2 Compromise and closure: a theory of social dynamics

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This chapter introduces the main conceptual framework that will allow an analysis of modern state formation and the politicisation of ethnicity 'from the outside', i.e. without using a terminology already coloured by the basic principles of the contemporary world divided into nation-states. Anthropological theory might be the best starting point to develop such a 'view from afar', because its main focus has traditionally been state-less and pre-modern societies.

This is not to say that anthropological theory has not been deeply influenced by the master narrative of nationalism or by modes of thinking about statehood derived from experiences with the nation-state. In fact, anthropology's terminological totem, the concept of culture, bears a family resemblance to the idea of nation as a culturally homogeneous, clearly bound unit persisting over time (Wimmer 1996a). But still, the close acquaintance with non-modern forms of identity politics has made it easier for anthropology to move away from such essentialising and reifying notions of culture and gradually to develop a theoretical framework within which another reading of social processes became possible. In what follows, I will first discuss the traditional anthropological notion of culture, then go on to briefly describe its main analytical problems, and finally outline a theory of cultural and social processes based on the new consensus that has emerged in post-classical anthropology over the last two decades.

The success of 'culture': anthropological unease

Anthropology's traditional notion of culture as a complex, integrated whole has never been more popular outside the academic world than at present. Samuel Huntington's (1993) well-known vision of a 'clash of civilisations' after the end of the Cold War is just one best-selling book that relies on a popularised version of the classical notion of culture. Another bestseller from America is Fukuyama's (1995) *Trust. The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. He tries to show that certain cultures,

notably those of the United States, Germany, Japan and South Korea, enable the formation of large-scale organisations based on trust among people who do not know each other. This in turn provides a necessary condition for sustained economic development. In this way, culture explains the economic success and failure of whole nations. Popularised anthropological notions of culture are equally *en vogue* in public discussions on how European societies should try to integrate newly arriving migrants from other continents and whether or not this will eventually lead to a 'multicultural' society. All contributors to this debate seem to share the basic understanding that the relation between cultures is the core issue, whether they perceive immigrants and their children as threatening Western civilisation like Trojan horses or whether they welcome newcomers as additional ingredients for the postmodern pot-pourri of diversity (see Wicker 1996).

Many of these interventions rely on the classical anthropological way of defining culture as a clearly defined unit, a historically lasting and integrated whole. Culture comprises all the non-biological aspects of the life of a group of people, ranging from their technology, social organisation and religion to their typical personality traits. These various cultural fields are integrated by a series of values and norms and so constitute a comprehensive, quasi-organic whole (cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). In their thoughts, feelings and plans of action, individuals more or less follow the rules prescribed by their respective culture. They are – figuratively speaking – the clay from which culture forms its creatures by enculturating and socialising them. From this perspective, the human world looks like a patchwork of clearly discernible cultures (cf. Malkki 1992).

A renaissance of this classical notion of culture can also be observed in the realm of the social sciences. Wolf Lepenies observed what he calls an 'anthropologisation of social sciences' (Lepenies 1996). Geertz's hermeneutical reformulation of the concept of culture serves, to give one example, as the evening star for a whole school of research navigating in the waters of social history (Burguière 1990; Burke 1992a; Groh 1992). In the history of science, to cite a second example, an anthropologisation of some strands of debate can also be seen (Elkana and Mendelsohn 1981). The same holds true for certain branches of management sciences, where Hofstede's book on cultural variations within a transnational company triggered a series of research projects (Hofstede 1991; Gamst and Helmers 1991), and for migration studies, although here the usefulness of anthropological concepts is contested, to say the least (see Radkte 1996).

Paradoxically, however, anthropologists seem to be very uneasy with the success of their terminological totem. Many distinguished anthropologists seriously worry about the path culture takes as soon as it leaves the gardens of anthropology (see Hannerz 1993a; Barth 1995; Kaschuba 1995). Some writers, notably Abu-Lughod (1991) or Fernandez (1994), are convinced that nowadays anthropologists should 'write against culture', as one widely cited paper of the former's is entitled. Instead of focusing on the cultural differences between 'us' and 'them', the singularity and immediate understandability of every person met during fieldwork should be emphasised, so the argument goes. In this way, notions of cultural difference can be overcome and the gulf separating 'them' from 'us' is bridged. The most radical writers in the postmodernist and constructivist school take all writing and talking on cultural differences as an attempt to 'essentialise others', as 'ethnicising or racialising differences' and so on. They think that it should be the future task of anthropology to understand the mechanisms of these discursive machineries in order to be able to undermine the political effects that they presumably entail. This radical position has already produced a countermovement by other anthropologists who feel that the discipline would do better to ride on the wave of its popularity while at the same time trying to move it in a different, less dangerous direction (Bruhmann 1999).

There are obvious political reasons for anthropologists' discomfort with the success of the classical concept of culture. On the one hand, when combined with the political project of nationalism, the idea that cultures are clearly discernible, bounded and integrated wholes becomes exclusionist and potentially dangerous for all those considered to belong to another culture. In fact, there is an interesting and largely forgotten historical relationship between nationalism and cultural anthropology (Wimmer 1996a). Both have common intellectual ancestors in Herder and other writers such as Gustav Klemm. It was Franz Boas who breathed the famous Herderian 'spirit of a people' into American anthropology from where it came back to inspire scholars on the Continent.

On the other hand, anthropology's unease with its own success is also due to the fact that it has in the meantime moved far away from the classical notion of culture.[1] In the last five decades, anthropological theory has step by step dismantled the traditional way of analysing culture and has developed alternative conceptual tools in order to understand the many forms of cultural practice that can be found around the globe. I shall limit

[1] Compare Gupta and Ferguson (1992); Welz (1994); Wicker (1996).

myself here to a discussion of four crucial critiques of the classical understanding of culture that have been formulated from different theoretical points of view and have given rise to various strands of anthropological thinking during the last decades.[2]

Four points of critique on 'culture' and a fifth on 'discourse'

The first point concerns the idea of cultural homogeneity that was implicit in the more theoretical statements of the classical writers themselves, if not in their ethnographic accounts. Intra-cultural variation characterises not only stratified societies with a clearly established division of labour (Barth 1989; Hannerz 1993b; compare in general, Archer 1988: 2ff.), but also so-called simple societies (Bricker 1975). The founding mothers and fathers of anthropology were of course well aware of this fact and pointed it out in several programmatic statements (cf. Bruhmann 1999), but the idea of a somehow homogeneous nature, a single *Gestalt* of each culture, prevented them from drawing the necessary theoretical conclusions. The functionalist overpainting of the classical concept of culture, as found in British social anthropology of the thirties as well as in the Redfield school of American cultural anthropology (itself heavily influenced by Radcliffe-Brown's writing), made a thorough analysis of intra-cultural diversity even more difficult, because it provided the previously rather vague notion of integration and cohesion with a solid theoretical foundation. Leach's study of the Kachin, Turner's work on the Ndembu and later ethnographic studies slowly undermined or, as one would say nowadays, deconstructed this notion of cultural homogeneity. The cultural territories on anthropology's imagined globe were dissolved in a raster of differently coloured points. The cultural world seen through contemporary anthropological eyes no longer resembles a picture by Modigliani, but rather one by Kokoschka.[3]

Secondly, the so-called critical anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s put the classical concept of culture on trial for ignoring those aspects

[2] This discussion will necessarily have to be selective, since almost every contribution to anthropological theory implies statements on the concept of culture. For overviews, see Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952); Keesing (1974); Service (1985, part 6); Clifford (1988); Alexander and Seidman (1990). In German-language literature, see the contributions of Kohl (1993); Stagl (1993); Drechsel (1984).

[3] This was even true for national cultures in Europe which lived through a century of politics of cultural homogenisation by central-state institutions such as school and army (*pace* Gellner 1983: 139f.). A whole series of studies on the national character has shown this, although they were originally designed to understand what elements of German, Italian or Japanese cultures made the respective populations prone to Fascism (Shweder 1979).

of the production of meaning that are closely related to power relations between women and men, old and young, rich and poor, patrons and clients or even whole societies within the world system. Especially in the 1970s, many anthropologists turned to the theory of ideology developed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser or to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, in order to understand how inequalities of power influence symbolic processes and the production of collective representations. The most radical exponents of this critical anthropology were convinced that the classical notion of culture had served as a terminological tool that helped legitimise (to use a term with wide currency at that time) colonial subjugation and exploitation.[4]

The third point refers to the theory of action implicit in the classical notion of culture. It somehow assumed that in their way of thinking, feeling and behaving, individuals follow the cultural rules that they learn during their socialisation process. Culture thus writes the script according to which individuals play their role on the stage of society. Critics like Maurice Bloch have called this the model of the oversocialised individual (Bloch 1985; 1991; 1993). Following the research tradition of Piaget, many studies in the last decade have indeed shown that universal cognitive development reaches a final stage, from which the cultural givens can be perceived as just one of several possibilities for thinking, feeling and doing things.[5]

Anthropological research has shown the limits of the model of the oversocialised individual for the field of human behaviour. The new ethnographic realism, such as developed by British anthropologists of the 1950s in 'situational analysis' and the presentation of 'social dramas', showed in study after study that the observable behaviour of real-life individuals very often did not correspond to the cultural rules (Fortes 1949; Leach 1954; Turner 1957). Although eminent authors of the classical period, such as Malinowski, had repeatedly noted it, they did not reflect upon the discrepancy between rules and actual behaviour in their theoretical writings. Starting from these early studies and crossing the territory of so-called processual anthropology[6] delineated by the early Frederik Barth, Jeremy Boissevain and others, this line of anthropological

[4] For the role of Marxist theory of ideology in anthropology see Asad (1979); Gendreau (1979). The work of Gramsci was especially well received in British and American anthropology (Harris 1992). Apart from rather rudimentary models of ideology as a mechanism of veiling reality, some more sophisticated approaches were developed, notably by Godelier (1984, ch. 3) and Donham (1990, ch. 3).

[5] But see the debates in Schöfthaler and Goldschmidt (1984).

[6] For reviews, see Whitten and Whitten (1972) with regard to social organisation, Vincent (1978) with regard to political strategies and Barlett (1980) with regard to economic behaviour.

discourse has since established itself in the interdisciplinary field of rational choice analysis, where it meets with political science and, of course, with neoclassical economics (see e.g. Schweizer and White 1998).

The fourth point of critique follows from the third. If thinking, feeling and acting are completely shaped by cultural rules, then there is no room for cultural dynamics. This problem has, of course, been accentuated by the functionalist colouring of the traditional notion of culture from the 1920s and 1930s onwards. Cultures can, therefore, only be changed by contact with other cultures. Correspondingly, these processes have been the focus of so-called studies on acculturation in American cultural anthropology or of research on culture contact in British anthropology. These studies were limited to descriptions of the colonial encounter, however, and did not take into account the dynamic character of every cultural order (cf. Moore 1987) even outside situations of colonial subjugation.[7]

To sum up: the classical notion of culture is confronted with four principal theoretical and methodological problems. It does not give an answer to the problem of intra-cultural variation; it cannot help to understand the relation between power and meaning; its concept of human action is largely inadequate; and it does not offer an adequate tool to analyse processes of cultural and social change.

Since the Second World War, anthropology has slowly moved away from a notion of culture as an integrated whole.[8] The focus has now shifted to questions of individual and subcultural variability, to process and the strategic adaptability of cultural practice.[9] Discourse has replaced culture as the master term in much contemporary anthropological writing. Following Foucault and other so-called post-structuralist writers, anthropology tries to understand how in a certain place – a village, a railway station, a neighbourhood – multiple discourses criss-cross each other, overlap, develop into bundles of meaning, dissolve again and disappear. Local and global discourses interact, women pursue different

[7] A history of acculturation theory and its critiques can be found in Wimmer (1995d, ch. 3).

[8] A notable exception is Clifford Geertz, who restated the classical concept in hermeneutical terms, following Dilthey and Ricoeur (Geertz 1973). He continues the tradition of classical American cultural anthropology, in so far as he shares its cultural relativism, the notion of cultural homogeneity, a systematic blindness to questions of power and dominance, and the model of the oversocialised individual (compare the critiques of Geertz's paper on the Balinese cockfight by Roseberry 1982; Shankman 1984; Crapanzano 1986; Watson 1989).

[9] This new consensus is documented, for instance, in the collection *Assessing Cultural Anthropology* edited by Robert Borofsky (1994). As far as German-language social anthropology is concerned, the contributions by Kaschuba (1995), Wicker (1996) and Wimmer (1996c) should be mentioned.

discursive strategies to men, colonial discourses are contested by counter-colonial ones, ethnographers develop their distinctive discourse, while natives have their own. Notions of multiplicity, hybridity, creolisation and multivocality have replaced the idea of cultural homogeneity and integration (cf. Vertovec and Rogers 1998: 7–14); discourses are now seen as the source and focus of an all-pervasive power, creating and devouring worlds of meaning; emergence, construction and process have replaced stability, functional equilibrium and givenness.

The emergence and disappearance of these different discourses, the dynamic of their mutual displacement, is not, however, the object of much analytical rigour. As the social world is synonymous with the coming and going of discourses (see Foucault 1978: 211), notions of economic relations, of social structure, of hierarchies of power etc. are reduced to *discourses* on economic, social and political relations. Thus, there is no way of determining why one specific construction of the world permeates a certain group and not another, why it is being changed, why it disappears or reappears in another context (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1987, ch. 4). The original project of a comparative, and thus theory-led, anthropology is lost from sight (Foucault 1977: 102ff.). Instead, monograph after monograph documents how the people of this Pacific atoll or that Chinese village become instruments of the evolution of one or other discourse (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Lindstrom 1990; Pemberton 1994; Yang 1994). Moving towards Foucault's famous state of 'happy positivism' (1991: 44), the scientific programme of anthropology is reduced to the 'ethnography of the particular' and there is a risk of ending up with the kind of butterfly-collection anthropology that dominated the discipline before the advent of functionalist anthropology and its notion of culture.

A look at a recent book of James Clifford (1997) makes clear where this will lead. The postmodern anthropologist travels from place to place, observes how his own, learned discourse meets the many voices of others in a lost village of Alaska (Fort Ross), in a heritage park in California, in Sigmund Freud's house in London, in a subway of New York or during academic encounters in Honolulu. With considerable skill and elegance, Clifford turns his kaleidoscope, and the fascinated readers see discursive bits and pieces assemble and disperse in ever-changing arrangements of paradoxes, illusions and contradictions. However, the master tells us that we should not ask why we see precisely one discursive formation in this place but not another, because these questions already imply privileging the point of view of the anthropologist and risk reifying or essentialising others. The world is no longer understandable in these terms, since

everything has become fuzzy, interconnected, ever-changing. Nowadays, meanings are moving around the globe, and they do this so fast that they can no longer be pinned down on the drawing-board of anthropological analysis (see Geertz 1998). Thus, the anthropologist has to accompany them in travelling round the globalised world. He runs after a discursive butterfly here, follows the washed-out traces of meaning there, stumbles over an analytical paradox over there. What is left of all these adventures in the wonderland of discursive encounters is an admirably elegant travel prose that enchants even the most hard-boiled modernist reader.

However, disenchantment quickly follows, and the hangover from drinking too many glasses at too many tables is considerable. Postmodern anthropology's solution to the four problems of the classical concept of culture comes at too high a price, namely the abandonment of analytical rigour and the burial of the comparative and scientific project altogether. Good literature is no replacement for bad science. What is needed are conceptual tools that can overcome the difficulties of the classical notion of culture without having to give up the scientific aims of classical anthropology altogether. Such a reformulation should be able to integrate the insights gained by processual anthropology, critical anthropology and other currents of the last four decades. In what follows, I would like to present the sketch of a theory, which I think moves in the direction just outlined. At the heart of this theoretical outline stands the notion of culture as compromise that I have developed in a number of recent publications (cf. 1995a; 1996c). I will discuss this concept in some detail in the next section and will then go on and try to show that it is indeed a useful tool in giving an answer to the problems of variation, of power and of cultural change.

Culture as compromise

Culture is understood as an open and unstable process of the negotiation of meaning. Three closely related aspects need to be discussed in order to clarify this notion: first, the internalised culture of an individual as a precondition for this negotiating process, because portraying human beings as the pre-cultural, rational men, so central to Enlightenment philosophy and to much contemporary economics, must obviously be avoided; secondly, the generally binding world-view resulting from this process; and thirdly, the cultural practices that mark the boundaries of the social group within which the negotiating process took place.

Habitus

For the analysis of the internalised culture, I shall use Pierre Bourdieu's term 'habitus'. It portrays human beings as strategically competent actors, and thus modifies the image of the oversocialised individual of classical anthropology. Bourdieu presupposes an unequal distribution of economic, political and cultural resources, in other words a social structure. Individuals internalise their position in this structure by gradually developing a habitus tailored to this position. By habitus, Bourdieu understands a system of predispositions that determine action, perception and interpretation (Bourdieu 1992, ch. 3). It is made up of a repertoire of strategies for action and cognitive patterns that have become routinised. The concept of 'habitus' can be translated into a more empirical language by identifying it with the term 'scheme', which plays an important role in contemporary cognitive anthropology. Schemes are models of prototypically simplified worlds, organised as networks of meaning. They are selectively activated in day-to-day thinking, perception and action.[10]

These schemes of cognition and action are not imposed on the individual by the overwhelming power of the educational apparatus, as suggested by the classical notion of culture. Individuals do not simply play a role designed by society, but internalise a matrix that is gradually built up from within their own *Lebenswelt* (or life-world) by means of learning processes.

In one decisive point Bourdieu's concept needs to be modified, however. It contains the idea of a person's habitus making him or her *want* exactly what his social position allows him to have, by internalising probabilities and thus making a virtue of necessity. This leads very close to a Marxist theory of ideology (cf., for example, Bourdieu 1993: 58–61). Instead, habitus here is to be understood as being formed on the basis of a universal human competence not determined by specific cultures, namely the competence of assessing pros and cons in given situations in light of one's own interests. The perception of *what* one's own interests are is indeed dependent on primary adjustments to cultural surroundings and one's own social position. These two are, after all, incorporated in the individual's habitus. Yet individuals are able, thanks to this universal competence that does not melt away as habitual dispositions grow, to critically assess their own situation and develop strategies which can be at variance to given cultural patterns (cf. Wimmer 1995a, ch. 2). This modified term of habitus will allow a mediating position to be taken between the theory of rational decision-making on the one hand and the

[10] An overview of this research tradition is given by Strauss and Quinn (1997).

currently fashionable theory of the power of discourse on the other; in other words to steer a middle way between the Scylla of materialism and the Charybdis of idealism.

Compromising on collective representations

So much for internalised culture, which forms the starting point for the negotiation of meaning. Let us now take a look at this negotiating process itself. As habitual schemes are adapted to the different positions within a society, they produce different classifications and world-views. Yet individuals are also related to one another in an arena of social relations and communication. In this arena, they work out elements that all actors involved can recognise as congruent to their respective long-term interests. The result of this negotiation process is what I call cultural compromise. It is no longer a matter of internal culture, but of collective norms, social classifications and world-view patterns; in other words, of what Emile Durkheim called collective representations. Thus, only where some interests concur will any binding rules for making meaning develop. If the distribution of power is so unequal that no field of common interest can be discerned, a cultural compromise is not expected to emerge. It happens only if all those involved can relate to some elements of the shared discourse in a meaningful way because they can all put forward some of their interests in this language.

Thus, a cultural compromise is based on the acceptance by all actors relating to one another in a communicative arena, since moral categories and social classifications have to be validated and accepted. They cannot simply be defined by some centre of power, as is postulated in current discourse theories. They have to make sense from the interest point of view of *all* those concerned in order to become widely accepted. Neither do cultural patterns of meaning have an existence of their own, moulding generation after generation, as is implied by various cultural theories in the tradition of Durkheim. They have to be reproduced in the everyday cultural practice of strategically competent individuals.

The notion of cultural compromise can be elaborated further by making the concepts of negotiation and consent more explicit and by situating them in their corresponding theoretical context. I will start with the idea of negotiation and with those aspects of the process of compromising that can be observed empirically. In everyday interaction the actors negotiate how a situation should be defined, who should play what role, which plans for action should be pursued, and which norms and values are relevant in the specific context. This level of co-ordinating representations was the focus of ethnomethodology. Its protagonists, however,

took this perspective to its radical extremes, by excluding the possibility that such a process could lead to an agreement that would transcend a circumscribed situation and thus develop into an institutionalised consensus on the valid rules for action and representation (see e.g. Garfinkel 1967: 33). For Garfinkel, every consensus is necessarily of a fragmentary, local, precarious and decrepit nature. Cultural norms and rules exist only as a problematic and momentary consensus over how to define a situation agreed upon by interacting individuals, who nonetheless are never able to grasp the conditions for the formation of such agreement. The 'formal structure of practical action' remains invisible and non-intelligible to those who are the objects of its workings (Garfinkel and Sacks 1976: 164). The so-called 'dialogic anthropology' proceeds in a similar way. Following Bakhtin and other literary scholars, it tries to understand 'how shared culture emerges from [dialogic] interaction' (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995: 2).[11]

If the occasional character of cultural processes is overestimated in this way, we lose sight of the fact that these local and situational agreements, if observed from outside and over a longer period of time, reveal enough similarities to reconstruct them as realisations of a general pattern, i.e. as variations over a scheme, which defines the limits of meaningful agreements (see Bourdieu 1976: 149ff.). Only from the point of view of an overdrawn terminological realism does such a reconstruction seem problematic because the pattern obviously only 'really' exists in its local variations. According to the view developed here, a cultural compromise is understood as consensus over the validity of norms, classifications and patterns of interpretation that lasts beyond the open process of its production. Research by Robert Bellah and his collaborators shows that such guard-rails of liability even exist in late modern societies such as the United States, where they consist of the triad 'achievement', 'freedom' and 'justice' (Bellah *et al.* 1992).

The concept of compromise thus rests on the idea that normative claims are consented to. How can we grasp this act of consent, without leaving the ground of empirical social science and taking off into a normative theory of social contract? And how can we take into account the fact that this consent never develops in a cultural vacuum – where the precultural rational man of Enlightenment thinking and of much contemporary economy has found his home – but is instead based on an evaluation process that implies already established and internalised norms? The 'non-contractual element of the contract', as Durkheim once called it,

[11] Some proponents of 'dialogic anthropology' recognise the parallels with ethnomethodology. For a discussion of the role of ethnomethodology in anthropology, see Watson (1991).

has to be so conceived that we can avoid reifying culture as a being of its own, standing over individuals, while at the same time we have to acknowledge that culture has a collectively binding character that precedes individual acts of thinking and doing (cf. König 1961). An ontogenetic analysis could show us the way here. I will try to do this in discussing briefly Mead's theory of socialisation, which will also allow me to elaborate further the revised notion of habitus.

Mead shows how human beings take 'the institutions of their community in to their own conduct' through the mechanism of adopting attitudes (Mead 1968: 204f.). During the first phase, the paternal threat of sanctions and the evaluation of conduct associated with it are increasingly anticipated and thus come to determine the behaviour of the child. While this process is still entirely based on adaptation and minimisation of costs, the second phase is of a different character in so far as the parental norms are now perceived as being part of encompassing social liabilities. This happens by attributing these norms to the perspective of a 'generalised other', i.e. the entire group of reference. Again, the mechanism of adopting attitudes forms the basis of this enlargement. Finally, a cognitive scheme is developed according to which the normative order is accepted as valid and relevant for one's own conduct, independently of the mechanism of sanctioning deviant behaviour and the costs this entails.

Accepting and consenting to a normative order are not, however, automatic processes as Mead implies in his variant of the theory of the oversocialised individual and as Bourdieu presupposes with his notion of habitus. The simple fact that conflicts between generations are known in almost all societies shows this clearly enough. Rather, for a norm to be accepted as valid and legitimate, it has 'to consider the interests of *everybody* concerned by the matter in need of regulation, and it should embody the will, which *all* can reflect *jointly* in their *own* respective interests, as the will of the "generalised other"' as Habermas (1981: 64) has formulated it in his reinterpretation of Mead's theoretical outline. If, on the contrary, an expectation of behaviour or a classification does not meet an individual's perceived interests in a way which would allow them to express them in these terms, the rules might perhaps be followed in order to avoid sanctions, but are not taken to be legitimate and valid.

In this way, the theory of cultural compromise incorporates one insight of Habermas's theory of communicative action, namely that norms and values can be substantiated through a process of argumentative negotiation and thus in principle can be questioned. However, this is not only feasible in modern societies where the structures of life-world are 'rationally' differentiated, as Habermas would have it. Research on political rhetoric

in traditional societies (Bloch 1975; Paine 1981) and a series of studies in legal anthropology on procedures for settling disputes (Caplan 1995; cf. Strathern 1985) have clearly shown that the validity of a norm can be questioned not only by referring to universal standards of rationality. Thanks to the heterogeneity of every cultural order, norms can be impeached by referring to other norms and modes of validation, as will be shown in later sections of this chapter. While Habermas takes the fact that norms can in principle be questioned as a starting point for saving the universalistic project of the Enlightenment from its postmodern attacks, my argument is an empirical one: Even in so-called traditional societies, people are not imprisoned in the confines of their own cultural traditions or in discursive strait-jackets.

The term cultural compromise should allow us to grasp this negotiability and transformability of cultural forms and thus help to avoid totalising notions of culture without ending up with the occasionalism of interaction theory. But why are these formulae of compromise couched in symbolic terms? According to the argument hitherto developed, a simple negotiation process in sober language would be sufficient to arrive at an agreement.[12] It could easily be shown, following the methodology outlined by the theory of speech acts, that it is precisely because of the over-density of symbols offering multiple connections and interpretations that there can be an agreement from different interest positions on such ambiguous meanings.[13]

[12] It may be useful to note the difference between the theory of cultural compromise and classical contract theories. The founders of Enlightenment philosophy usually did not think of the social contract as a historical event, but rather conceived it as part of a theory of legitimacy. This theory was thought to be of a normative, rather than an empirical or descriptive character. Contemporary debates that have developed around the work of Buchanan, Rawls and Nozick basically belong to the field of moral philosophy as well: the counter-factual reconstruction of a social contract should help to establish which forms of government and politics could reasonably be regarded as legitimate (see the overview of Koller 1986).

The theory of cultural compromise, on the other hand, is not based on the idea of an original state of mankind or on the notion of pre-cultural rationality. Cultural compromise is based on consenting to a social order from different positions of interest, without implying that this order could be based on formal reasoning. On the contrary: individuals eventually consent by weighing different, not universal, interests; their evaluations are not based on abstract standards of rationality, but on habitualised schemes that are grounded in the experience of social and cultural givens. Every institutional order that is not solely based on force thus implies aspects of an 'implicit social contract' (cf. Ballestrem 1986). Elements of such a sociologically turned theory of social contract can be found in the work of political scientists (J. Scott 1990), social history (see Burke 1992b: 87, 157) and dialogue theory (Dermott and Tylbor 1995).

[13] The theory of speech acts tries to understand, among other things, the role of symbolisations in situations marked by power difference. According to Brown and Levinson, symbolisations are used when the social distance and power difference between partners of interaction are considerable. Symbols develop through the use of the so-called conversational implicatur: the more powerful people make the statement *x* but imply that the

This can be shown by a first example of such cultural compromise, the nationalist self-description of modern societies, of which later chapters of this book will provide a fuller analysis. For the sake of illustration, I will mention two characteristics of this ideological formula at this point. To begin with, it is based on the now proverbial 'imagined' community (Anderson 1991), i.e. the conception of a political community of destiny, based on common origin and historical experience. A new relationship towards territoriality constitutes a second element of this compromise. The immediate surroundings of a settlement, bound by relations of friendship, kinship and profession, are no longer the horizon for expectations of solidarity; the idea of mutual bonds and assistance was extended to the national group. The limits of state territory now form the line beyond which the world of insecurities and dangers begin.

Why has this nationalistic self-image and the corresponding political institution of the nation-state been so successful? According to the argument that will be developed in the next chapter, the nation-state does not appear as a functional necessity of highly differentiated societies (contrary to, for example, Gellner 1983). Nor does it automatically result from the rise to power of the bourgeoisie – as Marxists would have it. Rather, it is to be interpreted as the outcome of a successful compromise of interests between different social groups: an exchange of the guarantee of political loyalty for the promise of participation and security. The new state elite can enlarge their power domain in the name of the nation and the well-being of the citizen. The population of the nationalised states, for their part, can appeal to the ideal of the national community of solidarity and equality in order to enforce their claims for political participation, free education and, finally, the provisions of the welfare state. In the nationalistic language, many interests can be put forward (Wimmer 1996b).

It is precisely because in the national order of things a vast number of different groups are relating to each other that nationalism has to remain ideologically fuzzy and poorly defined. Thanks to its polysemic character, it can make sense from different and varied points of view and incorporate a wide range of claims. Perhaps this explains the apparent paradox (cf. Elwert 1989a) that the most powerful ideology in the history of modernity is at the same time its least substantial one.

subordinate understands that they mean *y*. This helps to avoid the subordinate losing face. Such implicaturs can solidify in the course of time and become standardised, in such a way that the communication process is overpainted by symbolic meaning, as has been shown by the anthropologist Strecker (1988).

It should be added that symbolisations can also be meaningful when ambiguity presents the only possibility of overcoming the diverging interests of individuals related to each other in an arena of communication, because symbolic language opens up a semantic field with the most possibilities of interpretation and meaning.

More precise and symbolically dense are those cultural compromises developing in small-scale social environments – a fact that played a considerable role in Durkheim's (1988: 348ff.) theory of the division of labour. An example of this is the ideal of community that until recently prevailed among the Indian groups of Mexico and Guatemala. One's own commune represents the centre of the moral and geographical universe. In the middle of this social island lies the village. There are no conflicts among its inhabitants; they live the solidarity of the poor, peacefully united under the guardianship of their sages, who balance relationships with the gods and the powers of nature. The patron saint of the village symbolises the common interests of all, the idea of a community of destiny in a hostile and insecure world. This collective representation of the social world allows the local elite to keep competitors for economic and political power away from the social island, because as outsiders they would not have the right to establish themselves in the commune. On the other hand, the members of the community owe political loyalty to the village elite. They can insist on the shared understanding that this obligation is tied to the correct behaviour of the elite's members, who are expected to commit themselves to the common interests of the village, for example in land disputes, and to take the command of solidarity seriously (see Wimmer 1995a, ch. 4; 1995b).

Social closure and cultural distinction

Both examples show that cultural compromise also defines the boundaries between participants and outsiders. This leads to the third aspect of the cultural process. The search for cultural compromise is connected to the process of social closure, to use a term of Max Weber (1985 (1922): 23ff.). Social closure means excluding those who are not felt to belong, drawing a dividing line between the familiar and the foreign. Social closure can lead to the formation of classes, subcultures, gender-defined groups, or ethnic groups and nations, as the next chapter will show in fuller detail. The borderlines between 'us' and 'them' are often marked by distinctive forms of everyday cultural practice, for instance wearing certain clothes for a Sunday market where people from different ethnic groups meet, or else by 'good taste', which differentiates established members of the upper class from parvenus; by the use of a certain jargon that only anthropologists will understand, or else by the consumption of vast amounts of melted cheese, which only those initiated in a certain national culture are able to digest.

I have distinguished here between three closely related aspects of culture. Internalised culture forms the starting point for the negotiation of

meaning; it is composed of a system of habitual dispositions, or mental schemes. This is culture on the individual and cognitive level. On the collective and symbolic level, notions about the set-up and workings of society, on what is just and unjust, sacred and profane, are negotiated. Such cultural compromise is achieved if all actors relating to one another in an arena can formulate aspects of their long-term interests in a shared symbolic language. Finally, as a consequence of this compromise, certain cultural markers are singled out in order to reveal and reinforce the distinction between insiders and outsiders – between those partaking in the basic compromise and those remaining on the margins.

Trying to summarise what has been said so far in a short formula, culture could be defined as an open and unstable process of negotiating meaning, which has cognitively competent individuals of differing interests and aims relating to one another, and which, in the finding of accepted compromises, leads to social closure and corresponding cultural boundary-marking.

Towards a pragmatics of cultural production

I admit that this formula is not outstandingly elegant. Its worth has to be measured pragmatically, i.e. whether or not it helps to overcome at least some of the difficulties of the classical notion of culture while avoiding the pitfalls of discourse theory. In the remaining part of this chapter, I should like to address the problem of cultural heterogeneity, the relation between power and meaning, and the analysis of cultural change.

Heterogeneity: variations over schemes

The problem of cultural heterogeneity and variation dissolves if it is looked at from the perspective of the theory of cultural compromise. Every group and every individual constantly tries to interpret the cultural compromise in ways that seem to justify their own demands, to validate their own actions, and to represent their own private vices as public benefits. This process of adoption and interpretation does not rely on a conscious attempt at convincing or even deceiving others. Rather, it is due to the mechanisms of social perspectivity (Hannerz 1993b, ch. 3), the selective way in which habitual schemes organise perception of the social world. Variations over cultural themes thus emerge, which give every cultural order the character of a conflictive, but nevertheless structured, process. It is this variability and heterogeneity of culture which is so difficult for functionalist notions of cultural integration to grasp and which

is, at the same time, overestimated and totalised in postmodern theories of culture as a field of criss-crossing discourses.

The idea of social perspectivity can be illustrated with a metaphor. The structural position of a person influences his or her thoughts in a way which is similar to a magnet under a table upon which iron filings have been scattered. I have tried to show this in an empirical study on different versions of a mythical theme. All the versions recount the history of the foundation of an Indian village in Mexico (Wimmer 1995b). The stories vary according to the position occupied by the narrator in the field of political alliances. Their current relations to the local priest or to Protestant sects, to different regional power-brokers and other villages are mirrored in the details of the tale. Nevertheless, all versions agree on a certain basic perspective on the social world; all portray the village as an integrated and egalitarian community of solidarity, an island immersed in a sea of insecurity, moral corruption and hostility.[14]

The example of mythical variation should make clear that the notion of cultural compromise does not lead back to a functionalist view of society where conflicts and change vanish from sight. A cultural compromise merely limits the horizon of possibilities within which individuals can argue in their search for power and recognition. In this way, a cultural compromise influences the direction in which these battles develop. Max Weber has expressed this relationship in a much-cited paragraph in his introduction to *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* in the following way:

> Interests (material and ideal), not ideas, determine the actions of man. But the world-views, which have been created by ideas, have often acted as switchmen in defining the pathways along which the dynamics of interests have moved their behaviour. (Weber 1920: 252, my translation)

In the course of this dynamic, we can observe how elements of the cultural compromise are interpreted in new ways by inverting or displacing their symbolic content or by merging them with other elements to create new, syncretic cultural forms (cf. Turner 1967: 27–30; Harrison 1995). In peasant movements all over the world we observe how the image of the good king, part of the cultural compromise of many agricultural societies, is redefined. The ideal of the noble provider of protection and provisions in times of hardship is fused with the religiously defined figure of the redeemer. The image of the king as saviour, who will install a new and

[14] Malinowski's famous metaphor of myth as 'dogmatical backbone of primitive civilisation' (Malinowski 1983: 90) might be leading in the wrong direction. Myths are not only mirror-images and charters of legitimacy, but symbolic practices guided by perceived interests, part of the attempt discursively to appropriate a common history for one's own purposes.

more just world order, is thus created (Scott 1977). The workers movement and feminism, to give two examples closer to Western societies, have radicalised the liberal idea of equality of chances into the notion of equality of outcome.[15]

Which elements of the cultural compromise are chosen and how they are reformulated and transformed depend again on the position in the power structure. Since I will show this in full detail in chapter 5 discussing the Indian movements of Mexico and Guatemala, a brief summary of the argument will be enough here. The state elite that came to power after two decades of revolutionary disorder reformulated Mexican nationalism. They successfully extended their control over the whole of the national territory by constructing an impressive pyramid of patron–client relations controlled by the Party of the Institutionalised Revolution. In the course of their efforts at integrating and assimilating the Indian minorities, a new educated middle class of Indian professionals developed, who soon felt their aspirations to social mobility frustrated. They began to contradict the hegemonic claims of the central state and developed for the first time an Indian ethno-nationalism. It is interesting to observe that the tropes and metaphors on which this counter-discourse unfolded present a mirror-image of the *mestizo* nationalism formulated by the central elites and adopted by large sections of the Mexican population. They took precisely those elements of the prevailing cultural compromise most open to a reinterpretation that would make sense to the new Indian elite, given their interests. Granting cultural and political autonomy to the different Indian nationalities implies, of course, new opportunities for power, recognition and influence in Indian parliaments and Indian regional executives, in cultural institutes and so on (Wimmer 1993). By contrast, peasant movements in Chiapas or Hidalgo relate themselves to other elements of the national cultural compromise, namely the revolutionary rhetoric tied to land reform and social justice (cf. Wimmer 1995c).

Power and the formation of subcultures

This brings us to the problem of power. The Mexican examples show that cultural compromises can entail their own power effects. In limiting the field of legitimate arguments, they force groups that have not participated in the formation of the cultural compromise and entered

[15] Mach (1993) and Guha (1983) provide further analysis of such processes of reinterpretation and inversion.

the political arena for the first time, to address themselves to the generally accepted forms of collective representations and in that way to enforce their validity and legitimacy. Any way of making sense of the social world that does not at least connect to the prevailing cultural compromise is not understood and quickly marginalised in public debates. Collective representations thus present themselves as an outside force to those who have not taken part in the finding of the cultural compromise and who are nevertheless subject to its results. In this restricted sense, power and discourse are in fact as closely interlocked as Foucault and his anthropological followers would have it. Several examples come to mind, apart from the already mentioned Indian and peasant movements of Mexico. Immigrant minorities, for example, have to relate their claims to prevailing ideas of a liberal, secularised and constitutional society when they want to be heard. Even the most particularistic political projects have to be expressed in universalistic language, such as the right to the maintenance of identity, if the slightest chance of success is to be expected (Soysal 1994). The best example, however, is perhaps provided by the so-called caste system. When the idea of a hierarchy of ritual purity is generally accepted, one can legitimately argue that one's own caste should rightfully belong to a higher tier of the system. There are in fact many examples of successful castes climbing on the basis of such claims (Bailey 1969: 95–100). But it was almost impossible for untouchables at the bottom of the ladder of ritual purity to question the principle of caste hierarchy in public and in principle (see Moffat 1979).

The excluded and marginalised, nevertheless, do not become accomplices of their own discursive disempowerment and subjugation. According to the perspective developed here, discourses are not acting subjects, which make use of human beings in order to realise and diffuse themselves, as implied in much of current writing following in Foucault's footsteps. Rather, it is individual actors who design discursive strategies in order to serve their perceived interests. Those excluded from the arena of public debate thus develop their own ideas of just and unjust, holy and profane, pure and impure, in and out. Even when they are the objects of an overwhelming sanctioning power, they cannot be forced to accept the legitimacy of a cultural order. When they meet those in power, they might feign consent to the dominant culture. But in those social spaces which are accessible only to them, they develop their own vision of the world, a counter-discourse that James Scott (1990) has called a 'hidden transcript'. It can be found in the barracks of slaves and guest-workers, in the secret societies of peasants, in churches and mosques controlled by the subordinates where millennarian utopias are imagined, in the slums

of global cities where youth cultures flourish, or in the huts of menstruating women in Papua New Guinea, where they symbolically reverse the sexual order of things.[16]

These counter-discourses can develop into stable cultural forms, a new cultural compromise valuable within the confines of the social spaces in which it has emerged. These patterns of meaning may be termed subcultures, as they usually remain related to the dominant cultural order despite turning its moral appeals on their heads. To be sure, I do not want to make the somewhat romantic point that resistance is everywhere, that you just have to peek behind the curtains and look into the huts of the marginalised and the overcrowded apartments of the poor. Rather, the possibility of subcultural heterodoxy is an important part of the theoretical sketch I am presenting here, because it relates directly to the central notion of cultural compromise. It is important to emphasise that such a compromise does not emerge automatically and may include only small sections of a society. As a cultural compromise is based on a partial concurrence of interests, subcultural differentiations will flourish whenever important claims of the groups involved cannot be formulated in a commonly binding symbolic language.

Cultural change

A set of conceptual tools has now been developed that should allow the last of the four problems to be addressed: understanding cultural change. It should have become clear that a cultural compromise is embedded in a specific constellation of interests and thus reflects a certain balance of power between the groups involved. This balance of forces can shift, either because one or another group gets or loses access to economic, political or cultural resources (e.g. in the process of becoming colonised) or because the distributional patterns change as a result of the accumulated consequences of previous actions (e.g. the process of inflationary

[16] However, in situations of total subordination, the formulation of a counter-discourse becomes impossible and the subjugated tend to adopt the representations of the powerful. The characteristics of total power have been specified by Newby (1975) and J. Scott (1990): there is no counter-elite that offers alliances; uncontrolled social spaces are not available; those in power can control information from the outside world; the only possibility of overcoming the situation of subjugation consists in winning the masters' favour. In this frontier zone of totalitarianism it is in the perceived interests of the weak to adapt their representations of the world as closely as possible to those of the powerful, because their chances of survival might be increased by anticipating the masters' expectations. In other words, we are faced with a social constellation where the discourse of those in power indeed assumes the all-permeating power that the early Foucault had observed in prisons and mental homes. We may consider as exemplary cases of totalitarian institutions the concentration camps of the Nazi regime (Niethammer 1994).

devaluation of the worth of academic degrees after the opening of universities to larger sections of the population) (Wimmer 1995b, sect. 7.3).

Depending on their changed position in the hierarchies of wealth, power and knowledge, individuals develop new strategies and new perceptions and interpretations. More precisely, the habitualised dispositions produce variations on the hitherto accepted cultural themes, because these no longer make sense from the point of view of those whose changed position of interest lets them see the world through different eyes. Subcultural variations or true counter-cultures may unfold. Because the habitual schemes themselves change only relatively slowly, they provide a certain continuity and a characteristic cultural style to the practices they produce and thus reduce the space of contingency even in moments of historical crisis and change.

However, the new variations generated under these circumstances may differ enough from the established modes of thinking and speaking to break apart the existing cultural compromise and dissolve it into a range of variations and counter-discourses. When a new balance of power has been stabilised, new cultural compromises may eventually emerge, according to the transformed distribution of chances to get one's own view accepted. New cultural forms may emerge according to the new constellation of interest and possibilities for compromise. Depending on these changing structures of inclusion in, and exclusion from, the realms of a cultural compromise, processes of both social closure and social opening can be observed. In this way, social groups dissolve, transform and reorganise. In order to mark the new boundaries, they invent new cultural practices or redefine existing elements of distinction.

Throughout these historical transformations, certain patterns can be observed. Shifts in the fabric of power lead to a sharpening of conflicts over the rules of the cultural game, until subcultures start to flourish in the different parts of society and the cultural compromise finally breaks down under the attack of the most varied claims to recognition and validity. As soon as a new constellation of interests and a new distribution of resources stabilise, the horizons of meaning are reorganised around commonly accepted icons, the core of a binding world-view of the future. Seen over time, a structural cycle can thus be observed that starts with the diffusion of a cultural order, reaches maturity when it is most widely shared and culturally elaborated, before entering a crisis of conflictive contests, decaying and eventually giving rise to a reformulated and reconstructed cultural compromise.

Showing that this model of cultural change is indeed useful for empirical analysis was the aim of an earlier book (Wimmer 1995a). I tried to explain how in different regions and individual villages of Mexico and

Guatemala local cultural forms have emerged and been transformed since the seventeenth century. On the basis of ethno-historical work and a reading of several dozen ethnographic studies and re-studies, I wanted to understand why in certain regions or villages the already-mentioned self-image of an egalitarian, closed community of solidarity developed and became institutionalised in certain forms of local governance, enshrined in ritual systems, and firmly established in local political discourse, while in other villages and regions this was not the case. In the same way, the further transformations of this local compromise into other concepts of community were explained on a comparative basis.

Such a 'methodology of multilinear evolution', to use Julian Steward's (1955) term, is equally useful in understanding the many different forms in which the nation-state has historically appeared in various parts of the world. It will allow us to understand why the introduction of the model of the nation-state had different political consequences according to the prevailing cultural compromises and forms of social closure, without having to resort to a sequential typology distinguishing less- from more-developed nation-states in order to explain certain phenomena such as ethnic conflicts. Political modernisation through the introduction of democracy, national self-determination and citizenship rights can lead to varying forms of cultural compromise and social closure, depending on the exact way in which the balance of forces is changed through the introduction of these institutions and depending on the nature of previous social arrangements.

Conclusion

With this reformulation of the notion of culture, I have tried to maintain some of the insights of discourse theory, i.e. that culture emerges from discursive practices, which construct and thus influence reality in many different ways. This approach has certain advantages over the notion of culture as a fixed frame of norms and values, as seen through the lenses of classical anthropological and, by the way, sociological theory. But these discourses do not have the quasi-magical power that many postmodern theories attribute to them. Rather, cultural practices depend in a clearly definable way on the intentions of strategically competent actors and on their position in the frameworks of social structure. As soon as we can conceptualise this relation between culture as discourse and the non-cultural aspects of the social world, it becomes possible to trace regularities in processes of cultural transformation, and we can go beyond an anthropology that looks through the kaleidoscope of discourses without ever grasping the logic of its assembling and dispersing patterns.

From the perspective of a processual theory such as outlined in this chapter, it does not make much sense to understand the world as a patchwork of cultures in the way classical anthropology did. The metaphor of a cultural landscape of continuous transitions would be more appropriate, such as presented by Tim Ingold (1993: 226ff.; see also Drummond 1980; Rosaldo 1989). In this landscape we can discern topographical features – hills and mountains, valleys and gullies. Different people have shaped these topographies forming different cultural compromises, if one may stretch the image somewhat. However, this topography is in constant motion, and certainly faster than at a geological rate. Whenever the balance of power shifts, conflictive processes of negotiating meaning are unleashed, and new cultural arrangements are to be found. Furthermore, individuals can also travel in this landscape, because they are able to distance themselves from their own cultural inculcation and can reinterpret it in a creative way (see, for example, Schiffauer 1992).

What enables human beings to transform this landscape and to travel within it is the universal ability of making meaning and interest concur. I would like to call this the pragmatics of cultural production. Whether it is in our cacophonous media market-place or in the relaxed chatter in the *diwan* of a Kurdish village; whether in the babble of voices at an Indian community meeting in Mexico or in the lecture programme of an academic conference, we can always discern the same motive: the attempt to establish one's own view of the world as a valid perspective and thus to form the world in accordance to one's own notions. As this can only be achieved if others come to accept and share one's world-view, the formation of a cultural compromise is the implicit aim of the pragmatics of cultural production, and the negotiation of meaning of fundamental importance in order to achieve it.