3

Culture as a Social Creation

We have seen that culture possesses meaning. Cultural objects are meaningful to human beings living in a social world; conversely, the social world, otherwise random and chaotic, is meaningful because of the cultural lens through which people view it. But pressing questions remain: Who makes specific cultural objects? How are they endowed with meaning? What types of creators and creative operations does the left point of our cultural diamond represent?

As a cultural creator, consider Bessie Smith. Regarded in her own time as the "Empress of the Blues" and since as a singularly important figure in American music, Smith established the "classic blues" style in the 1920s. *Classic* may seem an odd term for blues singing (odder still, the term is never applied to male singers), but this specific musical form, tinged with jazz, combines African American country blues rooted in the Mississippi Delta with a vaudeville style of showmanship. With her extraordinary vocal gifts, flamboyant lifestyle, and great popularity, Bessie Smith seems to fit the standard image of exceptional individuals who create cultural objects by shaping and bending symbolic expressive forms to their will. This creative-artist-as-genius view holds that Bessie Smith took a form of Negro folk singing, polished it, and delivered it with a smooth sophistication to audiences a long way from the Delta. Accounts of Smith's precocious talent (she made her musical debut in Chattanooga at the age of nine), domineering personality (she refused to let any other blues singers appear on the bill with her), and

premature death (she died in an auto accident in Mississippi at 39; one story tells that she bled to death because the hospital would not treat Negroes) support this story of individual cultural creation.

The singer who distills the experience of her people into the blues, the reformer who leads a social movement based on a new vision of social justice, the artist who works feverishly in a lonely studio, the prophet with burning eyes who brings a message from God, the animator who dreams up a character called Mickey Mouse, the poet who transforms the beauty of nature into a simple haiku, the praise singer who comes up with an innovative song to celebrate the chief—all of these figures we recognize as cultural creators. In moments of inspiration, these individuals create something altogether new, something moving, entertaining, brilliant, and often either profoundly disturbing or delightful. Such gifted people—the van Goghs and Bessie Smiths, the Disneys and Jeremiahs—change the cultural world in which human beings live.

So the answer to the question "Where does culture come from?" at first seems to be "from the efforts of individual geniuses." But this individualistic answer seems to work best for individual cultural objects such as a blues style or a haiku. What about culture in the broader sense of a "historically transmitted pattern of meaning"? It is harder to think of culture at this level as "coming from" anywhere. It seems always to have been there.

Sociology suggests an alternative to both the unsatisfying "it has always been that way" view at one extreme and the un-sociological "individual genius" view at the other. This alternative posits culture and cultural works as collective, not individual, creations. We can best understand specific cultural objects—the haiku, Jeremiah's prophesy, or Bessie Smith's singing—by seeing them not as unique to their creators but as the fruits of collective production, fundamentally social in their genesis. In this chapter we explore the background and implications of the sociological approach to cultural creation. In the following pages, we try to indicate how a fuller picture of Bessie Smith's singing emerges when viewed as a collective product, the result of Smith's concrete location in a particular social world, a context with competing cultural traditions and individual opportunities, organizations, and markets.

This view of culture as a social product originates in the work of Émile Durkheim on religion. We begin the chapter, therefore, by reviewing Durkheim's analysis and considering what happens when we follow his suggestion to view culture as collective representation. We then examine four contemporary sociological approaches to the collective production of culture: symbolic interactionism, the study of subcultures, research on whether cultural changes precede or follow social changes, and the social basis for

creative innovations. As we proceed, we return often to the case of Bessie Smith to see how a sociological understanding of cultural creation can enrich our understanding of her music.

Durkheim and the Social Production of Culture

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a French sociologist working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He follows Marx and Weber as the third "founding father" of the discipline of sociology. Like these other two, he tried to understand how modern societies worked.

To these founders of sociology, as to modernist poets and artists such as William Butler Yeats, the modern world seemed fractured, divided, and increasingly unglued (Yeats 1956:184):

> Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .

Social chaos—"mere anarchy"—seemed a real possibility. Over and over, the question "What can hold society together?" troubled thinkers of the early twentieth century. Durkheim investigated everything from suicide to religion to systems of education to science to sociological methods with this central question in mind. In his theory of collective representation, he thought he had found the answer.

The Problem of Modern Social Life

In modern life, Durkheim observed, people can be sorted in many ways: They have different occupations, different fields of knowledge and expertise, different beliefs, and different life experiences. Durkheim compared this to an earlier, less differentiated social state, which he called mechanical solidarity, wherein people join together because of their similar lives. In simpler times, he reasoned, each member of a society did the same type of work (e.g., farming), followed the same religion, raised and educated their children, and thought and believed and hoped and feared in pretty much the same way. Each member of the society could say confidently, "My people do this" or "My people believe this." The shared beliefs and understandings of a people constituted their collective consciousness, and this collective consciousness governed their thoughts, attitudes, and practices.

Change came when societies grew in size and density and people began to specialize. The most obvious form of specialization is the different types of work people do, but institutional specialization occurred as well. In the past, for example, teaching the young what they needed to know, performing religious rituals, and making the transitions of birth and death took place within the family, and the society as a whole exerted strong pressures against deviation. Modern institutions—schools, mosques, and hospitals—separate these life processes from the family, as well as from one another. Durkheim asked, just as we still ask, Under such conditions of specialization and differentiation, how can such societies hold together?

Durkheim considered a number of possible answers to this question. At times, he stressed the need for people to exchange with one another, a state he called organic solidarity; in effect, the farmer exchanges his produce with the teacher who, in return, educates his children, just as the organs of the body exchange with one another. At other times he proposed professional associations as a future source of cohesion. Although he never settled on a single solution to his problem, Durkheim believed that every society must have some kind of collective representation, some tie that binds that demonstrates to the society's members their undoubted connection to one another.

Social Bonds: The Role of Religion

Durkheim's search for collective representation and how it worked led him to take a close look at religion, which he viewed as the most fundamental bond among people of earlier times. His magnificent study of the social production of religion, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1915] 1965), emerged as his most influential work in cultural studies. Durkheim wrote this work toward the end of his career, when his thinking had changed from an early emphasis on structural influences on social behavior to a greater concern with culture and meaning. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* Durkheim looked at what he regarded as the most primitive forms of religion—the totemism of Australian Aborigines and certain Native American groups. Why study primitive religion if his interest leaned toward human society today? Durkheim began with a functionalist postulate: A human institution such as religion cannot rest upon error or superstition; instead, it responds to a profound human need. Consequently, he looked at primitive religions to see the "constituent elements" fundamental to all religions.

Durkheim's analysis of religion centers on four key ideas: (1) collective representation, (2) the distinction between the sacred and the profane, (3) the origins of the sacred, and (4) the social consequences of religion.

First, Durkheim argued, religion provides the basis for all categories of thinking, and religion and categories of thinking alike are "collective representations which express collective realities" (22). How does he make this argument? Human beings, he pointed out, cannot conceive of time and space independent of socially agreed-upon divisions, even though we know they are arbitrary and not natural. The seven-day week, for example, is a social convention of Western societies, one we recognize as artificial (in Nigeria, the Igbo have a four-day week), yet thinking of time without resorting to this convention proves impossible. Durkheim pointed out all categories of thought, all essential ideas, as social. Human beings are "double"—we possess an individual biological component and a shared social component, our participation in a collective consciousness—and our categories of thought, including our sense of the religious, come from that second social component. Hence, religion and culture are collective representations.

But how does the society, the collective, make its presence felt within us? Durkheim answered this question in the next two steps of his argument. He started by asking, What do all religions have in common? The answer is not that they all believe in some supernatural or divine being; Buddhism doesn't, for example. There is a simpler answer: All religious beliefs divide the world into sacred and profane. Now, nothing special determines the nature of the sacred; virtually anything can fit this category. As said in Chapter 1, bread, the homeliest of foods, becomes sacred in the Christian communion. Similarly, Native American and Australian groups sanctify such animals as snakes, insects, and carrion eaters that other cultures despise. Its absolute separation from the profane and its inapproachability with impunity characterizes the sacred—the biblical story of Uzzah, who touched the ark of God and died on the spot, reminds us of this—and the core of religion lies in this separation.

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (Durkheim, [1915] 1965:62)

Durkheim traced our sense of the sacred by looking at totems, central to "elementary forms" of religion. He pointed out that many simple societies are organized around clans, kinship groups distinguished by names like "the kangaroo clan" or "the people of the white eagle." Each such name represents the clan's totem, which serves as the emblem of the clan; this image or representation of the clan appears on its property and the bodies of its members, especially when the clan gathers together. More than just a

name or an emblem, however, the totem is sacred, and all sorts of ritual prohibitions surround it—a taboo against eating it, for example. These tribal peoples base their entire cosmologies, their classifications of human beings and nature, on the totem, thus imposing a sacred/profane structure on the entire universe.

Up to this point, Durkheim has argued that the sacred/profane distinction organizes and classifies all social and natural beings and that this distinction emerges in its most elementary form in the totemic religions of tribal people. But where do such people get the idea that the totemic emblem is sacred? Clearly, not from the object itself, for the totem often personifies a rather lowly animal. Durkheim answers this question from the heart of his cultural analysis, suggesting that the totem symbolizes two things: the totemic principal (or, we would say, God) and the clan. "So if it is once the symbol of the god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one?" (236). The god of the clan, in other words, is the clan itself.

How does Durkheim justify this conclusion? Society, he suggested, arouses a sensation of divinity in human beings through (1) its power or control over us, shown in its ability to cause or inhibit our actions without regard for individual utility, and (2) its positive force, the "strengthening and vivifying action of society." When a member of society lives in moral harmony with his comrades,

> he has more confidence, courage, and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned graciously toward him. [Society] thus produces, as it were, a perpetual sustenance of our moral nature. (242)

People think this moral support must result from some external cause, some force always represented with religious symbols, and they respond to the force with respect and awe. Two sorts of reality seem to emerge—that associated with the force (sacred) and that associated with the everyday (profane).

Using the example of Australian clans, Durkheim shows how people awaken to a sense of religious force. The Aborigines, like most hunter-gatherers, experience their lives as having two phases: times of scattered wandering in groups and times of gathering for a ceremony called the corroboree. The first phase, normal everyday life, contains things "uniform, languishing, and dull." But during the corroboree, people come together to sing, dance around the fire, enjoy a normally forbidden sexual freedom, and celebrate until they drop from exhaustion. In such a gathering, life is emotional, people are animated by powerful forces and passions, and each sentiment is echoed back by another until the energy and exuberance grow like

an avalanche. Durkheim referred to this stage as one of "collective effervescence." When taken up by such collective effervescence, people feel unlike themselves or, almost literally, "carried away."

Because their lives have such very different phases—the routine everyday and the effervescent corroboree—the Aborigines believe they participate in two separate worlds: the profane, flat and dull, and the sacred, charged with energy and excitement. Thus arises the religious idea of the sacred and the profane and the absolute separation between them. Why does the force felt during sacred time get associated with the totem? Durkheim reasoned that because the totem provides the clan name, totemic emblems abound during the gathering of the clan. Because of its visibility during these times, the totem comes to represent both the scene and the strong emotions felt. It becomes a collective representation.

Therefore, Durkheim concluded, the rational folks who equate religion with superstition are wrong. The religious force is real enough, but the source of the force is not what the believer thinks: "The believer is not deceived when he believes in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself: this power exists, it is society" (257). The religious force comes not from a totem or a god but from the experience of the social. Religion, therefore, encompasses the system of ideas by which people represent their society. And because religion provides the source of the classifications through which we apprehend the world, all of human culture becomes a representation of the social.

Culture as Collective Representation

Durkheim's analysis of religion points to all cultural objects as collective representations. They represent not just a particular society but social experience itself. We recognize the functionalist thread here: Groups and societies need collective representations of themselves to inspire sentiments of unity and mutual support, and culture fulfills this need.

We have seen before, in reflection theories, the idea that culture represents society. Rather than assuming a straight reflection, however, Durkheim's analysis shows a more complex picture of how cultural objects, such as religious beliefs, can represent our experience of the social in all its force. Culture, including religion, is a collective representation in two senses. First, the cultural objects we began with—a painting, a social movement, a prophecy, an idea, or a blues song—are not simply created by an individual touched by genius or inspired by God. Instead, people bound to other people—people who work, celebrate, suffer, and love, like the clan

members in Australia—produce them. Second, in their cultural products, people represent their experiences of work, joy, pain, and love. Durkheim's cultural theory gives us the social mechanism whereby cultural creators produce, in Wallace Stevens's words, "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves."

The implication for sociological research would be that if one tried to understand a certain group of people, one would look for the expressive forms through which they represent themselves to themselves (and to others, although this function would have secondary importance). A business organization, a youth gang, a nation, a family, or any identifiable social group will develop collective representations through which it demonstrates its collective solidarity to itself and others. The sociologist can come at this collective representation process from the other direction, from the analysis of a particular cultural object, as well. In the planning for possible disasters, one researcher has shown, for example, optimistic scenarios (cultural object) that avoid worst-case thinking demonstrate a particularly American cognitive orientation (collective representation), and a dangerous one (Cerulo 2006).

What would it mean, then, to call Bessie Smith's blues collective representations? It would imply that even songs about individual pain represent group experience, in this case that of African Americans in the South during the early twentieth century. For example, many of Smith's songs tell of losing a man. On one level, we could regard this theme as the expression of the universal problem of lost love; at another, personal level, this theme could express a very specific problem of how one woman lost one man at one particular time. On an intermediate level, however, a social representation occurs as well, and this specific representation speaks to the difficulties of sustained relationships among impoverished blacks in the rural South. "Frosty Morning Blues," for example, begins, "Did you ever wake up on a frosty morning and discover your good man gone?" Sharecroppers living in unheated shacks—and most Southern blacks endured this condition during the time Bessie Smith was singing—would have loathed to leave their beds on cold mornings; their shared experience of this common misery lends a collective weight to the individual's particular misery of being abandoned. This collective understanding of the pleasures of warm beds and the pain of cold floors "on a frosty morning" can be said to "strengthen and vivify," in Durkheim's language, even the bawdy development of the frosty-morning metaphor: "Oh my damper is down and my fire ain't burning and a chill's all around my bed." Both the humor and the pathos of the song, and of Bessie Smith's blues more generally, represent the social world in which they originated.

The Collective Production of Culture

Applying Durkheim's insights constitutes what we call the collective production approach to cultural meanings. This approach tries to take away the mystery about the creation of art, ideas, beliefs, religion, and culture in general by revealing the many social activities, such as interaction, cooperation, organization, and contestation, involved in the formation of what we designate as cultural objects. If culture is a collective representation, as Durkheim argued, the collective production approach investigates the nuts and bolts of just how the collectivity represents itself.

Collective production theory has two sides. One involves the interactions among people and how these interactions themselves generate culture. This version of collective production theory stems from the branch of social psychology known as symbolic interactionism. In the remainder of this chapter we look at such interactions and how they work on both the small group level and the broader societal level. The second type of collective production looks less at interactions and more at the organization of cultural producers and consumers, including such things as culture industries, distribution mechanisms, and the markets for cultural products. Chapter 4 examines these studies, generated by what is usually called the production-of-culture school and rooted in organizational and economic sociology.

Symbolic Interactionism

Most branches of social theory assume certain things as given. For example, although we might try to explain how the norms of a society constrain its members to act in one way and not another, the norm itself—say, the norm of apologizing if you bump into someone—is taken as a given. Or, we might examine certain roles, such as the role of a teacher or a mother, to see how they are enacted, but we largely take the roles themselves for granted. Symbolic interactionism concerns how people actively construct and learn their norms and roles. The basic insight of the interactionists holds that the human self is not a preexisting Platonic form but is shaped through social interaction. An early theorist of this school was Charles Horton Cooley, who coined the term "looking-glass self" ([1902] 1964). According to Cooley, an interaction comprises three phases: (1) The self imagines another's response to his or her behavior or appearance, (2) the self imagines the other person's judgment, and (3) the self has an emotional reaction, such as of pride or shame, to that judgment. For example, a little girl runs and bumps into a boy in her playgroup. The girl observes the boy's expression of pain and anger,

and she imagines that he thinks her clumsy or thoughtless. She understands his probable judgment of her action (he may say, "Hey, watch out," or give her a scornful look), and she responds emotionally (she feels embarrassed or ashamed at having hurt him or provoked his anger). Such interactions establish the norm of apologizing when accidentally bumping into someone else, for the apology constitutes a second interaction sequence to restore the social harmony that the first disrupted.

All social learning does not take place through two-person interactions, of course. George Herbert Mead (1934) pointed out that the developing child first learns to take the role of another person. This constitutes the "play" stage; the child plays at being a teacher or plays with an imaginary friend. Later comes the more complicated "game" stage, wherein the child learns to take on and take into account a variety of other roles. Mead used the analogy of the baseball game: The runner must know what the shortstop is likely to do, what the fielder will try to do, and so forth. Children move from play to games as they develop more complex responses to those with whom they do or might interact. Ultimately, the child learns to take into account the response of the *generalized other*, Mead's term for the society—he calls it "the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self" (1934:154)—with which the individual always implicitly interacts. This generalized other is the source of morality, and children are socialized into understanding what it expects.

> It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. (155)

Where does culture come in? From the symbolic interactionist point of view, the human individual—the self—is wide open to influence. As we saw in our earlier discussion of meaning, biology or our innate nature gives little direction to our lives, so we must develop our own guidelines, and we do so in the course of our interactions with one another. Symbolic interactionism suggests that human interactions create culture, just as Durkheim's corroboree created totemic religion. Once created, cultural objects are perpetuated and transmitted through their repeated expression and the socialization of new group members—for example, the young. Symbolic interactionists are interested in the micro-settings through which this process happens.

Consider a classic paper by Howard Becker (1953) on how people learn to smoke marijuana. Many people think of getting high on marijuana as

simply a biological response. On the contrary, Becker argued, a complex process of social learning must take place. The novice smoker interacts with more experienced users, often with members of a marijuana subculture (at the time of the study, the early 1950s, marijuana smoking was primarily confined to jazz musicians and similar bohemian subcultures). From these experienced smokers, novices learn how to smoke (e.g., to hold the smoke in their lungs), what to feel (the experienced smokers identify and label such feelings as floating or time distortion), and what to enjoy. If the interaction process breaks down—for example, if a new user tried to smoke a joint while alone—the novice would unlikely develop the habit of or the taste for marijuana. But with all of the interaction processes completed, the novice "becomes" a marijuana user, with smoking part of his or her identity.

Similarly, one "becomes" a blues singer through interactions, not just through inborn talent. Bessie Smith's immediate musical heritage was not call-and-response work songs in the cotton fields—the blues' birthplace—but the vaudeville stage and tent show circuit played by black performers in the early twentieth century. On the vaudeville circuit, female singers developed a smooth, sophisticated style of singing, a far cry from the earthy blues style of the fields. Indeed, it might be said that Smith innovated not to sophisticate a folk idiom but instead to rough up this slick, cabaret singing. And even that wasn't strictly her own innovation. An immediate predecessor of Smith's, Ma (Gertrude) Rainey, traveled with touring companies throughout the South introducing down-home elements into the vaudeville style. Rainey discovered Smith and took her into her company, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, where the young girl's singing and showmanship developed. After leaving Rainey's troupe, Smith worked the Southern circuit with tent shows, pursuing her career in the world of segregated music. Bessie Smith's identity as a blues singer, in other words, grew out of her interactions with other musicians.

Identity is a key concept for the symbolic interactionist approach. One's own identity or sense of self—"I am a blues singer" or "I am a brother-in-law"—develops through interaction with others and requires confirmation from others. Once again, we enter the realm of meanings here; the self tries to project a certain set of meanings onto those with whom it interacts and in return tries to interpret the meanings constructed by partners in the inter-action. Erving Goffman (1959) analyzed this process by using the metaphors of theatrical performances: When it interacts, the self is an actor performing a role before an audience. If the performance succeeds, the self confirms a certain identity both to her partners in interaction and to herself.

A striking example comes from research on the homeless. In their study of homeless street people in a Texas city, David Snow and Leon Anderson (1993) found that the down and out constantly try to do what Snow and

Anderson call "identity work": They manage their interactions in such a way as to foster a specific set of impressions. Some construct their identities in terms of distancing; they stress that they are "not like the other guys who hang out down at the Sally" (215) and therefore don't need the services of the Salvation Army or other relief agencies. Others embrace the homeless role—"I'm a bum, and I know who my friends are" (221)—declaring themselves proud of their freedom and clever at surviving in the harsh world they inhabit. Still others construct elaborate fantasies about their past histories or future prospects. One homeless man told the researchers at great length how the next day, "I'm going to catch a plane to Pittsburgh and tomorrow night I'll take a hot bath, have a dinner of linguine and red wine in my own restaurant, and have a woman hanging on my arm" (226). In all of these activities, the homeless conduct impression management in their interactions to control the meanings they present to others.

Again we see the cultural position as distinct from the biological one. A biologically based argument that Snow and Anderson cite (Maslow 1962) suggests that human beings have a hierarchy of needs; they require certain things to survive—food, clothing, and shelter—and only once these needs have been met do people have the luxury of worrying about meanings, identities, or symbolic representations. On the contrary, respond Snow and Anderson, the homeless, who may not know where their next meal is coming from or where they will sleep that night, are nevertheless adept manipulators of words and symbols, compelled to construct and project specific identities. Like all people, they use culture—in this case, the resources of language and storytelling—to enact their social performances and make their world meaningful to themselves and others. (For a similar example of performing identity to achieve specific goals, see Cheris Sun-ching Chan's 2009 study of how life insurance agents operate in front of a skeptical clientele.)

Although the homeless must make up their own culture and identities with few resources and limited precedents, most interactions that transmit culture and form identity call on a known and shared history of the community. The generalized other is usually concrete, with specific characteristics, in more stable social worlds, so the cultural objects that serve as collective representations do not have to be made up on the spot. Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, children learn to greet their parents by kneeling in front of them before speaking. This kneeling is a form of etiquette, and the practice constitutes a meaningful cultural object. Through socialization into this practice, the child learns something about Yoruba relationships (the child must respect the adult) and behavior (the child must show respect in a particular way). The child also learns her collective identity. She is a Yoruba because she thinks and acts this way, and she thinks and acts this way because she is a Yoruba.

Subcultures

Speaking of Yoruba culture or identity evokes the image of an undifferentiated generalized other, a community to which all Yoruba belong. People, however, belong not simply to a single group or community but to a variety of them. Mead (1934) identified two types: abstract social groups, such as debtors, that function as social groups only indirectly and "concrete social classes or subgroups, such as political parties, clubs, [and] corporations, which are all actually functioning social units, in terms of which of their individual members are directly related to one another" (157). If these relations to one another prove strong enough to counteract some of the influences of the societal generalized other, the group becomes a subculture.

We might well refer to the worlds of marijuana smokers, homeless men, or traveling vaudeville performers as *subcultures*. As the name suggests, a subculture exists within a larger cultural system and has contact with the external culture. Within the subculture's domain, however, operates a powerful set of symbols, meanings, and behavioral norms—often the opposite of those in the larger culture—that bind the subculture's members. Thus, we might speak of the hip-hop subculture, the gay subculture, or the cyberpunk subculture. A subculture doesn't just refer to consumption tastes—we don't speak of the subculture of Volvo owners or pizza lovers—but to a way of life. Teenagers especially flock to, and produce, subcultures, for they have the means to express themselves through consumption, they desire to differentiate themselves from other age groups and even other teenagers, and they are not yet anchored by the institutions of adult life (Hebdige 1979).

Sociology's interest in subcultures began in the early twentieth century with the Chicago School of urban studies. Research focused on unassimilated subcultures—immigrant groups and criminal gangs—and the questions posed involved when and how such subcultures would assimilate into mainstream American life (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920; Thrasher 1927). While the youth subculture research carries on this tradition in the sense that youth groups tend to be short-lived (youth grow up, and subsequent cohorts of teens want to distinguish themselves from their elder siblings), contemporary scholarship often focuses on more permanent subcultures such as those associated with professions. In the aptly titled *Wild Cowboys,* Robert Jackall (1997) uncovers the subculture and "habits of mind" of the law enforcement officers—New York homicide detectives and the district attorney's prosecutors—as well as the criminals who interact with them in the tight world of New York's big-time drug trade. The detectives seek to transform chaos into order as they pursue cases—small-time drug dealers killed by other dealers—that no one else cares about. In the detectives' subculture, this

is an intellectual challenge as much as a moral one. Detectives' near obsession with solving cases that everyone regards as "public-interest homicides"—that is, slayings in which everyone is glad the victim is dead—mystifies people outside this subculture.

Subcultures, with their elaborate symbols and meanings, develop by people interacting with one another and therefore have been of great interest to sociologists oriented toward symbolic interactionism. Gary Alan Fine (1987), for example, studied how members of Little League baseball teams produce their own temporary subcultures. Drawing on extensive participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires with ten Little League teams in three cities, Fine explored how social interaction in the Little League context socializes boys into adult male roles and gives rise to what Fine calls the "idioculture or self-culture" of the group. In this socialization process, adults (coaches, parents) emphasize effort. They exhort the team to try harder by maintaining that a boy or a team must "want to win" and that a player must always "give it his best shot." The unspoken assumption is that success or failure depends on internal motivation—on character, in other words—and not on physical talent, compatibility among team members' skills, or luck. The boys themselves emphasize "proper behavior," which they regard as the expression of appropriate emotions and emotional control: Big boys don't cry.

Little League teams develop an elaborate linguistic and symbolic code known only to the team members. One team, for example, designated a foul ball hit over the backstop as a "Polish home run." An outsider hearing jokes such as "Don't hit a Polish home run" might guess, based on his or her knowledge of American ethnic jokes about Poles, that the team referred to some inept play but would have no idea of the specific act being referred to. Little League teams generate hundreds of such private, shared meanings.

What are the roots of this idioculture? Fine's causal argument is sketched in Figure 3.1. The interacting preadolescent group—the team—responds to general cultural values, such as the importance of winning. The boys also participate in a preadolescent cultural system familiar to youths from coast to coast; what ten-year-old hasn't sung "A Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall"? Some of the cultural objects in this system come from the media, and some come from such institutions as summer camps where boys from different communities come together and trade information. The boys pick up both direct and indirect messages from adults, and they feel the influence of biological pressures, including an acute discomfort around girls. The most notable characteristic of this peer culture is a desperate longing to fit in with the other boys, coupled with a scorn for outsiders.

Figure 3.1   Cultural Production in a Little League Baseball Team
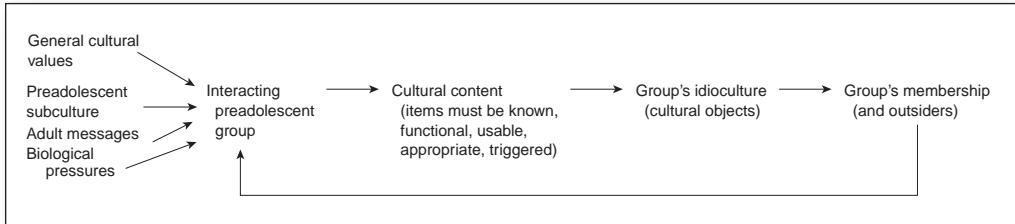
In such a context, events transform into culture. Not just any event or object can undergo transformation into a cultural object, however. For a symbol or expression to enter the idioculture, it must draw on known information (e.g., ethnic slurs about Poles); it must be functional (nicknames help identify players, some of whom might have the same first name); it must be usable (coaches forbid certain four-letter words, well known in preadolescent subculture, so they do not enter most teams' idiocultures); it must be appropriate (the nickname "Maniac" stopped being appropriate when a player improved); and it must be triggered repeatedly (the expression "Polish home run" would have been forgotten had not so many foul balls gone over the backstop). Subcultures also interact with and perpetuate one another. On a college campus racial "wannabes" (whites who embrace hip-hop), Goths, and Christians mutually define one another through their mutual antagonism (Wilkins 2008).

Subcultures make meaning, producing cultural objects significant to insiders and mystifying to outsiders. They often emphasize opposition, as in youth subcultures built around music and style (Hall et al. 1980; Hebdige 1979). In this sense they exhibit the more general behavior of constructing symbolic boundaries, ways people distinguish between "people like me" and "those others." Michèle Lamont (2000) shows how French and American working-class men make elaborate discriminations between regular guys like themselves and people who operate very differently, even though their class positions sometimes are much the same. Sometimes, the creation of such boundaries is less about meaning than about avoiding the meaningful. Nina Eliasoph (1998) studied how small groups like environmentalists and country dancers work to avoid meaningful talk, especially about politics, to keep their groups cohesive.

Up to this point, we have considered the specific social world in which interactions take place, such as a subculture, as a relatively stable collectivity

into which people smoothly socialize. This is an incomplete view. In reality, societies change, culture changes, and changes in one realm influence changes in the other. To complete our understanding of culture as a social creation, we need to add this dynamic element into our model.

Cultural Innovation and Social Change

I have described how subcultures may perpetuate mainstream culture (the Little League teams) or defy it (the marijuana smokers), but sometimes they set out to change it. Although a relatively rare event—most subcultures just want to be left alone—many social movements start out as subcultures. To use Weber's terms, they move from the separation of otherworldly asceticism to the reforming or even revolutionary engagement of innerworldly asceticism.

China offers a good example of how a separatist subculture became a movement for revolutionary social change. What became known as the Boxer Uprising of 1900 began as the Spirit Boxers, a subculture of peasant youth during the late Qing dynasty who were devoted to martial arts and a ritual involving the divine possession of a believer by one of the popular gods (Esherick 1987). In 1898, the terrible poverty and dislocation brought about by the flooding of the Yellow River combined with increasing anti-Westernism in response to escalating imperialist and missionary activities to transform the Boxers into a militant nationalist movement, the Boxers United in Righteousness. Their slogan was "Revive the Qing, destroy the foreign." Over the next two years, the number of Boxers grew, as did their attacks on Chinese Christians and the foreigners themselves, finally culminating in a siege of the foreign enclave in Beijing that fell by a foreign expeditionary force amid great bloodshed.

Although secret societies or spirit possession cults were not unusual in the late Qing, specific social pressures—increasing foreign demands and routine poverty exacerbated by natural disaster—turned what had been an "otherworldly" subculture into a movement bent on radical social transformation. The very meaning of the Boxers' cultural objects changed. Martial arts, for example, initially represented individual discipline and self-control to the Spirit Boxers. To the Boxers United in Righteousness, it meant aggressive Chinese nationalism. How would we describe this in terms of the cultural diamond? Did a change in the social world (increasing foreign pressures) produce a change in the cultural object (martial arts)? Or did the development of a cultural object (the increasing popularity of martial arts among youth) produce a change in the way the young Chinese viewed the social world?

Cultural response to social change need not take the dramatic form of a secret society or revolutionary movement, however. We can see cultural adaptations to changing circumstances in how communities respond to demographic pressures. Maria Kefalas (2003) studied how a white working-class neighborhood in Chicago, feeling threatened by poor African American neighborhoods on its fringes, developed a strong culture of place to protect the residents' ideas of the good life. In everything from how they clean their kitchens (obsessively, even behind the refrigerator) to how they honor their veterans (seriously) to how they landscape their small lawns (precisely), residents of Beltway construct their neighborhood as the "last garden," cultivated to ward off the urban jungle that lies beyond the clearing.

Which came first, the ideal of the garden or the perception of racial and class threat? We need to take a closer look now at the relationship between cultural innovations and societal changes.

Cultural Lags and Leads

Reflection theories of either the Marxist or the functionalist stamp, as discussed previously, could not answer these questions very well. If culture passively reflects the social world, which the reflection model usually implies, change must come from that world first. In this view, innovations in music, art, theology, ideas, popular culture, literature, and expressive behavior must all be responses to social changes. Now, although clearly something is right about the idea that social shifts produce cultural changes, such a deterministic position suggests that the social world always changes first, with culture lagging behind.

The "cultural lag" hypothesis was put forward by a sociologist named William Ogburn ([1922] 1936), who maintained that sociologists should distinguish between "material culture" and "adaptive culture." Material culture is just what it sounds like: "home, factories, machines, raw materials, manufactured products, food stuffs and other material objects." When this material culture changes, the nonmaterial culture, which includes practices, folkways, and social institutions, must change in response. Adaptive culture comprises the portion of nonmaterial culture that adjusts to material conditions. It always takes awhile for the adaptations to catch up with material changes, and this gap is the "cultural lag." Ogburn used the example of the American forests. At one time, social practices (large-scale timbering, clearing forests for agriculture) matched the material conditions (vast forests). The destruction of the forests constituted a dramatic change in American material culture, but many years passed before serious efforts at conservation and reforestation were made at the level of adaptive culture—hence the cultural lag.

Ogburn believed that changes in the material culture usually precede changes in the adaptive culture. In some sense, this is true by definition (adaptation means adapting *to* something). Such a belief fits reflection theory in both its functionalist and Marxian forms. At the same time, we can easily come up with examples wherein nonmaterial culture leads, not lags behind, material conditions. Max Weber's account of how the spirit of capitalism burned hot in backwoods eighteenth-century Pennsylvania provides one such example. For another, consider the worldwide changes in cigarette smoking. Neither a material change (there was no scarcity of tobacco) nor a material discovery (the dangers of smoking to health had been known for years) prompted the abrupt decline of smoking among the American and (later) the European middle classes. The change in attitude came when the large generation born after World War II became concerned (some might say obsessed) with health and fitness. For baby boomers, the body—exercised, slimmed, and well cared for—represented an ideal of youth and strength. They demonstrated high status not with martinis, fur coats, and silver cigarette cases but with expensive mineral water, jogging, and disdain for smokers. As a cultural object for this group, the cigarette came to mean a foolish disregard for health.

The idea that culture always lags behind material change also goes against our experience with dramatic cultural change. As the humanities have long emphasized, now and then a genius, a prophet, or an innovator bursts onto the scene and shakes up existing cultural conventions. At a collective level, some new cultural movements—abstract expressionism, punk music, New Age spirituality, the African American female novelists of the 1970s, prime-time serials, or the rage for physical fitness—emerge and prosper without any direct push from the social. So we need to understand this cultural innovation, where culture seems to lead, not lag behind, social change, or where cultural change seems to bear no direct relation to changes happening in the society at large.

Cultural Innovations

A random event—a boy hits a ball over the backstop—gets processed by group interaction. The symbolic representation of the event functions in its usefulness for building group solidarity, identifying norms, and separating the insiders from the outsiders. Cultural creation has occurred, and a cultural innovation—the "Polish home run"—gets established. More generally, the collective production approach to culture suggests, although innovations may occur randomly and unpredictably, some patterns as evident: (1) Certain periods prove more likely to generate innovations than

others, (2) even the innovations follow some conventions, and (3) certain innovations prove more likely than others to become established.

Let's look at these points in order. A number of cultural analysts argue that cultural creativity does not take place at a steady rate but shows dramatic peaks and valleys. During periods of relatively little change, conventions remain stable, the community in question generally shares ideas, and the status quo remains unchallenged; individual selves and the generalized others live in harmony, Mead might say. At other times, cultural creativity explodes. Thinkers come up with new ideas and systems of ideas that circulate among men and women concerned with public affairs. Artists defy the conventions of their genres. Long-standing relations, such as those between the sexes, get overturned. Behaviors change in everything from dress to living arrangements to occupational goals. In much of the world, the 1960s represented such a period of intense cultural ferment.

What causes such a burst of cultural innovation? "Unsettled times," says sociologist Ann Swidler (1986). A "disturbance in the moral order," says Robert Wuthnow (1987). A loosening up of the dominant ideology, says Marxian critic Raymond Williams ([1973] 1980). The common point they make seems that under certain conditions—massive demographic shift, war, or sudden economic change—the old rules, cultural and social, no longer apply. A moral vacuum occurs, and in such a situation people cast around for new guidelines, new meanings with which to orient their lives. Failure to find such meanings brings the experience of anomie, the disorientation that Durkheim attributed to rapid social change. Cultural innovation—the production of new meanings—emerges as a response to incipient anomie. It reorients people and gives them their bearings in the new social circumstances.

Think again of the middle and late 1960s. The United States experienced a controversial war; unusual but unevenly distributed economic prosperity; legislation bringing the agenda of African Americans, other minorities, and (later) women into mainstream politics; and a demographic bulge (the baby boom) going through its teenage years. This combination laid the ground for extraordinary cultural change. Ideologies, fads, artistic movements, behavioral changes—from cohabitation to long hair to the drug culture to Pop Art to the Black Panthers to Women's Liberation to acid rock—all represented cultural responses to the unsettled times of the 1960s. The slower pace of cultural change from the mid-1970s to the end of the century was a consolidation period that resisted dramatic changes (Steensland 2007).

The innovations of the 1960s were not just an American phenomenon. The withdrawal of colonialism from Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, stimulated a burst of artistic and intellectual activity. In contrast, the failure of such

economic programs as the Great Leap Forward and Mao's increasing uneasiness over the future of the Chinese Communist regime lay the groundwork for the Cultural Revolution, clearly an innovation in the extent and ferocity of its repression. In Europe, youth culture, spurred by the baby boom, consumerism, and left-wing politics, shook the traditional establishment.

Does this mean that cultural lag theorists were right—that culture changes in response to the social world? Although the arguments of Wuthnow and Swidler may seem to suggest this, the issue of what leads what depends largely on when you start the analysis. We could say that the ongoing Chinese Communist revolution (social world, material culture) led to the Cultural Revolution (cultural objects, adaptive culture). However, we could just as legitimately say, rather, that earlier changes in the Chinese culture (modernization, the impact of the West) led to changes in the Chinese social world (the Communist Revolution).

Although certain periods seem to exhibit more cultural change than others, the second premise of the collective production approach to innovation is that cultural innovations may not be as dramatically different as they first seem. Cultural creators typically respond to conventions rather than ignore them. Howard Becker (1982), for example, distinguished four types of artists: the integrated professionals, the mavericks, the naive artists, and the folk artists. Three of the four types are conventional. Folk artists follow the conventions of their craft. Integrated professionals perpetuate the conventions of their own particular art world (Becker uses the term *art world* to encompass all of the people whose various activities—from making paintbrushes, for example, to writing art criticism—go into the production of a certain kind of art). Mavericks ostentatiously defy the art world's conventions, but the key point is that only those who know the conventions in the first place can recognize their very unconventionality. They act conventionally unconventional, like teenagers who express their nonconformity with adult values by conforming to a rigid teenage dress code designed to appall their elders. Only naive artists not attached to a collective production world may be said to innovate without regard for convention, but their very lack of connections makes the work of such artists virtually unknown. Thus, their innovations have neither audience nor influence.

This brings us to the third premise on innovation: Cultural creators may produce something new, but not all such innovations will become established. We saw this in Fine's (1987) Little League study; a new symbol or nickname will wither unless conditions allow it to become known, used, functional, apt, and repeatedly triggered. On a larger scale, Robert Wuthnow (1985) suggested that ideological innovations of the modern era will unlikely last unless the state is hospitable to them. Looking at the

Reformation in Europe, he pointed out that monarchs always favored some version of Luther's reforms, for the Reformation downgraded ecclesiastical authority and thus removed Rome and the church hierarchy as a major rival to royal authority. Whether or not the Reformation took hold in a particular country, therefore, resulted from the king or queen's power in comparison to the landed aristocracy, which favored Rome. Countries with a relatively strong monarchy, such as England, embraced the Reformation, whereas countries with a monarchy dependent on the landed aristocracy, such as France, did not.

Similarly, though innovative, Bessie Smith's singing so succeeded for other reasons. It caught on, or became established, only because of a specific set of conditions, including her lucky timing: In 1920, a singer named Mamie Smith (no relation) made the first blues record, *Crazy Blues*, and opened up a vast new market for the record industry. Within a few years, Okeh, Paramount, and Columbia's "race record" series sought singers for the African American market. Bessie Smith signed up with Columbia, and her recordings for the company provided the basis for her immense popularity. She continued to tour the vaudeville circuit in the South, but the Columbia recordings had created an audience in the North as well. She played in large Northern cities under the auspices of the Theater Owners Booking Association. (TOBA was considered the best management and booking agent for Negro performers, but its demands gave it the nickname among the stars of "Tough on Black Asses.") Indeed, much of Smith's reputation for innovation stems from her introducing a Southern musical form to a Northern audience.

Bessie Smith's story, unquestionably one of individual talent, is also one of record companies and vaudeville circuits, artistic mentors and new audiences, and expanding markets and skilled promotion. Her blues provided both a collective representation of African American life in the segregated South and a collective product of an entertainment industry. Although her genius was her own, her creation was social.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we traced some sociological theories of the creation of culture. We saw how sociologists followed Durkheim in regarding culture as collective product or representation rather than as exclusively the work of individual creators. Cultural objects, by this reasoning, express aspects of the social world and are produced by the collective activities of members of this world. We saw how interactions among people create new cultural

objects—practices, beliefs, symbols, and expressions—and how such cultural objects bestow meanings on the human experience. We saw how cultural innovation, creating new meaning, occurs at the microlevel of subcultures and the macrolevel of ideological shifts. We saw that creativity, along with its recognition and its establishment, depends on social conventions and social institutions.

So far, we have concentrated on creators of culture on the one hand and the social world on the other. We have paid only minimal attention to two things: the audience or recipients of culture (the right point on our culture diamond) and the organizations of production and distribution that tie all of the points together. Yet we have seen in the example of Bessie Smith the vitality of organizations and audiences to any understanding of cultural creations as collective representation. The next chapter discusses these two—the right point of our cultural diamond and the organization as links among creators, receivers, and cultural objects.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Think of some ways in which culture works as "collective representation" in contemporary life. Where might we find vestiges of what Durkheim called "organic solidarity"? What are some contemporary sacred symbols? Do we still need such symbols outside of religious life?

2. Identify a subculture within a larger cultural formation. For example, you might think of a youth gang, a religious cult, a tight ethnic group, or a student fraternity; perhaps you can use a group with which you have had personal experience as your example. Discuss how your subculture erects and maintains its symbolic boundaries.

3. If cultural objects are social creations, where do inspired individuals come in? Does a sociological theory of culture ignore the creative genius of people like Leonardo da Vinci, Toni Morrison, Isadora Duncan, or Yo-Yo Ma?

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Becker, Howard S. 1982. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Becker gives readers a lively account of how a wide variety of human activities and interactions produce art and how whether or not a cultural object gets the label of "art" is itself a product of interactions and negotiations.

Durkheim, Émile. [1915] 1965. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. New York: Free Press. No summary can capture the rich detail of Durkheim's study or the precision of his analysis.