The complexity of culture and the sustainability of groups[1]

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It is widely accepted in culture research today that culture is both heterogeneous and diverse, with most societies maintaining a state of growing complexity. If culture is the contract that makes social relations possible, then at any given time for any given group there are more than one single contract that regulate that group's life. Even groups that managed to isolate themselves in some degree growingly find themselves tangled in a multi-group environment, which makes the number of contracts necessary for maintaining life rather large. While it used to be believed, though I have strong reservations about the validity of this generalization, that a person could normally pursue their life in some not too remote past with a once-and-for-all learned stable culture, a growing number of human beings must now face and cope with unrecognized circumstances through life.

This growing awareness of the necessity of coping with a diversity of circumstances has led me to investigate the possible dependency between the complexity of culture and the sustainability of groups. Hence, my purpose is to analyze complexity not simply as a state, commonsense or otherwise, but as a factor, namely as a necessary if not sufficient condition for a group to maintain itself over time. "Complexity" therefore would mean in such a context not the same as heterogeneity, multiplicity or variety as such, but a very specific variable that emerges out of a state of multiple choices to provide solutions for coping with changing or unrecognized circumstances.

In order to be able to conceptualize a state where such solutions may emerge in the life of groups, I need to introduce an auxiliary concept to making it possible to think in concrete terms. In all discussions about culture in the social sciences, although there is an attempt to deal with culture in concrete terms with the help of long lists of components (such as 'beliefs' 'values' and the like), it is never clear where all those components reside, how they get organized, and what the constraints on their availability are. Both socio-semiotic traditions (e.g., Lotman's semiosphere 1984 & 1990; see also Alexandrov 2000), and the more recent Darwinian Cultural Evolution research (Mesoudi 2011; Mesoudi, Whiten & Laland 2006) conceive of culture as a repertoire of options that makes life, biologically and socially, possible for strategies of both acting in, and understanding of, the world.

Although the concept of culture would make no sense without its adoption by groups, all studies actually manage to discuss them separately. The separation between human beings on the one hand and repertoires of culture on the other means that groups and repertoires are conceived of as maintaining functional multi-dimensional rather than inherent relations to each other; and that these relations are generated by historical and accidental circumstances rather than by genetic or mental continuity. Such a seemingly trivial generalization is neither self-evident nor universally acknowledged in all academic fields. Moreover, the innateness of repertoires for groups has been inculcated into the modern mind by two hundred years of diligent intellectual labor at the service of the modern economic and political organizations such as states, whose major project for gaining ground has been a comprehensive endeavor to create and impose homogeneity among the population controlled by them. Exported with much success all over the globe, it now clearly prevails on the market of accepted ideas and images on both official and popular levels among most organized groups known under the name of 'nations'. In this capacity, it still serves entities such as states to maintain their distinction and separation and similarly does groups-in-the-making to claim such rights. It has even succeeded where

there were no local historical precedents, such as the creation of language-based new states, a principle wholly imported from the European modern repertoire.[2]

This controversy, which on the academic level may seem highly abstract and detached from reality, but in the political reality has generated conflicts and wars, is basically about the control of repertoires. Obviously, those who control repertoires also control the group served by those repertoires. It therefore becomes a critical issue who is authorized, and by whom, to legitimize changes in the contents of the repertoires or suggest such changes. Homogeneity blocks change by making it unthinkable, impossible or simply not available. By contrast, heterogeneity is a pre-condition for potentially making it possible for alternative components, or even whole repertoires, to emerge. Therefore, to hypothesize a relation between heterogeneity of culture and subsistence of groups is elementary in any theory of complex systems. The gist of the argument would be that since it is the multiplicity of repertoires which co-exist as permanent competitors that makes it possible for a system to change; and since change is necessary because systems necessarily clash and conflict with other systems, heterogeneity allows systems to subsist in the long run.

These assumptions allow dealing not only with repertoire change as such, but also with repertoire creation. While repertoire creation is normally analyzed as an anonymous process, if we do not also add to this an analysis of the role played by named individuals it is often impossible to understand why seemingly similar circumstances in disparate places, such as high heterogeneity of culture, do not produce the same level of complexity, namely, the ability to generate alternatives, in a similar way. This is why I have been engaged in an ongoing attempt to study the parameters of initiatives taken with cultural repertoires in relation to processes of change in the history of collective entities. In these studies, evidence has accumulated to suggest that the massive labor invested in the making, and the endeavors of distributing and inculcating of new repertoires may eventually have created a whole array of results, a high and intensive level of activity, which can be termed "energy" (Even-Zohar 1994), or, to follow now some suggestions in complexity theory – "complexity". It was my contention therefore that it is this "energy", or "complexity", that has made it possible for the groups studied to stand reasonably well in competition with the contiguous world.

In all of the cases I have studied – such as pre-state Israel, Italy, Spanish Galicia, Iceland, Québec and Catalonia – this engagement with the making of repertoires was launched in the context of an attempt made by the makers of these repertoires to break off from some contemporary circumstances and create new conditions of life for the group of people they considered to be a legitimate target for these repertoires.

What kind of new repertoires were being created and what kind of "options" they engendered?

The people who were engaged in great intensity in making new repertoires, both "idea-makers" and "culture entrepreneurs", have always had in view some vision of improving the situation of the group for whom they targeted their repertoire inventions. Whether the "actual situation" indeed justified their enterprises or not can be assessed only in relative terms, taking into account the contextual situation as it was perceived by these individuals.

I must emphasize the fact that those new suggested practices were not explicitly directed at devising strategies for accumulating material capital. Material poverty may indeed have been a strong drive and a point of departure for such endeavors, and it surely helped create positive reverberations among the targeted public (such as having Sicilian peasants vote for the Italian Union),[3] but the public discourse and the new alternatives that

were offered often centered around different modes of managing life. In situations that were perceived and presented as acute, discourse focused predominantly on saving the group from persecutions and humiliations, or even from perishing. In situations of high competition, it was about putting the group on an equal footing with other groups (normally described as the more advanced). Restoring some past grandeur, actual or imaginary, has been a default ingredient since the Age of Romanticism. The options devised in congruence with these views may appear as belonging to areas that have nothing to do with parameters of either economic or social prosperity. These may indeed seem like a whole battery of odd gismos, such as opening windows to let sunshine and fresh air in, or using disreputable or non-spoken languages, or walking out in nature, or planting trees in great ceremony, or getting up early to go to work, and the like.

Theoretically, what I am here referring to are two different kinds of projects. One is the making of new repertoires for whatever purpose. The other is the creation of new political entities where these repertoires were designed to prevail. However, from the point of view of the outcomes, the two projects actually are one single package on the levels of both discourse and action. Namely, the making of an entity with socio-political characteristics has often been presented as both a necessary condition and a possible result of new proposed repertoires. For example, the creation of the modern Italian state was inseparable from the attempts to vernacularize the literary Italian language or the whole plethora of new other options devised by the handful of Italian repertoire-makers involved in that event. And although is was propagated that the expected outcome of this bundled project is the achievement of betterment of life for the targeted group, it was also widely propagated that people should be prepared to accept that there might arise incongruities between individual and collective conditions. Therefore, even when members of the collective would have to starve or get killed in war because of the new devised repertoires, they would accept the premise that the collective may survive or even thrive by their actions.

These bearings may not apply at all to those cases where the making of nations and states has taken place without the making of new repertoires. In such cases, if people do not experience any positive change in their lives, on whatever level, they are more likely to reject the outcomes. They may experience the whole enterprise as superfluous and surely would accept the famous "Lord Acton's melancholic remark" (Pratt 1985) that nationalism "does not aim either at liberty or prosperity, both of which it sacrifices to the imperative necessity of making the nation the mold and measure of the State. Its course will be marked with material as well as moral ruin, in order that a new invention may prevail over the works of God and the interests of mankind" (Acton 1967; quoted from Pratt 1985: 196).

This only means that it is important to understand that this kind of solution for a situation of perceived inferiority may not have emerged out of some unconstrained "free will" of "the people," but out of some deliberate thinking entertained by individuals who have been able to generate or spot an opportunity. These individuals were driven to thinking, and often to subsequent action, by unavoidable inter-cultural competition. Analyzed from the point of view of business evaluations (that is, by the rates of investments to yields), the benefit of certain entities that have emerged as a result may indeed be questioned. But from the point of view of inter-group competition, to follow or reject a certain ingredient of repertoire has been, and continuously is, a matter of choosing between perpetuated inferiority and belonging to a new club that offers some new privileges.

My contention is therefore that the principle which worked in accepting an alternative under conditions of heterogeneity is not only that of "why haven't we got what our neighbor has got?" but often "We have got no alternative but to follow the example of the neighbor." It is therefore that I suggest that the fruitful question here would be: under what relations with the contemporary repertoires this action takes place? If new repertoires are involved, even when their adoption is a matter of political convenience rather than a desire to alter conditions for "the people" (as so often is maintained, e. g., in relation to such cases as the politics of Piedmont and Count Cavour), a deadlock may thereby be broken in a domestic repertoire. Subsequently, even in cases of a limited stock of innovations, the doors may open to allow more options. Once it is made widely acceptable that the older ways of life can be at least in part replaced by different ones, often there is no way for anybody to block the surge of complexity, or energy, which followed as a result.

The moment when new options are made permissible in whatever society is not an event that should be taken for granted. It is true that new options are being produced every day by an untold number of individuals, either accidentally or deliberately. If you accidentally find out that you can cook your food with some herb you may have accidentally acquired, you thereby devised a new option, but there is no guarantee that other people will accept it, and in some places and past or present periods you might stand to trial for witchcraft and end up in unexpected bad places.

The basic reason for this is that repertoires tend to establish themselves in society to eventually become the agreed culture of that society, that is, its recognizable way for handling life situations. It is then not at all self-evident that people will be encouraged, nor even supported, by the other members of a group in making additional – let alone alternative – options to those already in use. Sticking to accepted repertoires may often be stronger than the need to confront changing circumstances. Groups, as well as individuals, are often willing to go a long way – even risking their lives – in order to maintain the repertoire which may have become identical with their sense of orientation in the world. Jared Diamond has dedicated a whole book to discussing cases, both past and present, where he claims that societies have selected to collapse rather than change their repertoires (Diamond 2005).

For while the idea-makers and the culture entrepreneurs normally claim that the only way for the group to extract itself from its misery is to introduce changes in its culture, if not replace it completely, the opponents of such initiatives normally claim that the opposite is true. Clearly, the understanding of survival must be very different for the opposing parties. Those who normally are in favor of maintaining a current repertoire unchanged frequently consider heterogeneity as negative and change as disruptive. From their point of view, the disappearance of the current repertoire or of any part of it – the repertoire they live by – would simply mean the disappearance of the group as such. Naturally, when force is involved, or even when perceived as forceful, new repertoires may be more collectively resisted, whether actively or passively, depending on the power circumstances of the relevant case.

It therefore requires certain conditions for repertoire innovations to be suggested in the first place, before any attempt is ever made to implement these suggestions, if the aim is to have them accepted by at least a reasonable part of a targeted group. Seen from this point of view, the strategy of proposing the creation of a new group can be understood as a way for making new repertoires more attractive. That is, since they are normally not presented as aiming at serving replacements for the current group as such.

When the dynamics of the making of new repertoires is set in motion, the very nature of the situation and the different backgrounds of the people involved often create

alternative sets of new options. These may never be fully compatible in the long run, even in cases where certain levels of integration or compromises have been achieved between the competitors. In most cases of deliberate creations of new options, more than one agenda is normally proposed in almost every domain of life. In the cases of the making of new entities, the alternative proposals cannot be characterized in general terms, but we can frequently observe incompatibility between "left" and "right", "religious" and "secular", "republicans" and "royalists", and the like. Each of these may have proposed a different set of new options, and sometimes no final settlement is ever reached.

As an illustration, in many of these cases, the new entity, now possessing political power to impose repertoires, often makes the choice between the proposed alternatives. In the case of the Italian language, for instance, a committee was set up and its chairman, Manzoni, after many back-and-forth hesitations, finally decided in favor of a certain variety which subsequently was introduced into the newly established Italian schools and has now become more or less the common language of the Italians (de Mauro 1984). The Norwegian conflict in matters of language, however, could not be solved by similar governmental decisions, so the compromise was that both alternatives (in that case – both Norwegian languages) were adopted. In the Israeli case, a state described as "status quo" was agreed upon between the secular majority and the religious minority back in 1948 in matters of church and state, though each section has been trying since then to erode the agreement if not to break it altogether. Such impositions or agreements have not necessarily lasted in the various cases. Resentment and rejection of new repertoires often take place partly because of the lack of a settlement between competitive agenda, but plausibly also because there always is a group there that is not content with the outcome of certain actions, which it considers to have created some disadvantage for it. This lack of contentment, if developed into passive resistance, often functions as a factor of deadlock. On the other hand, if it develops into a state of active opposition, it seems to be able to create the necessary dynamics for a continued struggle about the desirable repertoires, which contribute to a continued state of complexity.

The continuation of the normal lack of agreement on matters of culture repertoires among groups therefore guarantees that there will be a continued struggle about those repertoires. This may guarantee the continuous dynamism which will allow the creation of new options, and above all – the legitimacy of making new options. In this sense, the "energy" that was set free, or created, during the activities involved with the making of new repertoires, may be safe to continue at least for some time if not halted by yet another stage of immobile culture.

However, the same kind of energy may generate the opposite results. If disagreements exceed a certain level, the co-habitation of multiple repertoires in the frame of one society, and the pre-occupation with the elementary, or "core" agenda, for the various groups who would rather live by the one rather than by the other repertoire, heterogeneity does no longer guarantee survival, or success, but rather disorder and failure. This is often discussed in the social and the political sciences in terms of instability. In these discussions, naturally the focus of attention is human interaction or political power relations. These, however, may more often than not be only manifestations of the cultural discrepancies.

The problem here – and it is a problem for which I see no solution at our current stage of knowledge – is that we do not know what the limits of heterogeneity need to be in terms of repertoire disagreements. Parameters such as "small" vs. "large", "having existed for long" vs. "having existed for a short time" may sometimes help on a heuristic, but not on a general level. We may perhaps understand why Switzerland can cope with four

different cultures without falling apart. But would the same model be working in other places? A state like France surely believes that if this is allowed, it will no longer survive.

The problem of the limits of heterogeneity and its repercussions for the survival and success of groups is in fact one of the most burning practical problems of modern societies. The debate that was going on between innovators and conservers in terms of making new repertoires is continuing today between groups in relation to the legitimacy of claiming equal footing. While it is more and more apparent that without heterogeneity there are slight chances for the emergence of alternatives, and thus for the creation of complexity, which in its turn is assumed to be a pre-condition for success, heterogeneity is not a sufficient condition. How it is that one group can generate the conditions for complexity under heterogeneity while another cannot depends, to judge by the evidence I have accumulated, on the ability of the relevant group to maintain an industry that is rarely discussed and analyzed – the industry of ideas. This topic has been discussed in few of my other works (Even-Zohar 2012, 2016, and forthcoming).

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[1] Based on a paper presented at the international conference "Cultural variety in Europe: policy and practice." Amsterdam, November 23, 2007.
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[2] A striking example is the case of the creation in 1953 of the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, where language was mobilized by local activists (with the famous Potti Sreeramulu fasting to death in 1952). Once again, in 2014, the newer state of Telangana was created on the basis of the same language distinctiveness. (See Reddy, V. Ramakrishna 2016.)
[3] An act that probably was not fully supporting their interests.

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