

**Semiotics of culture.  
Some general considerations**

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## Introduction

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**Studies on cultural forms and practices and in intercultural communication:**

- very fashionable, to-day
- used in a great diversity of disciplines, for a big variety of objects and for practical objectives, ...
- but it is rather difficult to speak of a general “picture” of culture, of cultural forms and practices, to speak even of some kind of general definition of “culture” shared by the specialists.

**This seems to be also the case for a semiotics of culture**

- There are traditions in semiotic studies about culture (Lotman, Greimas, ...);
- There exists a big amount of articles dedicated to specific cultural problems or objects ;
- **But : there does not really exist a semiotics of culture.**

**My purpose for this conference:**

- presentation and discussion of 4 dominant approaches (“paradigms”) of studying culture and cultural phenomena;
- in order to understand a **possible** “picture” of a semiotics of culture
- my principal emphasis: a semiotics of should be a part of a theory, viz. a **semiotics of action** (example : the outlined theory of a **narrative schema** by Greimas)

**Note: my purpose will rest, nevertheless, only an exploratory one ....**

## **Four definitions (approaches) of what a culture is**

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**Culture is :**

**1) a system of knowledge and values which is supposed to be more or less commune to a group of men who constitute with respect to this system a “social actor” (a “community”).**

**2) a set of strategies and solutions for given needs (problems) of a group of men (of a “social actor”).**

**3) a species of capital (a “symbolic capital”) that distributes hierarchical places (produces a “social space”) and opens trajectories within the social space of a social actor (“community”).**

**4) a historical form with an evolutionary dynamics and embedded within a genetic filiation process.**

## The first approach

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Culture as a system of knowledge and values which is supposed to be more or less commune to a group of men who constitute with respect to this system a “social actor” (a “community”)

- **Social actor;**
- **Knowledge ;**
- **Value.**

➤ **Social actor : a group of men (« agents ») that share**

- 1. common knowledge and values (i.e. a “common culture”);**
- 2. common “activities” (needs and goals);**
- 3. objects (products, symbols, ...);**
- 4. social place (social field, « champ ») ;**
- 5. common history ;**
- 6. contexte (environnement).**

**Examples :**

- **« formal » or « formalized » social actors** : family ; social class ; institution ; social organisation ; profession ; ...
  
- **but also “un-formal”, “loose”, ... social actors** such as people who share ....
  - **Political ideas and convictions, symbols, traditions, activities**  
(= loose political actor but who may become influent ...);
  
  - **Metaphysical ideas and convictions, symbols, visions, places, ...** (= loose religious community of people ...);
  
  - **etc.**

– finally: a social actor by itself may be internally differentiated in groups, members, ... i.e.:

- the social actor behaves like a constituting **society of social actors**;
- who share at least as a **common reference** their constitutive society.

cf.

- the political party as a “society of (formal and loose) social actors”;
- the enterprise as a “society of (formal and loose) social actors”;
- etc.

**Note:**

Notions like “national culture”, “global culture”, “ethno-culture”, “scientific culture”, “popular culture”, “mass culture”, “professional culture”, “bureaucratic culture”, ...

– can always be described and explain with respect to the above mentioned 6 criteria

– and in taking into account that a social actor may behave as a society of social actors.

➤ **knowledge** : « cognitive systems » (*knowing how and knowing that*)

diversity of “species” of cognitive systems; i.e. a social actor may possess, refer to, produce ...

- practical knowledge, skills,
- theoretical knowledge (paradigms, themata, theories, ...)
- tacit and explicit knowledge (topoi; standards, ...)
- specialised and general knowledge,
  
- traditions, costumes,
- idéologies, « Weltanschauungen »,
- mentalities,
  
- belief systems,
- « representations » and stereotypes,
- ....

➤ **value : hierarchy of preferences conditioning preferential choices within a social actor**

***semantics of preferences:***

- epistemic preferences,
- moral preferences,
- esthetical preferences,
- practical preferences,
- ontological preferences,
- emotive preferences, ...
- as well as “mixed (hybrid) categories” of preferences (such as emotive and moral ones; emotive and esthetical ones; etc.)

**culture is a « preferential », preferentially graded (hierarchical) knowledge for a social actor; i.e. knowledge that is considered – by the social actor - :**

- to be true, certain, ... delusive, fallacious, not certain, improbable,
- to be good, bad, ...
- to be efficient, operational, “working”, ...
- to be basic, unquestionable, ...
- to be general, universal, eternal, ...
- to be horrible, appealing, disgusting, ...
- ...

**This means that a cultural pattern (a *valued cognitive system*) that defines, characterizes a social actor (a society of social actors) can be:**

- more or less monolithic and “simple”;**
  
- more or less differentiated in a more or less stabilised diversity of concurrent valued cognitive sub-systems that give rise to (polemical) interactions aiming at the re-production of a given cultural situation or, a contrario, at the production of a new one;**
  
- constitutes by itself already a sort of an intercultural environment (i.e. a global valued knowledge environment within which more specific knowledge and value patterns take place and interact).**

## The second approach

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**Culture as a set of strategies and solutions for given needs (problems) of a group of men (of a “social actor”) living in an given (physical, ecological, social, mental, ...) environment.**

**1) A social actor is a group of men that :**

- share a set of common activities, i.e. needs and goals to satisfy;
- occupy a place (social field,...) and lives in a (physical, ecological, social, mental, ...) environment with *limited resources* for satisfying these needs and goals.

**2) A culture, in this sense**

- is composed by a set of **strategies (plans, schemata, ...)** for satisfying given needs and goals;
- constitutes itself a **species of resource (a cognitive resource)** for satisfying given needs and goals (activities).

**Note : cf. the first approach of culture as a cognitive system of valued and graded knowledge ...**

### Needs and goals: high diversity of types or kinds of activities ...

- “basic” (biological) activities: nurture, sexual reproduction, security, ...
- activities concerning the internal organisation of a social actor, the social field and time occupied by the actor, ... as well as the relationships with its relevant environment;
- more peculiar “cultural” (graded cognitive) activities of a social actor;
- etc.

### Culture as a set of plans, schemata, ... for such activities can be :

- biologically pre-determined schemata (cf. ethology of behaviour);
- culturally transmitted schemata (“traditions”, “customs”, “manners”, ...);
- conventional schemata (“laws”, “rules”, “standards”, ...);
- highly differentiated and formalised schemata (“institutions”).

**Culture as a strategy (schema) : is basically –**

- 1. a cognitive resource (knowledge of how to do);**
- 2. that ought to be selected, used (applied, ...)**
- 3. given a specific type of needs or goals (i.e. of activities).**

**Note :**

**Specific cultural patterns and practices such as “national culture”, “ethno-culture”, “media culture”, “global culture”, “popular culture”, ... can therefore be described from two very complementary view points:**

- Either as a more or less complex, internally differentiated cognitive system of graded knowledge;**
- Or as a set of strategies or schemata for solving given needs and goals (“activities”).**

## The third approach

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Culture is a species of **capital** (a “**symbolic capital**”) that distributes hierarchical places (in a “**social space**”) and opens **trajectories** within the social space of a social actor (“**community**”).

A social actor (cf. Bourdieu) lives in a:

- structured and structuring **social space** (i.e. in a society of social actors) ;
- where he occupies a set of «**social fields** » (“**champs**”) corresponding to his « **symbolic (economic, ...) capital** » with respect to the global symbolic (economic, ...) capital and its distribution over the other social actors within the constituting society;
- and where he can perform, following the changes in his symbolic capital, **social trajectories** leading him from one position (champ) to another one.

**Example : social field (« champ ») of the academic world**

**Principal notions implied here :**

- **Social space;**
- **Social field (“champ social”);**
  
- **“Habitus of reproduction”;**
- **Symbolic capital and power;**
- **Distribution of symbolic capital;**
  
- **Relationship of conflict and domination;**
- **Appropriation/expropriation of symbolic capital;**
- ...

## The fourth approach

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**Culture is a historical form with an evolutionary dynamics and embedded within a genetic filiation process.**

- **Historicity of cultural forms;**
- **Evolutionary dynamics of a cultural form (life cycles of a cultural form and capacity to transform itself)**
- **Heritage of a cultural form/cultural forms.**

**Note: Culture as a graded knowledge, cognitive resource and symbolic power :**

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|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– <b>Has a certain life span;</b></li><li>– <b>Is involved itself in an evolutionary process;</b></li><li>– <b>Inherits from preceding cultures, cultural forms.</b></li></ul> |
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## **Cognitive references as thematic configurations**

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Following the four discussed approaches, culture is – for a social actor :

- A graded or graduable knowledge;
- A cognitive resource for solving needs and goals;
- A means of power (i.e. – in the sense of Greimas – a potestive resource) for maintaining or changing a given social position;
- A “historical” resource.

It constitutes, in this sense a **reference for a social actor** – a **reference** of which the **status** is conditioned by the four above mentioned parameters.

In order to speak with Schütz, such references are themes or **thematic configurations** that constitute die “Wissenswelt” of a social actor.

« thematic configuration » following Husserl and Schütz means, grosso modo, the creation and fixation of a frame or a framework (a « vision ») for practical or theoretical purposes

**components of a thematic configuration:**

- **themes (« semes »)**
- **thematic relations (i.e. relations between themes)**
- **referents (i.e. the « objects », « situations », « histories », ... to which refers a theme or thematic configuration)**
- **a « contexte » (of validity)**
- **finally: a theme = condensed thematic configuration (i.e. a theme can be unfolded in a configuration)**

**thematic configuration : compare with script, template, schema, « conceptual model », ...**

- **a thematic configuration is submitted to the 3 principles:**

- 1) classificational principle**
- 2) functional or narrative principle**
- 3) statutory or contractual principle**

### **I) classificational principle**

- a thematic configuration identifies and categorizes (« qualifies ») situations, objets, histories, intellectual constructions, and so on
- a thematic configuration itself can be classified with respect to other thematic configurations

### **II) functional or narrative principle**

- a thematic configuration is a strategy, a procedure, a plan for solving a set of (informational, cognitive, ...) problems or objectives
- i.e. a cultural reference is a « standardized » (more or less complex, more or less adaptable) solution for a class of problems (cognitive, practical, communicational, ...)

### **III) contractual or statutory principle**

- it is a « standard » : « norm », « law », « convenances », « habitudes », ... which has a « contractual » (« communitarian ») value
- but is fallible, it is controverse, normally negociable, more or less valide; there are different, concurrent references, standards, « normes », ...:

## **The need of a semiotics of action**

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### **1) Culture as a graded or graduable knowledge for a social actor :**

**in the most cases : graded or graduable knowledge is submitted to negotiation, discussion, ... within a social actor (or “specialist members” of it) :**

**paradigm of the rhetorical stasis (cf. Lausberg)**

**a theory of action in order to describe, explain the production of valued, graded knowledge**

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### **2) Culture as a cognitive resource for satisfying a given type of needs and goals**

**the cognitive resource as a part of of a theory of action (“social” action in the sense of Weber as a “chance” to fulfil some goal)**

**(social) action: the (collective) doing of a social actor in order to satisfy some goal, some need**

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### **3) Culture as a “symbolic capital”**

the use of culture to impose, to constraint, ... to evolve in a social space, to win against another, etc.

**a theory of action in which the capital constitutes a kind of a “power” (symbolic power) in order to perform, achieve a goal, satisfy a need.**

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### **4) Culture as a historical form**

culture as a knowledge that has a certain life span, that evolves and that always is positioned with respect to preceding cultural forms

**a theory of action that explains the evolutionary dynamics of a cultural form)**

## The narrative theory

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### 3 different interpretations of “narrativity”

#### 1st interpretation:

The narrative syntax refers to a specific class of discourses - narrative discourses - of which it is supposed to produce several scenarios - several generic and more or less specialised types of narratives (cf. « myth », « fairy tale », « science fiction story », historical narrative », « legend », « saga », « biography », « life story », « soap opera », « sitcom » ...)

#### 2nd interpretation:

The narrative syntax constitutes - with the narrative semantics - a more general principle (« narrative principle », « narrativity ») that underlies the production and interpretation of all sorts of discourses and not only of narrative ones, such as, for instance, persuasive discourses, didactic or pedagogical discourses, scientific discourses, philosophical discourses and so on.

- « Narrativity » = « problem solving »:

The « reason » of a discourse is, basically, to give an answer to a (presupposed) question.

- « question » = problem (« information objectif »)
- « discourse » = supposed solution (more or less adequate, more or less convincing, ...)

### 3rd interpretation:

all activities of a social actor understood as an **oriented doing (from a situation of needs to a projected goal situation)** can be understood (described and interpreted following the model of **narrativity**)

- (Tentative) characterization of a – simple - structure of narrativity

**initial qualification:** problem, need, desired goal, ...

(initial disequilibrium) -

**choice of plans/construction of plans -**

**execution of plans («actions ») -**

confrontation with obstacles -

intermediate qualification -

(correction, abandon, continuation)

**final qualification :** solution of the problem (final equilibrium)

- Model of the « narrative schema » of Greimas

1. semiotics of manipulation (--> initial qualification)
2. semiotics of sanction (--> final qualification)
3. semiotics of action (---> sequences between the initial and final qualification)

## **Semiotics of culture – narrative semiotics**

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### **Double relationship**

**a) semiotics of culture : cognitive “pendant”** what you need in order to describe in narrative terms the activities (places, times, objects, environments, ...) of a social actor (i.e.

- the cultural references –knowledge - involved;
- the plans and solution schemata used;
- the symbolic power at stake;
- the historical dimension of such a cultural reference.

**b) narrative semiotics : pragmatic “pendant”** what you need in order to explain the constitution, maintenance, transformation of a given cultural form