INTRODUCTION:
CULTURE, CULTURAL SYSTEM AND SCIENCE

Author's note: Imre was a deep thinker and a wonderful friend. He was not an anarchist and he did not toy with ideas. While often acting the buffoon in everyday life, thus misleading many a superficial observer, he was deeply earnest when ideas came up for discussion. In my last few meetings with him I tried to 'sell' anthropological thinking to him and he wanted to show me how wrong I was. I am now working on a slim volume called 'Science as a Cultural System' intended as an Introduction to a more extensive study of Intellectual History which I hope to pursue. This introductory volume will be dedicated to Imre. Here is the first chapter of it: 'Introduction: Culture, Cultural System and Science'.

The slim volume presented here is, as the subtitle suggests, an attempt at developing analytical tools for a general intellectual history of Europe, i.e., of Western culture from the vantage point of science. There are many intellectual histories from different points of view: the most easily acceptable are those of political and social ideas and institutions – some emphasize the central importance of religion, others the deep social role of the arts and especially of visual art; but ambitious histories of Western music also exist (for example, Paul Henry Lang's). Most of them try only superficially to cover their real aim of being a 'total intellectual history'. Some histories of philosophy have the same ambition. Yet, depending on the author's image of knowledge, science is almost always upgraded or downgraded to be in a class by itself – different. Science is rarely considered as much a totality of human culture as art or religion because it is seen as different, unique, all apart. In those rare cases, when science is considered as the whole of human culture it represents an arrogant technocratic view stemming not from viewing science as inclusive of art, religion, etc., but rather by eliminating the other dimensions of culture by treating them as obsolete and irrelevant for modern man.

The fundamental presupposition of this introductory volume and the subsequently planned ' Intellectual history' is that the various
dimensions of culture: religion, art, science, ideology, common-sense, music, are all on a par – they are all cultural systems. Moreover, that approach to culture according to which it can be viewed as a sum of the dimensions like a cake called Culture cut into slices of Religion, Art, Science, is rejected here. Even allowing for minor distortions I do not believe that such a summation is meaningful in any sense. On the contrary, it seems to me that an interpretative venture can only be aimed at totality by selecting a focus, a vantage-point and from this view the whole culture. Thus, one can consider the whole of Western Culture primarily as Religion which does, however, have aspects relating to art, science, ideology; just as the few really good books on religious history tried to see their subject. One can see the whole of culture through the spectacles of philosophy, or art, or music. For some primitive culture it even sometimes seemed that Art would be one of the few legitimate spectacles; magic used to be the other. I claim this for Science. Any culture, and especially Western or European Culture, can be viewed as the Culture of Science with mystical, religious, artistic, musical, ideological aspects connected with it. Or again, in some cases illumination is gained by seeing the whole of culture as an area of class-conflict or of ideation conflict: take Marxism or T. D. White's 'The Warfare of Science and Christianity'. Naturally no such interpretive essay is complete or total. But, in my opinion, any one such attempt is more illuminating than the summation-of-dimensions-view. Moreover, this approach is an open-ended one: while a cake can be cut up only into a finite number of slices, and their size diminishes as their number grows, there is no limitation to piling one upon the other, layers upon layers of 'total view', each from a given chosen perspective.

The title of the book echoes the well-known papers of Clifford Geertz. 

Geertz’s concept of culture

...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

The word ‘semiotic’ is either misleading, or the analogy of the word is not to be taken seriously: for though the web is spun by man himself, yet it has a reality beyond what we tend to denote as ‘semiotic’. We should stick to this reality of the web. If we do, we can now go from the concept