Semiotics of culture and intercultural communication

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1st lecture

The life world of social actors

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

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

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

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

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

1. A general and short presentation of the reciprocal relationship between a social actor and culture.
2. A very short and general discussion of some specific cultural forms.
3. The description of the world, the life world (« Lebenswelt ») that is inhabited by a social actor.
4. Sets of specific lifeworld themes.
1st topic

- What is a social actor? -
Culture is a common feature of human nature, of the human species.

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

- a system of knowledge and value patterns (W. Goodenough) that allow people
  - to represent themselves and the others,
  - to inhabit the surrounding world
  - and to intervene in this surrounding world with premeditation, in a planned way (C. Lévi-Strauss)

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

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

- “popular culture”
- “literate culture”
- “oral culture”
- “national culture”
- “scientific culture”
- “culinary culture”
- “housing culture”
- “shopping culture”
- etc.

The expression “popular culture”, typically:

- opposes this form of culture to the culture of the (intellectual, scientific, artistic, political, religious, …) elites,

- and qualifies it as embodied in the so-called trivial literature, in spontaneous, “non-academic” and highly mass-mediated perceptions and practices of religion, policy, justice, science, social welfare, as well as in everyday life practices (such as housing, cooking, meeting people, leisure, …).
The expression “oral culture” generally -

- oppose or, at least differentiates this form of culture from written culture in the sense that it possesses its own space and environment (the “aural environment”) that requires from the participants specific competences of knowledge production, distribution, reception and interpretation and inter-generational conservation and transmission.

The expression “housing culture”:

- not only recovers technical aspects such as the building, designing and maintaining of an inhabited space
- but also its appropriation by its inhabitants, its emotional, aesthetic and economic values or again its geographical and historical variations as a diversity of housing genres.
The general meaning of such and similar expressions is to represent not culture “such as” but as particular manifestations of culture which have to be understood with respect to a more or less important number of people (individuals, groups, agents), activities, artefacts, periods and places, knowledge and skills, etc.

and which, reciprocally, make such groups of people (individuals, groups, …), activities, artefacts, periods, places, … understandable as composing a sort of a common entity called social actor.

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

possess a common cognitive reference frame (composed, among others, by a common tradition, common knowledge and values, common routine practices, common communication means, …)

requires the possession or acquisition of a specific competence for understanding, accepting and dealing with this common cognitive reference frame and with the actor itself as well as with its members.
Some ad hoc examples for (types of) “social actor”:

- people, groups referring to a common charismatic figure (such as the fan groups of a soccer club, of a pop band, of a political or religious leader, …);

- people, groups sharing common convictions, beliefs and values (such as religious communities and/or sects, political parties and movements, artistic movements, groups bound together with respect to some moral, aesthetic, social, … ideal, etc.);

- people, groups sharing the access to some rare and/or valuable resources (such as the prestigious, renowned intellectuals, experts and artists; the honourable members of closed and elite groups or institutions attainable only via heritage and birth or the long and difficult acquisition of a very high economic and cultural capital such as the frequentation of elite universities and colleges; …);

- people, groups sharing the more or less same language and communication resources (such as the vernacular communities, pluri-lingual communities, diglossic communities, pidgin speaking communities, lingua franca communities, …);

- people, groups engaged in the same type of a social practice (such as the production and/or consumption of goods and services).
Semiotics of Culture and intercultural communication

Question: what makes these and other groups (types of groups) identifiable as a social actor?

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

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

The explanation of the notion of communality uncovers in fact two complementary, central dimensions in the recognition of social actors:

- their recognition as forming a sort of wholeness by others and for themselves

- the recognition that they share a common life world (Lebenswelt in the sense of Husserl and Schütz) a common social reality.

For instance, the life world of a social actor referring to a charismatic figure is organised in places, in special activities, in valuable social goods, also in more or less specific communication means, etc. This observation is valid for all above mentioned examples of social actors.
Nevertheless, the common use of the term “culture” suggests that there exist (is implicitly supposed that there exist) a kind of cross-cultural communality, a “common ground” underneath the “superficial” diversity of cultural forms.

This cross-cultural communality – with respect to the « ontological structure » of the Lebenswelt - is interpreted, framed differently by the different cultural forms.

Let us stress the point that the assumption of a sort of communality, of a common ground between the whole diversity of cultural forms:

- is an important argument for the position of a limited cultural relativism assuming
- that in spite of the diversity of cultural forms and of a more or less important cognitive distance between two cultural forms, any cultural form is at least partially understandable and translatable in any other cultural form.
2nd topic

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

- **the form of national culture** as it has been defined by B. Anderson;

- **the form of scientific culture** as it merges in several works starting with those of Th. Kuhn and including those of the sociology of sciences (D. Pestre, B. Latour, …)

- **the form of shopping culture** as it is explained in different sociological and socio-ethnographic studies
2nd topic

Specific cultural forms

- A national culture can be defined – following B. Anderson – as
  - an imagined community (people don’t know each other …);
  - a limited community (no one global national community) and
  - a sovereign community (no dependancy from other community).

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

- The « imagined » dimension of such a political community is not only a « philological » (B. Anderson) one, but supported also by:
  - collective rituals (especially comemorations, sporting events, …);
  - distinguished places and periods;
  - distinguished persons, objects and symbols;
  - formalized collective practices (represented through the main institutions of a nation).
A “scientific culture”, roughly speaking, may be characterised:

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

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

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

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

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

- **experiences, habitudes and traditions** that structure specific shopping genres;

- **languages and communication means** between the different agents involved in a shopping activity.
These very short and general descriptions of specific cultural forms show us some recurrent, central characteristics of the Lebenswelt (life world) of - hypothetically - any type of social actors:

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

So to speak, these central characteristics are “ontologically privileged moments” for identifying, understanding, classifying, ... Lebenswelten or lifeworlds.
Definition(s) of the lifeworld:

As already quoted, it has it roots in Husserl’s phenomenology and in Schütz’s phenomenological sociology

A very nice definition-description of the notion of lifeworld is provided by Philip Agre and Ian Horswill ("Lifeworld Analysis", San Diego 1997):

“We will use the term lifeworld to mean an environment described in terms of the customary ways of structuring the activities that take place within it -- the conventional uses of tools and materials, the "loop invariants" that are maintained within it by conventional activities, and so on. The term originally comes from phenomenological sociology […], where it refers to the familiar world of everyday life, and specifically to that world as described in the terms that make a difference for a given way of life. Cats and people, for example, can be understood as inhabiting the same physical environment but different lifeworlds. Kitchen cupboards, window sills, and the spaces underneath chairs have different significances for cats and people, as do balls of yarn, upholstery, television sets, and other cats. Similarly, a kitchen affords a different kind of lifeworld to a chef than to a mechanic, though clearly these two lifeworlds may overlap in some ways as well. A lifeworld, then, is not just a physical environment, but the patterned ways in which a physical environment is functionally meaningful within some activity”.

As Sonesson ("The multimediation of lifeworld", Lund 1997) has pointed it out, the lifeworld notion is close to the notion of “natural world” in Greimas’ semiotics, i.e. a world that is doxastically given to us in a form very similar to what Husserl calls “natürliche Einstellung”.

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3rd topic
- The Lebenswelt (life world) of a social actor -
Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

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

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

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

- …
### Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

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

  - practices that compose the daily **life agenda** (hygiene, household, rest, shopping, meal, …);
  - educational as well as social and cultural **acculturation** activities especially of children;
  - social **reproduction** activities essential for the maintenance and evolution of the family actor;
  - **leisure** activities that regularly assists other types of activities: acculturation, social reproduction, …;
  - activities belonging to the **intimate life** of the members of the family actor;
  - …
Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

- objects and artefacts that have their specific functions and roles (“value”) in the life of a social actor. There exist, once more, a high diversity of such objects and artefacts that intrinsically belong and structure the social reality of the family actor:
  - symbolically more or less charged tools and instruments belonging to the daily life agenda of the family actor (hygiene, meal, shopping, household, ...);
  - symbolically highly charged objects and artefacts composing the historical heritage of the family actor (letters, photos, post cards, all sorts of objects passed from one generation to another, ...) documenting especially the actor’s self-representation of history, of its origins and its historical destiny;
  - all sorts of objects and tools that belong to the interaction realm between the family actor and the relevant outer environment: education, community, neighbourhood;
  - ...

3rd topic
The Lebenswelt of a social actor
Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

- moments and periods that punctuate the agitations of a social actor. Like the social reality of any other actor, also the social reality of the family actor is characterised by a rhythmic texture which is highly repetitive and routine. Moments that compose the social temporality of the family actor can be identified with respect to the social practices:
  - the rhythmic structure of the daily life agenda composed by the typical routine activities around the clock;
  - the rhythmic structure of commemorations, celebrations, etc. (= historical dimension of the actor);
  - the repetitive moments in the social reproduction agenda of the family actor in form of invitations, dinners, parties, public consumptions of cultural goods;
  - the repetitive moments concerning especially the activities of core members of the actor: education, intimate practices;
  - …
#### Example: the social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

- **Territories and places** that structure the social spatiality more or less typical to the family actor. Like the activities of all other social actors, also these of the family actor are spatially situated in appropriate territories where they evolve:

  - places organising the activities of the members of the family actor as well as the interactions between them: private and intimate spheres of reproduction, education, leisure, ... ;
  
  - places specialised in the interaction between the family actor and other actors: “outer/inner interface” of the social actor;
  
  - places localising the agitations of the members of the family in the outer world: working places, social reproduction, leisure;
  
  - ...

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### Example: The social reality of the Lebenswelt of the actor “family”

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

  - **Parents/children languages** (languages used for educative reasons, for reasons of the maintenance of traditions, …);
  - **Intimate languages** between core members of a family actor (languages used mainly in the interactions between children, in the interactions between parents, …);
  - **Languages for formal or informal social encounters** between the family actor and other social actors relevant for the social life of the family actor;
  - “**Administrative languages**” used for the interactions between the members of a family actor and administrative entities relevant for the life of the family actor;
  - …
4th topic
- Life world themes -
The previously stipulated “common cognitive reference frame” is nothing else than an other linguistic expression for the culture of a social actor, a specific form of culture embodied by people, objects, artefacts, signs, etc. that compose a social actor.

In this sense, culture or a specific cultural form

- composes the symbolic or meaning realm of the Lebenswelt of a social actor which:
  - frames (defines, illustrates, describes, explains, …) the specificities and particularities of the social reality of the Lebenswelt
  - in this sense qualifies the naturality of the Lebenswelt for a social actor (i.e. – in the sense of Husserl and Schütz – the meaning horizon of the social actors trust in his/her world as it is and also, more crucially, as it could be imagined);
  - is essential for the maintainance and evolution of the identity and integrity of the social actor.
In other words, in the Lebenswelt of a social actor, the just introduced (and probably other) types of entities possess specific functions and roles - they have a meaning and belong to meaning configurations more or less specific to a given social actor or, contrarily, common to different and even all social actors.

Principal types of such meaning configurations organising the social reality of an actor:

- people, animate agents, personification → “social roles, networks and faces”;
- objects, artefacts → “social environment”;
- activities → “social practices”;
- moments, periods → “social temporality”;
- territories, places → “social spatiality”;
- signs, sign systems → “languages”.

4th topic
Life world themes
The study of the culture of a social actor, in this respect, consists mainly in two complementary aspects:

- the identification, description and classification of themes, *cultural themes* that articulate the meaning realm of a specific cultural form or one of its central configurations;

- the comparison of cultural themes belonging to different cultural forms in order to reconstruct and classify more general (supposed universal) cognitive features of culture.

The study of culture or cultural forms from a semiotic point of view consists in trying to understand:

- the meaning or meaning realms of the practices of a social actor, the languages, the value objects, the histories, …

- in studying specimen, records, samples, … of such social practices, languages, … composing the Lebenswelt

- i.e. in studying them – analogically speaking – like *texts* (broadly speaking) that are documents of the life and the history of a social actor.
4th topic

Life world themes

Types, species of cultural themes …

- “social roles, networks and faces” : themes concerning the “self” and the “other”, the identity, specificity, of a social actor, the internal organization of an actor, the status hierarchies and the social capital bound to a role or a network;

- “social practices” : themes concerning the practical, (broadly speaking) institutional aspects of the doing of a social actor;

- “social environment” : themes concerning value objects (goods, services) relevant for a social actor;

- “social spatiality” : themes concerning the actor’s territoriality;

- “social temporality” : themes concerning the history of the actor;

- “languages” : types of languages, aspects of language composition and use, evolution and changes of language, status and place of language, …
4th topic
Life world themes

Examples: **social roles, networks and faces** : themes concerning the “self” and the “other”, the relationships between people and the consequences of such relationships, etc.

- social status and functions of roles within a social actor or again within a society of social actors

- “social face” (E. Goffman): based on social codes, images and impressions of a person or group of persons (corporal hexis, behaviour, appearance, …);

- social networks (or webs): networks between people or groups and their reproduction creating “small worlds”, “closed worlds”, communities”, “memberships”, … that procure a more or less high social capital (P. Bourdieu) to the concerned people and with respect to other networks;

- social biographies and trajectories: analogically to typical novel scenario (cf. the picaro tradition, the 19th century novel) – the evolution of a person or a group of persons seen through the changing belongings to constituted social networks (small worlds, communities, …);

- etc.
Examples: “social practices”: themes concerning the doing of an actor – all its activities that, dominantly, possess a highly routine and traditional dimension. There are very different views and approaches: 

- studies of the core activities characterising a social actor: governance practices and “intellectual” practices, power practices, (re-)production and consumption practices; communication activities; …

- studies of social practices as life genres: social practices (such as labour, social events, leisure, …) as configuring life forms

- studies of a social practice as problem solving activity presupposing knowledge and practical (through history cumulated) experiences;

- …
Examples: “social environment” : themes concerning the plenty of relevant objects, artefacts, ... but also persons, ideas, ... that constitute the (expected, desired, needed, feared, looked for, ...) environment of the life world of a social actor.

This environment is a valued one, it is characterised – broadly speaking – by objects of any sort which possess a certain value for the social actor;

Valued objects can be goods, products, services, money, possessions, knowledge, experiences, persons, intellectual creations, ... 

Studies on specific themes concerning the social environment of the life world of a social actor are concerned, for instance with

- the different forms and types of values (ranging from emotional, esthetical, moral to epistemic and practical values)
- the acquisition, distribution and circulation of value objects within a social actor.
Semiotics of Culture and intercultural communication

4th topic
Life world themes

Examples: “social spatiality”: themes concerning the actor’s territoriality and its social space such as:

- types and functions of places composing the social space that characterise the life world of a social actor (cf. for instance, S. SCHÜTTE: “The washermen of Benares” (University of Heidelberg 2000) - a very interesting study of the lifeworld of the social actor “washerman” in Benares showing, more particularly, the relationships between the washermen living space, their social activities and social networks);

- the “trajectories” (in the sense of Bourdieu) of members of a social actor within the characterising social space;

- the space as a structuring element of the life world of a social actor for instance:
  - capitalism as a spatial phenomenon,
  - migration as a spatial phenomenon,
  - multiculturalism as a spatial phenomenon,
  - social identity as a spatial phenomenon,
  - …
Examples: “social temporality” : themes concerning the history of the actor as well as its contemporaneous evolution. Typical questions concerning these type of cultural themes are concerned with:

- the interpretation, reconstruction, … of the actor’s own history in order to strengthen his identity, his specificity, his difference;
- the projection of a social actor in an intended future;
- the typical (more or less routine, stereotyped and even institutionalised) rhythmic patterns of the constitutive social practices of a social actor (work/leisure; governance; enculturation/education; …).

Note: the evolution of (parts of) the life world of a social actor:

- is not a part of the (experienced, lived) social temporality of the social actor
- but much more a theory (a theoretical tentative) to explain changes or, more generally speaking, the dynamics of a culture in time (this is the typical investigation style in social history and in historical anthropology)
Semiotics of Culture and intercultural communication

Examples: “languages” : themes concerning the sign and sign systems as well as their uses within the social life world of a social actor. As we will see again in the third lesson, investigations in this type of themes are concerned especially with:

- the different types and forms of languages that are used by a social actor for communication purposes;
- the social distribution of used languages, i.e. their roles and status within the social life world of an actor;
- the language policies used by a social actor for his communication necessities;
- the appropriation and effective use of language resources;
- the similarities and dissimilarities of language resources over different life worlds;
- the evolutionary dynamics of languages.
- Conclusion -
In this first course, we have introduced the notion of Lebenswelt (lifeworld) originally coined by Husserl and introduced in sociology by Schütz.

With the help of a hypothetically assumed “ontological structure” of the Lebenswelt of a social actor, it is possible – so our conviction – to describe, explain and understand more explicitly cultural themes that organise the social reality (the horizon of the social reality) of a social actor, in other words: the specific culture of a social actor.

This is, in our opinion, a necessary step for:

- obtaining more explicit scenarios of life forms of social actors;
- being able to localise, describe and explain more accurately cultural specificities of social actors;
- being able to overcome a too general and also too intuitive level of cultural descriptions;
- being able to compare not only cultural forms but also descriptions of cultural forms;
- being able, finally, to understand with more accuracy forms of cultural evolution within a Lebenswelt or again as a result of the encounter of two or more different Lebenswelten.