CULTURE: PANACEA OR PROBLEM?

Eric R. Wolf

Cultures are not integral wholes carried by social isolates. We must distinguish between reality culture and ideology-making, and recognize that the creation or dismantling of cultures always goes on within extensive social fields, structured by the dominant modes of production. It is suggested that ideology-making derives from the prevalent mode of production and is entailed in its operations.

Just before the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in December 1980, the New York Times asked me to discuss the condition of anthropology and anthropologists. In the piece I wrote (Wolf 1980) I talked about the split between materialists and mentalists and suggested that the proliferation and severance of specializations within the discipline had called into question the old culture concept, both as the unique possession of humankind and as the distinct, internally coherent and transgenerational repertoire of artifacts and customs characteristic of any given society or culture-bearing population. I tried to say that anthropology was alive, even though unanimity on the old culture concept had fallen apart. Maybe it was the cartoon drawn by the Times's artist, showing a man holding a mask over his face, that exacerbated the anxieties of the readers, but I soon began to get mail from friends extolling the enduring beauty and virtue of the concept in the face of what they considered my insensitive attack. Then, at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Los Angeles, Kent Flannery gave a finely-honed and humorous lecture (Flannery 1982) in which he portrayed the fate of an archaeological old-timer—and a true believer in the culture concept—who had been fired by his department because Wolf had said that the concept no longer constituted the cutting edge of anthropological endeavor. Speaking through his laid-off old-timer, Flannery argued that only by relying on the culture concept was the archaeologist enabled to understand the connections obtaining among all the artifacts dug up at a site.

Yet, surely, no archaeologist would stop at saying that the tool kits, coprolites, and ceremonial wands found at a given site are all equally held together by “culture”; he would want to know just what kinds of relations obtained among these elements. If he found an Iroquois site on the Niagara frontier mostly stocked with artifacts of European manufacture, he would not stop at saying that these artifacts were evidence of contact between cultures; he would surely be interested in identifying the circumstances that could account for the distribution of artifacts at that site. If he studied the sudden transformation of a riverine cultivating population of the Upper Republican archaeological horizon into a fully-fledged population of horse pastoralists of the Plains Indian type, he would most certainly not stop at saying that what he had found was a case of culture change; he would want to know as much as possible about the causes and courses of that transformation. He would be led to inquire into the economic and political forces that turned the Upper Republicans into agents of Europe-initiated commerce and fur trading, and he would have to take note of the ways

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in which these involvements did not merely impinge upon Upper Republican culture from the outside, but transformed and changed it from within. Thus the culture concept is no panacea—it is, if anything, but a starting point of inquiry. Its value is methodological: "look for connections!" But it still takes work and thought to discover what these connections may be and, indeed, if any connections exist. Thus the culture concept can serve us well at the beginning of our inquiries. But it is not a useful prescription for a millenarian movement, and we would be most vulnerable were we to treat it as such.

I am surely not the first to raise doubts concerning the nature of cultural integration. Writing in the 1930s, Pitirim Sorokin contrasted "causal-functional integration" with logico-aesthetic integration (Sorokin 1967), a distinction Clifford Geertz laid hold of to discuss ritual and social change in Java (1957). In 1950, Alfred Kroeber drew a distinction between what he called reality culture and value culture (Kroeber 1952:152–166). But the contrast between practical reason and value culture is older than that; it stems from the concerns of the neo-Kantians in early nineteenth-century Germany, concerns that connect Kroeber and Sorokin with such predecessors as Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, and Max Weber. Even Julian Steward drew a distinction between the primary features of a culture, directly connected with its ecology, and the secondary features allowed free play in analysis, free because not directly anchored in ecological reality. None of these discriminations and distinctions, however, at that time affected the central tenet that a culture constituted the integral possession of a people, organized into a coherent and bounded society. Functionalism, both of the Malinowskian and the Radcliffe-Brownian variety, assumed internal coherence through linkages within an organic whole or a common structural social architecture, and a clear boundary of such an organic whole or social edifice towards the outside. Even Edmund Leach's quite revolutionary depiction of Kachin society as an alternation of gumsa and gumlao modes of organization (1954) still envisaged this alternation as changes of phase within a single bounded system, Kachin society.

The comparative method still consisted in the juxtaposition of single cases—Hopi, Navaho, Trobriand, Kachin, Nuer. Cultural ecology, too, emphasized the functional linkages within a single case, arranging societies in developmental or evolutionary sequences, as in Steward's study of the cultural ecology of the Southwest or Marshall Sahlins's study of social stratification in Polynesia. The comparative anthropologists who used the Human Relations Area File or similar instruments also compared separate and isolated cases, taking care not to contaminate their samples through possible contact and diffusion. Finally, anthropologists interested in unravelling symbolic systems also took the position that each separable culture constituted a symbolic universe unto itself. (The example of Claude Lévi-Strauss who inspired much of the work on symbolism, however, might have given them pause, for Lévi-Strauss paid no heed to social and cultural boundaries in tracing the dialectic of myth.) There was a measure of acknowledgment that communities in modern societies had historically come to form parts of larger totalities or wholes, but the societies and cultures of primitives—savages and barbarians—were thought to have formed "back of history," and were seen as existing and persisting outside the flow of historical change. Thus they could be understood still as distinctive, separable, bounded, isolated—one people, one society, one culture.

Yet the notion of the static isolate primitive can be sustained only as long as one abuses any interest in history. Such an attitude of willful ignorance—or naiveté, as Max Gluckman called it (1964), with approval—imputes an autonomy or unity to your subject matter, and thus delimits and preserves your area of study. It also saves you from the possible realization that what you are looking at may not be what it seems. For example, even a little pinch of history would make the society and culture we call Iroquois more problematic and less securely grounded than it has been in our anthropology books. In 1657 the Senecas were said to "contain more foreigners than natives of the country"; in 1659 Lalemant said of the Five Nations that "these are, for the most part, only an aggregation of different tribes whom they have conquered." In 1668 the Oneidas were estimated as two-thirds Algonkin and Huron. The Jesuits complained that their knowledge of Iroquoian did not allow them to preach the gospel to these multitudinous newcomers (Quain 1937:246–247). Or what shall we say of the Ojibwā when, as Harold Hickerson has shown (1962, 1970), there were no such people before the advent of the fur trade, but that an Ojibwā identity developed only gradually as local Algonkian-speaking lineages slowly coalesced on their trek to the west, to form larger
groupings whom the French called Salteurs or Ojibwë, after one local group known as the Uchibus. Similarly, the Midewiwin cult or Grand Medicine Society associated with the Ojibwë (but also reaching beyond them) unfolded as such groups of varied origins aggregated in multi-lineage villages. It should be of note, too, that the famous midë shell that served to concentrate and project magical power is but an Indian Ocean cowrie, probably introduced through the good offices of the Hudson’s Bay Company. The aggregation of various populations around the Great Lakes had a great deal to do with the fur trade; and the transformation of food collectors and food producers in and around the Great Plains into horse-pastoralists owed as much to the demand for pemmican in the Saskatchewan fur trade, to the provision of buffalo hides and tongues to the merchants of St. Louis, and to slave-trading and slave-raiding as it did to the advent of horse and gun. Among the Blackfoot, as Oscar Lewis has shown (1942), the production of hides and pemmican intensified buffalo hunting, horse-raiding, polygyny, and the development of graded associations. The point is not that North Americans did not produce distinctive cultural materials of their own; the point is that they did so under the pressure of circumstances and constraints of new demands and markets, and new political configurations.

Much the same point can be made about Africa. There the development of the slave trade gave rise to politics and to enterprise that owed both origins and distinctive characteristics to their function in the trade. I am not saying that political development and entrepreneurship in Africa had to await the advent of the Europeans—not at all. There existed complex political arrangements and trading networks that facilitated the flow of goods—certainly gold and very large numbers of slaves—from the zone of the tropical forest to the shores of the Mediterranean and of the Indian Ocean. The advent of the Europeans on the coasts of Western Africa channelled some of these flows towards the Atlantic. It should be noted, however, that the Atlantic slave trade left the capture, transport, and maintenance of slaves largely to local political and economic entities—“the trade in slaves,” wrote the French factor Jean Barbot in 1732, “is a business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants” (quoted in Boahen [1971:317]). The Europeans furnished the commodities most desired by the African elites—fine cloth made in India, Brazilian tobacco, rum, metal, and guns—above all guns, guns by the hundreds of thousands annually (Inikori 1977; Richards 1980). Thus we get the emergence of “gunpowder” polities. Asante had its origins among Twi-speaking matrilineages that began to acquire guns in the mid-seventeenth century and were strong enough by 1699 to replace other rivals in dealings with the Europeans. Similar processes underlie the rise to dominance of Oyo, Dahomey, and the city-states of the Niger Delta. Further south, in the Congo, the advent of Portuguese officials, traders and slavers unleashed a series of political upheavals that successively mobilized slave-raiding and slave-trading elites all across Central Africa up to the Zambezi in the east, creating new polities and entirely new ethnic formations in their path. Nyamwezi, Chikunda, Cewa, Macanga, Nsenga, Maseningire, Anakista, Ovimbale, Bemba—all names that denote newly emergent ethnicities, compounded out of previously existing units, just as in the shatter belt between Portuguese and Boers in Southeastern Africa there developed a Zulu macro-cluster under a Mthethwa nucleus; a Matabele macro-cluster, consisting of Tswana, Sotho, and people across the Limpopo, under the leadership of the Nguni Komale clan; a Swazi macro-cluster compounded out of Nguni and Sotho under Dlamini leadership; a Ngwato cluster compounded out of elements of Western Sotho, Tswana, Northern Sotho, Shona, Rotse, Kubam, Subia, Herero, and Bantuized San. A large literature in anthropology has used such entities either to construct typologies of African political systems or to stack them as independent steps in an evolutionary sequence, as if they were static, timeless, and independent of any historical process. However, they will be better understood as effects and causes, agents and victims of processes of political and economic expansion, directly connected with the European presence in Africa.

Some years ago Morton Fried (1966) argued that “tribal groups did not constitute any kind of original unit,” and Elman Service (1968) responded by going further and abolishing bands as well. But I am trying to convey more than this—I am arguing here that in a majority of cases the entities studied by anthropologists owe their development to processes that originate outside them and reach well beyond them, that they owe their crystallization to these processes, take part in them, and affect them in their turn. All such designations as Ojibwë, Iroquois, Chipeweyan, Assiniboin,
Crow, Blackfoot, Zulu, Tswana took shape in a larger social and cultural field that included voyageurs, cavalry, slave traders, prime merchants, Jesuits, Hudson’s Bay factors, and others. The “cultunit” of anthropology—to use Raoul Naroll’s (1964) Orwellian term—did not precede the expansion of commerce and capitalism; they arose and differentiated in the course of it (Wolf 1982). They develop not as independent systems, standing in relations of inputs and outputs to their environments; they are themselves what Kenneth Boulding once called “through-puts.”

Such considerations will recall for you the approach of the diffusionists or culture historians, whose intellectual corpse was thought to have been safely interred by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. If the old bones now threaten to walk again, it is because the diffusionists saw cultural integration as a problem, and not as an assumption. I think they were correct in their distrust, if not in their manner of looking for explanations. They emphasized cultural forms; but with notable exceptions (such as Alexander Lesser) they failed to emphasize the ways in which people relate themselves to one another—ecologically, economically, socially, politically, and ideologically—through the use of forms.

Perhaps we should once again adopt their distrust of the automatic or organic coherence of culture, and see a culture, any culture, in Kroeber’s words, as “an accommodation of discrete parts, largely inflowing parts, into a more or less workable fit” (1948:287). But we shall do well to understand both the formation of discrete cultural sets as well as their accommodation as conditioned by specifiable ecological, political-economic, and ideological processes. Put another way, neither societies nor cultures should be seen as givens, integrated by some inner essence, organizational mainspring, or master plan. Rather, cultural sets, and sets of sets, are continuously in construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, under the impact of multiple processes operative over wide fields of social and cultural connections.

These processes and these connections are ecological, economic, social, political; they also involve thought and communication. Here the distinction between reality culture and value culture asserts itself—the dimension of the “practical” and “rationalization,” to use Robert Lowie’s (1937:138–139) terms. In a similar vein, Maurice Bloch (1977) has written about the contrast between communication used in the organization of practical activities and ritual communication aimed at transmitting a particular view of the proper ordering of the universe. There is the level of practical knowledge and activity—digging, planting, harvesting, cooking, eating—and there is the level of insistent significations bestowed on these activities—relations of gender, patterns of conduct towards the spirits of plot and house, categories of food you may eat or not eat—to connote symbolic implications. The activity through which such significations are made to dovetail with the praxis they signify is ideology-making, a distinctive human process.

Formally, ideology-making involves the institutionalization of codes, channels, messages, senders, audiences, and interpretations. Variation in these elements markedly vary the nature of communication flows, as demonstrated by S. N. Eisenstadt (1965) in his study of differences in communication among Israeli immigrant groups of different ethnic origins and social structures. Technically, ideology-making involves overcoding (Eco 1976:133–135), an insistent imposition of connotations or metaphors upon denotations. Geertz has written (1973:211) that

the power of a metaphor derives precisely from the interplay between the discordant meanings it symbolically coheres into a unitary conceptual framework and from the degree to which that coercion is successful in overcoming the psychic resistance such semantic tension inevitably generates in anyone in a position to perceive it.

That coercion involves the reduction of the potential fan of connotations to a few licensed imperative meanings. In that sense, ideology-making is a form of appropriation, alienation, theft. Myth, as Roland Barthes put it (1972:131), is “stolen language.” What this form of communication institutes—in art, music, philosophy, ritual, myth, science—is redundancy, in order to maximize the number of domains, contexts, or occasions that proclaim the same insistent fiction. Yet this process is clearly not merely linguistic, artistic, or psychological; it is also a matter of power, power in the immediate social sense in which human beings “realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others,” to speak with Max Weber (1946:180), but even power in the much wider, ecological sense suggested by Richard N. Adams (1975:9–20)—power wielded in order to structure
and limit the environment of a population so that some forms of action become unthinkable and impossible.

The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of cultural sets also involve the construction and destruction of ideologies. And ideological relations—like ecological, economic, social, political relations—also transcend boundaries. Thus the sacred paths of the ancestors and sacred heroes among Australian aborigines were intergroup and intertribal in character. The celebrations associated with the paths and sacred way-stations take place as much between groups as within groups—and the same statement can be made about most primitive social formations. Lévi-Strauss has spoken of totemic universalization that at one and the same time differentiates people by descent, and yet “breaks down tribal frontiers and creates the rudiments of an international society” (1966:167).

Once we are in the realm of complex social formations, we use the term “civilization” to designate wide-ranging cultural interaction zones, characterized by the elaboration and pyramiding of significations and connotations.

In place of separate and static, clearly bounded units, therefore, we must now deal with fields of relationships within which cultural sets are put together and dismantled. This raises the question, however, of how we are going to grasp these fields of activity, the question of what sort of armamentarium is available to begin this admittedly difficult task.

One’s answer depends on what Marvin Harris would call one’s epistemology. For myself, I share Harris’s sense that there is a real world out there that is not a figment of our imagination; that the degree of correspondence between the ideas in our heads and reality matters—to paraphrase Bertrand Russell: “it had better”; and that human life depends on how humans engage the reality of nature. I do not think, however, that it is all a matter of protein capture and the whelping of human litters. We do not attack reality only with tools and teeth, we also grasp it with the forceps of the mind—and we do so socially, in social interaction and cultural communication with our fellows and enemies. I think that this is what attracts me to Karl Marx and the storehouse of Marxian ideas, especially to Marx’s notion of the social relations of production.

Marx has been everything to everybody, and is understood sometimes as a prophet of the future, and other times as a lord of misrule and chaos. There has been much discussion of just what he meant by “production” and “the mode of production,” terms that often strike the modern ear with an archaic ring, much as Hegel’s Geist or Kant’s categorical imperative. There is a vast literature on this, and I shall merely stress what I consider to be the key element in the discussion: I think that it is that humans engage the natural world not only through forces of production—tools, techniques, organization, and the organization of work—but also through strategic social relations that govern the mobilization of social labor. To quote: “In the process of production, human beings work not only upon nature, but also upon one another. They enter into definite connections and relations to one another, and only within these social connections and relations does their effective influence upon nature operate” (Marx, quoted in Colletti [1973:226–227]). The engagement of the natural world is social—it always involves human beings in relation to one another; and that engagement, as well as these relations, always involve, simultaneously, head and hand. But these relations are not evident on the surface of things; they must be analyzed out.

We must indeed seek adequate descriptions of social interaction and cultural forms, but such description—even “thick description” or, alternatively, “descriptive integration”—will not yield an understanding of the strategic relationships that underlie interaction and cultural construction. At the same time we shall look in vain for a notion of social interaction in Marx, or for a theory of culture. The first we owe to the sociologists, the second to anthropologists. Marx read a good deal of ethnography, but what he sought was not cultural detail but the basic principles of variation upon which human life is built up. Is there a way in which we can utilize his insights into how social labor is mobilized in the transformation of nature to gain a better understanding of the vectors of cultural construction?

What would be the major ways of mobilizing social labor? If we distinguish—quite heuristically, for the moment (Wolf 1981, 1982)—among the mobilization of social labor ordered by kinship, the mobilization of social labor ordered by tributary relationships, and a capitalist mode of mobilizing social labor, we can see that this trinity is characterized by important differences. We can treat the kinship-ordered constellations as a family of constellations—built up, as Lévi-Strauss noted,
upon the separations institutionalized by the incest taboo and upon the conjugations of opposite groups. In The Elementary Structures of Kinship Lévi-Strauss (1969) went on to show how, given these basic principles, kinship systems could be treated as transformations of one another. Now if, with the British social anthropologists, we think of kinship as entailing claims to resources and services, then we have here a family of social constellations in which the kinship-ordering of people entails the mobilization of social labor.

The tributary mode of mobilizing social labor is, in turn, governed by social relations in which the surplus is pressed out of the primary producers and passed on to a tribute-taking elite. The mode is governed by power and its operations are affected by the degree to which power is concentrated or dispersed. Once again, the various constellations built up upon tribute-rendering can be treated as a family, whose mutual transformations have been examined, for example, by Jonathan Friedman in his book on the evolution of “Asiatic” social formations (1979).

Finally, under capitalist relations of mobilizing social labor, as Marx showed, capitalists—owners of means of production—buy the labor power of workers who have been freed, cut loose from any means of production of their own, and rendered dependent upon wages for their subsistence. Once again there is variability among capitalist social formations or constellations, but the Marxian model derives its explanatory power from its ability to understand them as transformations of each other.

These modes of mobilizing social labor are not only ecological, however—ecological in the sense of governing the human relation with nature through social organization. They also impart a characteristic directionality, a vectorial force to the formation and propagation of ideas. Thus, the operations of the kin-ordered mode generate claims to resources and services, and apportion these resources and services among rival claimants within and between groups. Yet descent and affinity, heirship and alliance, cannot be postulated without recourse to symbolic understandings of what binds or distinguishes bodies of kin, or binds and distinguishes categories of kinsmen and affines. At the root of kinship lies the incest taboo, a “phenomenon which has the distinctive characteristics of both nature and its theoretical contradiction, culture” (Lévi-Strauss 1969:11). The distinction between those whom you may marry and those whom you may not marry entails notions of descent, dogmas of “common substance” (Leach 1961:19), as well as notions of distinctions that must be overcome in alliance through the extension and management of reciprocities.

If the kin-ordered mode depends vitally on symbolic understandings of who is and who is not kin, the tributary mode depends on the exercise of power. That power depends in turn, however, upon notions of who may take from whom. The exercise of power entails symbolic distinctions between tribute-takers and tribute-payers, as well as symbolic understandings of what binds the two together. Characteristically, in such systems the tribute-taking elite asserts special prerogatives because of their imaginary attributes—“blue blood,” “white bone,” descent from the gods—and assigns to those attributes a key role in upholding the hierarchy of nature, whether that hierarchy is imagined as The Great Chain of Being, the Structure of Heaven, or the superimposed purities and impurities of Caste. Capitalist relations, in their turn, are intertwined with notions of the free individual able and willing to enter into contractual relations with others. These notions of the individual as free agent are then conjugated variously in the notion of the social contract, of society as the outcome of interaction among egos and alters, of the market of commodities and ideas, or of the political arena as constituted by the ongoing plebiscite of individual voters.

In these concepts and in the bodies of signification associated with them we note a common phenomenon, the displacement or projection of the real contradiction underlying each mode upon an imaginary screen of belief and ritual. Symbolic thought substitutes for the real contradictions an imaginary universe. Kin-ordering may allocate claims by descent and affinity, but in the very process raises the oppositions and contradictions of nature and culture, gender and age, the commonalities of shared substance and the hostilities of “substantial” differences. These oppositions and contradictions fuel myth, but—as Lévi-Strauss has argued—myth cannot overcome the contradictions if, as it happens, the contradictions are real. In the tributary mode relations of power govern in the real world, but imaginary relations of hierarchy structure the imaginary realm of world order. Such hierarchical world orders are portrayed in the Hindu Ramayana; in the Chinese notion of appropriate relations among people, emperor, and Heaven; in the Aztec concept of rulership that entitles the
rulers to sacrifice the people in order to sustain the gods with human hearts. At the same time, these models of rulership are never wholly dominant. Alternative models arise to challenge the hegemonic world view in every case—bhakti devotional models in India; millenarian visions carried by secret societies in China; or even the possibility adumbrated in the founding Aztec myth that if kings and nobles fail to win the right to rule through defeat in their battle with Atzcapotzalco, their subjects would have the legitimate right to sacrifice and eat them, instead of the other way round. The hierarchical models generated by the tributary mode thus always produce alternative models and visions. Yet these alternatives come to operate within the same topology of ideation as the model they react against. All of them shift their central concern from the real nexus of power to concern with justice or “right living,” from the workings of the mode of production to a concern with the legitimacy and rightness of human thought and behavior. They substitute for political economy a “moral economy” (Thompson 1971), an ideological mode of portraying the human lot. Under the aegis of capitalist relations the fiction that human laborpower is a commodity like any other and produced in order to be sold in labor markets creates the ideational vector of “commodity fetishism.” Individuals are conceptualized as vendors of goods, ideas, and votes, and society is understood as a contract maintained by the social strategies of individuals, firms, or social groups.

In this perspective, much of what anthropologists have called culture is “ideology-in-the-making,” “rationalizations,” developed to impart to the practical existence of everyday life an imaginary directionality, a fictitious resolution. If we adopt such a perspective, however, we shall be forced to reconsider and reformulate our understanding of culture. Cultural construction, reconstruction, and destruction are ongoing processes, but they always take place within larger historical fields or arenas. These arenas are shaped, in their turn, by the operation of modes of mobilizing social labor and by the conflicts these generate internally and externally, within and between social constellations. In these operations and in the conflicts to which they give rise ideology-making and ideology-unmaking play a vital part. Cultural forms and sets of forms are put to play in this process; but to understand their significance we must go beyond the level of their ostensible meanings. We must come to understand them as human constructions built up to embody the forces generated by the underlying mode of mobilizing social labor. They are not static and given for all times; embodying the tensions of the regnant mode, they are subject to a continuous process of social ordering and dismemberment.

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