

Meaning and Cultural Interaction in Society

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Abstract

The idea that we want to promote in this article is that the meaning of a society stems from its culture, and the "sociological imagination" is an explanatory factor of the dynamics in relation to Meaning and culture within a society. With this objective in mind, we analyze the contributions of classical sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Thorstein Veblen. From these thinkers' approaches to the structure of society, historical change and the evolution of human typologies, we will draw evidence and arguments to support the thesis that the meaning of a society, while not deterministic, is the result of cultural interactions between individuals, closely related to the style and 'sociological imagination' that C. Wright Mills speaks of. Through the prism of this concept, we will understand how individual biography and collective history intersect, how meaning and culture cannot be seen as isolated phenomena but must be analyzed in relation to social and historical processes. The "sociological imagination," mediates how individuals relate their personal experiences to larger social forces, giving them a clearer vision of their place in the world. What is at stake in the present article is to demonstrate that meaning is not a natural given but emerges as a social construction. Culture is also shown to be a vehicle through which societal meaning is manifested and negotiated. Here again we want to make a link between social structure and historical change, with the idea that complex, open societies offer multiple possibilities for individuals to assert themselves, with a variety of ways of giving meaning to life. Meaning and culture are dynamic processes that evolve in close connection with social, economic and political structures. In the modern world, on these coordinates, the balance between rationalization and a meaningful life becomes a central challenge of life.

Keywords: *Meaning; culture; society; "sociological imagination";*

1. Introduction

Society, in all its complexity and diversity, has always been the object of study of philosophy and sociology, because it is the most appropriate framework for understanding human nature. The link between the individual and the social, historical and cultural context is central in defining identity, in shaping the meaning that people attribute to their lives and in shaping patterns of collective behavior. This paper aims to deepen the concepts of meaning and culture in relation to society, drawing on the ideas of thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and other classic sociologists and

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philosophers. By the way they have explored the structure of society, the mechanisms of historical change and the prevailing human typologies in different periods, we will discover more meanings and uses of "meaning" and "culture" in a society.

It should be emphasized that the present study is based on the concept promoted by C. Wright Mills, in his book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Here, the American thinker analyzes society through the prism of the phrase "sociological imagination" and raises a series of questions about social and human dynamics, which we will try to answer by circumscribing them within the concepts of "Meaning" and "Culture".

1) *What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another?* (2) *Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole?* 3) *What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of "human nature" are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for "human nature" of each and every feature of the society we are examining?* (Mills, 1959, pp. 6-7).

In the following sections, we will deepen the relationships between the concepts of meaning, culture, history and society, in dialog with the theories proposed by the great thinkers mentioned above.

2. The concepts of "Meaning", "culture" and "society"

Meaning is the significance that individuals attribute to their experiences, relationships and existence in the world. Within society, meaning is mediated by social interactions, cultural norms and historical narratives. Meaning is fluid and changes as individuals and groups reinterpret experiences through the lens of social and historical change.

Culture can be defined as the totality of values, norms, customs and beliefs shared by members of a society. Culture is the vehicle through which meaning is transmitted and negotiated between individuals. Emile Durkheim considered that social facts, including culture, are 'external to the individual' and constrain him in a subtle but fundamental way in his everyday behavior. Culture not only reflects social reality but also helps to shape it, providing a framework for understanding how individuals interact and relate to the world around them.

Society, in the sociological sense, is a complex structure of relationships between individuals and groups, shaped by shared institutions, norms and values. It is the context in which meaning, and culture develop and interact. C. Wright Mills provides us with an interesting analytical tool to understand this interaction through the *sociological imagination*. According to Mills, society cannot be understood without considering its history, individual biographies and the intersection between the two. This allows us to understand how personal events

are influenced by social forces, how, in turn, individuals contribute to shaping society, and the relevance of the 'sociological imagination' for understanding societal dynamics.

In this sense, the individual 'biography' is shaped by structural and historical forces and these forces, in turn, are influenced by the collective actions of individuals. „SOCIAL SCIENCE deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within social structures” (Mills, 1959, p. 143). This is where we see the nuclei of meaning that aggregate at the level of a society. To understand a society, we need to understand how historical events influence individual lives and vice versa. Mills invites us to look beyond the limited perspectives of our personal lives and see how our individual experiences are linked to larger social structures. In his view, the "sociological imagination" is the engine that organizes society, because the imagination connects historical events with the everyday lives of individuals. From this perspective, meaning and culture cannot be considered as isolated phenomena, but must be analyzed in the specific historical and social context in which they develop. Mills warns us that lack of this understanding leads to a narrow perspective on social reality, in which individuals are unaware of the structural implications of their existence.

Therefore, in our analysis of meaning and culture in society, the sociological imagination will be a central framework of interpretation, allowing us to answer the questions Mills asks about the structure of society, the role of history, and how individuals are shaped by and contribute to the culture in which they live. Sociological imagination is a component of social meaning; a society without imagination is a meaningless society.

3. Meaning and culture in classical sociology

In this chapter, we analyze the contributions of important classical philosophers and sociologists to our understanding of the concepts of meaning and culture. Each of these thinkers developed his or her own theory of how individuals ascribe meaning to their lives and how culture functions in shaping society. We will focus on the seminal works of figures such as Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen, highlighting their specific contributions.

3.1 Social evolutionism and the meaning of progress

Herbert Spencer, one of the founders of evolutionary theory in sociology, comes up with an original vision of how meaning and culture develop. Spencer considered that societies evolve in a similar way to biological organisms, from simple and homogeneous to complex and differentiated forms. For Spencer, the meaning of social life is linked to the idea of continuous progress, and culture plays an essential role in this evolutionary process.

According to Spencer, culture and values emerge from the needs of communities to adapt to their environment. „Progress is not an accident but a necessity. It is a part of nature” (Spencer, 1876, p. 24). Through this evolutionary

lens, the meaning that people attribute to their individual and collective actions becomes a reflection of their capacity to contribute to this process of social progress.

Spencer believes that the meaning of social evolution lies in the increasing complexity of social interactions and that culture is the mechanism that facilitates and regulates these interactions. Cultural values such as cooperation, solidarity and respect for the law are seen by Spencer as indispensable for the smooth functioning of society and for maintaining progress. In such a theoretical model, culture acts as a coping mechanism and a control mechanism for interactions between people, linking the social structure to the meaning that individuals give to life.

3.2 Positivism and the construction of meaning through science and culture

Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, played a fundamental role in establishing science as the basis for understanding society and cultural processes. For Comte, meaning in society is not something naturally given, but is constructed through scientific knowledge and culture. He argues that the evolution of human thought passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical and positive, the latter being dominated by science and reason.

In Comte's conception, culture is a product of intellectual evolution, the medium through which society organizes and structures the meaning of existence. „Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour agir” (Comte, 1830, p. 47) is a principle that shows his belief that meaning can be found by understanding the laws that govern social life. For Comte, culture and science are inseparable, providing a framework through which individuals can organize their experiences and lives in predictable and orderly ways. Therefore, meaning in society, in Comte's view, derives from humanity's ability to organize itself through the mediation of science, and culture plays a normative role, providing a stable framework for this organization. Comte saw culture as the vehicle through which science and reason can transform society in a positive and progressive direction, contributing to order and stability.

3.3 Function functionalism and the role of culture in creating social cohesion

Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, addressed the relationship between culture and social cohesion. He considered that meaning is constituted through social relations and cultural norms, which function as 'social facts'. In his work *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, Durkheim (1895) argues that "les faits sociaux doivent être traités comme des choses" (p. 14), i.e. social facts have an objective and constraining existence on individuals.

For Durkheim, culture can maintain order and social solidarity. He distinguishes between two forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic. In simple societies, mechanical solidarity is generated by a homogeneous culture, where the meaning of life derives from conformity to common traditions and beliefs. In complex societies, organic solidarity results from the interdependence of individuals within a specialized social system, and culture becomes more pluralistic and diverse.

Durkheim believed that social meaning is created through rituals, traditions and symbols, which contribute to the formation of collective identity. In his work on religion, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, he emphasizes that "la société est la source d'une énergie morale et collective qui nous donne un sentiment d'appartenance" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 29).

In this context, culture and meaning are not only reflections of structures, but also a way in which individuals connect and integrate into society.

3.4 Rationalization and the meaning of life in modernity

Max Weber makes an essential contribution to our understanding of how meaning and culture are formed in modern societies. In his works on rationalization, Weber argued that one of the distinctive features of modernity is the tendency towards an ever-deeper rationalization of social life. This rationalization involves the organization of human activities on a calculable and efficient basis, which, in Weber's view, decisively determines the meaning that individuals attribute to their lives. In *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Weber reveals the ways in which religious culture, in particular Protestant ethics, has influenced the development of modern capitalism and a rational attitude towards work and success. "Die protestantische Ethik führte zur Entstehung des modernen Kapitalismus durch die Wertschätzung der Arbeit und des individuellen Erfolgs" (Weber, 1905, p. 67).

For Weber, the meaning of life in a capitalist society becomes paradoxically linked to rational labor and economic accumulation, and culture contributes to this meaning through norms that valorize efficiency and productivity.

However, Weber warns of the dangers of excessive rationalization, which he calls the 'iron cage' of modernity, where the meaning of life becomes confined to bureaucratic and economic processes and culture loses its transcendental elements. In modern societies, culture is no longer just a medium for the expression of meaning but becomes a restricted framework in which individuals are trapped in a system of rules and norms that determine their behavior in an increasingly rigid manner.

3.5 Cons conspicuous consumption and leisure class culture

Thorstein Veblen criticizes the relationship between meaning, culture and society, especially in the context of modern capitalism. In his seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen emphasizes the way in which the culture of conspicuous consumption becomes a central way in which individuals assert their social status and give meaning to their existence. Veblen observes that the meaning of life is often linked to the accumulation and visible display of wealth. "Conspicuous consumption is a means by which the upper classes demonstrate their power and prestige" (Veblen, 1899, p. 45).

Culture, in this case, becomes a space in which meaning is negotiated through symbols of social status, and consumption of goods becomes a vehicle through which individuals mark their identity and place in society. Meaning is no longer

linked to productive labor or spiritual values, but to the competition for prestige and recognition in the eyes of others.

So far, we have extracted from the works of the thinkers we have analyzed different conceptions of how meaning is shaped in a society, how individuals construct and experience meaning in their social context, and how culture plays a decisive role in this process. Meaning and culture are understood as dynamic forces that shape and are shaped by historical, social and economic.

4. Fundamental questions about meaning and culture in society

In this chapter we attempt to answer the three questions conceived by Mills, which we reformulate below: (1) *What is the structure of society?* (2) *Where is this society situated in human history?* and (3) *What varieties of people now prevail in this society and in this period?*

We will answer these questions in dialog with the theories of classical sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, Comte and others, trying to find out how meaning and culture relate to the structure and history of societies.

4.1 Structure and functions of society

The first question focuses on identifying the structure of a society, the relationships between its components and the significance of these elements for social continuity and change.

Émile Durkheim is one of the main thinkers who approached the structure of society from a functionalist perspective. In his work, *De la division du travail social* (1893), Durkheim discusses how the different parts of society work together to maintain social stability and order. For Durkheim, society is a system of interactions between individuals and institutions, and the meaning that individuals attribute to their lives derives from their place in this system.

Durkheim identifies two types of social solidarity: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. In simple societies, the social structure is unitary, and the meaning of existence is derived from the conformity of individuals to common cultural norms. "La solidarité mécanique est fondée sur les ressemblances, sur l'homogénéité morale et culturelle" (Durkheim, 1893, p. 60).

In modern societies, the structure becomes much more complex, and individuals specialize in different roles, thus creating organic solidarity based on interdependence. From such a perspective, the meaning of life in a modern society is linked to the role of each individual in the social chain of the division of labor. The social structure, in Durkheim's view, includes institutions that mediate social relations and provide stability, such as the family, education and religion. These institutions function to perpetuate the culture and values that provide social cohesion, giving individuals a clear framework for finding meaning in their lives.

Max Weber analysed the structures of authority and rationalization in modern societies, emphasizing that meaning and culture are linked to the types of authority and organization that prevail. In *Economy and Society*, Weber distinguishes between three types of authority: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal. In modern

societies, bureaucratic and rational-legal structures dominate, creating a framework based on formal rules and standardized procedures. Rationalization, a central process for understanding modern society, implies an increasingly bureaucratic and impersonal structure. "Die fortschreitende Rationalisierung verringert den Einfluss traditioneller und magischer Werte und bringteine berechenbare und effiziente Lebens weise in den Vordergrund" (Weber, 1922, p. 137). The meaning of life in this case becomes less bound by cultural traditions and more by individual success and achievement in a rationalized system.

The modern social structure, in Weber's view, is dominated by rational and bureaucratic institutions, which help to define cultural norms and individual values. This structure profoundly influences the meaning that individuals attribute to their activities, since success in such societies depends on conformity to rational-legal norms.

4.2 Where does society stand in human history?

The second question focuses on the place of a society in historical evolution, and the mechanisms through which it changes and evolves. To answer this question, we turn to the ideas of thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Auguste Comte was the first to systematize a theory of the historical development of societies, proposing the law of the three stages of human knowledge: theological, metaphysical and positive. In his view, each stage of history corresponds to a particular way of thinking and a particular form of culture. Modern society, in Comte's view, is in the positive stage, where science and reason dominate culture and the meaning of life. "À ce stade, les hommes n'expliquent plus les phénomènes par des références à des divinités ou à des entités métaphysiques, mais par les lois naturelles et la connaissance scientifique" (Comte, 1830, p. 94). The process of the positivization of thinking provides a new framework for the meaning of life in modern societies, and culture becomes a product of scientific and rational progress. Comte proposes the organization of society on a scientific and cultural basis, and a hierarchy of knowledge reflecting the evolution of societies. The meaning of life in positivism will coincide with scientific progress and the rational organization of human activities.

The transition *from mechanical to organic solidarity, as Durkheim notes, will mark a radical change in the way individuals find meaning in life.* In the traditional world, meaning was derived from belonging to a culturally homogeneous community, whereas in modern societies, meaning is linked to one's specialized role in the division of labor. "Dans les sociétés modernes, l'interdépendance des individus devient essentielle au fonctionnement de la structure sociale" (Durkheim, 1893, p. 68).

Interdependence creates a new type of culture, based on pluralism and diversity, but which nevertheless maintains social cohesion through specialized functions. The meaning of life in modern societies is dependent on one's place in this system; culture and values adapt to support new forms of cohesion. Culture becomes an adaptation mechanism to new historical and economic conditions and becomes the main component of social meaning in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

4.3 What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period?

The last question concerns the prevailing human typologies in a given society and historical period, and how these are shaped by social and cultural structures. The contributions of Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen are relevant to this discussion.

Max Weber developed a typology of social action, which includes four main types: traditional, affective, value-rational and goal-rational action. In modern societies, goal-rational actions, which involve calculating the most efficient means to achieve an objective, predominate. "Die Rationalisierung des sozialen Lebens hat zu einer grundlegenden Transformation des Individuums geführt, in dem es ihn veranlasst, nach rationalen und wirtschaftlichen Kriterien zu handeln" (Weber, 1922, p. 234).

The German sociologist argues that this form of rational action is related to modern capitalist culture, where success and individual fulfillment are the most important criteria for finding meaning in life. The modern individual is shaped by the values of rationalization and efficiency, while contemporary culture promotes these values as standards for social behavior.

According to Veblen's conception, individuals in the *leisure* class define their identity and the meaning of existence through the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. "Conspicuous consumption is a means by which individuals assert their social status and find meaning in the eyes of others" (Veblen, 1899, p. 85).

The sociologist argues that this form of consumption is not only a manifestation of wealth, but also a way in which modern culture creates types of individuals who find meaning by demonstrating prestige and power. Consumer culture becomes the fundamental framework for defining human typologies and assigning meaning in society.

5. Meaning, culture, structure and social dynamics

In the light of the answers, we have given to the questions raised by Mills, based on the theories of the classical sociologists invoked, we can argue that meaning and culture are not isolated concepts, but fundamental processes that shape and are shaped by social and historical structures. The theoretical conclusions of the classical thinkers show that meaning is not a natural given, but a social construction generated by societal relations and structures. Whether it is Durkheim's social solidarity, Weber's rationalization or Veblen's conspicuous consumption, the meaning of life in modernity is determined by the individual's interaction with dominant cultural institutions and norms. Culture, as the vehicle through which meaning is expressed and negotiated, plays a central role in the organization and cohesion of society. From Comte's perspective, culture is determined by the evolution of scientific knowledge, whereas for Durkheim, culture functions as a mechanism of social cohesion, giving individuals a sense of belonging and direction. In contrast, Weber warns of the dangers of a culture

dominated by excessive rationalization, which reduces the meaning of life to mere bureaucratic and economic processes.

Another important aspect of our analysis is the link between social structure and historical change. In all the theories discussed, modern societies are characterized by increased structural complexity, economic transitions and cultural change. Durkheim and Comte emphasize that the transition from traditional to modern forms of social organization has created new ways of giving meaning to life and social structure has adapted to reflect these changes. Max Weber also highlighted how the process of rationalization has shaped the structure of society. In an increasingly calculated and rationalized world, meaning derives from following formal rules and norms, often at the expense of traditional or affective values.

In terms of the formation of "human nature", thinkers' conclusions suggest that individuals and human typologies are products of the social and cultural context in which they live. The dominant culture, norms and values select, shape and release certain types of behaviors and sensibilities. People are not just passive participants in society, but active creators of meaning through their interaction with social structures and cultures. Individuals in modern societies, as Weber has shown, tend to adopt a rational attitude towards purposes, and Veblen emphasizes that individuals of the *leisure* class assert their identity and meaning in life through consumption and social status. Meaning, in this period, becomes increasingly linked to individual achievement and social recognition within a culture that promotes economic and material success.

Our analysis shows that in modern societies, meaning and culture are dynamic processes, constantly evolving under the influence of economic, technological and political change. In the modern era, rationalization and consumption have redefined both the social structure and the way individuals find meaning in life. While Durkheim and Comte saw modern culture as a mechanism for cohesion and scientific progress, Weber and Veblen pointed to the risks of an overly rationalized or materialistic society.

The relevance of these theories for contemporary society is obvious. With globalization and digitalization, social structures continue to diversify and become more complex. Culture is also changing rapidly, influenced by new technologies, social movements and economic pressures. In this context, the meaning of life continues to be renegotiated at individual and collective level. The main challenge for contemporary individuals is to balance the demands of rationalization with the need to live a meaningful life. Culture plays an essential role in this equation, as a space for finding and expressing meaning, even in the midst of the constraints imposed by social structures.

We believe that we have shown clearly enough that meaning and culture are inseparable from the structures and processes that shape collective life. The theories of the classical thinkers provide us with a sufficiently solid analytical framework to understand how meaning and culture evolve in relation to historical and social context. By the same token, we can conclude that the concepts of

meaning, and culture are sufficiently robust to enable us to understand contemporary societies and to explain the complexity and dynamism of the world.

6. The link between meaning, culture and "sociological imagination"

Sociological imagination is the ability to see the interplay between individual biographies and social structures, between personal experiences and collective history, between individual agency and larger external influences such as cultural institutions and norms. Mills defines the sociological imagination as "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills, 1959, p. 6). Through this concept, meaning and culture become more clearly understood when analyzed in relation to social and historical structures, not just as individual experiences.

It is through the sociological imagination that individuals construct meaning in their lives. Mills argues that without this ability to link individual biographies to larger structures, individuals risk becoming trapped in a "personal trap", misunderstanding the true nature of the social issues that influence their lives. No study that does not return to the problems of biography, history and their intersections has completed its intellectual journey. Culture, as a system of values, norms and beliefs, is the vehicle through which society transmits patterns of meaning to individuals. The sociological imagination is not only an individual's capacity to understand the world, but also a tool through which institutions can be approached and critically analyzed. Mills argues that the family, the economy, the educational system, and the government, shape not only behaviors, but also how individuals construct and understand the meaning of their existence.

The sociological imagination allows us to understand not only the impact of institutions on individuals, but also the role of individuals in maintaining or changing them. Institutions shape culture and the meaning that individuals attribute to life, but at the same time, individuals have the power to modify or challenge existing institutions through collective actions and decisions. A clear example of this dynamic is education, an area strongly influenced by cultural norms and social structures. Educational institutions not only shape the elements to function in society, but also perpetuate existing structures of power and inequality, giving some groups more opportunities than others.

Sociological imagination, according to Mills, occurs when people realize that their personal problems have roots in broader social structures. For example, an individual-level unemployment problem is not just a personal problem but may be a result of wider economic processes such as recessions, technological change or outsourcing policies. Sociological imagination connects individual experiences with macro-societal processes. "True social understanding comes when individuals can grasp not only their personal troubles but also how these are connected to the larger structures of society and historical change" (Mills, 1959, p. 12).

The ability to see the link between the micro and macro levels of society is crucial not only for individuals but also for the institutions responsible for

managing social problems. Mills argues that lack of sociological imagination can lead to alienation and a sense of powerlessness in the face of structural problems. Individuals who cannot link their personal problems to wider social structures risk becoming trapped in a crisis of meaning and identity. In such a situation, culture can play an ambiguous role: it can either help to clarify relationships and provide a framework of meaning, or it can contribute to confusion and disorientation, depending on the context.

7. Limits and challenges of the "Sociological Imagination"

Sociological imagination, although a powerful tool for understanding society, also comes with its limitations. For example, in an increasingly complex and globalized world, it is not always easy for individuals to link their personal problems to global social and economic processes. Not all cultures or societies provide an adequate framework for developing the sociological imagination. In authoritarian or highly conservative societies, individuals may be prevented from developing this capacity for critical understanding by cultural or political constraints. Unequal distribution of power between individuals and institutions may limit the manifestation of the sociological imagination. For example, those from lower or marginalized social classes have less access to the resources needed to understand social and economic mechanisms. There is a tension between power structures and the ability of individuals to use their sociological imagination to claim the place they believe they deserve. The concept proposed by Mills should enable individuals and institutions to link biography and history, personal issues and social structures. Through this prism, meaning is not an objective given, but a product of interactions between the individual, culture and institutions. However, the development and manifestation of the sociological imagination depends on the cultural and social context of each community, and its challenges include structural barriers and the complexities of the modern world.

8. The Problem of Meaning and Culture in Society. Conclusions

We believe that the problem of meaning in society goes back to the way in which human needs are translated, coagulated and administered in institutions. Needs are physical and metaphysical and are institutionalized in the tension between conservation and progress. Different needs produce different meanings historically normalized (political, economic, social) and culturally assimilated. It is in its culture that the meaning of a society is most visible, so it is culture that is the sensitive element of societal meaning, the one that senses changes, transformations, influences, but also the translator of these into new trends and orientations of meaning.

Culture, the one that gives meaning to society, is as much about science and technology, based on tradition and innovation, as it is about tradition and the humanities, based on creative power and the capacity to imagine. The extent to which institutions are culturally encumbered gives meaning to society. A society

without a culture, or one with a closed, closed, xenophobic, xenophobic, ideologized, radicalized culture, is meaningless. On the contrary, the more open, varied and competitive a society is, the more sense it makes.

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