions, perhaps Mircea Eliade. But it would be a mistake for a non-Western scholar to take it for granted that comparative studies arise only from Western experience and therefore require an acceptance of Western problems, methodologies and general premises.

*The goal of the comparative civilizationist is a precise grasp of what is validly unique, or uniquely valuable, in the distinctive symbolic form and its historical trajectory, that which entitles it to preservation (in however changing, always more or less deformed, comprehensions) in the collective memory of humanity.* One must of course ask for what evaluative, or for what existential, communities a given civilizational text—a text of its own history—is worth preserving, in which of its potential readings, and for what purposes (e.g., as example or as warning, as “form of life” or as “scholarly understanding”). One must further ask what of this text is known in such communities, and what of it must be known to decide “rationally” whether it is, or is not, worth preserving. Only after these operations have been performed, can one inquire whether universal standards of judgment on what entitles a civilizational text to be preserved in the collective memory of humanity exist or might be emerging.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of such universal standards, civilizations may be conceived of as the largest cognitive-evaluative-existential communities in history.

To the concepts of *historicity* and *textuality* with which I began, those of *multi-perceptivity* and of the *deformation-resisting core* of the text have been added. To these identifying marks of the object of civilizational studies must be further attached a description of our relationship to our object of study. I would conceive of this relationship as a critical kind of *self-civilization reference*: using the historic-civilizational record as a source of critical perspectives for judging

that toward which we spontaneously incline, using our experience as a source of questions for all civilizations to answer. Civilizationists have the responsibility, beyond the technical adequacy of their work, for seeing the connectedness of the most important things on the largest scale, but also in relation to the agent of conscious experience.

#### THE DEPTH LEVELS OF SOCIOCULTURAL ORGANIZATION

A civilization offers itself to us most immediately as a constellation of symbolic designs laid out in history, the largest interresonating constellation which has retained its continuity over centuries while its parts have been changing in different directions and at various rates; and it continues to be a *living* civilization to the extent that its elements reflect and affect (not merely cause and constrain) each other. Variations in the mutual resonance of elements of a civilization can be expected to be indications of changes in its general vitality (as distinguished from its productivity, power, or the capacity of self-advertising). It is precisely by increasing this mutual resonance that the Romantic movement, or Vienna between Freud and Wittgenstein, have enlivened—increased the vitality of—Western civilization.

I wish to propose that linkages among the particular research findings of the human sciences could be sought more systematically, and individual discoveries would have a more cumulative effect, if the symbolic designs constituting civilizations were to be viewed as structures disposed over a series of ever-present *depth levels* of sociocultural organization (Table I).

Culture, for its analyst, consists not of everything that can be said about human experience, whether “truly recorded” or “artificially constructed,” but of the durable symbolic designs—the general texts of a cultural tradition—into which humanity has succeeded in organizing its accumulated experiences. What a civilization has symbolically organized is, in the interior space of its full-scale participants, prior to their actions. One must of course recognize that most inhabitants of an area covered by a historic or contemporary civilization may have been incomplete and half-conscious participants in it. For them, most of the symbolic organization of a civilization may exist in a “restricted code,” as a vague shadow, or even as collections of residual fragments of half-forgotten systems, much as pagan mythologies survived for half a millenium among Christianized East European peasants. But this is a problem of how *people* are distributed over time in relation to a changing *structure* (or several alternative structures), a crucial problem but still analytically subsequent to that of an adequate recognition (and description) of the structure itself at any one point in time.

The levels of a symbolic design which appear to be closer to the intuitive perception of its producers (but not necessarily to that of its reproducers) I view

as the “deeper” levels; those which seem closer to observable action I think of as the more “superficial” ones. Increasing depth is indicated by qualitative differences in the organization of meaning along the continuum from the particular, the immediately given, the detachable, and the applicable, to the general and the all-pervasive. I do not think of the deeper levels as necessarily either genetically or logically prior, or as “controlling” in some cybernetic sense, or as ultimate keys unlocking the overall structure of a symbolic design, but as supplying the foundation (as well as, under certain conditions, the balancing counterpoints) for the more particularized levels of sociocultural organization superimposed upon them. The seven levels represent all the structurally distinguishable steps that must be viewed as intervening between subjective perception and objective action, all the baggage of dynamic cultural tradition packed into the moment between “sensing” and “doing.”

To a greater or lesser extent in particular cases, the levels of cultural organization refer to the same cultural designs viewed in their different aspects. A particular design shares some but not all of its aspects, or levels of organization, with other designs of its civilization (and sometimes with entities across civilizational boundaries or zones of transition separating one civilization from another). The deeper levels of cultural organization are more likely to be common to a variety of particular symbolic designs within a civilization (without necessarily congealing into a single and unchanging key metaphor providing the ground of unity of a particular civilization, as Spengler suggested). The more superficial levels of cultural organization are more likely to diffuse from one civilization to another (though they do not all diffuse with equal ease in all directions).

Sociology of culture has tended to address itself more to questions of the sources, increases and decreases in plausibility, and social consequences of symbolic designs (usually conceived as schematic types rather than as fully developed texts) than to the issue of why the contents and structures of symbolic designs evolve over time, once they have been formally established. Is there any internal logic of the particular design—a developmental thrust inherent in its original formulation and its limitations—or are its changes over time due to its encounters with human drives (both widely shared and highly individual “human needs”) and the requirements and yields of external situations (some of them systematic, others accidental)? In studies of changes over time of symbolic designs, both the internal thrust and the external circumstances have received attention. What has tended to be neglected is relations among particular elements and levels of organization of the design as a source of change (e.g., such issues as supportive or strained relations between the basic idioms of liberalism or socialism and the structures of particular national languages). In any case, when something demonstrably changes in the symbolic designs of a society, one needs to ask what

TABLE I  
DEPTH LEVELS OF SOCIOCULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Levels	Cultural Organization	Observable Action	Social Organization
Moves	Images of the rhetorical moment		Human relations of individuals observable at a point in time
Specializations	Logics of action and of feeling		Life patterns (trajectories of moving through spheres of life, careers in organizations)
Structures of Everyday Conduct	Moral cultures; established or changing cultures of particular fields of activity (legal, medical, artistic)		Groups and organizations: families; communities; formal organizations; occupations; classes; movements; historic-natural groups (ethnic, racial, religious) publics
Integrative Foci	Systems of faith integrating orientations toward the self, others, nature, history, and transcendence into relatively consistent wholes		Systems of social coordination (kinship, stratification orders, markets, states, central planning, international organizations, mass media)
Differentiated Languages of Organization	Linguistic fields and codes, grammatical constructions, classificatory systems, semiotic networks, mythological models, ritualistic calendars, dramatic forms, modes of discourse, genres of expression		Divisions into spheres of life (economic, political, religious, erotic, scientific, aesthetic; formal organization, intimate sociability, nature; sacred-secular, public-private, male-female, child-adult, self-society areas and relations)
Cognitive Foundations	Basic forms of order and disorder, and of movement, space-time organizations, part-totality paradigms, structure-energy, nature-spirit, inner-outer interactions, comprehensions of selfhood, dynamics of evil (or of purity-and-danger), epistemes, text-reality assumptions		Primordial and charismatically reconstituted collective identities (tribal, national, ideological, civilizational, and humanity-wide), collective memories, burdens of destiny
Emotional Holdings	Grounding affectivities (stances toward life, senses of basic quality of existence, intuitions of undivided unity, of the “movement of things,” and of beginnings and endings, perceptual sets, modes of sensibility)	Intuitive Perception	Premises of sociability (forms and relations of trust, authority, discipline, and gratification in social behavior)

has preceded this change—and what is going on during it—on *all* levels of cultural organization and their relations to each other.

After having sorted out the elements of *cultural* organization into depth levels, I tried to imagine whether comparable depth levels could not be located

among the “practical texts” of *social* organization, and whether particularly close engagements could not be found between equivalent levels of social and cultural organization. Societal texts are “practical” only in the sense that they have no status, no potentially generalizable validity, no claim on our attention



beyond the social group in relation to which they have been designed. What is “practical” is limited to the group for which it is practical; what is “abstract” can be detached from its sociohistorical setting and, as a generally available alternative, speak in principle to all humanity (at least in the sense in which religions can speak to the “religiously unmusical”). But at any particular time (and in any normal situation of action) the “practical” and the “abstract” are, tightly or loosely, intermeshed with each other. Both practical and abstract texts can be found in a particular system of law-enforcement, a working-class culture, a literary movement, a therapeutic practice.

A symbolic organization can be thought to exist in society to the extent that the societal stream of life allows itself to be viewed as variations around a changing constellation of texts—that is, of designs of social life so respect-worthy for their intrinsic qualities that before them, as Durkheim says, “human passions stop.” They never stop completely. But neither do they stop completely before the more “abstract” texts of cultural organization. In both cases, much negotiation of terms and infliction of pain takes place, and both kinds of texts need to be studied in relation to what particular people do with them by such means.

As the theory of anomie suggests, a society may be read, by a varying part of its members, as insufficiently textualized. The anomic individual is the critic who condemns what he knows of the texts of his society as lacking in adequacy. But this judgment may be based on his lack of knowledge of adequate texts which exist in his environment, in which case the central question of anomie theory is the same as that of the study of cultural services: what prevents the delivery and reception of adequate texts where they stand a good chance of being needed to give coherence—or clarity, vividness, and sense of direction—to experience?

The character and relevance of the *distributions of acts* in society cannot be reliably grasped without utmost precision in identifying the various *symbolic designs and levels of signification* to which they refer, the interdependencies of these designs and levels, and their changes over time: a capacity which contemporary sociology does not yet possess. All this is only to say that social organization is less purely, and in a different manner, textualized than cultural organization,<sup>8</sup> not that culture, as distinguished from society, is the privileged depository of all historical texts.

The central problem of the sociology of culture—as of civilizational analysis—is the mode of participation in each other of social and cultural texts: their emergence from the profuse “stream of life” into definite “textuality,” their drawing upon each other in various stages of their histories, their impact upon (or dissolution in) the “stream of life,” and their fading away, or breakdown, and replacement or hidden, “subtextual” persistence (either as an underground alternative preserving “the truths of the

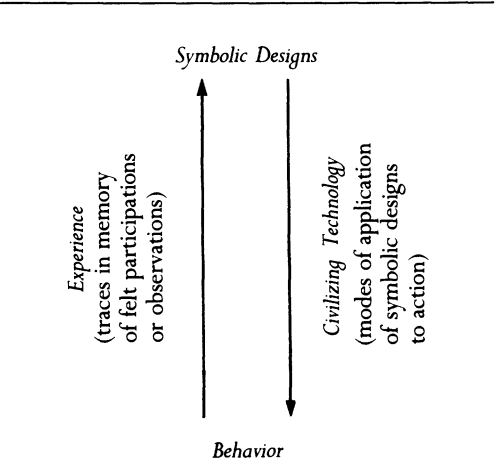
vanquished,” or as premises dissolved in some other entity or become not specifically recognizable parts of “general culture”).

The seven levels are presumed to be always engaged in any major sociocultural phenomenon, but, in a dynamic situation, to be independently variable in it. The depth levels of cultural and social organization must be presumed to be, at least potentially, in tension with each other. So are the “abstract” and the “practical” texts. But the levels also provide resources for each other and they must be sensed—in the “normal” civilizational situation—as resonating, sounding with, each other (if they are not, in a highly stabilized tradition, even more closely integrated with each other).

What is treated here as a text is not *action*, as it is for Paul Ricoeur, (1981: 197–221) but a *symbolic design* which (a) consolidates some of the meanings of many actual or potential actions and (b) persists over historical time and thus serves as a model—or partial model—for such actions. Texts are, to varying extents, elements of situations in which actions occur.

The smallest operational unit of civilizational processes may be conceived of as *a text in a situation of action*, the relationship between the text and human behavior mediated either by experience (traces in memory of participations or observations) or by civilizing technologies (modes of application of symbolic designs to behavior), as in Table II. A text detached from behavior is devitalized, behavior not oriented to texts is dissolute; in each case, the civilizational unit breaks down into fragments which, no longer held together, cease to take part in civilizational processes. And where only experience or only civilizing technology mediates between behavior and symbolic design, we may perhaps identify a half-unit of civilizational processes, an operational but one-sided entity.

TABLE II  
THE UNIT OF CIVILIZATIONAL ACTION



While the point of entry into civilizational studies must be the text, as previously described, the final goal of civilizational studies—and one which cannot be accomplished by the specialized comparative disciplines, such as the histories of religion or of science, or by the various social sciences as currently constituted—could be more precisely identified as understanding human actions in their largest comprehensible settings. Civilization analysis is concerned, on the one hand, with the distinctive varieties and changes of human experience and the symbolic designs for interpreting experiences, and, on the other hand, with the immersion of symbolic designs in social behavior. Its goal can only be accomplished by uncovering the connections between the histories of behavior and of consciousness. The study of these connections is the field of the sociology of culture.

Two questions need always to be asked in civilizational research: (1) What alternative or conflicting designs—or their fragments, memories, or unintended byproducts—exist in a situation of action or of attentiveness?; (2) What conditions of actions or attentiveness can be specified for each design and each state of development of that design to help explain the distribution of acts in society and of “conviction bits”—individual commitments of adherence to the design—in culture?

In the analysis of both social and cultural action, a distinction needs to be made between the designs which are subjectively perceived by the participants to be present in the situation of action or attentiveness, and those which are objectively present (and by which the participants may be affected without consciously perceiving the effect, or which they “take for granted”). The distinction between the objectively present symbolic organization (which can be reconstructed either from the evidence internal to a particular text or from other sources of information pertaining to it) and what is subjectively perceived provides a basis for a critical evaluation of consciousness, though it is not to be presumed that what is consciously perceived *should* be a fully explicit isomorphic representation of underlying symbolic structures. Rather a good deal of unselfconscious use of culture must be regarded as not only normal, but also as an essential condition of creativity. What the consciousness of everyday life needs to focus on is the unresolved issues, confusions, and contradictions which exist in the underlying symbolic structures. It is by how clearly these issues are sensed, and how effectively they are handled, that the various modes of the consciousness of everyday life—including those of ideological leaders—need to be judged.

The object of study of civilizational analysis is always simultaneously a sociocultural universe as a whole, its structural levels and alternative versions clearly distinguished, and a particular, historically specific element of social or cultural organization in relation to that whole. Without attentiveness to *all*

essential components of a civilization, we cease being responsible in our concern with civilizational matters.<sup>9</sup> Without a focus on a particular element of social or cultural organization—a profound detail of structure or process—we cease being able to do fruitful research.

We need a method suitable for describing the distinctiveness of a unique symbolic design, the largest traditional or emergent configuration to which it belongs or, in the case of intercultural encounters, the several such configurations in which it simultaneously participates, and the relationships, on various levels, between the design and the configuration—a method adequate both to particularity and to generality (but without confusing the two, as is frequently the case in interpretive approaches in which inferences are made from a particular cultural document to a more general state of mind or its changes).

What is required in the comparative study of any phenomenon—whether of “changing sex roles” or of traditions of politics—in civilizational perspective is an adequate spelling out of the structure of each level of sociocultural organization and of the connections and resonances among all the levels bearing, in a particular civilization, on that phenomenon.

#### NOTES

1. However, while Louis Dumont can be regarded as a historical structuralist, Philippe Ariès is closer to historical phenomenology, a congregation which includes Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Bernard Groethuysen, Martin Green, Jackson Lears, Steven Tipton.
2. On the civilization analytic perspective in sociology, see Holzner, 1982; Nelson, 1981; Robetson, 1978; Kavolis, 1974, 1979, 1979a, 1980, 1982, 1984.
3. Otherwise put: experience has a symbolic form when its representation can grip the imagination of those whose experiences are different and compel them spontaneously to respect its intrinsic qualities for their own sake. This definition implies that, at any given time, a form may vary in its symbolicality for various actual or potential audiences, and that, over time, it may acquire or lose symbolicality: the history of culture is in part an ongoing battle over what is culturally significant (and how “chic-ly” significant it is), and only the spontaneous judgments of subsequent generations decides, for them, the issues.
4. The notion of the perceived (or reconstructed) history of the text as an essential dimension of its meaning, as well as different assumptions about the relationship between the text and the analyst, and the particular methods of studying it, distinguish the concept of the *civilizational text* from the semiotic concept of the *cultural text* (Winner and Umiker-Sebeok, 1979).
5. A peculiarity of Western civilization in its present stage is that the civilizational text is less attached to a particular natural language than civilizational texts have been in the past, and that *translatedness* is therefore more of an essential characteristic of the civilizational text than ever before. In the West, the typical civilizational texts of modernity—e.g., liberalism, Romanticism, Marxism, psychoanalysis—transcend any par-

- tical natural language and incorporate a variety of natural languages—and extensive relations among them, mutual or unidirectional translations, misinterpretations and so on—as necessary conditions of their being or at least as their essential historical components.
6. Perhaps the most flamboyant case in which a Western mode of discourse is marched off as the basis of accusations that other scholars have inflicted Western perceptions on non-Western cultures is Edward W. Said (Said, 1978).
  7. In an over-computerized world in which the danger arises of drowning in excessive information, it is particularly important to develop a methodology—or at least a problematic—of asking what is *worth* being retained in the collective memory of humanity (as distinguished from the data depositories, in which presumably the more information can be collected, the better).
  8. In this respect, I differ from Clifford Geertz's view that "the real is *as* imagined as the imaginary" (my italics). *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 136. The "real" is *less* imagined than the "imaginary." While Geertz himself is aware of this distinction, the theoretical formulation of his universal hermeneutics denies it. It is therefore a less effective method in understanding the West than in interpreting historic Bali.
  9. In this respect, S. N. Eisenstadt, whose recent work is permeated with a comparative-civilizational perspective, lacks, in contrast to Max Weber, in civilizational responsibility.
- Eisenstadt is concerned exclusively with the relationships between religion and politics (how religion bears on politics, not how politics bears on religion) and in particular with variations in the transformative capacity of social institutions. A mode of approach that reduces the rich diversity of the symbolic structures of each civilization to an intersection of a few schematic dimensions of the organization of social and cultural systems amounts to an exploitation of civilizational concerns for a social-systemic sociology that ends up deforming its subject of investigation. (Eisenstadt, 1978; 1980: 840–869; 1982: 155–181; 1982a:294–314; 1982b:1–21)
- A similar lack of civilizational responsibility—though of a different kind—is evident in the otherwise challenging work of Michel Foucault. The matter is particularly serious when it occurs in work explicitly addressed to the study of "civilizations," that is comprehensive and shifting balances of enormous numbers of symbolic designs.
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