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# Chapter 1

## What Is Culture?

> Man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning he himself has spun (Clifford Geertz).

### 1. Introduction

Culture comprises everything that members of a group or society believe, find, or think they know. It explains what belongs to what and how to distinguish good from bad, moral virtue from immorality, normal from pathological, pious from sinful, beautiful from ugly, etcetera. In doing so, culture provides humans with standards of classification and evaluation that endow the worlds in which they find themselves with meaning. In the hypothetical situation of a world without culture, events and phenomena would just meaninglessly "occur," "exist" or "happen." Premised on three uncontested starting points, the study of culture has evolved into a principal sociological research interest in the past decades: that culture is situated at the group level and is thus a pre-eminently social phenomenon; that culture can be analytically distinguished from the non-cultural aspects of social life; and that culture is inescapably variable and open to change.

Firstly, culture is part and parcel of social life. It does not comprise strictly personal understandings and evaluations, e.g., how satisfied one is with one's job, how much one enjoys the services delivered by a restaurant or hotel, how one evaluates the beauty of a work of art, the leadership qualities of a sports coach, the trustworthiness of a politician, or even of

politicians generally. Culture rather captures the socially shared standards that give rise to such individual evaluations. These standards are learned from others. They are transmitted in processes of socialization in families, peer groups, the educational system, the media, and much more. They precede individuals in the sense that they already existed before they were born and outlive them after they die. This does not mean that socially shared evaluative standards are immutable and frozen in time, but merely that in making evaluations individuals draw on a reservoir of pre-given standards, some of them virtually taken for granted, others considered outdated or eccentric. What matters is that in neither case such standards are developed idiosyncratically by individuals. Culture is part and parcel of group life to such an extent that even group boundaries themselves are quintessentially cultural. One group ends and another begins where evaluative standards change – standards of what is good and what is bad, what is normal and what is abnormal, or put in the classical terms of Durkheim: what is sacred and what is profane (Chapter 3).

Secondly, culture is an aspect or dimension of social life, which implies that the latter also has non-cultural aspects or dimensions from which culture can only analytically be distinguished. For the cultural and non-cultural dimensions of social life are inextricably intertwined and co-constitute each other. Cultural standards for the proper functioning of democracy, for instance, are situated at the heart of political institutions, which derive their operational logic and legitimacy from them. The point is not that a reliance on raw, naked power, unsanctioned by cultural approval, plays no role in democratic political orders whatsoever. The point is that a politics dominated by conflicts and power struggles between strongmen and warlords contradicts deeply embedded and widely accepted standards of what democratic politics ought to be like, thus lacking legitimacy among those who cherish these standards.

Cultural sociologists do obviously not deny the existence and significance of non-cultural aspects of social life, like stocks of unassailable scientific knowledge, material and technological affordances, structures of power and inequality, and what have you. Yet, they foreground culture in their work, of which they do not think as a distinct "realm" or "sphere," but rather as permeating the full breadth of social life (e.g., Jaworsky et al. 2022). As American cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2003: 7) puts it succinctly, "Culture is not a thing, but a dimension." Yet, culture must be given full attention to successfully understand the vicissitudes of social institutions. It is a precondition for their functioning and their legitimacy and critiques that push for their reconstruction and reform do similarly draw on cultural meanings (typically competing ones, of course).

Thirdly, culture is inescapably variable, as it changes across time and boasts significant differences between groups and communities. Much of what used to be taken for granted in the western past is nowadays regarded as hopelessly out-of-date and much of what is here and now taken for granted is seen as strange, odd, or even frightening and threatening elsewhere. Whereas a century ago religion was still firmly established in Northwestern-European countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries, for instance, this is no longer the case today. Religion has not disappeared from these countries, to be sure, but has nonetheless declined dramatically (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2004). This has led "being religious," pretty much a "default" identity half a century ago, to become understood by many as at worst "backward" and at best "eccentric." And of course, such understandings of religion strike observers from deeply religious countries, and indeed from orthodox religious milieus in these Northwestern-European countries themselves, as disrespectful and alarming.

While there are no human groups or societies "without" culture, then, cultural contents inevitably change and vary. As "natural" cultural beliefs and understandings may appear to those who hold them, they cannot simply be taken for granted and there are virtually always cultural others who contest them. These elementary facts inform the sociological study of culture, which addresses its variegated and changing contents as well as the latter's consequences.

In this chapter I discuss the notion of culture in more detail to pave the way for the chapters that follow. I first elaborate how culture inevitably boasts diversity and is not frozen in time either, to then explain how and why it tends to be metaphysically grounded. This prevents cultural standards from losing their naturalness and plausibility and facilitates an essentialism that defines all that deviates from what one believes as "less than real." I then move to the cultural foundations of social institutions, with a focus on religious and political ones, demonstrating how changes in cultural meaning spark institutional change. Then I take up the question why what people believe is important in the first place. For skeptics, also within sociology itself, often suggest that it is more important to study "reality itself" than whatever people believe about it. My aim here is to convince the reader that things are more complicated than this binary distinction of "reality versus belief" suggests. For culture is a vital dimension of social reality in and of itself and it has profound consequences. I exemplify this by means of a discussion of how even nature and biology cannot simply be understood as "harder" or "more fundamental" than culture, because they are themselves in all sorts of ways profoundly shaped by the latter. I conclude with an explanation of what cultural sociology is,

and how it differs from its positivist sociological counterpart: not in terms of methods, but in terms of its understanding of social reality as first and foremost a series of webs of meaning.

## 2. **Culture, Meaning and Belief**

### *2.1. Cultural Diversity*

The first association of culture many non-sociologists may have is that with art, as in "art and culture," an association that limits culture to "high culture," or "culture with a capital C." This notion of culture has its roots in the humanities (art, literature, philosophy, etcetera), which back in the nineteenth century conceived of culture as "the best that has been thought and known" or "the wisest and most beautiful expressions of human effort" (Griswold 2013: 4). Culture was then and there understood as the opposite of the ugliness and vulgarity of modern industrial society, "set[ting] the alienating, dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization against the healing, life-enhancing capacities of culture" (idem: 4). Whereas to sociologists high art, and indeed belief in its exalted status as compared to the remainder of social life, is certainly part and parcel of culture, they nonetheless conceive of the latter much more broadly. Sociologically speaking art is culture, but culture is more than art.

So the broader sociological conception of culture differs profoundly from its nineteenth-century "high culture" predecessor (Griswold 2013: 1-16). Sociologists dismiss the idea that culture can be "neutrally" or "objectively" ranked in terms of "superiority" and "inferiority." Of course, it is not at all uncommon for people to regard some cultures – most typically their own or an imagined utopian alternative – as superior to others, but for sociologists such beliefs in cultural superiority are themselves major elements of culture, often closely related to nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and the like. As sociologists they dismiss the idea that such beliefs in superiority and inferiority can be defended on scientific grounds. Sociology also refuses to set culture apart from society, let alone consider it as an exalted sphere that needs to be protected against its vulgarity and ugliness by storing, exhibiting, and performing it in specialized institutions like libraries, museums, or opera houses. Sociology instead, as pointed out above, conceives of culture as everything groups of people believe, find, or think they know, so that it is part and parcel of society, only analytically distinguishable from non-cultural aspects of social life.

The pervasive presence of culture in social life is perhaps best exemplified by apparently trivial everyday practices like eating habits, a phenomenon that displays major cross-cultural

variation. Whereas the need for food is a biological given, because all humans need nourishment to survive, what is considered acceptable food, or even "edible" in the first place, differs significantly cross-culturally. Food taboos, as they can be found in the world religions, are an obvious case in point. Hinduism forbids consumption of beef, Muslims and Jews disavow pork, and vegetarians avoid meat altogether. Vegans go a step further by excluding all animal-derived foodstuffs from their diets – not only meat, but also dairy products, eggs, honey, and the like –, staying away from other animal-based products, such as fur or leather, too. Vegans find their inspiration in a (quasi-)religious philosophy that dismisses a strict boundary between human and non-human animals that authorizes humans to eat, exploit, and commoditize animals as if they were mere "things." Beyond veganism one finds so-called "fruitarianism," defined by a refusal to eat anything but fruit, nuts and seeds, because eating vegetables is seen as killing plants, here put on par with killing and eating animals. The doubtlessly most radical diet – or rather: non-diet – of them all is so-called "breatharianism." Its adherents believe that humans need no food at all, because they can live on an alleged spiritual force or energy that surrounds and permeates them.

Yet, such religiously, spiritually or philosophically informed diets constitute merely the most eye-catching tip of a much larger food-cultural iceberg. Of more practical significance is what cultures regard as "edible" in the first place. Most westerners are hard-pressed to eat foodstuffs that are considered staples elsewhere, like Guinea pigs (Peru, Eduador, Bolivia), dogs (South Korea), live octopus (South Korea), scorpions (South-East Asia, North Africa), insects and larvae (many non-Western countries across the world), Hákarl (fermented shark, Iceland) or surströmming (fermented herring, Sweden). Western understandings of what is "edible" and what is not are indeed major cultural obstacles to efforts of introducing insects to the western diet. Not many in the West are inclined to follow the recommendations of insects-for-food enthusiasts that grasshoppers, crickets, mealworms, and the like are not only sustainable and protein-rich food sources, but moreover have familiar and well-appreciated tastes, not unlike shrimp (grasshoppers and crickets) or nuts (mealworms).

### *2.2. Social Movements and Cultural Change*

There are no groups or societies without culture. Even without storage in specially designated protective places like museums, culture can neither disappear nor decline. It can only change, and so it does. The vegetarian, vegan, and related diets mentioned above have for instance increased much in popularity in the West in the wake of the so-called "counterculture" of the

1960s. Among much else, the latter was critical of the traditional conception of human domination over nature in the West, which conceives of nature as a resource to be legitimately dominated and exploited. The counterculture instead embraced an understanding of humanity as itself an intrinsic part of nature, which in the wake of the 1960s sparked the environmental and animal-rights movements (Campbell 2007: 68-111). The latter have contributed much to the disrepute of meat consumption and unsustainable foodstuffs flown in from far-away countries, while the other way around they have significantly increased the popularity of vegetarian and vegan diets, much like sustainable and regionally produced foodstuffs.

Like culture generally, food cultures are thus not frozen in time, but open to both endogeneous change (sparked from within, mostly due to social movements pushing for it) and exogeneous change (adopted from without through processes of diffusion). Originating in Italy, for instance, pizza is nowadays made and consumed virtually all over the world. Kebab, shawarma and falafel have become popular fast foods in most of the West, especially after long nights of drinking, despite origins in the Middle East. Finally, sushi, once exclusively consumed in Japan, has become a staple all over the world. The other way around, quintessentially American hamburgers and chains like McDonald's have in the twentieth century diffused across the non-Western world. It is indeed precisely this global dissemination of foodstuffs, and the fears and anxieties of global culinary uniformization it brings in its wake, that have made "authentic" local or regional cuisine even more of a tourist highlight than it has always been.

Some of the most profound cultural changes in the West in the past half century are arguably those that pertain to family life and sexuality. Until well after World War II children were expected to obey their parents and physical punishment was part and parcel of their upbringing. Without suggesting that they have meanwhile completely disappeared, such practices are now generally understood as unacceptable, indeed as criminal offences. Ideas about the preferred division of labor between spouses have similarly changed. Until well after World War II young women were simply fired from their jobs upon marriage, because their role was ideally seen as confined to the family, especially care for children and household chores. The man, on the other hand, was seen as the "natural" head of the family and its breadwinner. Here, too, it is easy to exaggerate the changes that have actually taken place, but it can safely be claimed that in the West such traditional gender roles have lost much of their former taken for grantedness and alleged naturalness, similarly under the influence of struggles for emancipation and liberation in the post-1960s era.

Related changes have occurred with respect to sexual identities. What we today call LGBTQ+ identities were still heavily tabooed back in the 1950s. There were obviously those who privately identified as gay back then, but they tended to be cautious enough to hide this from the outside world. For in those days public outings meant inviting ostracization and social exclusion. Again without exaggerating changes in what is still a sensitive issue for many, not least in religiously conservative circles, much has changed in most of the West. In little more than half a century homosexual identities have become normalized and accepted as legitimate by sizable majorities in most western countries, while obviously not without meeting resistance. Nonetheless, a major cultural reversal can be observed: while back in the 1950s homosexual identities were typically rejected as abnormal and deviant, nowadays large segments of western societies dismiss not so much homosexuality, but homophobia as deviant and objectionable.

Social movements play a major role in effectuating changes like these. Such movements have their roots in experiences of alienation, exclusion, and neglect, all attributed to evils and injustices caused – or at minimum justified and sustained – by socially dominant ("hegemonic") cultural standards. The cultural turmoil of the counterculture of the 1960s led to a virtual Cambrian explosion of social movements, the best known of which were – and in most cases still are – the women's movement (or rather its so-called "second wave"), the gay and lesbian liberation movements, the peace movement against the war in Vietnam, the environmental movement, the civil rights movement in the United States, and the New Age movement in the religious realm. These movements came to be dubbed "new" social movements to distinguish them from the socialist workers' movement of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Unlike the latter they were seen as not so much "economically," but "culturally" leftist and progressive, in the sense that they first of all aimed at liberation from socially imposed cultural standards and hence at cultural recognition of identities seen as "deviant" or "morally reprehensible" (e.g., Melucci 1989; Watts 2022: 61-80).

That said, their "newness" can be challenged, because cultural aims like these were neither absent from the workers' movement, which also espoused an identity politics aimed at pride and recognition, nor from a range of other movements, many of them preceding the 1960s and many being notoriously rightist rather than leftist or progressive. Just consider racist movements like the Ku Klux Klan; religious fundamentalist movements like Al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Hindu nationalist movement in India, or the American Tea Party; nationalist movements across the world from the early 1900s to the present, not least in Western Europe at the eve of World War I and today in response to EU expansion. Social movements have

always aimed for cultural change, liberation, pride and recognition, and they are not necessarily politically "leftist" or "progressive" in doing so. This makes it debatable to set a subset of social movements apart as "new," apparently for no other reason than that their social-scientific students see them as "relatively 'attractive' [and] vaguely on the left" (Calhoun 1994: 215).

Challenging the cultural meanings that most others take for granted, and advocating new ones to take their place, social movements are vital actors in processes of social change, or more precisely: of initiating the cultural changes that set it in motion. For social movements throw doubt on social phenomena that used to be understood as "appropriate" or "normal" by explaining why they are not, indeed why they are harmful and would better disappear in the dustbin of history. Their activity entails a "cultural recoding" of social conditions, critiquing the latter's taken for grantedness and advocating new ones in the name of morality and justice. This dynamics of "cultural recoding" applies to all the examples discussed above: they involve new understandings of what nature is; of what is edible and what is not; of what it means to be a man, a woman, a gay man, a lesbian woman, or any other sexual identity. Most of the literature refers to such cultural recoding as a process of "social construction," even though "cultural construction" would be the better term, because it brings out more explicitly that cultural recoding is not necessarily driven by non-cultural social interests, yet does in all instances involve an attempt at replacing established meanings by alternative ones. It is indeed no coincidence that the period in which the "new" social movements appeared on the scene also witnessed the emergence of a new sociological approach to the study of social problems, so-called "social (or cultural) constructionism" (see Chapter 2). It understands social problems as outcomes of processes of "cultural recoding" that transform things that used to be taken for granted into unacceptable states of affairs. Indeed, as James Jasper (2014: x) correctly observes:

> Looking at voluntary collective action for a cause is […] a good way to see how culture works, because central to any social movement is the effort to create new meanings. Nowhere is the creation of culture, or its effects on the world we live in, more obvious. We need to appreciate culture to understand protest, but protest also helps us to understand where culture comes from.

A widespread source of misunderstanding and confusion is that the study of processes of cultural construction comes down to a denial of the reality of the relevant phenomena. This is

best exemplified by the oft-heard accusation against constructionism that "humanly caused climate change is actually taking place." The sociological study of culture is however not even interested in whether beliefs are true or not. There is for instance no need to demonstrate the "actual" existence of God before one can embark on a study of variations in cultural understandings of God (or more generally: of the sacred). Whether or not God "actually" exists is as much a non-issue from a cultural-sociological point of view as the question of whether or not cows do "actually" exist. The question is rather how God is religiously or theologically conceived, or whether cows are understood as incarnations of the divine (Hindus), as hamburgers in the making (Texans), as critical sources of carbon dioxide emissions (environmental activists), or still different. In this sense, and in this sense only, God and cows are cultural constructions – cultural constructions that are moreover vitally important, because they have major implications for social life, not least how humans deal with God and cows in their everyday lives. Constructionist British environmental sociologists Burningham and Cooper (1999: 309) correctly define a "strict constructionist position" as "a radical scepticism about ontological claims, and not as an ontological claim about the non-existence of (…) reality."

It is indeed interesting to observe that "the" environmental problem is nowadays construed quite differently than it was in the 1970s. Back then the Club of Rome published its influential study *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), which conceived the environmental problem as first of all one of finitude of natural resources. The book did much to put environmental problems on the political map, where they have remained ever since, even though they have meanwhile undeniably moved from the margins to the center of politics. Yet, "the" environmental problem has transformed since then from a problem of "finitude of natural resources" into one of "climate change" caused by carbon dioxide emissions due to the use of these very natural resources. In a sense, then, the finitude of natural resources has transformed from a major problem into a blessing in disguise that promises to help solve the environmental problem. The vital point here, however, is that cultural sociologists interested in environmental problems are not so much likely to be interested in defending or challenging its old or new understanding, but rather in understanding how and why the cultural understanding of "the" environmental problem has transformed so profoundly in the first place.

In making claims about what they see as problematic, illegitimate and wrong, social movements do not simply challenge existing cultural codes, but also mobilize alternative ones to get their ideas accepted. They do so by means of cultural "framing," i.e., the

invocation and mobilization of cultural meanings to discursively associate whatever or whomever with the morally pure and good or the morally corrupt and bad. Such invocations of what Emile Durkheim has called "the sacred" and "the profane," neither of them understood in the conventional and strictly religious sense (see Chapter 3), are exemplified by conflicts about abortion in the United States. These pit two social movements against each other that portray each other as evil, as even the names they use for themselves bring out. For those who are against women's right to abortion do not self-identify as the "anti-abortion" movement, but as the "pro-life" movement, thus suggesting that their opponents are against life. Similarly, those who defend the right to abortion self-identify as the "pro-choice" movement, which suggests that their opponents betray quintessential American ideals of individual liberty and personal freedom. Acknowledging the role of culture is vital for a proper sociological understanding of social movements and social change, in short, not only with respect to their aims of creating what they see as a better society, but similarly so with respect to the rhetorical and performative means they mobilize to attain this goal.

### *2.3. Metaphysics: Meaning and Belief*

Beyond classification and evaluation standards per se, culture refers to their grounding by invoking metaphysical beliefs about how the world "really" or "essentially" is. These are beliefs about the "really real," conceived as an "original," "pure," and "uncorrupted" state of being that can be neither validated nor invalidated by actually existing circumstances. They facilitate the forgetting, or even sheer denial, of the circumstance that cultural meanings are inevitably of human making, thus lacking foundations beyond the cultural imagination itself. In doing so they make them appear "natural" and "self-evident" and are of great help in demonizing and ostracizing those who dare to suggest otherwise. This is arguably what is most difficult about the sociological study of culture: we all have our pet beliefs and principles and many of us find it difficult to accept that these are "merely" conjured up by humans themselves. Yet, the sociological study of culture necessitates doing so, which is why it is not easily combined with firmly held metaphysical belief, be it religious, political or otherwise (Watts and Houtman 2023).

Religion is without doubt the historically most widespread mode of metaphysically grounding cultural meaning. Humans have created a wide range of different religions, boasting a myriad of different understandings of the sacred, ways of ritually connecting to it, and ideas about the duties of the religiously pious. These religion-creating activities have given rise to a wide range of religious institutions and roles such as priests, prophets,

theologians and religious reformers. Religion, more than anything else, makes it possible to forget, or even deny, the human origins of culture by grounding meaning in a metaphysical realm that precedes and transcends humanity – a realm that is not humanly made and that endows culture and meaning with a status that goes beyond the human imagination (Berger 1967: 32-34).

The metaphysical grounding of meaning does however not remain confined to religion, but extends to non-religious understandings of the world. This can be seen from the modern political ideologies that have vied to replace religion ever since the latter came under siege in the eighteenth and nineteenth century under the influence of Enlightenment thought (Seidman 1994: 19-53). Enlightenment thought sparked liberalism, which shared its emphasis on reason, freedom and equality. The unbridled laisser-faire capitalism that liberalism gave rise to then sparked socialism, which aimed to remedy a situation in which large parts of the population were "free" and "equal" in name only. Conservatism, finally, emerged as the third modern ideology in critical reaction to what it saw as the excesses of market-centered liberalism and state-centered socialism, aiming to restore and secure order and to protect society against state and market. All three ideologies are based on their own constitutive metaphysical myths: "the individual" for liberals, "classes" for socialists, and "community" for conservatives.

For liberals, human persons are first of all individuals, even if they define themselves as members of classes or communities. So individual identifications with classes or communities can from a liberal point of view only be based on free and personal decisions to do so. Individuals who disagree, like "backward" women who loyally accept what their religious communities have in store for them (e.g., traditional gender roles or face veiling) need to be "emancipated." Those concerned need education that teaches them to think of themselves as individuals rather than obedient role players in a game designed and dominated by others. Whereas for liberals individuals are thus "more real" than either classes or communities, socialists regard "classes" as "more real" than individuals, similarly understanding dissenters as failing to see social reality as it "really" is. In this case, what those concerned miss is that their own and others' life chances depend on their position in a structure of economic inequalities. If members of the working class make such a mistake, it evokes reproaches of "false consciousness." The same applies to conservatism. From a conservative point of view "community" is "more real" than either individuals or classes, so that those who disagree are condemned for eroding community and loyalty to the common good. More specifically, conservatism understands those who think of humans as first of all

individuals as egotistic and anti-social, and those who understand society in terms of class struggle as similarly corroding community-based loyalty and solidarity.

Metaphysical groundings of meaning do not only undergird the modern political ideologies, but similarly inform human rights declarations, national constitutions, and the like, endowing them with a quasi-religious status that fosters their legitimacy and acceptance and discourages their skeptical questioning. Consider the United States Declaration of Independence, for instance: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The phrase "we hold these truths to be self-evident" powerfully brings out the assertion's quasi-religious status and counter-factuality. For this is not a claim about the actually existing world, but a metaphysical one that invokes an "original," "pure," and "uncorrupted" state of being – a reality that outshines the world as it is, with all its vices, injustices, and imperfections.

Much the same can be said about Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous claim to the effect that "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" (1762) or the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), according to which "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." These claims are similarly metaphysical, because reasoning soberly and empirically there is obviously no way in which a baby girl born in a Calcutta slum can be said to be born as "free and equal in dignity and rights" as a baby boy born in an affluent, aristocratic, and politically well-connected family in a country like Great Britain. Neither of these are as such claims about how the world is, empirically speaking. They are rather claims about how it "really" is, metaphysically speaking: how it could be, should be, and will be after its existing evils and injustices have been removed. Only then it will become how it is "meant to be," indeed how it has "more fundamentally" always been, even though sadly enough many failed to appreciate that. It is indeed the conjunction of the "truly good" and the "really real" that gives such metaphysical claims their rhetorical power, their mobilizing potential, and their moral appeal. Questioning, let alone denying such conjunctions, invokes suspicions of forsaking the sacred.

### *2.4. Essentialism and Cultural Construction*

Metaphysical beliefs about the "really real" give rise to what cultural sociologists call "essentialism," the belief that social phenomena have distinct characteristics that make them "real." Based on the belief that it is possible to distinguish "real" social phenomena from their "unreal" or "fake" counterparts, such essentialism is a major intellectual vice in cultural

sociology. This is because it flies in the face of the cultural-sociological understanding that culture and social life generally are inevitably humanly constructed and variable. For at the heart of the cultural-sociological endeavor lies the study of how social phenomena are culturally constructed, so that elsewhere, or in other times, they are not "less real," but "different." Given the almost endless variety of manifestations of social phenomena it is simply not possible without exposing one's own beliefs, moral hang-ups, and prejudices to single out some of them as "real," dismissing all others as "less than real."

Such essentialism helps protecting one's beliefs against doubt, skepticism, and evidence that calls them into question. Consider the white racist who despite his racism gets along well with his Moroccan neighbor: "Mohammed is not a 'real' Moroccan, he is as Flemish as you and I are." The racist in question salvages his deep-felt belief that there is something seriously wrong with "Moroccans" by excluding Mohammed from this detested category. This applies generally. Essentialism makes it possible to continue believing whatever one believes: everything that appears to contradict it is simply defined away as basically "not real," just an exception that confirms the rule. Social psychologists refer to such a cognitive dynamic as "reduction of cognitive dissonance," i.e., reduction of the unpleasant feelings that arise from the experience of an undeniable gap between firmly held beliefs and what is actually the case. The classical study about the phenomenon is Leon Festinger et al.'s *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), about the response of a religious group after its prediction of the end of the world failed to materialize (and in effect its own miraculous salvation, too). Here, too, the group's initial beliefs were not simply discarded as being in error, but were rationalized in ways that made it possible to stick to them.

Whereas understandings of what is "real" and what is not do at a superficial first glance appear to be claims about reality, they at a closer and more critical look bring forth moral and political understandings of the world. Take the observation that "real poverty no longer exists in contemporary Western Europe," as typically brought forward to counter opposite assertions from the political left. A claim like this is not an empirical one, but one that brings out a metaphysical distinction between "real poverty," which can allegedly be found in either a distant past or in non-western countries, perhaps also in the United States, but certainly not in Western Europe. For in Western Europe, observers who make such claims aim to bring across, one can surely find groups that are much less well-off than others, but their living conditions do not qualify as "real" poverty.

From a cultural-sociological point of view such essentialism is a major intellectual vice. For "poverty" differs historically, cross-nationally, and even cross-socially between

groups within the same society. Poverty in the European Middle Ages is not the same as poverty in the context of laisser-faire capitalism or that of a well-developed modern welfare state, just like poverty in poor Third World countries is not the same as poverty in a country like the United States. This is because notions of poverty invoke cultural standards that bring out what is deemed "normal" or "minimally acceptable." Not being able to afford public transport; a properly functioning Internet connection; membership of a gym or sports club; small presents for friends or family members celebrating their birthdays: all this rules out a "normal" life in contemporary Western Europe and may therefore well be defined as a "modern" manifestation of poverty, profoundly different from poverty in the past or elsewhere in the world. For the cultural sociologist, however, this also remains just one understanding, interpretation or definition of poverty next to many other potential ones. Accepting it as "more real" than any of these others amounts to what cultural anthropologists call "going native": taking the cultural understandings of one's own group, community or society to be "more true" than all others.

## 3. Culture and Institutions

### *3.1. Culture, Social Institutions and Social Change*

Cultural understandings of the good and the just provide the moral foundations of the social order. They are externalized into the institutions that make up society, ranging from education, the family, science, and media to the judicial and political systems. To actually operate in a way that is accepted as legitimate, institutions need to be grounded in, and justified by, collectively held moral values. Judicial systems or democratic states, for instance, need to be more than just series of organizations, roles, laws, rules, and regulations. Without the authority and legitimacy that derives from their moral foundations, they degrade to exercises of naked power, ruthlessly imposed on subjects. A first implication is that institutions are ultimately frail and vulnerable, dependent as they are on moral understandings of goodness and justice to undergird their legitimacy. A second implication is that they are nonetheless amenable to change, because if moral understandings change, then so do institutions (Shils 1975). Western history is rife with examples of this dynamics, not least in the realms of religion and politics.

*3.2. Culture and Religion*

It was new religious understandings of the sacred that sparked the sixteenth-century Reformation, which was initially a reform movement in the bosom of the Catholic Church, but ultimately turned out to be the birth pangs of Protestantism. The early Protestant Church Reformers – people like Martin Luther, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli – advocated an understanding of the sacred that was much narrower than that of Roman Catholicism. The latter understood the sacred as being almost omnipresent – in a pantheon of saints; in material objects like statues, icons, and relics; and not least in the authority structures of the Church itself, with its extensive ecclesiastical hierarchy, ranging from the pope as God's representative on earth, through a series of archbishops and bishops, to ultimately a multitude of parish priests. This Catholic dispersion of the sacred fueled Protestant discontents: for the early Reformers only God was sacred, and to them God was radically transcendent, inhabiting a world of his own, radically separated from the world He had created. The implication was that the Protestant Reformers also dismissed clerical claims to authority as illegitimate and misplaced, giving rise to power abuse at the cost of the laity.

Driven by the belief that religious authority exclusively resides with a transcendent and omnipotent God, on whose behalf no one has the authority to speak, Protestantism thus sparked a longing to democratize Christian religion. No believer could claim authority over others and only God's Word as contained in the Bible was seen as a legitimate guideline for a pious life. The consequences of this new Protestant understanding of the sacred can be seen until the present day. First, the Protestant churches that came into being differ profoundly from the Catholic Church in terms of their organization. The clerical hierarchy that defines the Catholic Church is notoriously absent, so that religion here basically comes down to individual believers trying to live the sorts of pious lives that God demands from them. Because God's Word remains as the sole legitimate guideline for such a life, individual believers face the necessity to sort out what the Bible "really" demands from them. Second, the absence of ecclesiastical authorities, priests, or theologians who can provide authoritative answers explains Protestantism's susceptibility to literalism and fundamentalism. Protestants find it hard to admit that the Bible may be open to different interpretations, let alone to accept that there is no way to separate "correct" from "mistaken" interpretations. This explains Protestantism's characteristic centrifugalism: while there is just one single Catholic Church, a wide series of Protestant ones exists. Because a "correct" understanding of the Bible is so important in Protestantism, leaving a church that embraces a "wrong" interpretation is often easier than remaining, hypocritically feigning agreement with "false" beliefs. The history of

Protestantism is indeed full of schisms, sparked by disagreements that strike outsiders as trivial and unimportant. Whether or not the snake had "actually" spoken to Eve in paradise, as the Book of Genesis recounts, sparked major conflicts in Dutch Protestantism in the 1920s, for instance – the so-called "Geelkerken-affair," named after the protestant minister who had voiced doubts about the literalness of the story.

Of course, from the sixteenth century onwards orthodox Protestant understandings (especially Calvinism) have been contested by more liberal ones (especially Arminianism, Methodism), while from the 1960s onwards Anglican and Protestant theologians like John Robinson and Rudolf Bultmann tried to defend and salvage Christianity by steering away from literal readings of the Bible. The result of their efforts came closer to spurring a post-Christian spirituality than defending Christianity as conventionally and traditionally understood, however. They thus largely unintendedly helped spreading a conception of the sacred as not so much Christianity's traditional omnipotent personal God and creator, but rather an impersonal spiritual force or source of energy, a conception of the sacred that needs to be personally experienced rather than believed in (Campbell 2007: 262-268). Such spiritual understandings of the sacred have become only more widespread since then, giving rise to religious self-understandings of being "spiritual, but not religious" (Fuller 2002; Tromp et al. 2024). This turn towards spirituality heavily undermined the legitimacy of church-based Christian institutions and traditional Christian religious doctrines. The result was a religious field that became increasingly dominated by post-Christian spirituality rather than the type of Christianity that the West had known for centuries (e.g., Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Watts and Houtman 2024; Tromp et al. 2022). The new spirituality's aversion to institutional authority and religious doctrines does indeed differ so strongly from traditional Christianity that many, if not most, observers in sociology of religion have wrongly denied its religious status altogether (see however Aupers and Houtman 2006; Campbell 2007; Watts and Houtman 2024). So here, again, the emergence of new understandings of the sacred has had major consequences for the institutional organization of religion.

### *3.3. Culture and Politics*

A similar relationship between culture and institutions holds for politics. Here, too, social institutions are informed by cultural understandings of the world and susceptible to change if these understandings change. Without delving into the history of western democracy, it is important to highlight that democratic politics features major cultural tensions. This can be

exemplified by Abraham Lincoln's famous "Gettysburg Address," a brief speech reproduced on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and celebrated until the present day as an iconic expression of the nation's democratic ideals. Lincoln delivered it at the dedication of Gettysburg National Cemetery in November 1863, briefly after the Union's armies had defeated the Confederate South in the Battle of Gettysburg. He praised those who had sacrificed their lives there in defense of the ideals of America's young democracy, that nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He expressed his sincere hope that despite the bloody and divisive civil war these ideals would thrive and persist, so that "these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Now government of, by, and for the people are obviously not goals that are easily combined without tensions. Margaret Canovan (1999: 10) indeed distinguishes two principal dimensions of democratic politics to which she refers as its "pragmatic" and "redemptive" faces, conceived as "a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, inescapably linked, so that it is an illusion to suppose that we can have one without the other." Pragmatic politics is based on the conviction that in a democracy conflicts and disagreements need to be dealt with by means of rules and institutions that prevent violent conflict and enable effective governance. Redemptive politics, on the other hand, is based on the conviction that in a democracy sovereignty ultimately rests with the people. Contemporary populism in the West stems from the tension between these two democratic convictions, with populist movements critiquing the centrality of institutional procedures, expert knowledge and political elites – "government *of* the people" – at the cost of "government *by* the people." Whereas it is not uncommon to conceive of populism as a sort of petty (or not so petty) fascism, there is in principle thus nothing inherently un-democratic or uncivil to it (Morgan 2022).

For populism does not necessarily invoke a xenophobic and ethnically based "nativism," according to which non-native immigrants ought to have less rights than an alleged "us," conceived as "those whose forefathers have built this country." It entails a "thin-centred ideology" (Mudde 2004: 544), which can be given flesh and blood in various ways, both leftist and rightist (see also Frank 2020). Yet, whatever their substantive political profiles, all populisms conceive of society as consisting of two antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde 2004: 543). Populism's substantive flexibility is due to the fact that "the pure people" may in practice refer to many different groups, be it "the native population," "the silent majority," "law-abiding, hard-working and tax-paying

citizens," or "the poor and underprivileged," "exploited peasants," or "the working class." Based as it is on a notion of "the people," populism thus invokes its own metaphysics. Like the "individuals," "classes," or "communities" of liberalism, socialism and conservatism, the notion of "the people," understood as homogeneous and undivided, should not be confused with actually existing reality either. "The people […] are neither real nor all-inclusive," they are "a mythical and constructed sub-set of the whole population", basically "an 'imagined community', much like the nation of the nationalists" (Mudde 2004: 546). Referring to the populist notion of a "heartland," an alleged space where "in the populist imagination, a virtuous and unified population resides," Paul Taggart (2000: 95) similarly underscores populism's mythical foundations.

Contested understandings of what democracy "essentially is," or what it ideally should be, in short, are central to contemporary political conflict in the West. Whereas the established democratic institutions are infused by and based on democratic ideals, they are also open to critique based on other democratic ideals that exist in tension with them, not least those that underscore "the sovereignty of the people." While there is nothing that makes this populist appeal to "the people" inherently anti-democratic, it is obvious that populism can easily give way to non-democratic totalitarianism and authoritarian political leadership. Yet, technocratic political and administrative elites imposing their will on "the people," the latter seen as too stupid, unknowledgeable, short-sighted and irresponsible to be listened to or even taken into account, just as easily ends up in a democratic nightmare. So whereas pragmatic and redemptive politics exist in tension with each other, and indeed give rise to heated political conflicts, democracy suffers arguably even more if one of the two is discarded altogether.

## 4. Culture's "Hardness" and Causal Efficacy

### *4.1. A Matter of Life and Death*

Given its major role in shaping religious and political orders, and sparking religious and political conflict, it is odd to discard culture as a mere "soft," "socially insignificant" factor. Culture is indeed quite literally a matter of life and death, because human history is rife with examples in which people's beliefs have led them to kill or exterminate others, be these beliefs in racial inferiority and superiority (e.g., the Nazi Holocaust; the Ku Klux Klan in the Southern United States after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery; Turkey's

Armenian genocide during World War I; the Rwandan genocide in 1994); nationalism and loyalty to the fatherland (young men enthusiastically signing up to fight in World War I; Japanese *kamikaze* pilots in World War II); extremist political ideals (the radical-leftist terrorism by the Rote Armee Fraktion and the Brigate Rosse in respectively Germany and Italy in the 1970s); or religious fanaticism (Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State). Similarly, a dedicated willingness to sacrifice one's life for God, the nation, the fatherland, or any other exalted idea, can only be understood as an outcome of culture, of the beliefs and ideals one fosters. So culture cannot be considered a trivial "side issue" that stands in the way of an unprejudiced understanding of what is "really" going on, but not much else beyond that. Ideas kill, literally. They kill others as much as selves.

### *4.2. The Cultural Shaping of Human Biology*

Yet, culture is often understood as less "hard" and decisive than non-cultural factors, not least biological ones. Without denying the latter's role in shaping social life, it is however not too difficult to come up with arguments to the effect that biology itself is profoundly shaped by cultural forces. It has become a commonplace that femininity and masculinity, what it means to be a woman, respectively a man, are first of all cultural scripts, so that the language of "gender" has increasingly replaced that of "sex." Yet, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), Professor Emerita of Biology and Gender Studies at Brown University, points out that this overlooks that "sex" itself is not a strictly biological phenomenon either. More specifically, she demonstrates that almost two percent of American newborns have genitals that are neither unambiguously male nor female. Such "intersex" children have traditionally been singled out for genital reshaping surgery during their childhood, so as to transform them into "normal boys" or "normal girls." Indeed, in a provocative paper Fausto-Sterling asserts that despite widespread belief in the existence of just two biological sexes, male and female, it makes more sense from an empirical biological point of view to distinguish no less than five of them (Fausto-Sterling 2002). In other words, not only "gender" is culturally constructed, but so is "sex." On the wings of the LGBTQ+ sexual liberation movements since the 1960s, genital reshaping surgery has become increasingly consensual, while the felt need to undergo such surgery has declined now that intersexuality has gained legitimacy as a distinct sexual identity in and of itself.

Apart from its influence on the social shaping of biological sex, culture affects human biology in many other ways, not least in matters of health, illness, and death. A fascinating study by David Phillips and colleagues (1993), for instance, demonstrates that Chinese-

Americans, but not white Caucasian-Americans, tend to die earlier if they fall seriously ill and have a birth year traditional Chinese astrology considers ill-fated. The difference between the two ethnic groups exists across nearly all major causes of death, amounts to no less than a couple of years, and is larger if those concerned are more firmly embedded in Chinese culture and traditions. This study convincingly demonstrates the profound biological consequences of cultural beliefs.

The same can be said about the so-called "placebo effects" that modern medicine conceives as "distorting" the "real" effects of medical treatments, therapies, or drugs, so that they need to be methodologically cancelled out in so-called "double-blind" experimental trials. This is an experimental research design in which half of the patients receives the medical treatment the effectiveness of which is studied, while the other half receives something that at face value looks like it, but is actually "fake," so that if it has an effect at all it cannot be a "real" one. The design is "double-blind" in the sense that neither the doctor nor the patient knows which of the two treatments a patient receives. The fascinating thing about this institutionalized practice in medical research is that it underscores how trust in a medical therapy, drug or doctor affects health outcomes, even though these effects are considered "fake" rather than "real." Such placebo effects are, in the words of Anne Harrington (1997: 1), "the ghosts that haunt our house of biomedical objectivity, the creatures that rise up from the dark and expose the paradoxes and fissures in our own self-created definitions of the real and active factors in treatment." They are of interest to cultural sociologists, because they are causal effects of culture, willy-nilly recognized to exist by modern medicine, yet defined away as "unreal" and not to be taken substantively serious (see Chapter 5).

What applies to placebo effects also applies to prayer, the denial of the efficacy of which has been a favorite pastime of hard-nosed rationalists ever since the Enlightenment. The skeptics are no doubt right when they point out that experimental research can effortlessly demonstrate that prayer does not lead lost limbs to miraculously grow back, or metastatic cancer to disappear like snow in the sun. Much like trust in the efficacy of medical therapies, drugs or doctors, however, it is not far-fetched to assume that prayer has beneficial health effects for the religiously pious themselves, and indeed for themselves only. For even though it will not produce the sorts of miracles just alluded to, the hope, trust and peace of mind it instills in them is likely to reduce stress and anxiety. It is likely that this helps ameliorating "real" health problems like high blood pressure or headaches, and perhaps even more serious medical conditions that the latter may give rise to.

Strong cultural identifications with ethnic or religious in-groups do even have biological consequences at population levels, because they increase risks of inbreeding and genetically transmissible diseases. A quintessentially biological process, inbreeding is caused by genetically similar individuals mating and producing offspring. The arguably best known example is the European Habsburg dynasty, which ruled large parts of Central Europe from the fifteenth to the early-twentieth century. Entering marriages with close relatives for many centuries here led to physical deformities, not least the protruding lower jaw that became popularly known as the "Habsburg jaw." Whereas Habsburg inbreeding was caused by strategic political considerations aimed at protecting and consolidating dynastical power, the process can more interestingly also be sparked by cultural beliefs that define who can legitimately marry whom, thus limiting the range of acceptable marriage partners.

The consequences of such beliefs do much to relativize the age-old debate about "nature versus nurture." For individuals receive half of their genes from their father and half from their mother, so that a person's alleged "natural" genetic make-up is in fact already an outcome of social and cultural processes. Small, closely knit communities with a strong sense of common identity and marked longings for ethnic or religious purity are particularly vulnerable to inbreeding, due to their powerful norms against exogamy and in favor of endogamy, or in-marriage. So while inbreeding is a quintessentially biological process at the level of populations, much of its actual occurrence in human populations stems from cultural understandings of group boundaries, boundaries between "us," the in-group, and "them," the "out-group" consisting of all others, cultural boundaries that may or may not coincide with sheer physical isolation.

(Ultra-)orthodox Ashkenazi Jews are a good example of a community traditionally plagued by genetically transmitted diseases, due to both living for many centuries in largely self-contained communities in Central and Eastern Europe and to traditional practices of in-marriage on religious grounds. Their religious orthodoxy makes the problem even harder to handle, due to the strict religiously imposed taboo on abortion that impedes prenatal screening. Such screening is indeed hardly used by Israeli ultra-orthodox women, while almost universal among their secular Jewish counterparts (Raz and Vizner 2008: 1362). On top of the abortion taboo there is the religious incitement to procreate and have large families, which further increases the risk of families being hit by genetic disaster. In the beginning of the 1980s Rabbi Joseph Ekstein, who had tragically lost four of his own children to Tay-Sachs disease, took a successful initiative to counter these risks when he started the *Dor Yeshorim* program in New York City. Catering mostly to Israeli, American and European

Jews, the program genetically screens teenagers, stores their test results safely, and provides confidential identification numbers to those in question, so that they can seek marriage advice if and when this becomes relevant to them.

Offering a powerful alternative to prenatal screening, the program manages to keep potentially sensitive personal genetic information (which easily leads to stigmatization or personal anxiety) secret, even information about their own genetic make-up to those who seek *Dor Yeshorim*'s advice themselves. The program capitalizes on the recessive character of the relevant diseases, which means that they can only be transmitted if both parents are carriers (with a likelihood of 25 percent). It compares the genetic profiles of prospective marriage partners at request and only advises against marriage if they are both carriers of the same genetically transmitted disease. The advice is positive in all other instances, including those of prospective partners carrying different genetically transmitted diseases (where there is no transmission risk due to the recessive character of these diseases) (Prainsack and Siegal 2006; Raz and Vizner 2008). Neither the risks such diseases pose to Ashkenazi Jews, nor the *Dor Yeshorim* program to deal with them, can be understood without taking the cultural factor into account, in short. It is due to their status as a pious religious community, keen on in-marriage and observance of orthodox religious rules and regulations, especially the taboo on abortion and the religious incitement to have large families.

### *4.3. The Cultural Shaping of Non-Human Nature*

Whereas inbreeding interestingly demonstrates how cultural quests for ethnic or religious purity can biologically harm human communities, human culture even impacts animal populations profoundly. For since the earliest beginnings of the domestication of animals human communities have engaged in selective cross-breeding to create animal species that optimally cater to their culturally defined nutritional needs and aesthetic tastes. The breeds that have resulted from this are as such not simply "natural." They have been humanly and culturally made out of "natural" raw materials.

The breeding and trading of popular breeds of cats, dogs, birds, or fish is indeed a lucrative multi-million-dollar business, with individual specimen that abundantly feature the appearances that make their breeds popular fetching the highest prices. Depending on its color and patterning a single koi fish can for instance easily cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, in exceptional cases even more than one million. This incidentally also shows how cultural taste plays a major role in determining economic value – not only in this particular case, but quite typically when it comes to luxury goods (as opposed to commodities

that satisfy so-called "basic needs"). Whereas elementary economics teaches that given economic supply, increased consumer demand leads to higher prices, cultural sociology teaches that consumer demand itself is largely a matter of aesthetic cultural standards. This gives rise to the principal dilemma of animal cross breeding, i.e., that selecting individual specimen for further breeding based on their culturally valued aesthetics increases risks of inbreeding and health problems. A cultural sociological rule of thumb is indeed that the more appreciated a breed of domesticated animals is, the more it will suffer from health problems. Animal populations, in short, are profoundly affected by human culture.

Animal breeding does obviously not remain confined to pets and aesthetic considerations, but extends to equally culturally defined nutritional preferences. Indeed, today's most popular cattle or poultry breeds do not simply exist "by nature" either, but are similarly outcomes of selective cross-breeding. "Dairy cattle" breeds like Holstein / Holstein-Friesian or Jersey that optimize milk production are for instance bred alongside "meat cow breeds" like Angus or Belgian Blue for meat production. The same goes for hens, where "broiler chickens," breeds that grow quickly and produce much meat (like Belgian Malines and American Plymouth Rock and Jersey Giant) are distinguished from "layer hens," breeds that provide large quantities of relatively large eggs and do not tend to go broody easily (like Dutch Barnevelders and American Leghorns). These breeds of cattle and hens are not strictly "natural" either, but historical outcomes of culturally defined human diets, preferences, and interests. A strictly vegetarian society has no interest in breeding either meat cows or broiler chickens, just like breeding strong and aggressive bulls or cocks is only of interest to societies that cherish traditions of bull or cock fighting. Many animal species that we know today, in short, are as humanly made as they are natural.

Human practices of selective cross-breeding date back thousands of years, but have been brought to much higher levels in the twentieth century under the influence of advances in science and technology. Artificial insemination has become a staple in modern stock breeding, so that carefully selected male animals are now used to produce millions of offspring. An example is the Dutch bull Sunny Boy, born in 1985 in the Dutch province of Friesland – the heartland of the Holstein-Friesian cattle breed that doubles as the heartland of the Dutch dairy industry – and euthanized in 1997 due to health problems. He was singled out for breeding purposes thanks to the quality and quantity of the milk his daughters produced, alongside their good health and friendly character. Up until today Sunny Boy holds the world record as the most productive breeding bull in history. During his life Sunny Boy delivered more than two million doses of sperm, which through artificial insemination produced an

estimated one million offspring across the world, even until well after his death in 1997. The world-famous Frisian bull still stands out as an icon of Dutch cow breeding, praised for having single-handedly brought the industry back to the leading global position that it had lost to Canada and the United States in the 1970s. After his death Sunny Boy's head was kept, now exhibited in the Frisian Agricultural Museum in Leeuwarden, the capital of Friesland. A life-size statue in Wirdum, also in Friesland, immortalizes him and his excessively productive life.

Cultural understandings of what nature "ideally" should be like play an even more interesting role in "rewilding" projects all over Europe, aimed at restoring prehistorical landscapes (Lorimer and Driessen 2013). Many of the resulting landscapes are grazed by fierce-looking Heck cattle, a bovine species that resembles prehistorical cave paintings, like those in Lascaux in southwestern France. The resemblance is not coincidental, as the animals are in fact a human creation, using such prehistoric cave drawings as a source of inspiration. The cattle were created in the 1930s by Lutz and Heinz Heck, German brothers who were zoologists and directors of the zoos of Berlin and Munich, respectively. Their aim was to breed back the extinct European aurochs, the last specimen of which had died in Poland in 1627. Their project received enthusiastic support from members of the Nazi elite, especially Lutz's hunting partner Hermann Goering, who had a marked interest in creating landscapes that matched mythical Nazi imaginations of pristine German nature in Central and Eastern Europe (Lorimer and Driessen 2013; 2016).

### *4.4. Natural Selection and Cultural Adaptation*

Human efforts at shaping animal populations according to their own culturally defined needs and tastes have little to do with the processes of "natural adaptation" and "natural selection" that are central to Darwin's theory of evolution. They are indeed more properly dubbed processes of "cultural adaptation" and "cultural selection," processes that apply to humans themselves even much more than to animals. This is because humans, as I have argued in this chapter, inhabit worlds that are not simply natural or biological, but profoundly cultural and of their own making. The implication is that those best adapted to the human-made cultural environment, more specifically its culturally defined priorities, have a reproductive advantage – be it based on physical appearance or skills in mathematics, poetry, sports, music, computer gaming, mouth painting, foot painting, nose fluting, or whatever a particular culture may fancy. True, so-called "coevolutionary theory" nowadays highlights how culture and biology interact in bringing forth adaptive advantages (Feldman and Laland 1996). "Cultural

adaptation" and "cultural selection" go much further than this, however: they bring out that the notion of adaptation to a natural environment misrepresents the worlds that humans inhabit in the first place.

Consider Stephen Hawking, the world famous British theoretical physicist and cosmologist who died at the age of 76 in 2018. Despite his severe disability, Hawking made a shiny academic career, was widely read outside academia, guest-starred in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and the animated comedy series *The Simpsons*, and transferred his genes to one daughter and two sons. None of this has anything to do with optimal biological adaptation to a "natural" environment, but it has everything to do with Hawking's excellent adaptation to a culture that cherishes science and thinking skills more than anything else. More than that: it is not too far-fetched to assert that Hawking's stardom and fame were due to the major gap between his physical frailty and his unmatched thinking powers. It was this gap, more than anything else, that made Hawking the icon of modern ideals of "mind over matter."

## 5. What Is Cultural Sociology?

As brought out by the motto of this chapter, taken from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, cultural sociology much like cultural anthropology understands humans as animals suspended in webs of meaning of their own making. It makes the ways in which people give meaning to the worlds they inhabit central to sociological theorizing and research. Cultural sociology thus boasts an understanding of "society," "social life," or however one prefers to call sociology's object, as pertaining first of all to what the members of a group or society believe, find, or think they know. In doing so, cultural sociologists distinguish themselves from their sociological peers by a refusal to treat culture as a side issue. For many of their peers emphasize that humans have in the course of history had all sorts of ridiculous beliefs about social and political life, many of them moreover dangerous and immoral, so that a scientific sociology worth its salt should critique such nonsense and find the truth about social and political life as it "really" is. Sociologists like these tend to conceive of culture as at best a mystification of how social life "really" works, a mere justification of structures of power and inequality that ought to be made central to the sociological endeavor.

Cultural sociology dismisses such arguments and does not hesitate to nonetheless situate people's allegedly "false," "irrational," or "short-sighted" cultural understandings at the heart of sociological analysis. It does so for the simple reason that ideas do not need to be

"true" to influence what people do and shape their societies and institutions. It is as William I. Thomas succinctly put it in the beginning of the twentieth century in the famous theorem that came to be identified with his name since Robert Merton (1968; see also 1995) introduced it to a wide sociological audience: "If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Or in other words: what is actually true is less important than what people believe to be true, because people inevitably act based on what they believe, whether this is true or not. A social science worth its salt should therefore take people's cultural understandings seriously rather than treating them as insignificant side issues.

Cultural sociology is a general sociological approach that understands culture as situated at the heart of society, so that any effort at understanding the latter's vicissitudes necessitates it to be taken seriously. It distinguishes itself from a "positivist" sociology, which aims to model sociology after the natural sciences and denies the pivotal role of cultural understandings. To simplify a complex distinction, one could say that cultural sociology studies humans as cultural animals, whereas positivist sociology studies them as if they were "things" or "machines," influenced by powerful and invisible non-cultural forces that "work behind their backs." Sociological positivism has indeed since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment identified the distinction between the non-cultural and cultural dimensions of social life as one between "social reality" and "beliefs." In such an understanding of social life, it is up to sociologists to produce reliable knowledge about "social reality as it 'really' is" – knowledge that can then pave the way to social progress, not least by driving out "beliefs."

Positivist sociology is particularly useful in the study of phenomena like health, death, poverty, homelessness, educational failure, or downward social mobility, all outcomes that fatefully "happen to people" in the sense that they are virtually universally evaluated negatively and thus unlikely to be actively sought after. With very few exceptions, stemming from either insanity or exotic and marginal cultural motives, people prefer being rich and healthy over poor and unhealthy. Precisely therefore phenomena that simply "happen to people" can be studied without taking differences in cultural preferences or motives into account. That said, culture does of course also "happen to people," in the sense that they are socialized in the society and social milieus in which they happen to be born or end up in. The implication is that culture is not just a source of motives that drive action (Campbell 1996; see also Chapter 4), but also a resource with major consequences for social inequality. For deviating from the cultural tastes of powerful gatekeepers to privileged positions easily leads to exclusion from such positions. For the distribution of life chances it matters a lot whether

cultural tastes match or contradict those of those in power (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984).

Culture is thus more than just a source of meaning and a driver of action, because it doubles as a "resource," a major determinant of life chances and social mobility. Following Pierre Bourdieu's path-breaking work, such notions of "culture as resource" – or "cultural capital" – have become quite popular in sociology, not least in survey research into social stratification and inequality (e.g., De Graaf et al. 2000). Cultural sociologists keen on studying meaning in and of itself – not least advocates of the so-called "strong program" in cultural sociology at Yale University's Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) – tend however to be skeptical about this, arguing that it results in a reduction of culture to a realm taken to be "more real" and "more important," here structures of power and inequality (e.g., Alexander and Smith 2003).

The major appeal of cultural sociology is that it is not a "specialized" sociology in the way for instance political sociology, sociology of education, sociology of work, organizational sociology, sociology of science, or sociology of religion are. With culture permeating all of social life – politics, education, work, science, religion, and what have you – cultural sociologists can (and indeed: do) study basically any substantive domain, or indeed relationships between different social spheres, like the religious and the political or the religious and the economic. Rather than a specialized sociology, cultural sociology is a general sociology, as intellectually open and flexible as sociology as a discipline can be – not only thematically or substantively, but also theoretically and methodologically. Sociologists have for instance always understood Emile Durkheim and Max Weber as classical founders of their discipline, but the two do in fact double as classical founders of cultural sociology. Yet, the sociological reception of their work has traditionally marginalized and downplayed their most cultural-sociologically significant insights and contributions. This is why this book devotes chapters to Durkheim (Chapter 3) and Weber (Chapter 4) in which precisely these vital issues are discussed, alongside the ways in which they have inspired later research and can inspire future work in cultural sociology. Cultural sociology is also methodologically ecumenical. While it has traditionally been dominated by qualitative methods, this has become less and less the case since the rapid expansion of cultural sociology in the 1980s (Chapter 2). I indeed argue in Chapter 5 that it is a grave misunderstanding that quantitative methods, especially experiments and survey research, cannot be usefully employed in cultural sociology – to the contrary, as I will argue.

So finally, is cultural sociology any "better" than non-cultural, positivist sociology? As a cultural sociologist I am obviously inclined to answer this question fully affirmatively, but as a cultural sociologist I also know that evaluations like these are inevitably matters of taste or belief. Whether cultural sociology is "better" than its positivist counterpart is indeed a silly question, basically equivalent to whether biology, economics, psychology, or astronomy is "better" than any of the others. Like such scientific disciplines, general sociological approaches like cultural and positivist sociology cannot simply be empirically "tested." Only the specific theories they bring forth can. The choice for cultural sociology itself is thus first and foremost a matter of cultural taste – a matter of what is deemed interesting or uninteresting, inspiring or uninspiring, worthwhile or pointless.

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