

Between the Stage and the Text:

**Agency and Structure in the Analysis of Cultural Change
from the Perspectives of Trust and Uncertainty**

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Between the Stage and the Text:

**Agency and Structure in the Analysis of Cultural Change
from the Perspectives of Trust and Uncertainty**

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Foreword

“Society” is increasingly viewed and treated as a “network” rather than “structure” (let alone a solid “totality”): it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and of an essentially infinite volume of possible permutations.¹

If contemporary cultural studies and sociology are ruled by any structuring principles rendering order to otherwise nebular character of the disciplines, this may be the idea of fluidity permeating every possible field of social life and cultural production. A cognitively informed and intellectually dexterous observer may purport to immobilize a single, isolated snapshot of cultural reality but this action will result in providing an illusory, simplified representation. In this way, scholarly perception of culture emerges, as Chris Jenks declares, “from the noun ‘process,’ in the sense of nurture, growth and bringing into being.”² Ontologically speaking, both society and culture are processes *in statu nascendi* — their natures unveil themselves as the dynamics of social becoming.³ This statement, to put it otherwise, demonstrates that socio-cultural realities resemble constantly evolving networks of interpersonal phenomena chief among which are processes of interaction and communication undertaken by knowledgeable agents. Moreover, this inherent dynamism is also experienced as the dialectic of continuity and change which is typical of the supposedly static and systemic character of norms, values and signs of culture.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times. Living in the Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 3.

² Chris Jenks, *The Analytic Bases of Cultural Reproduction Theory*, in *Cultural Reproduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

³ Piotr Sztompka, *Society in Action. The Theory of Social Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 95.

The principal aim of this work is to reflect upon the processes of socio-cultural change from the perspective of trust and uncertainty conceived as correlates to evolving forms of socio-cultural organisations. It is postulated that technological, economic and political transformations (as embodied by industrialisation, the spread of free markets and democratisation) are factors whose impact is instrumental as far as the development of interpersonal trust relations is concerned. In other words, modernisation paves the way for changes taking place in the selection of cultural elements (e.g. ideologies, values or discourses) which makes social reality appear as an organised, predictable and, therefore, trustworthy system. The same cultural repertoire of trust is applied to the collective process of coping with social traumas and uncertainties, such as the loss of domestication or the erosion of traditions, which come in the wake of technological, economic or political change.

Modernisation processes produce two distinct kinds of trust cultures, that is cultural systems sustaining and reinforcing personalised trust relations. The former is associated with the cultural "regime" of pre-modernity in which trusting is based upon structural resources, such as fixed role expectations, established interaction patterns and the unquestionable authority of tradition. This model of trust culture is best illustrated by the institution of the "Kula Ring" which denotes a system of ceremonial, ritual activities aiming at the exchange of symbolic artefacts among tribal, stateless communities of the Triobriand archipelago. The latter system is related to (late) modernity in which trusting is based upon the individual's personal reflexivity and agency, that is the ability to make informed choices under conditions of ideological, normative and axiological multiplicity. This latter model of trust culture is typical of informational networks in which reciprocity is a project in progress that needs to be negotiated and implemented by all parties engaged in online interactions.

The aforementioned argument is conceptually divided into six chapters. Four of them comprise methodological and theoretical problems referring to both uncertainty and trust as well as social ontology (the structure/agency dichotomy). The theoretical and methodological remarks are concluded by the model of "theoretical performance" which is introduced as an original methodological framework for cultural analysis. The remaining two chapters are interpretative projects aiming to analyse modernisation processes from the perspective of the applied methodological framework and its conceptual toolbox.

From a strictly theoretical point of view, the work is based upon a firm intellectual belief that the idea of trust may be defined as a phe-

nomenological coefficient to societal interactions with Other(ness). In this sense, trusting, as Piotr Sztompka observes, resembles a kind of “bet” placed upon contingent and chronically unpredictable actions performed by other individuals.⁴ In this way, trusting constitutes a core element of “ontological security,” a term coined in order to emphasise that contingency management is instrumental in coping with the reality inhabited by myriads of unpredictable Others equipped with diversified political and economic agendas.⁵ Consequently, the cultural discourse of trust is very often conceptualised as a vernacular of social productivity, a category whose intellectual origins can be traced as far back as to the legacy of political theories centred upon the notion of civil society and the related idea of civic culture. The discourse of trust becomes a vital tool enabling a more informed insight into the cultural significance of modern democratic and multicultural orders in which the political construct of civil society is founded upon the mechanisms of multilateral reciprocity and solidarity conceived as distinct forms of the public good.

When approached from a strictly methodological perspective, the work addresses the dichotomy of agency and structure which is conceived here as a starting point for synthetic conceptualisations, such as Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory, aiming to provide a more holistic outlook on the ontology of socio-cultural realities. These theories are applied to formulate an original methodological framework that sees socio-cultural processes in terms of iterative “theatrical performances.” In this context, modernization processes (and the transformation of trust cultures) can be subsumed within a cognitive model suggesting that cultural processes may be conceived as a specific form of “theatrical performances.” The theatrical performance is, thus, conceptualised as a constitutive element of socio-cultural ontology comprising the existence of the stage (the spatial and temporal dimensions of interpersonal interaction), the text (the totality of structural resources from which individuals draw during the performance), the principal actors granted dominant roles in the process of cultural reproduction and, last but not least, the audience which observes cultural processes but is not empowered to alter them.

In the context of the delineated theatrical framework, the realm of traditional, pre-modern community may be interpreted as a distinct form of trust culture in which networks of moral obligations are an-

⁴ Piotr Sztompka, *Trust. A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 25.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 243.

chored in the structural (or textual) properties of dramaturgic events. Actors of the pre-modern cultural stage — as we learn from Bronislaw Malinowski's observations of the Kula Ring communities — are seen as being united by robust, non-negotiable social ties and fixed interpersonal relationships fostering durable trusting expectations. Thus formed trust culture is rooted in structural underpinnings of cultural reproduction, that is in the existence of stable textual devices (mythical texts) which create the common plane of morality and, therefore, foster the shared axiology of social interaction.

Modern socio-cultural orders are furrowed with entirely different mechanisms rendering the creation of trust cultures. Their distinctiveness is anchored in the "phenomenology of modernity"⁶ stressing the incredible impact of human agency which runs rampant in social organisations of the contemporary era. The realm of (late) modern culture is characterised by the demand for making relatively autonomous (agential) choices which function as an unavoidable coefficient of living in the times of individualisation. The era of individualisation connotes a model of social organisation in which structural constraints of social class, nationality or gender are becoming increasingly remote from the individual practice of making everyday life choices. Hence, the idea of individualisation, as Ulrich Beck proclaims, results in the demise of "standard," clear-cut biographies. Facing the lack of palliative and stabilising impact of solid structures (such as tradition, for instance), human identities resemble individual projects, agential narratives constructed, so to speak, *ab ovo*.⁷

In the era of individualisation, trust mechanisms also resemble projects that need to be completed in the process of interpersonal communication and negotiation with other actors. As opposed to the aforementioned order of traditional pre-modernity, in which trusting relations are deeply related to the stabilising authority of cultural texts, the emergent realm of modernity postulates the agency of trust which becomes anchored in individualised actors' competences. This is facilitated by processes of globalisation which, as the theatrical framework sees it, foster a new model of societal interaction uniting myriads of strangers who at the point of interpersonal communication remain absent and elusive. In this specific case, reciprocity in not

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 137.

⁷ Ulrich Beck, "The Reinvention of Politics: Toward a Theory of Reflexive Modernization," in *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, eds. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

granted by any reliable axiology of interaction but, on the contrary, is furrowed with uncertainties and perils inscribed in the chaotic nature of communication networks. This networked environment of trust gives rise to an essentially fragmented model of subjectivity which, as Scott Bukatman teaches us, may be defined in terms of the "terminal identity."⁸ Trusting relations are inscribed in the network of territorially distant and physically absent Others who remain shrouded in the aura of uncertainty since from the onset their interactions are simulated and mediated by hyperreal technologies of information processing. Online reciprocity constitutes the foundation for a novel form of trust which becomes vested in the abstract qualities of a system by which the very interaction becomes mediated.

⁸ Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity. The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham DC and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

Tomasz Burzyński

**Pomiędzy sceną a tekstem
Podmiotowość i struktura w analizie zmiany kulturowej
z perspektywy zaufania i niepewności**

Streszczenie

Publikacja stanowi interdyscyplinarny projekt łączący w sobie teorie kulturoznawcze, socjologiczne, politologiczne i filozoficzne oraz zmierzający do przedstawienia dynamiki zmian społeczno-kulturowych z punktu widzenia zaufania i niepewności. Przyjmując tezę, że zaufanie jest sposobem na radzenie sobie z niepewną i ryzykowną przyszłością, praca ta opiera się na założeniu, że omawiane pojęcia służą zobrazowaniu stopnia zadomowienia się jednostki w zmieniających się strukturach i systemach społecznych, ekonomicznych i kulturowych. W ten sposób niniejsza publikacja wychodzi poza ramy tych teorii modernizacji, które zmianę społeczną przedstawiają przede wszystkim z perspektywy strukturalno-systemowej, uwzględniającej przemiany instytucji politycznych, administracyjnych (struktur biurokratycznych) lub ekonomicznych. Praca ta jest zatem próbą nakreślenia dynamiki procesów zmiany kulturowej, a zwłaszcza jej normatywnych, aksjologicznych i symbolicznych aspektów. Książka jest adresowana przede wszystkim do osób zainteresowanych problematyką kształtowania się społecznych zasobów zaufania (kapitału społecznego) oraz powstawania kulturowych mechanizmów wzmacniających lub osłabiających skłonność jednostek do przybierania postawy uogólnionej ufności.

Tomasz Burzyński

**Zwischen der Bühne und dem Text
Subjektivität und Struktur in der Analyse der Kulturänderung
hinsichtlich des Vertrauens und der Ungewissheit**

Zusammenfassung

Die Publikation ist ein interdisziplinäres Projekt, das kulturkundliche, soziologische, politologische und philosophische Theorien vereint und bezweckt, die ganze Dynamik der sozialkulturellen Wandlungen von dem Vertrauen und der Unsicherheit her zu schildern. Angenommen, dass das Vertrauen eine Methode ist, mit der ungewissen und risikoreichen Zukunft zurechtzukommen, stützt sich der Verfasser auf die These, dass vorliegende Begriffe dazu dienen, die Anpassung des Menschen an die sich verändernden sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Strukturen und Systemen darzustellen. So sprengt das Buch den Rahmen der Modernisierungstheorien, welche den sozialen Wandel vor allem aus der strukturell-systemhaften Perspektive betrachten, d.i. alle Wandlungen im Bereich der politischen, administrativen (bürokratische Strukturen) oder wirtschaftlichen Institutionen in Rücksicht nehmen. Der Verfasser versucht, die Dynamik der Prozesse des Kulturwandels, und besonders dessen normativer, axiologischer und symbolischer Aspekte zu schildern. Das Buch richtet sich vor allem an die Personen, die sich für die Entwicklung des gesellschaftlichen Vertrauensbestandes (Gemeinschaftskapitals) und für die Entstehung der Kulturmechanismen interessieren, die im Stande sind, persönliche Neigung des Menschen eine vertrauensvolle Einstellung anzunehmen, zu verstärken oder abzuschwächen.



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