CULTURE AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN UTOPIA AND REALITY

I

Defined as a process of humanization of man and his world — as an image of a more human world — culture always stands midway between conception and realization, between the ideal and reality, between the new and the already attained.

But in sociology and anthropology, culture is not usually defined as a process of humanization, the results of which are measured by the humanization of man. Culture is instead usually viewed much more narrowly and pragmatically as the social heritage of a people in a given social system.

Those definitions of culture as standardized, learned behavior or as traditionally acquired habits (such as, for example, Linton's, Margaret Mead's 'forms of traditional behavior,' and Ford's are sociologically one-sided. Such a concept of culture is doubly limited. First, culture is viewed exclusively as a means of adjusting the individual to social conditions. This ignores the fundamental characteristic of culture — man's work of altering his environment and adapting it to himself, in the course of which both the natural and the social conditions are altered. Second, such a concept of culture reduces culture to the forms and components of the social behavior of the individual and — even more narrowly — to that standardized behavior prescribed as 'normal'. Thus all other significant areas of life and creativity find no place in such a definition of culture since they cannot be classified under the concept of behavior, and certainly not standardized behavior. (Using this definition, art and philosophy would certainly be classified as 'deviant' behavior, inasmuch as they cannot be standardized.) These definitions make provision only for the pragmatic functions of culture. But reducing the concept of culture in this way prevents an explanation of the total content of culture and its development. If culture is understood as standardized behavior (i.e., exclusively relative to social standards which level down individuality and anything exceeding the bounds of the standard, the officially accepted, that which is supported and favored at a given moment), then how is it possible to explain the cultural process arising from invention, or the appearance of the new, the original, the nonstandard, in opposition to the given and fixed? Culture (even in regulating

167

*This translation © 1979 by D. Reidel Publishing Company.
the social behavior of the individual) is not innate or ‘given’ once and for all, but can and must change: it is not the product of standardization, or of established, regulated, preaccepted experience devoid of any impulse toward change. Cultural processes, and their produce — culture — are the result of breaking the chain of a configuration of standardized behaviors and conservative forms of life and activity.

Clyde Kluckhohn and W. Kelly\(^3\) criticize those conceptions that treat culture either as 'the traditional means of solving problems' or which stress social inheritance as a component of culture. The first do not account for the fact that 'cultures create problems' and 'create new needs,' and the second suggest too passive a role on the part of man, "as if man gets his culture . . . without effort and without resistance." But one may also criticize Kluckhohn's definition, that culture is a 'design for living'.\(^4\) This is not only incomplete, saying nothing about the content of the concept and not defining the differential characteristics that distinguish cultural from other phenomena, it is also one-sided, since culture offers not only 'designs' for real life but also a vision of the future; it encompasses not only "historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit . . ." but also the means of transcending historically derived schemes. One of the oldest definitions, formulated by E. B. Tylor, is the least satisfactory of any.\(^5\) The defect of this definition is that it is descriptive. It fails to offer criteria for the selection of characteristic cultural phenomena or for the explanation of these as special phenomena; without such criteria we do not see on what basis the aforementioned elements may be enumerated. Thus defining culture as the sum of overall accomplishments does not assist us in defining the differentia specifica of cultural phenomena. We must heed the warning of Zygmunt Bauman\(^6\) that culture does not consist of man's products, but of the meanings of these products and the way in which these meanings are systematized and rationalized. In other words, culture is what makes a thing meaningful to man and is internalized in the structure of the personality as a criterion. (Bauman terms the material, objective forms of this process 'cultural correlates.') Thus culture means "how man thinks and how man understands his world;"\(^7\) but since in Zygmunt Bauman's conceptual system, understanding of the world is not separated from human action, then understanding of the world is defined by that action and is not identified by its results. For these reasons this concept of culture is not the same as the definitions of culture as a 'symbolic system,' or as the 'structure of symbolic interaction' (Levi-Strauss). Bauman's concept of culture is much fuller and richer than the definition of culture as a symbolic system because in human activity meanings, models, and values are united with the goals toward which man aims.