

# The Making of Repertoire, Survival and Success under Heterogeneity<sup>1</sup>

This paper suggests that,

1. The concept of complex, otherwise heterogeneous and dynamic open systems, is a useful framework for dealing with both change and perseverance of human groups.
2. The making of new repertoires, enabled only by heterogeneity, creates at any time, but especially in times of intensive involvement with socio-political change, socio-cultural motion.
3. This motion in turn creates an energy that allows devising options for new ways of doing things in life. These options may, through their proliferation, if the state of »energy« continues, enable growing cultural and economic success.
4. However, such a state of affairs is subject to a tolerable volume of conflicting repertoires. Beyond a certain limit, a socio-cultural entity may collapse rather than succeed. Unfortunately, that limit is not known, and it is doubtful whether it can be known in the current state of research.

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<sup>1</sup> Dieser Beitrag basiert auf einem Vortrag, den der Verfasser auf dem siebten internationalen Kongress der International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) am 08.10.1999 in Dresden gehalten hat [G. Z.].

1. A central question in theories of dynamic systems is how systems persevere, that is, how they manage to maintain themselves over time. Of course, this is an abstract, or perhaps even a metaphorical, formulation of a very tangible matter. In the context of the semiotic sciences this could mean how networks of interdependencies, or otherwise »repertoires«, manage to persist for groups of people who are dependent upon them. In culture research carried out with socio-semiotic tools, the question must be reversed, namely: how *groups of people* manage to persevere through the use of certain repertoires.

2. In various current research traditions, the connection between repertoires and groups has been conceived of as an inherent relation, meaning that a certain identifiable repertoire is conceived of as built-in into the very »nature« of a certain identifiable group. Such a view, even if not always formulated in such explicit terms, characterizes not only the earlier stages of anthropology, but even later parts of sociology on the one hand and »the history of mentalities« on the other. In simplistic terms, this stand actually hypothesizes »one indivisible repertoire for one group«.

3. However puzzling this may seem to the semiotically thinking community, this is not a far cry from some central semiotic traditions. The brands of system theories developed in the disciplines which have inspired modern semiotics heavily inclined to adopt the assumption about the monopoly of single repertoires not as a matter of a theoretical alternative, but without even hypothesizing any. We all know that system theories have emerged in our domain as part of the search for economical explanations of unmanageable or what appeared as disorderly phenomena. Indeed, these theories have gained a high level of simplicity, which was helpful in developing conceptual and investigatory tools for discovering regularities. But this was carried out at the expense of reducing complexity to homogeneity, while the symptoms of complexity were regarded as disorder, and hence non-pertaining to system analysis.

4. I am using here the term »symptoms of complexity« because it would be wrong to attribute any recognition of complexity to the system theories that emerged. There was no room in these theories for recognizing complexity as such, or as pertaining to system analysis. System thinking had to undergo radical change in order to recognize complexity not as a possible variable of systems, but as an indispensable built-in feature. And indeed this radical change was beginning to take place already towards the late twenties (with Tynjanov and Ja-

kobson), and accumulated some momentum during the thirties with the works of Prague Structuralists, mostly in the field of language interference. Ever since the early seventies, a number of researchers, myself included, have attempted to develop a theory of heterogeneous systems under the name of »polysystem theory« which has drawn some attention and has been tested on various fields. The various aspects of this theory are widely discussed in the literature, and need not deter us here. (See Even-Zohar 1990; Even-Zohar 1997; Lambert 1997; for a recent introduction see Iglesias Santos 1999.)

5. In the field of culture research, what seems to me most important in dynamic systems thinking is the separation it can make between human beings and repertoires. This means that groups and repertoires are conceived of as maintaining functional multidimensional rather than inherent relations to each other; and that these relations are generated by historical and accidental circumstances, rather than by hereditary continuity. Such a seemingly trivial generalization is, however, neither self-evident nor universally acknowledged.

Thus, while classical anthropology undoubtedly believed in innate repertoires, this is no longer *bon ton* in modern anthropology. James Clifford stated with astonishment, back in 1988, that Margaret Mead, who had in 1932 typically »found Arapesh receptivity to outside influences ›annoying‹« would not change her view as late as 1971 (1988: 232f.). Thus, »expectations of wholeness, continuity, and essence« (ibid.: 233) are indeed no longer held by the discipline. On the other hand, such stands, believed to have long been discarded, are daily bread in the »history of mentalities«. They also seem to characterize economic research done by social scientists who work on non-Western societies. At least this is what quite recently Rupert Hodder (1996) criticized with great outrage, going as far as claiming that in view of the failure of the social sciences to properly analyze multidimensional and complex societies, no »scientific« approach could any longer be acceptable. While Hodder's criticism is entirely justified, it is both frustrating and distressing to realize how theories of heterogeneous systems are still being completely ignored where they seem to be most needed.

6. To hypothesize a relation between heterogeneity and persistence is therefore elementary in any theory of complex systems. The gist of the argument is 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 carry on.

7. With this framework as a working hypothesis, I have been engaged, since a number of years, 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. Gradually, 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). It was my contention therefore, though I would rather like to call it »conjecture« at this stage, that it is this »energy« that has made it possible for the groups studied to stand reasonably well in competition with the contiguous world.

8. In the beginning of my work, the very awareness that cultural repertoires, comprising even basic items of collective sentiments, could be explicitly invented by individuals was a revelation. It was only natural that the study of the features of such repertoires has taken most of my attention. However, 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 repertoire 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 living conditions for the group of people they considered to be a legitimate target for these repertoires, thereby in fact either aspiring at, or in reality creating a new group for that repertoire. And in spite of different geographical and historical circumstances, there is more resemblance than disparity between the tools and ingredients used in all of these, and many other cases, as if they all had followed a hidden script which somehow was made available to them from some source.

As a matter of fact, there is no mystery here about the possible source, although it is not at all certain that the infiltration of knowledge, or information, has been explicit or direct. Although such scripts can be traced back to antiquity, so there need be no illusion they are exclusively »modern«, it was the French revolution which has set the example of how to launch new repertoires for everybody in modern times. And it was the aftermath of the Revolution, most conspicuously the Napoleonic wars, which has made it possible for disparate and various, often relatively marginal, groups to get in touch with these new cultural initiatives, which probably inspired them to think, fantasize and act in ways not imaginable before.

9. What kind of new repertoires were being created, and what kind of »options« they engendered?

No doubt the entrepreneurs, those who were engaged in great intensity in making new repertoires, had always in view some vision of improving the situation of the group for whom they targeted the repertoires. Whether the »actual situation« indeed justified their enterprises or not is not a fruitful question as long as it can be shown that they were convinced of their understanding of the situation they have come to correct. (Typically, such doubts are normally cast in cases of controversial outcomes, like that of Newfoundland.<sup>2</sup>)

The new suggested practices were not explicitly directed at devising strategies for accumulating material wealth. Material poverty may have been a strong drive, and it surely helped to create positive reverberations among the targeted public (such as having Sicilian peasants vote for the Italian Union), but the public discourse focused predominantly on saving the group from persecutions and humiliations, or even from perishing; putting the group on an equal footing with other groups (normally described as the more advanced); restoring the grandeur of the group in the past, and the like. The repertoires devised in congruence with these views may appear today as belonging to areas that have nothing to do with parameters of prosperity. These may seem a whole battery of odd gismos, such as opening windows to let sunshine and fresh air in, or using unreputable or non-spoken languages, or walking out in nature, or planting trees in great ceremony once a year, or getting up early to go to work, and the like.

10. Theoretically, we may then distinguish two different kinds of projects in all of the modern cases of repertoire making. One is the making of new repertoires, as well as the efforts to distribute them. The other is the creation of new socio-political entities where these repertoires would prevail. Would it make sense then to ask which came first, or which of the two projects was the stronger drive? As far as the motives of the people involved, it could be interesting to make such questions. Here it can be helpful to analyze the different roles played by »intellectuals« – the makers of the repertoires – on the one hand, and the »powerholders«, those who made use of the new semiotic products, on the other. And this would apply even to those cases where the »intellectuals« and the »powerholders« were the very same persons playing different roles, often before, but not infrequently even after, entities endowed with political power were born.

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2 The endeavors of Smallwood in 1948 and 1949 to make Newfoundland part of Canada are typically either hailed or strongly criticized as a conspiracy against the people. The reason is perhaps the fact that Newfoundland is not doing very well from the point of view of »success« on any level. (See i. a. MacKenzie 1986.)

But from the point of view of the outcomes, the two projects were one single package on the levels of both discourse and action. Namely, the making of an entity with socio-political characteristics was often presented as both a necessary condition as well as a possible result, of the new proposed repertoires. For example, the creation of the modern Italian state was inseparable from the tentatives 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 it was propagated that the expected outcome of this bundled project is achieving a 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 starve, or get killed in a war, they would accept the premise that the collective may survive or even thrive by their actions.

11. 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 deed as superfluous and surely would accept »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 mould 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 the circumstances of the emergence of entities in modern times. For many of them – whether social criticism is justified or not in terms of our current modern ideologies – we must not ignore the crucial fact that such projects may not have emerged out of unconstrained »free will« at all. If the people involved wanted to achieve equal footing with other groups of people, who may have achieved better conditions only because they had already been organized in socio-political entities, then they actually were driven to action by unavoidable intercultural competition. Analyzed from the point of view of business evaluations (that is: by the rates of investments to yields), the benefit of certain entities may indeed be questioned. But from the point of view of inter-groupal competition, to follow or reject a certain ingredient of repertoire has been a matter of choosing between perpetuated inferiority or belonging to a new club with some new privileges.

12. My contention is therefore that the principle which worked in accepting an extraneous model (namely, getting organized as »a nation«) is not only that of »why haven't we got what the neighbor has?« 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 if their adoption was a matter of political convenience rather than a desire to alter socio-economic conditions for »the nation« (as so often is maintained, e. g., in relation to such cases as the politics of Piedmont and Count Cavour), a stalemate was thereby broken in a domestic repertoire. Subsequently, even in case of a limited stock of innovations, the doors opened to allow more options. Once it was made widely acceptable that the older ways of life could be at least in part replaced by different ones, often there was no way for anybody to block the surge of energy which followed as a result.

13. 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. If you accidentally find out that you can cook your food with some herb you may have accidentally acquired, you thereby devise a new option, but there is no guarantee other people will accept this option, and in some cases you may stand to trial for witchcraft and end in unexpected places.

The basic reason for this is that repertoires are sets of options invented by humans for conducting their lives. Once such repertoires establish themselves in society, they 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 agreed 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.

For while the cultural entrepreneurs claimed that the only way for the group to extract itself from its misery was to introduce changes in its cultural repertoire, if not replace it completely, the opponents of such initiatives normally claimed the opposite was true. Clearly, the understanding of survival must have been very different for the opposing parties. Those who normally were – and are – in favor of maintaining a current repertoire unchanged frequently consider

change as disruptive. From their point of view, the disappearance of the current repertoire – 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 resisted 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 the targeted group. Seen from this point of view, the strategy of proposing the creation of a new group should also be considered as a way to make new repertoires more acceptable. That is, since they are not always presented as aiming at serving replacements for the current group as such.

14. When the dynamics of the making of new repertoire is set in motion, the very nature of the situation and the different backgrounds of the people involved often creates alternative sets of new options. These may never be fully compatible in the long run, even in cases where certain levels of mergings or compromises have been achieved between the competitors. In all of the cases where new or renovated entities emerged, more than one agenda have been proposed in almost every domain of life. The alternative proposals cannot be characterized in general terms, but in some cases there has emerged incompatibility between »left« and »right«, »religious« and »secular«, or »republicans« and »royalists«, and the like. Each of these may have proposed a different set of new options, and sometimes no final settlement has ever been reached.

In many of these cases, the new entity, now possessing political power to impose repertoires, often made the decisions in one direction or the other. In the case of the Italian language, for instance, a committee was set up and its chairman, after many back- and-forth hesitations, finally decided in favor of a certain variety which subsequently was introduced into the newly established Italian schools. The Norwegian conflict in matters of language could not, however, be solved by such a governmental decision, so the compromise was that both alternatives (in that case – both Norwegian languages) were adopted. In the Israeli case, a status quo was seemingly agreed upon between the secular majority and the religious minority back in 1948 in matters of church and state.

Such impositions or agreements have not necessarily lasted in the various cases. Resentment and rejection of new repertoires have also taken place in the various cases partly because of the lack of a settlement between competitive agenda, but plausibly also because there always is a group that is not content



with the outcome of certain actions. This lack of contentment, if developed into a passive hesitance, normally seems to have functioned as a factor of stalemate. On the other hand, if it developed into a state of active opposition, it seems to have created the necessary dynamics for a continued struggle about the desirable repertoires.

15. The continuation of the normal lack of agreement on matters of cultural repertoire among the groups which may have accepted in principle the process of establishing a new entity 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.

16. The same kind of energy, however, may generate the opposite results. If disagreements exceed a certain level, the co-habitation of multiple repertoires in the frame of one entity, 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 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 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 this stage, is that we do not know what the limits of heterogeneity might 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 languages representing four at least partly different repertoires 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 socio-political entities today. The debate that was going on between innovators and conservers in terms of making new repertoires is continuing

today between such groups in relation with the legitimacy of claiming equal footing not to large entities, but to various groups within such entities, whose repertoires have been ignored or even oppressed in the past. The trouble is that our wisdom ends here. The only possible hope is perhaps more thinking, more study, and more research.

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