Semiotics of culture and communication

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Signs, culture and communication

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1st lesson

Social actors and culture
Culture as a universal feature of mankind appears and evolves as an highly disparate and heteroclitic diversity of specific, historically and socially attuned forms.

Such specific cultural forms are *embodied* in people, spaces, periods, objects, artefacts, documents, activities, environments, etc. which, together, take the form of a social actor.

But cultural forms are not only « embossed » - they also *shape* social actors, give them their specific identity and integrity.

In any case the empirical study of culture only can be undertaken with respect to a specific social actor.

We will therefore work in this first lecture on the central notion of social actor, try to understand what it is and what could be a simple but sound general theoretical and methodological framework for studying its forms and dynamics.
There are three main topics of this first lecture are:

1. A general and short presentation of the reciprocal relationship between a social actor and culture.

2. A very short and general discussion of some specific cultural forms.

3. The description of the world, the life world (« Lebenswelt ») that inhabits a social actor
1st topic

- Culture and social actors -
Culture is a common feature of human nature, of the human species.

(In a first approximation), we define the notion of culture as:

- a **system of knowledge and value patterns** [GOD 65]
- that allow people to **represent** themselves and the others, to **inhabit** the surrounding world and to **intervene** in this surrounding world with premeditation, in a planned way [LEV 61].

But culture as a universal feature is counterbalanced by the fact that it appears always as attuned to:

- a group of men or, much more generally speaking, a group of interrelated agents or entities (people, artefacts, instruments and tools, documents, …),
- a natural and socio-historic context, i.e. environments, places, periods, activities and events.
This fact is demonstrated by an almost free proliferation of terminological expressions that show “culture” in relation to some specific social settings: “popular culture”, “literate culture”, “oral culture”, “national culture”, “scientific culture”, “culinary culture”, “housing culture”, “shopping culture”, etc.

The general meaning of such expressions is to represent not culture “such as” but particular manifestations of culture which have to be understood with respect to given groups of people, specific types of activities, specific types of artefacts, given periods and places, specific types of knowledge, etc.

and which, reciprocally, make them understandable as composing, forming the identity and integrity of a social actor.

Nevertheless, the common use of the term “culture” suggests that there exist (is implicitly supposed that there exist) a kind of “communality”, a “common ground” underneath the “superficial” diversity of cultural forms.
Let us start to examine the specific relationship between culture and a social actor – relationship that we find in the following definition of the notion “social actor”:

**Definition:**

A *social actor* is any (human, animal, “artificial”, ...) *agent* such as a group of persons, an individual, an organized group (a company, a union, a party, ...), who:

- possess a *common cognitive reference frame* (composed, among others, by a common tradition, common knowledge and values)

- requires the possession or acquisition of a *specific competence* for understanding, accepting and dealing with this common cognitive reference frame.
Some ad hoc examples for “social actor”:

- groups referring to a common charismatic figure: the fan group of a soccer club, of a pop band, of a political leader, ...
- groups sharing common (religious, political, ...) convictions: religious communities, political parties,
- groups sharing the access to some rare and/or valuable resources: the elites, the “intellectuals”, the connoisseurs, the bourgeois, the deprived, ...
- groups sharing the more or less same language resources: linguistic communities, plurilingual communities, diglossic communities, pidgin speakers, dialectal communities, ...
- groups engaged in the same type of a social practice: consumers, vendors, workers, ...
- etc.
Question: what makes these and other groups (types of groups) identifiable as social actor?

A possible response is that all these and other groups share something in common, something that makes them a recognizable, more or less stable figure.

For instance, the “communality” (an aspect of the communality) of the above listed groups of social actors is represented by the lexical expressions of the classification: “charismatic figure”, “common convictions”, “social practice”, ...

Indeed, such expressions design two complementary, central dimensions in the recognition of social actors:

- they are recognizable (by others) and they recognize themselves
- because of the fact that they share a common life world (Lebenswelt in the sense of Husserl and Schütz), a common social reality.
2nd topic

- Examples of specific cultural forms -
Before trying to understand more systematically central criteria for studying specific cultural forms embodied by social actors, let us present quickly three of them:

- The form of national culture as it has been defined by B. Anderson [AND 81];

- The form of scientific culture as it merges in several works starting with those of Thomas Kuhn [KUH 68] and including those of the sociology of sciences (Dominique Pestre [PES 02], Bruno Latour [LAT 88], ...)

- The form of shopping culture as it is explained in different sociological and socio-ethnographic studies
A national culture can be defined – following B. Anderson – as

- an imagined community (people don’t know each other …)
- a limited community (no one global national community)

and

- a sovereign community (no dependancy from other community; cf. also [STO 88])

Such a political community uses (generally, not – especially in recent creations of « national states » – necessarily) a common printed lingua franca which is the official « national language ».

The « imagined » dimension of such a political community is not only a « philological » (B. Anderson) one, but supported also by:

- collective rituals (especially comemorations, sporting events, …)
- distinguished places and periods
- distinguished persons, objects and symbols
- formalized collective practices (represented through the main institutions of a nation).
A “scientific culture”, roughly speaking, may be characterised:

- (in Kuhn’s sense) by the existence of some paradigmatic knowledge of a given relevant domain (physics, psychology, ...),
- by general maxims, behavioural rules and customs (cf. Zack Henley on “scientific culture”),
- by people acting in different roles (the scientists, the engineers, the administration, the public, the journalists, the industry, ...),
- by functionally specialised places (laboratories, offices, seminar rooms, expositions, ...) and periods (conferences, lectures, meetings, laboratory work, ...),
- by a high diversity of artefacts, tools, instruments, etc.
- by functionally different languages and sign systems (for daily communication between specialists, for publication, for popularisation, ...).
A “shopping culture”, roughly and intuitively speaking, can be appreciated with respect to

- people – individuals, groups, institutions, … - that embody it or some aspect of it in fulfilling specific tasks and roles (the customers, the vendors, the assistants, the cashiers, the guards, the deliverymen, …);

- routine activities that compose the social practice of shopping (customer activities, vendor activities, commercial service activities, customer protection activities, …);

- places and periods which not only locate the different routine activities of shopping but that also constrain them (shopping places, shopping periods, …)

- goods and services that constitute the value horizon of a shopping culture (goods, money, aids, counsels, laws, …)

- experiences, habitudes and traditions that structure specific shopping genres

- languages and communication means between the different agents involved in a shopping activity.
Central characteristics of the Lebenswelt (life world) of any type of social actor:

- collectivity of agents: individuals, groups, organisations, … formalized under the heading of **social categories**;
- common social activities and practices formalised in the form of **social institutions**;
- common places and territories formalized as different acknowledged types of **social space**;
- common languages formalized as **social language forms** (natural language, spoken language, media language…);
- common past, future, actuality rhythms, … formalized and controlled as **social forms of temporality**;
- objects and artefacts as goods and services formalized as **social value objects**.
3rd topic

- The Lebenswelt (life world) of a social actor -
The life world of social actors such as the above mentioned groups is typically composed by a set of “entities”:

- agents (people, individuals, groups, organisations, …) playing one or more roles in the life of a social actor;

- objects, artefacts, that have their specific functions and roles in the life of a social actor;

- (routine) activities that compose the life of a social actor;

- territories and places that locate the different agitations of a social actor;

- moments and periods that punctuate the agitations of a social actor;

- languages that are used for communicating and “speaking” appropriately with or within a social actor.
Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

- people playing one or more roles in the life of a social actor. Any social actor is composed of, more generally speaking, agents who possess a more or less determined status and function (i.e. a social competence) in the life of the social actor. The notion of “agent” recovers not only individuals and groups, but any animate entity, any personification (of abstract and/or imagined entities), any (imagined, technical, …) simulation of an animate agent, etc. Social roles composing an actor represent the agent network structure or configuration of the actor:

  ✓ parents, children, relatives, … are typical role attributions of people composing the specific agent structure of the “inner” reality of the family actor;

  ✓ but there are also a plenty of typical agent networks via which the family actor defines its place within a society of social actors: daily life, education, community, work, leisure, public administration, …
Example: the Lebenswelt of the social actor “family”

- **(routine) activities** that compose the life of a social actor. The routine activities of a social actor aim at solving specific problems (needs, desires, interests, …) of the actor. They constitute the texture of **social practices** more or less typical to a given actor. For instance, social practices in the life of the family actor are:

  ✓ practices that compose the daily **life agenda** (hygiene, household, rest, shopping, meal, …);

  ✓ educational as well as social and cultural **acculturation** activities especially of children;

  ✓ **social reproduction** activities essential for the maintenance and evolution of the family actor;

  ✓ **leisure** activities that regularly assists other types of activities: acculturation, social reproduction, …

  ✓ **activities belonging to the intimate life** of the members of the family actor

Peter Stockinger: Semiotics of culture and communication (Paris, 2005)
Example: the Lebenswelt of the social actor “family”

- objects and artefacts that have their specific functions and roles in the life of a social actor. There exist, once more, a high diversity of such objects and artefacts that intrinsically belong and structure the social reality of the family actor:

  ✓ symbolically more or less charged tools and instruments belonging to the daily life agenda of the family actor (hygiene, meal, shopping, household, …);

  ✓ symbolically highly charged objects and artefacts composing the historical heritage of the family actor (letters, photos, post cards, all sorts of objects passed from one generation to another, …) documenting especially the actor’s self-representation of history, of its origins and its historical destiny;

  ✓ all sorts of objects and tools that belong to the interaction realm between the family actor and the relevant outer environment: education, community, neighbourhood; …
Example: the Lebenswelt of the social actor “family”

- **moments** and **periods** that punctuate the agitations of a social actor. Like the social reality of any other actor, also the social reality of the family actor is characterised by a **rhythmic texture** which is highly **repetitive** and **routine**.

Moments that compose the **social temporality** of the family actor can be identified with respect to the social practices:

- the rhythmic structure of the daily life agenda composed by the typical routine activities around the clock;

- the rhythmic structure of commemorations, celebrations, etc. (= historical dimension of the actor);

- the repetitive moments in the social reproduction of the family actor in form of **invitations, dinners, parties, public consumptions of cultural goods**;

- the repetitive moments concerning especially the activities of core members of the actor: education, intimate practices, …
Example: the Lebenswelt of the social actor “family”

- territories and places that structure the social spatiality more or less typical to the family actor. Like the activities of all other social actors, also these of the family actor are spatially situated in appropriate territories where they evolve:
  - places organising the interactions between the core members of the family actor: private and intimate sphere
  - places specialised in the reception of others
  - places localising the agitations of the members of the family in the outer world: working places, social reproduction, leisure, …
Example: the Lebenswelt of the social actor “family”

- **signs and sign systems** that are used for communicating and “speaking” appropriately with or within a social actor. People (parents, children, relatives, “spectators”, “visitors”, ...) composing the social actor “family” possess communication means in order to organise and control their Lebenswelt, to speak about it and to speak about it with respect or in interaction with other Lebenswelten. There are, for instance:

  ✓ parents/children languages

  ✓ intimate languages,

  ✓ languages for formal or informal social encounters,

  ✓ “administrative languages”,

  ✓ ...