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# **THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

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September 1994  
Thesis submitted for the  
degree of Master of Arts**



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## **The Concept of Culture in American Anthropology**

### **Abstract**

This dissertation is a collection of essays on the concept of culture in American cultural anthropology.

Culture has been a key concept in American anthropology but anthropologists have recently been criticised for representing culture as too coherent and historically static. While there is an agreement that culture must have some coherence to have any meaning, too much emphasis on coherence gives the impression that culture is static.

These essays examine this problem by considering the work of leading American anthropologists to whom it has been a central concern. The dissertation assesses the various contributions made by these researchers to what has been an unfolding debate.

It argues that the problem first emerged through Boas's theory of culture history which raised the question: Has culture, in order to have any meaning, to be conceptualised as an integrated, autonomous system? That again raises the question: How can culture as an autonomous system change historically?

These essays suggest that a complete answer to the question has not been given by symbolic anthropology which can be criticised for placing consciousness in a symbolic system outside the world. The dissertation concludes by considering the work of other researchers who propose that the problem might be overcome by placing the conscious social person in a continuous field of social relations. The dissertation argues that the sources of culture are to be sought in human action situated in a field of social relations.

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## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	1
II.	The evolution of culture or the diversity of cultures	4
III.	The work of people, the work of culture	15
IV.	The integration of culture	22
V.	Culture as an autonomous system	32
VI.	History and culture	41
VII.	Interpretive anthropology	50
VIII.	The constitutive view of social relations	61
IX.	Conclusions	81
	Bibliography	82

## I. Introduction

This dissertation is a collection of essays on the concept of culture within American anthropology.

The concept of culture has been a key concept of American anthropology but recently anthropologists have been criticised for their usage of the concept. The critics claim that anthropologists have tended to represent each culture as all too coherent and historically static.<sup>1</sup>

This critique points to a problem with which anthropology has long been faced. While it is generally agreed that culture must have some coherence to have any meaning, too much emphasis on coherence gives the impression that culture is static.

The essays of this dissertation examine this problem by considering the works of leading American anthropologists to whom it has been a central concern. The dissertation assesses the various contributions made by these anthropologists to what has been an unfolding debate.

I follow Ingold (1986a; 1993a) in maintaining that the problem arose with Franz Boas's theory of culture history. By playing down the role of human consciousness in the development of culture and by stressing the historical contingency of each culture, Boas's theory left the question: Has culture, in order to have any meaning, to be conceptualised as an integrated, autonomous system? That again raises the question: How can culture as an autonomous system change historically?

I follow Fabian (1983: chapter 5) in arguing that symbolic anthropology has not given complete answers to these questions. Having restored human consciousness as a force in culture, symbolic anthropology places it in a symbolic system where the world is represented and the question, how did the symbolic system itself arise, is left unanswered.

As Boas developed his theory of culture in opposition to the evolutionism of E.B. Tylor, I begin, in chapter 2, by outlining Tylor's theory of the evolution of culture and contrast it with Boas's notion of the different histories of diverse cultures.

In chapter 3 I again contrast Tylor's idea that culture is the work of rational man with Boas's idea that the man of habit is the work of culture.

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the views expressed by, for example: Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988; Marcus 1989.

Having established the difference between Tylor and Boas, I turn to the questions about the relationship between coherence and history and how they are related to the theories of Boas. While Boas had freed culture from all external constraints his diffusionism threatened to render culture devoid of meaning. The question arises if culture is not integrated in some ways.

In chapter 4 I discuss this question as it is exemplified in the works of Ruth Benedict and Julian Steward. My aim is to show how their solutions differ and also to show that they both have their own limitations. By unsuccessfully grounding culture in the environment, Steward, again, poses the question as to whether culture should not be conceptualised as an autonomous system.

In chapter 5, then, I discuss the articulation of culture as an autonomous system as it is expressed in the works of Alfred Kroeber and Marshall Sahlins. This notion has further relevance for my subsequent concerns with culture and history in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 will be concerned with Sahlins's recent attempts to give culture, conceived as an autonomous system, some historical character. It is argued that Sahlins's attempt fails because it retains the notion of culture as an autonomous system and fails to incorporate the creative character of human action. The conclusion to chapter 6 raises the question if the notion of culture as a meaningful system is incompatible with a notion of meaningful action.

In chapter 7 I examine the conception of culture as a meaningful action expressed in Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology. It is argued that while Geertz offers valuable insights, he limits their value by then placing meaning in socially shared structures of symbols.

I will not be so much concerned with different definitions of culture that anthropologists have given over the years. These are of limited value as is evident from the fact that in 1937 Robert Lowie could still propose a definition overtly, remarkably similar to the one advanced by Tylor in 1871 (see Lowie 1937; Ingold 1993a:210-11). As definitions can hide significant changes, I will be more concerned with what the employment of the concept of culture by different anthropologists tells us about their views of human affairs, and how it is related to other such key concepts as history, man and society. The notions of culture I discuss, all share two fundamental characteristics: that culture is acquired, not innate, and that it is social, in some sense, not just an attribute of the individual.

It is by considering these two notions that I move on to more positive points in the last chapter of this essay. It will be argued here that culture can only be of use in anthropology when we have an adequate conception of the

social. The conception of the social I will argue for, I seek mainly in the work of Tim Ingold while drawing upon insights from other anthropologists who have voiced similar opinions (especially Carrithers 1992). What it involves is to shift the emphasis from studying societies as things, to the study of social life as a process. In other words, instead of asking why different societies take the form they do, we ask what it is about a form of life that makes it social (Ingold 1994b:738). The answer I take from Ingold is, that the essence of sociality lies "...in the *relationships* that bind people together as fellow participants in a life-process" (Ingold 1994b:739). As this, moreover, involves seeking the sources of culture in "...human practices, situated in the relational context of people's mutual involvement in a social world..." (Ingold 1994a:329; see Ingold 1994b:738) consciousness has, firstly, to be seen as a creative force in the world, and, secondly, its embodiment, the social person, has to be located in a *continuous* field of social relations. It is in the social field that the sources of meaning and culture lie.

On one level the chapters of this essay can be read as separate essays on different subjects. On the other hand they are related through their concern with the concept of culture. These concerns I try to bring together in the last main chapter.

There is one point to be made about this essay. It contradicts itself in a major way. Its message, if there is one, is that if we are to understand fully the ideas and meanings we call culture we cannot abstract them from the practices of the people that generate them. Still, that is what is being done here. My only answer to this is, that what is being done now is only setting out some of the course over which anthropology has travelled. To account for the actual steps, and why they were taken, requires a much larger research.



## **II. The Evolution of Culture or the Diversity of Cultures**

In this chapter I will begin by discussing Tylor's theory of the evolution of culture. I follow Ingold (1986a: chapter 2 in particular) in arguing that the integration of Tylor's culture is based on his view that the culture of mankind is one progressive movement. Then I set out Boas's idea that each culture has its own unique history, that is the idea of the diversity of cultures.

### **Tylor: The evolution of culture as one movement**

The idea that mankind is engaged in a continual progressive development was well established in Tylor's days. Tylor found reason to stress the idea of progressive development because it had in his time come under a sustained attack from the degeneration thesis (see Ingold 1986a:31; Tylor 1964 [1865]:157-8). According to the advocates of this thesis, divine intervention had in the beginning placed mankind on some recognisable level of civilisation from which some had subsequently fallen to savagery while others had risen to even higher achievements (Ingold 1986a:31). Tylor was well aware that great civilisations had risen and fallen over the course of time, but maintained that on the whole mankind was marching forward (see Tylor 1903 [1871], I:69). Savagery was for him the beginning of civilisation, not the end, as the degenerationists would have it. To confound the two was for Tylor like confusing the ruins of a house with the material out of which a new house is to be built (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:38; Ingold 1986a:31).

The evolution of culture was, according to Tylor, to follow a lawfully determined, uniform course. Primitive men were, for him, taking the first steps in the construction of culture that was to follow a prescribed plan (Ingold 1986a:31; Tylor 1903 [1871], I:1-5). Tylor's views in this regard are hardly part of any lively debate within anthropology anymore. For a long time now, it has been customary to claim that Tylor's concern with demonstrating a universal evolutionary sequence, through which all cultures must go, has been thoroughly invalidated by the detailed documentation of cultural diffusion (see Steward 1955:14; Lowie 1966 [1917]). This constitutes though, as Ingold (1986a:39) has demonstrated, some misunderstanding of Tylor's views. So much should indeed be evident from the fact that Tylor was, as he himself claimed, concerned with the history of Culture, not the history of different cultures (1903 [1871], I:5). A further indication is that Tylor always used culture in the singular, never in the plural, and often with a capital C (Ingold 1986a:33;

Leopold 1980:53; Stocking 1968:203). Being concerned with the lawlike succession of cultures requires a conception of culture in the plural that was foreign to Tylor.

It is important in this regard to have in mind the kind of evolution Tylor is talking about. If it is now customary to equate ideas of evolution with the work of Charles Darwin (see Horigan 1988:10), it is important to stress that Tylor developed his ideas independently of Darwin and that Tylor's ideas are quite different from Darwin's views (Ingold 1986a:29; Leopold 1980:23, 25).

The notion that the course of cultural evolution can be represented as the branching tree of Darwinian evolution, rests on an analogy between human cultures and the Darwinian organic species (see Sahlins 1968). On this analogy the concepts of culture and population are indissolubly linked, for just as a species, in Darwinian biology, consists of a population of individuals "...each bearing a particular combination of genetically transmitted traits drawn from a common pool, so by analogy a culture must consist of a population of human beings sharing a common heritage of learned attributes" (Ingold 1986a:32-3). If the heritage be referred to as "a culture", it can have no real existence in this view, except as an aggregate of elements carried by the individuals of the population at a particular time (Ingold 1986a:34; see Lowie 1937:269). As every culture is then, like every species, a unique historical event, it follows that the "comparative method" is invalid as a basis for reconstructing the past. The history of culture can be nothing but the paths actually taken by particular populations (Ingold 1986a:34).

There is a passage in Tylor (1903 [1871], I:19), that might lend support to the view that he was proposing to examine evolution in this way; along its many lines as it has been called (see White 1959:119; also Sahlins 1968; Ingold 1986a:33). But if Tylor arranged cultural material on the basis of biological principles, the biological principles in his case were, "...steeped in essentialist taxonomy and Lamarckian orthogenesis, still poised on the threshold of the Darwinian revolution" (Ingold 1986a:32). When Tylor employs biological principles in his cultural studies he does not compare culture, but the culture trait with a biological species (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:8). The notion of biological species Tylor has in mind is the Lamarckian, essentialist conception that Darwin rejected (Ingold 1986a:32). Every new trait is not a further potential for diversity within a species, as Darwinist biology would have it, but the emergence of a new species. A line of culture consists therefore of a chain-like succession of such species, each developing out of its forerunner, being already contained within it, in the pre-Darwinian sense of *evolve* (Ingold 1986a:2, 35-9;

see Williams 1976). Animism contains the seed of all higher religions, just as the tribal law contains the seed of modern law. This is why, Tylor maintained, when looking around the world, "...one could observe the cultural edifice at various stages of completion, and by placing these stages in serial order, it would be possible to reconstruct the entire process by which it was built up" (Ingold 1986a:31). The "lines of culture" Tylor has in mind do thus *not* connect populations with their ancestors, as a part of tracing the process of diversification, but connect particular cultural traits with their forerunners, as a part of tracing the process of evolution (Ingold 1986a:35).

This is then the reason why Tylor placed such importance on the comparative method (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:7; Ingold 1986a:32, 35; Leopold 1980:60). It is instructive here to compare Tylor's ideas with the work of Lamarck. Lamarck's idea, in this regard, was that if populations of living things are thought of as travelling, through the generations, along the same developmental path, then "...the succession of forms assumed in the past will be translated into the diversity of forms apparent in the present" (Ingold 1986a:32). By substituting the cultural trait for species, thus conceived, we have the proposition that, if all human groups are on the same path towards higher civilisation, "...the contemporary customs of supposedly more primitive peoples may legitimately be compared...with those practised in the remote past by the ancient ancestors of the more 'civilized' peoples of today" (Ingold 1986a:32; see Leopold 1980:59). If this be so, then comparison could provide a legitimate basis on which evolutionary laws might be discovered (Ingold 1986a:32; see Tylor 1903 [1871], I:19-20).

If we look at Tylor's own definition that: "Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1903 [1871], I:1), the derivation of the "complex whole" can be conceived in many ways. What Tylor seems to have had in mind is not that these come together in each culture to form any kind of system or structure (Leopold 1980:109). Each culture trait is, for Tylor, a separate strand, a separate species, an example of its species essence. That is, a "line of culture" is, again, the chain-like succession of such species, running the course of evolution from, say, animism to the Church of England. Though one religion may thus be superseded by another more rational one, and one kind of hunting weapon may be replaced by another more effective one, it is obvious that, for example, bows and arrows do not give rise to the Church of England (Ingold 1986a:37). As it takes more than bows and arrows, useful as these are, or the Church of England, to live, there cannot

be simply one line of culture, there must be many, in fact, "...whole *bundle* of lines" (Ingold 1986a:37), corresponding to the enumeration in Tylor's definition. Tylor's "evolution along its many lines" is then but another way of expressing the familiar "evolution stage by stage" (Ingold 1986a:39).

As Tylor's definition does not contain any clear notion of the relations between the discrete strands that make up the complex whole, it could be argued (see Malinowski 1944:29), that Tylor fragments the integrity of living cultures, placing their constituents in an alien evolutionary sequence. The charge is that Tylor was concerned with discrete cultural traits irrespective of their relations with other traits in the wider cultural context, that he did not, to take an example out of context, trace the connections between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. This, it is maintained, is a fragmentary atomism whereas the later practise of assembling cultural elements into integrated cultural wholes, is holism (see Ingold 1986a:42-3). Ingold (1986a:43) has argued that this view is mistaken. The difference between the two, Ingold argues, should be seen as resting on the direction of derivation. In atomism, then, "...the totality is seen to be constituted by the aggregation and interaction of discrete elements each of which exists as a static, independent entity prior to its incorporation...", whereas in holism "...elements have no existence apart from the total, continuous process of which they are but particular points or moments of emergence..." (Ingold 1986a:43). From this perspective Tylor's is surely a holistic vision and the later practise atomistic. What gives Tylor's culture its coherence is its continuous movement as a whole, the process by which the Church of England grew out of animism. Take that away and Tylor's culture falls apart as so many "shreds and patches" (Ingold 1986a:98).

Tylor recognised of course that mankind could be divided into separate populations, which he refers to by such terms as "people", "tribe" and "nation". As he himself stated, Tylor was not concerned with the history of such populations, but with their stage of Culture, the condition of knowledge, religion, art and custom and so on among them (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:5). This Ingold has likened to an exercise in mapping the course of a road along which march successive populations of an advancing army, some in the vanguard, others lagging behind (Ingold 1986a:33). When Tylor characterises his project as the classification and arrangement of the phenomena of culture in a probable order of evolution (1903 [1871], I:6), what he has in mind is something akin to "...placing every cultural object in position on the road, so that the course resembles one of those board games in which each square contains a set of instructions that players must carry out before their pieces are able to move on"

(Ingold 1986a:33). While the course of evolution is thus laid out, according to Tylor, the movements of the players are *not* necessarily determined in the same way (Ingold 1986a:39-40). By disengaging the evolution of culture from the lines of descent of its human bearers, Tylor was able to maintain that the course of evolution can be seen as one preordained path even if the movements of human populations along the path can be seen as many (Ingold 1986a:35; Leopold 1980:110).

The picture that emerges, as Ingold points out (1986a:39-40) is of each human population advancing over the board, picking up some of the cultural objects pertaining to its present position, that have been placed along the road. But the way different populations advance along the road is, for Tylor, an open question. Tylor's evolution, that is, does not rest on the idea that each people invent independently all their cultural traits (Ingold 1986a:40). Invention and diffusion were for Tylor matters of the way in which separate people reached their present point of development; the hard way or the easy way, and not a matter pertaining to the evolution of culture in itself. It was something to be investigated in each instance (Ingold 1986a:39-40; Lowie 1937:72-5; Harris 1969:174-5; see Tylor 1903 [1871], I:48). As the course is, in thought at least, "...already laid out, every invention is really only a discovery - the realization of an immanent possibility - and diffusion is merely discovery at second hand" (Ingold 1986a:40). The ability to invent a trait is already immanent in those who are ready to receive it by diffusion (see Harris 1969:175).

By leaving the ways in which people acquire their cultural traits out of his conception of evolution, Tylor also purged it of everything that seemed accidental. As no law could seemingly account for how a certain trait was obtained by a particular people, by leaving it out the apparent determinacy of the evolutionary process was left unshaken. Not only "...were all individual exemplars of an ethnographic species supposed to embody a common essence, but that essence was conceived to have been immanent in the course of evolution prior to its 'discovery'..." (Ingold 1986a:42).

### **Boas and the idea of diversity**

Boas is credited with providing most of the necessary material for the construction of the modern view of culture and there is no need for me to stress the validity of Boas's criticism of the evolutionism of Tylor and his contemporaries (see Stocking 1968; Stocking 1974a:1; Hatch 1973:4; Lesser 1985 [1981]).

According to Boas's status much has been made of his intellectual development, and the influences his background may have had on his anthropological work. Boas was initially a student of physics and geography, and staunchly materialistic in outlook, but came under the influence of the idealism of the neo-Kantian movement before he turned to anthropology (Harris 1969:263, 267). These two forces could hardly have been more different and understandably they have been used to explain Boas's work (Kroeber 1943:5). His empiricism and general antagonism against grand theories is often attributed to his scientific training (Kroeber 1943; see Lesser 1985a [1981]:17; Harris 1969:250, 278), while the ideas most closely associated with his name, that each culture is unique, and has to be studied on its own terms, are attributed to the neo-Kantian influence (Harris 1969:268-9; see Stocking 1974a:9; Hatch 1973:38-42).

On these grounds Stocking (1968:204) has observed that the main elements of Boas's thinking - historicism, pluralism, holism, behavioural determinism and relativism - were present in his thought from the beginning of his career. Here I want to focus on Boas's historicism and the pluralism and relativism it contains. I will begin by considering Boas's debate with Otis T. Mason and follow Stocking (1974a:2) in maintaining that "...much of Boas' basic anthropological orientation can be extrapolated from the position he took on this issue...". Boas's debate with Mason leads to a discussion of Boas's critique of the comparative method in anthropology. Having thus established Boas's argument for the historical method in anthropology I will discuss his own employment of it in his work on the diffusion of myths.

Boas's debate with Mason concerned, on the practical level, how ethnographic specimens should be arranged in museums, with the substantive issue being how to account for the occurrence of similar inventions in areas widely apart (Stocking 1974a:1-2; Boas 1974a [1887]). Boas gives as the leading idea of Mason, "...his attempt to classify human inventions and other ethnological phenomena in the light of biological specimens" (Boas 1974a [1887]:61). Thus Mason maintains, says Boas, that they can be, and here Boas quotes Mason: "...divided into families, genera, and species. They may be studied in their several ontogenies (that is, we may watch the unfolding of each individual thing from its raw material to its finished production)...." (1974a [1887]:61). This research method, Boas notes, is founded on the idea that, if no connections exist between people widely apart, then the similarities of inventions can only be explained by the psychic unity of mankind, on the axiom

that like causes produce like effects (1974a [1887]:61). It is on this axiom, says Boas, that Mason bases his work. It is apparent from the way Mason has arranged the ethnological collections. His principal aim, Boas says, the study of each invention among all the peoples of the world (1974a [1887]:63), shows through in his arranging the museum according to objects, and not according to the tribes to whom they belong (1974a [1887]:61).

As Stocking observes (1974a:2), Boas rejects Mason's principle by pointing out that while like causes have like effects, like effects can have different causes. Having observed that, Boas continues (1974a [1887]:62-3):

But from a still another point of view we cannot consider Professor Mason's method a progress of ethnological researches. In regarding the ethnological phenomenon as a biological specimen, and trying to classify it, he introduces the rigid abstractions species, genus, and family into ethnology, the true meaning of which it took so long to understand. It is only since the development of evolutionary theory that it became clear that the object of study is the individual, not abstractions from the individual under observation. We have to study each ethnological specimen individually in its history and in its medium...A mere comparison of forms cannot lead to useful results, though it may be a successful method of finding problems that will further the progress of science. The thorough study must refer to the history and development of the individual form, and hence proceed to more general phenomena.

What is at issue is not simply the method of classification, but the kind of explanation that lies behind the classification (Boas 1974a [1887]:62; Stocking 1974a:2). Boas is arguing that in Mason's classificatory scheme there is inherent a specific kind of explanation, that of orthogenetic evolution, according to which Civilisation is the unfolding of the seed contained in savagery. It is on this basis that Mason's analogy rests.

Boas agrees with Mason that anthropology should try to understand the laws behind human development. But having rejected the view that behind every culture trait there is an essence, whose working out is the process of evolution, it follows that anthropology has to investigate ethnological phenomena, "...in their historical development and geographical distribution" (1974a [1887]:63). If the final aim of anthropology, Boas says, is to discover the laws of the psychological development of mankind, that can only be done by a preliminary study of the "surroundings" in which the development, through different cultural traits, expresses itself. As the surroundings are, moreover, subject to change, the study has to be historical (Boas 1974a

[1887]:63-4). To discover the development of different culture traits, the history "...of the people, the influence of the regions through which it passed on its migrations, and the people with whom it came into contact, must be considered" (1974a [1887]:64). For this kind of study, furthermore, the tribal arrangement of museum specimens is the only satisfactory one. If the object of study are researches on psychology, the method is the study of surroundings. As these are physical and ethnical, the museum arrangements have to be so as well.

This can be viewed as the first point in Boas's critique of evolutionism. He was to return to this matter in his essay (1940b [1896]) on the limitations of the comparative method in anthropology. There Boas begins by observing that anthropology had discovered that laws exist that govern the development of human society, laws applicable to each and every society. In accordance with this, Boas notes, anthropologists had in recent years moved away from historical studies and towards the study of these very laws. Instead of accounting for similarities between different peoples by historical connections, they were subsumed under the common workings of the human mind. This again is used, says Boas, to support the idea that the human mind obeys the same laws everywhere.

This kind of research, Boas goes on, one that compares similar cultural phenomena from various parts of the world, in order to uncover the uniform history of their evolution, assumes that the same phenomenon has everywhere developed in the same manner. Herein lies the flaw in the argument, for no such proof can be given. Even the most cursory review of the literature, says Boas, shows that the same phenomena can develop in many different ways. Instead we must, says Boas, demand that the causes from which like effects stem be investigated in each instance and comparison restricted to the cases that have been proven to be effects of the same causes. Before extended comparison can be made we have to prove the comparability of the material under investigation. If the object of investigation, argues Boas, is to find the processes by which culture has developed, the comparative method will not do (1940b [1896]:273-6).

There exists, though, another and a much safer method (1940b [1896]:276):

A detailed study of customs in their relation to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes, affords us almost always a means of determining with considerable



accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their development.

Instead of the comparative method Boas argues for the historical method (1940b [1896]:277). Even if the immediate achievements of the historical method are no more than the histories of the cultures of diverse tribes, Boas says, this is a necessary first step to solving the questions of general laws of the development of culture (1940b [1896]:278-9). Only by comparing histories of development, argues Boas, can general laws be found, and here the historical method is the sound method, because instead of deducing from a hypothetical model the course of cultural evolution, as is the essence of the comparative method, the historical method induces the course of evolution from actual cultural history (1940b [1896]:279; see Hatch 1973:43-4; Lowie 1937:145; Herskovits 1953:51-2).

In applying his own advice in his work on mythology in North America, Boas, then, started out with the premise that diffusion, rather than independent invention, was the more likely explanation for the existence of the same tales in areas widely apart (Boas 1940c [1896]:428). The most important proof of dissemination, as Boas saw it, was if connections could be established between the areas through which the story might have travelled. If Indians on the West coast and further inland had the same stories, diffusion was proven if elements of the story could be found in the area in between (see Boas 1940c [1896]:425-9).

From his studies Boas reached the conclusion, that in the mythology of any one tribe of North America there were embodied elements from all over the continent. It was a proof to him, "...that dissemination of tales has taken place all over the continent" (1940c [1896]:433). Similarities of culture are more likely to be due to diffusion rather than to independent evolution (1940c [1896]:434).

Boas argues that if it is the case that mythologies are not organic growths, not independent inventions, but have only come about by the accretion of foreign material, then the original idea behind every story must be at best obscure if not irrelevant (Boas 1940c [1896]:429-30). As elements occur variously combined in various areas, they must have been embodied ready-made in the myths, and may never have had any meaning, at least not to those among whom they are now found (Boas 1940d [1891]:445). The ultimate cause of myths cannot simply be found in the processes of thought of individual human beings - its history not seen as the unfolding of a seed existing in the

human mind - but only in the complex histories of diffusion of each and every story. If this is extended to other aspects of culture we see that each and every trait has such complex history that any hope of straightforward universal evolutionary schemes is gone (Hatch 1973:47-8). If we want to understand how the culture of mankind developed, we "...must understand the process by which the individual culture grew..." (Boas 1940c [1896]:436). The individual cultures, in turn, must have such a complex and in fact unique history on their own as to render any hope of evolutionary schemes fanciful (see Hatch 1973:48).

It is important to emphasise the methodological and philosophical issues behind Boas's approach and how his argument hangs together. Constructively Boas makes four claims. First, he insists that any definitions and distinctions should be present in the material at hand rather than being put on it by the investigator (Boas 1940e [1914]:454-5). Instead of thus approaching the material equipped with rigid abstractions the anthropologist should, secondly, base her research on each individual case and not on generalisations (Boas 1940c [1896]:435). From these she must, thirdly, *induce* their, fourth, *actual history*, (Boas 1940e [1914]:457) rather than deducing from her own generalisations their hypothetical development. This should all lead us to establish the processes at work in and behind diffusion, providing an explanation for the situation as we find it today rather than a model of how it should have been (1940e [1914]:484).

Alexander Lesser (1985 [1981]) has pointed out that Boas's theory of culture history resembles Darwin's theory of descent with modification. We do in fact have it on Boas's own admission that he not only saw biological evolution as scientifically valid, but as the first principle of anthropology (Boas 1974b [1889]:67; see Lesser 1985 [1981]:28-9). What Boas found most important in evolutionary theory was its way of seeing every living being as the product of a historical development. This, he maintained, had opened the natural sciences to the historical method and provided ethnology with a justification for existence (Boas 1974b [1889]:67). In arguing against the idea of orthogenesis, the idea that history is but the unfolding of essential types out of their embryonic seeds, Boas is apparently following Darwin's theory of evolution (see Boas 1974a). The implications, as Lesser points out, are the same for Boas and Darwin. Just as each species, as we find it today, is, for Darwin, the product of a long evolution, so "...every culture is the result of a long history...[that] involves a great complexity of events, accidents of history, and interrelation of factors" (Lesser 1985[1981]:30-31). If Darwin's theory of

evolution expressed the continuity and change of living forms through descent with modification, so Boas's theory "...of the historical evolution of cultures served to express their continuity through time and their diversification and change..." Boas's culture history expresses the idea of "*continuity with change*" (Lesser 1985a [1981]:31; see Ingold 1986a: chapter 2; Harris 1969:295).

Tylor's theory was steeped in essentialist biology. It rested on the assumption that each species, each cultural trait, has its essential nature, whose working out is the process of evolution. This is the justification for arranging them in hierarchical order from simple, early, to complex, late. In arguing against the idea of universal evolution and for a strong emphasis on the different histories of different cultures, Boas is also arguing for a strong sense of relativism. To use the comparison with Darwin again, it can be said that cultures, for Boas, cannot be arranged in a hierarchical order for the same reason that Darwin's organic species cannot be arranged in a hierarchical order. Each is a unique event (see Ingold 1986a: chapter 2).

### **III. The Work of People, the Work of Culture**

In this chapter I will further contrast the ideas of Tylor and Boas. I emphasise the point that Tylor's idea is that culture is the work of rational man while for Boas the man of habit is the work of culture.

#### **The work of people**

It was Tylor's conviction, and one he was not alone in, that evolution was a progress towards the better, that civilised man was "...not only wiser and more capable than the savage but also better and happier..." (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:31; see Hatch 1973:13-21). This idea refers to the way in which different people advance along the route of culture. Here Tylor's case rests on his assumption that man is fundamentally a rational animal, seeking better conditions in the world and better understanding of the world (see Hatch 1973). Man is for Tylor actively engaged in the world even if the nature of his engagement is an indication of how far he has advanced along the route of evolution. This is why it was so important for Tylor to disengage man from the evolution of culture. They have to be kept separate as man's advancement rests on him freely employing his intellect, while the course he will march, the evolutionary path of Culture, is still supposed to be laid out. Paradoxically maybe, the degree of culture people live with is, for Tylor, their achievement, it is not a condition to which they have been sentenced by culture (Leopold 1980:38). In Tylor's definition of culture the stress is on the capabilities acquired by man as a member of society, rather than on the habits it also refers to (see Ingold 1993a).

Tylor's theory about the rise of religion through animism is a case in point here (1903 [1871], I). According to Tylor the belief in souls is the "primitive's" clever way of accounting for such diverse experiences as dreams and ghosts. It is a way of making sense of the world. If animism, having been established, then limits the way the "primitive" sees the world and structures his experience, that is for Tylor an unstable condition. The "primitive's" reason will lead him to see the almost logical contradictions in animism and his drive to make sense of the world will lead him to find a better solution.

As noted above the integration of Tylor's culture rests on the assumption that history possesses a simple progressive character. Tylor then grounds the progressive character of history in man's rational faculties, his natural inclination to improve his conditions and make better sense of the world.

Culture is, for Tylor, integrated as a single continuous progressive movement. Cultural evolution is lawful because it is grounded in the nature of the universal, rational man.

But this is, as Boas amongst others was to show, inadequate, and for many reasons. If the "primitive" and the "civilised" are of the same nature the evolutionary distance between them becomes troublesome. How are we to explain that the "civilised" man has grown up, while the "savage" remains a child, if they are at the same time postulated to be of the same nature? To achieve this Tylor has to suppress time with the consequence that travels in space become travels in time (Fabian 1983: chapter 1). If the "savage" is literally a child (Tylor 1903 [1871], I:31), travels to "savage land" are also a return to childhood (Fabian 1983: chapter 1). This is to essentialise both the "savage" and the "civilised" and points to the implicit part racism plays in Tylor's cultural evolutionism. In the end, in this perspective, there can be no other explanation for the "savage's" impoverished state, compared with that of "civilised" man, than his inherent inadequacy.

There is another point here concerning the individualism that lies in this evolutionist conception. One of the basic tenets of classical evolutionism is that "...the collective life of mankind is but the life of the particular man writ large, a passage from childhood to maturity" (Ingold 1986a:112). On this assumption human purposes, driving humans along the path of progress, could be seen as underscored by the nature of the universal man, as implied in the notion of psychic unity. Tylor's theory, that is, is based on a belief in a natural individual. But if we reject Tylor's suppression of time, how are we then to account for the differences we observe between different peoples of the world? Boas's answer is that people are the work of culture and by that Boas substitutes the encultured man of habit for Tylor's universal man of reason.

### **The work of culture**

In the second half of Boas's career, problems of the internal development of individual cultures came to occupy his attention. Boas was in fact from early on concerned with cultural wholes, as for example in his exchanges with Mason, but his own anthropological work was, paradoxically, based on the analysis of discrete elements (Stocking 1974a:5).

One obvious reason for this is that Boas used diffusionism to criticise evolutionism perhaps to the effect of overemphasising the accidental character of existing cultures (Stocking 1974a:5-6; see Sahlins 1976b:68). More

specifically, we can say, that by rejecting the idea that culture undergoes an internal, *organic* growth that is part of the idea of orthogenesis, Boas stressed the historical contingency of each culture (Stocking 1974a:5-6).

In stressing the diffusion of culture traits Boas in fact undermined the notion of culture as a meaningful whole that was part of his intellectual heritage. As Boas himself argued, if cultural elements occur variously combined in various areas, they must have been assimilated into the cultures where we find them ready-made and they may then never have had any meaning, at least not for those among whom they are now found (Boas 1940d [1891]:445). By extending this and stating it a bit more forcefully, we can say: If culture is but a more or less arbitrary collection of discrete traits, associated only by historical accident, the ideas behind each trait will be lost and culture must be devoid of meaning (Hatch 1973:62; Stocking 1974:6).

This was surely not acceptable to Boas as he carried with him the idea of each culture being a meaningful whole. The path to Boas's solution to this problem is contained in his conclusions concerning the diffusion of myths. If the ultimate cause of any myth is only to be found in its complex history, then by extension, culture cannot be understood as the product of the natural mental processes of the individual. Culture must be understood then as a result of its own historical principles. It is, in other words, an emergent system (Hatch 1973:47-8).

An early indication of what Boas is getting at is his article on 'Alternating sounds' (1974d [1889]). "Alternating sounds" was the phrase used to refer to a characteristic, thought to be prevalent in many "primitive" languages, that they did not distinguish properly between sounds. Boas bases his solution on the contention that the objective world is at base continuous, but is divided up by man in perception. This division is not simply based on some inborn structure of the human mind, it is learnt. New sensation is comprehended by means of similar sensations received in the past. This explains, says Boas, the idea of alternating sounds. Far from being inherent in the languages under study, alternating sounds reflect the way in which the philologists themselves comprehend sounds unfamiliar to them; a comprehension dependent on the native language of the philologist. Alternating sounds, Boas says, are "...in reality alternating apperceptions of one and the same sound" (1974d [1889]:76, 74-5).

It was on this psychological level that Boas increasingly came to locate the integration of culture. The effort was based on Boas's observation, that there seemed to be in "...all men a tendency to classify phenomena" (Stocking

1974a:7). Boas apparently thought that at the deepest level this was expressed in some broadly defined categories that were universal, but "...except at this very general psychological level Boas saw the tendency to categorization expressed in diversity rather than uniformity..." (Stocking 1974a:7; see Boas 1938 [1911]:154). Culture, as the categories of thought that structure experience, becomes a name for diversity rather than uniformity.

The categories of thought, says Boas, structure the way we see the world and think about it, and, hence, the way in which we react to it (see Ingold 1993a:219; Hatch 1973:51). Accordingly, Boas wants to define culture now (1938 [1911]:149), as: "the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually..." Boas is clearly moving away from viewing culture as an aggregate of behavioural elements. The behavioural elements are no longer seen as independent, they are said to have a structure (1938 [1911]:149). Their structure is though not seen as resulting from the integration of the behaviour elements in question. Instead, culture more and more comes to stand for the categories of thought, and as these are supposed to inform every action and reaction, underscore understanding and behaviour, the "structure" of a culture and the integration of its people is based on the categories informing every activity, and being shared by everyone that belongs to the culture. Culture is a way of thinking and acting that is shared by its members. Therein lies also the difference between groups, says Boas. If the basis of thought rests in the rise to consciousness of the contents of the categories in which experience is classified, then the "...difference in the mode of thought of primitive man and that of civilized man seems to consist largely in the differences of character of the traditional material with which the new perception manifests itself" (1938 [1911]: 198-9).

It is important to note that culture is, for Boas, only located in the individual mind, and not in some supra-individual entity (1938 [1911]:55). Still, it is not the product of native intelligence. As culture does not arise from within the human being, it must come to him ready made from without. Man learns it rather than creates it; his behaviour and beliefs reflect his cultural tradition (Hatch 1973:49). Culture comes before the individual even as it itself is the product of history (Stocking 1974a:7). The reason is that the categories of thought never rise into consciousness so as to be evaluated, and when they do so, evaluation can only be on the basis of the categories themselves (Boas 1938 [1911]:190). Herein lies also the most fundamental source of the integrity of each culture: its underlying categories are a priori in that they develop in each

individual and in the whole people entirely sub-consciously, even as they are still fundamental in forming our beliefs and actions (Stocking 1974a:7-8). Culture is the habitual way a people have of comprehending the world and subsequently acting upon it.

There is also a secondary foundation for the integration of culture. As there can be no conscious motives for many of our actions, says Boas, there develops a tendency to invent the motives that may determine them. Customary behaviour is made the subject of secondary explanations. These can have nothing to do with the historical origin of the behaviour in question, as the origin is forever obscured. The secondary explanations are but inferences based upon the general knowledge possessed by the people (Boas 1938 [1919]:205-209; Stocking 1974a:7). From which follows, that rationality cannot be the reason why people hold on to or reject their cultural traditions and social institutions. Instead of reason Boas puts emotion (Hatch 1973:53; Ingold 1986a:230). If Tylor accounted for the "savage's" backwardness by referring it to his childlike intelligence, Boas maintains that the resistance to change "... is not by any means dictated by conscious reasoning, but primarily by the emotional effect of the new idea which creates a dissonance with the habitual" (Boas 1938 [1911]:209). The custom is obeyed so often and so regularly "...that the habitual act becomes automatic; that is to say, its performance is ordinarily not combined with any degree of consciousness" (1938 [1911]:209).

Boas is here arguing for a staunch cultural determinism. Instead of Tylor's universal and rational man, Boas is substituting the emotional man of habit. By this determinism the autonomy of culture as a specific subject matter and a force in human affairs is also raised. Culture becomes irreducible to any external restraints be they psychology, biology or the environment (Boas 1938 [1911]:137, 174-5). Boas's cultural determinism is, as Hatch has observed (1973:49), related to the development of Boas's view of culture as an emergent system. That is, Boas's cultural determinism is linked to his concern with culture as an integrated totality.

The roots of Boas's cultural determinism are often traced to his associations with the neo-Kantians (Hatch 1973:42). Boas was, as Stocking's (see Stocking 1974a:1) extensive studies have shown, greatly influenced by the neo-Kantian movement. Especially he seems to have adopted Wilhelm Dilthey's separation of *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, and used it as a springboard for the declaration of the autonomy of cultural facts (Ingold 1986a:92; Harris 1969:268-70; Hatch 1973:42; Stocking 1968:152-4). Many of Boas's programmatic statements, furthermore, echo the views of leading neo-



Kantians. There is, for example, a resemblance in the neo-Kantian suggestion that the historian should approach his subjects from within and Boas's concern with getting inside other peoples' heads to uncover there the patterns of cultural meanings (Ingold 1986a:91-2; see Harris 1969:269).

But as Ingold (1986a:93) points out, this is slightly misleading for it is not entirely clear what the idea of looking at the activity of people from the inside entails. We must in fact, as Ingold continues, ask: "Inside what?" (1986a:93). For Boas the social world is made up of "...autonomous individuals, each of which is the bearer of a unique pattern of cultural elements drawn from a common heritage. These elements, lodged within the individual's mind, direct thought and action" (Ingold 1986a:93). To uncover what makes people behave the way they do, one is then to investigate into the contents of the mind of each and every individual. According to Boas the individuals are moreover largely unaware of these contents, else they would cease to be bound within their cultural tradition. Their consciously held and expressed thoughts are also to be ignored, as these are no more than secondary elaborations, rationalisations, not the real motives behind peoples' doings (Ingold 1986a:93).

This is not exactly what the neo-Kantians were concerned with. Their agenda has recently been revived in what is known as the anthropology of experience that draws its inspiration specifically from the work of Dilthey (see Bruner 1986a; Turner 1986). His major concern was with what he called *Erlebnis*, lived experience, or that which has been lived through (Bruner 1986a:3). To that end he made a distinction between *mere experience* and *an experience* (Turner 1986:35). The former refers to the passive acceptance of events, while the latter extends to the shaping of them by "...active agents in the historical process who construct their own world" (Bruner 1986a:12). If the former is something passed through, the latter is something truly lived through.

It may be admitted that Boas's work constitutes a Kantian problem: it is a critique of pure reason. But there is hardly any conception of Dilthey's *an experience* in Boas's anthropology. His culture refers to the categories that underscore and structure experience and the behaviour that follows from experience thus structured. Culture, rather than being a subjectively perceived whole (as Hatch 1973:42 maintains), is to Boas more like the whole that structures perception. As these structures usually do not enter into consciousness Boas's focus is on that which remains hidden from people. This may be characterised as the way in which they pass through life, but can hardly be extended to something being lived through in Dilthey's sense. Culture is fundamentally, for Boas, not something people actively shape, nor so is their

life. To him behaviour reflects cultural traditions, but plays only an accidental, and equally insignificant, part in shaping them.

In fact, as Ingold has argued (1986a:191-2; also 1990), Boas's culture has an interesting similarity to the neo-Darwinian notion of genetic codes. There are five elements here. First, culture, like the code, most importantly carries instructions as to how to act and react.

Second, the most elementary fact about human activity, according to Boas, is the degree to which it is moulded by tradition. Man, as a creature of habit, devotes his life to carry out the traditional project he has absorbed from the heritage of his population and which he then passes on to the next generation, in much the same way as organisms exist to reproduce their genes in neo-Darwinian biology (Ingold 1990).

Third, as culture is intensely conservative every innovation will be preserved and replicated. There is a cumulative build-up of variation that provides the material for endless diversification of cultural forms, analogous with descent with modification, through combination of various traits in individuals and populations.

Fourth, as man is, to Boas, neither deliberately inventive nor rationally selective, the only possible source of historical change is, as in neo-Darwinian biology, chance: "...the occasional, arbitrary and apparently unmotivated 'miscopying' of elements of tradition in the process of intergenerational transcription" (Ingold 1986a:191). By thus "...invoking the agency of chance, Boas could reconcile the ubiquity of cultural change with the 'iron hold' of tradition" (Ingold 1986a:191) and, finally, banish teleology, and consciousness, from culture history just as Darwin had banished teleology from biology.

For Tylor's universal evolution of culture Boas substitutes the different histories of diverse cultures. And for Tylor's universal man of reason, Boas substitutes the encultured man of habit. But by this Boas raised two problems: First, the radical diffusionism Boas argued for in his polemic against evolutionism leaves the impression that culture is but an accidental aggregate of discrete elements. This poses the question if culture, in order to have any meaning, has not to be seen as an integrated whole, and then in what ways it can be so conceived? The ways in which Benedict and Steward answer this are discussed in the next chapter, and the ways in which Kroeber and Sahlins answer this are at issue in chapter 5. Secondly, by invoking "the agency of chance" in the development of culture, Boas raised the question if history is nothing but a stream of unconnected events? This is at issue in chapter 6.

#### IV. The Integration of Culture

In the second decade of this century American anthropologists had defeated evolutionism and established diffusionism as the "hero of the plot" (Lowie 1966 [1917]; see Boas 1940f [1920]; Stocking 1976:13-14). Accordingly they turned their attention to other issues and by the 1920s Boas had defined a new research agenda, reflected in the work of a number of his students. It consisted in turning away from tracing the distribution of traits between cultures to studying the process of configurations within individual cultures (Yans-Mclaughlin 1986:187-8). Boas's own 'The Methods of Ethnology' (1940f [1920]) in many ways signalled this shift in emphasis away from diffusionism and towards the inner development of each culture (see Stocking 1976:15).

At the same time the problems that inhere in the radical nominalism that goes with too much emphasis on the diffusion of culture traits had come apparent. This strand of thought reached its culmination in Robert Lowie's *Primitive Society* which included the catch-phrase of culture being a "planless hodgepodge" (1921:428). This idea does not rest easily with that part of Boas's intellectual heritage which stressed that each culture is a whole. In addition there seems to have been some feeling in the air around 1930 that each culture represented a specific unity and uniqueness, that could not be captured by tracing the diffusion of cultural elements (Mead 1959:xviii). The primary concern of American anthropologists in the 1930s became the integration of cultural elements into whole cultures (see Hatch 1973:74-6).

Boas's theory left two paths open along which his followers could seek ways in which to express the notion that cultures are integrated. Boas himself stressed the unconscious workings of the mind, that is psychology, and this was the road Ruth Benedict travelled (see Stocking 1974a). But Boas also recognised, through the notion of "possibilism" (Ellen 1982) the limiting constraints the environment has on the development of every culture, opening the way to integrate culture through its relations with its geographical setting. And this road Julian Steward was to travel (see Hatch 1973:208-12). Here I want to discuss the concerns with the integration of culture as exemplified in the work of Benedict and Steward. My aim is twofold: first to show the radically different ways in which integration can be thought of depending on the other questions being pursued at the same time. Benedict's solution rests on psychologising and personifying culture. It threatens to reduce cultural studies to psychology and eliminates history. Steward's solution on the other hand rests

in the end on an environmental determinism that, while it can cope with historical changes, renders culture meaningless.

### **Benedict's patterns of culture**

I want to begin by linking Benedict's concerns with the increasing role of fieldwork in anthropology. It can be clearly envisioned in Boas's introduction to Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*: "The occupation with living cultures has created a stronger interest in the totality of each culture. It is felt more and more that hardly any trait of culture can be understood when taken out of its general setting" (Boas 1935:xii). Some of these concerns are present in the works of Margaret Mead, all based on more or less extensive fieldwork. With regard to the Samoa she said that each primitive people selected their way of life and that this selection was their unique contribution to the history of the human spirit (Mead 1928:18). In her study of sex and temperament she claimed that each people emphasises a different sector of the whole arc of human potentialities (Mead 1935:xiii). These last words were directly influenced by Benedict, and it was Benedict that was in the forefront and developed to its fullest the notion of the integration of culture so prominent in the work of American anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s (Mead 1959:xviii).

While it is customary to view Benedict's work as if it were primarily concerned with integration (see Hatch 1973:76), I want to approach it with the idea in mind that it has also a lot to do with cultural diversity and difference (Carrithers 1992:16; see Geertz 1988: chapter 5). There are two reasons for this. First, integration is no simple idea and may be thought of in many different ways. Second, while diffusionism may be contradictory to any serious concern with integration, it cannot account for cultural diversity and difference, except in a superficial sense. Evolutionism and diffusionism were largely debated with regard to how to account for cultural similarities in areas widely apart, as exemplified in Boas's exchanges with Mason. For Benedict the puzzle was exactly the opposite: How to account for radical cultural differences in areas closely together. Here it is important to note that the problem facing Benedict in her book was not only of a theoretical nature. Aspects of it arose out of her fieldwork among the Pueblo Indians. The peculiar and perplexing fact that Benedict faced was that while the Pueblos lived close to their neighbours, were of the same biological stock, and with no geographical hindrances in the way, they were still so strikingly different (Benedict 1959:251, 254). The problem, for Benedict, was twofold. First: How are

cultures integrated? Second: How can cultures that share many cultural traits be so different?

The central idea of *Patterns of Cultures* is variability and selection. Variability is the idea that there are many cultural traits in the world that each and every people can acquire and elaborate, just as there are many interests in life each and every individual can choose from. "In culture...", Benedict said, we must also "...imagine a great arc on which are ranged the possible interests..." (1935:24) a culture may adopt. Each culture can obviously not choose all of them, any more than any individual can choose all of the possible interests his culture provides. Then it would become exactly the planless hodgepodge Benedict was avoiding, it would lose any sense of a centre from which choice could be made. In cultural life, as in the life of the individual, selection is necessary (1935:23). Each culture, says Benedict, chooses some among the traits available, its identity depending upon its "...selection of some segments of this arc" (1935:24).

This is clearly not enough: there is still the possibility that two cultures, by some chance, had chosen the same traits and should therefore, by the logic so far developed, be the same culture. Here is where Benedict introduces the idea of pattern. The diversity of culture, she writes, "... results not only from the ease with which societies elaborate or reject possible aspects of existence. It is due even more to a complex interweaving of cultural traits" (1935:37). The final form of any cultural trait goes way far beyond its original impulse and depends on how it is integrated into the existing culture. The result is that (1935:46):

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportions to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behavior take more and more congruous shape.

Culture selects from among the possible traits in the surrounding regions those which it can use and modifies them into conformity with its demands, says Benedict. This is not a process of which the culture's individual members are conscious. "What was at first no more than a slight bias in local form and techniques expressed itself more and more forcibly, integrated itself in more and more definite standards..." (1935:48). All the behaviour is remade

over into consistent patterns in accordance with unconscious canons of choice that develop within the culture (1935:48).

We can distinguish between two mechanisms here. Each culture has its favourite customs, like the acquisition of wealth in the West for example. The individuals tend automatically to focus on these, hence they become ever more dominant. Secondly, by temperament some individuals are more adapted to their culture. They become more successful and influential and leave a stronger impression on their culture than the rest, and direct it even further in the direction it was already moving (Hatch 1973:77).

This is still hardly satisfactory; there is no indication of what it is exactly that guides the selection of traits and their subsequent modification. Even if the choice is not made consciously by any of the many members of a culture, it must still be guided by some principle. Now, it was stated before that each culture is more than the sum of its parts as these are related. Here we can note a significant shift in Benedict's argument. This "more" is no longer the interrelations between elements. Instead Benedict argues that behind every culture there is a basic psychological attitude, the "more" becomes the temperament underlying every culture (Caffrey 1989:155-7). The Zunis are Apollonian, the Kwakiutl Dionysian and so on. Culture is personality writ large. Differences between cultures can be explained like differences between individuals: like an individual each culture tends to have a unique temperament (Hatch 1973:80).

This attitude, embedded in each functioning individual member of the culture provides the standard by which cultural traits are chosen and also the way in which they are modified to fit the whole, says Benedict. As it does not rest on any conscious reasoning on behalf of the members of the culture, the attitude is at bottom emotional in nature. Being Apollonian is not being rational, but downplaying emotions, while being Dionysian is not being irrational, but highlighting emotions. Rationality has nothing to do with it in itself. Some people may highlight the acquisition of wealth, or the development of technology, but that is just their selection from the great arc, no more rational or useful in any absolute sense than those who emphasise religion and ritual (Hatch 1973:84). Each culture is unique in its own right. The difference between them is difference in kind, not in degree (Benedict 1935:52). Cultures differ because each has certain goals toward which its behaviour is directed. Cultures are oriented in different directions, "...travelling along different roads in pursuit of different ends..." (1935:223).

To indicate that Benedict is not merely interested in making the point that culture is integrated, it is instructive to compare the word she uses, *pattern*, with the concept chosen by the English functionalists, who were concerned with many of the same questions (see Stocking 1976). They used the word *system*, or *structure*, in expressing the idea that culture, or society, is more than the sum of its parts. The idea is that there are systematic relations between the parts to the extent that change in one influences all the other parts. This is not Benedict's idea. Her notion of integration between elements is fairly weak; what keeps them together is more what they share than what binds them: the attitude behind them that gives them all the same colour. A culture has, for Benedict, a psychological and aesthetic consistency. We can well imagine a trait or two being lost from a culture's selection without any fundamental changes to the other elements. This implies that the attitude as such exists prior to, and even independently of, the traits; that it is even not cultural. While the former seems indeed to be the case, in Benedict's conception, to make the latter assumption is mistaken. Culture should rather be seen as the attitude, and the traits as peripheral to it, possibly not part of it. What matters is not what people do, but how they do it: that is their culture.

The elements of culture, for Benedict, are thus not integrated as they are for functionalist anthropology. That is to say, the seed of integration can, for Benedict, not rest in the traits themselves, nor in the relations between different traits. As the integration of culture is furthermore for Benedict not a process people consciously take an active part in, there is hardly but one thing left: Culture is, for Benedict, integrated to the extent that it is itself personified.

We can now see that Benedict's view, while still sharing many attributes with Boas's view, is significantly different. If culture was for Boas the categories that structure experience, the categories can hardly be said for him to be actively selecting one thing or another. The diffusion of traits is more or less an accidental affair. In contrast, for Benedict it is the culture's attitude that selects and modifies its elements. The *patterns* of culture are literally the patterns of *Culture*: it creates them, makes them what they are.

This may be the right time to evoke a metaphor Benedict uses to make her point, an Indian proverb saying that in the beginning every people were given a cup to dip into the well of life. What is important here is that, for Benedict, culture is the cup and not the content. We can still have the Boasian distribution of traits, some of the contents may get spilled and some other may find their way into the cup, but the cup remains the same (Benedict 1935:21-2). The only changes that really matter, must at the same time be fundamental:

culture, just like a cup, can be broken, but then it is completely destroyed. The boundaries between cultures must likewise be complete, there is nothing in between two cultures, and they do not overlap (Carrithers 1992:14-5). If the contents of one are from time to time poured over into another, that is but like changing outer garb; each and every cup remains the same.

This is to suspend culture in time and space: each is fundamentally an isolated entity onto itself. The origin of each culture must remain as mysterious as related in the Indian proverb: the cultures of the world were literally handed down in the beginning. As the basic psychological attitude in no way inheres in the traits themselves or their association, but must be prior to both, Benedict can have no genuine theoretical interest in actual historical happenings, nor even the transmission of traits. Her work must take place in a timeless suspension, bringing together, old and new, the beliefs and practices of the people under study to show how they are all affected by the framework that lies behind them (Carrithers 1992:16). This is evident from Benedict's work on the patterns of Japanese culture (1967 [1946]). There she brings together such diverse things as chrysanthemum and swords, covering more than three centuries from the Tokugawa period to the time of writing, to show how they all display the same basic attitude and ideas. That can only be done by collapsing the dimension of time into a single instant, an eternal present (Carrithers 1992:16).

I can now show a similarity between Benedict and Tylor. If a specific trait is for Tylor an example of its essential type, so for Benedict swords and chrysanthemum are examples of the essential type Japanese culture. Instead of each trait having its own sequence of unfolding, as for Tylor, each culture has for Benedict its own unique idea of which its actual history is but an example. This said, we see that even if Benedict was troubled with a Boasian problem, and even if she had his (Boas 1935) approval in solving it, her solution brought her to conclusions totally at odds with Boas's culture history. If Boas employed radical historicism to account for cultural similarities widely apart, Benedict employed an equally radical anti-historical view to account for cultural differences closely together. With this in mind, I turn to Steward.

### **Steward's cultural ecology**

Steward noted that Boas's culture history introduced a capricious element in the development of culture. If it is merely a matter of borrowing and lending between tribes, cultural change seems little more than the result of one



accident after another. Steward bluntly pointed out that diffusion does not explain anything: neither why a certain trait is adopted nor the way in which it is modified to its new context. Instead of using history to explain the present state of different cultures, says Steward, we need to explain the history of different cultures (Murphy 1977:18-19; Steward 1977:45; Murphy 1981:186).

Likewise, Steward noted that the solution most commonly sought for this in his days, to translate patterns of culture into psychological terms in the way Benedict did, does little more to explain how that culture originated. It threatens to reduce culture to psychology, Steward argued, and eliminates history. It is then, Steward argued, not an explanation at all, but simply a way of describing cultural integration that has been taken for granted (Steward 1977:61).

Steward instead turned to the environment. His rationale was quite simple: the quest for subsistence has an urgency apart from other human activities and exists prior to them historically and logically. Before anything else humans must provide themselves with means of survival (Murphy 1977:22; Murphy 1981:175). Accordingly, Steward characterised his cultural ecology as "...the study of the processes by which a society adapts to its environment" (Steward 1977:43); the first question being: do these processes initiate internal social transformations of evolutionary change? (Steward 1977:43; Murphy 1977:22). That is, Steward's attention was from the start partly focused on matters of historical change and comparability, whereas Benedict's was on cultural differences and stability.

Cultural ecology was basically a strategy, a method of investigation, based on the hypothesis that culture could be cut up into different levels that could be arranged hierarchically based on how closely related they were to the environment. The first level is the exploitative technology a group possesses, its tools and knowledge, and the first stage of investigation to trace the interrelationships between that technology and the environment. These were assumed to have direct influence on the next level, the behaviour patterns involved in the exploitation of that environment, the organisation of work and the division of labour which should reflect the technology the group possesses. These again were assumed to have determining effects upon other social institutions and practices, for example the kinship system, which must be able to provide the people needed to carry out the work. These were, finally, thought to have effects on the rest of the culture; ideas, beliefs and values. These must be such that they enable the group to seek subsistence within its environment by allowing the exploitation of the important resources and the use and co-

operation of the labour needed (Steward 1955:40-6; Murphy 1977:22; Steward 1977:180-1).

To illustrate Steward's point we can take a hunting band living in an area where resources are scarce and widely distributed. If we take for granted the limited technology of this band, and that hunting is the activity of males, we can postulate that men tend to stay where they are born, as it is more adaptive that they hunt in a territory they know. Add to this that the exploitation of the resources requires the co-operation of several men, and we may say it is likely we have a patrilineal band practising patrilocality. That, in one stroke, ensures that men remain on familiar grounds, where they are of most use, with men they likewise know, co-operating with them to exploit hunting grounds they all share. Still coupled with this we have the need, given the precarious environment, to share the game hunted within the group, lest someone be left out, and we will expect to find a value-system that advocates sharing, possibly hard work, and maybe egalitarianism. In this way the whole of a culture hangs together in a functional way, all its elements are united in securing the survival of the group.

From this it should be obvious how different the integration Steward has in mind is from the one Benedict advocates. Instead of a basic attitude that goes on to modify, give the same colour to, discrete elements, the elements are integrated in direction to a common goal so as to constitute a system. Rather than the attitude, the way things are done, being prior to the things people do, activity is, for Steward, basic and prior to ideas. Culture rises out of repetitive social activity, activity that is conditioned by and directed towards the survival of the group (Murphy 1981:181-2, 185; Murphy 1977:25). To return to our example, and keeping in mind its causal sequence, it is obvious that if Steward's band was to turn away from hunting and take up gathering instead, that would, provided now women do the gathering, spell profound changes for the culture of the tribe. For Benedict that need not be so. If the things people do are no longer the same, the important bit, the way they do it, may still stay the same, something Benedict thought she was on to in her work on Japan.

If the question of integration is for Steward thus settled, the questions of cultural differences and cultural change remain. These are related, for just as each culture must adapt to an environment that is at least slightly different from that of any other culture, so each culture also to some extent transforms its environment in the course of exploiting it, thereby triggering its own evolution. If cultural change is then the way in which culture adapts to its environment and if each culture has to some extent its own environment, this movement

necessarily takes different cultures down different roads. The substantive differences between cultures are caused by the particular adaptive processes by which any society interacts with its environment. This cultural diversity has to be recognised, says Steward, but it does not mean that each case is unique. What it requires is empirical investigation of each society before generalisations concerning whether similar adjustments occur in similar environments, can be made (Steward 1977:44; Steward 1955:42). The comparison is to take place with regard to the level of culture most closely connected to the use of the environment.

This constellation of functionally interdependent features most closely related to subsistence activities, the ecological nexus of society, Steward called the cultural core (Steward 1955:23; Murphy 1977:34; Ellen 1982:54). What constitutes the cultural core differs from case to case. Hence it is necessary to classify cultures in types according to the features that make up the cultural core of each society, a type being those societies that have fundamental similarity of core features. Inside the type we may assume that the same causal processes are at work (Murphy 1977:34).

Steward tried thus to account for both cultural similarities and differences in historical terms, and by the same principle he had used on integration. For even as each culture may have to adapt to its own environment, what different cultures - that are still sufficiently alike - share, are the functional-causal processes at work within their core. Two different hunting bands may have two somewhat differing histories, but given that the environment they have to adapt to is sufficiently alike, the same processes of adaptation should be evident behind the history of each.

This sounds like a solution to the problem at hand, Steward seems to offer an account of how cultures are integrated without rendering them historically static. There are though certain problems with Steward's theory. Firstly, the contents of the culture core are said to vary from case to case; and, secondly, the boundaries between the core and the rest of the culture remain unspecified, an open question to be decided in each case.

As Ellen (1982:61) has argued, by leaving the key concept of cultural core in this way obscure, the very problem Steward tried to avoid by introducing it is not solved. If the variables composing the core are subject to considerable variation then the core is in danger of boiling down to the very relativism that Steward was trying to avoid. Moreover, by leaving the boundaries between the core and the secondary features also unclear, the question rises: when does the core become the entire cultural pattern. By this

the concept dissolves into mere tautology. Accordingly Steward has to concede that cultures that appear similar on one level, for example that of subsistence, may be completely different with regard to other things. Steward has then to turn to diffusion to explain that difference. Steward even admitted that diffusion could account for most of the culture of any given group (Steward 1977:180). Steward, then, as Ellen has observed (1982:61), leaves history to explain those things that his theory cannot explain, but what is worse he gives no general standard to draw the line between those two. The choice remains that of radical diffusionism, or environmental determinism. For having left the category of culture core so vague the only place to start Steward leaves open is that of the environment; that is what in the end lies behind those culture cores that have anything in common.

As a conclusion I want to mention Steward's views about society. His theory requires that, to evoke Marxist terminology, social relations of production be reduced to technical means of production. They are, for Steward, but the organisation of the labour force in the process of exploitation. Historical changes, as adaptation to the environment, become little more than a vague functionalism in which the social system is accorded no dynamic except that derived from techno-environmental interaction (Ellen 1982:63-4; see Friedman 1974; Godelier 1977 [1973]).

This points to the fact that for Steward culture is little more than man's means of adaptation to the environment, that is Steward seems to hold a purely instrumental view of culture. His attempt to tie culture down to the environment, again raises the question as to whether culture, in order to have meaning, has to be conceptualised as an autonomous system, in ways similar, but not identical, to Benedict's personification of it. This question is at issue in the next chapter.

## **V. Culture as an Autonomous System: The Superorganic and the Symbolic**

If Boas did free culture from any external constraints (see Lowie 1966 [1917]), he was not willing to articulate it as an autonomous system (see Hatch 1973:110). Boas had, as I will come to, some very good reasons for this but his diffusionism threatened to make of culture an accidental aggregate of discrete traits and render culture meaningless, and his unwillingness to see culture as an autonomous system opened the way for Benedict's psychologism and Steward's environmentalism.

I will first discuss the earliest attempt to articulate culture as an autonomous system, Kroeber's notion of the "superorganic". Kroeber's work does of course predate the work of both Benedict and Steward and was set forward as an argument against the reduction of culture to biology (Kroeber 1952a:22-3). But my next subject, Sahlins's notion of culture as a symbolic system, was developed explicitly against the cultural materialism that arose from Steward's work (see Ortner 1984).

This chapter will take me somewhat far afield. But from this excursion I want to turn to the question of the relationship between culture and history. This chapter is placed here before that endeavour as the notion of culture as an autonomous system is important for what follows. As Fox (1991b) has recently argued, Boasian anthropology has, on one level, no difficulties in dealing with simple cultural changes, it is built around the notion of cultural diffusion. With the notion of culture as an autonomous system different difficulties concerning the relationship between culture and history arise.

### **The superorganic**

Kroeber developed his notion of culture as a separate level of organisation most explicitly in his paper 'The Superorganic' (1952a [1917]).<sup>1</sup> According to Kroeber himself (1952a:22) his primary concern was to argue against the "...blind and bland shuttling back and forth..." between race and civilisation and to establish the fundamental difference between organic evolution and cultural evolution (1952a [1917]:26).

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Kroeber's own advice (1952a:22-23) I have, where appropriate, substituted culture for society in Kroeber's text. When Kroeber wrote his piece there was no clear convention as to the use of the concepts "culture" and "society" and they were not yet systematically differentiated.

Kroeber says that it is the idea of biological evolution that is responsible for the confusion between the organic and cultural and adds that this is understandable as human civilisation exists only through the living members of the species. That it is wrong to confuse organic evolution and culture history, says Kroeber, can be shown by a little example (1952a [1917]:22-4). Some millions of years ago birds grew out of their reptilian ancestors, as scales were turned into feathers and front legs into wings. A new power, aerial locomotion, was added to the faculties of the vertebrate group of animals. The vertebrates as a whole, and this is the important point, remained unaffected by these changes. Over the past few years, human beings have likewise attained the power of aerial locomotion, but through a process that could hardly be more different from the one through which birds appeared.

As a new species is derived wholly from the individuals that first manifested the new traits that distinguish it, only those belong to the species who are descended from these individuals. Heredity is the only means of transmission. If descendants may in that course be given new powers, the ancestors *cannot* acquire these powers from their descendants, and neither can members of other species. This is exactly what can happen in the progress of civilisation, says Kroeber. The most important point is that human means of flying have not taken those who invented them down a separate route of evolution (1952a [1917]:24-5). Those who benefit from human inventions do not have to be genetically related to the inventors, or may be so in reverse order, as many fathers have profited from the inventions of their sons. This has two implications: First, civilisation is potentially universal and can travel between populations of human beings without there being any mixing of blood (1952a [1917]:24-5). Second, civilisation is potentially cumulative. Man does not have to give up anything to make use of his inventions; if the bird had to sacrifice his front legs in order to fly, man gets to keep his, flying or not (1952a [1917]:24-5).

This clearly precludes any derivation of culture from race but it also precludes any derivation of race from culture. This second attempt would have to be based on the Lamarckian belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:35-7; Ingold 1986a:232). It would be like claiming that the ability to fly aeroplanes was to become part of the genotype of the first pilots and passed on from them to their children much the same way blood types are (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:36). As Kroeber has already shown, the one thing heredity does not do, is to accumulate (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:36-7), which is again exactly the way civilisation operates. Deriving

race from culture is confusing two processes, heredity and civilisation, that do in fact rest on mutually independent courses (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:36-7; see Ingold 1986a:233; Stocking 1968:265-6).

For the latter process Kroeber proposes to use the term *superorganic*. When Herbert Spencer coined the term it was to include all artefacts produced by the co-ordinated action of many individuals (Ingold 1986a:232-3). Kroeber's superorganic is different and does not refer to a product of a "society" (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:31). For Kroeber, superorganic are those artefacts that manifest a design inscribed by tradition on the minds of the individuals who made them, "...rather than one indelibly 'pricked in' by the materials of heredity" (Ingold 1986a:233; see Kroeber 1952a [1917]:32, 37-8). This difference between society and tradition is important. Thus, Kroeber says, the ant may be termed a social animal, in the sense that it associates, yet if you take a few ant eggs and hatch them in isolation from other ants, the whole of ant "society" will be reproduced in one generation (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:31). If you, on the other hand, place two hundred human infants on a desert island and provide them with means to survive, what you get is "...a troop of mutes, without arts, knowledge, fire, without order or religion...Heredity saves the ant all that she has..." but it cannot maintain "...one particle of the civilization which is the specifically human thing" (1952a [1917]:31). That is to say, even if the ant associates, as far as social *influences* are concerned the animal is as "...unsuitable as a dish of porridge is for writing material..." (1952a [1917]:32). The animal enters the world more or less ready-made by nature and has as such neither culture nor history. Man, on the other hand, comprises two aspects: he is an organic being and he is a tablet that is written upon by the tradition of his society (1952a [1917]:32, 37-8). As an organism, Kroeber says, man has of course undergone evolution, but has not had any history. As a tablet to be written on, man has a history, because he has a culture.

This is mostly in keeping with the Boasian position (Ingold 1986a:233), and constitutes in fact one of the most thorough arguments for the autonomy of culture on which that position was based. Yet many of Boas's followers reacted to Kroeber's paper with unease (Handler 1986:127; Ingold 1986a:233). What Kroeber had made of the concept, and the Boasians could not allow, were arguments that came close to the "superorganicism of Durkheim" (Ingold 1986a:233). Biology, Kroeber noted, starts from the individual, the minute variations among them providing the material upon which natural selection works (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:36, 40). The cultural, in contrast, is to Kroeber in essence nonindividual, it "...begins only where the individual ends..." (1952a

[1917]:40; see Ingold 1986a:233). Culture is not merely suprabiological, something to which all the Boasians adhered, but more importantly, it is also supraindividual (Ingold 1986a:233). It is not merely "a collection of individuals" or "an aggregate of psychic activities" but an entity beyond the individuals and their mental activities (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:41, 49, 37-8; Ingold 1986a:233). This "superpsychic" entity is supposed to have a life of its own - it is a superorganism - "...analogous to the life of the individual organism, but unfolding on a higher plane of reality" (Ingold 1986a:233; see Kroeber 1952a [1917]:41, 49).

Man's cultural being was for Boas an aspect of his individuality (Ingold 1986a:234), each individual possessing a unique combination of the cultural elements shared by his group. It was exactly the reverse with Kroeber. To him man is both an organic substance and "...a tablet written upon" (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:32). It is the organic substance that for Kroeber comprises the individuality of each and everyone, but the message written upon the tablet is the mark of him belonging to a specific cultural tradition, and not an aspect of his individuality. As such, says Kroeber, the message must be external to the individual and imposed on him from without (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:32; Ingold 1986a:234).

It was this detachment of culture from the individual, "...and the attribution to the former of a purpose transcending the residually innate dispositions of the individuals subject to its dominion, that most worried his fellow Boasians" (Ingold 1986a:234; see Handler 1986:127). Goldenweiser, for example, maintained that the concrete individual manifests a unique psyche constituted by those attributes he has received by heredity and by a selection of elements passed on and absorbed from the cultural heritage of those around him. That is, Goldenweiser argued, culture cannot have any existence except in the heads of concrete individuals. To elevate culture into a living organism of its own was, for the Boasians, to re-introduce the idea of *organic* growth into culture in ways analogous to what Tylor had done before. Having made of culture a living organism, Kroeber could thus, the Boasians thought, turn the history of each culture into a deterministic unfolding of its life in a way the Boasians thought Tylor had done for the culture of mankind as a whole (Ingold 1986a:234). And this, Boas would argue, is to rob culture of its historical character. For if the history of a culture is nothing but the unfolding of its essence then the history of the culture must already be contained there, in a way Boas again thought Tylor conceptualised the history of the culture of mankind. That is to say, for Boas, the historical character of culture is predicated on in



*not* being an autonomous system. For him history works through the "agency of chance" on a population of individuals that, while they have drawn their cultural attributes from a common pool, each constitutes a unique combination of those attributes, the very individuality of each member providing the material on which history works its changes (see Ingold 1986a:191-2). By elevating culture into an autonomous system Kroeber had, to Boas, reintroduced the essentialist conception of culture Boas had formerly criticised Mason and Tylor for (see Stocking 1974a).

Yet, Kroeber also maintained that culture exists only in the minds of the individuals who carry it (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:38). If only to add that the cultural "...is in its essence non-individual..." (1952a [1917]:40), as it comes to the individuals from a "...transcendent, supraindividual level of reality..." (Ingold 1986a:234). That Kroeber could maintain two so contradictory positions, comes, according to Ingold (1986a:234), down to the fact that the key terms "social" and "cultural" had as yet not been differentiated clearly. As Ingold (1986a:234) argues, hidden in Kroeber's opposition between the "individually biological" and the "socially cultural" (Kroeber 1952a [1917]:41), are two different dichotomies: one between the individual and the collective; another between the innate and the acquired. As society is a condition for the transmission of an acquired cultural tradition, culture might be said to be social in its mode of reproduction. By then consistently substituting the "social" for the "cultural" it may have been easy to slip into the belief that tradition is essentially social in its mode of *existence*, that its locus lies in a supraindividual consciousness. That is why Kroeber believed "...that to demonstrate the autonomy of tradition from hereditary constraint was, *ipso facto*, to assert its character as a supraindividual emergent" (Ingold 1986a:234).

### **The symbolic system**

Kroeber's concern with culture as a separate level of organisation was taken over by Leslie White in the course of arguing for a specific science of *culturology* (White 1949:xviii, 15-17; see Kroeber 1952b:4; Hatch 1973:128; Carneiro 1981:209-10; Barnes 1960:xxiv-xxviii). What is important here is that White changes Kroeber's notion of culture as a separate level of organisation significantly. For Kroeber, superorganic are those artefacts that show a design inscribed in the minds of its producers by tradition, rather than having been inscribed in their organic material through natural selection. The difference is essentially that between the innate and the acquired. For White, on the other

hand, the cultural level is made up of things and events that depend upon the ability to use symbols; a symbol being a thing whose meaning is bestowed upon it by those who use it (White 1949:15-17, 25). This is clearly to restrict the meaning of the concept of culture as an autonomous system compared to how Kroeber thought of it. We can easily envision humans acquiring, through their interactions with others, patterns of behaviour for the execution of which they do not depend on symbols. Despite that, *to symbol*, is for White, dependent upon a faculty peculiar to human beings, and more than that, the symbol is, for him, the basis of all human behaviour. Human behaviour is symbolic behaviour, symbolic behaviour is human behaviour. Those actions that do not depend on the use of symbols, are simply not human in his terms. They are biological in that there is nothing in them that makes them uniquely human (1949:22, 35).

Sahlins was later (Sahlins 1976b; also Sahlins 1976a) to take up this same lead that runs from Kroeber through White. In his *Culture and Practical Reason* Sahlins criticised those of the prevalent theories in anthropology, that were founded on a notion of practical reason, arguing that they all lead to a misguided naturalism. Against this Sahlins argued for the autonomy and priority of culture as a symbolic order of meaning, claiming that practical reason and action are in each case constituted and defined by culture.

What Sahlins refers to as a misguided naturalism does apply both to Tylor's and to Steward's theory of culture. But to set forward Sahlins's ideas I want to discuss his criticism of Malinowski's theory of language.

To Malinowski culture is but an extension of human nature, an instrument invented, refined and used in the constant struggle for survival (see Hatch 1973). So too with language. For Malinowski it did not so much qualify as a system of abstract thoughts, as a means for organising mundane activities and creating ties of solidarity. In his own words:

...each verbal statement by a human being has the aim and function of expressing some thought or feeling actual at that moment and in that situation, and necessary for some reason or other to be made known to another person or persons - in order either to serve purposes of common action, or to establish ties of purely social communion... (Malinowski 1930:307; see Firth 1957:101).

Language is always bound up with the context in which it is being used, a "... statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered..."; at least until it is written down in dictionaries,

language only exists while it is being used (Malinowski 1930:307; see Firth 1957).

This, argues Sahlins, is nothing less than a proposal for the dissolution of language, and beyond that, culture. A proposal for the examination of language, only after language has been stripped of its systematic properties, its symbolic consistency (Sahlins 1976b:79). But Malinowski, says Sahlins, forgets in this what is unique to man, that he lives according to a symbolic system of meanings of his own devising, a system that is always arbitrary to the physical world around it (1976b:viii). The world for man does not exist until it has been appropriated as such through culture; action is not action until so defined by culture. This admitted, argues Sahlins, culture as a thing-in-itself is saved and established as a legitimate, and the most important, object of study (1976b:viii).

Malinowski's mistake, says Sahlins, comes down to two misconceptions. Forgetting that culture is symbolic and systematic, "...Malinowski repeatedly dissolved the symbolic order in the acid truth of instrumental reason..." and postulates a false continuity between nature and culture, subject and object (1976b:79, 83). Accordingly, to Malinowski language contains no theory, it is but a verbal grip on things. Words are actions, their meaning the effect made on the audience, the reaction evoked. Rather than classifying experience, language is itself divided by experience, not dividing the world, it only reflects the division existent in the world (Sahlins 1976b:80-1). Malinowski is implying that there is a direct relationship between man and the world, and between man and man, a direct relationship of which language and culture are instruments.

But a response in another human being is not effected in the same way as a material good is produced, says Sahlins, her reaction not of the same kind as that between two chemicals. Not simply because she is an intentional being herself and able to resist my intentions, but more "...decisively because the communication implies a community, and therefore the bringing to bear on the "effect" of all those common conceptions of men and things which, ordering their interrelations, determine the specific "influence" of the word" (Sahlins 1976b:83). The semantic fields of "sheep" and the French "mouton" overlap, but are not identical. Sheep is simply the living animal, whereas mouton can be both the living animal and the dish it so often ends up like. The first thing about the word, is its place in the language as a whole, its relations to other words and not its relation to the world. It is this system, says Sahlins, that determines the specific influence of the word, not the word itself in isolation. An Englishman

lecturing his fellow country men on "sheep" will produce different reactions than a Frenchman lecturing his on "mouton". Prior to the act of speaking we have the language spoken in (Sahlins 1976b:83).

Language and culture, says Sahlins, are thus not the instruments by means of which the direct relations between man and world, and man and man, are fostered. Conversely, they are the system by which the world, the relations between man and world, and the relations between man and man, are defined (1976b:70). Culture, a symbolic system of historically accumulated meanings, is prior to experience, action, and society. Practice "...enfolds in a world already symbolized; so the experience, even as it encounters a reality external to the language by which it is understood, is constructed as a human reality by the concept of it..." (1976b:123; also 1976b:139). As the meaning of the concept is always arbitrary with regard to the world, it refers in the first place to the principle of classification of the culture of which the concept is a part (1976b:123). Furthermore, as each system has its own principle of classification, it follows that the system as a whole, is arbitrary to the world, only one way of appropriating it.

By eliminating symbol and system from cultural practices, says Sahlins, Malinowski "...constitutes an epistemology for the elimination of culture itself as the proper anthropological object" (1976b:83). Without ascribing to culture distinctive properties *sui generis*, the study of it is reduced to one kind of naturalism or another. Meaningful analysis gives way to manipulative rationality, culture appears simply as a medium through which the individual achieves his self-appointed ends (1976b:83-5).

Sahlins reproduces here in many ways the arguments Durkheim used against Spencer in *The Division of Labour* (see Sahlins 1976b:106). It is important to note that Sahlins's argument points to Durkheim rather than Boas, as Sahlins sometimes wants us to believe. As Sahlins himself observes, Boas's work was marked for its radical nominalism, his fragmentational conception of culture most neatly captured in Lowie's phrase of the "planless hodgepodge" (Sahlins 1976b:68; see Stocking 1968; Stocking 1974a; Lowie 1921; Ingold 1993a). As there was little more consistency in Boas's culture than Malinowski's, Sahlins's conception of the symbolic system, is, in its systematic character, more closely related to Durkheim's society and Kroeber's superorganism than to Boas's culture. But Durkheim's concern with establishing a positivistic science of society requires a conception of society as a natural system, not as a system of meanings. If he formulated a sociological theory of symbolisation, says Sahlins, most notably in *Primitive Classification* and the

*Elementary Forms*, he did not formulate a symbolic theory of society. "Society was not seen as constituted by the symbolic process; rather, the reverse alone appeared true" (Sahlins 1976b:116). This, says Sahlins, explains why Durkheim was forced to substitute the individual utilitarianism of Spencer by a sociological utilitarianism of his own. Simply negating individualism while retaining the conception of society as a natural system, this was the only way open to him (Sahlins 1976b:108-9). Which takes us finally where Sahlins really wants us to go; to Ferdinand de Saussure, who was of course strongly influenced by Durkheim, and in whose conception of *langue* we have both the system and the symbol (see Sahlins 1976b:214-5).

What identifies language as a system, for Saussure (1959), is the arbitrariness of the signs and their constitution through difference. The sign is arbitrary because the sounds that make up the words in a language have no intrinsic connection with the physical world, and secondly simply by the fact that different languages have different words for the same thing. Taken together, a language is radically arbitrary in relation to the world. From this it follows, as with Sahlins before, that the terms of a language can only be defined *sui generis*, they only assume identity in so far as they are differentiated from one another as differences within the total system. An example is the "Paris-Geneva train". What gives it its identity, says Saussure, what makes it the same train even though from day to day it is in fact different engines, coaches and so on, is the way it is differentiated from other trains by its time of departure, route etc., its place in the railway system (Giddens 1979:11-12). These ideas of difference and arbitrariness secure the insulation of *langue* as a self-contained system, in much the same way as it secures the status of culture as a thing-in-itself for Sahlins. The notion of arbitrariness affirms, for Saussure, both, that language cannot be explained by the intentional acts of the speakers, and that the sign is established through convention (Giddens 1979:14). Language is radically arbitrary in relation to the world, but it is also radically compelling for the individual speaker, much as culture is for Sahlins.

Having achieved this, Sahlins is of course faced with the same questions that have confronted the structuralism of Saussure all along: How are we to see the relationship between culture, as an autonomous system, and history? This is an issue that Sahlins has applied himself to, and that is my concern in the following chapter.

## VI. History and Culture

In recent years anthropologists have taken greater interest in and seen it as one of their main objectives to introduce some sense of history into their descriptions of different cultures (see Wolf 1982; Friedman 1989; Sahlins 1981; Sahlins 1985; Sahlins 1989; Roseberry 1982; Roseberry 1989). Here I want to discuss Sahlins's structural theory of history but before I turn to Sahlins I will discuss the debate that surfaced between Boas, Kroeber and Paul Radin in the 1930s, concerning what constitutes a truly historical approach. Boas saw history as a stream of events, Kroeber saw it as a stylistic growth while Radin saw it as the result of human action. These three elements, and the relationships between them, are, then, at issue in Sahlins's structural theory of history.

### **History: events, growth, action**

The debate in question was initially opened by Kroeber (1952c [1931]; also 1952d [1935]) when he claimed that Boas's culture history, contrary to common opinion, was not history, but science. Kroeber's argument is, I must admit, not easy to follow, and Boas himself (1940g [1936]:305) did not understand it. Boas had early on in his career distinguished between the scientific approach and the historical approach that he said could each be applied to any phenomena (Boas 1940g [1936]:305). The former was characterised by having interest in aspects of the phenomenal world only as examples of the specific laws that governed them, whereas the latter was characterised as showing interest in the various phenomena of the world for their own sake.

The root of the confusion between Boas and Kroeber may lie in Boas rendering the scientific and the historical as two different approaches, when they, as he characterises them, could perhaps be seen as two stages in the same approach (Ingold 1986a:77). Boas was here apparently following Wilhelm Windelband's distinction between the *idiographic* and the *nomothetic*. Windelband's contention was originally that the methods of science and history were different as the latter, dealing with values, required a subjective, *idiographic* approach, but that science was based on an objective, *nomothetic* approach (see Ingold 1986a:77). By then, expressing the difference as exactly that between the discovery of general laws, and the description of singular events, Windelband's distinction easily became two stages in the scientific

approach: first, the collection of facts, and second, the attempt to subject these within general laws (Ingold 1986a:77).

Boas aligned himself with the historical approach (1940g [1936]:305) but did not embrace the subjective approach Windelband advocated. If Boas did not maintain any strong hope of discovering general laws applicable to human affairs, his anthropology was still to rest on the strictest canons of objectivity. That is evident from the way Boas himself refrained from editing his copious material from the Northwest coast lest it became tainted with his own subjectivity (Radin 1966 [1933]:8-9). Boas's culture history was to be an attempt at reconstructing and tracing the events that lead to the situation as it is today, without the ethnologist's views coming into question (see Boas 1940g [1936]:305-11).

Kroeber's complaint was that Boas's approach was analytic and atomising, in line with positivistic science, whereas the truly historical approach endeavours at descriptive integration (Kroeber 1952d [1935]:63). What exactly Kroeber has in mind is all but clear. The first clue is contained in his essay on the superorganic, where Kroeber stated that (1952a [1917]:40): "Civilization...begins only where the individual ends; and whoever does not in some measure perceive this fact...can find no meaning in civilization, and history for him must be only a wearying jumble..." In another place Kroeber proposed to define civilisation as that which is left when the events have been abstracted out of history (1963:5). Having thus rescued culture out of the flux of events, and placed it on a higher level, Kroeber does not hesitate to describe the history of cultures as a progressive development, that moves "...from amorphousness towards definiteness, from fumbling trials to decision. Any civilization will tend to move in this direction on the way towards its culmination" (Kroeber 1963:23; see Kroeber 1952a [1917]; Ingold 1986a:84).

As Ingold observes (1986a:84-5), Kroeber's view is perfectly in keeping with classical social evolutionism, except that Kroeber adopts a pluralistic conception of cultures. The process of development is not uniform for mankind as a whole. Instead each culture is "...discernible as a limited spurt or pulse of growth in a particular region..." (Ingold 1986a:85) of the world. The peak of growth being past, the culture will rigidify and fall apart, its pieces again coming together to form a new culture with renewed growth.

Having made of culture a superorganic being, with a life on its own (Kroeber 1952a [1917]), Kroeber can in this way make of its growth a teleological unfolding of its own intrinsic master-plan, or idea (Ingold 1986a:85). Placing stress on the *styles* that form out of the diverse elements of a

*culture*, instead of the *laws* that govern the evolution of *the culture* of mankind as a whole, gives Kroeber's approach a stamp of historical particularism. "Locating the cultural plan on a level intermediate between the individual and all mankind, Kroeber is able to combine the element of happenstance that goes into its formation with the determinacy of its subsequent unfolding" (Ingold 1986a:85).

This is a far cry from the nominalism of Boas (Ingold 1986a:85). The difference can perhaps be stated by saying that if for Boas history is simply a stream of events that happen, for Kroeber history is an *organic* growth that unfolds in a deterministic manner. The difference does not simply concern a difference in approach as Kroeber wants us to believe. For Boas there was no such process going on in the world that could legitimately be described by history in Kroeber's sense.

Despite their differences, both Boas and Kroeber came under an attack from Radin (1966 [1933]), who claimed that neither of them was truly historical in approach. That Radin saw in both the same failures, may indicate that their differences were not so great as Kroeber believed.

There are three things that, for Radin, point to the fact that both Boas and Kroeber are not historical in their approach. The way they see their data, their view of the human being, and the way in which they relate themselves to their data.

Radin claims that both Boas and Kroeber have essentially a static view of culture traits. He claims that Boas and Kroeber only give culture traits a fictitious dynamic character through inferences drawn from their distribution over geographical areas or their merging into stylistic patterns (Radin 1966 [1933]:17). In as much as this implies that the traits could have existence outside their movements and uses, this is, Radin claims, to treat individual cultural elements as objects. And to treat individual cultural elements as objects is, in the end, to treat culture as a whole as an object.

By thus objectifying culture it has in a way been separated from living people, claims Radin. Accordingly he relates his prior observation to Boas's and Kroeber's views on the human being. For Boas she is primarily a prisoner of her cultural tradition and her role is to carry on that tradition. There can, then, be no purpose and agency in Boas's culture history (Radin 1966 [1933]:chapter 2). This is slightly different for Kroeber who sees agency and growth in the way in which cultural elements are brought together into stylistic patterns. Yet, as living individuals are for Kroeber "...adventitious excrescences on the supersocietal whole..." (Radin 1966 [1933]:43, 45) he places the agency he sees



in history on the level of the superorganic, away from living human beings. This, Radin maintains, is to separate culture and culture growth from its connections with living individuals, it is, again, to objectify culture.

This, finally, Radin relates to Boas's and Kroeber's approach to their subject matter. Radin claims, that Boas treats his cultural facts as a naturalist treats his "physical" facts (Radin 1966 [1933]:5; see Vidich 1966:xxiv). For this opinion, one he recognises Boas himself would forcefully reject (Radin 1966 [1933]:5), Radin mentions in particular the way Boas presents his data. His Kwakiutl and Tsimshian monographs were floating with bare facts which Boas refrained from editing, unless to indicate the diffusion of specific traits (Radin 1966 [1933]:8-9). The facts are, seemingly, supposed to speak for themselves. That is the crux of the matter, says Radin, for: "Cultural facts do not speak for themselves, but physical facts do" (1966 [1933]:9 italics omitted). Boas is acting, Radin says, as if the anthropologist could stand above the facts, and not be part of them. Even if this constitutes the very objectivity of natural science, in cultural history, to the contrary, Radin maintains, we are very much part of the facts we are describing (1966 [1933]:11-12).

Here Radin is in an agreement with Kroeber in his criticism of Boas. But Radin further maintains that as Kroeber sees culture as non-individual he is in fact appropriating for himself all involvement in culture. That is, says Radin, in his stress on objectivity Boas denies having any involvement in the lives of his subjects, if only to separate himself from the data. Kroeber, on the other hand, says Radin, denies his subjects any involvement in culture only to appropriate it for himself in his exercises of "descriptive integration" (Vidich 1966:lv).

These two approaches, claims Radin, are both unsatisfactory. The only way to overcome them, he continues, is to see human beings as conscious, purposive agents (see Vidich 1966:lv; Radin 1966 [1933]:chapters 1 and 2). History, for Radin, has to be made; it has to be seen as the result of conscious human action.

But if this is accepted Radin can again be asked if his conception is not the instrumentalism Sahlins ascribes to Malinowski? How may his insights and emphasis on action be incorporated within historical anthropology without anthropology falling back towards what Sahlins describes as the naturalism of Malinowski? Here is Sahlins's answer.

## Structure and history

Anthropologists that have articulated culture as an autonomous system, in the way Sahlins did, face the same difficulties as structuralism has had to face: How to resolve the antinomy between culture and history, or structure and event (see Friedman 1989). This resolution is the subject matter of two of Sahlins's recent works (1981;1985). His aim is to demonstrate the historical uses to be made of structural theory, with its emphasis on culture as an autonomous system, with special reference to his own work on the Hawaiis (Sahlins 1981:33). Let me try to explain what Sahlins means. He is foremost trying to give some sense of history into anthropological descriptions of culture arguing that it should not be seen as a static entity. At the same time he is arguing that history is not an accidental sequence of events but that it has a structure, is informed by culture.

Having discussed *Culture and Practical Reason* it comes as no surprise that Sahlins rejects any utilitarian account of historical changes, whether ecological or historical materialistic. These can only offer a history on the model of classical physics with direct cause-effect relationship between environmental base and culture, economic practice and superstructure. If so, neither does structural-semiotic analysis offer a viable alternative, says Sahlins, for what is lost in such an analysis is not only history and change, but the very source of change, human action in the world (Sahlins 1981:6-7). It is between these extremes that the challenge and project of truly historical anthropology lies. It must show how events are ordered by culture and how culture is reordered in the stream of events (1981:8).

The first point takes us back to *Culture and Practical Reason*. This is the assertion that people appropriate and act upon the world in accordance with their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories by which they perceive and classify the world and themselves. These categories are always relative both to the world and to any other given set of categories, never the only ones possible (Sahlins 1981:67). In this sense, says Sahlins, practice is culturally constituted. But, Sahlins continues, "...the worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to the categories by which certain people perceive them" (1981:67). In the event, and to the extent, that they do not, the cultural categories are potentially revalued in practice (1981:67). Though the relations generated in action are motivated by the traditional self-conceptions of the actors, they may in fact functionally redefine those very conceptions. "Nothing guarantees that the situations encountered in

practice will...follow from the cultural categories by which the circumstances are interpreted and acted upon" (1981:35). Practice has its own dynamics, "...which meaningfully defines the process and the objects that are parties to it" (1981:35). These, if different from the culturally presupposed definitions, have the potential capacity of working back on the conventional values (1981:35; see Sahlins 1985:138).

This is one source of historical changes. Captain Cook and his men were not the gods the Hawaiians, in accordance with their culture, took them for. Still, though the killing of Cook was not premeditated by the Hawaiians, it was in accordance with their culture, it was an event with structure, history with culture, an act with meaning. On the other hand, the fact that Cook was not the god he so resembled, means that his presence had significance far beyond what the Hawaiians could have at that time imagined, and their actions then, had consequences far beyond what they intended (see Sahlins 1981:24).

The other source of change is the discrepancy between culture and the interests of individual actors. Members of the same culture can have quite different views of things in general, they may interpret the same events differently, says Sahlins. As actors with "...partially distinct concepts and projects relate their actions to each other...", the clash between the cultural understanding and the private interests provides another source of historical change (1981:68). For in action signs and symbols are subject to contingent arrangements and rearrangements in instrumental relations that can in the end also effect their semantic values. Firstly, they can acquire new value by being placed in new relationships in the referential process itself, and secondly, by being placed in novel relationships with other signs in the instrumental process (1981:68-70; see Sahlins 1985:151).

Hawaiian women sought the company of European men in an attempt to be impregnated by gods. By being accepted, they helped undermine that very same godly status of the Europeans, and forced a revaluation in the semantic field; of the relations between gods and men, and between chiefs and common people.

These then are the sources of change: culture is risked by being put into action in the world because the world may turn out to be different than predicted by the culture. And within the same culture people do have different roles, different positions and hence different interests. By applying their culture in seeking their interests they again put their culture at risk because these may put their cultural categories into new relations and again foster changes.

Despite all this the changes brought forth are not random, says Sahlins. As much as the world is experienced as already segmented by relative principles of significance, even as experience disproves people's categorical assumptions, the process of redefinition is still motivated by the logic of the cultural categories (Sahlins 1981:70; see Obeyesekere 1992:55). Events are structured, there is culture in history, as in fact there is history in culture.

Sahlins's work has been hailed as a resolution between these old dichotomies culture and history, structure and event (see Ortner 1984; Biersack 1989:85-92). What I want to maintain is that Sahlins still retains a sense of dualism, of there being either structure or event, either culture or history, and that he does not really concern himself with action.

That there is an element of dualism in Sahlins's approach can perhaps be substantiated by what may seem like a subtle contradiction in his formulation. In action culture is risked because the world may turn out to be different than the culture defined it, and it is re-evaluated in accordance with the interests of its different people. This implies a kind of realism, in the form of a direct experience of the world, and a kind of naturalism, in the form of pre-cultural interests, foreign to *Culture and Practical Reason*. At the same time, the redefinition this confrontation with "the real" provokes, is supposed to happen within the logic of the culture which is supposedly by then discredited. This can make for a rather strange picture, as Obeyesekere points out. Thus Sahlins maintains that the European presence brings about profound changes in the lives of the Hawaiians, except in the realm that happens to matter most to Sahlins's theory; for the godly status of Captain Cook and the religious ideology surrounding it are supposed to be left unshaken. But by that the very historical quality of Hawaiian culture that Sahlins wants to stress is put at risk (Obeyesekere 1992:55-67).

The problem is that Sahlins's formulation is still too structural and does, as such, amount to a suppression of time (see Thomas 1989a). And this suppression of time works both on the level of human action and on the level of cultural change (Giddens 1979:7)

On the level of human action Sahlins works with a model of practice, of the intentional character of human action, as an articulation of discrete and separate intentions. Thus Sahlins states that all praxis begins in theory, in the concepts of the actors sought in the cultural segmentation and values of an a priori scheme (Sahlins 1985:154). We go from theory to action, theory to action, in separate instances of the reproduction of culture. At the same time by saying that culture is only reproduced, but at the same time changed, in action,

in contact with the world, Sahlins seems to be stating, not only that culture only quite occasionally comes into contact with the world, or we would have constant flux, but also that it does so in separate actions (see Sahlins 1985:138). First we have culture, then it is put into use, it changes, and then again we have (possibly changed) culture.

In stating that action always begins in theory (Sahlins 1981:67; 1985:154) Sahlins makes of human intentionality nothing but the execution of *prior* intentions, and does in fact not concern himself with actual *praxis* and improvisation, as Bourdieu (1977) calls it. To equate the two, prior intentions and praxis, can, as Bourdieu has further argued, only be sustained by viewing action from the outside, when it comes to stand proxy for something else (cultural schemes). From there praxis does indeed take on the form of execution of prior intentions but then again its fundamental character must also be to reproduce the cultural schemes (see Bourdieu 1977:96, 1-3; Fabian 1983:140-1). Furthermore, by implying that human intentionality can be seen as an articulation of separate intentions, Sahlins suppresses the duration of time into a series of separate moments. This makes it difficult to account for historical continuity, for we must ask: if all there is to intentionality is its separate intentions, whence do these latter come from? (Ingold 1986a:312; see Obeyesekere 1992:55). And it is difficult to see how this should be answered. As Giddens observes, this "...exclusion of time on the level of the *duree* of human agency has its counterpart in the repression of the temporality of social institutions in social theory..." (1979:7).

On the macro level, Sahlins's theory, based on the specific Hawaiian incidence, is intended to have a general applicability, to say something about how and why cultures change in general (Sahlins 1981:vii). Yet, it may be asked if the synthesis of structure and event can be taken as the basis of such a theory of cultural change (Thomas 1989a:108; see also Thomas 1989b). For Sahlins's idea "...that change is inherent in enactment leads to a theory of history in which there is no source for change apart from the discrepancy between sense and reference" (Thomas 1989a:108). This leads to two observations: Firstly, that Sahlins does not put the happenings that befall the Hawaiians into any coherent whole, outside the reach of the Hawaiians themselves. For the Hawaiians, it is true, these were quite comprehensible events, but apart from that, they only appear as accidental happenings and are not related to any "structural" changes outside Hawaiian culture; the expansion of European power for example (Thomas 1989a:109). In this way "...the old anthropological opposition between a coherent system of some sort [Hawaiian

culture], and a disconnected stream of events [European expansion], is in fact reproduced" (Thomas 1989a:109). Which leaves us, secondly, with no idea about what change in Hawaii before contact would have been like. That is, the "...indigenous system is only historicized in its dealings with Europeans..." (Thomas 1989a:109). This amounts to saying that Sahlins's formulation does not have any general applicability, and in fact, that it distorts whatever relevance it has. If culture is in fact everything then change can only have its source within culture, in a "superorganic" way, or in the clash between culture and events. Sahlins, that is, ends up by reproducing the dichotomy he set out to resolve.

Boas made of history nothing but a series of events. By abstracting culture from the events Kroeber made of culture's history a deterministic unfolding of its basic idea. To which Boas would have replied that Kroeber had in fact eliminated history, for according to Kroeber all the history of a culture must be contained within its own master-plan from the start. Sahlins seems to leave us with the choice of following Kroeber and seeing the history of a culture as contained within its master-plan, or to see it as only brought about by the culture's clash with a stream of foreign events. What Radin saw missing in both Boas and Kroeber was a recognition of conscious human action and that is, I argued also, missing in Sahlins. But Sahlins conception of culture as an autonomous system was articulated to counter the naturalism of views similar to those of Radin and we might ask as Sahlins did of Malinowski: Where do the intentions of the individual actor come from? Are we then faced with the choice of going back to history and behaviour as a series of meaningless events or to resurrect culture as an autonomous system? An answer in the negative and an attempt to provide something new is contained in Geertz's interpretive anthropology to which I turn now.

## VII. Interpretive Anthropology

Here I want to begin by discussing Geertz's notion of culture as meaningful action. This formulation appears to take us beyond the conception of culture as an autonomous system without relegating it to a purely instrumental order. It will, however, be argued that Geertz's insights have limitations as he then places the meaningful in a socially shared structure of meaning, in culture as text. Finally I want to assess Gulick's (1988) argument that the difficulties inherent in the notion of culture as text can be overcome by relating it to Geertz's background in Parsonian sociology. I question Gulick's suggestion as the notion of "society" evoked has certain limitations.

### Culture as action

With regard to his interpretive anthropology Geertz has sought inspiration in many different quarters. The most important source with regard to action is undeniably the sociology of Max Weber (see Weber 1978), especially as it was handed down through the works of Talcott Parsons and even Alfred Schutz (see Peacock 1981).

In developing his brand of sociology Weber (1978) made a fundamental distinction between *behaviour* and *action*. Behaviour is mere execution, a matter of material reactions amongst things. We can say that water, due to its chemical properties, behaves in a certain way under certain circumstances, and that a bee, due to its genetical makeup, behaves in a certain way under certain circumstances. Action, on the other hand, presupposes a conscious subject. It "...is a behaviour to which the actor *attaches* a subjective meaning..." (Levine and Levine 1975:165). Subjectivity here always takes the form of an intention, as it is thought of as the nature of subjectivity to bring otherwise "...self-enclosed behaviour out of its shell" (Levine and Levine 1975:165). An involuntary twitch in the eye is behaviour, while a wink, behaviour that carries an *intended* message, is an action (Geertz 1973:7).

If Geertz, as most anthropologists, seeks to know why people do the things they do, he clearly thinks that the answer to that is a *meaning* rather than a *cause* (Segal 1988:40). In the more ordinary sense of the terms a twitch is explicable because it has a cause. It is meaningless because it is unintentional and has no purpose. A wink, on the other hand, is meaningful because it is intentional and has a purpose rather than a cause (Segal 1988:41). More technically, maybe, "...a wink is meaningful not just because it is purposeful, or

intentional, but also because the purpose is inseparable from the behavior: in winking, one does not first contract one's eyelids and then wink but rather intentionally contracts one's eyelids. The purpose is therefore not the cause but the meaning of the behavior" (Segal 1988:41).

The difference between a cause and a meaning can be explained by pointing out the difference between the ideas of Geertz and Boas. For Boas culture is the categories of thought that structure experience and they remain as such largely out of reach of human consciousness. Behaviour is moreover the reaction that follows more or less automatically from experience thus structured by culture. We can then say that behaviour is for Boas caused, but then it should also be meaningless. For Geertz, on the other hand, culture is the meaning people consciously put on experience and the meaningful action that flows from that experience.

Though Weber was not concerned with different cultures conceived as self-contained entities, he highlighted intercultural differences in beliefs, attitudes and values (Ingold 1986a:333). Gaining access to those calls for some kind of interpretive sociology. To get the meaning an agent attaches to his action is, to Weber, to expose his state of mind. That requires "...a process of observation and interpretation Weber called *Verstehen*..." (Ingold 1986:333), through which the observer tries to understand the purposes inherent in the actions of those under observation. This may confront the anthropologist with the well-known philosophical problem of subjectivism. Against such charges, Schutz maintained that the kind of interpretation carried on by the sociologist was feasible "...because this interpretation process is essentially identical to the ongoing process of interpretation or "meaning-giving" engaged in by agents in the course of their own daily lives" (Gell 1992:70). This principle of congruence "...between observer's meaning-giving and agent's meaning-giving acts...is the underlying principle behind Geertz's "interpretative" approach in anthropology..." (Gell 1992:70).

What this amounts to may be explained by showing what Geertz thinks is the fundamental nature of the things anthropologists do. To Geertz, the most distinguishing thing anthropologists do is to write ethnographies (see Spencer 1989). Ethnographies, at least the good ones, are thick descriptions, says Geertz (Geertz 1973: chapter 1; see Austin 1979). A description is thick when it manages to observe the difference between behaviour and action, and get beyond behaviour and understand the meaning the action has. After observing that a wink is not a twitch, the anthropologist still has to decide if it signals a conspiracy, or even the absence of a conspiracy while intending to suggest that



one exists. While a thin description would only recognise the twitch, a slightly thicker one would recognise the wink as an indication of conspiracy and an even thicker one would recognise it as signalling the lack of conspiracy, and so on. It is here between the thin and the thick that the object of ethnography lies, in "...a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which winks...are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not...exist..." (Geertz 1973:7). The anthropologist must, as any other social person, try to perceive, recognise and interpret the winks other people produce, he is confronted with a multitude of complex conceptual structures, superimposed on one another (1973:10). While the object of ethnography is apparently in the beginning the intention of the actor, this intention gives us access to the true object of thick description, the "hierarchy of meaningful structures". Having said this it follows that the anthropologist's task in analysing human action, is to sort out the structures of meaning that inform it, and the aim is to find out what it is that is being said through it (1973:9-10).

### **Culture as text**

There is a concept of culture to go with this approach and it is a semiotic one. If man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, Geertz says, "...I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973:5). This is important as Geertz notes that it was around the concept of culture that anthropology arose, and that since then the discipline has been concerned with specifying the meaning of this concept all the way down from Tylor's "complex whole". Geertz's interpretive anthropology is also to be dedicated to this cutting to size of the culture concept and thus to secure its continuing importance (1973:4). To indicate what is new in it, according to Geertz, it is perhaps right to identify the notions of culture against which it reacts and which it seeks to go beyond.

There are three senses of the concept current in America at this time against which Geertz fights in particular. One sees culture as a superorganic whole, a living organism in its own right, in line with Kroeber's initial formulation of the superorganic. To treat it this way is to reify culture, says Geertz (1973:11). Secondly, we can see culture as patterns of behaviour. This view can perhaps be traced back to Boas, it was expressed by Steward, and it was this sense of culture the Boasians stressed in their reaction against Kroeber's superorganism. This is to reduce culture, says Geertz (1973:11).

Thirdly, we can see culture as a frame of mind, as existing in the heads and hearts of people. This sense can possibly be identified with Benedict's patterns, even though Geertz would most likely not do so (see Geertz 1988: chapter 5), it runs through the culture and personality school, and was later taken up by the ethnoscience movement, and it is against this latter in particular that Geertz is fighting (Geertz 1973:11).

This is clearly important as we are meant to have here a truly novel conception of culture. It should, then, be worthwhile to investigate further what exactly it is Geertz is fighting against, and why. First, culture is not a superorganism, for Geertz, because it can not be seen as a power that causes events to happen, institutions to exist or processes to take place. To see culture as a symbolic system in its own terms is to risk locking cultural analysis away from its real object, the informal logic it gives to actual life. It is only in social action that culture finds its articulation, and exists. It receives its meaning from the role it plays in the flow of social life, and not from the intrinsic relations that different parts of it may have to each other (1973:10-14). Establishing a coherent culture can then not be the test of validity for any cultural analysis (1973:17). Secondly, culture is not to be seen as heterogeneous patterns of behaviour. Such a conception precludes the ethnographer from describing it thickly, prevents her from seeing the difference between a twitch and a wink. In brief, this conception is contradictory to the very sense of meaning Geertz wants the term to cover. Finally, this is not a notion of culture as a psychological frame of mind. There are two principal but different reasons why this is not so.

On one hand, this would be to relegate action back to behaviour in the sense that culture would then no longer be a source of the meaning an actor attaches to his behaviour but simply his psychological predisposition to perform such a behaviour. To say that culture is socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people act and, for example, signal conspiracies, is not to say that it is a psychological phenomenon, not any more at least than we would say that music is a psychological phenomenon by the fact that some people have predispositions to perform it (Geertz 1973:12-13).

On the other hand, culture cannot be a purely psychological phenomenon because there is no way in which you can observe the state of mind of someone else. This is only open to you through the meaningful actions of that somebody. And that which is thus open is, for the anthropologist at least, the important bit. Culture is *public* because meaning is; if it is ideational, it still does not exist in someone's head (1973:10-14).

This notion of culture being public is an important point (see Gulick 1988; Segal 1988; Shore 1988b; Tyson 1988; Strauss 1992; Austin 1979; Barth 1993:169-70). Strauss (1992:5) has identified two things Geertz has in mind here by *public*: First, culture is *shared*, it is a social phenomenon, not an attribute of the individual. Second, because it is shared, and because action's fundamental quality is that it signifies, culture is also "...*open to view* - out in the world...rather than hidden, as people's thoughts and feelings are" (Strauss 1992:5). Once human behaviour is thus seen as "...symbolic action - action which...signifies - the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind...loses sense" (Geertz 1973:10). Culture, instead, emerges as a context within which institutions, actions and events can be intelligibly and meaningfully described (Geertz 1973:14; see Tyson 1988:102).

I believe there is one more point Geertz is making. Public is, I believe, also meant to connote intelligible, or perhaps better interpretable. Whereas sensations and feelings may be fleeting and personal at first, they become intelligible when the subject puts them in a public form through which she interprets them and expresses them. We have here, then, a dichotomy between psychological sensations that are idiosyncratic, maybe, and public forms of expression and interpretation that are social and stable. If this sounds familiar then it should. Geertz seems to have something akin to Durkheim's *collective conscience* in mind, but this idea, that the public is somehow more "rational", more "real" than private sensations, has, though, a much older pedigree. It runs through Western thought from Kant to Plato (Lloyd 1983; see Strathern 1988:94-5).

Geertz resorts to a wide variety of metaphors to bring home this point of culture being public. In 'Thick Description' culture goes from being an "imaginative universe" (Geertz 1973:10) to becoming a "conceptual structure" (Geertz 1973:7; see Tyson 1988:102-6). These are clearly not quite the same thing. The former would rest quite comfortably with Bourdieu's phrase "on the hither side of words and concepts" (Bourdieu 1977:2), whereas the latter seems to imply that culture can be translated into storable propositions (Tyson 1988:102-6). The former seems to identify culture with something like a poem or a painting, the latter implies that it is like mathematics. Tyson (1988), who likes the "imaginative universe" but is not so fond of the "conceptual structures", has given a kind of autobiographical account of his various journeys through Geertz's essay. He identifies as the crucial move from the former to the latter the moment when acts become signs. Then social action

becomes social discourse informed by the conceptual structures in which the signs have their place (Tyson 1988:102-6).

This can be illustrated by returning to Weber. He made a further distinction between action and social action. If action is still behaviour the actor attaches a meaning to, social action is action which "...by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual...takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber 1947:88; see Ingold 1986a:332). In brief, social action is meaningful because it is directed towards other agents. But for this to have any effect, Geertz claims, social action must be mediated by a recognised and shared code of interpretation. A wink is not really a wink unless it is recognised as such (Geertz 1973:7). It is on this "code" that Geertz increasingly focuses his attention, changing the import of Weber's distinction. Action, for Geertz, becomes social, in that "...the orientation of the act is to a socially shared meaning" (Levine and Levine 1975:165). This is also the import of the metaphor that Geertz came to rely most heavily on in pressing home the point that meaning is public (Gulick 1988:134); Ricoeur's (1979) suggestion that meaningful action - culture - be viewed as a *text*.

In making this suggestion Ricoeur was concerned with establishing an interpretive science of symbolic action (Gulick 1988:135). He tried to show that meaningful, public behaviour is an object that can be interpreted the way a text can be, arguing that just as some readings of a text are more valid than others, so are some interpretations of social reality, even if the latter is seen as fundamentally symbolic (Gulick 1988:135). The first step in Ricoeur's argument is to distinguish language, an atemporal system of signs, from discourse that is only realised in temporal events. Ricoeur rejects the former as a model for meaningful action because it is, as the work of the structuralists had made obvious, fundamentally ahistorical. Instead Ricoeur focuses on discourse which he again divides into speaking and writing (Gulick 1988:135). It is this latter that Ricoeur takes as his basic unit and principal model of meaningful action.

The most important characteristic a written text has, for Ricoeur, is that once written and in circulation the author's intentions and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. The text escapes the intentions of its author. The meaning of what is written becomes a fixed public meaning that goes beyond the temporal conditions of its production (Gulick 1988:136). For this observation Ricoeur postulates a parallel between the way a text is read and how social action is interpreted: "Just as what is said in writing is inscribed in a

way that outlasts its action of being written, so what is done in social action has an importance which outlasts the event character of its enactment...Social action is autonomous, a publicly available, historical record with an importance which transcends its relevance to its initial situation" (Gulick 1988:136). In this way the model of the text draws the attention to the question "...what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events - history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior - implies for sociological interpretation" (Geertz 1983:31).

The important point Geertz appropriates from Ricoeur's model (see Gulick 1988:137-8), is the latter's observation that the intentions of the author have no import on the interpretation of the meaning of a text. This allows Geertz to insist on the public nature of meaning and enables him to distance himself from any concern with the psychological processes of the actor. Ricoeur's notion of the text has the same implications as Geertz's notion of culture as described above (Gulick 1988:137-8; see Strauss 1992; Barth 1993:169-70; Tyson 1988; Segal 1988; Spencer 1989; Wikan 1989).

There are some problems with the model of the text. It is even difficult to see, as Gulick points out (1988:138-9), exactly what the benefits of the model are. First, even if the model of the text turns the attention to the fixation of meaning it is obviously simplistic to treat all written material as similar in its textual character. In a personal letter the intentions of the author are crucial, and can, if need be, be ascertained. In the manual for a washing machine, on the contrary, the subject matter at hand is all important, not the intentions of whoever wrote it. Second, the model of the text seems unnecessarily restricted. Written material is not accompanied with such richness of illocutionary and perlocutionary signals as is spoken discourse and the text seems to reduce social reality accordingly (Gulick 1988:138-9).

Most important, though, is the notion of meaning employed here. If we admit that a text has, potentially, a meaning far beyond the intentions of its author, it still does not mean to say that it has somehow become a fixed, public entity, apart from the psychological processes of all actors. Or how can a text have a meaning apart from the activity of *a* reader? (Gulick 1988:140). It would seem that one can only identify a wink by inquiring into the state of mind of the winker. That entails that a wink cannot simply be recognised by reference to a socially shared structure of meaning. A success in perceiving a wink and in interpreting its meaning must also call for some knowledge of the personal history of the winker in question, whether he is prone to wink and what he is wont to signal by winking.

In neglecting the intentions of the actor, and in the end all actors, we can ask, with Gulick, if Geertz has not resurrected behaviourism, if in a slightly different form (1988:141-2). It may be pointed out here that in arguing for the model of the text Ricoeur was interested in countering "...the historicism, romanticism, and...relativism of alternative views of meaning..." (Gulick 1988:140), and used the world of the text as an atemporal world against which interpretations could be judged. And the consequence of separating the text from the state of mind of all actors is that Geertz's "...middle world of public meaning..." (Gulick 1988:143), seems to somehow hang in mid-air, unconnected to individuals which see a meaning in a "text", or the social and historical context in which they do so. Geertz's world of public meaning is formal and textual rather than substantial and contextual (Gulick 1988:143; see Scholte 1986).

Gulick (1988:147-8) points out that the model of the text does not play any positive role in Geertz's ethnographic descriptions. That is right, I believe, as the example of the 'Balinese Cockfight' Gulick takes seems to imply (see also Crapanzano 1986; Roseberry 1982). There is no new insight gained by treating the cockfight as a text rather than simply as a social occasion, and anything of value in the essay has already been spelled out before Geertz turns to this metaphor (Gulick 1988:147-8). Still, in implying that the model of the text plays an insignificant part in Geertz's work, I think Gulick goes too far. The model of the text is wholly in keeping with the import of Geertz's theoretical work.

This assertion can be augmented by pointing out the ways in which Geertz conceptualises the symbolic which he in general equates with the meaningful. Here Geertz relies heavily on the work of Suzanne Langer (see Austin 1979:45). Langer proposed two theories of meaning. First, that the meaning of words are images of the objects they refer to. Secondly, that sentences picture reality so that the structure of a sentence is analogous to the state of the world the sentence refers to (Austin 1979:46). As there is obviously no direct connection between images one might associate with words, and their meanings, and no inherent relation between the meaning of a sentence and its grammatical structure, Langer went on to identify any sensation in a structured form with symbolism, asserting that even the cognitive organisation of perception is symbolic (Austin 1979:46).

This theory Geertz follows and supports his view by observing that the sets of symbols which constitute cultures are both models *of* and models *for* reality (Austin 1979:47, 49; see Geertz 1973:91-4). Models *for* reality would

normally be found inherent in nature in the instinctual responses of animals to their reality. This is what is lacking in man, says Geertz, in the very limited programming involved in human genetics. Instead man constructs models of reality, which become blueprints for his own actions. The symbol becomes the medium by which "...man imposes a structure, derived from observation of the world, onto his own behaviour" (Austin 1979:49). By then comparing these with maps, plans and blueprints, Geertz (1973:91-4, 249-51) adds plausibility to his view, suggesting that the arrangements of symbols picture reality (Austin 1979:49). Moving from these to discussing common values expressed in daily behaviour and the manner in which symbols embody world views and ethos, the claim that symbols share a common structure with reality becomes more tenuous. Referring to structure here appears to be no more than a spurious means of describing the meaning of symbols by resorting to an imagery theory of meaning. Introducing that theory "...is strategic in this context because it suggests that perception, cognition, language and behaviour, are all structured in a similar fashion and are all similarly symbolic. Cultural representation then does indeed begin with perception and dominates all our behaviour" (Austin 1979:49).

Symbolism, that is, becomes for Geertz, the way we see the world. At the same time it ceases to be the result of our conscious interpretation of the world. If the symbolic is furthermore the same as culture, as Geertz is wont to say, culture as text must be inscribed into the minds of all actors and be the same for all actors of the same group. Culture comes to constitute their natural response to an external stimulus. That is surely to resurrect behaviourism as Gulick (1988:141-2) argues.

### **Culture and social system**

Gulick suggests that Geertz's "...middle world of public meaning..." could be reconnected if Geertz were to return to the more Parsonian social perspective of his younger days (1988:143, 148).

The Parsonian perspective is maybe most pronounced in Geertz's essay 'Ritual and Social Change' (Geertz 1973:142-69). There Geertz is concerned with the difficulties functionalism has in dealing with historical changes. This is so, he argues, because functionalism follows a reductionist logic. Having developed the concept of social structure considerably, functionalism has left culture unexamined. To make room for change within this framework, the notion of culture has to be developed, says Geertz, and culture and social

structure kept analytically separate. By treating culture and social structure as independently variable yet interdependent factors, Geertz says, they will be seen as capable of many modes of integration with one another and the incongruities between them can be seen as conducive to change (Geertz 1973:143-4; see Rice 1980:29).

Geertz, then, follows Parsonian orthodoxy by distinguishing between culture and social structure. Culture is the fabric of meaning by which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions, whereas social structure is the form that those actions take, the actual network of social relationships. The importance of keeping these two apart, says Geertz, is evidenced by the fact that their mode of integration is different. Culture is logico-meaningfully integrated, the social system is causal-functionally integrated (Geertz 1973:145).

Having made this distinction Geertz goes on to describe a funeral in a Javanese town that went wrong and the implications this has for social change in the island. The details of the story need not detain us here. It is enough to say that Geertz reaches the conclusion that the conflict around the funeral "...took place simply because all the...residents did share a common, highly integrated, cultural tradition concerning funerals..." (1973:164), while they were not so integrated socially. The difficulty rested upon the fact that socially the participants were urbanites, while culturally they were still folk (1973:164).

One could of course begin a criticism of this by saying that Geertz does not deal with history as such in this account, and does not offer much of an alternative to functionalism. History enters the story as an explanation, not as anything to be explained, or taken into account. As such, the story could be dismissed by functionally minded anthropologists as an abnormal case of disequilibrium.

The difficulty Geertz wrestles with becomes apparent in that what he sees initially as an incongruence between culture and social structure, turns out in the end to be a contradiction in either the realm of the logico-meaningful or the causal-functional. Thus sometimes Geertz implies that the disorganisation of the funeral was a result of the basic ambiguity of the meaning it had to different participants. That is a contradiction in the sphere of the meaningful (Geertz 1973:165; Rice 1980:35). Yet, Geertz also says that the disorganisation of the ritual arose from the fact that its rural social organisation was largely incongruent with the urban social organisation in which it took place. That is an example of contradiction within the social structure and not of disintegration between meaning and organisation (Rice 1980:35).



The problem is that Geertz does not make it clear how culture and social structure can be successfully connected. There is no implication of how this might be done in the observation that culture is logico-meaningfully integrated, while the social system is causal-functionally integrated. How the former rises out of the latter, or how the former informs the latter, is not spelled out. Again it is difficult to see how it could be.

The distinction was initially made on the assumption that causal-functionally integrated social systems could be found throughout the natural kingdom, but that culture was only human (see Kroeber and Parsons 1958). If the former can then be held more or less constant, while the latter can vary so dramatically from zero to fully developed culture, it is difficult to see that they in any way hang together. Accordingly, there can be no indication of in what way the two might be in conflict with each other.

As the conception of culture Geertz advances seems to be widely accepted, the fundamental question here, I believe, concerns the conception of the social. If Geertz's view of it is inadequate how are we to conceptualise the social? To discuss that question I now want to turn to my last main chapter.

## VIII. The Constitutive View of Social Relations

The notions of culture I have been discussing all share two general characteristics: That culture is *acquired*, rather than inborn, and that it is a *social* phenomenon, in some sense, rather than simply an attribute of the individual. These run from Tylor (1903 [1871], I:1) to Geertz (1973: chapter 1; see Ingold 1993a). They are meant to account for the fact that when born the human being can potentially lead many different lives, but the one it actually lives depends to a great degree on its social group. Now I want to follow Ingold (1993a) and examine these two notions as they are in no way as straightforward as they may sound.

I will begin with the former by discussing two tenets of cultural anthropological orthodoxy: cultural relativism and cultural determinism. By that I want to show that having taken consciousness out of culture history, culture is turned into an active agent and "acquire" becomes stamped by cultural tradition. That raises problems in accounting for historical changes. These problems, I follow Fabian (1983) in arguing, have not been overcome by symbolic anthropology. While it reckons with consciousness, it places it in a symbolic system outside the world and faces the same problems with cultural acquisition and historical changes as the other view. For cultural change, it will be argued, must be seen as part of the way in which culture is transmitted and used in the world. This involves different sense of action and meaning than the one fostered by cultural anthropology. Most importantly it involves situating consciousness within the world rather than in the symbolic realm where the world is represented.

Second, I will follow Ingold (1986a) in arguing that cultural anthropology has an asocial view of culture. I will maintain, following Ingold (1986a; 1993a) that to overcome this we need to replace received notions of *society* by a conception of the social as the process by which people create each other as persons. It is here, it will be argued, that consciousness and the meaningful have their source. This involves substituting for the idea of society as a bounded entity a conception of it as a continuous field of social relations.

### Cultural acquisition

The idea of cultural relativism is based on the belief that various cultural forms can correspond to a single natural factor, man's biological make-up (Bauman 1973:18-20; Harris 1969:10-11; Jenks 1993:13). The idea states

simply that there are many distinct and different cultures in the world that each, to the extent that it deserves the name, is unique in its own right. Cultural determinism, furthermore, holds that this culture somehow determines how people experience, think about and act upon the world. These two notions are clearly related. Determinism would not be called cultural unless there were postulated to be many cultures in the world, and relativism would not be called cultural unless the culture has some fundamental import on its people's lives.

Together these two notions accomplish two things. Relativism provides a name for the observable differences between groups of people in the world (see Ingold 1993a:210-11). And determinism works against ideas of universal rationality as expressed by Tylor for example. That is, in view of the differences between the West and the rest these are not postulated to correspond to different degrees of reason, but to different reasons (see Fabian 1983: chapter 2). Cultural anthropology can, then, not accept radical empiricism of the Humean type for this implies naturalism and either environmental or biological determinism (see Sahlins 1976b; Shweder 1984b). Cultural anthropology must maintain with Kant that man is somehow active in shaping his experience, that his experience does not reflect external "reality" naturally (see Sahlins 1976b:viii; Boas 1974d [1889]). Yet, cultural anthropology cannot accept the Kantian notion of universal and ahistorical categories of thinking, for this again implies naturalism in a psychological form.

The solution has been to posit culture between the individual and her environment. In this way culture retains the Kantian characteristic of being prior to the individual and comes to structure her experience, while at the same time it keeps the Humean character of being arbitrary, relative and conventional, rather than absolute and ahistorical. That is, cultural anthropology maintains that the individual is formed by her cultural environment, no less than she is by her heredity (see Harris 1969:10-11). As cultural acquisition is, according to Boasian orthodoxy, a purely unconscious process in which the receiver plays no active part, the contention that the human being is formed by her environment is wedded to another cultural anthropological orthodoxy; that the human animal is incredibly plastic and malleable (see Boas 1938 [1911]; Lowie 1966 [1917]; Lowie 1937; Kroeber 1952a [1917]; Benedict 1935; Herskovits 1943; Harris 1969:10-11). The fact that the human infant can grow up to take on any number of a large variety of cultural attributes is accounted for by claiming that culture comes to form and determine her as she grows up.

The question remains if this is a solution to the problem. Culture is after all man-made, and we can ask: How can such a plastic, unstructured animal

come to learn, let alone create, such a complex system? As Sperber (1985:42-4) has argued, cultural anthropologists seem to have got things wrong in this matter. If we agree, Sperber says, that to be a dog entails different requirements than being a cat, then it follows that an animal that faces the prospect of becoming either a dog or a cat as it matures must be a more complex creature than an animal that only faces the prospect of becoming either. The same must apply to the human being, says Sperber. If, in the beginning of her life, the human being can take on a wide variety of different cultural attributes, become either American or Japanese, not to mention all the rest, then paradoxically, it takes more hard-wiring, less plasticity, than if she was only able to become one of them.

I stress this point here not to put forward any argument concerning human nature, but to underline the fact that this notion of plasticity either elevates culture into an active agent or stands in the way of any understanding of culture acquisition. For if we can only comprehend the world through culture, as cultural anthropology maintains, if without it we are "unworkable monstrosities", "mental basket cases", as Geertz says (1973:49), how can we, as children, acquire culture? (see Ingold 1993a). Take cultural anthropology as it stands and the answer would have to be, we cannot. Not being born with it, we cannot but acquire it from other people through interaction and communication. Yet, communicating with them is supposed to be impossible until we have been encultured (Ingold 1993a).

The situation of the child can, in a good anthropological fashion, be related to the situation of the anthropologist (Palsson 1993b; see Ingold 1993a; Ingold 1986a:44-6; 103-4). According to Boasian orthodoxy to belong to a culture is "...to be imprisoned in one's thought and action within a framework of received categories that - remaining unconscious - cannot be transcended (Ingold 1986a:45; see Boas 1938 [1911]:225-7). This is supposed to be the condition of all ordinary human beings (Ingold 1986a:45). But this leaves the anthropologist in a peculiar situation. If human, he must remain the prisoner of his own culture - the way in which he is compelled to comprehend the world - and his work would be impossible and pointless. If not, he must be superhuman. In refraining from passing judgements on other cultures, on the premise that these must be understood on their own terms, avowed relativists do thus "...place themselves in an ethereal, cultureless void. One culture may not be better or worse, more or less advanced, than another, but *they* are above culture" (Ingold 1986a:45). That is to say, this "objectivist relativism" (Ingold

1986a:103) cannot account for the observers' own existence in the real world (Bidney 1953:424; Herskovits 1948:63-4).

If this is the problem it also points to the way in which it is brought about. Namely by wedding relativism - that divides the world up into self-contained cultures, arranged alongside each other like pieces in a museum (Carrithers 1992:14-16; see Benedict 1935) - and cultural determinism; the notion that our culture structures the way we see the world. This places people in different worlds and, to the extent that it amounts to "a denial of coevalness" (Fabian 1983:chapter 2), places consciousness outside the world (see Ingold 1986a:103-4). By this, any understanding of how the child, or in fact the anthropologist, learns is prevented. The child is turned into a product of culture and the anthropologist is turned into an observer in the museum where the different cultures of the world are arranged to view (Carrithers 1992:chapter 2). Not only is the anthropologist placed above the rest of mankind, "...but also imagines the entire tapestry of 'ways of life' to be a pageant put on for his personal enjoyment" (Ingold 1986a:193). He alone is able to travel the World while the rest must remain within their worlds. Which is of course how he, and maybe the West at large, has been depicted. Cultured in the classical sense of civilisation, the West is not a place of culture in the anthropological sense of tradition; the relative ascendancy of the West over the rest, in Tylorian evolutionism, becomes a total transcendancy in cultural relativism (see Ingold 1993a; Ingold 1986a:103-4, 45).

### **The symbolic, meaning and action**

This, one would imagine, is not the case with symbolic or interpretive anthropology (Sahlins 1976b; Geertz 1973). Symbolic anthropology clearly has a place for consciousness and the creativity inherent in meaningful action, and Geertz, for example, stresses the congruence between the observer's meaning-giving and the agent's meaning-giving acts placing the observer within the culture of the agent (Gell 1992:70). Yet, the problems of cultural determinism and cultural relativism are even further exaggerated when culture is equated with the symbolic. Culture is, then, made to represent two different things. In the first place, it denotes that complex whole people acquire as members of society, the things they learn as opposed to the things they are born with. Secondly, it is the symbolically coded system of meanings. The problems begin when culture is set up as both the unique and the most fundamental feature of the human condition (see Sahlins 1976b:viii; Geertz 1973:chapters 1, 2, 3).

Firstly, man is of course not unique in that he has to learn to be able to function for this is a plight of all the higher animals. Darwin, for one, studied the learning abilities of the earthworm, which are apparently quite advanced (see Ingold 1988b:84). Secondly, in most of our daily lives, we are not guided by any symbolic system of meanings at all (see Bloch 1991). To take one example: We do not go about preparing and eating breakfast with a model in our mind of how breakfasts are prepared and eaten (Ingold 1986a:299).

As the tendency in the field seems to be to equate consciousness with cognition, and in the end, culture (Ingold 1986a:302) and allowing culture to be the symbolic system of meanings, we are faced with the conclusion that the things we do without the aid of a blueprint, we do unconsciously. That is surely absurd. Eating breakfast is of course something we are quite conscious of doing, something we do on purpose, even though we take no symbolic guidance in doing it (Ingold 1986a:299-302).

If we take culture to be this symbolic system of meaning we need a term to cover what is left. Here the distinction between *discursive* and *practical* consciousness is useful (see Giddens 1979, 1984; Ingold 1986a:chapter 7). Discursive consciousness is this ability, presumably unique to humans, to freeze a moment out of time, hold it up for speculation, and transfer it, if need be, from one realm to another (see Giddens 1979:25). It is discursive consciousness we apply when we hold an image in the mind of a future state we want to attain; when we are guided in our actions by symbolically coded, formal rules. In our daily lives, on the other hand, we are to most extent guided by practical consciousness, that is, "...all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression" (Giddens 1984:xxiii). Though discursive consciousness may be unique to humans it is essential to acknowledge that we are not constantly guided by it in our conduct. And even more important, that even if we are not, we still feel ourselves to be conscious agents, acting on purpose (Ingold 1986a:310).

What is at issue here is Searle's (1979) distinction between *prior intention* and *intention in action*. A prior intention is a blueprint brought up in discursive consciousness, "...an imaginative representation of a future state that it is desired to bring about..." (Ingold 1986a:312). Intention in action, on the other hand, is to be directly conscious of acting; it "...corresponds to the experience of actually doing; in that sense it is *presentational* rather than *representational*" (Ingold 1986a:312). That we can act intentionally without a prior intention may seem obvious, but Sahlins, for one, is still able to say that

all "...*praxis* is theoretical. It begins always in concepts of the actors and of the objects of their existence, the cultural segmentations and values of an *a priori* system" (Sahlins 1985:154; see Sahlins 1976b:57).

The point is that the intentional character of human action is not to be understood, "...as an articulation of discrete and separate 'intentions', but [as] a continuous flow of intentionality in time..." (Giddens 1979:40). For *praxis*, after all, refers to the actual doing and not to the ends to which it strives. If we argue as Sahlins that all *praxis* begins in theory, we would have to ask: From where comes the theory, the prior intention, and we would soon come up against a logical impasse. Behind it "...must lie another prior intention, of which the former is a realization, behind that another and so on *ad infinitum*" (Ingold 1986a:312). If practice is but the execution of prior intentions, then it, in itself, need be no different than brute behaviour. That is, the opposite of automatic, unconscious behaviour is not self-conscious discursive expression, but the intentionality that inheres in the action itself. For if practice is but the execution of prior intentions then it cannot have any historical character for all its ends must already be contained in the theory (Ingold 1986a:312). But *an end* is not *the end*.

There is another point here. There can be no direct relationship between a cultural ideal and its putting into practice. This is not only because, as argued above, motivation for acting is not automatically acquired even when cultural descriptions of reality are learned (Strauss 1992:11-12), but also because learning cultural descriptions of reality is no straightforward business (see Toren 1993). For Sahlins (1985:144-51), to take an example, cultural categories are *received* ready-made only to be *risked* in practice. Yet, cultural categories cannot be said to be received in this sense. To follow Sahlins and say that is to raise an "...implicit distinction between cognition and practice [which] reifies his cultural 'system' as an ultimately all-encompassing and a-historical model of possibilities" (Toren 1993:474, n.2). But the acquisition of cultural categories must always be the product of a process of cognitive construction in particular persons. Here we can follow Boas and invoke the agency of chance and see change and cultural variability in the occasional miscopying of cultural instructions that is supposed to happen in cultural transmission (Ingold 1986a:191). That would be to render culture meaningless again. Or we could follow Marx and Engels when they observe, in the *German Ideology*, that ideas in and of themselves are practically inert. Then, the receiving of culture must also involve some activity on behalf of the receiver. The nature of the acquisition must as well in some way depend on who the receiver is, rather than

the receiver being defined simply by the message. It follows that culture is not so much *received* and *risked*, as *actively made* in the process of cultural transmission and acquisition. Cultural acquisition must be based on the same element of human creativity that fosters historical changes (Toren 1993).

This can perhaps be explained by pointing out the difference between technology and technique (Ingold 1993c:341-4; see Ingold 1993e:450-3). Technology, simply put, refers to the operational principles found in the external means of production, and can be thought of as existing outside any immediate context of application and without reference to any particular people. Technique, on the other hand, is the embodied skills of human agents, and can only be thought of as existing in the context of its application and with reference to the people whose skills they are. Now, as technology refers to discursive consciousness, I have argued that we cannot possibly think of all culture, all the things people learn, as technology. To the extent that this holds, we have to view cultural acquisition as an achievement of particular people, rather than as the forming of particular kinds of people by culture. For technique, being the embodied skills of particular persons, is not a property of the culture but a "...personal accomplishment of its users..." (Ingold 1993c:342), the people whose culture it is.

This points to the conception of consciousness and meaning advanced by cultural anthropology. For cultural anthropology consciousness is primarily referential, referring to cultural ideals outside the world (Gulick 1988:145; see Geertz 1973:145; Peacock 1975:4, 7). It sees meaning as inhering in an ideal, symbolic structure, a technology or a *langue*, to which consciousness, in interpretation, refers. It is a basic presupposition of much anthropology that man lives according to such a scheme of meanings, a scheme of his own creation (see Sahlins 1976b:viii; Geertz 1973:chapters 1, 2, 3). The emphasis on this aspect of human life has in fact been growing over the past twenty years due to the influence of the likes of Sahlins and especially Geertz. The initial formulation, as mentioned before, comes from Weber's (1978) distinction between behaviour and action. Behaviour is mere execution, a matter of reactions amongst things. Action, on the other hand, presupposes a conscious subject in that it "...is behaviour to which the actor attaches a subjective meaning..." (Levine and Levine 1975:165). The problem is that the word *meaning* itself has here two possible meanings: what the actor means to do, and the meaning his doing has (Ingold 1986a:334). Meaning can refer to the subjective experience of action, and to the completed act (Giddens 1976:28).



The former sense is intransitive, it is equivalent to *Joe lives*, the latter is transitive, equivalent to *Joe makes* (Ingold 1986a:334).

Weber may not have given due attention to this ambiguity and it is in any way mistaken to suppose "...that we 'attach' meaning to action that is being lived-through, since we are immersed in the action itself" (Giddens 1976:28; see Weber 1978:7). Attaching meaning to action implies a discursive look at the act by the actor, or others, and is something that can only be applied retrospectively, to finished acts, or a priori to ones that have not yet been embarked upon. The different meanings of meaning thus correspond to intention in action and prior intentions, technique and technology. The former can clearly only be grasped by viewing acts and intentions, meaning if you want, "...as moments in a total process of life, in relation to what comes before and after..." (Ingold 1986a:334). The latter, on the other hand, "...establishes a relation between a concrete behavioural execution and a conceptual image...of which it is taken to be the realization" (Ingold 1986a:334). Again, the former is presentational while the latter is representational.

If Weber left us in doubt as to what he meant, there is no doubt about what stance Sahlins and Geertz take. They generally equate meaning with culture, the symbolic, concept and so on. That leaves us with the impossibility to take meaning in its intransitive sense at face value, and even risks the concept of meaning itself. It may perhaps be demonstrated by returning to Saussure.

We may accept that language is radically arbitrary in relation to the world, if also radically compelling for the individual speaker. A problem rises though when we ask what exactly is arbitrary? Is it the signifier, the signified, or the relation between the two? (Giddens 1979:14; see also in relation with Geertz: Asad 1983; Austin 1979). For Saussure it was the last one of these and as he thus "...focused on the signifier/signified relation as arbitrary, he tended to elide the 'signified' and the '*object* signified' (or referred to) by a word or statement" (Giddens 1979:14-15). This, as Giddens points out, has two consequences: Having banished the "object" from view, problems of reference all but disappear and linguistic theory is made to turn on the relation between signifier and signified. Secondly, the nature of the signified, variously described as ideas, concepts and mental images, was left obscure. By combining with signifiers, they were made to participate in the process of semiosis, but how they achieve any capability to refer to the world is completely unexplained. This is most unfortunate as the signified is in

Saussure's theory generally equivalent to meaning. A theory of language without a clear conception of meaning is of course absurd (Giddens 1979:15).

The formalism of Saussure is furthermore only brought about by suppressing the process of interpretation in the sign. To return to the "Paris-Geneva train" it is obvious that its identity cannot be specified independently of the situation in which the sign is used. And this context is not the system of differences, but the situation of practice. For the passenger, it is true, the "Paris-Geneva train" may be the same day in day out despite different engines and everything, but not for the railway engineer, nor, of course, for the train-spotter. For them it is exactly the different engines that make all the difference (Giddens 1979:15; see Ogden and Richards 1930; Malinowski 1930).

This leads to an important observation. *Langue* is insulated from *parole*, culture from practice, by arbitrarily taking up one point from which to view it and by making that the only point from which to view it. That is, by making language an object of observation in a way that it is not in the daily lives of most people (see Harris 1980). In other words, the context, and how people are situated within it, makes all the difference in language use, except for the outside observer. For him alone can language exist as a whole unrelated to its uses.

If this points to the fact that it only makes sense to speak of the symbolic in opposition to the non-symbolic, as Austin observes (1979:45-6), it is equally important to have in mind that nothing is symbolic in itself. It only becomes so by way of use, when made to stand proxy for something else, as Austin says (1979:45-6). That "something else" must then of course exist prior to and independently of it being symbolised. That means, moreover, that there must be some activity involved in making of that "something" a symbol, and, that the activity itself is *not* symbolic in the same way as its "product". This points to the fact, that seeing everything as symbolic is, again, to take up an outside view from where everything can stand proxy for something else. That is to say, all things become symbolic when the anthropologist ignores the process by which the symbolic is produced (Fabian 1983:140-1; Bourdieu 1977:96).

By taking it as the fundamental nature of action that it signifies, Geertz then (1973:chapter 1; see Tyson 1988) commits himself to an outsider's view of action and takes his seat among the audience and not on the stage. For even if action signifies something to the audience, for the actor it is also the experience of actually doing. Geertz can then not grasp the life of the "native" in its intransitive sense. For him it can only be an example, an instance, of the native's culture, which it then signifies, put on a display for the anthropologist

(see Ingold 1986a:103-4). Likewise for Sahlins. If for him the fundamental fact of action is that it risks received cultural categories (see Toren 1993), Sahlins cannot explain how that which is being risked was first created. Geertz and Sahlins can only see meaning in accomplished acts, or prior intentions, and not in the act of doing itself. They emphasise the sense made, and not the making of the sense, and leave us with an idea of the end-product, but not a clue as concerns the production itself (see Scholte 1986; Fabian 1983:140-1; Bourdieu 1977:96, 1-3).

Hatch (1973:42) may be right in saying that Boas thought of culture as a subjectively perceived whole, but it is important to have in mind that this was not a view Boas accorded the "native". The "whole" emerged, for Boas, when the anthropologist looked inside the native's head to find there the cultural categories that, while remaining out of the reach of the "native", were supposed to structure his experience and behaviour (Ingold 1986a:93). For symbolic anthropology, likewise, culture becomes a meaningful whole for the anthropologist, not by looking inside people's heads but by elevating it away from the actual activity of the people, by insulating *langue* from *parole*. What the Boasian and the symbolic view share is that they both ignore the component of meaning that inheres in the action itself (see Ingold 1986a: chapter 7).

If the Boasian view of culture tends to be ahistorical in that it takes consciousness out of the world, then the symbolic view is ahistorical in that it places consciousness solely in a symbolic system. Now I want to show that this view is also asocial, and that to overcome its limitations we need a conception of the social different from the one advanced by cultural anthropology.

### **The social as a continuous field of relationships**

Any anthropological discussions about the social are in some way or another affected by and set up against Western notions about the individual. The reverse seems to hold as well. Noam Chomsky, for example, reacted to Saussure's radically social view of language by reintroducing the natural individual, stronger than ever maybe (see Palsson 1991: chapter 1). His competent speaker is an isolated, autonomous individual closely related to Tylor's universal, natural man of reason. This creature is directly descended from the economic man of classical liberalism.

Classical liberalism was perhaps given its most logical formulation in John Locke's definition of private property (1978 [1689]:18-19). On the

gathering of fruits, Locke wonders where, in the chain from extraction to consumption, appropriation occurs and private property begins. In answer to this he says, "...'tis plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That *labour* put a distinction between them and the common. That added something to them more than Nature...had done; and so they became his private right" (1978 [1689]:18). Property, for Locke, begins, then, with the individual, with reason, and extends from there through the hands and the instruments to the resources with which the instruments are brought into contact (Ingold 1986b:227).

With regard to private property this is an enviable clarity. But if we now ask with Ingold (1988b:227): "From where comes this individual?" Locke would have to say: She is, "...a preconstituted entity, who comes into being already equipped with certain needs or desires and the bodily means to set about their satisfaction" (Ingold 1986b:227; see Lukes 1973: especially chapters 11-13).

In theory, at least, anthropology largely objects to this view. This was part of Boas's criticism of Tylor, and it was also around this issue that Durkheim's polemic against Spencer was centred (Durkheim 1933 [1893]). Spencer advanced the claims of individualism, maintaining that society was but an instrumental order designed to serve the interests of its individuals, interests that were ready-made by the time the individuals entered society (Ingold 1986a:223-7).

Durkheim showed that Spencer's formulae did not add up. To be on the safeside every individual would, in all transactions, try to cheat the other party if only to prevent being cheated himself. If this prevails, Durkheim says, as it should according to Spencer's logic, then society falls apart and social life would be impossible.

The reason why we do not cheat all the time is, according to Durkheim, the moral order, society (Durkheim 1933 [1893]:3). A man, Durkheim says, is not just an organic being, he is also an incumbent of a social position. These positions, he goes on, constitute another, higher kind of thing, that regulates and controls human conduct. This thing is then supposed to have a life of its own, the life of society. In other words, to have the effect it has, society must have its source outside the individual, argues Durkheim. It must be an emergent being, it must more than the sum of its parts, more than the individuals that are its components and come to them from the outside. The social, Durkheim argues, is a domain of reality over and above the organic individuals. It is brought about by the interpenetration of individuals that gives rise to a corporate

consciousness, with an individuality of its own, and to which the lives of its constituents are subservient (Durkheim 1933 [1893]:26, 61; see Ingold 1986a:227-30).

As Hatch (1973:208-13; see Ingold 1986a:230), has shown there are some striking similarities between Durkheim's views and Boas's. Both held that people absorb characteristic ways of feeling, thinking and acting from the social or cultural surroundings in which they were bred. Both rejected instrumentalist conception of society or culture. And both rejected biopsychological reductionism and asserted the autonomy of ideas in determination of human conduct.

This break with philosophical materialism, as Ingold notes (1986a:230) served both Durkheim and Boas as a basis for an indulgence in analogies between the social/cultural and the biological. These were though formed differently. Durkheim's analogy with the biological is of society as a real entity, an individual organism. Boas's culture, on the other hand, is a nominal entity, analogous to the biological species.

According to Boas, culture does not encompass the individual in a higher-order system of relations. Culture, says Boas, is itself contained as a property of its individual bearers, it has no supraindividual essence. Boas's culture is not a product of the fusion of individual minds into a higher entity, directing their conduct from without, but is separately installed within each one prior to their association (Ingold 1986a:230-5). And as culture does not emerge through the interpenetration of minds on a higher level, but is separately contained in each, "...society can be nothing but the resultant of their interaction. In other words, it is the product of the external contact of discrete, self-contained individuals, the manner of whose association is entirely predictable from the properties constitutive of their "nature"..." if that be cultural rather than biological here (Ingold 1986a: 235-6).

The Boasian view of society can be explained better by showing how cultural anthropologists have distinguished between culture and society. One of the earliest attempts to conceive this difference was by Bernhard Stern (Ingold 1986a:235). A culture, he maintained, is traditions of values and ideas, while a society is simply constituted by the association and interaction of individual organisms. That is, cultureless animals can enjoy social life, but the reverse does not hold true, though, as association is a condition for the transmission of culture through teaching and learning (Ingold 1986a:235; see Boas 1938 [1911]:149-50).

This difference was later canonised by Kroeber and Parsons in their attempt to establish a viable division of labour between anthropology and sociology (Austin 1979:48). Kroeber and Parsons argued that culture and social system did not designate two different concrete phenomena but selected two analytically distinct components from those phenomena (Austin 1979:48). They further suggested that either culture or social system might be held constant while the other was analysed, defining each in turn (Kroeber and Parsons 1958:583; see Austin 1979:48):

We suggest that it is useful to define the concept *culture*...restricting its reference to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in shaping of human behaviour...we suggest that the term *society* - or more generally, *social system* be used to designate the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities...One indication of the independence of the two is the existence of highly organized insect societies with at best a minimal rudimentary component of culture in our present narrower sense.

This is obviously somewhat confused (Austin 1979:48). I take it though that Kroeber and Parsons were claiming that culture and society were two ontologically distinct systems. Society could clearly, in their minds, exist without culture, even if the reverse did not hold true.

It is noteworthy here that cultural anthropology conceives of society in purely instrumental terms. Every interaction, for example between buyers and sellers, is a social relationship, one that is over the moment it is begun. Social relationships can then also be nothing but a tool to the execution of extra-social ends that have been constituted prior to the interaction, and must have their source outside society; in the genetic or cultural constitution of individual transactors (Ingold 1986a:222-3).

The Durkheimian and the Boasian view of the social have one important defect in common. Neither of them, enables us to understand social life "...as a creative process whereby human beings relate to one another as the authors as well as the players of their parts" (Ingold 1986a:244). They do in turn reproduce the very individualism they are set up against. Let me explain.

When Sahlins claims that Durkheim's sociology - being the direct negation of individual utilitarianism without any symbolic conception of society - can only lead to a sociological utilitarianism, he misses the point (1976b:108-9). What is lacking in Durkheim is not a symbolic theory of society, as Sahlins maintains, but an adequate conception of social relations.

Durkheim sometimes compared the properties of society, as opposed to those of its individual members, to the combination of elements in nature. Oxygen and hydrogen come together to form water and thus create properties which are not those of oxygen or hydrogen in isolation, or derivable from them. In the same way, we can imagine a buyer and a seller coming together to form a market, a social institution that is not reducible to either a buyer or a seller (Giddens 1979:51).

Yet, to extend this view to society only works for the views of society Durkheim was criticising, the views based on utilitarian individualism. It is only if, as Giddens observes, "...individuals, as fully formed social beings, came together to create new social properties by the fact of their association, as in contract theories of society..." that the analogy holds (Giddens 1979:51). In other words: You must have been established as a blood cell or a brain cell before you enter the social body, in order for you to be able to take up your position there and function properly. That is, not only are the positions established beforehand but so must also be the people who come to occupy them.

Durkheim, then, cannot account for the process whereby society and the people who make it up are created. This is admittedly one of the points Sahlins is making when he claims that Durkheim, by seeing society as a natural system, is forced to advocate a sociological utilitarianism (Sahlins 1976b:116). But if my argument in the section above holds, then neither does Sahlins, by turning society into a symbolic system, offer a viable alternative. By reifying his symbolic system as an all-encompassing and a-historical model (Toren 1993:474, n.2), Sahlins cannot give any account of how his society as a symbolic system may have arisen.

This points to the cultural anthropological contention that for people to be able to function in the world and in relation to other people, they must enter the scene preconstituted by culture. This is strikingly evident in Geertz's story of human evolution. There the abstract individual meets this other abstraction culture, seemingly before coming into contact with any other people (Carrithers 1992:35; see Geertz 1973:46, 49). The culture and the people, that is, must both have been established before the people can interact. As it stands, it could not be otherwise, "uncultured we are unworkable".

Against these two views Ingold (1986a: chapter 6) proposes what he terms the constitutive view of social relations and takes from the writings of Marx, mainly the early ones (see Marx 1961; Marx 1963; Fromm 1961; Avineri

1968). To formulate it Ingold takes something from both of the other alternatives and adds something that is included in neither; a concept of the person as a conscious agent.

From the Boasian sense Ingold retains the conception of social life as a process going on between particular human beings. However, this process is not to be conceived in statistical terms as a result of a mass of association between self-contained individuals, but in topological terms, "...as the unfolding of a continuous field of intersubjective relations in which persons do not so much interact with as constitute one another through the history of their mutual involvement" (Ingold 1986a:244-5).

From the Durkheimian sense Ingold keeps the notion that the intentions of persons are not given in advance of their entry into social relations but that they have their source in the social domain. This was Durkheim's point in his polemic against Spencer. The difference between Durkheim and Marx lies in the question of agency. For Marx, Ingold maintains, the locus of purpose is the person himself, not a special supra-individual social entity (1986a:245). This can perhaps be explained by reference to Marx's famous passage in his preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx 1970 [1859]; Ingold 1986a:245). The point Marx is making, says Ingold, is that social relations constitute the conscious subject and are not consciously devised by subjects whose consciousness would then somehow be given in advance, as if individuals had an independent, subjective existence outside of and opposed to society (Ingold 1986a:246). Human beings are for Marx the authors of their lives and history, there is no higher purpose that subverts their intentions. Living men are, to Marx, social men, men living socially make themselves, and in turn each other. Social relations must then be understood in processual terms, not as a component of a fixed structure. If this observation is to have any import, the human being - the other side of the dichotomy - must likewise be conceived in processual terms, not as of a fixed "nature" but as a creative process (Ingold 1986a:246-7).

This is then to do away with the dichotomy individual-society. Let me explain. When asked: "From where comes the individual?", Locke, Tylor, cultural anthropology, and even Durkheim all stopped short. As we know real people enter this world as helpless infants, and are for a very long period sustained by the labour of others. Should we not say then, according to Locke's logic, that they belong to those others as any other products of their labour? (Ingold 1986b:227). If so the chain of property can neither begin in the



individual nor end in the resources; "...rather it must end where it began, in the community of nurture from which spring the producers..." (Ingold 1986a:227).

As the relationships between the producers in the community of nurture are social, they presuppose a conscious subject. The relationships must then contain a meaning and link persons capable of meaningful action. Furthermore, if "the chain of property" ends and begins in the community of the producers it follows that the person of the producer and her purposes must have their source in the social domain, in the community of the producers. If the social furthermore does not denote a separate system, it follows that we have to view the social field from the inside and see the meaning of the person's action in the intransitive sense, inhering in the action itself. The process whereby meaning is created and changes brought about appears as the same process whereby men living socially constitute each other as persons. The social, that is, must refer to a quality of, or a kind of a relationship, one that "...binds people together as fellow participants in a life-process" (Ingold 1994b:739), rather than referring to a collectivity. To resurrect a collective system that exists independently of individual human beings, is simply to set up the dichotomy individual-society again.

This constitutive view of social relations can be likened to Strathern's (1988) gift metaphor, while Locke's formulation and those that resemble it, are perfect examples of her commodity metaphor. From this view, socialisation is not so much a ritual grown ups have children undergoing as something everyone undergoes all the time. For just as parents make children into who they are, so children make their parents into who they are. There is no moment when someone can be said to be made, the process is as such, endless.

There are two other points here where the Durkheimian and the Boasian views of the social are inadequate. The first one concerns though mainly the cultural anthropological view and has been touched upon in the last chapter. If either culture, as the sphere of the meaningful, or social system, as the sphere of interaction, can be held constant, or if indeed, we can have one without the other (Kroeber and Parsons 1958:583), then how are we to conceptualise the relationship between them? If culture is integrated logico-meaningfully, but the social system causal-functionally, as the saying goes (see Geertz 1973:145; Peacock 1975:4, 7; see Ingold 1986a:302), how can culture be socially transmitted as it is still supposed to be? To derive the former from the latter would, on this view, be nothing less than to return to atomistic materialism, analogous to deriving ideas from the association of brain cells. For the quality

of the message transmitted must depend on the conductor through which it is transmitted. The only way seems to be to leave culture without any link to the social. If culture is then further not to have an existence totally on its own, it can be but contained within the heads of autonomous individuals, which is again to render their relations with other such individuals purely instrumental. Then we are again faced with the question: how is culture transmitted and reproduced?

The Boasian view proper answers this by turning culture into an active agent that comes to give the individual the mark of his tradition. For symbolic anthropology, on the other hand, culture is a meaningful structure created by the individual. But, in as much as this view cannot account for the acquisition of culture in real life, it presupposes an original detached and intelligent subject that has to construct the world in his mind before risking a bodily engagement with it (Ingold 1993e:464). But if the social person is constituted by her direct involvement with other such persons in a community it is clear that the world for her is, from the start, inherently laden with significance. She does not approach it like a closed-in subject confronting external reality, but as a being wholly immersed in the relational context of dwelling in the world. For her meaning "...inheres in the relations between the dweller and the constituents of the dwelt-in world" (Ingold 1993e:453).

The second point concerns further the social status of culture. As Hannerz (1992:36, 42) has observed the culture concept in anthropology has been unreflectively sociocentric. Recently the nature of the "collectiveness" of "collective representations" has though been made problematic both by postmodernism and the growing field of sociology of knowledge. These have forced us to recognise, Hannerz says (1992:36), that structures of meaning are not uniformly shared but unequally distributed in populations.

This is though, as I take it, not the most important point. Populations can always be redefined according to the distribution of structures of meaning and the boundaries between populations thus moved. What is fundamental is that it does not constitute a social conception of culture to claim that it belongs to some collectivity. For what is lost in thus elevating culture away from people and to a higher plane, as truly as it is lost when it is internalised within their heads, are the *relationships* between the people that constituted the social in the first place (see Ingold 1994b).

If culture does not constitute an autonomous system, then integration cannot be an attribute of the culture itself when this is separated from the practical engagement of people in the world. And in as much as people's

practical engagement with the world takes place through their engagement with each other, integration must be a quality of the relationships that bind them together in a life-process. As these relationships are social, they presuppose a conscious subject. Having rejected the notion of society as an entity it follows that to be a person in this sense is to be located at a particular point in a continuous field of social relationships (Ingold 1990). Then the meaningful cannot be said to belong to some collectivity of any kind. It must be located in the relations themselves. In other words, take the relational field away, either by putting the meaningful within individual heads or by elevating it onto another plane, and you can as well substitute for the assemblage of interacting individuals, an individual who in isolation confronts the sphere of the meaningful (see Carrithers 1992:35; Rosaldo, R. 1984; Rosaldo 1989).

Let me explain further what to be a person in this sense means. Anthropologists have advocated relativism in a fight against centrism in all its forms, especially ethnocentric views of other cultures. This I followed Ingold (1986a:103) in calling "objectivist relativism" and maintained with him that it can neither account for the observer's existence in the world nor for the way in which culture is transmitted. There is an alternative to this relativism, namely "subjectivist relativism" (Ingold 1986a:104). It entails trying to enter imaginatively into other subjective points of view to see how things appear from there (Ingold 1986a:104; much of this is from Nagel 1979:209). If "objectivist relativism" takes the observer outside the world, "subjectivist relativism" "...enjoins us to remain within it but to take up a range of positions different from that in which we immediately find ourselves" (Ingold 1986a:104). It constitutes an affirmation of centrism, recognising that if to exist as a person is to have a point of view, there must be as many different centres and as many different views of the world as there are persons in it (Ingold 1986a:104). Subjectivist relativism clearly requires that the observer and the observed are "...fellow passengers in the same movement..." (Ingold 1986a:104), that there is but one world to which they both belong, and not many different "cultural worlds" to one of which only the observed belongs (Ingold 1986a:104; see Palsson 1993a).

Let me conclude with a little story Renato Rosaldo (1984) tells. It concerns the claim Ilongots make that they hunt heads because of their anger that is born of grief. In view of this rather pale statement Rosaldo asks if people really symbolise most elaborately the things they feel most strongly about and points out that to focus solely on the symbolic structure is to reduce emotions to culture, the webs of meaning. An anthropologist committed to this view,

Rosaldo continues, denies herself the possibility to distinguish between a genuine grief and the grief people may show out of social etiquette or even commercial responsibilities. It is as if all parties to a funeral were of equal status. We need to recognise, says Rosaldo, that what may be for the anthropologist a meaning attached, is for the native a presentation or meaning subjectively lived through. To grasp that, one must not only entangle the webs of meaning by which such feelings are represented, but also consider "...the subject's position within a field of social relations..." (1984:178).

The anthropologist may be confined to the former, excluded as he is "...from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place...in the system observed and has no need to make a place for himself there..." (Bourdieu 1977:1). But if this further "...inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practices, leading him to reduce all social situations to...decoding operations..." (Bourdieu 1977:1), we cannot take this as representative of the human condition in general. That is to miss the point altogether. If the problems of cultural determinism and cultural relativism were produced by taking the anthropologist out of the world, there is no reason to let everyone else follow suit.

In fact the import of Bourdieu's observation is that the anthropologist always has a place in the system observed. She can get no knowledge of it except through "coevalness" (Fabian 1983). This requires that we abandon the belief that people live their lives in bounded universes, not only because that is the only way in which the anthropologist can converse with his subjects, but also because that is the only way in which to have an adequate sense of action and the social.

The image of bounded universes was created by making of practical, conscious engagement in the world, either an unconscious bondage to it, or a contemplative, self-conscious detachment from it. The limitations of this view can be overcome by placing the social person, constituted as a wilful agent, practically engaged in the world, by her relations with other such persons within a continuous field of social relations (see Ingold 1986a: chapter 6). Now we face a choice of words, that is of course, never as important as the substantial issues. As it has become customary to refer to the field of relations between people by the term social, the field of relations in which mankind is entangled should be termed *social*. Local traditions of thought and symbolisation do of course exist and I think they will be well represented by the term this essay has revolved around: culture (see Ingold 1994a). The important

point to keep in mind is that the former is more fundamental than the latter. The latter always grounded in the former. To acquire culture requires to be placed in a meaningful relationship with another human being. To express it, debate it, use it, or share it, likewise takes place in that relational field called the social (Carrithers 1992:34-5).

## **IX. Conclusions**

Cultural anthropologists, I argued, have not managed to find a way to express their conviction that human cultural life is both meaningful and coherent and at the same time historical and changing. This is so, I said, because they have not accorded human consciousness a hand in people's mutual involvement in the world, but made man either a unconscious prisoner of his culture, or a self-conscious detached subject.

I followed Ingold in arguing that we have to see the source of meaning and historical creativity as inherent in the intentionality present in human action. To achieve that we have to see the meaning of action in its intransitive sense, from the inside, in the actual experience of doing. In order to do that, we furthermore have to place the embodiment of consciousness, the social person, in a continuous field of social relations, through which the people related constitute each other as persons. It is only through social relationships thus conceived, I said, that we can think of cultural transmission and cultural acquisition. The sources of culture and historical change, that is, are only to be found in human action, situated in the relational field of the social world, and these are the same sources through which the social person emerges.

I followed Ingold and argued that we should see people as entangled in a continuous field of social relationships and abandon the notion of bounded societies, or cultures. Following Ingold's theory I also proposed that we reserve the concept "social" or "social field" for this, and retain the concept of culture for local traditions of thought and symbolisation. The existence of local cultural traditions can of course not be denied, but I finally argued that we had to see the social as more fundamental. Firstly, because it is only through meaningful social relations that we can acquire culture. Secondly, that while we use and share culture, we are still enmeshed in the web of those social relations.

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