

# Theorising National Cultures

PHILIPPE D'IRIBARNE



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# Foreword

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While there has probably never been such great interest in the cultural aspect of social life, there is intense debate over the notions of culture, and especially national culture. A great deal of confusion reigns over this issue in all disciplines which are faced with the diversity of practices that are encountered in the world in the functioning of institutions, law, political life and management.

There is a common challenge behind the questions raised: How to escape from the dilemma of adopting a conception of cultures that underestimates the autonomy of actors, on the one hand, and without being blind to what differentiates societies, on the other hand? A totalitarian vision of culture, qualified as “culturalism”, is rightly accused of considering human beings as sorts of “cultural dopes”, by neglecting their ability to act in a creative manner.<sup>[a]</sup> We clearly need a less deterministic conception of culture than the one that long prevailed, related to the mythical image of societies without history, prisoners of immobile traditions.<sup>[b]</sup> However, the way in which to go about broadening this scope remains problematic.

A whole host of attempts have been made to take account of the autonomy of actors without abandoning the notion of culture. The dominant trend has been to maintain the vision by which culture determines behaviour, but by attenuating the rigour of this determinism in various ways. The ability of actors to transform the routines that govern their action has been highlighted.<sup>[c]</sup> Culture has been presented as offering a toolkit of potential actions and not an unequivocal way of acting.<sup>[d]</sup> The notion of culture has been compared to that of a musical score, the performance of which leaves a certain margin for interpretation.<sup>[e]</sup> These approaches may no

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[a] Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 1967, Polity Press, London.

[b] C.f. the criticisms addressed by Lévi-Strauss to Sartre, who conveyed this image, in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1966, Chapter IX, “History and Dialectic”.

[c] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory; Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, University of California Press, 1979.

[d] Ann Swidler “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies”, *American Sociological Review*, 1986, vol. 51, April, p. 273-286.

[e] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York, Basic Book, 1973.

doubt be suitable as long as one is dealing with specific cultures in a particular field of social life, for which it remains relevant to speak of routines, toolkits or blueprints. But they are inadequate when one considers societies as a whole. Indeed, in this case, one comes up against the infinite diversity of behaviours.

These difficulties pose problems for the orientation of contemporary research. Countless research papers have led to cultural characteristics specific to a particular organisation being highlighted (a company, hospital, school), or even a segment of an organisation (a workshop), or a professional group. The very little research that takes into account a national level focuses on a particular field of social life, without seeking to link what one observes there with features that characterise national cultures taken as a whole, or even rejects any consideration of such features.<sup>[f]</sup> The terms “national character” or “minds of people”, which were formerly used to evoke general trends that might be compatible with very diverse practices, have been relegated to the prehistory of social sciences. In addition, the interest in national cultures has mostly been left to social psychology.

What can one effectively be dealing with behind the combinations of unity and diversity, of continuity and change, which one observes? One may suspect that a sociological entity exists, which needs to be discovered, that influences practices without determining them. But what could be the nature of it? Current theories of culture are silent about it.

While conducting field research on the different continents, we have encountered a strong family likeness, within one same society, between the ways of living together that are specific to very different areas of social life and very different periods – for example, in each of the Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and French worlds, between conceptions of the free man in the mediaeval world, those of liberty specific to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and the form of autonomy preferred by the contemporary world in the functionings of organisation.<sup>[g]</sup> These relationships were difficult to attribute merely to chance. Similarly, when one observes the mixed success of development policies, the difficulty to spread democracy in places where it does not have credit, or that of reaching agreement such as within supranational groups, one clearly has the impression that something cultural resists, which is difficult to identify as there is no clear idea of what its nature may be.

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[f] Frank Dobbin, *Forging industrial policy. The United States, Britain and France in the railway age*, Cambridge University press, 1994. Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor. Germany and Britain, 1640-1914*, University of California Press, 1995.

[g] Philippe d'Iribarne, « Trois figures de la liberté », *Annales*, September-October 2003.

It is to account for these phenomena that an innovative approach to national cultures appeared to be necessary. And it took substantial efforts to develop.<sup>[h]</sup>

A crucial point concerns the difficulties associated with the use of the same word “culture” to refer to very different types of sociological entities. A socially situated “culture”, specific to an organisation, a social group, a particular field of action, is one thing. This sociological entity is in relation to social strategies, combats for identity, a permanent creation. A national “culture”, common to those who have very diverse social situations can only be a completely different sociological entity. This publication is devoted to clarifying what this is about.

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[h] The stages of this definition are recounted in Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'envers du moderne*, CNRS Éditions, 2013.





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# Introduction

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The existence of major differences between peoples for a long time appeared as an obvious fact. From Montaigne to Weber, including Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, Michelet and so many others, the notions of “spirit of peoples” or of the “national character” were considered as being self-evident. Our day and age hesitates. The UN states that is important to recognise “*cultural diversity among all peoples and nations in the world*”.<sup>[1]</sup> At the same time, there is a real fear that the reference to cultural differences may conceal a thinly disguised avatar of the contemptible spectre of racism, and that focusing on what divides hinders humanity’s progress towards a world that is united beyond borders. “*Definitive and globalising phrases, with a strong culturalist or essentialist sense*” are denounced.<sup>[2]</sup> In one sense, the promotion of cultural specificities is accused of shackling people within a destiny that enslaves them, of denying their ability to freely build a world consistent with their will and, ultimately, of rejecting the *acquis* of the Enlightenment.<sup>[3]</sup>

There are a whole host of occasions whereby one comes up against this issue, as the destinies of societies are so different. How, in the face of the Asian “miracle”, can the difficulties of black Africa to develop be interpreted? How should one view the problem for democracy to take root in China? Or again, how is it that in the USA the right to own firearms is seen as a symbol of freedom? In all this, there is surely a legacy of a long history, but to what extent and by which processes? In many respects, a legacy is never more than what one does with it. It is constantly revisited and reinterpreted. Its effects can only be understood by paying attention to the action of those who take hold of it and transform it. Therefore, how is it possible to put things into perspective, and understand the subtle interplay between the received and the created, without forgetting the created, by seeking to give the received its rightful place, or forgetting the received by amplifying the created?

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[1] “Human Rights and Cultural Diversity”, Resolution 55/91 adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, 81<sup>st</sup> Plenary Meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2000.

[2] Cf. the reactions to the speech made by Nicolas Sarkozy in Dakar on 26<sup>th</sup> July. Philippe Bernard, « Le faux pas africain de Sarkozy », *Le Monde*, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2007.

[3] Zeev Sternhell, *Les Anti-Lumières. Du XVIII<sup>e</sup> à la guerre froide*, Fayard, 2006.

Faced with these questions and the debates that they lead to, social sciences are rather disarmed. It is in observing small societies that are deemed not to have a history that the anthropologist has built his toolkits of concepts and methods. The vision of culture that dominates his discipline is intimately linked to the idea of shared practices associated with the meaning, which is also shared, that everyone gives to the world in which they live.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Geertz, it involves a “*system of symbols*” which, like the “*computer program*” or the “*cake recipe*”, constitutes the “*source of information that [...] gives shape, direction, specificity and weight to a continuous flow of activities*”.<sup>[5]</sup> This notion of culture is intimately associated with the image of a community linked by common ways of being and acting, and respect for ancestors and the traditions that they have passed on. Nowadays, it is a contentious issue among anthropologists themselves, as it concerns their traditional fields of observation. How can it be useful when one is dealing with societies marked by history, resistant to traditions, passionate about innovations; societies where there is a clash between ways of being and acting? When one looks at these societies, there is no intellectual framework to allow reflection on what one observes, nevertheless, in terms of unity and continuity.

It is true that in the Anglo-Saxon world there is a boom in cultural studies. But their purpose excludes everything that might characterise vast entities. It mainly involves focussing on what unites members of a restricted entity, a workshop, a professional group, a school, a sports club, a company, by evoking, when one refers to culture, a set of common practices, which take on meaning in shared representations, or being attentive, with Pierre Bourdieu, to the diversity of *habitus* that are specific to fundamentally distinct social groups. Furthermore, in gender studies, post-colonial studies and other studies, it is often a question of highlighting the representations that are at stake in the battles between the dominant and the dominated. There is therefore no place for any form of common legacy that is presumed to unite those who are in conflict.

In past centuries, those who spoke of the “spirit of peoples” or of the “national character” were surely aware that they were dealing with societies that were both divided and mobile. Is not one same “spirit” likely to remain constant within a changing world, to be common to all those who embody it in opposing ways? But these precursors merely considered rather vague notions; what is a “spirit”, how to identify

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[4] A good expression of this approach can be found in the classic work by Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973. This point will be developed in Chapter IV.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 250.

it, with what methods? As long as these questions have not been answered, what such a term evokes will not find its place in contemporary social sciences. Nowadays, various authors focus on what differentiates peoples in a more abstract register, without directly leading to observable practices. For example, François Jullien speaks about “*folds of thought*” to evoke what separates Chinese society from the heirs of classical Greece.<sup>[6]</sup> Olivier Roy speaks about “*grammar*” concerning the form that political solidarities take in the Middle East.<sup>[7]</sup> Here, we have suggestive metaphors, but they leave many doubts over exactly what we are dealing with.

Personally, I found myself faced with these issues considering a question that was initially narrowly circumscribed. How is it that in multinational firms, despite the unifying pressure of reputedly universal management models, the organisational methods to be found all over the world remain so diverse? What is the nature of that which opposes a standardisation that forgets borders, and what processes are at work? In practice, this field of investigation proved to be an important entry point to address issues related to the cultural diversity that remains within so-called “modern” societies. Indeed, the life of companies is marked – to an extent that is undoubtedly not found in any other aspect of life in society – by the rule of a triumphant modernity. Global standards make reference to this. There is constant innovation. Anything “traditional”, duly classified as such, in the sense of customs deemed to be ancestral (even though they have been invented more or less recently), such as the tea ceremony or voodoo rituals, is scarcely encountered. No “authentic” objects are to be found that bear witness to a carefully safeguarded past or a past that one is seeking, with varying degrees of difficulty, to resuscitate, such as the wigs of British judges or Bigouden headdresses in Brittany. Remembrance places are widely disregarded. Local institutions have little weight. What is to be found there that is nonetheless inherited can therefore only be of a very different nature than what is generally associated with the term “traditional”. It may not involve practices that are passed on from history, which hold back the advent of modernity in a rearguard battle. It may only be something, which remains to be defined, that is closely intertwined with such modernity and contributes to shaping it.

The orientation of this research was at the outset (and essentially remains so) resolutely empirical: observe and analyse ways of living and working together, with the long-term objective of producing an inventory and a rational classification of what one

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[6] François Jullien, Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine)*. *Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident*, Seuil, 2000, p. 61.

[7] Olivier Roy, *Le Croissant et le Chaos*, Hachette Littérature, 2007, p. 54.

encounters in this area around the world.<sup>[8]</sup> Progressively, in order to be able to think out what was observed, it was necessary to considerably extend the field in question and look at the general conceptions of living together. This is because when human beings work together, they remain motivated by the same visions of life in society as when they build political institutions, or imagine a better world. It was ultimately this group of factors that had to be used as the research topic.

The initial inspiration owed a lot to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, without excluding a whole host of contributions, from Weber to the sociology of organisations and cultural anthropology. The vision of culture as a context of meaning, which contemporary anthropology favours, appeared to be in harmony with the approach implemented.<sup>[9]</sup> However, little by little, it became clear that in order to account for the phenomena with which we were faced, it was necessary to go beyond the available stock of theories. Friendly criticism invited us to specify our concepts.<sup>[10]</sup> Furthermore, the use of the term “culture” arouses such misinterpretation among the opponents of “culturalism” that one cannot use it without specifying the way in which it is understood. In the end, it was necessary to build a theoretical framework which, we believe, increases the ability to think out the diversity of the world, far beyond the extremely limited field that served as the starting point. This publication is devoted to presenting this framework.

We shall first see, by using some examples, how the diversity that is to be accounted for is seen by the observer at two levels of investigation: on the one hand, when he examines, in a comparative manner, the forms taken on by one same aspect of social life in various parts of the world and, on the other hand, when he repeatedly addresses the same society from different angles (Chapter 1). We shall subsequently propose a theoretical framework that allows this diversity to be interpreted. We shall see that, in each society, everything that concerns living together is marked by an opposition between a peril feared above all and ways of salvation that make it possible to escape from it; a vast mythological elaboration leads to a meaning being given to events and situations from everyday life by associating them with these

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[8] This research was conducted from the 1980s onwards with a team that was formed for this purpose, Gestion et Société, and to date (2014) has concerned some fifty countries located on various continents. The publications that report on these investigations include: Philippe d'Iribarne, *La Logique de l'honneur*, Seuil, 1989; Philippe d'Iribarne, with Alain Henry, Jean-Pierre Segal, Sylvie Chevrier, Tatjana Globokar, *Cultures et Mondialisation*, Seuil, 1998; Philippe d'Iribarne, with Alain Henry, *Successful Companies in the Developing world, Managing in Synergy with Cultures*, AFD, 2007; Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'Étrangeté française*, Seuil, 2006; Philippe d'Iribarne, *Managing corporate values in diverse national cultures*, Routledge, 2013.

[9] This was the view expressed in the preface to the paperback edition of *La Logique de l'honneur*, published in 1993.

[10] Jean-Pierre Dupuis, « Problèmes de cohérence théorique chez Philippe d'Iribarne. Une voie de sortie », *Management international*, vol. 8, n° 3, spring 2004.

experiences of peril or salvation (Chapter 2). We shall see that a certain permanence of cultures (in the sense given to the term here) has been combined with the advent of modernity and the development of democratic societies. We shall, in particular, examine how the movement of emancipation associated with the Enlightenment represented in some respects a major break in the history of humanity, while being compatible with a remarkable cultural continuity within each of the societies in which it occurred. We will look at the way in which the diversity of cultures is combined with the unity of humanity (Chapter 3). We shall see why the various common visions of culture do not allow us to account for the phenomena that we have observed, meaning that in contemporary social sciences, these phenomena have, until now, constituted an unidentified object (Chapter 4). We shall conclude by seeking to show that a good understanding of the processes that govern the diversity of the world constitutes a crucial issue for social sciences, both in their own construction and in the role that they are likely to play in serving society.

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# Chapter 1

Differences  
that withstand history



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## Differences that withstand history

Organisations in general, and companies in particular, are certainly not communities, in the sense of groups united by a shared vision of the world. Conflicts are a daily reality for them, between the parent company and subsidiaries, between manufacturers and sales professionals, between supervisors and workers, between employers and trade unions. In order to defend their positions, each category, or each individual, puts forward a representation of situations that makes them look good. Tensions also abound, with the conflicts of representations that go with them, in economic life taken as a whole, and in particular in the relations that each company has with its clients and suppliers. As long as we confine ourselves to one country alone, as is the case for the vast majority of research on organisations, work and the functioning of economies, we can only be struck by all the differences in the way in which the various actors in question see things, to the extent that we find that they have nothing in common.

When broadening the perspective, we diversify the fields of observation and we begin to compare, we do certainly continue to see what, within each of these fields, opposes individuals and groups, both in the interests that they defend and in the understanding that they have of situations. Other perspectives do, however, emerge at the same time. It appears that the actors who, within the same society (which one can describe, as a first approximation, as national),<sup>[11]</sup> clash and cooperate have, in contrast to their counterparts encountered in other places, a certain family resemblance in the very way in which they manage their conflicts, find – as after all

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[11] The term traditionally used is “national culture”. I shall leave the question open as to whether this term is appropriate, or whether it would be better to use “societal”, “political” or “inclusive”, or find another term. Furthermore, the expression “national culture” is likely to be understood in very different ways, which may be a source of confusion. It is sometimes used more or less synonymously with “national identity”, which is far removed from the perspective used here. We shall clarify this point in the next chapter. Experience shows that for countries that are characterised by a strong internal stability, one does indeed find the same culture, in the sense that we shall gradually specify, when one develops the investigations.

it there is a need to work together – more or less temporary agreements, and in the way in which they feel bound by certain forms of duty. Their views are marked by common references, by ways of defending their positions, justifying their points of view, which are certainly far from being completely identical but which, compared to those that one observes elsewhere, give the impression of having something in common. The whole path of our research has involved moving from this feeling, which remains unclear, to a precise understanding of this “something”.

To give an idea of the approach by which a culture gradually reveals itself, we shall use a two-stage process. We shall first look at what is revealed by fieldwork conducted from a comparative perspective. We shall see the extent to which actors belonging to different societies and referring to the same situation conceive very diverse ways of handling it. We shall subsequently focus on what is observed when one considers one same society from various perspectives and at different periods. We shall see that one encounters distinctive traits that characterise it over time.

## Different ways of giving form to one “same” situation

Whenever one compares the way in which human beings go about organising their lives together under different skies, one sees that their practices differ. One is dealing with distinct legal traditions, political institutions and conceptions of the family. The existence of these differences raises a question. Are we dealing with legacies from a pre-modern past, doomed to disappear in the foreseeable future, under the effects of the globalisation of the economy, combined with the triumph, all over the world, of democracy and human rights? Or does it involve something more lasting?

To have an idea of the degree of resilience of such specific characteristics to the great movement of unification that is spreading across the world, it is necessary to observe what is happening in places where this movement has made the most progress. There are areas, such as the conceptions of law, where national traditions are upheld by organised bodies able to resist the developments that threaten their identity. The permanent situations that one observes there may be understood as being the result of rearguard actions that cannot indefinitely put off an inevitable calling into question. But there are others where such forces of preservation appear to be virtually absent. This is the case for corporate management. In this field, there are no national, duly codified traditions cultivated by institutions that would trumpet their excellence. On the contrary, it is the same conception of management that business schools spread throughout the world. Globalisation has already produced its effects. This highlights more clearly what is likely to lastingly resist it.

Let us take as an example the relationship between a bank, more specifically a development bank, and its public and private borrowers. They are within a financial sphere that already functions at a largely global scale. An international institution, the World Bank, sets the tone in all the countries concerned. Borrowers everywhere wish to have moderate rates and long-term loans, and want to be trusted without multiplying the number of formalities. Everywhere, as well, lenders are wary, ask for guarantees and establish controls. Yet anyone who goes to the different parts of the world to question current or potential borrowers about their expectations can only be struck by the diversity of ways in which they conceive their relationship with a lender. And they are also struck by the fact that within one same society, there is a great convergence between the visions of their respondents, even if the latter come from very different institutions, are senior civil servants, small-scale entrepreneurs or local bankers.<sup>[12]</sup>

It is through this type of observation that one begins to see the diversity of cultures. It is true that when one is at this stage of the research, it is only a question of traces, and there is still a long distance to cover before moving from what stands before us in a very specific situation to a broader vision. Yet when it is simultaneously conducted in several places, this initial contact cannot fail to convince that when it comes to organising their relationships, human beings have extremely different ways of going about it. In the views that are expressed, one finds something that is specific to each society: a reference to a unique way of arriving at a *modus vivendi* between more or less antagonistic desires; a vision of an acceptable form of relationship. One might of course wonder whether these discourses do not simply offer different ways of “dressing up” the relationships that remain, nonetheless, invariant in their substance. But these doubts disappear when one observes the relationships between actors who belong to different societies, and the way in which everyone reacts to ways of doing things that are unfamiliar to them. It thus becomes apparent that the difference in discourses goes hand in hand with a difference in practices, that the conceptions that are specific to different societies have a real impact on how those concerned organise their relationships.

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[12] We shall draw on the results of a survey conducted for Agence Française de Développement (AFD) in 7 countries or territories (Chad, Martinique, Morocco, New Caledonia, Senegal, South Africa and Vietnam) on a group of its public and private partners. The interviews in Vietnam and South Africa were conducted by Jean-Pierre Segal, in Chad and Senegal by Sylvie Chevrier, in Martinique and New Caledonia by Hèla Yousfi, and in Morocco by Philippe d'Iribarne. The results of the research are presented in: Philippe d'Iribarne, *AFD and its Partners, The Cultural Dimension*, AFD, Working Paper n° 23, March 2014. Without reproducing here everything that we observed, to illustrate our point, we shall simply mention the main characteristics of the conceptions of good cooperation that were to be seen in four of the fields covered.

## *Reference to the market in the Anglo-Saxon world*

In the Anglo-Saxon world, which we encountered in South Africa, where the white establishment continues to dominate in financial institutions, it seems clear to everyone that people meet to do business. The key interface that allows them to adapt to each other is a duly organised market.

Even when it comes to development and assistance to the poorest, it is still a question of "business". There is simply a need to go about it in a specific way, as it involves a specific field. Those who want to enter into this market must *"move away from the way they were traditionally doing business"*.

The great regulator is the competition between lenders on one side, and between borrowers on the other. The only way to impose oneself is to be more attractive than one's competitors and find *"a more competitive solution"*. It is not sufficient to have good products, it is necessary to know how to sell them, to do one's *"marketing"*. The others are what they are. It is not a question of seeking to change them, but of knowing what one can expect of them, on what basis one can decide what one will do oneself. *"You assess management's ability to do something or not [...]. Once this is clear to you, you decide whether or not you lend."* The fact that there are certification agencies helps each lender to assess the risks that they take when doing business with a borrower. It is good to be *"an organisation with a good reputation, well rated by international agencies"*.

An important characteristic of a market that functions well is that one has a choice between a sufficient number of potential partners. If one does not find a common ground with one, one will find it with another. Consequently, none of the parties can impose their own rules on a hard-pressed partner and the operations that they enter into tally with the interests of each of them. *"Both parties constantly seek a balance of power in their relations"; "Neither of us absolutely needs the other, but we are both interested. I think that this is very good"*.

This image of a correctly regulated market takes on significance by contrast with that of other unsatisfactory types of market, where rules are not respected, such as a market *"where one plays poker"*, or a *"less developed financial market"* where there is not an appropriate balance of power.

The reference to good contacts and to good human relations is not absent. But it is an ingredient of the proper functioning of a market. It is a question of *"sharing"* and of *"cooperation"* in relation to an approach that allows interests to converge and leads to doing business together: *"If we have an idea for the institutions that*

*finance development, we share it with each of them. [...] If they find some interest in this, we move on to the next stage. This may not be explicit, but implicitly it is cooperation.” People who are “very interested in the way in which we approach the market” find themselves described as “super-nice people to work with”.*

One may be tempted to say that what is mentioned here is in no way specifically Anglo-Saxon and that it is simply a question of universal relations between a banker and his clients within a market economy. But in fact, as soon as one leaves the Anglo-Saxon world, one sees that other ways of converging interests and points of view are the reference. Each in their own way diverge significantly from this canonic model.

### *The French and the “métier”<sup>[13]</sup> or the profession*

When one arrives in a French universe, there is a radical change in reference.<sup>[14]</sup> What is put forward is no longer the fact that one meets on a market, but the construction of a relationship where everyone acts in accordance with what seems normal for someone who has their position in society. In order to know what one can expect from a partner, the key question is to know what he is: what is his profession, his mission, his vocation? In the case we are dealing with, an opposition between contrasting references structured this questioning. At one extreme, we found the image at the same time majestic, selfless and rather arrogant of the State and its representatives, *“a great lady who does not personalise her relationships very much”*. At the other, we found the image of the trader who prospects his clients, *“the local Chinese trader who wants to develop his business”*. Other images again marked the remarks, such as that of the *“moneylender”* who refuses to take risks. The respondents were far from being in agreement on the policies that the entity in question should follow, but what they had in common is that they associated all these policies with a certain place occupied in society: *“AFD is there for what purpose? [...] What is AFD’s status?”*

The requirements associated with the position held by a specific person or entity define what is *“normal”* and *“logical”* to expect from the latter. *“They impose things on us, but it is logical, we would like to criticise them for this, but we cannot do it, because it is normal to ask for supporting documents and all that...”* *“Sometimes AFD requires certain guarantees, which is normal; it is its lending activity, so there is a need for guarantees.”*

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[13] *Translator’s Note: The word “métier” in French corresponds to a profession, with the notion of both expertise and ethics, but can take on a much broader meaning, including for industrial or commercial activities.*

[14] A universe that we encountered during our research in New Caledonia and Martinique. In both cases, many of our respondents were French from “mainland” France, temporarily posted and who carry references of French standards. The latter coexisted, with some of our other respondents, with more specifically local references.

Establishing satisfactory cooperative relations between a lender and a borrower requires a meeting point between what appears normal to do for both parties in respect of what they are (their status, their mission). For example, for one of our respondents, explaining what had led to a favourable form of cooperation: *“They found that it corresponded on the one hand to the mission that was entrusted to us, to our status, to our role as a port authority and, on the other hand, that it was part of their mission.”* Once the mission has been defined, it can be fulfilled with varying degrees of commitment. The ideal encounter occurs when the supplier (in this case the banker) seeks to excel according to the standards of his profession by applying them in both an intelligent and inventive manner, takes an interest in his client’s expectations, and therefore provides the latter with something much better than a standard product. *“We expressed our needs, the services at the headquarters worked on the subject, and then we were able to present a product that was entirely suited to what we were asking for. [...] It is a financial product that needed to be devised. But it corresponds exactly to what we needed. [...] Today, AFD is a development partner. [...] They have fully understood what our needs are.”*

The singularity of this manner of shaping relations between lenders and borrowers appears in a harsh light when it is confronted with other expectations associated with other benchmarks. For example, we encountered such a case in Martinique, via the reaction of local companies to the way in which banks that impart standard French references act. *“We were at a meeting at the Préfecture and [...] we mentioned the difficulties we had in making money [...] To develop trade in the Caribbean [...] there is no mystery about it, we need support from bankers because we spend a lot of money going to the Caribbean. For bankers here, it is not their problem, it is not their mission, that is what they replied to us. [...] Their mission is to manage their thing in Martinique, in Guadeloupe, in French Guiana, and that’s all. The English-speaking Caribbean is not their mission.”* The reference to the mission that one carries out, which prompts one to be deaf to any request that is not part of it, goes without saying in standard French references. It is out of the question to depart from it, even when you consider the person with whom you have cooperated as a partner. It is a source of incomprehension for those who, having a very different view of what is good cooperation, focus on the support that one must provide to the person with whom one has forged ties if they find themselves in need.

### ***Right track and harmony in Vietnam***

With our Vietnamese respondents, reference was constantly made to what is good in itself, according to criteria that transcend the desires of those who are directly concerned. *“You are on the right track”; “It is a good direction”; “The money lent is*



*used for a good purpose". A perspective of effectiveness is associated with this idea: "It allows the money spent to be used more effectively."*

It is not that one can expect everyone to spontaneously take this right track. It should be the rule. *"A beneficiary must use the funds in an effective and fruitful manner."* But there is a high risk that each ordinary member of society, seeking to take advantage of the situation, may divert things from the path that they should take. *"The beneficiary is not aware of its responsibility."* *"I think that the project beneficiaries are going to use that for a different purpose."* It is up to those who exercise power to fight against these abuses. For an official: *"The objective of the beneficiaries is to get money from the loan, [...] but for us, it is to manage as effectively as possible."* The responsibility that one thus assumes is commensurate to one's position in society. *"The more AFD's role is important, the greater AFD's responsibility."*

In the name of this vision of good, it is legitimate to criticise those with whom one cooperates if one considers that they are going astray. *"This project, we can say that AFD did not understand the situation, and that led to the project not being a success."* *"The AFD agency was unable to give its decision and had to send the files to Paris. It took a week more, which meant that we missed the deadline. It is unfortunate."* Such direct criticisms could lead to sharp confrontations, which would make it difficult to implement constructive cooperation. This risk is countered by permanently tempering the criticisms of actions with kind remarks about people, remarks recognising their efforts, the quality of their involvement, their work and their progress.

The right track is not seen as something that one has reached once and for all, but as a perspective that encourages one to constantly seek to improve oneself. *"We appreciate AFD's operations; there are always areas for improvement."* The criticisms take on meaning in this perspective. The partner's good will, the improvements that one can expect of it, are constantly put forward. *"AFD has made a lot of efforts and progress recently."* *"AFD worked actively."* *"We have noted that AFD has had a lot of improvements in its activities in Vietnam."* What one can really demand from a partner is that it does its best to enter the process of permanently improving what is expected of everyone; *"We want AFD to make more efforts and take even more time to understand the actual situation of Vietnam."*

At the same time, it is repeatedly stated that if one criticises others, one has to improve oneself. *"They are only points that could be improved, but we too, on the Vietnamese side, we are responsible for the various successes; we need to have exchanges to improve that."* If one mentions a fault, one assumes at least part of it as being one's own doing. *"This is why we can say that it is partly our fault"; "We cannot say whose fault it is; we could make improvements."*

## *The Chadian vision of adjustment between interests*

In the vision of things evoked by our Chadian respondents, everyone is responsible for defending their interests. In this respect, we are close to the Anglo-Saxon world. But the processes on which one relies to allow lenders and borrowers to adjust are very different in both cases. In Chad, it is not a question of simple business relations, with what they involve in terms of affective distance, or even impersonality. One also does not find any mention of a duly organised market that acts as an interface between actors. Reference is made to much more personal relationships, to a kind of hand-to-hand where friendship competes with manipulation.

Everyone must personally protect their own interests, as one cannot rely too much on representatives or intermediaries, who are suspected of being tempted to act on their own behalf. *"People think that if they manage a project, they will have compensation, they will benefit from it."* To be involved in what is done, is decided, is an issue that is repeatedly mentioned. If one is not on the spot: *"You are not listened to. The company will ignore it."*

The management of things is seen as being inseparable from the close relationships between people. It is necessary to have direct relations with those with whom one is required to cooperate, relations without which one cannot clearly understand their expectations. *"We have established a deeper relationship, very close collaborative relations with AFD in terms of correspondence, meetings, physical relationships with AFD."* One constantly sees an opposition between the relationships between those who know each other, and find it relatively easy to adjust, and the difficult relationships with those who are more distant.

The adjustment between the interests of parties is seen as being the result of a patient confrontation of points of view, thanks to which everyone becomes aware of what is important for their partners and finally a compromise is reached. If there is *"not enough place for consultation"*, the decisions taken may prove to be *"completely inappropriate"*.

This process of mutual adjustment functions continuously, without the agreements made at a given time being able to be set in stone, as the elements of reality that need to be taken into account only appear gradually. *"It went very quickly. We did not have the time to think of everything. And at each time there are amendments, there must have been two or three amendments and it is still going on, it is still going on, it is not finished."* Conversely, wanting to give a final form to things is considered as preventing the complexity of reality from being taken into account. *"Over there, there are no amendments, it is such and such amount and it is finished. [...] It is the project which does not function in terms of the city's needs."*

In this type of process, what everyone says must be taken into account. *"We discuss our expectations, these are our expectations, this is what we want, and we stop... no one imposes anything..."* When the relationship between the person who gives advice and the person who receives it is mentioned, it is interpreted as a relationship between people who consult each other. *"Yes, advice, what is it? [...] We discuss our point of view, we put it on the table, we discuss it, yes that is it, so everyone speaks."* One cannot refer to a good that would be objective, to which some would have more access than others, in order to establish a dissymmetrical relationship between an advisor and an advisee. There are only *"points of view"* that must be adjusted.

The relationships that are established between usual partners lead them to say that they are *"friends"*: *"On a personal level, I managed to have very good relations, which are very friendly with all those people, including colleagues, the friends from Proparco, the friends from EIB."* However, the term should not be misunderstood. Being *"friends"* does not mean that in the process of adjustment between interests, one will not seek to get the most out of the situation. *"I obtained a lot of things from Proparco because from the others, I have DEG and EIB. [...] If one gives in and the other resists, with the threat that we can do without it, it aligns with the others. We have obtained things like that"*, stated (shamelessly, one is tempted to say, if we look at things from a French point of view) the respondent who spoke about his friendship with the representatives of these donors.

### *Doing business and living together*

When we compare the four visions that we have just referred to, we can see the extent to which one *"same"* situation can be managed in different ways depending on the location. Everywhere, whenever an operation involves several stakeholders, it is necessary to find a way to link up the points of view and interests. But to do so, there are many ways of going about it.

In some cases, as in the Anglo-Saxon world or in Chad, everyone is entitled to defend their interests without referring to a vision of good that is deemed to transcend the parties' points of view. It is a form of procedure that allows a mutual adjustment that serves as a benchmark. It is a procedural approach to the common good. In other cases, as in France or Vietnam, a certain notion of what is good in itself serves as a benchmark and there is a substantial vision of the common good. At the same time, within the thus defined families, there are a whole host of options: the market or a sort of consultation in the first family; the excellence that everyone is seeking in doing their jobs, or the right track, of which those holding power are the guardians in the second.

The explorative approach is the same when the field is different, since one observes simultaneously, in different contexts, different ways of giving form to one “same” situation. For our part, we experienced this in a wide range of research conducted all over the world.

What one thus observes is made all the more significant by the fact that there is no need to go to countries that are deemed to be exotic to see that, even in the life of companies, the same approach to carrying out common actions is not used everywhere. Consequently, in the research that served as the starting point for our approach, such differences, which concerned both hierarchical relations and cooperation between services, or the conception of professional duty, characterised the comparative functioning of factories belonging to the same company and located in France, the USA and the Netherlands.<sup>[15]</sup> Other research has shown the extent to which the same procedure could be implemented differently in the USA and in Quebec, or just how what was understood by “to decide” could have a different meaning in Sweden and in France.<sup>[16]</sup>

When one goes to countries marked by other cultures in a more immediately visible manner, such as Malaysia, Jordan or Mauritania,<sup>[17]</sup> the differences are certainly more spectacular. It is not sure that they are deeper. The existence of such differences is also, of course, not confined to the business world. It is to be found, for example, in the functioning of political assemblies.<sup>[18]</sup>

Overall, when considering, in one way or another, a limited field of investigation, one can observe very different solutions to what is, in a much more general way, one of the major problems of humanity: how to go about, despite everything, doing something together when everyone has their own interests. Each situation that one encounters thus shows, in each location, a solution to this problem. A question is thus raised: In each of the societies studied, is it an *ad hoc* solution? Would the latter be specific to the distinctive field of the social life we studied (the relations between a banker and his client, the organisation of work in a company or, at a completely different level, the construction of a political society)? Or, even more so, would it be confined to a specific field (the organisation of work within a given

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[15] Philippe d'Iribarne, *La Logique de l'honneur*, *op. cit.*

[16] Jean-Pierre Segal, « Le frère déplace le frère ; un épisode de la vie d'une usine québécoise » and Philippe d'Iribarne, « Comment s'accorder, une rencontre franco-suédoise », in *Cultures et Mondialisation*, *op. cit.*

[17] For Malaysia and Jordan: Philippe d'Iribarne, “The effect of culture on business ethics”, in Jean-François Chanlat, Eduardo Davel et Jean-Pierre Dupuis (2013), *Cross-Cultural Management, Culture and Management Across the World*, London, New York: Routledge; for Mauritania: Alain Henry, « Sensibiliser avec retenue : une démarche participative en Mauritanie », in *Cultures et Mondialisation*, *op. cit.*

[18] Marcel Detienne (Ed.), « Qui veut prendre la parole ? », *Le Genre humain*, n° 40-41, Seuil, 2003.

company or a service)? Could one therefore expect, by changing the field of investigation, to encounter radically different solutions? Or, on the contrary, in each specific case, are we dealing with the implementation of a much broader option that characterises a society as a whole? We shall see that when this is analysed, it is the second assumption that is right.

## Contrasting continuities

What does one observe when, advancing in the research and addressing again a society that one has already studied, one considers other actors and other areas of social life? Each situation has its specific characteristics; for example, hierarchical relations are an important component of the functioning of companies, whereas they are not present in the relations between a supplier and its clients. Yet we are far from starting from scratch. The more the research advances, the more, behind the diversity of situations, a general vision appears of the way in which the respondents interviewed wish to live and work together. The representation that we have of this is gradually enhanced, becomes clearer, and distinguishes more and more what is really common among what could stem from the singular properties of a particular field of investigation.

It is particularly significant to observe what thus makes a conception of social life unique since the society one is dealing with claims to have freed itself from the weight of the past (traditions, customs) and to have reached the universal. There would not appear to be anywhere in the world where this claim is as developed as in France and the USA. Consequently, we shall focus on their cases to illustrate, in some ways *a fortiori*, a general phenomenon.

### *A France where it is important to maintain one's position; from privileges to statuses* <sup>[19]</sup>

We have seen, in the particular case of the clients of a development bank, the extent to which reference was made to the specific place that everyone has in society, to the customs and practices associated with this position – what it is “normal” to do when one finds oneself in it –, and to the way in which this position is situated compared to positions that can be similar or far removed (development actor, Chinese trader, moneylender). When French people speak about their working lives, whether they be workers or managers, employed by a company, civil

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[19] Here, we shall mainly summarise analyses developed in: Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'Étrangeté française*, *op. cit.*

servants or have a self-employed activity, this reference to the specific position that one has in society, to what one “is”, is omnipresent, even if the words used differ somewhat depending on everyone’s activities. For example, one person, to justify the fact that he considers himself as being authorised to take a certain type of decision without consulting anyone, will state that it is part of his duties “as a technician”;<sup>[20]</sup> he considers that the fact of being a technician alone determines a large part of his responsibilities. Another will state that “for me, a supervisor must...”, thus considering himself as a part of a category, supervisors, in which the duties of each member are defined by the fact that he belongs to it.

This link between the position that one has in society and what one must do is created by the fact that it is important to meet the requirements that are inherent to this position. To use vocabulary for which only the appearance is archaic, one must “*tenir son rang*” (maintain one’s position). “*My mandate is a nobleness [...] and I want to be worthy of it, in the way in which I will decide*”, stated one French President.<sup>[21]</sup> This reference can be used to remind others of their duties. For example, Air France pilots were criticised by a trade union newspaper when they threatened to go on strike at a time when it would have been very detrimental to the country: “*The pilots were unable to resist the temptation. [...] As if the nobleness of a profession did not require of he who carries it out a social as much as a professional duty.*”<sup>[22]</sup> Carrying out a profession does not only mean performing certain tasks, it also means attaining a position in society, a position that comes with duties, not only with regard to one’s working environment (professional duty), but to the entire society (social duty).

This form of reference may also concern a company as a whole. If one takes a “Group Values” document of a large French company,<sup>[23]</sup> one finds statements such as: “*Our position and our ambition as a world leader [...] require us not only to be good professionals, but to be the best.*” The position that one has in society is a source of obligation. This is also especially true as it involves an eminent position (“world leader”). It is a question of being worthy of this place, which requires, for he who claims to be the leader, being the best.

The strength of the reference to the status that everyone has is to be found in labour legislation, which gradually developed in France. Here again, the reference to the specific position that everyone has in society, to the specific rights associated with this position, plays a central role.

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[20] *La Logique de l’honneur, op. cit.*, p. 27.

[21] François Mitterrand during a press conference on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1992.

[22] Editorial of *Syndicalisme Hebdo CFDT*, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1998, the date when the Football World Cup was being held in France.

[23] Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux.

For a whole host of issues – recruitment, dismissal, working hours, paid leave, salaries, retirement, training, etc. – a labour law, which has gradually been built, replaces the Civil Code. In all these fields, the relations between an employee and his employer are only very partially governed by an agreement between the parties (whether it concerns an individual agreement or a collective agreement). They are marked by the existence of rights that are inherent to the very condition of the employee, whether for employees in general or for a specific category of employee. The weight of these rights, to which the notion of public order is associated, is such that it is forbidden for the parties to deviate from them, even if they were in complete agreement to do so; any contractual clause by which an employee, or a group of employees, would fall back on the rights attached to their status is deemed null and void.

This development of labour law has led to countless hesitations and conflicts over the delineation of categories and the scope of the distinctions to be made between them. Sometimes, a very unitary vision of employees, united in the face of employers and demanding the same rights, triumphs, as was the case when the monthly payment method was applied to workers, which was conceived as a means of approximating their status to that of employees.<sup>[24]</sup> In other cases, on the contrary, a whole host of category-based demands triumph – a modern reincarnation of the quest for privileges in bygone times. For example, while the Ordinance of 1945 that established the Social Security system makes reference to all categories of “workers”, many “special regimes” remained. “*The organisation chart of the Social Security*”, notes Robert Castel, “*gives quite a good projection of the structure of the labour society, i.e. of a hierarchical society in which each professional group, guarding its prerogatives jealously, strives to have them recognised and to mark their distance in terms of the others.*”<sup>[25]</sup>

This same structure is to be found if one considers the way in which education functions in France, with the hierarchy that one finds between courses that are commonly referred to as more or less “noble”, the division between universities and the “*grandes écoles*” (elite higher education institutes), and the difficulties to give credentials to technical education.

This role played by the specific rights and duties attached to the position that one has in society, to one’s rank, is so important in France that, in continuously renewed forms, it has remarkably survived the many upheavals experienced in the history of France.

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[24] Jean-Daniel Reynaud, *Les Syndicats en France. Textes et documents*, Seuil, 1975, V. II, p. 291.

[25] Robert Castel, *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale*, Fayard, 1995, p. 376.

It already characterised the Ancien Régime period in France. For example, Tocqueville notes that while in England “*commoner against the noble, [...] entered the same professions*”,<sup>[26]</sup> this was not the case in France, where the “*modern nobles*” remained “*steadfastly attached*” to the “*prejudice that prohibited ‘gentlemen’ from trade and industry*”<sup>[27]</sup> And within the bourgeoisie, one found “*endless divisions*”, related to the fact that there are activities reputed to be more or less honourable.<sup>[28]</sup>

Further back in history, this type of vision already characterised mediaeval France. For example, the “*vassal*”, like the serf, was among the dependents of his master and was tied to him for life. However, the fact that he had quite a different position in society closely conditioned the type of services that he provided. He could only carry out “*obligations worthy of a perfectly free man*”, such as the exercise of an armed service or at least “*command positions*”, otherwise he would be demeaned. On the other hand, activities such as “*ploughing, digging, transporting wood or manure on the back of a donkey*” were “*incompatible with the grandeur of his status*”.<sup>[29]</sup>

One does, of course, sometimes seek to escape from such a conception. For example, in a general movement of abolishing privileges, the Revolution suppressed the corporations and established the freedom to be an entrepreneur and to enter into contract. However, in the light of experience, the economic dependence hidden behind the legal equality was criticised. Various ways were imagined to escape from this dependence, but were unevenly applied. In the end, most of the progress achieved in protecting employees from the severity of a strictly contractual relationship was ultimately by building, little by little, or rather rebuilding, a status for them. There was thus a return to the same conception of the Ancien Régime by which it is as a member of a social category that one has rights, rights which are the same for all the members of the same category, but distinguishes the latter from neighbouring categories. Still today, this conception of labour law is vigorously contested by proponents of an eradication of the specificities of the “*French social model*”, to the benefit of more strictly contractual relationships. However, it is difficult for this objection to be translated into action. This was seen, for example, in 2006 during the battle over the CPE (first job contract), when pressure from the street led to the application of a law duly voted by Parliament being abandoned.

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[26] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, L II, Ch. IX, p. 81.

[27] Alexis de Tocqueville, *État social et politique de la France* (1836), in *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, 2008, p. 41.

[28] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, *op. cit.*, L II, Ch. IX, p. 90.

[29] Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale* (1939), Albin Michel, 1968, p. 240, 457.



The same pattern is to be found whatever the area of social life used as a starting point and the period that one considers: there is, at a given time, a sort of repository of possible positions within society. These positions are not only characterised by the advantages that they give in terms of power and wealth (what one encounters in any society), and by the fact that specific rights and duties are associated with them (which is already less common). They are also characterised by the fact that a notion of nobility, of “status”, is attached to them and that the existence of the rights and duties that are inherent to them plays a central role in the functioning of society. By not fulfilling these duties, one is showing oneself to be unworthy of one’s position. This repository evolves with the passage of time, sometimes to a considerable extent, and, at a given time, there is far from being agreement among everyone on the situations that relate to these different elements. But we are dealing with a structure that continues to exist.<sup>[30]</sup>

### *The omnipresence of the contract in the USA*

The USA is certainly not the only place where contracts are entered into, but the reference to the contract is taken much more seriously than anywhere else, to the extent that it shapes relations which are organised in a much different manner in other places.

Working relationships there are widely conceived there like contractual relationships between a supplier and its client. It is well accepted that a subordinate works for his superior, that the latter is completely free to define, like a client towards its supplier, what he expects to receive; by setting his objectives, it is a question of defining the product that the subordinate undertakes to deliver, after a clearly specified period of time. That latter, for his part, has the choice of the means to be implemented, by himself or by turning to his own subordinates, to fulfil the order that he has thus been given. This way of seeing things is expressed in statements such as: “Just tell me what you want and I’ll try to get it for you”, or again: “Most people do not like to be told, the American people, how to do their job. [...] They like to feel that they have the responsibility and that they have to accomplish whatever they are responsible for”.

<sup>[31]</sup> This contractual conception is to be found in the relations between a “supplier” department and a “client” department, or again, in unionised companies, in the relationships between the company and the trade union.<sup>[32]</sup>

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[30] We have only mentioned here a small part of the data that allow us to believe this. This data continues to grow as the research advances. A much more complete set is presented in *L’Étrangeté française, op. cit.* More generally, the analyses presented in this publication are based on a much more extensive set of observation data than those that are mentioned in it, and we shall frequently refer to other publications in which these data are presented more extensively.

[31] Comments made during a survey conducted in a factory in the USA; *La Logique de l’honneur, op. cit.*, p. 137-138.

[32] Cf. *La Logique de l’honneur, op. cit.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> part.

This way of conceiving working relationships underlies management theories, which are themselves marked by a strong American inspiration, to such an extent that it could seem self-evident; not to be a manifestation of a particular culture, but something inherent, in a universal manner, to an effective functioning of organisations. In fact, on analysis, it is clear that the concerns for effectiveness are far from being the only thing in question.

The cultural dimension of this conception of working relationships is apparent in the fact that it can lead to resistance to the introduction of forms of organisation that Americans themselves recognise as being more effective than strictly contractual relationships. This was clear, for example, in the early 1990s, when Japanese success in the automotive industry led to the introduction of a Japanese-inspired way of organising production (lean production) being advocated for. An extensive study on the automotive industry in the world conducted by MIT posited that this organisation method could and should be implemented worldwide, independently of cultures.<sup>[33]</sup> However, the authors were forced to recognise that in the USA, there was a difference between the enthusiasm in principle for certain practices that they recommended and the *de facto* reluctance in terms of these practices.<sup>[34]</sup> This difference was particularly clear for the way in which relations between companies and their subcontractors are organised. The traditional organisation of these relations in the USA (the client defines specifications, without the candidate suppliers being involved, the candidate suppliers make an offer, without the client getting involved in their in-house functioning, then the client chooses and a contract is signed) offers everyone the guarantee of a contractual logic. On the contrary, the form of organisation recognised as being more effective means that one can no longer unambiguously define who is responsible for what; the subcontractors are thus kept informed well before their client's projects, and they themselves let their client closely examine their production process and know their cost prices. It is this difference compared to a contractual logic that is not well accepted.

More generally, when one moves from management theories to the observation of the daily life of an American company, it appears that in the USA, even the implementation of contractual relations in the functioning of companies is far from being self-evident, that it is not easy to have recourse to it to format a life of organisations, which is often resistant to it, and that such relations represent a sort of Procrustean bed to which one can only adjust the reality of things through sometimes serious damage. Indeed,

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[33] James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, Daniel Roos, *The Machine that Changed the World*, Rawson Associates, Collier Macmillan Canada and Maxwell Macmillan international, New York, Toronto, 1990.

[34] We specifically analysed this inconsistency in: Philippe d'Iribarne, « Contre l'anticulturalisme primaire », *Revue française de gestion*, n° 91, November-December 1992.

to implement them it is necessary to show, using a few figures, the results of everyone's contribution to the common task. Yet this is seldom possible, strictly speaking, and sometimes seriously caricatural. This observation was central to the questions related to the effectiveness of the widely practised management methods, which characterised the USA in the 1980s.<sup>[35]</sup>

This attachment to a contractual ideal is to be found in US labour law, and here again there is a major contrast with France. The law does not aim to create a status for workers, to set minimum wages, a duration for paid leave, etc. It leaves the interested parties, employers and employees, directly reach agreement in all these areas. The public authorities avoid dictating the clauses of the contracts that bind them. They would not be legitimate in this role. Consequently, their intervention does not call into question the free negotiation of the very *content* of the contracts. But the law does seek to ensure that the conditions of the negotiation are such that the result is *fair*. Employers and employees must negotiate on equal terms. Here we find the American attachment to the idea of the level playing field, which is conceived in such a way that neither of those who find themselves face to face has the upper hand. The law has sought to create the conditions for a balance of power by increasing the negotiating power of employees.<sup>[36]</sup> It involved defining and prohibiting the employer's actions, qualifying them as unfair labour practices, which aimed to weaken employees.<sup>[37]</sup>

As in France, the form of organisation of life in society that characterises the world of work does not only concern the latter.

For example, the specificities of the US education system are in line with the fact that the US society brings together individuals who are united by contractual relations, devised on the model of relationships between a client and its supplier. In the USA, education essentially plays the role given to it by the theories of human capital: improve the position that one has as a supplier on the labour market.<sup>[38]</sup> It is worth

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[35] Cf., in particular, the two best-sellers: W.G. Ouchi, *Theory Z. How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge*, Avon, 1981, and T.J. Peters and R. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence*, Harper & Row, 1982.

[36] These points are developed in *L'Étrangeté française*, *op. cit.*, chap. IV.

[37] Cf. the chapter "Unfair labor practices in perspective", in F.W. McCulloch and T. Borstein, *The National Labor Relations Board*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1974. The legal definition of "unfair labour practices" is set out in the United States Code, Title 29, "Labor". Successive amendments have sought to come increasingly closer to the ideal of balanced contractual relations by forbidding additional unfair labour practices on the part of both employers and employees.

[38] The theories of human capital consider education as an investment that increases the market value of the person who benefits from it. This value is estimated on the basis of the income that he is likely to get from his work. On the relationship between the US model and these theories, cf. C.F. Buechtemann: « L'enseignement professionnel et la formation technique en tant qu'investissement et mobilisation des ressources humaines et financières », in the review *Formation Emploi*, n° 64, October-December 1998, p. 59-76.

undertaking if it is profitable. Unlike the French vision, it does not define for life what one “is”, what is the “status” that one has. It is seen as an investment and it is not at all shocking that there are fees charged for it, as long as the quality of the service provided justifies the asking price.<sup>[39]</sup> The fact that education streams are characterised by their ability to increase the market value of those who follow them is part of the normal functioning of a market. The public authorities must not obstruct this. However, it is up to them to ensure that access to the goods offered by the market are not biased by factors that would make the competition unfair between those who wish to have access to certain goods that are particularly coveted. The fight against any discrimination that is likely to affect the recruitment of students and that of teachers falls within this perspective.

Contractual logic goes as far as to play a major role in a field where it would hardly be expected elsewhere than in the USA: the functioning of criminal justice.<sup>[40]</sup> “Plea bargaining” is implemented in over nine tenths of criminal trials. It involves a “*process whereby the accused and the prosecutor [...] work out a mutually satisfactory disposition. [...] It usually involves the defendant’s pleading guilty to a lesser offense or to only one or some of the counts of a multi-count indictment in return for a lighter sentence than that possible for the graver charge*”.<sup>[41]</sup> One can clearly see the different elements of a contractual relationship: a negotiation whereby one seeks to define what each party will renounce in exchange for what they obtain: a duly signed and sealed agreement that determines the terms of the exchange.

Furthermore, such a conception of life in society is not, once again like in France, a creation *ex nihilo* of the present.

For example, Tocqueville was surprised to see the way in which the situation of servant could be experienced in the USA: “*Why then has the former [the master] a right to command, and what compels the latter to obey? – the free and temporary consent of both their wills. [...] The master holds the contract of service to be the only source of his power, and the servant regards it as the only cause of his obedience.*”<sup>[42]</sup> This contractual reference in some way determines the fundamental structure of the relationship, the subordination, and what it involves in terms of inequality of

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[39] Michèle Lamont, *Money, Moral, Manners. The Culture of the French and the American Upper-middle Class*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[40] Antoine Garapon and Ioannis Papadopoulos, *Juger en Amérique et en France*, Odile Jacob, 2003.

[41] Bryan A. Gardner (Ed.), *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., St. Paul (Minnesota), West Group, 1999.

[42] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, V. II, 3<sup>rd</sup> part, chap. V, Vintage Books Edition, 1990. The surprise expressed by Tocqueville in this field does, of course, clearly reveal a vision shaped by French references.

position becomes a secondary concern, like a sort of accident that does not change its essence. *“Neither of them is by nature inferior to the other; they only become so for a time by covenant.”*

This continuity in the fact that the contract freely entered into between equals is regarded as the ideal form of relationship, even in situations where its implementation is far from being self-evident, has its roots in a distant past. For example, we see a trace of it in mediaeval England. Unlike what one observes in France, any lifelong commitment can only be servile there. A free man can leave his master at will, as long as he returns to him the goods with which the latter has entrusted him as a remuneration for his services and, having fulfilled his obligations in terms of the past, he does not owe him anything. We are already in a sort of contractual relationship. While one finds major social differences among free men, they do not affect the common barrier that separates them from those who are dependent on the arbitrary power of their master.<sup>[43]</sup>

## A “spirit” whose nature needs to be identified

As the research advances, it appears that links equivalent to those we have just described about France and the USA can be made in a number of societies.<sup>[44]</sup> One sees, for each of them, a sort of ideal vision of the organisation of society become more and more visible. While it is continuously reinterpreted, it constitutes a lasting reference. This ideal vision appears to the observer in a certain way of shaping ordinary situations in social life. Major, more or less successful, efforts are made to configure the daily reality in order to make it look like such a vision. The latter is present in the background of the remarks made by those who mention their experience, whether what they experience fits in with this image or deviates from it, to either express their satisfaction with it or complain about it. This does not mean that they are fully aware of this and able to explain it. It remains something that is implicitly self-evident. It is up to the researcher to identify the outline. As the investigations continue, as new fields are explored, as one compares what one has observed in various areas of social life, as one links daily behaviour with institutional constructions, and as one looks at political ideas, these differentiated visions of a right way of living together gradually take shape for him. What characterises them becomes more clear and the understanding of them more reliable.

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[43] Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale*, *op. cit.*, p. 262, 459.

[44] One can mention, for example, research that leads to establishing this type of link in Morocco; Philippe d'Iribarne, *“Total Quality and Islam in Casablanca” in Successful Companies in the Developing World*, *op. cit.*.

Two questions are thus raised: What is the nature of what thus remains within worlds that are in many respects highly changing? Furthermore, what processes can provide the connection between what remains and what changes?

The idea by which a society can be characterised by something that remains when the world changes has, of course, often been expressed. One finds it, for example, with Lévi-Strauss when he evokes “*something is preserved which may be gradually isolated through observation – by means of a kind of straining process which allows the ‘lexographical’ content of institutions and customs to filter through – in order to retain only the structural elements.*”<sup>[45]</sup> It is undoubtedly to evoke this type of reality that Montesquieu speaks of “*the general spirit [...] of a nation*”<sup>[46]</sup> and Weber of the “*national character [...] of the peoples*”.<sup>[47]</sup> These terms “spirit” and “character” clearly seem to refer to an element that remains within a changing reality rather than to invariant social forms. But they only suggest what it is about rather than clearly defining it.

Nowadays, it is common practice to explain the existence of lasting differences between societies by evoking the inertia of institutional constructions. It is then a question of the action of those whose destiny is related to the sustainability of the institutions in place, of their resistance to the questioning of the latter. The difficulty of separately changing an institution that is part of a coherent group is also highlighted. In this respect, reference is made to “path-dependency”.<sup>[48]</sup> One clearly sees how this type of mechanism can explain the existence of a certain continuity of institutions and practices in societies characterised by a strong social continuity. But this is not the case when one is dealing with a “spirit” that is embodied, over the centuries, in a group of institutions and practices which, apart from such a “spirit”, appear to have nothing in common. Consequently, what needs to be accounted for requires other types of explanation.

Let us consider France. There is no institutional continuity between the role of privileges in the Ancien Régime, on one side, and the role of statuses in contemporary labour law, or the existence of streams in higher education that are deemed to be unequally noble, on the other side. The social forces through which these post-revolutionary institutions and practices came about are quite different from those

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[45] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, 1963, p. 22.

[46] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), 1<sup>st</sup> part, book XIX, “Of Laws in Relation to the Principles Which Form the General Spirit, Morals, and Customs of a Nation”.

[47] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Routledge, 1992, p. 105.

[48] This type of approach can be found, for example, in Douglas North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

supported by the Ancien Régime society. They do not defend the same interests. The cultural continuity that one observes cannot therefore be the result of a social continuity. The break between the old and the new is all the more clear because the Revolution sought to build a society where labour relations would, in the words of Le Chapelier, be regulated by “*free conventions between individual and individual*”.<sup>[49]</sup> The revolutionaries believed that the establishment of contractual relationships would put an end to the ancient relationship of dependence between the master and journeymen.<sup>[50]</sup> It was only after this major break had been accomplished that new forces, without resuscitating the institutions of the past, while innovating, recovered in some way the spirit of ancient forms.<sup>[51]</sup> Everything happened as if there had been some kind of mysterious reminder.

For our part, our observations for a long time left us puzzled. Reading Marc Bloch was an intellectual shock. The contrasting figures of the free man that he describes in mediaeval England, Germany and France surprisingly evoke the type of autonomy that serves as a reference today in companies that belong to corresponding cultural areas. It is, of course, not a question of evoking any social or institutional continuity to account for this relationship. In fact, such a comparison did not fail to arouse a certain amount of scepticism (or even some sarcasm), due to the extent to which the social discontinuities between the periods under consideration are obvious. Yet it seemed difficult to believe that this was a mere coincidence. The analysis (which we shall come back to)<sup>[52]</sup> of the contrasting conceptions of freedom that characterised, at the time of the Enlightenment, the thinking of Anglo-Saxon, German and French philosophers was a major milestone in reflection; it revealed an essential link in the chain linking the present to the past within the societies in question.<sup>[53]</sup> However, it was necessary to go further in order to propose a conceptual framework that would more broadly account for what we were observing.

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[49] Philippe Joseph Benjamin Buchez and Pierre-Célestin Roux, *Parliamentary History of the French Revolution*, 40 volumes, Paris, 1834-1838, vol. 10, p. 195.

[50] “*There is nothing here*”, states Cabanis, “*than reciprocal exchanges, nothing that troubles the natural relationships between men, nothing that leaves one at the mercy of the other*”, J. G. Cabanis, *Observations sur les hôpitaux*, Imprimerie Nationale, 1790, p. 38.

[51] William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

[52] In Chapter 3.

[53] Philippe d'Iribarne, « Trois figures de la liberté », *Annales*, 58 (5), September-October 2003.





# Chapitre 2

From a scene of peril and salvation  
to myths of justification



## 2

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# From a scene of peril and salvation to myths of justification

With experience, it appears that one can account for the differences that one observes between the ways of living together that are specific to the various societies by referring to two types of elements for each of them:<sup>[54]</sup>

- Firstly, specific experiences, peril on the one hand, and protection from this peril (salvation), on the other hand, which play a key role in the imaginary within which social life has meaning;
- Secondly, meaningful chains through which each situation in ordinary life is associated, by widely calling on mythical constructions, either the peril or the salvation, which structure this imagination.

While in a given society, the imaginary of peril and salvation that prevails provides a meaningful framework that is both common and remarkably stable from a historical perspective, the meaningful chains that determine the understanding of each situation are both plural and changing. It is by combining these two types of elements that one can understand how, within a society, what changes is combined with what remains and what differs from what is shared.

### A (reference) scene of peril and salvation

Everywhere, human beings are prey to countless fears and deploy a thousand means to lay them to rest. However, when one looks at how they interact with one another, at social life, and at political life, it becomes apparent that in each society, the

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[54] We shall not retrace here the long process, marked by much trial and error, which led to this representation (cf. Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'envers du moderne*, Cnrs Editions, 2012). It is because it makes it possible to account for a complex set of data built up over the years that convinced us that we had finally found what we had been looking for for a long time. By presenting it, we shall not seek to provide an *a priori* justification for it, but rather to highlight how it accords well with what one can observe, as well as its capacity to provide a coherent interpretation.

opposition between two experiences plays a central role. On the one hand, a specific peril is perceived as a serious threat to everyone: a form of being reduced to a miserable condition, or of being abandoned within a radical chaos, leading to a disastrous state. On the other hand, ways of salvation are seen as being able to ward off this peril. The opposition between this peril and the ways of salvation that make it possible to escape from it may be represented by referring to a sort of scene, like diptychs where heaven is in contrast with hell. To evoke this opposition, we shall speak about a scene of peril and salvation or, in short, of a reference scene. This structure is to be found everywhere, but, when one moves from one society to another, different perils are feared above all, and different ways of salvation are devised to ward them off. This type of scene, where destiny wavers between peril and salvation, is present in the background of the entire social life. The best way to have a clear understanding of what it involves is to highlight what this means in a few societies taken as examples. In this respect, we shall evoke the USA and France, and subsequently, more briefly, India Bali, Cameroon and Mexico.

### *Protecting against the will of others in the USA*

American society accords a central and lasting place to the opposition between two experiences: on the one hand, the most feared experience of being at the mercy of the actions of others; on the other hand, to be, on the contrary, master of one's own destiny.

One finds a particularly striking depiction of this opposition in the Federalist. It was written at the time when the USA was adopting a constitution and remains the main point of reference in American political thinking.<sup>[55]</sup> Let us look at the short central text that concerns the structure of the Union's institutions (n° 51). The sentiment of a peril, which is evoked by the terms "*insecure*", "*insecurity*", "*danger*", and "*attack*", is omnipresent. Faced with this peril, the will to protect oneself is affirmed continuously. It is a question of protecting oneself ("*defence*, *self-defence*, *precautions*, *guarded against*, *resist*, *counteract*, *protect*"), by implementing appropriate means ("*armed*, *sentinel*"). It involves reaching a position whereby one is safe ("*preservation*, *safe*, *security*, *secure*"). What is thus feared? The term "*encroachment*", which is repeated several times ("*encroachments of the others*", "*dangerous encroachments*"), by affirming the will to "*resist*" it, clearly shows what it involves. According to the dictionary (Webster's), "*to encroach*" means "*to trespass or intrude (on or upon the rights, property, etc., of another)*". It is against this encroachment, with which ideas

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[55] Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers or The New Constitution* (1787, 1788), Everyman, 1992.

of dependence, oppression and submission are associated (“*dependence, oppress, submit*”), that one needs to protect oneself. The establishment of a check and balance system is seen as the main means of defence; “*the constant aim is to divide and arrange the several offices in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other – that the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights.*”

This vision of peril and salvation is already to be found in England. It is, for example, central with Locke, who states “*Man [...] hath by Nature a Power [...] to preserve his Property – that is, his Life, Liberty, and Estate, against the Injuries and Attempts of other Men*” (§ 87).<sup>[56]</sup> It is because, in the state of nature, men see their property under threat that they create a society “*for the mutual Preservation of their Lives, Liberties and Estates*” (§ 123). One is in a world where everyone is threatened, in all aspects of their existence, by the actions of others and where it is essential to “*preserve*” what is important to them. It is the experience that involves not controlling one’s destiny, being subject to the will of others, that is on the side of the peril feared above all. Locke evokes the risk that he whose power is not limited will commit the gravest acts. The threat is seen as having no limits, even in the case of what a father may subject his children to. If no external force sets a limit to his power, how can one be sure that he will not “*take or alienate their Estates, sell, castrate, or use their Persons as he pleases*” (I, § 9)? And it is the fact of having protected oneself against the vicissitudes of any foreign will that can ward off this peril.

These experiences of danger and protection are depicted in major, more or less mythified events: the very foundation of a nation on a new land, protected from the arbitrary powers that governed the old Europe, the independence won from the British Crown; previously, in Britain’s past, the Magna Carta and gaining the *habeas corpus*, which were essential stages in protecting everyone against the potential excesses of the sovereign. We find them magnified in the mythical character of the cowboy, who allows no one to govern his existence, to the extent that to defend himself, he prefers to rely on his arm rather than on the protection of a tutelary power. The importance given to them is at the root of the attachment that is so widespread in the USA, despite everything, to everyone’s right to own a firearm.

The central character of such experiences can clearly be seen via the permanent reference made to them concerning the most diverse aspects of the functioning of society. Let us take, by way of example, the industrial policies as presented by an

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[56] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Peter Laslett (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1960.

American sociologist: *“The concentration of power in either the state or monopolistic firms came to be seen as the greatest threat to collective efficiency and progress”*. There is a need to protect oneself in the face of such a threat. *“In 1887, Congress established the United States’ first federal regulatory agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), and charged it with protecting the economic liberties of railway customers and railwaymen by enforcing market competition and eliminating price-fixing and rate discrimination”*.<sup>[57]</sup>

The importance of the notion of interest in American society can be understood from the perspective that is thus opened. By defending one’s interests, one protects oneself against the harm that may be done to you by forces that are external to you. This perspective even characterises the aspects of existence that one otherwise tends to think of from very different perspectives. This is striking for ethics. The Federalist (§ 6) states that a *“benevolent and philosophic spirit”* is on the side of the *“true interest”* in opposition to the *“momentary passions, and immediate interest”*. A sentence in the Epistle to the Romans translated in French as *“vous n’êtes pas sous l’emprise de la chair, mais sous l’emprise de l’esprit”* (“you are not dominated by the unspiritual, but by the spiritual”), with similar translations in German, Italian and Spanish, could be translated into English by using the register of interests: *“your interests are not in the unspiritual, they are in the spiritual”*.<sup>[58]</sup> The reason is, to come back to the Federalist, everything that is in opposition to an ethical conduct, the *“momentary passions, and immediate interest”*, is seen as a sort of external force likely to exert an *“active and imperious control over human conduct”*. Refusing to be controlled by such a force is perceived as being part of the same approach as not being controlled by a flesh-and-blood person. In these conditions, we can see that the same notion, to defend one’s interest, can be used to evoke a rejection in both cases.

This specific universe of a culture is more clearly understood when it is compared to what one observes elsewhere. For example, the one to be found in France is extremely different.

### *French society and the fear of a servile position*

When, in 1789, Sieyès passionately expressed the frustrations, anger and thirst for revenge of the *Tiers État* (Third Estate), he brought out particularly clearly the reference scene that characterises France, with the importance it gives to the opposition

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[57] Frank Dobbin, *Forging Industrial Policy. The United States, Britain and France in the Railway Age*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 28.

[58] Epistle to the Romans 8, 9. Versions used at Notre-Dame de Paris, 24.3.1996.

between a servile complacency based on fear or interest and the proud refusal to be subjugated to someone stronger than oneself.

The Third Estate, declares Sieyès is “nothing” and it “wants to be something” (p. 45, 53).<sup>[59]</sup> What does to be nothing thus mean? It relates to a “state of humiliation” combined with what is “debasement” (p. 43, 102). Such a state is related to a situation to which one is subjected, to “contempt”, to a “dishonourable” exclusion from positions and places that are “somewhat distinguished” (p. 45, 97). And, at the same time, perhaps more fundamentally, it concerns a way of leading one’s life.

“This miserable part of the nation”, laments Sieyès, “has come to form a great antechamber, constantly preoccupied by what its masters say or do, it is always willing to sacrifice everything for the fruits that it promises itself from the joy of pleasing” (p. 56). The misfortune of he who, out of interest (“to procure the fruits”), consents to occupy a servile position (the valet, placed in “the antechamber” of his “masters”, willing to “sacrifice everything” to “please” them) is thus depicted. The reference to the debasement of he who accepts to serve because it is in his interest and to the indignity that this debasement carries is found throughout the work; “to attach oneself by all kinds of baseness to a mighty person”; to buy “at the expense [...] of human dignity the right to be able to [...] avail oneself of someone” (p. 45); “prostitute oneself [...] for a miserable bodily interest” (p. 88).

Besides interest, it is fear that demeans. A nation that allows itself to be “frightened” can be described as “vile” (p. 79). Sieyès also stigmatises “the calculation of cowardice” (p. 152): “While, at the time when it [the Third Estate] can do something, it was voluntarily devoting itself to abjectness and to opprobrium, with what terms should it be denounced? We complained about the weak, we should scorn the coward.” The “lowest degree of baseness” would thus be reached.

Recovering one’s dignity means ceasing to succumb to interest and fear. Those in the Third Estate are “as sensitive to their honour” as the privileged. Consequently, they will act as he who “arms himself to defend his life” (p. 100). He will know how to “no longer hope anything but from his enlightenment and from his courage” (p. 150). He “will become noble again by in turn being a conqueror” (p. 44). Therefore, if he “is able to know himself and respect himself, the others will respect him too” (p. 78).

Such references are not specific to Sieyès. For example, Tocqueville, heir to a noble lineage, does not share the bitterness of the commoner who feels he is being treated with contempt. What concerns him is, in a sense, the opposite of what revolts

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[59] Emmanuel Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ?* (1789), Flammarion, coll. « Champs », 1988. The page numbers refer to this edition.

Sieyès: not the ills of a society of orders and privileges but, on the contrary, those of a society where, as equality has triumphed, the difference of conditions will have disappeared. However, what he fears the advent of, like what he is attached to, takes on meaning in the same reference scene that Sieyès denounces: on the one hand, the “*lowly complacencies*” attributed to the slave and, on the other hand, the “*male and proud virtues*” that are specific to the citizen.<sup>[60]</sup> This opposition is central to his thinking when he expresses concern over the potential abuses in American democracy.

Tocqueville opposes the “*idea-mongers*” to the “*great authors*”.<sup>[61]</sup> The public, acting like a king towards his courtiers, “*enriches*” the former, “*venal souls*” who desire nothing great. But at the same time, it “*scorns*” them. One finds the baseness, stigmatised by Sieyès, of a servile choice that accepts the scorn if the satisfaction of small interests comes at this price. In contrast, one finds with the “*great writer*” “*huge efforts*” which, while they “*may bring a lot of glory, will never provide a lot of money*”. Gaining the respect of others without ever stooping to make any concessions to seek to attract their favours is in opposition to flattering it, like the courtiers who flatter their sovereign in order to gain some benefit from it (courtiers about whom one has spoken of “*domestication of the nobility*”). Similarly, Tocqueville is aggrieved when he observes “*a selfish, mercantile and trading taste for the discoveries of the mind*”.<sup>[62]</sup> He opposes to this an “*ardent love – it is this proud disinterested love of what is true*”.<sup>[63]</sup> And as with Sieyès, by passing this time from a social register to a moral register, he associates the quest for small benefits with cowardice. Tocqueville fears that men “*allow themselves [...] to be possessed by the cowardly love of present pleasures*”.<sup>[64]</sup> This love is a sort of master, willing to submit he who is too cowardly to face it.

What reference scene common to our two authors is to be found behind their words. The choice of he who is faced with a superior force. On the one hand, to submit and serve one’s victor, to protect one’s existence while benefitting from the small advantages that one can reap by serving a master; on the other hand, to fight to the limit of one’s strength, even if it means paying with one’s own life. Two paths are in opposition, which each lead to a founding experience: on the one hand, to give in through fear or interest in front of someone stronger than oneself; on

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[60] Alexis de Tocqueville, *État social et politique de la France* (1836), *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[61] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, V. II (1840), Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863, p. 73.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 324.



the other hand, to the contrary, proudly resist fear and petty interests. It is a vision of things whereby courage in combat is opposed to cowardice (more than victory to defeat). The heroic death of he who fights until the end, associated with glory and carrying a memory that transcends time, passes on the side of fullness of being. And, associated with darkness, the life that continues with the shame of becoming a slave passes on the side of annihilation. By extension, the glorious refusal to be bought, to give in to corrupting forces, is in opposition to the cowardly complacency towards those who can be useful to you. Similarly, the fact of being rejected for being faithful to one's ideas is on the side of greatness, therefore of the fullness of being, whereas an effective integration, if it presupposes a form of complacency towards common opinions (bleating with the herd) is on the side of baseness, therefore of annihilation.

This opposition is repeatedly depicted in the way in which French society recounts its history, *via* exemplary characters who refused to submit, for many at the cost of their lives, more or less mythified historical characters (Vercingétorix, Roland, Jeanne d'Arc, Jean Moulin), or literary creations (Cyrano de Bergerac), with, as a counterpoint, some despicable figures who preferred to serve their victor (Ganelon, Laval), or *via* magnified events (Verdun, the call of the 18<sup>th</sup> June, the Resistance) in opposition to abhorred events (the collaboration). Such an imaginary universe evolves throughout the course of history; more recent figures take over from the older ones (for example, the appearance of figures of the Resistance and collaboration); old and almost entirely forgotten figures are once again remembered (for example, the creation of a sort of myth of Vercingétorix in 19<sup>th</sup> century France). However, through these new figures, the same structure is used indefinitely, a sort of template by which historical characters are redrawn in the imagination. And, of course, some would tend to treat a given character who embodies this structure with some distance, but it will then be to revere even more those who give them a different face (for example, Jeanne d'Arc on the one side, and Jean Moulin on the other).

In common language, an entire vocabulary is associated with these opposite experiences; on the one hand, "bow down", "be beholden"; on the other, "face up to things", "stay the course".

### *The diversity of founding fears: India, Bali, Cameroon and Mexico*

The inventory of the founding fears specific to the different cultures constitutes a major task, which essentially still needs to be conducted. In societies, such as the USA or France, which aim to be at the forefront in the advent of modernity, these fears are supposed to have disappeared, with the obscurantism and prejudices of

the past. The Enlightenment is deemed to have swept them away in order to give access to a purely rational relationship with the world. Thus, to identify them, it is necessary to go beyond the official vision that each society gives of itself. On the contrary, in societies where the weight of “traditional” conceptions remains more visible (which does not necessarily mean that it is greater), the fears that one seeks to ward off can be seen more tangibly. Sometimes, the literature has clearly highlighted their role. A brief overview of some of them can already give an idea of their diversity.

It is in a very explicit manner that the Indian world shows the central place held in the entire social life by the fear of what is soiled. *“The tragedy of Indian culture”*, notes Luc de Heusch, *“is [...] that it is based on the metaphorical extension of nausea. [...] Consequently, India offers us the strange and dramatic spectacle of a universe where the metaphorical delirium of soiling reigns supreme over thinking, invests all the prohibitions, all the classifications [...]. Everyone risks being drawn into the abominable and falling.”*<sup>[65]</sup>

If one is to believe Clifford Geertz,<sup>[66]</sup> the Balinese society is characterised by the fear of emotional outburst carried by what everyone feels as an individual person, beyond the roles that they are expected to play. What is specifically feared is that this outburst disrupts the rituals that carefully codify the entire existence and thus jeopardize the well-functioning character of social relations: *“What is feared – mildly in most cases, intensely in a few – is that the public performance that is etiquette will be botched, that the social distance etiquette maintains will consequently collapse, and that the personality of the individual will then break through to dissolve his standardized public identity.”*<sup>[67]</sup> This fear is warded off by eliminating, as much as possible, all that relates to the keen expression of emotions. Every effort is made to ensure that, when required, their manifestation in some way remains unfulfilled. The absence of climax, notes Geertz, characterises Balinese society. The only exception is to be found within a well-defined area of existence, cockfighting. In the background, and the history of Bali shows that this is not without meaning, there is the fear that an unbridled emotional outburst will lead to chaos, and to unlimited violence.

In the latter case, the central fear does not concern the fate of each individual within a society whose persistence is perceived as being self-evident, but the fate of the society itself. It is the problematic nature of the social order that opens the door to the threat that is perceived as being major. This central character of the

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[65] Luc de Heusch, preface to Mary Douglas, *De la souillure*, François Maspero, 1981, p. 18-19, translated from the English version, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge, 2002.

[66] Clifford Geertz, “Person, Time and Conduct in Bali”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, New York.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

fear of chaos is to be found in a number of societies, especially, it would appear, among Eastern societies, and first and foremost in China.

For our part, we have clearly perceived this great diversity of founding fears in our fieldwork.

In Cameroon, the fear of what is being plotted against oneself, behind closed doors, by those who appear to have good intentions towards you, including relatives and friends, was seen to be omnipresent. For example, within a company belonging to the most modern part of the economy, it was repeatedly a question of “*hidden interests*” and what results from them: what some do to “*trap*” others, to leave them get “*bogged down*”, the “*false breakdowns*” done “*to test them*”, the “*small acts of sabotage*”, or again “*the resistance secretly orchestrated by those who have an interest in it*”.<sup>[68]</sup> The fear of retaliatory measures that take the most diverse channels, engineered by those who have been criticised or sanctioned, was repeatedly expressed. Reference was made not only to all sorts of manoeuvres likely to occur in the visible spectrum, but also to what is being plotted, through witchcraft, in the invisible field. Such fears, which do not spare the most fervent supporters of Western rationality, are not specific to the field of companies. For example, they make it difficult, nationwide, to develop a life insurance system leading to a sum being paid to a beneficiary designated by a person when he dies: this beneficiary would be immediately suspected of having caused the death.<sup>[69]</sup> More generally, the fear of witchcraft occupies a prominent place in modern Cameroon.<sup>[70]</sup>

In Mexico, we encountered a very different form of fear.<sup>[71]</sup> What our respondents feared above all was a world where, deprived of the support of others, they risked being left to their own powerlessness. In the world thus feared, one cannot expect much help from one’s work colleagues, even to provide the most basic support; the manager, for his part, is inaccessible “*untouchable*”, he stands “*apart*”. There is a great desire to “*grow*”, but it is constantly frustrated. This peril, so often encountered in daily life, can be warded off if one finds oneself in a group where others come to your assistance. The terms “*assistance*” and “*support*” (*ayuda, apoyo*) repeatedly come to people’s lips when a world where one feels good is evoked: the assistance that everyone receives and gives, in their relations with their managers, their companies, their work colleagues, the community to which they belong. By helping each other,

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[68] Alain Henry, “Revolution by Procedures in Cameroon”, in *Successful Companies in the Developing World*, op. cit.

[69] Eric Le Goff, « Acceptation ou rejet de l’assurance-vie », DEA post-graduate thesis, Paris-X Nanterre, 1995.

[70] Éric de Rosny, *La Nuit, les yeux ouverts*, Seuil, 1996.

[71] Philippe d’Iribarne, “Growing Together in Mexico”, in *Successful Companies in the Developing World*, op. cit.

one will be strong, although everyone, on their own, can do very little: “Everything must be done like small ants. Everything must be done by carrying small identical loads (*parejitos*), small loads to build a great, well-cemented fortress.” It is thus a question of “everyone growing”. Here again, what one encounters when observing a specific field is not unique to it. For example, the famous *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, by Octavio Paz, depicts a huge gap within Mexican society between a keen desire for grandeur and the feeling of being powerless to achieve it.<sup>[72]</sup>

## A problematic connection between daily life and reference scenes; myths of justification

The members of a society have little awareness of what is specific about the reference scene that gives them common benchmarks. The corresponding meaningful framework is part of what their thinking is based on, the categories within which they judge the social reality, not to what is judged (for example, Sieyès and Tocqueville on one side, Locke and the Federalist on the other, base themselves on a particular vision of what is feared and of what is desired in order to judge their society, but none of them discuss this vision). This framework does not need to be justified. It is not subject to debate and is not likely to be manipulated by the actors. The logic that characterises it runs through history and its upheavals without being called into question.

It is quite a different case for the way in which the many aspects of existence are shaped within each society. The meaning given to a situation due to the fact that it evokes the experience that is central to fears or, on the contrary, what makes it possible to escape from them, is often uncertain. It is the subject of conflicts and develops throughout history, although, at certain periods of history, a more or less temporary consensus can emerge within a society on the meaning taken on by certain ways of being, acting, or enduring. This process is the subject of ideological confrontations between actors seeking to influence the meaning taken on by the events and situations. These confrontations accompany the battles over the organisation of society. Those who are concerned live their action and give meaning to it through the perspective opened by the reference scene within which their action takes place. They seek to gain a position perceived as being favourable when one sees things from such a perspective.

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[72] Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la soledad*, Mexico City, Fondo de cultura económica, 1981.

On the one hand, the connection that is thus made between everyday situations and the reference scene specific to a culture relates to the action of individuals each operating on their own account. However, within one same society, one also finds, at a given time in history, a formatting that is widely shared.

Depending on the case, this formatting requires more or less distorting the reality. At one extreme, there is little need to make such a distortion, as what one is seeking to highlight constitutes an exemplary manifestation of the form of salvation that is specific to the culture in question. For example, in France, there are situations where one effectively encounters an heroic refusal to comply, whatever the cost for one's career or even for one's life; one does not need to distort the reality to glorify the action of those who are the heroes of such episodes. At most, the events in question can be subject to an elaboration allowing to move from history to epic, by removing from it all traces that may remain, despite everything, of human weakness. It involves transforming those who, such as Jeanne d'Arc or Jean Moulin, have acted in an exemplary manner, into legendary heroes. But there is no need to radically reconstruct reality. At the opposite extreme, there are cases of complete denial. It involves completely disguising the facts so that they appear, in fact, as being part of what is contrary to them. This is thus how, for example, the flatterer proceeds by affirming to Mr. Jourdain that his merchant father was not selling cloth, but was giving it to his friends for money.<sup>[73]</sup> He disguises an activity that is considered to be menial and makes it appear as something free and, therefore, honourable. At the theatre, the spectator is not a fool, but this is not always the case in real life.

In both cases, one can speak of a mythical vision, but with meanings that should not be confused: magnifying what is really experienced or disguising a reality that one does not want to see.<sup>[74]</sup> In practice, one is often in an intermediate state, where one amplifies what is worth highlighting, while hiding what one is not keen to think about, without being completely fooled, but at the same time being so a little.

The life of organisations provides a good illustration of the processes that are thus at work. In all societies, it leads to typical situations, such as to receive an order from a superior, have one's action assessed, rewarded or sanctioned, respond to an order made by a client. Experience shows that, in the perspective opened by the various reference scenes that are specific to the societies in question, some of these situations

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[73] Molière, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Act IV, Scene III.

[74] Here, we are close to the vision of Lévi-Strauss, for whom "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)", Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, op. cit., p. 229.

are likely to be subject to extremely unfavourable interpretations. For example, in places where, like in the USA or France, a certain form of dependence constitutes the peril feared above all, the condition of the paid employee raises questions. Paid employment in these countries was for a long time denounced as being a form of slavery and it took a long time for a combination of representations and practices to emerge allowing, to varying degrees, these difficulties to be overcome, on the one side in reality, and on the other in spirit. To arrive at such a result, a positive meaning had to be given to problematic situations by assimilating them to situations that are on the side of the ways of salvation, within the framework of meaning of the society in question. Practices had to be organised to ensure that the problematic realities resemble, as authentically as possible, the images with which one was seeking to associate them. It was, at the same time, necessary, to disguise these realities by giving them consoling interpretations.<sup>[75]</sup> This movement is very advanced in certain societies, much less so in others.

### *The “métier” or profession as a rampart against servile dependence*

We have evoked the role played in France today by the reference to the profession, to the man of the profession, to the grandeur of the profession, with all the representations and practices that are related to it. This reference plays a crucial role in ensuring the link between what is experienced in the everyday lives of organisations and the imaginary that characterises French society. When such an imaginary reigns, it is essential to escape from the image of he who has accepted a servile position. There is a need to escape from a manner deemed to be servile of being in relations with those who, in one way or another (a superior, a client), are in a position to allow you to benefit from some advantage, provided you accept their demands. As far as possible, anything that could suggest that one is submissive, through fear or interest, to these demands should be avoided. Consequently, both authority relations and client relations tend to be staged (both in the way in which they are organised in practice and in the formulations that serve to evoke them) in such a way that it becomes possible, to a large extent, to keep this image of servile submission at a distance.

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[75] Cf. the research by Barley, which highlights the way in which, in a funeral home, a corpse is metaphorically assimilated to someone who is sleeping, which requires an elaborate staging process that aims to establish the greatest resemblance possible between both. Stephen R. Barley, “Semiotics and the Study of Occupational and Organizational Cultures”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 28, n° 3, 1983, p. 393-413. The difference is that, in the case of the corpse, it is only a question of creating an illusion, whereas in terms of the functioning of organisations, it partly involves creating an illusion, but it also involves conceiving forms of organisation so that there is a real resemblance.

We see forms of duty put forward, such as the requirements attached to the position that one has in society, which exclude any reference to the will of those who can serve you or harm you. Furthermore, activities that are deemed to be servile, due to the fact that those who have been reduced to servitude have been compelled to carry them out, are strongly rejected. This is also the case for what is associated with the ways of being of those who carry out such activities and, by extension, all that is related to a “low” position in society. At the same time, the attachment to what characterises the position that one has in society can be redoubled when this position carries a certain nobleness. When one is faithful to the duties associated with such a position, one takes some distance in terms of those who are in a servile position, and this distance makes one grow.

Consequently, putting forward the profession provides a way of connecting the work done in a subordinate position, submitted *de facto* to the authority of a boss, with a vision of independence, honour and nobleness. It involves, at the same time, representations, that partly carry illusions, and practices. When everyone, working for an organisation, considers themselves as being guided by the conception that they have of their profession and seek to be up to the duties associated with the latter, it allows them not to think too much about the elements of constraint and interest that their situation implies despite all. Furthermore, the practice of authority in French companies, with the manner of delegating that prevails, truly gives an important role to the form of autonomy from which the man of the profession benefits.<sup>[76]</sup> Consequently, this results in giving a large place to the “good pleasure” evoked by Michel Crozier: “Subordinates [...] will never have to bow down before the personal, humiliating will of someone; what they do, they do by their own will and, in particular, they accomplish their task outside any direct obligation. They endeavour to show that they are working, not because they are forced to, but because they choose to do so.”<sup>[77]</sup>

For its part, the relationship with clients tends to be evoked by using terms (prescribe, diagnostic, listen, offer, welcome) that do not evoke a submission with an ulterior financial motive, therefore servile, of a simple service provider to a foreign will, but, on the contrary, the goodwill of the person who dominates the situation towards the person who calls on him. Let us take, as an example, the annual report of a company listed on France’s CAC 40 stock market index, evoking the action of “salespeople”: “Their in-depth knowledge of their clients’ needs allows them

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[76] Philippe d'Iribarne, *La Logique de l'honneur*, op. cit., 1<sup>st</sup> part.

[77] Michel Crozier, *Le Phénomène bureaucratique*, Seuil, 1963, p. 289.

to prescribe the most appropriate solutions”.<sup>[78]</sup> Here again, this representation is not unrelated to practices, for the best (a great ability to go beyond the client’s immediate desire) and for the worst (the lack of a spirit of service, which the French are often criticised for).<sup>[79]</sup>

Similarly, one finds representations and practices that lead to very prosaic actions that one must accomplish in order to contribute to the regular functioning of an organisation being considered as an opportunity to deal with a “nice problem”, to which one will provide a solution described as specific, creative, elegant and imaginative.<sup>[80]</sup> By diverting attention from the utilitarian nature of the intended practical purpose, and by focussing it on the nature of the process by which one pursues it, one associates activities, for which, traditionally, there was very little esteem as they are specific to those who serve, with challenges that provide the opportunity to achieve kinds of feats, by cultivating the beauty of the gesture. This allows individuals who, by the position they have in society, notably due to their level of qualifications, would have very good reasons to scorn these activities, in fact carry them out assiduously. The tendency, which the French are so often criticised for, to intellectualise questions and lack “pragmatism” finds its roots here.

These representations and these practices allow a connection to be made between what is permanent in French culture and the requirements of our time. They have made it possible to escape from a vision of things whereby a person “of quality” could not carry out an industrial or commercial activity without derogating, and where working under the authority of others was regarded as a servile activity. But the combats aiming to escape from the image of a servile position are not always crowned with success, or at least their success sometimes remains equivocal.

If we think, for example, about the remarks made by a general secretary of the CFDT trade union, declaring that “there is not a noble function that would voice demands and a less noble function that would be managerial”.<sup>[81]</sup> It goes without saying that an image of nobleness is associated with everything that relates to combats, “social achievements” obtained by making employers “back down”, the refusal of everything that is granted, which are all elements of a “protest function”. Combat is unquestionably the opposite of servility. The “managerial function” is more problematic. Management

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[78] Lafarge, Annual Report, 2004, p. 23.

[79] Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'Étrangeté française*, op. cit.

[80] Sylvie Chevrier, « Le solide contre l'ingénieur ; malentendus dans la gestion de projets franco-suisses », in Philippe d'Iribarne et al., *Cultures et Mondialisation*, op. cit.

[81] Nicole Notat, *Syndicalisme Hebdo CFDT*, 10 October 1996.



means recognising the power of employers, and interests defended *via* compromises likely to be less than glorious, in acceptance of an inferior position. A hint of servility threatens and it is important to defend oneself against it.<sup>[82]</sup> Generally speaking, everything that relates to “cooperation between classes” has an ambiguous status. Are those who, with an inferior status, share the company of the powerful to manage their common affairs honoured? Or, by doing so, do they ratify a position of lackey, which is certainly familiar to the great, but in the same manner as the dog from the fable?<sup>[83]</sup> This dual analysis is encountered when certain representatives of a group that traditionally has strained relations with its hierarchy are willing to be involved in the projects of the latter.<sup>[84]</sup>

There are also a lot of uncertainties over the degree of nobleness that can be attributed to certain positions. If we look at the figure of the “intellectual with a high media profile”: Is he in an eminent position, condescending to share the treasures of his thinking with those who benefit from his enlightenment? Or is he rather the contemporary heir to the courtier, all the more skilled in pleasing opinion, the new monarch, because he is unencumbered by real convictions and real ideas? In a completely different area of the social scene, it has remained difficult, despite many efforts, to “ennoble” manual work.

These uncertainties are, for the people who are affected by them, a source of weakness of identity, which leads the latter to react in a particularly strong manner when what forms the basis of their status is threatened. One sees them passionately affirm that they are not slaves and are determined to be treated accordingly. The use of such a strong term may seem abusive when one thinks about what was (and still is in certain places) the reality of slavery. It may be understood in a symbolic register. What is indeed at stake is nothing less than the barrier being broken down that protects against a particularly feared threat: to find oneself in a position that evokes a servile dependence.

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[82] One could, of course, link to this meaningful framework the way, so widespread in France, in which social relations are managed by only negotiating after “a gallant last stand” has at least been organised.

[83] The dog in the fable “The Wolf and the Dog” by Jean de la Fontaine is at the service of his master.

[84] One finds a particularly spectacular case of this type of situation at the RATP public transport authority with the reaction of the staff of the conventional metro lines towards those who participated, with much more positive relations with their hierarchy than usual, in the *Météor* automated line adventure. Jean-Pierre Segal, « De la difficulté à diffuser en interne une innovation réussie », *Gérer et Comprendre*, September 2003, and *Efficaces ensemble : un défi français*, Seuil, 2009. We can also mention a case analysed in Pascale Trompette, « La négociation dans l'entreprise ; symbolique de l'honneur et recomposition identitaire », *Revue française de sociologie*, XXXVIII, 1997, p. 781-822.

## *The contract as a way of being in control of one's choices*

Similarly, in the USA, one observes a whole formatting of the life of organisations, both in the language and in the practices. In this case, it involves warding off the image of he who is reliant on the will of others. In a society governed by contractual relations, others can impose nothing on me, because they can demand nothing from me, apart from what I agreed to by ratifying the contract that binds us. Insofar as my consent is truly free (where it is not a case of a one-sided agreement), the fear of not being in control of my destiny is warded off.

The representation of the subordinate as a supplier of a superior assimilated to a client is a key aspect of this type of formatting. The careful division of responsibilities, leading to freely negotiated objectives being set for everyone, which are supposed to faithfully represent their contribution to the common task, even though in reality this faithfulness is very relative,<sup>[85]</sup> is along the same lines. The life of an organisation thus finds itself matched with the mythical image of a society of owners.<sup>[86]</sup>

An organisation of work consistent with such a representation has been established. Everyone, free to determine the way in which they will go about responding to the order that they must satisfy, can have the feeling that no one other than themselves is going to govern their existence. Let us take, for example, this remark made by an American employee: *"I feel if the bottom line numbers, the results are here, how you get them is between that OK. Most of the people feel that they have to be somewhat of a master of their own destiny, by determining how they accomplish their work somewhat by themselves. As long as their goals are accomplished, they [the bosses] must be happy with that."*<sup>[87]</sup> In fact, it is quite a limited form of autonomy: having the choice of the means that one uses to achieve an objective that others have set leads to the feeling of being "master of one's destiny".

The importance given to such a form of organisation can particularly be found with Locke. For him, the fact of being bound by a contract allows a condition of a free man to be maintained within a relationship where one is at the service of others: *"A Free-man makes himself a Servant to another, by selling him for a certain time the Service he undertakes to do, in exchange for Wages he is to receive: and though this commonly puts him into the Family of his Master, and under the ordinary Discipline thereof; yet it gives the Master but a Temporary Power over him, and no greater than*

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[85] William G. Ouchi, *Theory Z*, op. cit.

[86] *La Logique de l'honneur*, op. cit., 2<sup>nd</sup> part.

[87] Remarks given in *La Logique de l'honneur*, op. cit., p. 138.

*what is contained in the Contract between'em. But there is another sort of Servants, which by a peculiar Name we call Slaves, who [...] are [...] subjected to the Absolute Dominion and Arbitrary Power of their Masters.*" [88] The contract is not only a practical way of guiding everyone's action. It has a political sense. It is the contract which, by limiting the power held by the employer, makes it possible to escape from the "absolute dominion and arbitrary power" and by doing so, from a situation where someone else controls your destiny.

Here again, the elaboration of representations and practices that make a connection between the ideal vision of the contractual relationship between equals and subordination was the result of a chaotic history. For example, the elaboration of a legal framework governing the relationships between employees and their employer gave rise to endless debates before leading to a relatively stabilised result. [89] Some presented any intrusion by a public authority as depriving parties of their sovereign power to manage their own affairs (and this vision for a long time fed into the decisions of State Courts and the Federal Court). Meanwhile, others, while also referring to everyone's right to decide for themselves, criticised the dependence in which the so-called free employee with regard to the employer finds himself. Some have gone as far as to speak of "wage slavery". [90] The common reference of those who thus confronted each other was the fear that a stronger person would deprive a weaker person of the possibility of controlling his destiny ("the invasions of rights"). [91] In this respect, the debate focussed on what is to be feared the most: the deprivation of liberty attributable to the employer or that caused by the public authorities. It was not until the New Deal and the Wagner Act that legislation was found that gave the feeling of simultaneously warding off the two fears. This was achieved by protecting the freedom of choice of the weak (the employee) faced with the strong (the employer), without as such limiting the autonomy of actors in the elaboration of contracts whereby they can commit themselves, which led to the focus being exclusively on the framework of their negotiations, without becoming involved in their result.

The cultural roots of such intellectual constructions can particularly be seen, in the USA as elsewhere, through the understanding that those who have other references may have of them. For example, Max Weber, commenting on the Anglo-Saxon contractual approach sees in it "a special kind of coercive situation which, as a general

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[88] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, *op. cit.*, The second Treatise, § 85, p. 322.

[89] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, Norton, 1998, New York.

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

[91] The expression is to be found in *The Federalist*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

*principle, applies without any discrimination to workers, enterprisers, producers and consumers, viz., in the impersonal form of the inevitability of adaptation to the purely economics 'laws' of the market.*"<sup>[92]</sup>

In an American vision, and more generally Anglo-Saxon vision, it is the form of autonomy that the functioning of a market allows everyone, the freedom of choice that such a functioning allows everyone, which matters the most. The freedom inherent to the procedure protects from the main peril: to have one's destiny dictated by a foreign will. Weber, for his part, recognises that the situation in which everyone finds themselves, when such a form of organisation prevails, is not directly or openly imposed on them. He evokes the "*the great variety of permitted contractual schemata and the formal empowerment to set the content of contracts in accordance with one's desires and independently of all official form patterns.*" But he is looking at something else, at what ultimately happens to he who, *de facto*, does not find himself in a position of strength at the time of the negotiation.

Weber highlights the fact that the form of freedom available to a person who can freely enter into a contract "*by no means makes sure that these formal possibilities will in fact be available to all and everyone.*" At the end of the process, "*the sanction*" can be severe: "*The sanctions consist in the loss or decrease of economic power and, under certain conditions, in the very loss of one's economic existence.*" Weber does not consider the existence of such a sanction as an inseparable part of a process generally considered favourably. He does not see in this a sort of necessary manifestation of the fact that what everyone obtains is indeed the result of their own efforts. He isolates from this context the economic precariousness that is inherent to the market rules. He also underscores its severity when one considers it in itself.

### ***Being judged in Cameroon***

The aspects of the functioning of organisations that tend to be felt as threatening depend on the type of fear that plays a central role in the society in which one finds oneself. By imagining the world too much on the basis of what the USA and France have in common, one could believe that subordination is in itself problematic everywhere. In fact, this is not at all the case. There are many societies, especially in the Asian world, where the fact of working under the authority of a boss is in no way a problem in itself. But in this case, it is other aspects of the functioning of organisations that have a sensitive nature.

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[92] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), "Economy and Law" (The Sociology of Law), Ch. VIII, section 7, pp. 729-731.

To illustrate this variety, one can evoke the difficulties that the appraisal of subordinates arouses in Cameroon, due to the fundamental fear of suffering from hostile manoeuvres engineered behind one's back by the very people who appear to have good intentions towards you.<sup>[93]</sup> This fear is triggered as soon as everything is not completely "clear" and "transparent" in the action of those with whom one works, superiors, subordinates or equals. In particular, as soon as the delegation and control procedures leave a degree of discretion in the appraisal of the action of subordinates, difficulties arise. The judgment made *a posteriori* on the subordinate who has been set objectives and has been left the choice of the means to achieve them is a source of mistrust. Is it not based on reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of the work of the person being judged? If a person has succeeded, is it not because a complacent superior has set him objectives that were not very demanding and, if another fails, is it not because a superior who wanted to harm him set him impossible ones? If the person in question has accepted such objectives, perhaps the superior knew, and hid from him, aspects of the situation that doomed the mission to failure.

The proper functioning of a company requires silencing suspicions. To achieve this, the uncertainty that fuels them should be removed, whether this concerns the actual intentions of the person who entrusts the work or the hard work of the person to whom this work has been entrusted. Companies in Cameroon would still appear to be far from having found the recipe. However, possible solutions are emerging, at least in some of them. In a small structure, a good way to trust one another is to agree in advance on the action to be taken. The manager simply needs (we have observed it) to give his agreement on a case-by-case basis when his subordinates inform him: "*Boss, I am going to do this.*"

In large structures, it is not possible to proceed in this manner without slipping into a paralysing centralisation. But the agreement on a case-by-case basis can be replaced by the existence of manuals identifying, in an extremely detailed manner, the tasks to be accomplished in every circumstance. The more these tasks are clearly defined, the more the margin for interpretation as to the actual intentions of the person who has outlined them is reduced, as is that of the person who carries them out. There is even less risk that the parties concerned will suspect each other of being motivated by a lack of good faith, or of laying "traps" for one another.

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[93] Alain Henry, "Revolution by Procedures in Cameroon", in Philippe d'Iribarne, with Alain Henry, *Successful Companies in the Developing World*, *op. cit.*

## *National culture and national identity*

What is the relationship between the framework of meaning that is specific to a society and what a national community puts forward to assert its specific characteristics and thus give itself an identity? In both cases we speak of culture, which may be a source of confusion. Indeed, we are dealing with extremely different realities, even if they are not unrelated.<sup>[94]</sup>

A feeling of identity can only be fuelled by what one is aware of. Yet the reference scene specific to a society is mainly unconscious.<sup>[95]</sup> Furthermore, national identity is more built than given. It is based on a mythical universe whose elaboration is often recent at the level of history.<sup>[96]</sup> Conversely, within a society, the peril feared above all and the ways of salvation that ward it off run through history.

These two realities are, nonetheless, related. The mythical universe that fuels the feeling of national identity takes on meaning, like the rest of social life, in the vision of peril and salvation that characterises the reference scene that is specific to each society. For example, in France, Vercingétorix or the Resistance take on meaning as exemplary figures of a refusal to comply out of fear or interest. Identifying oneself with their mythical figures within a national “we” helps the French to protect themselves from the peril of being demeaned. More generally, French nationalism, which cultivates a multifaceted imagination of grandeur, takes on meaning within the French vision of peril and salvation. It is different from American nationalism, which is associated with the refusal to allow others dictate your destiny (*cf.* the attitude of the USA to supranational bodies, such as the International Criminal Court), or German nationalism. The diversity of reference scenes existed long before the emergence of what one can qualify as a national feeling. Each of them played a major role in the way the symbolic universe, on which the subjectively experienced national identity is based, was built.

At the same time, the way in which the national mythical universe is structured contributes to maintaining the manner in which, more generally, a culture gives meaning. Indeed, by giving a special relevance to the opposition between a certain peril and certain ways of salvation, its structure contributes to imposing an understanding of events and situations that gives, in an “obvious” way, a central place to this opposition. However, in this role, this mythical universe intervenes as a simple element, not necessarily essential, of a much bigger picture covering all the

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[94] In Chapter 4, we shall come back to the variety of what is understood when the term “culture” is used.

[95] This does not prevent it from constituting an element of objective identity (just as fingerprints for an individual). But it involves something very different from the elaboration of a subjective feeling of identity.

[96] Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales*, Seuil, 1999.

representations that, concerning a whole host of situations, take the reference scene which prevails in the society in question as a scope of meaning (for example, in France, an understanding of the relationships with a boss or a client, which clearly highlights the refusal to adopt an attitude towards them that may be suspected of being servile).

The fact that the national mythical universe takes on meaning within a specific reference scene means that it is difficult to share a same national identity if one gives meaning to social life in different reference scenes. It is highly likely that the features of a character, of a story, that make one gladly identify with them when one is marked by a certain vision of peril or salvation, will be despised when one is marked by another vision. For an American, for example, it is highly likely that Vercingétorix will appear as a “loser”. This is coupled with the fact that it is difficult to share the same institutions, the same law, the same forms of government, if one is not seeking to protect oneself from the same central peril or if one is not relying on the same ways of salvation for this purpose. From this perspective, it is hard to see how a lasting nation can be formed if it does not share the same reference scene.

The opposite is not true. It is quite possible to have the same reference scene and not share certain elements of identity that one considers to be crucial (the language, the religion, an ethnic feeling), which leads to the feeling that one is not part of the same “nation”. It can happen that one belongs to separate political entities or that one coexists, in a more or less conflictual and temporary manner, within the same political entity (as is the case today for the Flemish and Walloons, or again for the “Serbian”, “Croatian” and “Muslim” Bosnians).

These elements make it possible to specify in what sense one can refer to a “national” culture when one evokes the diversity of scenes of peril and salvation and the ways of giving meaning that are based on each of them. The term “national” must be understood as referring to something that is common to a nation, but not necessarily as something that makes it possible to differentiate one nation from a neighbouring nation. The accidents of history can lead to two distinct political entities emerging within a population that shares the same culture, in the sense of the same vision of peril feared above all and the ways of salvation that make it possible to escape from it. It is much more difficult for these accidents to allow a political entity to be stable without its members sharing a common culture, understood in this sense.<sup>[97]</sup> It is true that there are empires in which several “nations”

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[97] Furthermore, within a political entity there can, of course, be minority groups, on a geographical, ethnic or other basis, which do not share the political culture (in the sense that it is understood here) of the majority, with all the difficulties of integration that this leads to. We can think, for example, of the position of Gypsies in a number of European countries.

coexist (cf. the ex-USSR or ex-Yugoslavia). However, in any case, as soon as certain forms of democracy develop in them, their political stability becomes a problem.

## From one to various

Within one same culture, ordinary experiences, ordinary situations, take on meaning when they are linked to the same reference scene. But this in no way implies that they have the same meaning for everyone.

### *The diversity of habitus*

Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of the diversity of habitus within French society clearly highlight the way in which various actors can give very different meanings to the same situation, while at the same time using the same categories.<sup>[98]</sup> The opposition between the "distinguished" and the "vulgar", which is at the heart of *The Distinction*, provides a common reference on the basis of which the judgements of taste made by various actors take on meaning. However, and it is what forms the basis of the diversity of habitus, there can be considerable differences of opinion over what is considered as distinguished or vulgar. What is for some an object of admiration may be an object of contempt for others (for example, *The Blue Danube*, a reference esteemed by the middle class and symbol of bad taste for intellectual professions). For intellectuals and artists, notes Bourdieu, what qualifies as being refined are "disinterested, gratuitous, free pleasures"; for the bourgeois "of the old stamp", it is above all the "ancient", "family property"; and for the petit bourgeois, everything that is "clean, sober and neat".

In all cases, this diversity does not preclude the fact that it involves the opposition between what is "refined" and "vulgar". In France, such an opposition plays a key role in all levels of the population and not only in high society. It takes on all its meaning in the French vision of what constitutes the peril feared above all and the ways of salvation that make it possible to escape from it (even if, for his part, Pierre Bourdieu merely highlights the supposed universal opposition between "dominant" and "dominated").<sup>[99]</sup> "Vulgar" relates to what is "base", associated with servility, with petty interests and the submission to basic impulses. Due to their situation, everyone

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[98] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1987.

[99] "Matrix of all the 'commonplaces' which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order, the network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest) [...] has its ultimate source in the opposition between the 'elite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated."



is particularly sensitive to a particular form of baseness. Intellectuals and artists perceive as such the “*enjoyment [...] – mercenary, venal, servile*” of those who conduct activities where the inspiration of the spirit is lacking. The “old France” bourgeois thus regards ways of being that are specific to the “*nouveau riche*” who, to make a fortune, whereas he was nothing, did not fail to show some complacency towards those who could serve his interests. For the petit bourgeois, this characteristic focuses on the “*animal nature*” of he who, with no education, “*stuffs himself*” without restraint. At the same time, everyone feels that the “*refined*” is what allows one to avoid the form of baseness that particularly horrifies them.

The shared refusal to be seen and feel that one is put in a “base” position coexists with the many visions of what is “base”, and therefore with the many ways of going about averting the risk of being considered as being in such a position.

Generally speaking, the unity of a culture, in the sense of the general meaningful framework, goes hand in hand with the variety of local ways of giving a precise meaning and reacting accordingly. These ways do not concern a society taken as a whole, but are specific to a small entity, a hospital ward, a women’s movement, a boat crew, or any particular group belonging to such an entity. These are the local realities that are evoked when reference is made to “corporate culture” or “occupational culture”. The term “culture” is thus understood in a traditional sense of a shared vision of the world, of shared values, forming the basis of a certain unity of practices. These realities are the main objects of contemporary cultural studies, with their difficulty (which we will come back to in Chapter 4) to go beyond the observation and analysis of what happens in narrowly circumscribed fields.

### *Relay images*

To have meaning, ordinary experiences, ordinary situations, are not necessarily directly associated with the reference scene that prevails within a culture. One is often dealing with sorts of relay images (the contract signed between equals, the level playing field, in an Anglo-Saxon context; the professional whose rights and duties are defined by his profession in France). The latter in turn take on meaning either through a direct evocation of the reference scene or, indirectly, by evoking other images, which themselves are more directly associated with this scene. All these images form the links of chains of associations that in stages connect the ordinary situations to the reference scene. To give meaning in this way does not only signify structuring the experience, but also associating an emotional dimension with it and making a given situation appear as being attractive or repulsive.

All these images stage, by more or less specifying it, the central opposition that is specific to the context in question (to control one's destiny or not; nobility and servility). Whatever the share of reality (of memory) on which they are based, they are widely part of a mythical register that rebuilds and schematises. It may involve characters: more or less mythified historical characters (Spartacus, the Pilgrim Fathers), purely mythical heroes (Jean Valjean), or social types that are specific to a particular context (the untouchable, the Brahman, the holy warrior). It may concern stories, with here again more or less mythified historical events (the United States Declaration of Independence) or purely mythical events (The Social Contract, *Germinal*), or actions from everyday life that embody "exemplary" narrative patterns ("*It is a nasty person who did this to me*").<sup>[100]</sup> These characters and narratives are interrelated; the features that mark the characters give depth to the narratives, while the characters take shape thanks to the narratives (Vercingétorix and Alésia, Abraham Lincoln and Gettysburg). These images, characters and narratives are ballasted with a heavy affective weight associated with happy or unhappy emotions that are related to the situations and events they evoke. One is dealing with a specific network (a constellation) of elements. Everyone refers to the group to which they belong and makes sense of the latter, while being likely to evoke it.<sup>[101]</sup>

For instance, in the life of organisations in France today, the main ways of making sense of typical situations, such as receive an order from a client (by "prescribing" for it what one considers that it needs), or receive instructions from a superior (by taking some and leaving some in order to adjust them to the conception that one has of one's occupation), play this role of intermediate link. They form the substrate, with successive levels, of the actual meaning given to specific events, to situations that occur at a given moment within a particular organisation (receive a certain order, given in a certain way, by a certain superior). In particular, the reference to the profession fuels the representations and practices in a way that affirms the nobleness of a certain particular profession (for example, journalist or ticket inspector for a railway company), or a certain sub-category (for example, journalist for a major daily newspaper or for a local newspaper, responsible for foreign policy or "dogs that have been run over") and ultimately of a certain specific position.

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[100] Paul Ricœur, *Temps et Récit*, V. I, L'Intrigue et le récit historique, Seuil, 1983.

[101] Each element is in a metonymy relationship in relation to the whole and is likely to evoke it, with the emotions that are associated with it, like the taste of a Madeleine cake, or the uneven paving stone in the courtyard of Guermantes: Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1917, 1927), Gallimard, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1954, V. I, p. 43; V. III, p. 866. One could also certainly evoke a rhizome structure and the support of a neural net.

One of the ways of giving meaning to events and situations is to metaphorically attribute particular significant characteristics to them in the perspective opened by the reference scene that prevails:<sup>[102]</sup> “*We found an elegant solution*”, “*This way of acting is base*”, etc., and more generally to associate them, through various rhetorical processes, to particularly significant elements in this perspective. This type of connection can occur in various parts of the chain of meaning that comes into play. For instance, in the example quoted above of a general secretary of a trade union declaring that “*there is not a noble function that would voice demands and a less noble function that would be managerial*”, there is a twofold connection: on the one hand *via* a metaphorical link, by directly associating the activity in question with the term “noble” and, on the other hand, by metonymic proximity, by associating the managerial function, the nobleness of which poses a problem, with the protest function, of which the nobleness is self-evident.

Through these chains of associations, an event that could seem mundane is likely to become important and strike a significant emotive chord, which is incomprehensible if one does not perceive what is at stake. For example, in France, it is difficult to understand why being or not being invited to a given meeting is likely to be experienced by some as a dramatic exclusion, whereas if they had been invited, they would perhaps have been extremely bored. This is likely to happen if the person concerned is in an uncertain position in terms of the frontier between those who are accepted as “*cadres*” (executives) in the world and those who are not. In this case, the fact of not being invited will clearly signify to him that he “is not one”. And in turn, to be or not to be a “*cadre*” takes on importance due to the fact that it places the individual on one side or the other of a fundamental frontier: Is one in a situation that protects from the risk of being perceived as having a servile condition? Or, on the contrary, is one among those who must fight every day to have the fact that they are “someone” “recognised”?

A certain characteristic of common experiences will take on importance because it readily evokes the images of the different levels that serve to give meaning. When one of the characteristics is thus favoured, it tends to characterise the situation and conceal other characteristics that are deemed to be less relevant, whereas the latter can, on the contrary, have a highly discriminatory nature in another context. Different cultures can thus “see” different things in one same situation.<sup>[103]</sup> For

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[102] On the metaphorical extension of a number of basic experiences in the more general organisation of experience, the classic work is George Lakoff and Marc Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

[103] As in the experience of experimental psychology where one can see two very different figures, one of a very young woman and one of a very old woman, looking at the same drawing, but structuring the elements differently. When one has developed a representation (organised the elements in accordance with the latter), it is necessary to make a great effort to change representation and, subsequently, a great effort to go back.

example, in the USA, the fact of being a “simple service provider” or even, if we are to believe Tocqueville, a servant required to carry out ancillary tasks, loses all importance when the person concerned finds himself in a freely negotiated contractual relationship with the person he serves. This latter characteristic is so important that it becomes significant to group together all its elements, and one can then say that the activity of a servant is not fundamentally different from that of the president of the USA.<sup>[104]</sup> This way of seeing things loses all relevance when one is dealing with a way of grouping together experiences that select other characteristics; for example, in France, to be in a servile position or not. What the experience of a servant and that of a president of the USA have in common thus loses all importance. The categories that are thus created in some way constitute a system of boxes, specific to a culture, in which to classify situations (although the way in which each situation finds a place in one of these boxes is far from being self-evident).

### *Stability and evolution of cultures*

When history goes on, the reference scene specific to each society remains, which is a sort of unquestioned matter of course. The perspective that it opens impregnates the entire social life, without the actors concerned being aware of it, from the functioning of political institutions to the thousand details of everyday life. New situations, new events, are understood, as much as what is familiar, by adopting this perspective. The fact of being constantly exposed to it, of adopting it oneself, and of finding it with people that one meets in life, when one argues, to attack or defend oneself, or simply when one recounts events and when one describes situations, means that it is intimately integrated into the functioning of the mind. It is equally as present when it structures the way in which revolutionaries legitimise their action as when it quietly orients the permanence of routines.

The evidence of the particularly dramatic character of a certain form of peril and the lifesaving character of a certain way of reacting to it is partly maintained by the existence of the great narratives through which a society recounts its history to itself. But this evidence impregnates discourses concerning the most diverse aspects of existence in a much broader manner.

For example, in the USA, every opportunity will be good to give importance to the fear of not controlling one’s destiny, from the evocation of foreign policy in the presidential State of the Union addresses to the way in which a young child is asked to control itself. For example, to highlight the depth of the change experienced by

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[104] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, *op. cit.* V. II.

American society after 11<sup>th</sup> September, a major daily newspaper will evoke the loss of the USA's capacity "to control its own destiny".<sup>[105]</sup> Or again, to encourage children to forgive, one will use arguments such as: "Forgive, even if there are no apologies or amends. [...] Do not let your life depend on the behaviour of the other", or "By showing kindness towards an attacker, you take control of the situation".<sup>[106]</sup>

While this meaningful framework remains sustainable, continuous ideological work leads to new ways of using it being provided in order to understand situations that one encounters in life.

If we take the debates that gave rise to the ratification of the US Constitution, the reference scene in which they took place was not discussed. In the perspective that it opened, the major question was to know how to go about avoiding citizens seeing their destiny as being ordered by others, foreign powers or factions inside the country (avoid being subject to an "invasion of their rights"). The entire argumentation of the proponents of the draft Constitution was marked by this issue. They sought to demonstrate that the organisation of powers to which the Constitution led would generally allow citizens to be better protected against such a risk than they were previously. A key part of the argumentation involved arguing that, thanks to an appropriate organisation of institutions, the form of federal State that was planned to be established would not subject citizens to a power that would deprive them of their rights. Such an assertion was *a priori* not at all self-evident and the supporters of the bill had to use all their talent to win over people's minds.

Sieyès, for his part, demonstrates well the way in which, without changing the meaningful framework, one can radically reinterpret situations. He remains faithful to the reference scene, which already characterised the Ancien Régime, and favours the opposition of servile and noble. But he seeks to lay emphasis on a representation of the world where, within this scene, the privileged and Third Estate exchanged their suits. He presents the nobility as a "false people which, without useful organs could not exist by themselves, are attached to an entire nation like these plant tumours that cannot live without the plant sap that strains them and desiccates them."<sup>[107]</sup> Nobles are thus depicted in the position of he who, reduced to a sort of powerlessness, ("could not", "can only"), needs, in order to exist, to be attached to someone (like the valet to his master) who will provide his subsistence, and consequently finds himself reduced to the humiliating role of a parasite. At the same time, Sieyès

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[105] *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2008.

[106] David W. Schell, *Forgiveness Therapy*, Abbey Press, St. Meinrad (Indiana), 1993.

[107] Sieyès, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

attacks the representations by which the Third Estate appears to have something vile about it. *“To think only in terms of wholesomeness, what kind of society is it where you lose caste if you work? Where to consume is honourable but to produce is vile? Where laborious occupations are called base? As if anything but vice could be base, and as if this baseness of vice, the only true one, could be found mostly among those who work!”*<sup>[108]</sup> He thus uses an entire discourse conveyed by the bourgeoisie and the Church, which sought over the centuries to change the criteria of noble and vile by favouring a moral ground.

This reinterpretation of situations does not only occur during major events that mark the history of a country. It occurs with every passing day in the different areas of social life, with particularly significant episodes from time to time.

In France, such a reinterpretation characterised the elaboration of representations that allow a connection to be made between ordinary situations of working life with an image that is not without nobleness. By way of example, one can mention the advent of the so typically French category of *“cadres”*.<sup>[109]</sup> When the category took shape, an array of literature of combat worked to remove the servile image of the *“petty-minded boss”*, the modernised figure of the intendant instructed by his master to carry out menial tasks, and who accepts to do so to satisfy his base interests. *“Cadres”* have been presented as having a general interest *“mission”*, a *“social role”* similar to that of an officer. In this role, they are not accountable to their employers and the latter must respect this.<sup>[110]</sup> When, nowadays, a collective comprising the main organisations of *“cadres”* evokes their *“social responsibility”*, associating with it *“a right to alert, or even a right to oppose their hierarchy”*,<sup>[111]</sup> it depicts employees who, far from being in a position where they must comply with the will of their hierarchy, are entitled, in the name of something greater (their *“social responsibility”*), to show independence with regard to this will, and even be able to oppose it.<sup>[112]</sup>

This permanent ideological work leads to a continuous evolution in the ways of seeing things that are specific to each period. For example, in France, what is more commonly perceived as being grand or noble or, on the contrary, base, constantly

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[108] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[109] Luc Boltanski, *Les Cadres. La formation d'un groupe social*, Minuit, 1982.

[110] J. R. Bonneau, « La fragilité du contrat de cadre », *Revue des affaires sociales*, July-September 1977, p. 77-93; quoted in L. Boltanski, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[111] Terms of a *“Manifesto for the Social Responsibility of Executives”* signed in October 2003 at the initiative of a collective of seven partners, including the *“cadres”* branches of the CGT, CFDT and CJD (Centre for Young Managers); *Syndicalisme Hebdo CFDT*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005.

[112] One could also quote all that concerns the organisation of the public world in France and the role played in it by the defence of statuses.

evolves over time. This evolution simultaneously affects more or less broad areas of social life. Seen as a whole, the way of considering paid employment did, for example, undergo profound changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At a more limited level, this is also the case for more specific forms of work: in the more elite spheres, having a position as an executive in a company no longer gives the feeling of “derogating”; in more modest environments, working as an employee no longer gives the feeling of being “sold” to a boss. Similarly, the appearance of the character of a “*bohemian bourgeois*” corresponded to the emergence of a new form of distinction. Here again, one can see that the permanence of the reference framework does not imply that there is a stability in ways of giving meaning in concrete terms and of acting.

## Conclusion

In each society, the opposition between a certain peril, feared above all, and access to a way of salvation that frees one from it, has a central place in social, economic and political life. This opposition is depicted in a whole host of narratives, whether they are drawn from history, legend or daily life. It marks the existence of the real or mythical characters who are the actors in these narratives. It is present, as a backdrop, in the way in which everything that concerns living together is experienced. Existence takes on meaning, metaphorically, by being associated with the experiences of peril and salvation, which thus serve as a reference. Each situation receives its affective tone from the way on which it resonates with either of these experiences. The action of everyone, when they manage their own existence or when they seek to influence the organisation of society, owes a great deal to the desire to escape from what the peril feared above all evokes and to gain access to that which frees from it. It involves associating the problematic situations on the positive side of the reference scene that depicts this opposition (for example, in France, have a profession where one has to resolve “nice problems”; in the USA, to work in a company in the way in which a supplier works for a client) and, at the same time, dissociating them from the negative side of this scene.

An array of ideological work, subject to manipulations and conflict, governs the establishment of connections between situations of ordinary life with the main images of peril and salvation. The result is obtained through history and culture and never purely through culture (by that meaning generic oppositions whose central character marks a society beyond history and the involvement of actors). Through this work, those who use common references can give very different meanings to one same reality.

A whole range is to be found between a common reference scene and an infinity of different ways, specific to a fragment of society and a period, of giving meaning in practical terms. At a given time, one finds within one same society some principal

ways of giving meaning to typical situations which are so widespread that it is still legitimate to speak of national culture, in one of the generally accepted definitions of this term. It involves, more specifically, the form taken, in a historically dated manner, by such a culture, if by that one means, as we have done in this text, a property of a society that is much more lasting at the level of centuries, if not millenniums. Beyond this common core that is specific to a period, one gradually arrives at closely idiosyncratic meanings being given to particular situations, meanings for which speaking of national cultures would no longer be at all legitimate.

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# Chapter 3

Cultures, modernity  
and unity of humanity



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## Cultures, modernity and unity of humanity

The understanding of what relates to cultures, their sustainability, and the way in which they influence the functioning of society, comes up against a major difficulty. The use of the term “culture”, or again the evocation of what, in the life of a society has been inherited from past centuries, provokes the intrusion in the debate of a sort of founding myth of so-called “modern” societies. According to this myth, the advent of the Enlightenment brought about a radical break in the history of humanity. A traditional order, marked by the weight of prejudices inherited from the past and a confinement in the particularisms of a territory, was rejected. A modern order, resulting from the rational action of individuals who had taken control of their destiny, free of the shackles of traditions, and having gained access to the universal, took its place. When thinking is formatted by this opposition, any reference to an inherited culture immediately leads to the belief that one has in mind, or is defending, a “traditional” order. It is assumed that accepting the existence of such a culture means denying the advent of modernity. At most, it is legitimate to evoke the existence of residues of a past that one has not finished eradicating, by adopting an approach that aims to uncover these survivals in order to combat them more effectively. However, considering the existence of an inherited culture as a permanent characteristic of so-called modern societies is always, if one believes that modernity carries a radical break, to be complicit with those what resists the advent of the Enlightenment. It is, ultimately, to refuse the ideal of emancipation that the latter carries.

The way of seeing things changes dramatically if, avoiding being confined to this mythical vision, one adopts towards it the distanced view that an ethnologist has of the myths of the Bororos or Trobrianders. One thus accepts to focus on aspects of the lives of our societies that such a vision does not make it possible to take account of. One sees that there are of disturbing elements of reality. Indeed, they

do not find a place in either the “traditional” or “modern” boxes, where this vision encourages a classification of social forms. Thinking of cultures does not only involve the fact that the advent of modernity is still incomplete, that in societies where the emancipation process has been taken furthest, there are still pockets of resistance, that many combats are still necessary against the social forces which, by blindness or out of interest, remain complicit to obscurantism: it is necessary to be able to envision, within the most radical emancipation processes themselves, at the heart of what is most authentically modern, most resolutely universal, the intimate presence of inherited elements that carry particularisms that cannot be transcended. It is this intimate association of what is deemed to be perfectly antagonistic that we need to theorize.

## The place of cultures in a mythical vision of modernity

Those who celebrate the radical emancipation of man that modernity is supposed to produce, like those who denounce the effects of this emancipation, are in agreement to offer a vision of it that corresponds little to reality. Their value judgements are, of course, in radical opposition. The former consider this burden of what is inherited as an obstacle to a complete emancipation of the individual and to the advent of a better world. The latter consider it as a founding element of a social life, which leads them to see in its loss a disaster for humanity. However, to welcome it or regret it, both sides associate modernity with its destruction.

### *Between Enlightenment and “anti-Enlightenment”*

The founders of the Enlightenment were well aware of the plurality of cultures. They hardly conceived that one could make it disappear, and they thought rather that the lawmaker should adapt to it. For example, Rousseau, criticising the reforms conducted in Russia by Peter the Great states: *“His first wish was to make Germans or Englishmen, when he ought to have been making Russians; and he prevented his subjects from ever becoming what they might have been by persuading them that they were what they are not. In this fashion too a French teacher turns out his pupil to be an infant prodigy, and for the rest of his life to be nothing whatsoever.”*<sup>[113]</sup> But the movement gradually radicalised and the sphere of what it demanded to be emancipated was constantly expanded.<sup>[114]</sup> Furthermore, the clashes that took place over the legacy of the Enlightenment played a role. Everything that concerns the

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[113] Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (1762), Chap. VIII, « Du peuple », Garnier-Flammarion, 1975, p. 82.

[114] Philippe d'Iribarne, *Vous serez tous des maîtres*, Seuil, 1996.

specificity of cultures became an object of passion. One finds, on one side, those who, such as Burke, Herder, Barrès, Spengler and others, have adopted a critical position with regard to a project for radical emancipation. They have all set themselves up as champions of what, transmitted through history, characterises the uniqueness of a people. The cult of roots, of the authentic, of the earth and blood, the romantic attachment to the legacy of the past, and the celebration of a conventional Middle Ages, has often led them to refuse the universal. As a consequence, the defenders of the universal have become radicalised. They have tended towards assimilating the enhancement of cultures to a rejection of the Enlightenment.

It is on the basis of the customs, inherited prejudices and affiliations that they found that the debate was established. The opponents think of them, on both sides, when it is a question of culture. To adhere to a culture, be faithful to it, is seen, for good or ill, as involving an attachment to a “traditional” social order, characterised by the respect of traditional institutions, traditional forms of authority, and traditional customs. Such an attachment leads to valuing all that is unique to this order, finding a source of identity in it, and therefore rejecting the universalist aspect of modernity. The two differing sides are radically opposed in the judgement that they have of a society guided by new ideas. But they generally agree in thinking that men have the power, for their happiness or unhappiness, to rid themselves of their culture, and associate this term with all that is openly claimed to be “traditional”.

For example, the body of work that the historian Zeev Sternhell devotes to the denunciation of what he qualifies as the “Anti-Enlightenment” offers a good testimony of the manner in which a hard-line defence of the Enlightenment leads to a radical rejection of the inherited culture.<sup>[115]</sup> In the vision of the Enlightenment that is proposed, the “*passage from the state of authority to the state of freedom*” implies removing “*the superstitions, the survivals of what is only historical*” (p. 61, 198). It is necessary to shape a future, “*free of the obstacles of history and religion, of the old habits and old prejudices*” (p. 414). Yet while there may be many prejudices, there is only one reason. Consequently, there is a need to access a stage where “*the principle of universality*” will be “*universally accepted as the only moral basis of political life*” (p. 198).

All that is likely to impede the advent of such a future is mercilessly denounced, and primarily “*the cult of all that distinguishes and separates men – history, culture, language*”, a cult with which is associated “*a political culture that refuses against*

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[115] Zeev Sternhell, *Les Anti-Lumières*, *op. cit.* The page numbers refer to this publication. One could quote, as a particularly virulent expression of such a position, the pamphlet by Jean-François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*, Allia, 2006.

reason both the capacity and the right to shape the lives of men" (p. 14). Those who think that "man comes into the world full of innate principles, inexorable instincts, traditions that are theirs from birth" are stigmatised and under such circumstances, by being accused of supposing that "he will always only be what his ancestors have made of him [...]. He will never be able to change his destiny" (p. 211).

In such a perspective, culture does not have a good reputation. The "refusal of universalism" that is denounced is seen as going hand in hand with a "combat for cultural and ethnic particularism" (p. 367). Consequently, the "horizon of the individual" is blocked by the "straitjacket in which his cultural community encloses him" (p. 15). The spectre of racism is inevitably brandished. It is affirmed that one is dealing with a "cultural determinism that in reality few things separate from an ethnic then racial determinism" (p. 20). The contemporary call for cultures to be respected is radically swept aside. The reason is that "under the pretext of a theoretical respect for all cultures", one is dealing with a "cultural determinism [...] that is already bordering racism" (p. 547).

Those, such as Herder and Burke, who are thus denounced certainly do not see culture as a factor of confinement. But it is true that what they defend is effectively a traditional social order based on a set of customs and prejudices that have been inherited from a long history. It is such an order, they affirm, that strong minds are in the process of destroying.

For example, Burke, reflecting on the French Revolution, is concerned about the fate it reserves for what he describes as the "chivalrous spirit".<sup>[116]</sup> He associates the latter with "pleasing illusions", which "are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason". For him, these fictions, these illusions, constituted a fundamental ingredient of a well-regulated social life. They "harmonized the different shades of life". It certainly involves "ideas furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination", but such ideas are "necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation" Unfortunately, all these old ideas "are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion". And Burke evokes grim prospects marked by the application of "that long roll of grim and bloody maxims which form the political code of all power not standing on its own honor and the honor of those who are to obey it."

One finds such a vision of things with Taine.<sup>[117]</sup> "A moment arrives where [...] the guiding ideas that tradition was reserving fall in the hands of reason [...] Instead of bowing down, one verifies, and the religion, the State, the law, the custom, in short,

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[116] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Penguin Classics, 2004, p. 171 sq.

[117] Hippolyte Taine, *Les Origines de la France contemporaine. L'ancien Régime* (1875), Robert Laffont, coll. « Bouquins », 1986, p. 155 sq.

*all the bodies of the moral life and practical life, will be subject to analysis in order to be preserved, rectified or replaced, according to what the new doctrine will have prescribed*". It is followed by detailed praise of the "hereditary bias" at the foundation of the "secret force which, from a herd of ruffians, has made a society of men" and which is "like instinct, a blind form of reason".

### **The rejection of "culturalism"**

This representation of culture as a set of prejudices and customs is very present in social sciences today. It fuels the criticism of "culturalism", a term that is used to evoke, with little distinction, any representation of society that attributes a role to the influence of the cultures inherited. For this critical vision, to speak of culture means ignoring the crucial role of action in the existence of societies; it is to forget history, the constant change in men and things and to confine oneself to a "fixist" vision.

For example, for the *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*, by R. Boudon and F. Bourricaud, which is very representative of such a vision, "cultural anthropology, culturalism can be taken, if not as synonyms, at least for terms that are very close". There is thus no need to hone the criticism by distinguishing various conceptions of culture. And this criticism is final and conclusive: "Except, perhaps in the case of the most simple societies, the totalistic or holistic conception, according to which all the members of a society would participate in a unique culture, i.e. in a common system of values, represents an exaggerated simplification"; "Culturalism [...] assumes that the values and other elements of the 'cultural system' are faithfully internalised by the individual, and constitute a sort of programme that would mechanically regulate their behaviour [...] To this, one can object that many behaviours must be analysed, not as the product of a conditioning, but as the result of an intentionality"; "As with structuralism, culturalism claims to be able to erase, without damage, the fundamental category of the action, without which cultural phenomena themselves are unintelligible", etc. <sup>[118]</sup>

Sometimes, the emphasis on a so-called "cultural essence" that would mechanically determine conduct is purely and simply associated with racism. For example, Pierre Bourdieu denounces "the substantialist way of thinking, which is that of common sense – and of racism – and which leads to the activities or preferences that are specific to certain individuals or certain groups of a certain society at a certain moment being treated as substantial properties, once and for all part of a sort of biological or – which is no better – cultural essence". <sup>[119]</sup>

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[118] Raymond Boudon et François Bourricaud, *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*, PUF, 1982, section « culturalisme et culture ».

[119] Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action*, Seuil, 1994, p. 18-19.

These criticisms, like those that are made in a more immediately political field, are intimately linked to the influence on social sciences of a conception of culture that sees in it the foundation of a traditional form of social order. This vision has gained an eminent place via the mythical opposition between community and society.<sup>[120]</sup> The community (*Gemeinschaft*) is conceived as a form of social order where everyone's existence is governed by a set of shared beliefs and standards inherited from ancestors. Conversely, society (*Gesellschaft*) is conceived as a free association of individuals aware of their interests and masters of their values, who negotiate their participation in any common task with their fellow human beings.

In this dichotomy, culture, conceived as a set of shared beliefs and standards, is at the heart of a community-based social order. Boudon and Bourricaud are in such a perspective when they associate the notion of culture with "*the most simple societies*", with a "*holistic conception*", and with "*a common system of values*", which are all elements associated with the image of the community. The opposition between community and society is obvious when they oppose, on the one side, individuals who are totally submissive to all, slaves of a "*sort of program that would mechanically regulate*" their behaviour, caught in a "*conditioning*", and, on the other, the "*intentionality*" of the individual who is free in terms of his choices and values. We are in an all or nothing situation: we are either dealing with a community, and culture determines everything, or we are dealing with a society and culture is of no use. And, as obviously, in so-called "modern" societies, culture does not determine everything, one can say without debate that one finds nothing of such in them. For this, there is no need to question everything that separates real modern societies from the mythical model of the *Gesellschaft*. And one does not need to examine if there is not at work, in these societies, something that would have some connection with what the term "culture" is likely to evoke.<sup>[121]</sup>

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[120] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (1887), Courier Dover Publications, 1957.

[121] In other fields of knowledge, the existence of influences combining several factors, none of which are likely to fully explain what one observes, is self-evident. If we consider, for example, the length of the day. It depends on both the latitude and position of the Earth compared to the Sun. Furthermore, one cannot understand the effects of one without taking the other into account. For example, the effect of the latitude on 21st June (the day is longer the further you go north) is the opposite of what it is on 21st December (the day is shorter the further you go north); conversely, the effect of the Earth's position compared to the Sun is completely different depending on whether one is at the equator (this position is indifferent) or at the Pole (the length of the day in this position varies from 0 to 24 hours). If one is to believe the debates over the influence of culture, the existence of such combined influences, meaning that culture jointly intervenes with what is classified as intentionality, and that one cannot understand one of these influences if one disregards the other, is often poorly understood in social sciences.



Beyond the myth, to really understand the relationships between modernity and inherited cultures, it is necessary to carefully distinguish two ways of conceiving this opposition. On the one hand, there are two conceptions of the social order that establish a major opposition of identities, with a relentless conflict between those who revere and those who reject the traditional order. On this front, the emancipation movement led by the Enlightenment represents a fundamental break. And there are, on the other side, the categories that everyone uses to envision the world, and what these categories owe, without it being known, to an inherited vision. On this front, which it is necessary to examine if one wants to think out the diversity of the world, the Enlightenment did not cause any break. This contrast can be clearly seen, as we shall see, when we look at the diversity of what is understood when we speak of emancipation.

## What does it mean to be emancipated?

What does it mean to be emancipated? It is certainly to move from servitude to freedom. But what exactly does servitude mean? What are its characteristics? And, correlatively, what does it mean to be free? To conceive what it means to be emancipated, it is necessary to have a representation of what is specific to the free man. It is in the way in which the idea of freedom is embodied that the diversity of cultures encroaches upon the holy of holies where the abstract ideal of freedom is developed. This can clearly be seen when one compares the visions of freedom that drive those who one can assume are the most independent of any cultural particularism: the philosophers of freedom. Each of them, believing that they are envisioning the latter in its universal essence, remain nevertheless marked by what taken for granted in the culture in which their minds have been shaped. <sup>[122]</sup>

The desire for freedom takes on meaning, like the other aspects of life, in the reference scene that is specific to each society. The form that it takes, the representations and the practices that are associated with it, depend on what is perceived as the major peril and on the ways of salvation considered as allowing this peril to be avoided. Depending on the reference scene within which one finds oneself, it is neither the same forms of servitude, nor the same forms of autonomy, which take on importance.

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[122] We shall refer here to: Philippe d'Iribarne, « Trois figures de la liberté », *op. cit.*

## Anglo-Saxon freedom conceived as property

With Locke, the idea of freedom is intimately associated with that of property.<sup>[123]</sup> The “Property” of an individual comprises “his Life, Liberty and Estate” (§ 87).

This vision of freedom as property takes on meaning in a reference scene where the major peril that needs to be warded off is to see one’s destiny depend on the will of others. When Locke describes the state of nature as “a State of perfect Freedom”, he specifies that by this he means a state of freedom, for men, “to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man”. (§ 4)

The image of the person who is protected from any intrusion by a foreign will is repeated three times in a single sentence: “without asking leave”, “without depending upon the Will”, “dispose as they think fit”. To be free means acting like an owner when he uses his property.

The only restriction that men encounter in this mythical state of nature is that they must remain “within the bounds of the Law of Nature”, i.e. ensure that everyone benefits from the protection against the interventions of others, which everyone is seeking; “no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty or Possessions”. While this “law of nature” does not only translate into towards others, but into duties towards oneself, it is because the way in which one acts towards oneself demands the respect for the property of the Maker: “For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker [...] they are his Property, [...] made to last during his [...] Pleasure” (§ 6).

What makes the state of nature unsatisfactory is the fact that the major peril that is warded off in it by right is not so in reality; the enjoyment of the right given by the state of nature is in practice “very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the Invasion of others” (§ 123). It is because, in the state of nature, men see their “property” threatened that they establish a society. They form a society for “the mutual Preservation of their Lives, Liberties and Estates”, things, says Locke “which I call by the general name, Property” (§ 123). Creating a society devoted to freedom means, by protecting property, preserving everyone from the intervention of others, whether this concerns oneself or one’s goods; it leads to warding off the major peril. To achieve this, men consent to give up to a “Body Politick” the rights attached to their property, the exercise of which protects the latter (§ 88, 89, 129), while strictly conserving what they have not given up (§ 22).

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[123] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), *op. cit.*

The key issue, concerning at the same time life, freedom and wealth, is to know whether or not they are exposed to the interventions of others. It is this common characteristic which means that these three aspects of existence can be intimately associated and be part of the same category: property. Indeed, this category defines what is protected, “preserved”, from the undertakings of others. Conversely, in the perspectives that are specific to many other cultures, grouping together life, freedom and wealth seems meaningless, or may even appear to be deeply shocking.

In his *Treatises*, Locke adopts a particular political position, which he was far from sharing with all his fellow citizens, who were more conservative or, on the contrary, more radical. However, the conception that he has of what it means to be free, the link that he makes between freedom and property, are not specific to him. They reflect a vision that deeply marks the UK and that one finds, sometimes in a surprising manner from a foreign perspective, associated with political positions that are markedly different from theirs. This vision is to be found in the USA. “A man”, declared Madison at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, “has a property in his opinions and the free communication of them. He has a property [...] in the safety and liberty of his person.” A few years later, he spoke of “a citizen’s ‘property’ in his rights”.<sup>[124]</sup>

### *German freedom as a voice in the chapter in a community*

With Kant, one finds a conception of freedom that is completely different from the one that prevails with Locke. The opposition between the freedom possessed in the state of nature and that which is possessed in the state of society is no longer an opposition between a precarious freedom and a sure freedom, but an opposition between a “wild freedom”,<sup>[125]</sup> a sort of false freedom, and a freedom of an individual, transformed, civilised, by the dependence in which he finds himself within a whole. When Kant evokes the agreement that everyone has given to the laws that govern it, it is not a question, as with Locke, of a series of agreements by individuals entrusting, each for their own part, to the group that they form, the defence of what they individually own. It involves an agreement of a united whole, of the collective sovereign formed by a group of individuals who are transformed and civilised by this integration into a whole, and where everyone consequently acts as an element of this whole. “There is only the will shared and unified by all, as long as everyone for all and all for everyone decide the same thing, there is consequently only the will of the universally unified people that can be the legislator.”<sup>[126]</sup>

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[124] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[125] I. Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* (1784), [http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/excerpts/kant\\_perpetual.pdf](http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/excerpts/kant_perpetual.pdf), p.8.

[126] I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1796), Cambridge University Press, 2013.

This freedom, which is inseparable from the existence of a whole, within which each individual decides for all and all for everyone, takes its meaning in a completely different reference scene than that which characterises Locke. The concern for uniting “into one people” from what may merely be a “wild multitude” recurs constantly with Kant, in one form or another.<sup>[127]</sup>

He goes as far as to consider the way in which one can get a “race of devils”<sup>[128]</sup> to live together. He looks with horror at the trees “that live apart from others and sprout their branches freely”, and, consequently, “grow stunted, crooked, and bent”, while, on the contrary, “in a forest”, each “by seeking to take air and light from all the others around them, compel each other to look for air and light above themselves and thus grow up straight and beautiful”.<sup>[129]</sup>

Behind these images lies the spectre of a humanity composed of individuals who are violent and deformed because, they have not been taken, or constrained, by an order that has civilised them. Such an order is necessary to ward off what poses a threat.

Man needs to be forced to escape from his bad inclinations by virtue of the constraints brought about by life with his fellow men. This is how he can gain access to a “development of all his capacities”.<sup>[130]</sup> He “requires a master, who will break his will and force him to obey a will that is universally valid”.<sup>[131]</sup> Consequently, “there can therefore be no legitimate resistance of the people against the lawmaker of the State; for juridical status, legitimacy, is only possible through subjection to the general legislative Will of the people”.<sup>[132]</sup> The force of the prohibition that is thus affirmed reflects the peril that must be warded off. The “law is so sacred (so inviolable) that from a practical point of view it is already a crime to simply question it, therefore to suspend its effect for a time”. Consequently, it cannot be a question of an English-style freedom. A form of freedom compatible with this vision can only leave everyone under the civilising pressure of all. Consequently, to be free means having a voice in the directions taken by this all and, in this way, being able to consider that one manages oneself; it is to have “relinquished entirely his wild, lawless freedom in order to find his freedom as such undiminished, in a dependence upon laws, that is in a rightful condition, since this dependence arises from his own lawgiving will”.<sup>[133]</sup>

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[127] I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (1795), London: George Allen & Unwin, New York: the Macmillan company, 1917, p. 164.

[128] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[129] I. Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, *op. cit.*, p.8.

[130] *Ibid.*

[131] *Ibid.*

[132] I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[133] *Ibid.*, p. 581.

Kant is a unique individual, and the German vision of freedom is compatible with very diverse conceptions of what can be in practical terms the community in which the individual is called to be free: a principality, a social group or humanity as a whole. However, in any event, the importance of the reference to a form a community is consistently a characteristic of the German conception of freedom. This reference plays a central role both among those who, such as Fichte, have the cult of German singularity, and are the most attached to German identity,<sup>[134]</sup> and among those who, such as Habermas, show the most mistrust towards this singularity and would willingly see Germans as humans in general with nothing that sets them apart from their fellow humans.<sup>[135]</sup>

### *Freedom and nobility in France*

The image that Sieyès has of the free man is again very different from what one finds with Locke or Kant. Whether he denounces servitude where, he considers, the Third Estate is constrained, or if he evokes its future state, he is driven by the same vision: to never be obliged to bow down to anyone, be treated with the consideration due to one's position; a free man is not willing to humiliate himself to satisfy any base interest whatsoever.

While those in the Third Estate "*languish in the sad and cowardly customs of ancient servitude*",<sup>[136]</sup> it is not because they are subject to the despotic power of a sovereign; apart from a few rare periods, Sieyès considers that "*it is not the King who reigns; it is the Court*".<sup>[137]</sup> It is the existence of privileges that is responsible for this: while, at the same time, it "*makes nobility like a breed apart*", privilege "*turns everybody else into a nation of helots, destined to serve*".<sup>[138]</sup>

How then, in the eyes of Sieyès and his readers, could the members of the Third Estate, some of whom, far from serving, had a large domestic staff, be qualified as helots, meaning slaves? It is because the main peril stems from being reduced to a social condition that is likely to be qualified as "vile". Such a condition, associates, whatever one's lifestyle, the infamous universe of those who have accepted to yield, out of cowardice or interest. If one is not among the privileged, one is continuously

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[134] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/12\\_EnlightPhilos\\_Doc8\\_English.pdf](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/12_EnlightPhilos_Doc8_English.pdf).

[135] Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Justification" in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, MIT Press, 1990.

[136] *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ?*, op. cit., p. 78.

[137] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[138] *Ibid.*, p. 100. For readers of Sieyès, nourished by Greek history, it was clear that the helot was a slave.

told that one belongs to this universe; it is necessary “to resolve to endure all kinds of contempt, insult and humiliation”.<sup>[139]</sup> No matter whether one has great possessions or has achieved great things. It is the destiny of those in the Third Estate: “One has dared to place an interdiction on the order of the Third Estate. It has been told: ‘Whatever your services, whatever your talents, you will go so far; you will not go beyond that’”.<sup>[140]</sup> Being free means escaping from such a condition.

When Sieyès states: “One is not free through privileges, but through the rights of the citizen, rights that belong to all”,<sup>[141]</sup> it is in thinking that the elimination of those entrusted with privileges will at the same time make the “helots” that serve them disappear. However, in order to escape from the threat of being reduced to a servile condition, it is even better to have gained access to the enchanted universe of the nobility. By enjoying the privileges that are inherent to the condition of nobleness, one escapes doubly from the major peril. On the one hand, by being protected by them, one does not have to bow down to the will of others, even that of the Prince. On the other hand, as one escapes from the law that applies to all, one appears not to belong to the common, with the image of baseness that is associated with it. Sieyès, who proclaims that the Third Estate “will become noble again”,<sup>[142]</sup> clearly means that the enlightened bourgeoisie, of which he is the spokesman, gains access to new privileges. He emphasises the extent to which the “available classes”, that is “those where a sort of ease allows men to receive a liberal education, cultivate their reason”,<sup>[143]</sup> distinguish themselves from what is common. And he states that the “representatives of the nation” should be chosen among them.

One thus still finds the form of freedom that prevailed in the Ancien Régime, “a kind of irregular and intermittent liberty [...], always bound up with the idea of exception and privilege, which allowed people to defy the law as almost as much as the exercise of arbitrary power”<sup>[144]</sup>

This vision of freedom, which associates that of nobleness and honour is not, here again, specific to a particular individual. It is constantly found in France with the defenders of freedom, even when they are “politically liberal”, such as Tocqueville or Constant, and appear to be influenced most by the English vision of the latter.

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[139] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[140] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[141] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[142] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[143] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[144] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

## *Ideologies and cultures*

In each of the three contexts that we have just addressed, the desire for emancipation carried by the Enlightenment led to a major ideological break. There was a shift from an ancient vision of freedom, which considered it as being confined to a social position, to a modern vision that makes it the first of the human rights. This movement led to an upheaval in the social order in each of the societies in which it took place. However, in each place, this upheaval was accompanied with a great cultural continuity. It is because the advent of the Enlightenment did not affect the reference scenes that are specific to the each of the societies where it occurred, and the conception of freedom that prevailed in each of them continued to take on meaning in the reference scene that characterised it.<sup>[145]</sup>

To understand what thus occurred, it is important to see the extent to which the ideologies are of a very different nature than the reference scenes that are specific to each culture. The changes that occur in the register of ideologies, with what this leads to in the transformation of the social order, are compatible with a great stability in the reference scenes. This remains true when one moves from a conservative ideology that values faithfulness to traditions, to customs, to established forms, to those in power, to an emancipating ideology characterised by the will to throw off the weight of the past and destroy the powerful. Those who clash, within one same society, in the field of the ideologies and conceptions of the social order do nevertheless share the same forms of fear. Conversely, the stability of reference scenes in no way prevents major ideological upheavals. It is perfectly compatible with a questioning of “traditions”, in the sense of established ways of acting, and the social order in force. The common assimilation between a “culture” and a set of practices passed on by tradition (practices valued by a conservative ideology leading to defend a certain social order) constitutes a major obstacle to understanding phenomena of cultural continuity.

Moreover, to fully understand this cultural continuity, it is not the defenders of “traditions” and the aspects of social life the most marked by the existence of what are claimed to be “traditional” practices, customs, and legacies that should be examined. It is much better to consider the most radical opponents of “traditions”, those who have the greatest passion for innovation, and the most “modern” aspects of social life, and the most marked by the circulation of ideas and practices across borders.

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[145] The link was probably made simultaneously through two channels: a direct influence from the local reference scene, and an indirect influence through the traditional figure of the free man that prevailed in each of the societies in question.

By proceeding in this manner, one avoids as far as possible the perception being blurred by the presence of “traditional” forms, in the sense most commonly given to this term. For our part, by focusing on both the thinkers of freedom and the functioning of multinational companies, it is indeed in this direction that we have oriented our research.

## Unity and plurality of humanity

Would the plurality of cultures imply that there exist several parallel humanities, living in universes with such different meanings that any real communication between them is impossible? Or is it compatible, and to what extent, with a certain unity of humanity? In fact, concerning the aspects of existence considered here, this unity is clearly present at two levels. On the one hand, humanity shares common fundamental fears, although the various peoples focus on different fears. On the other hand, they do not lack messages of salvation that, to varying degrees, are likely to have meaning where very disparate fears have prevailed.

### *Unity of basic experiences, diversity of cultures*

All human beings go through the experience of being projected into a world that is beyond them, a mysterious and frightening world. If, among the many fears that assail them, one of them takes on particular importance, it is probably in focusing on that fear that they open up the possibility, by warding it off, of more generally warding off the vague anxiety carried by their being in the world. Their ability to engage in such a process is the basis of the existence, at the level of societies, of representations and practices that more effectively ward off a vague anxiety, since the latter has been duly focused upon. We have here a common property of humanity. No society can claim to have “gone beyond” this form of being in the world to access a purely rational relationship with existence.

Furthermore, while the eminent place that others give to a certain type of fear (and, correlatively, to certain ways of salvation) may seem very strange to those who favour other references, it does not mean that the fear in question is unknown to them. For example, let us suppose that I am French. The fear of seeing my destiny depend on decisions that I do not control is not unfamiliar to me, nor that of being soiled by what I feel as being impure, or again that of being a victim of what my friends and relatives are plotting behind my back. Of course, I tend to be surprised by the importance that others give to these fears (and, correlatively, by their attachment to the ways of salvation that ward them off). However, I can occasionally experience them. Moreover, I do not lack words to name them, which suggests



that they are not unknown to me. I thereby have some access to cultures other than mine. Similarly, if others find it strange that the fear to find oneself in a servile position is of such importance in France, it does not mean that this fear is radically unfamiliar to them.

The unity of the species is reflected by the existence of experiences that can be described as primary experiences, which everyone has in all cultures. One usually quotes the experience of verticality, or the transition from day to night. These primary experiences form the basis of categories, such as the opposition between high and low for verticality, and that of light and darkness for the transition from day to night, which appear to be universal.<sup>[146]</sup> Sources of anxiety and of comfort, such as illness and health, strength and weakness, acceptance and rejection, are part of this group of experiences. The reference scene specific to each culture selects, among the host of distressing experiences that men face, what will focus on a vague set of fears. But to ensure its originality, there is no need to call on the experiences of what is known only to the culture in question. It is sufficient for it to draw, in a particular manner, on the vast repertoire of the common experiences of humanity.

What, within a society, constitutes the peril feared above all does not necessarily stem from a unique primary experience, but can correspond to an association of several of them. Some of these perils, as well as the corresponding ways of salvation, combine experiences that “naturally” (*i.e.* everywhere) go together, at least as a first approximation. One can associate images with them that are to be found everywhere. This is undoubtedly the case for the image of the poor person, built by grouping together the experiences of hunger, thirst, and cold, in contrast to the opposite experiences that are the basis of the image of the rich person. But one can also be faced with a combination of experiences that do not “naturally” go together. This is the case for what provides the basis of the notion of “vile”. The peril in question associates the register of being soiled (an unblemished honour, the purity of blood, the un noble character of the tasks of the gravedigger, butcher, etc.) with that of weakness (bow down, submit, renounce being the conqueror), an association that has nothing universal about it.<sup>[147]</sup>

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[146] Cf. George Lakoff and Marc Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, *op. cit.* These categories are perhaps “pre-programmed” in the brain at birth. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1994, makes this point.

[147] The composite thus created involves, to avoid everyone being constantly being pulled hither and yon between contradictory references, an array of ideological work allowing a connection to be made between the dimensions in question (*cf.* the relationship with the blood spilt in the ideology of chivalry).

One same primary experience plays very different roles from one culture to another (serving very unevenly to give a meaning) depending on the importance it has in the reference scene that characterises them. For example, let us take the contact with decomposing matter, with the feeling of disgust that it provokes, a contact that is the basis of the opposition between what is soiled and what is pure. This experience plays an important role in the Indian world. It remains essential where, like in France, the opposition between noble and vile prevails. It can also sometimes play a certain role, beyond situations where it is in directly at issue, without necessarily contributing to structure the entire social life. For example, it we are to believe Mary Douglas, the English especially use it to encode what is clean and what is dirty.<sup>[148]</sup>

Analysing the signifying chains that are at play in the ways other than one's own to give meaning, and intellectually understanding what they result in, would not appear to raise a major difficulty. That does not mean that one will stop having an unsurpassable feeling of strangeness when in contact with a foreign culture. This especially holds true when one is dealing with composite categories, such as the noble and vile, which are based on uncommon associations of elementary experiences. These categories undoubtedly retain something strange for those for whom they do not structure their perception, like composite sounds that do not exist in a foreign language and which one does not really manage to pronounce (such as the English "th" for French people). It is less difficult to go into what others feel, but it does remain difficult when one is dealing with categories that one knows, but which are used in very different contexts than one is used to associating them with. For example, the use of the category of interest, in American culture, to speak of ethics (with the association of ethics with "real interests" in contrast to the "interests of the moment") can only seem strange in French culture, insofar as to behave in an ethical way is precisely necessary to be "above" interests, the latter being readily qualified as "base". Furthermore, to intellectually understand what is at play in certain situations does not mean that one is able to feel the anxiety or fullness that others associate with them.

The understanding of another culture is facilitated when, due to strong interactions between societies, the categories that the latter favour are not absent in the one to which one belongs, even if they do not play a structural role. For example, the category of noble is not unknown to American society or at least, while it is not a common reference, it does have meaning for certain components of the latter, at least for certain social groups. The French expression "*noblesse oblige*" can be found

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[148] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, *op. cit.*

in dictionaries and is used on occasion. The Federalist, for example, uses this category little, but does not ignore it. It evokes “a people [...] who [...] have nobly established general liberty and independence” (n° 2), and looks at “the leaders of the revolution” as having “pursued a new and more noble course” (n° 14).

## *Cultures, universal messages of salvation and values*

Many movements of thought, religions or ideologies that aim to address humanity as a whole are received in a wide variety of cultures, and this reception involves an adjustment to the local ways of giving meaning. But the fact that such adjustments exist does not mean that those who have received the same message within different cultures do not share anything. For example, it would be excessive to say that there is nothing in common between what an English person, a French person and a German understand by freedom. For all of them, it is a question of a relationship between an individual and something, a force, that has a certain sense of what is external to it (even if it is a question of bad inclinations and if the latter can also be regarded as belonging to the person who is seeking to free himself of them). It is a question of fighting against the influence of this foreign entity, even if, from one culture to another, we are not dealing with the same entities and the same ways of fighting against their influence.

More generally speaking, the ways of salvation proposed by the messages that are intended to be universal are likely to resonate, in a differentiated manner, with what is specific to the different societies. There is, of course, nothing to stop these messages from offering those who receive them broader perspectives than warding off the fundamental fear that haunts them. It can happen that, by virtue of these messages, some are profoundly transformed, that, as the psalmist says, “ways open up in your heart”.<sup>[149]</sup> But these messages are at least expected to play a warding off role, and this has a major consequence on the way in which they take on meaning and are received.<sup>[150]</sup>

One can resume the same type of analysis by speaking of values. Certain core abstract values can be found in many societies (or even in a universal manner): one can speak in many places of freedom, equality, dignity, etc. When one questions what the incarnation of a value involves, its implementation, the specific meaningful

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[149] Ps 83, 6. *World English Bible*, Pinch Village LLC, 2014.

[150] There is a good example of the role played by this type of expectation in accounts of conversations; cf. Geneviève Comeau and Jean-François Zorn (Eds.), *Appel à témoins, mutations sociales et avenir de la mission chrétienne*, Le Cerf, 2004.

framework in each society, the specific founding experiences that symbolise fullness of being in them on the one hand, and destitution and annihilation on the other, come into play. This framework leads to what one means exactly by dignity, equality, etc. being specified, depending on the context in which one finds oneself. But in some respects, as we have seen with freedom, this does not necessarily prevent the different ways in which one conceives these values from having something in common.

However, while the universal messages of salvation may resonate with many different cultures, this does not mean that a given message is compatible with all cultures.

For example, one can question the reasons why the key message of emancipation conveyed by the Enlightenment materialised in European societies or European cultures. Why, in addition, did it take a particularly radical form in England, France and the USA?<sup>[151]</sup> This is undoubtedly not independent of the fact that, in these countries, a form of submission to an external force is experienced as a major peril, and the protection from this peril as the way of salvation *par excellence*. On the contrary, it is more difficult for this message to be received and for the pluralistic democracy to take shape in societies where, as in China or Arab countries, it is division that is perceived as the major peril. In these societies, the presence of a strong and undisputed power (as in China), or a perfect unity of thought (in Arab countries) are essential ingredients for the way of salvation that is favoured.<sup>[152]</sup> The development of a pluralistic democracy requires inventing institutional forms that take this factor into account and much remains to be done to achieve it.

Similarly, one can find a correlation between the poor success of Marxism in Anglo-Saxon countries and the fact that the perspective of salvation that it proposes leaves each individual with little sense of being master of their own destiny. In this context, this perspective can hardly resonate with the ways of salvation that the Anglo-Saxon imagination favours in its various forms.

The way in which this reception of universal messages occurs within each culture does not only depend on the properties of the message and culture in question, but on the way in which the connection work that is conducted, which is in any event necessary, allows them to be matched.

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[151] On the fact that this message took a more radical form than in Germany cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004

[152] Philippe d'Iribarne, *L'islam devant la démocratie*, Gallimard, 2013, and *Islam, démocratie et Occident*, éditions UPPR, ebook, 2014.

For example, if we take the modern day message of salvation through economic development, for this ideal to actually materialise in the concrete realm of everyday life, there is a need for effective forms of cooperation to be developed within the production system, and first and foremost within companies. This requires having representations and organisational models to ensure that the various situations associated with a cooperative way of functioning (whether it concerns reporting relationships, cooperation between departments or client relationships) are well accepted. For this, they need to take a form that allows them to be considered as positive in the meaningful framework that prevails locally. Yet the elaboration of such representations and such practices has made very unequal progress depending on the places. The combination of appropriate forms of organisation and rhetoric legitimising these forms of organisation in the local framework of meaning has particularly developed in the old industrialised countries over the last two centuries – we have seen it with France and the USA. In developing countries, this combination of legitimising forms of organisation and rhetoric still only come together in a nascent state, in certain specific organisations.<sup>[153]</sup> This certainly has an effect on the difficulty that one finds there to obtain a good productive efficiency.

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[153] Philippe d'Iribarne, with Alain Henry, *Successful Companies in the Developing World*, *op. cit.* The cases that are analysed are in Argentina, Cameroon, Mexico and Morocco.



# Chapter 4

An unidentified  
sociological object





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## An unidentified sociological object

When one speaks of culture, it is always a question, in one way or another, of what connects the individual to a larger whole, of what he shares with some of his fellow human beings, without this being with all humanity, and which directs the way in which he situates himself in life, of what for him is self-evident, what has been passed on to him, and what he will in turn pass on. But a whole host of conceptions of this notion coexist. They differ in the idea that one has of what is shared: practices, values, meanings, identity; simple materials that everyone uses by will, or a force that directs thoughts and acts in a decisive manner.<sup>[154]</sup> Contemporary social sciences, for their part, have virtually abandoned any conception of culture based on the mythical image of the community (*Gemeinschaft*), where everyone is rigorously guided by a way of thinking and acting that he has inherited from his ancestors. One no longer speaks of a “collective consciousness” involving a “merger of all individual feelings into a common feeling”, as conceived by Durkheim.<sup>[155]</sup> Apart from a managerial stream of the literature celebrating “corporate cultures”,<sup>[156]</sup> this totalitarian vision of culture, which makes humans sorts of “cultural dopes”,<sup>[157]</sup> is no longer used in investigations into cultures. It mainly remains like a sort of spectre brandished by those who, through their attacks against what they describe as “culturalism”, reject any vision of cultures that gives them some consistency.

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[154] Among the presentations of the diversity of conceptions of culture, we can mention Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order*, University of California Press, 1987; Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, *Culture and Society; Contemporary Debates*, Cambridge University Press, 1990. Jeffrey Alexander continues the debate on the role of culture in sociology in *The Meaning of Social Life; A Cultural Sociology*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

[155] Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), PUF, 1978, p. 329, 536.

[156] One finds a critical analysis of this literature in: Mats Alvesson, *Understanding Organizational Culture*, Sage, 2002.

[157] According to the expression used by H. Garfinkel. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 1967, Polity Press, London, p. 68.

But this distance taken from the image of the community leads contemporary approaches to come up against, in one way or another, the same difficulty: how to give the autonomy of actors its rightful place, and to their ability to select among what they have inherited, to reject, sometimes radically, established ways of being, to innovate, in short, how to give the rightful place to action without as much strictly taking the mythical image of society (*Gesellschaft*), a rational union of individuals free of any ties?<sup>[158]</sup> Therefore, how can one account for the existence of forms of unity and cultural continuity?

A way to avoid the difficulty is to focus exclusively on objects of research where there is no need to ask the question. For this, one only has to devote one's attention on studying forms of "cultures" (in the sense of shared ways of understanding and acting) that are both local (the culture of a workshop, a hospital ward, a bowlers' club), and clearly transitional. One can thus exclude any idea of a culture that is both encompassing and with a certain sustainability.<sup>[159]</sup> The inherited aspect disappears, or at least moves into the background, in favour of what is built *hic et nunc* by the actors. This type of approach, which owes a lot to symbolic interactionism, dominates contemporary cultural studies. In some respects, the term "culture" thus continues to be associated with the image of the community, but the community aspect becomes something that is both local and precarious, subject to the hazards of the life of a group of individuals who are only part of it in a more or less transitional fashion.

The proponents of such an approach to culture seek, and rightly so, to exorcise a totalitarian vision of the influence of what is shared and inherited, a vision which, it is true, has played a major role in the history of cultural anthropology. They work to deconstruct what appears to be "traditional", "authentic", and part of immemorial customs. However, by doing so, they omit to conduct the same type of deconstruction for what is regarded as "modern", "innovative", and radically built by the actors. This choice can be understood for those who, such as Africanists, focus on the traditional fields of anthropology. Their work as researchers involves observing societies where the reference to traditions, to the word of ancestors and to the unity of the community is omnipresent in the discourse, and highlighting what is illusory in this reference.

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[158] It should be noted that no one finds it difficult to understand that social belonging is far from not having an influence on practices, for example, political practices, without mechanically conditioning them. The mythical opposition between "community", where the culture fully determines practices, and "society", where autonomous subjects freely determine themselves, makes it more difficult to accept, in the field we are dealing with, the existence of an influence which, while being significant, does not have the form of a total conditioning.

[159] See, for example, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, « La rigueur du qualitatif ; l'anthropologie comme science sociale empirique », communication at the AFD/EUDN Conference "Does Culture Matter for Development?", Paris, 5 December 2007.

But this approach tends to divert them from understanding, what, conversely, in so-called modern societies, as within their main fields, comes from a legacy that the actors put forward even less because they are not aware of it. Those who adopt this way of looking at things undoubtedly tend to confuse the particular form of unity and continuity associated with the image of the community with the most general idea of unity and continuity. It diverts them from understanding that this unity and this continuity can take very different forms from those that such an image suggests.

At the same time, certain approaches, while similarly refusing a totalitarian conception of culture, focus on forms of cultural continuity that are both more sustainable and likely to concern relatively vast groups. Some associate the notion of culture with the existence of habits and routines, which have a certain inertia, even if the actors, who are far from receiving them passively, always have the ability to question them and make them evolve. Others focus on questions of meaning, whether for the meaning understood, *hic et nunc*, by the diversity of events and situations, or the overall meaning given to life. We shall see that, in fact, they all find it difficult to free themselves of the image of the community that bears customs and traditions that are more or less revered, associated with a feeling of identity. They continue to give preference to studying what, within a human group, concerns a shared manner of giving a meaning to shared practices. In this context, they completely disregard the sociological object represented by what is both inherited and common to individuals and groups that are completely different in their ways of acting and giving meaning.

Furthermore, on the fringe of research on culture, there is an array of reflection on the relativity of the categories of understanding and the diversity of languages. But we shall see that this diversity does not explain the phenomena of unity and cultural continuity that characterise the diversity of forms of living together.<sup>[160]</sup>

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[160] One could make more in-depth distinctions than we shall within each of the families in question. But the exercise would perhaps be endless since we are dealing with so many diversified approaches. Our argument is simply to show that the basic orientations of these diverse families mean that they are unlikely to identify the phenomena that we have sought to describe. Furthermore, we will not mention certain families of approach for which the purpose is clearly not to work to understand the diversity of ways of giving meaning and acting. This is the case for social psychology approaches, which are based on the use of scales of attitude and characterise each culture with a few scores (4 or 5 scores according to the versions in the research of Geert Hofstede, which is widely the reference in this field: Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences*, Sage, London, 1980, 2001). These approaches do not look at the variety of ways of giving meaning. This is also the case for approaches that focus on the construction of identities and, in particular, national identities, and for which the purpose is not to help to understand the diversity of ways of acting (approaches that are referred to in Chapter 2).

## Culture as a set of practices: the primacy of action

A large part of contemporary sociology associates the notion of culture with the fact that each actor, in the management of their daily lives, is not obliged to reinvent the world all the time and that they have at their disposal a whole repertoire of tried and tested practices that allow them to guide themselves in life. Many scholars have contributed to developing an approach to culture that adopts this perspective.<sup>[161]</sup> The latter ties in with a major trend in anthropology, focussed on the observation of practices that are both material (housing, clothing, food) and ceremonial.<sup>[162]</sup> It is, however, characterised by the fact that it considers customary practices more as sorts of toolkits that everyone uses as they see fit than models that one is obliged to follow. These toolkits simplify life (for example, when one takes one's car, one does not need to ask oneself a whole host of questions about what the road signs mean, which side of the road one must take, or what the steering wheel or pedals are used for). These practices are a result of experience, they have been developed over time and remain as long as we find them convenient. But the group that they form is constantly subject to minor or major changes. Precedence thus continues to be given to action and one avoids a totalitarian conception of culture. But what should one do, therefore, about the continuity of a certain "spirit" that accompanies the evolution of practices?

### A thorny issue

The desire to build a representation of society that gives the autonomy of actors its rightful place, yet without ignoring what concerns cultural continuity, is a source of perplexity that for some leads to questions that remain unanswered.

For example, Jean-Daniel Reynaud, opposing Durkheim, affirms the primacy of action.<sup>[163]</sup> *"It is not necessary, as Durkheim believed, to pose a collective conscience as the place of rules. Instead, there is a need to analyse the way in which rules are created, transformed or suppressed, i.e. regulation processes"* (p. 31). This idea is persistently repeated: *"They [the rules] are not transcendent in terms of human activity, they are, on the contrary, a product of them."* (p. 33); Actors are *"truly autonomous, capable of inventing their rules"* (p. 272), etc. Consequently, *"what ensure the stability of rules*

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[161] In addition to Anthony Giddens, who we will come back to, Ann Swidler is often quoted, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies", *American Sociological Review*, 1986, vol. 51, April, p. 273-286.

[162] It also inherits, without necessarily holding it up as an example, an entire school of thought which, in line with Wittgenstein and pragmatism, considers that is only through an analysis of practices that one has access to meaning.

[163] Jean-Daniel Reynaud, *Les Règles du jeu ; l'action collective et la régulation sociale*, Armand Colin, 1989.

[...] *are the strategies of the actors who use them and build them*" (p. 63). Such a statement has the force of evidence: *"Social history shows it so abundantly that it is not necessary to demonstrate it"* (p. 31).

At the same time, Jean-Daniel Reynaud departs from the proponents of the purest forms of methodological individualism. For example, he evokes the weight of *"customs"* (p. 34, 37, 101, 280), *"culture"* and *"cultural standards"* (p. 41, 43), *"traditions"* (p. 42, 43, 61, 119, 216), and *"mores"* (p. 115). He associates the existence of *"communities"* with these elements (p. 79). But he seeks to reintegrate this set of notions into a representation that remains focussed on the action of autonomous individuals. The fact that one individual is characterised by belonging to a community is seen as being conditional upon the existence of a project that pre-exists this belonging (p. 91). And the shared meaning taken on by situations and actions is considered as being conditional upon the action: *"What the community tries to agree on by creating a regulation and 'negotiating' it is also a meaning of social action [...] Creating rules of behaviour gives a meaning to the objects addressed (positive or negative, moral or immoral, beautiful or ugly, effective or ineffective). Creating rules for relationships gives a meaning to the social space"* (p. 208).

Yet everything is, ultimately, not so clear. *"When the weight of habits, traditions and customs is very strong, is there still in practice an autonomy of the actor? Does his action have another meaning that that which is proposed to him or imposed from the outside? Does the adhesion by which he consents to the tradition have great importance in reality? One can, of course, exaggerate the weight of the custom and it is true that in nearly all the cases we know, the reality shows rather a profusion of initiatives and a perpetual renewal, or reinvention (corporations have been an incessant shake-up). But while, overall, the essential aspects of the tradition are reinvented, i.e. maintained, does the autonomy of the actor have much weight? Does it not resemble very much what would be the effect of determinism?"* (p. 279). It then remains to conceive the manner in which what changes is combined with what remains, what is unaltered when the *"reinvention"* occurs. J.-D. Reynaud leaves the question open.

### *Cultures, routines and repertoires of action; the theory of "structuration"*

The attempt generally considered as being the most successful for constructing a theory (called *"structuration"*), able to account simultaneously for the place of the action and the role of structures is that of Anthony Giddens.<sup>[164]</sup>

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[164] We will quote Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory; Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, University of California Press, 1979 (1986 edition) and *The Constitution of Society*, University of California Press, 1984.

Giddens attaches a central role to the “routines” that humans rely on to manage the situations that they encounter in their daily lives. *“The concept of routinisation”,* he states, *“is vital to the theory of structuration”* (1984, p. 60). However, far from being received passively, these routines, founded in *“tradition, custom or habit”* are *“worked at’ continually”* (p. 86). The actors, aware of their existence, are able to account for them (p. 29), and provide *“good reasons”* to do what they do (p. 178). Far from enduring *“the structural framework within which their conduct is carried out”,* they *“draw upon that framework in producing their action as the same time as they reconstitute it through that action”* (1979, p. 144). And in the very act of seizing it, they are able to make it evolve: *“All social reproduction is grounded in the knowledgeable application and reapplication of rules and resources by actors in situated social contexts. [...] Social systems are chronically produced and reproduced by their constituent participants. Change, or its potentiality, is thus inherent in all moments of social reproduction”* (1979, p. 114).

The major reference is constituted by rules that govern the interactions face to face. And, starting with relationships of proximity, Giddens considers the structural elements that govern them. These elements have varying levels of sustainability and concern unevenly broad parts of social life. They are thus more or less *“deep-layered”*, the *“institutions”* for their part being *“practices constitutive of social systems that are the most deeply-layered”* (1979, p. 65).

The cultural dimension is not absent. One is dealing with *“codes”* (1984, p. 16). Giddens evokes a *“language”,* a *“common sense”,* or *“tacit presuppositions”* (1979, p. 251). It is a question of the *“mastery of the ‘dialogical’ contexts of communication”,* a mastery which *“involves the accumulation of practical knowledge of the conventions drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social interactions”* (1979, p. 129).

In the structural elements that are thus evoked, one remains very close to practices and what guides them in a very direct manner: practical knowledge concerning the way in which to manage a given specific situation, rules indicating how to act in a given well-specified situation, or how to interpret a given behaviour.

The framework for thinking thus constructed allows an entire dimension of social life to be conceptualised. Within a given society, a number of practices are clearly marked by a relative continuity in time. That does not mean that those who implement them do not have a certain distance towards them, or are not able to wonder whether they are convenient for them and transform them, suddenly or in small steps, when they take action. As long as one is in the same society, and that within the latter one looks at the activities of a particular social group, and as long as one considers relatively short time scales (a case which, nowadays, undoubtedly corresponds

to the vast majority of social science research), such a framework for thinking appears likely to effectively account for what one observes. Beyond daily practices, this remains true if one takes into account the institutions that give shape to these activities: a legal and regulatory framework, and organisations that handle the management of a given aspect of social life; here again one finds a certain combination of permanence and progressive evolution.

Furthermore, presenting the theory of structuration as a general theory of relationships between structures and action has a great ideological merit. In a period that believes that modernity represents a radical break with the past and that, through its virtue, men have radically taken their destiny in hand, the existence of forms of cultural continuity poses a problem. One can, of course, seek refuge in denial and declare up front that the observation reveals no significant element of unity and cultural continuity.<sup>[165]</sup> However, a much more subtle, and undoubtedly more comfortable, way in which to manage this difficulty consists, while recognising the existence of what poses a problem, in reintegrating it into an overall representation that is consistent with the vision that one wishes to defend. The theory of structuration has this virtue. It accepts that there are elements of social life that are not the direct result of action. But it reintegrates them into a representation of society that shows them as being made up of sorts of toolkits. Everyone uses the latter as long as they find them convenient. But they can replace them as they see fit if they no longer suit them. In this context, the existence of structures, particularly of a culture that has a certain sustainability, is no longer an issue. It can be deemed to be compatible with a vision by which human beings decide sovereignly the way in which they act and thus remain perfectly in control of their destiny.<sup>[166]</sup>

This framework for thinking makes it possible to account for forms of continuity, in the lives of societies, that are related to tendency that actors have to persevere in what they have done up to that point, unless they have good reasons to do otherwise; such a tendency causes a form of inertia that puts a brake on change, while leaving the door open, taking a certain amount of time to do so, to any change that is desired by actors. However, whatever its merits, such a framework leaves one ill-prepared when one seeks to envision processes that are different from the one that is highlighted. It makes no accommodation for the presence of

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[165] This is, for example, the position taken by Erhard Friedberg in « La culture "nationale" n'est pas le tout social. Réponse à Philippe d'Iribarne ». *Revue française de sociologie*, XLVI (1), 2005.

[166] In this respect, Giddens' theory plays the same role as the one played in the USA by the contractual representation of working relationships or, in France, by representations that allow the condition of the employee, who is in fact subject to the demands of clients and the authority of a boss, to be aligned with the image of an individual who is not willing, acting out of interest or fear, to bow down before the will of anyone.

a sort of restoring force, which is very different from resistance on the part of actors to the changes that affect the organisation of society. Yet only the existence of such a force makes it possible to understand that each people conserves, in many respects, their own trajectory during history and this despite the many changes that occur over the centuries, with all that they imply in terms of borrowing from the practices of other societies. Such a framework for thinking cannot account for the visceral rejection that sometimes follows the enthusiastic experimentation of ideas that have come from elsewhere. To account for these phenomena, it is necessary, as we have seen, to use a completely different approach.

## Cultures and meaning

The trends that we have just mentioned focus on practices. Others look more at meanings. We are in the perspective of “*sciences of the mind*” as conceived by Dilthey. The latter wondered why “*every word, every sentence, every gesture or polite formula, every work of art, and every political deed is intelligible*”. He stated that “*the individual always experiences, thinks, and acts in a common sphere and only there does he understand*”.<sup>[167]</sup> One can distinguish two types of approaches within this family: on the one side, those that look at the way in which, *hic et nunc*, events and situations are deciphered, and on the other, those that focus more on understanding what gives an ultimate meaning to existence.

### *The meaning attached, hic et nunc, to the diversity of events and situations*

A vast line of research, inspired by phenomenology and hermeneutics, focuses its attention on the way in which events and situations are interpreted in daily life. It looks at the way in which reality is described and what allows human beings to communicate together without too many misunderstandings.

When, adopting such an approach, one seeks to envision the existence of a culture that is both common and sustainable in a society divided and marked by history, one finds the same difficulties as those encountered when the starting point is practices; moreover, the two types of approaches have a lot in common: practices refer to meaning and meaning to practices. The idea of shared meaning is traditionally associated with that of the community of practices: those who have the same under-

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[167] Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical world in the Human Studies”, in Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, H. P. Rickman (Ed.), London, Cambridge University Press, 1976. Referred to in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, *Culture and Society; Contemporary Debates*, op. cit., p. 37.



standing of a certain situation will tend to react to it in the same way. However, within complex societies, one sees in fact a wide variety of practices. In this context, how can we accept that it is possible to find a shared meaning in them?

This observation prompts a large number of those who study culture to turn away from what is common to a society taken as a whole. The attention thus focuses on sub-groups that are sufficiently homogeneous to have some chance of finding a shared way of giving meaning. For example, an entire line of research studies the diversity of representations that are specific to each of the social groups. This is particularly the case with Pierre Bourdieu. *“The objects of knowledge”, he states, “are constructed and not passively recorded. [...] The principle of this construction is not the system of forms a priori and universal categories specific to a transcendental subject, but this sort of historical transcendental that is the habitus. [...] The habitus contributes to constituting the field as a significant world, with a host of meanings and values.”*<sup>[168]</sup> Far from being what gathers the members of a same society, in particular those who are in a more or less favourable position on the social scale, the habitus is what distinguishes them. It relates to the specific living conditions, as well as to the representations that make these conditions bearable. Bourdieu denounces an *“infra-political relation of doxic evidence; there is no fuller way of finding natural conditions of existence that would be revolting for somebody socialised under other conditions and who does not grasp them through categories of perception issued out of this world”*.<sup>[169]</sup>

In this type of representation, one does, of course, sometimes think of a shared meaning on a broad scale. But this requires a particular institution to be at work, able to have an impact on the construction of this meaning. And in this case, one is not faced with a permanent framework for thinking that escapes the will of actors, but with an object of struggle that is transformed as the balance of power evolves. Bourdieu thus presents things concerning school.<sup>[170]</sup> He evokes *“the system of cognitive patterns, which are the principle of the construction of reality and which are common to the entire society at any given time”, a system which “constitutes the cultural unconsciousness or, better, the ‘historical transcendental’ that founds the common sense (or the ideology), that is, all that is taken for granted, that goes without saying”*. He therefore highlights what is *“largely common to all the products of a same – national – school system”*. One is faced with the product of internal struggles in an institution, *“cognitive struggles that are also, always, partly power struggles”, struggles that lead to a constant evolution in what is valued.*

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[168] Pierre Bourdieu, *Réponses, Seuil*, 1992, p. 96-97, 103.

[169] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[170] Pierre Bourdieu, « L'inconscient d'école », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, December 2000, p. 3-5.

In this approach, it is not a question of the more permanent meaningful framework, which characterises the society well beyond the university system, within which such struggles take place. One can note that Bourdieu, after having evoked “*what, in a given moment in time, merits or does not merit discussion, what is important and interesting*”, adds, in brackets, as an apposition: “*a ‘beautiful subject’ or, on the contrary, a ‘banal’ or ‘trivial’ idea or theme*”. What “*merits discussion*”, is “*important and interesting*”, and thus associated, as if it were self-evident, with “*beautiful subject*”, and similarly what “*does not merit discussion*” with “*a ‘banal’ or ‘trivial’ theme*”. Bourdieu does not specify (maybe he is not aware of it) that it is because one is in France, with the extent to which, generally speaking, the opposition between what is noble (like a “*beautiful subject*”) and what (like an idea or a “*banal*” or “*trivial*” theme) is common is important, that these associations, manifestly, make perfect sense. It is questionable whether this is the case in most other societies, even those that are as close, such as Belgium and Quebec.

Furthermore, the specific meaning given to a situation *hic et nunc* is not simply received. It is widely constructed. The term used is “*sensemaking*”.<sup>[171]</sup> In a postmodern intellectual context, attentive to the fluidity of all things, the perpetual negotiation of meanings is particularly highlighted. For example, it is stated that the “*typificatory schemes*” of those one is dealing with enter into “*an ‘ongoing’ negotiation in the face-to-face situation*”.<sup>[172]</sup> Yet if all is an ongoing negotiation, this can only be achieved at local level. In this context, one cannot see what could be shared within a society considered in its entirety. It is true that some are quick to point out that the construction of meaning by actors is not created from nothing. It is thus a question of *raw material of sense-making*, of “*templates for action, scripts, schemas, logics*”.<sup>[173]</sup> But when it comes to specifying what this material can be, the authors of these remarks tend to evoke the characteristics of a social order: institutions (for example, those that organise working relationships), which guide perceptions and behaviour in a specific field; or institutionalised roles. Once again, this is in the continuity of a social order. We remain far from a cultural continuity that would not be linked to this social continuity.

It is true that all those who focus on questions of meaning do not simply pay attention to cultural characteristics that are both local and transitional. For example, Clifford Geertz, who is a reference in this field, particularly focused on a

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[171] Karl Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Thousand Oaks (CA), Sage, 1995.

[172] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City (N.Y.), Doubleday, 1966. This point has been particularly developed by ethnomethodology.

[173] Klaus Weber and Mary Ann Glynn, “Making Sense with Institutions: Context, Thought and Action in Karl Weick’s Theory”, *Organizational Studies*, 27 (11), 2006, p. 1644.

conception of culture as a universe of meaning. For him, the analysis of culture is “an interpretative science in search of meaning”.<sup>[174]</sup> While seeking to make a “thick description” of particular situations, in the spirit of phenomenology, he does not rule out working on deciphering cultures that are specific to societies considered in a much more holistic manner. For example, comparing how Islam was received in Morocco and Indonesia, his two main fields of research, he considers the differences between the forms of social order that one finds there.<sup>[175]</sup> And he sometimes, as he did in Bali,<sup>[176]</sup> seeks a common logic behind the various aspects of the functioning of a society (designation of people, way of dividing up time). But in this case, he focuses on practices shared by all. He sometimes also evokes the existence, within a society, of a “horde of hyper-concrete manifestations of a hyper-general, hyper-abstract form; a world of avatars”<sup>[177]</sup> However, while the metaphor of the avatar is telling, Geertz explores very little the way in which a great diversity of ways of giving meaning are connected with what makes the unity of a culture. He even uses ways of presenting what a culture is that rather prevent an understanding of how this connection can be made.

If we take, for example, the text where, after having evoked a conception of culture that sees in it a “as a system of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience”, Geertz states that the systems that are specific to the various societies “are to the process of social life as a computer’s program is to its operations, the genetic helix to the development of the organism, the blueprint to the construction of the bridge, the score to the performance of the symphony, or, to choose a humbler analogy, the recipe to the baking of the cake”.<sup>[178]</sup> There are, of course, many ways to play a score or follow a recipe; this is not a totalitarian vision of culture. But the scope for action evoked by these metaphors remains very limited.

Consequently, the way of conceiving culture proposed, with Geertz, by contemporary cultural anthropology makes it difficult to account for what one observes in so-called complex societies. It passes by what is common to those who do not have the same way of specifically giving meaning *hic et nunc*. It does not allow us to understand what may well remain invariant when the specific meanings given to various situations evolve. Overcoming these limitations, as we have seen, requires a very different approach.

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[174] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 5.

[175] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed; Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, The University of Chicago Press, 1968.

[176] Clifford Geertz, “Person, Time and Conduct in Bali”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit.

[177] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge; Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, Basic Books, 1983, p. 195.

[178] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 250.

## *Giving meaning to existence considered holistically*

For a vision of culture inherited from Weber's research on religion, the term of meaning does not evoke a simple code (like when we say that a red light means that it is forbidden to pass). It is used as in the expression "*life has meaning*", in opposition to a feeling of vacuity or absurdity. It is a question of "*ultimate meaning*", of "*a condition under which a person's life, or significant events in it, 'make sense' (i.e. have worth and relate to the subject's feelings of integrity, wholeness and self-mastery)*".<sup>[179]</sup> The interest thus focuses on holistic visions of the world and the conceptions of salvation.<sup>[180]</sup>

The reflection from this line of research initially focused on the subjective aspect of culture, and the way in which it concerns the intimate experience. The subsequent difficulty to actually have access to the meaning experienced prompted a certain shift in perspective. The interest focused on the more easily observable aspects of religion, and mainly the myths and rituals, with the core of the analysis continuing to concern what gives a holistic meaning to existence.<sup>[181]</sup>

This great tradition integrated, in its own way, what relates to the social construction of reality. It leads to attention being focussed on the way of "*binding the various representations together in a cohesive whole that will make sense*", of building "*a cosmological and anthropological frame of reference*".<sup>[182]</sup>

A specific focus of attention is what allows the individual not to feel that he is a stranger in this world, to have the feeling of belonging to "*a meaningful totality, serving to transcend the finitude of individual existence*".<sup>[183]</sup> In this perspective, there is a great deal of interest in the frontiers that separate the sacred from the profane and which one does not transgress without trembling. The role of these frontiers as an ingredient of the social order is especially highlighted.<sup>[184]</sup>

By emphasising the issue of salvation and understanding this salvation as the fact of escaping from an extreme peril (for Weber, damnation), this type of approach opens the door to understanding an essential aspect of cultures. But it tends to focus on the

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[179] Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[180] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *op. cit.*

[181] While sociology thus turned its focus to the objective aspects of culture, its subjective aspects were widely taken up by social psychology, with its interest in attitudes and values.

[182] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 93, 115.

[183] *Ibid.*, p. 120-121.

[184] *Ibid.*

great doctrines of salvation that are religious and, by extension, political. It disregards the both hidden and more permanent ways of escaping from the anxiety of being a man, which permeate the most profane daily lives: the entire manner in which this everyday life is matched with the way of salvation offered by the reference scene that is specific to each society.

As a result, this line of research focuses little on the way in which the great doctrines of salvation take root in the various cultural universes. It can, of course, look at the history of how they were received. However, the capacity of research that it engenders to inform the latter is limited. Indeed, it leaves aside the way in which the salvation in majesty (one could write Salvation) that these doctrines propose resonates with the ways of salvation, which are much more discreet, that each culture favours, *i.e.* what is perceived in them as a way that makes it possible to escape from the peril feared above all.

Furthermore, this approach suggests that when the doctrines of salvation, and mainly religions, lose their aura, a certain “disenchantment of the world” occurs, leading to a more rational relationship with the latter. It disregards the extent to which, within a world that appears (or is even intentionally meant to be) “disenchanted”, human beings in fact continue to live in a deeply enchanted world; the extent to which, full of “irrational” fears and hopes, they draw on myths. It ignores the extent to which they live in the comforting illusion that in their everyday lives they have reached the “rational” form of salvation that their society favours.

One can also wonder how these main ways of giving meaning are likely to contribute to the development of a culture that one can qualify as “national”.

Part of the construction of the meaning given to existence concerns the nation. One finds myths (for example, in France the victory of Charles Martel in Poitiers, the Resistance), symbols (the tricolour flag, the *Marseillaise*), rituals (the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, the celebrations on the Champs-Élysées in the evenings when France wins a major sports competition). “The cult of the nation” is sometimes referred to, although nowadays this is seen rather negatively, as well as the “national feeling” or “civil religion”.<sup>[185]</sup> However, apart from with the most fervent nationalists, the national symbol plays a very limited role in what gives meaning to existence.

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[185] Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

Furthermore, as we have seen previously, the national symbolism does, of course, have links with culture, meaning by this the general framework within which existence takes on meaning, but, with regard to this framework, this symbolism is more in a situation of dependence than a role of engendering. It is because the mythical universe that fuels the feeling of national identity takes on meaning, like the rest of social life, in the vision of peril and salvation that characterises the specific reference scene of each society. It is true that in return, the way in which this mythical universe is constructed, the fact that it draws on the opposition between a certain peril and certain ways of salvation, contributes to maintaining an understanding of situations that focuses on this opposition. However, in this role, this universe acts as a simple, and not necessarily major, element within a much larger group: all the situations that take on meaning depending on the reference scene that prevails.

## The categories of understanding and the role of languages

A whole stream of reflection, which goes back a very long way and concerns as much philosophy as social sciences, proposes an answer to the questions concerning the “spirit of peoples”. For this stream, the differences between categories of understanding, differences which are themselves related to the difference of languages, are in question: it would appear that it is because the various languages lead to a different vision of reality that cultures differ. This theory has the merit of proposing a link that is *a priori* plausible between, on the one side, the unity and continuity of a culture and, on the other side, the diversity and evolving nature of practices. The structural properties of a language remain remarkably stable over the centuries, to the extent that, even if we do not understand an ancient text, it is not difficult to recognise in which language it has been written, as long as one has a minimum of familiarity with the latter. At the same time, languages evolve and the unity of a language is compatible with a wide variety of discourses. Unfortunately, we shall see that this theory provides little help in understanding the diversity of forms of living together.

Within a given society, the way in which one expresses what concerns this living together certainly tells a great deal about the culture that prevails there. But in this case, it concerns much more the specific way in which the general resources of the language are implemented than what is specific to a particular language. The founding fears that differentiate cultures, and the corresponding ways of salvation, do not result from the specificities of a language. One can, furthermore, easily account for this in other languages than the one spoken where they prevail.

## Language and framework for thinking: the cultural aspect of categories of understanding

A whole stream of thought reflecting, in line with Abélard, Vico and Kant, on the categories *a priori* of understanding and their contingent nature, connects the diversity of ways of constructing reality with the difference of languages. For example, for Humboldt: “While largely the work of nations, languages nevertheless control them, hold them captive within a determined circle and form or indicate, at least predominantly, the difference of national character. [...] Their diversity is not due to sounds and signs: it is a diversity of visions of the world themselves”.<sup>[186]</sup> This idea is to be found with Durkheim, who states that “the system of concepts with which we think in everyday life is that expressed by the vocabulary of our mother tongue”.<sup>[187]</sup> This idea was particularly developed by Sapir and Whorf (hence the so-called “Sapir-Whorf” hypothesis): “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.”<sup>[188]</sup>

The fact that a same element of reality can, by highlighting any one of its characteristics, fall within very different schemes of associations and oppositions (and that, in turn, the scheme of associations and oppositions in which it is itself perceived, leads to a particular characteristic being highlighted) was particularly emphasised by Lévi-Strauss. The latter takes up the idea by which “the delimitation of concepts is different in every language”.<sup>[189]</sup> “The terms”, he notes, “never have any intrinsic significance. Their meaning is one of ‘position’ – a function of the history and cultural context on the one hand and of the structural system in which they are called upon to appear on the other”.<sup>[190]</sup> This idea is taken up repeatedly in different forms. For example, “different peoples can use the same animals in their symbolism, employing unrelated characteristics, habitat, meteorological association, cry, etc., the live or the dead. Again, each feature can be interpreted in different ways”.<sup>[191]</sup> Highlighting the fact that vocabulary carries ways of categorising that differ depending on the language is the subject of an

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[186] Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Sur le caractère national des langues* (1822/24), Seuil, 2000, p. 57, 101.

[187] Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, op. cit., p. 619.

[188] Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, Essay, collection of texts edited by J. B. Carroll, The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1956, p. 213.

[189] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 2.

[190] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[191] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

array of research.<sup>[192]</sup> It involves defining a “phenomenology of spatial and temporal experience”. This type of highlighting is the result of a reaction by anthropologists to an acultural theory, developed by cognitive linguistics specialists, which invokes the existence of universal “image schemas” rooted in the experience of the body (for example, the experience of verticality), from which, by metaphorical extension, all the representations provided by language are thought to be derived.<sup>[193]</sup>

Besides breaking down the experience of the physical world, the role of languages in the organisation of experience concerns social life. For example, the terms for family relationships make categories that differ from one society to another (assimilating or distinguishing, for example, a cross-cousin from a parallel cousin).

### *A theory that does little to help think out the diversity of forms of living together*

This theory, by which the frameworks that the various languages provide for thinking are extremely different, is highly controversial. Critics argue that there is a strong correspondence between the ways of segmenting the reality that one finds in the various languages, meaning that one can find more or less “equivalent” words in different languages. Some go as far as to assert that the differences between languages are not relevant, that it is necessary to distinguish “ways of speaking” and “ways of thinking” and that one is mainly faced with a universal way of categorising (that the categories of understanding are universal).<sup>[194]</sup>

Without entering this general debate, and to remain with the specific question of living together, it appears that, at least in this field, the differences between cultures cannot be explained by differences between languages, whether this be vocabulary or syntax.

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[192] One can quote, for example, research on the term “over” compared to “equivalent” terms in other languages and in particular, the German term “über” (Hoyt Alverson, “Metaphor and Experience: Looking over the Notion of Image Schema », in James W. Fernandez (Ed.), *Beyond Metaphor; The theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, 1991). The term “over” gives a name to a specific experience (the passage of the Sun over the Earth with its diurnal movement). It can be used, by metaphorical extension, to evoke a wide variety of situations, but which have in common the fact of having some analogy with this fundamental experience, due to the fact that one finds in them a set of characteristic features of this experience (the fact of being above, the movement that passes through, the relationship that is established between what is above and below, like the image of the relationship that is established between the Sun and the Earth through its rays). In other languages, like German, there is no term that corresponds directly to this experience and groups together its different aspects. There will therefore be different words to express the English “over” depending on the aspect of what is concerned. Consequently, *über* refers to a different experience (which the study quoted does not specify) and therefore cannot always be used to translate “over”; for example, “Sam walked over the hill” will be translated by “Sam ging über den Hügel”, but “Sam lives over the hill” (on the other side of the hill) by “Sam wohnt hinter dem Berg”.

[193] Cf. George Lakoff and Marc Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, *op. cit.*

[194] One finds this position, supported by a body of experimental psychology research, with Steven Pinker (who manages the centre for cognitive neuroscience at MIT); cf. *The Language Instinct*, *op. cit.*



There is clearly something shared in the way in which the various users who have the same culture implement the resources of the language when they evoke social life. They all favour the use of a certain number of terms and expressions that are constantly repeated in their comments. And the common property of these terms is that they make a connection between the situations in question and the reference scene that gives them an essential part of their meaning. However, those who use these terms are generally not at all constrained by the specific character of the vocabulary and syntax of the language they use to express themselves. The differences that one observes between the comments made by those who have different cultures could well be found if all humanity shared the same language. Those who have different cultures would simply have to draw differently upon the resources of this single language when they express themselves.

Let us take an example to illustrate what this is about: it concerns principles for action enacted by a large multinational group for which there are two versions of reference, one written in French, the other in English. We can observe two short passages, among many others that would be equally significant, concerning relations with the company's clients:

- “provide the construction industry” / “*offrir au secteur de la construction*”
- “delivering the [...] products...” / “*proposer les produits...*”

Linguistically, nothing would have prevented writing “*fournir*” (provide) in French in the first case and “*livrer*” (deliver) in the second. But it is the manner in which relations between the company and its clients are depicted that would have radically changed. “Provide” and “delivering” depict a mercantile relationship between an ordering party (the client) and a service provider (the company), who have common interests. In an American reference scene (in the perspective of which the writers of the English version were situated), this representation of the situation takes on meaning by evoking a positive fundamental experience: a contractual relationship between independent individuals. On the contrary, in a French reference scene, the French equivalents, “*fournir*” and “*livrer*”, terms used in the English version, evoke a mercenary activity, unworthy of a company's high position in society. At the same time, “*offrir*” and “*proposer*” evoke a certain sense of something being free, which removes any assimilation to a servile activity.<sup>[195]</sup>

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[195] In France, there is more generally a whole host of ways of referring to relations with the client, using terms – “*prescrire*” (prescribe), “*diagnostiquer*” (diagnose), “*accueillir*” (welcome), etc., which depict this relationship by connecting it with an experience of disinterested grandeur and not of commercial servility. This choice does not come from the properties of the French language.

Generally speaking, the way in which the resources of a language are used is marked by the existence of chains of meaning that allow the connection to be made between the situations one evokes and the founding experience that gives them meaning. For example, in the example that we have just used, the choice of words is the expression of ideological work (most likely completely unconsciously) that involves associating an activity (selling a product to a client) that needs to be presented in a favourable light with a positive founding experience. The signifying chain that leads to this link being produced is only partly explicit. The clearly visible link uses the terms “*offrir*” and “*proposer*”. It allows the connection between the issue at hand with other links, which are self-evident for a French speaker and that there is no need to explain. These links associate the terms used (“*offrir*”, “*proposer*”) with an experience of grandeur and not of mercantile servility.

In this type of situation, what thus comes into play is not the French language, with its vocabulary and syntax, but the way in which the French, Belgians and Quebecers use it; it is not Spanish, but the way in which the Spanish, Mexicans and Argentineans use it. Indeed, one same language (French, English, Spanish) may be associated with different ways of speaking about the world, associated with reference scenes that are also very different, in different communities of users (French, French-speaking Belgians and Quebecers; Mexicans and Argentineans; etc.). For instance, the fact of having in common the use of the French term “*liberté*”, rather than the English term “*freedom*” or the German term “*Freiheit*”, in no way implies that the French, French-speaking Belgians and Quebecers share the same conception of what it is to be treated as a free man: one does not find in either Quebec<sup>[196]</sup> or French-speaking Belgium<sup>[197]</sup> the central character, that is so marked in France, of the desire to be treated with the regard due to one’s position (one’s status). And their cultures remain separated by the fact that the fear of being regarded as being in a servile position does not play the same role in Belgium or Quebec in the entire social life as it is the case in France. As a result, groups of different speakers (French and Quebecers, for example) will use the same language by drawing on different terms in it to evoke the same situation. At the same time, groups of speakers using different languages, but which are close through their cultures (for example, French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians), may use equivalent or almost equivalent terms to evoke the same situation.<sup>[198]</sup>

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[196] Jean-Pierre Segal, « Le frère déplace le frère ; un épisode de la vie d’une usine québécoise », in Philippe d’Iribarne *et al.*, *Cultures et Mondialisation*, *op. cit.*

[197] Philippe d’Iribarne, « Coopérer à la belge ; la mise en place problématique d’un annuaire électronique », in Philippe d’Iribarne *et al.*, *Cultures et Mondialisation*, *op. cit.*

[198] *Ibid.*

We can add that certain categories may play a decisive role in practices while they are found very little in the language. For example, if we take the France of today, the reference to the rights and duties linked to the position that one has in society and the status associated with this position, this reference is omnipresent in practices. Yet we hardly find any trace of this in the vocabulary of the contemporary French. To evoke it, one has to either proceed to a sort of phenomenological description of the matter in hand, or use terms such as “honour”, “nobleness” or “baseness”, which have nowadays almost disappeared from the spoken language.

### *The influence of culture on the language*

In any event, concerning the forms that social life takes, it is not the language that is at the origin of the culture, but the culture that orients the discourse (*i.e.* the language as it is spoken). One can, of course, define the category “language”, not through the traditional field of linguistics, whether phonetics, syntax or semantics, but through the discourse used within a community of speakers; one thus enters the highly controversial sphere of pragmatics. However, if one adopts this perspective, it is the understanding of what one qualifies as “language” that cannot dispense with a broader comprehension of the society in which this language is spoken.<sup>[199]</sup> Consequently, one can say that it is the culture that is at the origin of the language, thus understood, and not the contrary.

Can one go further and say that the culture influences the language itself, in the traditional sense of the term, in particular what may be specific in its vocabulary? A language is not only characterised by the way in which it maps the boundaries between experiences that are universally considered as similar (blue and green, for example), but by the way in which it groups together experiences that can be considered elsewhere as having no relationship with each other. As such, it effectively contributes to structuring one’s view. But in this respect, when it comes to living together, in any event, it is influenced by forms of peril and ways of salvation that a society focuses on.

If we take the example of *mètis* (practical intelligence for the Greeks), as analysed by Detienne and Vernant,<sup>[200]</sup> this term refers to both the art of the navigator, that of the netmaker, as well as to a few other experiences, such as the behaviour of the

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[199] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, 1994.

[200] Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l’intelligence ; la mètis des Grecs*, Flammarion, coll. « Champs », 1974. On the method used, cf. Marcel Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (1967), Agora Pocket, 1994, p. 44.

fox or that of the octopus, or to the adventures of a legendary character, Ulysses. These experiences are, in many respects, very different from each other. But they do also have something in common, which the term *mètis* leads to giving a name to (whereas in other languages no term will refer to this common character): a certain art of adapting in a pragmatic manner to circumstances, controlling difficult situations, with a lot of rapid reaction, skill and strategies. The existence of this term contributes to highlighting what these various experiences that one refers to have in common. With the inclusion of each of the elementary experiences that it groups together, what is thus common gains a particular visibility. Does this mean that this term finds itself in some way in the language by chance and that this presence is behind the importance taken on by the art that corresponds to it in Greek culture? Or is it not rather the contrary? In Greek culture, as the story of Ulysses suggests, the mastery of this art constitutes one of the main ways of salvation in the face of the whims of fate. This art thus offers a way of salvation that Greek society particularly cultivated. It would seem reasonable to think that the role that it thus plays in the culture, which fosters the attention that is paid to it, was the reason behind giving a name to it.

Geertz particularly emphasised the local meaning (ideographic significance) of terms that one too easily translates by their so-called equivalent in a foreign language, and primarily the language of the ethnologist. These terms, he notes, express experiences that have particular importance in a given society, whereas they have little importance elsewhere, and particularly in the society of the ethnologist.<sup>[201]</sup> For example, for a term, *lek*, usually translated into English by “shame” (p. 402), Geertz seeks to show that there is thus a misinterpretation. In order to try to show what one can in fact associate with this term, he connects it with elements of experience, described by the menu, which, while being specific to life in Bali, have more or less approximate equivalents in the assumed experience of the reader. To go further, he uses a bias that draws on a French term “*faux pas*” (misstep). This term takes on meaning in a culture which, he supposes, is not unknown by its reader: the latter, a cultivated American, at least has some idea of what a society French-style court society can be. At the same time, the way of being and acting that is thus evoked has, considers Geertz, some similarity with what he observes in Bali and can consequently play an intermediary role in an understanding process. He also evokes a behavioural characteristic in Bali (“*absence of climax*”), which is “*so peculiarly distinctive and so distinctively odd that only extended description of concrete events could properly evoke it*” (p. 403).

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[201] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 385, 395, 400 sq.

One can add that a “same” word, or which would appear to be so, can refer to realities that are markedly different depending on societies. For example, one can refer to honour as much in Spain as in France. Yet one is not necessarily dealing with the same reference scene. The experience feared above all in both cases is an experience of humiliation. But in Spain, it primarily concerns an insult that is not returned (not washed) and less the acceptance of a servile position over time.<sup>[202]</sup> And one again finds other conceptions of honour in the Kabylie region<sup>[203]</sup> or in Lebanon.<sup>[204]</sup> It is thus clearly the culture that gives its meaning to the word and not the word that guides the culture.

## Should we speak of cultures?

Is it appropriate to retain the term “culture” to describe a sociological object that is very different from what one usually understands when one employs this term? Is it sufficient, in order to avoid common conceptions from preventing an understanding of what it involves, to specify what meaning one attributes to this term? Or, on the contrary, is it more realistic to accept that there is an indissoluble link between the word “culture” and the image of a group of individuals forming an entity that resembles the mythical image of the community: individuals united by uniform ways of acting, associated with shared ways of giving meaning *hic et nunc* to events and situations? Is this link so strong that it essentially remains, even when one takes some distance from a totalitarian vision of the influence of culture? Is it then necessary to use another term when what one has to name is foreign to this mythical image?

In fact, it is not easy to find a more appropriate term.

One could, of course, consider reinvigorating expressions that are now no longer used, such as “spirit of the peoples” or “national character”. It is not sure that they will convey less misinterpretation than the term “culture”. One can think of “ethos”, which evokes a general way of being, likely to be embodied in a certain diversity of representations and practices. But it evokes a form of life that is still too concrete to be really satisfactory. The term “*episteme*” highlighted by Michel Foucault at one stage appeared suitable to me. In the way in which it is used by Foucault, it involves

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[202] Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or The Politics of Sex; Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

[203] Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédée de trois esquisses d'ethnologie kabyle*, Geneva, Droz, 1972.

[204] Hèla Yousfi, « Le contrat dans une coopération internationale. La rencontre des intérêts à l'épreuve de la rencontre des cultures », thesis, University of Paris-X Nanterre, 2006.

a framework for thinking, the background of a set of representations concerning distinct fields of knowledge. Such a framework for thinking guides the general way in which the world takes on meaning.<sup>[205]</sup> However, by focusing on the cognitive dimension of culture, such a term tends to erase what is perhaps the most essential: a way of constructing an enchanted universe where a sort of imaginary salvation makes it possible to escape from a peril that is hardly less so, and to thus manage the fundamental anxiety of human beings thrown into a world that is beyond them.

In the end, this term “culture” perhaps remains the least inappropriate to evoke what forms the basis, over time, of each of the main ways of living together that one observes in the world: a specific reference scene where there is an opposition between a major peril and ways of salvation that make it possible to escape from it, and chains of meaning that give meaning to everyday life situations by showing them in the perspective opened by this scene. There is, of course, an ambiguity due to the fact that this term is also used to evoke forms of life that are at the same time more local, more transitional and more immediately observable. But these forms of life are not independent of the main underlying structures from which they take on meaning. Consequently, it seems to make sense to use the term “culture” to evoke three types of distinct elements: these immediately observable forms of life; the lasting underlying lasting structures; the processes by which the former take on meaning in the perspective opened by the latter. If one proceeds in this manner, it is important to remain aware of the fact that this term evokes a group of elements that are very diverse in nature and require approaches that are equally diverse in order to be understood.

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[205] Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Gallimard, 1966.

# Conclusion

A crucial issue  
for social sciences





# Conclusion

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## A crucial issue for social sciences

When the members of a same society evoke any aspect of what links them to their fellow human beings, and particularly speak about politics or work, something in common appears behind the infinite variety of discourses. A form of peril, evoked concerning the most diverse situations, is constantly present in the background. And this peril feared above all changes completely depending on which part of the world one is in. In the USA, it involves losing control of one's destiny, in France, bowing down, out of fear or interest, to those who can harm you or grant you favours, in India, making oneself impure, in Cameroon, being the victim of what is being plotted behind closed doors by a person who appears to have good intentions towards you, in Bali, of being abandoned to chaos caused by a collective loss of control over emotions, in Mexico of lacking the assistance one requires to live up to one's dreams of grandeur. Everywhere, the way in which individuals depict themselves and act is also marked by the great concern to ward off this peril. And this is also the case for the way in which life in society is organised. For example, in the USA, the omnipresence of contractual relationships helps everyone to have the feeling that they are never obliged to do what someone else has decided for them (although, in fact, the formal freedom to enter into a contract conceals many constraints that one prefers not to think too much about). In France, the role played by the duties inherent to one's position in society, the protection of status, and a high conception of the profession, help everyone to have the feeling that neither interest nor fear lead them to bow down to the will of someone stronger (although their fate does, in fact, depend on the way in which they satisfy the desires of a client and submit to the will of a boss).

This staging of life in society implies elaborating mythical visions. These visions help to give meanings to situations where, *de facto*, the peril feared by all has not really been warded off (where, *de facto*, others control your destiny, where one accepts

shameful compromises out of interest, etc.). They allow these situations to nevertheless appear as protecting from this peril. This presence of a peril feared above all does not prevent other perils from also giving cause for concern, but without having as much importance in the way in which life in society takes shape. Among all the perils facing humanity, each society reserves a particular fate for a specific peril that tends to focus the anxiety of being a man.

The great durability of what thus forms the heart of a particular culture (the contrast between specific visions of peril and salvation) is in no way incompatible with the violence that the convulsions of history may take on. But the nature of what is the object of fear, on the one hand, and the perspective of salvation on the other, goes as far as to mark the form that revolutions take, the objectives they set, and the social situation that emerges from them. In the societies that showed the way forward for the advent of the Enlightenment, this characteristic has gone as far as to mark the way in which to conceive the essence of freedom and map out the plans for a society of citizens.

What does the existence of such phenomena represent for social sciences? Would it exclusively concern one of their specialised branches, devoted to analysing differences in detail that may remain between modern societies? Or, on the contrary, are we dealing with an essential part of the functioning of societies? In fact, when one seeks to understand any aspect of this functioning, it is very detrimental to avoid taking this into account. One cannot really understand the logic of the action of men if one excludes the way in which they view what they experience, and this way itself depends fundamentally on the way in which their imagination is structured. The image of the world offered by social sciences, like the use that may be made of the latter for the benefit of society, are at stake. And a vast field of investigation, until now virtually unexploited, opens up before them.

## A forgotten dimension in understanding societies

There is a fascinating contrast between the representations of man that prevail in social sciences and the idea that one can have of the latter when one frequents the great works of literature. The men depicted by Shakespeare, Cervantes, Racine or Dostoyevsky, like those portrayed by Homer and Aeschylus, live surrounded by phantoms and demons, haunted by inaccessible dreams, immersed in an uncertain relationship with the reality of the world. The actor shown by social sciences bears little resemblance to them (although some of them tend to offer a less narrow vision than others). We find in him interests and sometimes values, but no phantoms or demons: maybe just sometimes a few myths, mainly in the research of those who

take an interest in exotic societies. Everything happens as if the obscure side of man only governed fields of existence that are so personal that the organisation of living together was not affected.

Yet when one pays attention to this obscure side – one thing leading to another – one arrives at an understanding of the extent to which it is important in the life of societies: in the design and functioning of their institutions, as in the unfolding of everyday life; in what is assumed to be the most governed by universal rationality, just as much as in everything that is seen to be “traditional”. The entire vision of living together is thus transformed.

Social sciences are flawed by the fact that they disregard an essential dimension of the life of societies. It is not only when it is a question of understanding the main differences between the social forms that one encounters around the world that they are handicapped. This is also the case when it comes to understanding the most dramatic events that mark the history of humanity: the great fears, the great massacres; situations whereby it is not only an individual who steps through the looking glass, but an entire society, whether through euphoria for carnage or in a cold extermination, implemented by a competent bureaucracy served by good citizens. They are also handicapped when it comes to understanding countless very ordinary events: social relations, as they take form in a certain context (for example, strike action in a French state-owned company, the way in which this action is combined with progress in negotiations); career management in companies (for example, in German companies, the position of managers who started at a relatively low level); the place given to immigrants (for example, the combination of political integration and social apartheid that characterises their situation in the UK). In all these cases, one of course always finds explanations in the specific history of a given company, in a very local power struggle, in the resistance to change of those, *hic et nunc*, take advantage of the *status quo*. But one then gets lost in a sort of pointillism that ignores the links which, within one same society, unite what happens in the various areas of collective life, from the functioning of the economy to political life, including working relationships and the organisation of school.

If one now considers the social sciences component that focuses on the construction of great theories, the fact of ignoring this aspect of reality is, here again, a major handicap. Between a vision whereby there is, in fact, no society, but only individuals who recreate the world all the time, and an opposite vision whereby an individual's autonomy with regard to everything is thought to be pure illusion, the undoubtedly central question facing social sciences is to understand the way in which structures and actions are combined. How can this be achieved if an essential part of social functioning is ignored? This leads, one way or another, to a very unsatisfactory

position being taken: either consider action as much less framed than it is in reality; or use elements to try to account for the forms of unity and continuity that one nevertheless observes, such as respect for inherited traditions and values, the observation of which shows that they do not have the influence that is thus attributed to them.

In other fields of knowledge, the vision, that triumphed at a given moment in time, of the rational man has at the very least seen some adjustments; Nietzsche and Freud play a central role in contemporary thinking. It is undoubtedly because, while the political plan of the Enlightenment is not in question, our societies recognise the existence of the fundamental irrationality of human beings. But the visions that they have of themselves involves, as with any other society, a certain form of enchantment of the world. It is with the radical emancipation of prejudices and access to the universal that they imagine they will be able to find a form of salvation. As a result, a sort of Great Wall of China tends to protect the vision of society and of man in society that prevails there from what one knows elsewhere about man in general and the way in which he leads his "private" life. And social sciences, for their part, are widely taken up in this indigenous vision.

When one broadens the perspective, the intention is not to replace a "social explanation" by a "cultural explanation". Social sciences would too often still appear to be seeking a sort of philosopher's stone, which would finally explain the functioning of societies, the unique factor to which everything could be related. Yet it would be equally illusory to seek such a factor in the culture that is specific to a society as in the power struggles that fuel its everyday life, or in any other element of social life. Culture provides a framework within which the actions of men take on meaning and there is little human action that is not influenced by the meaning that it takes on in the eyes of the person who carries it out. Consequently, one cannot understand the way in which men live and manage power relations if one leaves aside the cultural context. But for there to be meaning, there is a need for situations and events that take on meaning (just as, for there to be a language, there is a need to have something to say). Analysing the form that social relations take, particularly power relations, by focussing on the meaning they have for the actors is also, as we have seen, a good way to have access to the orientations of a culture.

## Informing action

The diversity of the world is not, nor primarily, a stimulus for research. It raises a question for humanity. The enlightened elites at one time thought that they could forget it. The creation of the UN, the elaboration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the liberation of trade, and the creation of supranational entities,

such as the construction of Europe, were assumed to be the early stages of a global unification movement. It was thought that what remained of diversity, languages, cuisine, music and religions would continue to give a certain charm to life, like the diversity of individual temperaments, or that of generations, without calling into question the progress towards a common conception of living together with, on the horizon, the perspective, admittedly distant, but full of promise, of a sort of world government. It seemed certain that the general modernisation movement was gradually going to lead to the disappearance of the prejudices of a bygone age and that the combined benefits of democracy and development were going to spread their beneficial flows over the human race. The only obstacle that appeared to remain, in the face of the advent of this glorious future, stemmed from the persistence of phenomena of domination. What one could expect of social sciences was that they would help to uncover them and combat them.

At this beginning of the third millennium, these perspectives are no longer very credible. The idea of a “shock of civilisations” has certainly convinced little. But international relations continue to be marked by a great deal of misunderstandings. And, to say the least, democracy is not present everywhere, nor is development. Furthermore, the world tends to break up as quickly as it unites. Explaining the woes of the world through the power of the dominant has lost much of its lustre and one sees the conviction spreading that if some countries find it difficult to follow the movement, their peoples are the first to carry the responsibility for this.

Faced with this situation, two main temptations fuel each other. On the one side, to claim that nothing can be done, that Z... will always remain Z..., that it is their culture and they will not leave it. On the other, to see nothing, hear nothing; either claim that everything is fine and that humanity is continuing to progress towards a bright future; more specifically, to believe that development, democracy and human rights are triumphing around the world, driven on occasion by the force of arms when the latter can bring down tyrants; or despite all, cling on to the old patterns and claim more than ever that domination accounts for the ills of the world. One can expect social sciences to help escape from this dual temptation. When the need for reforms becomes apparent and the pure and simple application of “recipes that work” in other places appears to be problematic, a thorough analysis of the cultural context, and the “resistance” whose meaning is to be found in it, could help shake off the hesitation between passiveness and utopia.

We can add that helping the different societies to become aware of their own spectres and their own demons may encourage them to be more indulgent in the way in which they view the spectres of others, and may help to be wiser in terms of the way in which to encourage them to exorcise their demons.

## A vast field of investigation

The understanding of the diversity of cultures and what results from them in the lives of societies has probably not made any more progress today than that of the diversity of languages at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the comparison of Greek and Sanskrit prompted reflection on the specificities of Indo-European languages. A vast field of investigation is opening up before us, with both new questions and the opportunity to take a new look at old questions.

The inventory of what, in the different societies, constitutes the peril that is considered as being major and ways of salvation imagined to ward off these perils is underway. But knowledge in this field still continues to be very limited. The more the work advances, the more one perceives that often, within what one would tend to consider as a cultural area characterised by a certain unity (Latin America or black Africa), one in fact finds a great diversity that essentially remains to be identified.

Furthermore, we still need to understand, essentially, the way in which in the past the encounter occurred and continues to occur between universal messages of salvation and the different cultures. This does not only concern religions, but also political doctrines, without forgetting the great message of emancipation conveyed by the Enlightenment. It involves examining how these messages are received and interpreted in each place depending on the way in which they resonate with a specific vision of peril and salvation.

Finally, much more generally, it is the various aspects of life in society, from political institutions to the functioning of the economy, that need to be better understood by taking account of the cultural context within which they take on meaning. A whole host of currently burning questions are concerned: What forms of democracy, based on what institutional constructions, are likely to thrive in different areas of the world? What forms of governance allow countries that are today “backward” to join the ranks of emerging countries? How to organise multicultural groups, within one same country or in multinational constructions, in order to ensure that they are sustainably viable?

In this sense, social sciences could take a big step towards resuming the great project of the founding fathers: to build a sociology conceived as a general science of societies; a sociology capable of understanding, in all its complexity, the way in which, both generally in its principles and specifically everywhere, human beings go about living together.

## By the same author

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Working on four continents, AFD has seventy-one field offices and bureaus, including nine in France's overseas provinces and one in Brussels. The Agency provides financing and support for projects that improve living conditions, promote economic growth, and protect the planet.

In 2013, AFD committed €7.8 billion to projects in developing and emerging countries and in the French Overseas Provinces. These AFD-financed projects will provide schooling for children, improve maternal health, promote equality between men and women, support farmers and small businesses, and bolster access to drinking water, transportation and energy. These newly-funded projects will also help mitigate climate disruption by abating nearly 3.3 million metric tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent annually.

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# Theorising National Cultures

While there has probably never been such great interest in the cultural aspect of social life, there is intense debate over the notion of culture. We clearly need a conception which, without being blind to what differentiates societies, gives the creative ability of actors its rightful place. But what sociological entity can one be dealing with?

A crucial point concerns the difficulties associated with the use of the same word “culture” to refer to very different types of entities. A socially situated “culture”, specific to an organisation, a social group, a particular field of action, is constantly being created in relation to social strategies and combats for identity. A national “culture”, common to those who have very diverse social situations, and which escapes their strategies, can only be something different. This publication is devoted to discovering this sociological entity, which has until now not been identified, by relying on a series of field research work conducted in both countries in the North (France, USA, Germany, etc.) and South (Mexico, Morocco, India, China, Cameroon, etc.). It highlights the way in which the social life of each people is haunted by its own specific core concern.

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