

Culture and Social Representations as Cross-cutting Factors in Social Dynamics

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Abstract: Through different tendencies exposed mainly by Zigmund Bauman (2002) it is necessary to determine what is the role of culture in the social order. For this purpose it is necessary in the first place to develop a definition of the concept, since culture is understood as a polysemic concept. The social dynamics that are defined through the cultural logics of social transformation are the configuring element through which the concept of culture is developed. Through a conceptual delimitation and the theoretical exposition of different authors it is possible to define the concept of culture. Subsequently, the different roles of the notion of culture according to Bauman are determined. Finally, and as a conclusion, the internalization of the culture is exposed from the social representations that are defined according to the specific case of the migrants.

Keywords: Culture, Representations, Actors, Social dynamics, Migrants.

1. Approaching the Notion of Culture

In this work, the initial proposal is to inquire about the role played by culture in social order, following the three trends proposed by Zigmund Bauman (2002), and how culture internalized by social actors intervenes in social dynamics. Naturally, the topic requires defining what is meant by culture, taking into account the polysemy of the concept.

In *Theory and Analysis of Culture* (2005), Gilberto Giménez Montiel has conducted an exhaustive work examining the methodological and theoretical traditions that have influenced the reflection on culture and encompassing a broad debate about cultural change. According to the author, culture has been approached as a code or system of rules by structural anthropology; that is, as ideology and worldview by the Marxist tradition; as a "model" or "pattern of behavior" by culturalists; as "internally structured schemes of perception, valuation, and action" by Bourdieu's sociology (Giménez, 2005).

However, in the 1970s, Clifford Geertz's work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) emerged, defining culture as a structure of meanings. With this work, and the contributions of John B. Thompson, a consensus was reached that the core of cultural phenomena was their symbolic nature.

Based on the above, culture is defined as an analytical dimension of social life and the set of symbolic facts present in a society, or more precisely, the social organization of patterns of meanings, "historically transmitted and embodied in symbolic forms, through which individuals communicate with each other and share their experiences, conceptions, and beliefs" (Giménez, 2005, p.67). Culture is therefore, according to Giménez (2005), "the action and effect of symbolically cultivating the interior and exterior nature of human beings, making it bear fruit in complex systems of signs that organize, shape, and give meaning to the totality of social practices" (Giménez, 2005, p.68).

Following the same line, Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes two dimensions of culture. Internalized culture as patterns of meanings, beliefs, representations, significations, and values, and objectified culture as tangible symbolic expressions, including buildings, practices, rituals, or every day, religious,

and artistic objects through which actors express meanings (Bourdieu, 1990). Although the two dimensions are inseparable, Bourdieu underestimates objectified culture, considering it as the support for symbolic forms.

Culture, understood as the symbolic dimension of society, is present in all human practices and social processes, especially in processes of signification, meaning production, and communication, where social codes or agreements appear. Thus, culture constitutes an instrument of intervention in the world and a power device. According to Clifford Geertz (1992), "symbolic systems are at the same time representations ('models of') and orientations for action ('models for')" (p.91).

By defining the concept in this way, culture is seen as an object of study that cannot be approached with a single method or research model but demands a global and interdisciplinary perspective because it addresses the entirety of social life. Based on this concept of culture as extended and totalizing, the following question can be asked: How can the role of these symbolic-cultural aspects in social totality be defined from the point of view of the social sciences? Based on the above, it is stated that there is no consensus on this matter; therefore, it is necessary to consider the postulates of Bauman (2002), who in his work *Culture as Praxis* defends three major tendencies, which are mentioned below.

2. Culture as An Instrument of Continuity, In Service of Social Order

This tendency understands culture as regularity and a model, while freedom means deviation and the breaking of norms. Culture refers to traditions, inherited values and ideas that are accepted and shared, with the aim of preserving the *status quo* and the existing social order. In this framework, culture is understood as a system of pressures supported by sanctions, of internalized values and norms, of habits that guarantee the repetition of individual behaviors and their predictability, as well as the monotony of their production (Bauman, 2002). In other words, the system operates on individuals who develop behaviors and conduct based on a particular culture.

One of the proponents of this view has been Durkheim. Although this author rarely uses the description of culture, he conceptually addressed the idea of culture. He emphasized that humanity should not be confused with civilization and defined civilization as a set of "social phenomena that are not linked to a particular social organism, extending beyond national territories or developing over time periods that exceed the history of a single society" (Durkheim, 1913, p.26). Durkheim attributed a force to the social phenomena that constrains the individual and guides their actions. Individuals are socialized within the context of traditions and become heirs and reproducers of them, but subject to the collective consciousness.

Collective consciousness, according to the author, is formed by collective representations, ideas, values, and common emotions shared by the entire population or rather a specific population or society (Giddens, 1971). Collective consciousness arises from individuals and imposes itself upon them. This highlights the role of culture in Durkheim's social theory.

Talcott Parsons, another representative figure of this trend, conceived culture as "the primary force that binds the various elements of the social world, or the system of action" (Parsons cited by Ritzer, 2001, p.85). By doing so, he indicated that culture is a mediating tool in the interaction between actors, integrating personality and social systems, as it serves as a fundamental tool to ensure social order and continuity. Furthermore, in the social system, culture is embodied in norms and values, while in the personality system, it is internalized by the actor.

For Parsons, the cultural system is not a part of other systems; rather, it is a patterned and organized system of symbols that actors orient themselves towards, as internalized components of the personality system, and institutionalized guidelines of the social system. Thus, the cultural system would be the horizon from which the world is interpreted. Being essentially symbolic, the cultural system has the ability to become a component of different systems and control other systems of action (Ritzer, 2001). Parsons demonstrates that from socially given patterns, a set of possibilities is generated through which individuals conceive the means to satisfy their will. There is a cultural order pattern in which individuals construct their wills and the means to satisfy them.

From this perspective, culture restricts the inventive capacity of human beings and is understood as an instrument for the unchanging reproduction of ways of life, resistant to change unless external forces push it towards it (Bauman, 2002). It is a stabilizing factor that makes separation from an established model highly unlikely. For Bauman, the Parsonian version of the orthodox concept of culture merely emphasized what had been the fundamental weakness of the prevailing approach in cultural anthropology, which allowed no room for the alteration of entrenched patterns (Bauman, 2002).

3. Culture as the Axis of Social Change

Another trend, opposed to the previous one, generated the idea of culture as the activity of free spirit, the seat of creativity, self-criticism, and self-transcendence (Bauman, 2002). Therefore, culture is the field where social change unfolds.

In *The Savage Mind* (2002), Lévi-Strauss points out that all the symbols and signs that constitute culture are products of

the same symbolic capacity possessed by all human minds. For him, culture, far from being a cage that restricts, truncates, and chains, has become a determinant of freedom, a tool of diversity, an endless engine of change, always incomplete. The creative capacity of the individual lies in ideas and in the ways social actors symbolically process the social phenomena (Bauman, 2002).

Another author who takes this position is Antonio Gramsci, who attempts to break the explanatory supremacy of the structural dimension over the symbolic dimension that prevails in the social sciences. He explores the possibility of constructing a philosophy of praxis that enables the spirit of rupture among subordinate classes, achieving the necessary homogenization to become protagonists in the transformation of the social order.

The author opposes positivist sociology because it attempts to describe and schematically classify historical and political facts according to criteria constructed based on the model of natural sciences (Gramsci, 2008). If social phenomena are not the product of an "external" mechanical determinism, the subject is also not free from structural conditions, as some subjective positions argued. The existence of a correlation of forces linked to the structure, independent of the will of individuals, is possible and must be known by individuals in order to transform them.

With the notion of hegemony, Gramsci emphasizes the aspect of consensus-building as a means to sustain the domination of dominant sectors. Thus, emphasis is placed on the cultural and symbolic dimension that upholds a particular order. According to Gramsci, material conditions are important, as well as the realm of ideologies in which individuals become aware of the conditions of their existence, making this realm a field of struggle (Liaudat, 2016).

4. Culture as Paradox

In the 1960s and 1970s, more unifying trends emerged regarding the role of culture in social life. According to these trends, culture is a paradox in the sense that it is a process defined by both "enabling and restrictive elements." It intertwines the social and objective world (Guerrero, 2010). Culture is heritage, tradition, and persistence, but it is also deviation, innovation, and permanent metamorphosis (Giménez, 2005).

According to Bauman, culture becomes a reality in the union of subjective life and its contents. The more conscious and determined the imperative to create order, the more visible the imprint of fragility that its products carry. The tragedy of culture, therefore, lies in actors being shaken by forces that reveal themselves as untamed when they try to dominate them (Bauman, 2002). And the paradox of culture can be summarized as follows: everything that serves to preserve a model undermines its consolidation at the same time (Bauman, 2002). Culture turns out to be an agent of disorder as much as an instrument of order.

Based on the above, Marx's proposal can be placed in this position, where culture is conceived on the one hand as the product of the relations of production, considering it one of the means by which social relations of production are reproduced, allowing for the persistence of conditions of inequality between classes. On the other hand, based on the ideas of the "young Marx," the fundamental goal of socialism consisted of freeing the proletariat from material pressures of

subsistence, giving everyone the possibility to dedicate their time and energy to self-cultivation. Culture within the framework of a socialist society could lead to self-realization, turning life into a work of art. The liberation from material concerns of existence would give rise to truly human accomplishments, as an ongoing process of unlimited expansion of the possible universe of meaning-making, in which the subject could recognize themselves without suffering the alienation of bourgeois cultural logics.

Another proponent of this position is Pierre Bourdieu, whose proposal seeks to overcome the dichotomy between objectivist and subjectivist perspectives of culture, linking action and structure and considering both objective facts and subjective phenomena.

The concept that allows him to transcend the dichotomy between the objective dimension and the subjective dimension of society is the notion of habitus. Habitus is understood as the process by which the social becomes internalized in individuals, aligning objective structures with subjective ones (Guerrero, 2010). In other words, it allows for the connection between the objective moments of culture, materialized in discourses and institutions, and the subjective moments, incorporated and set in motion through practices.

Habitus is an open system of dispositions, the product of the incorporation of social structure through one's position within that structure. At the same time, it structures practices and representations, acting as a practical scheme that structures perceptions and actions, from which the agent constructs their practices and representations of the world. The schemes provided by habitus are learned unconsciously by social agents and organize their worldview. Consequently, there is a correspondence between social structures and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the world—especially between dominants and dominated in different fields—and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to them (Bourdieu, 1989, p.7).

Symbolic systems, representations, "are instruments of knowledge and communication and have a power to construct reality that tends to establish a gnoseological order, an immediate sense of the world" (Gutiérrez, 2005, p.377). Therefore, the correspondence between social structures and mental structures serves political functions. Thus, symbolic systems are not merely instruments of knowledge; they are also instruments of domination (Gutiérrez, 2005).

5. The Case of Migrants

The most popular explanations of international migration are, in fact, of an economic nature (Kleidermacher, 2017). For economists, international migration would be shaped by global capitalist forces (Guerrero, 2010). Structural conditions, including inequalities among countries in the global system, would play an important role in this process. However, the economic approach reduces the migration issue to a cost-benefit calculation and, in cultural terms, leads to the assimilation of migrants into destination societies (Arango, 2003).

Migration, however, is a complex process that involves realities at different levels. Rational choice theory establishes analytical models, on the one hand, at the macro level, by identifying migration processes as the result of the sum of individual decisions in the image of the invisible hand of the free economy (Martínez, 2000), and on the other hand, at the

micro level, where individuals are seen as rational actors capable of making choices among the possibilities that arise in a decision-making process (Bergamaschi, 2011).

Poverty, lack of opportunities in the labor market, low wages, and poor working conditions would drive potential migrants from countries like Senegal to leave their societies of origin (Kleidermacher, 2017). It is necessary to assert, on a personal note, that migration is a socially constructed reality that is determined not only by economic conditions and the rational choice of actors but also, decisively, by the social representations and experiences of migrants.

The choice of the social representations approach highlights more complex qualitative aspects and emphasizes the multiple sources from which they draw. According to Jodelet (1989), "embracing a new element" – a situation, a theme, an unknown reality – corresponds to the main cognitive function of social representations as a form of creative knowledge and not just representation, one of whose fundamental elaboration mechanisms is the use of "reactivated previous knowledge" (Jodelet, 1989, p.35).

The migration process is marked by existing prejudices and expectations regarding this life phase. Social research from the perspective of social representations focuses on the process of meaning construction, which leads us to consider several levels for the sociocultural integration of migrants: 1) phenotypic traits and native language are factors that can generate derogatory discourses or forms towards migrant populations; 2) public institutions, while providing avenues for integration into the new reality faced by migrants, sometimes become bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the lives of migrants in the receiving society. According to the migrants' experience, the state and the economy create unfavorable conditions for personal and community development (Kleidermacher, 2017). People evidence continuous changes in the rules of the game, the state's inability to guarantee individual and public security, corruption, lack of professionalism and efficiency of public servants, irresponsible political class, exploitation, bankrupt economy, etc. (Mora, 2002). The same reality is equally described by similar cases.

To analyze the meaning that certain behaviors or words have for migrants, they need to understand the systems of social representation that they encounter because, according to Jodelet's propositions (1989), meaning is not in things but is produced by certain collective practices, as these provide a means to make things meaningful.

In conclusion, it is determined that social representations are shaped in the face of the heterogeneous factors of a culture defined by social dynamics and realities, and they can be seen as a tool defined in spaces of communication and interrelation of individuals or groups of individuals, where they seek to shape the different processes of social integration from a subjective perspective in terms of their individual, social, and cultural history. Thus, culture internalized in the form of social representations can be operative and effective when invested in the live flow of social action (Archer, 1988). Representations are constituted thought, but at the same time, they are constitutive thought that influences all dimensions of society. Therefore, culture and its internalized form are indispensable factors for understanding social dynamics and are efficient in addressing the issue of stereotyping migrants.

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