What Does Captain Cook Have to tell us about Culture? Contributions for a Structural and Historical Approach to Culture and Organizations.

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Abstract: Current approaches to organizational culture dynamics fail to define culture in terms of cultural resources deployed by individuals when faced to everyday events. We argue that culture dynamics is inextricably wrapped up with the dynamics of cultural resources. This paper aims to further develop the available theoretical anchoring of organizational culture dynamics through delineating contributions and research implications of a structural and historical approach to culture and organizations, according to which capturing culture dynamics implies studying culture as history. Drawing on Sahlins’ classical interpretation of Captain Cook visiting Hawaii and on ethnographic and historic research findings in Rio Pardo, Brazil, we show how interested subjects creatively use their pre-existing cultural categories and schemes of practice to commit to culturally grounded action strategies as they face threats and opportunities, potentially leading to unforeseen consequences and revaluating culture concepts. As we delineate a structural and historical approach on culture and organizations, culture dynamics is analyzed as a process of social realization of cultural resources.

Organizational culture has been a topic of academic and practical interest for at least three decades. Although scholars often recognize culture as being historically built (Schein, 1991), traditional frameworks conceptualize culture as structure (Staber, 2006), a set of exogenous constraints shaping individuals’ feelings and behavior (Hofstede, 2003), or still, a set of values or meanings, shared or not totally shared, informing organizational members’ behavior (Boyacigiller et al., 1996; Martin, 2002). Alternative approaches are developed by authors who claim the necessity of emphasizing the dynamic dimension of culture, assuming it as a dynamic set of concepts and understandings resulting from human action and interaction (Meyerson, Martin, 1987; Hatch, 1993; Hatch, 2004; Brannen, Salk, 2000; Hansen, 2003). Within cross-culture management studies, research on intercultural interactions often focus bicultural settings, capturing and interpreting processes and practices along which culture is produced and reproduced through the action of individuals (Brannen, Salk, 2000; Kleinberg, 1994; Kleinberg, 1998). Studies on intercultural interaction have shown that, granted that individuals are embedded in culture, that is, their judgments and behavior are influenced by culture, the opposite is also true, as behavior actually influences culture. Focusing on these latter phenomena, history and agency are incorporated into research designs, and findings may contribute to academics and practitioners better understand mechanisms of culture production.

Pursuing this latter goal, several authors have offered more systematic models of organizational culture dynamics (Gagliardi, 1992; Schein, 1991; Brannen, 1992; Hatch, 1993). For example, Brannen and Salk’s (2000) work on intercultural interaction conceptualize culture as emergent and historically situated patterns of meanings and practices, produced through the negotiation among individuals of different cultural affiliations and with unequal access to power. As studying international joint ventures, the authors conclude that the national cultural origins of organizational team members are the source of values based on which they operate in bicultural settings. However, cultural interpretations may be reformulated, recombined or modified over time, as individuals and groups interact and negotiate when facing everyday events within processes whose course is a priori undetermined and of unexpected development. In line with these ideas, we argue that structural, but also historical concepts to culture can add to this debate addressing overlooked issues, such as the interested engagement of organizational agents around cultural resources as
intrinsic to culture dynamics. This way, structural and historical concepts could further develop the available theoretical anchoring of organizational culture dynamics.

This paper aims to offer a structural and historical theoretical framework to studies on culture and organizations, delineating its potential contributions and research implications. Current approaches to organizational culture dynamics fail to define culture in terms of pragmatic resources marked and deployed by individuals when faced to everyday events (for an exception, see STABER, 2006). According to this view, culture dynamics is inextricably wrapped up with the dynamics of cultural resources. Interested subjects creatively use their pre-existing cultural categories and schemes of practice to commit to culturally grounded action strategies as they face threats and opportunities, potentially leading to unforeseen consequences and revaluing culture concepts. American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins innovatively articulated these issues in his seminal work on cross-culture contact, proposing a structural and historical approach to culture as facing the challenge of discussing not only how events are ordered by culture (such as assumed by culture-as-structure approaches) but how, within historical processes, culture is reproduced and transformed (SAHLINS, 1981).

We first introduce central theoretical concepts to a structural-historical approach to culture and organizations, illustrating them with a classical interpretation of a cross-culture contact (SAHLINS, 1981; SAHLINS, 1990). Drawing on historian research methods, Sahlins interpreted the events of European Captain James Cook visiting the Hawaiian Islands in late eighteen century, these leading to simultaneous and intertwined processes of culture reproduction and change. These concepts are then further illustrated with ethnographic and historic data of research held in Rio Pardo, municipality located in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Finally, drawing on both research findings, we deepen the discussion of central theoretical concepts and mechanisms of culture production, delineating a structural and historical approach to culture and organizations, suggesting theoretical and methodological contributions and implications. We argue that capturing culture dynamics implies studying culture as history (SAHLINS, 2004). Within a structural and historical approach, culture dynamics is analyzed as a process of social realization of cultural resources, requiring longitudinal studies capable of incorporating events, resources, ambiguity, contradictions and interests as features of culture.

“A Possible Theory of History”

Sahlins’ structural-historical anthropology has been pioneering material for debating a central tension in social theory, or the difficulties of integrating continuity to change in social-anthropological approaches (SCHWARCZ, 2001; ORTNER, 1984). His historical analysis as well as his “possible theory of history” (SAHLINS, 1985: 138) were developed along a series of writings from 1980 to mid-1990s, to be criticized, praised and further developed by anthropologists, such as Obeyesekere (1992), and historians, such as Sewell (2005), Windshuttle (1996) and Burke (1987). Within History, Sewell (2005) further elaborated Sahlins’ theory as he enthusiastically recognized its usefulness (“Sahlins’ theory is, in my opinion, brilliant, elegant, widely generalizable, and eminently useful for historians” [Sewell, 2005: 198]). In line with classical anthropologists (MALINOWSKI, 1976; REDFIELD, LINTON, HERSKOVITS, 1936) and contemporary organizational theorists (HATCH, 1993; HATCH, 2004), Sahlins suggests that culture dynamics embraces culture reproduction and change simultaneously. His theory of history constitutes a general approach to culture dynamics, focusing on the relations between structure and event. The author recasts the opposition between these two concepts as traditional in social sciences (“structure” refers to the permanent, ordered, pervasive aspects of social reality, while “events” incorporate multiplicity and chaos), articulating them into a more balanced relation. As to do so, Sahlins
adopts a processual view of culture, integrating interpretive traditions to a latter tendency in social theory highlighting the action of social agents upon the world (Dupuis, 1996).

Although deriving his concept of structure directly from Saussurian linguistics and Lévi-Straussian anthropology, Sahlins and his followers deviate from these traditions as they emphasize what Giddens calls the duality of structure (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1970; GIDDENS, 1984). Structure, or culture, not only constrains people, being the source of social conduct, but also enables creative action, being transformed as a consequence of social practice. In summary, Sahlins asserts, structural contents are altered in the course of events in such a way that the “transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction” (1985: 138). That is because events are to be considered happenings capable of transforming structures; however, they are recognizable as such just from within structures. Structures define how events will be interpreted and will run their course, being ultimately the cumulative outcome of past events (SEWELL, 2005: 199). Thus, the event incorporated within a structure is at the same time an innovative and conservative process that can be understood as history.

When building his argument in favor of merging cultural reproduction and transformation as to understand history or culture dynamics, Sahlins proposes the concepts of structure of conjuncture and functional revaluation. The first can be defined as a synthesis of culture and conjuncture, emphasizing the inseparability of history and culture, and expressing the way a culture reacts to an event through the dialogue between existing cultural categories and immediate contingencies. A structure of conjuncture can be analyzed in terms of processes of reinterpretation of structural content (we now come to the idea of functional revaluation), as new historical conjectures can put traditional meanings at risk, and still, as interested historical agents revaluate culture concepts as they face historical contingencies posing them threats and opportunities. For these situations, a “possible theory of history” should recognize that culture dynamics is inextricably wrapped up with the dynamics of material and nonmaterial resources people mark and deploy when faced to everyday events.

The eighteenth century-odyssey of Captain Cook in the Hawaiian Islands was the structure of conjuncture interpreted by Sahlins as to delineate his “possible theory of history”, then further elaborated by others. A structure of conjuncture is “a set of historical relationships that at once reproduce the traditional cultural categories and give them new values out of the pragmatic context” (SAHLINS, 1990: 160). Sahlins shows why Cook was taken as local god Lono (culture reproduction), culminating in his death as a tragic unfold of events being interpreted according to local worldviews, while Cook and his sailors started a fruitful exchange of unprecedented goods that rearranged local interests and alliances, leading to reinterpretation of culture concepts (functional revaluation; culture change). Therefore, structures can be defined as “mutually reinforcing sets of cultural schemas and resources” (SEWELL, 2005: 205), culture can be understood as a synthesis of past and present, and culture dynamics is analyzed in terms of meaningful practices of historical agents, the way they manifest themselves in a specific structure of conjuncture. About the notion of structure in our contemporary world, Sewell (2005) proposes considering a pluralistic conception, according to which subjectivities are formed within multiple cultural structures.

In the following sections we further explore these ideas based on two examples. Although each one is a complete illustration of a structural and historical analysis to culture, incorporating the four theoretical concepts introduced in this section, we will give different emphasis for each example, for didactic reasons. We will first explore Sahlins’ analysis of the events following Cook’s arrival in the Sandwich Islands with an emphasis on the concept of Structure of Conjuncture. Second, we will discuss research findings in Cedejor project, Rio Pardo, Brazil, with an emphasis on the concept of functional revaluation. For the last sections, we then recover both historical interpretations to further build our understanding of a structural and historical approach to culture and organizations.
Structure of Conjuncture: Captain James Cook in Hawaii

In this section we further discuss and illustrate the concept of *structure of conjuncture*, which expresses the way a culture reacts to events through the dialogue between existing cultural categories and historical contingencies. In a highly influential work, Sahlins (1990) shows how the arrival of the British reproduced Hawaiian culture, culminating in Cook’s death, but also led to Hawaiian (not to mention European) culture being transformed upon the engagement of interested nobles and ordinary people around cultural resources made available. Let us begin with a short description of mythological conceptions (which defined structure) in Hawaii at the time the British landed in those lands. In the following paragraphs we will recover Sahlins’ analysis of the events following Cook’s arrival in the islands, which eventually lead to culture change, as well as introduce Sahlins’ theoretical assumptions on culture production mechanisms operating within a structure of conjuncture.

In terms of Polynesian mythological conceptions about human condition, men are at times obliged to defeat the gods to guarantee survival. Kahiki is the invisible home of the gods, and the kingdom of the holy monarch of Kahiki is founded through the usurpation of the governing dynasty. According to Hawaiian myths, the king’s supremacy is annually reinforced as he replaces Lono, the original god, through defeating him in a ritual sequence of events taking place around the islands during Makahiki, eventually conquering fertility and economic prosperity. Makahiki is the New Year’s festival when the Hawaiians ritually celebrate the annual return of Lono, who renews the fertility of the land, reclaiming it as his own. As the image of Lono appears at the beach, human activities are suspended (the taboo of Lono is imposed) and the god starts a ritual circumnavigation that lasts 23 days, when ritual fights take place at each district visited, eventually suspending the taboo of Lono and allowing the now fertilized land to be again sowed. The peak of Makahiki happens with the Kali’i, which means “to play or act the king”. In a ritual battle with Lono the king dies, but later manages to win, conquering life for the people and supremacy for him. This battle happens as the king, followed by his warriors, reaches the original temple coming from the sea (in an allusion to the origin of the dynasty), where the warriors of Lono are waiting for him. The death of the king is actually the prelude of his victory: killed as a foreigner, arriving from the sea, the king is reborn as king, incorporating divine attributes and emerging as the protector of the people. In the following days, the taboos are suspended and normal life is restored.

One can discuss Sahlins’ ideas in terms of two main assertions. First, the author reinforces a long anthropological tradition stating that the seeing eye is the organ of tradition (SAHLINS, 1990). In this sense, culture is contextual constraint on thought and behavior. If seen as a system of meanings, culture is a type of lens through which we order historical processes and events. This first assertion allows for the cultural comprehenison of the events following Captain Cook and his sailors’ arrival in the Sandwich Islands, in December 1778 and again in December 1779. Captain James Cook arrived in Hawaii during the festivities of Makahiki. As Cook visited the islands for the second time, the local prophets interpreted and reified the event as the arrival of Lono, James Cook being Lono himself, imposing worship procedures to the people. In fact, the arrival of Captain Cook and his troop during the Makahiki was followed by an impressive series of coincidences, leading to this interpretation. The captain circumnavigated the islands in a trip that lasted just some days more than the 23, as the ritual prescribed. Upon landing, the captain was headed to the temple and worshiped as Lono. Wishing to establish good relations, Cook did not deny the title, but implemented an interesting exchange of goods. The Hawaiian supplied the British with food and other needy goods, while these offered iron tools in exchange. As the power of the king is based on the usurpation of the divine attributes of the god, diverging interests and postures were crystallized with the arrival of the British: while the prophets worshiped Lono (Cook), the
nobles, including the king, immediately established an ambiguous relationship with him, showing respect and fear while continuously promoting thefts in the ships, annoying the European. Indeed, the rituals of Makahiki were based on the idea of aggressively confiscating Lono’s divine gifts by the warrior king.

Normal life would be restored with the departure of Cook (which almost coincided with the end of Makahiki), and after the god’s gifts were usurped (including what was stolen and tools exchanged). However, history would have reserved him a tragic end. A storm stroked the ships and made them return to the islands days after the original departure. The captain wished to have the ship fixed, but the nobles interpreted the return as a threat to the reestablished supremacy of the king. Again, Cook would make explicit the diverging interests and postures of nobles and prophets. The nobles and the king would come to meet Cook days after his return, angry and curious to know the reason for that. Whether or not that event was a contradiction to everything that came before, soon it turned out to be the reverse script of Kali‘i, the final battle when the king reinforces his supremacy defeating Lono. As the cutter of one of Cook’s ships was stolen, he decided to take the king hostage against the return of his property. As he approached the beach with his boat to capture the king, news arrived that a chief had been murdered by the warriors of the gods (the British). At that moment, ritual roles seemed to be inverted, the king could be killed by the foreigner arriving from the sea. His wife and the nobles asked him not to board, and Cook was killed by one of the king’s closest warriors.

Cook’s death was not premeditated by the Hawaiian, but it was Makahiki in a historical form, a symptom of Hawaiian culture being reproduced as a consequence of a logical contradiction of mythical realities. On the other hand, this is only one part of the whole story. We come now to Sahlin’s second assertion: If the history of a group is culturally ordered according to its cultural categories (culture reproduction), the opposite is simultaneously true: cultural categories are historically altered within the context of human practice (culture change) (SAHLINS, 2001). Although events are interpreted according to previous cultural categories, these very processes put these categories at risk. Culture (or structure) may be transformed as a consequence of functional revaluations that alter meanings and their relations. Let us see how this happened in this classical episode of cross-culture contact.

As Captain Cook arrived in the Sandwich Islands, the exchange of goods between the European and the native rearranged traditional interests, opposing normal people and the nobles in face of the resources made available. As a counterpart to the system of heroic domination in Hawaii, normal women engaged in interested sexual relations with the foreigners, wishing to establish connections with the divine, allowing claims of social ascension in face of the powers-that-be. Normal men engaged simultaneously in tools exchange, and soon their wives’ “sexual services” allowed economic interests to emerge. According to Hawaiian culture, human reproduction merges the objectives of men and women. For men, this means struggling to pull out the substance of humanity in the format of food. For women, children would be the substance of humanity. Although Cook imposed their men a sexual taboo, wishing to stop the spread of the venereal, the insistence of the native women and the willingness of the foreigners allowed the emergence of a marginal system of erotic trade, as the sailors kindly rewarded the “sexual favors” with iron tools and female bracelets. The reproduction of this interested system put traditional meanings at risk, as old taboos were systematically transgressed. Assuming their own conceptions of domestic tranquility, the sailors ate with the women, ignoring social rules imposing the primacy of the nobles in the relationships with the gods and the segregation of men and women during meals.

According to local culture, society is founded through important social cleavages. The principle of the kings’ primacy states that all the political functioning of society mirrors the
projects of the nobles. Simultaneously, the taboo made sacred an opposition of gender: men ate in communion with the god; their food was itself sacrificing offerings, so prohibited for the women. In fact, as social structure imposed a cleavage between the nobles and the people and between men and women, these cleavages would become manifest since the arrival of the British. As men and women assumed their interested relationships with the foreigners, they expressed an opposition in face of the king’s projects. In the following decades of cross-cultural contact, the nobles intensified the exchange of goods, progressively adopting new European articles as signs of class identity, segregating normal people from the material exchanges. The meanings originally associated to the taboos, of things left apart for the gods, were manipulated by the nobles, who extended ritual purposes for the domain of regulating commercial intercourse. Within a process of functional revaluation, taboos were progressively used as a sign of material and property rights. The commercial use of taboos suggested the fact that, what originally guaranteed the people’s survival and prosperity was now in opposition to their interests. The reaction of men and women was of hidden protests and the reproduction of interested sexual relations. As commercial interests of men and women merged, the sacred status of men in relation to women ceased, and the social cleavages progressively emphasized class oppositions to the expense of gender oppositions. This was a significant culture change.

Functional Revaluation: Cedejor Project in Rio Pardo, Brazil

Let us now briefly present ethnographic and historic research findings to further illustrate Sahlins’ assertions and ideas on culture dynamics. In special, we emphasize the concept of functional revaluation, or the reinterpretation of culture content led by historical agents within specific structures of conjuncture. The research in question was held in Rio Pardo rural area, municipality located in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, between 2004 and 2006. This region has been historically dependent on the tobacco monoculture, developed in small to medium sized familiar properties and within exclusive and vertical relationships with big tobacco dealers.

The structure of conjuncture interpreted was installed after the arrival of Cedejor project, or the “Center of Development of the Rural Youth”, a proposal of social change promoted and sponsored by a corporate responsibility institute from Rio de Janeiro. As the formerly prosperous cycle of tobacco monoculture showed clear signs of debility, families were increasingly aware of the need for diversification of productive activities, as increasingly promoted by the local media and leaders. Coherently, Cedejor was a NG-project that aimed to foster local development by considering young people potential protagonists of social innovations. By proposing the diversification of the families’ activities, the intent of the project would be to lead a reformulation of local culture in a way coherent with new economic strategies. After modules of basic knowledge, the youth were supposed to develop a business plan for diversification of rural activities. Based on a French methodology, these educational proposals were thought as to help the families overcome a current cultural situation of low cooperation and incipient community organization, limited technical and managerial competencies available, economic dependence due to debts and duties with tobacco dealers and, consequently, lack of alternatives for the new generations.

The project’s mission was agreed between the sponsors and local leaders, and the latter were supposed to implement it, developing social and human capital within initiatives to raise the attractiveness of the territory to its residents, stimulating the permanence of new generations, reducing migrations. However, some very relevant and traditional cultural meanings and expectations were inconsistent to the projects’ mission and proposals, leading to conflicts, intertwined processes of reinterpretations and, eventually, culture change. As the business of agriculture has been traditionally taught within the families, the very few
opportunities of complementary education such as Cedejor have been historically considered strategies for leaving the rural environment, since they make the youth’s CV attractive to urban jobs, considered more interesting. Besides this, other inconsistencies were raised by candidates and families, who claimed, among other issues, that tight family budgets, the youth’s commitment to the properties and to the families as well as established expectations of temporary jobs with processing tobacco were obstacles to joining the program. In fact, these meanings and expectations explained much turbulence during the program, as one part of the youths was just interested in adding value to their CV, joining the program instrumentally, while the other required objective advantages in order to overcome program’s inconsistencies and join.

As an event transforming structure, the arrival of Cedejor promoted the interplay of external worldviews and material resources (such as the sponsors’ views and investments in the project) to traditional cultural expectations and action strategies adopted by local leaders, families and project’s participants. In Rio Pardo, priorities and worldviews of leaders in charge of the project were embedded in local culture, suggesting personal and group interests related to alternative possibilities of social ascension in a region threatened by economic decadence. Sahlins’ assertions allow us make sense of the events following the arrival of Cedejor in the region. Initially, the externally-born original proposals of culture change through education were functionally revaluated by the staff and candidates in a way coherent to local culture, leading to serious deviations from its original mission. This phenomenon could be seen since the recruitment of the youth, when staff had to waive with objective advantages for participating in the program, as the educational proposals seemed potentially promising, but little appealing given the families' everyday needs and restrictions. To solve inconsistencies raised by the families and guarantee a successful assemblage of a youth group in face of the sponsors’ eyes, offering free financing of the business plan for joining the program was not rooted in the original program’s philosophy or real possibilities, but in cultural expectations.

In a region of scarce resources and opportunities, the families interpreted joining Cedejor as a strategy for change; however, the project’s philosophy was not central. Candidates were rather inclined to join mostly because of financing promises or because of Cedejor allowing a more attractive urban CV. Later, investments in a new and permanent building for Cedejor were so significant that it became the region's most sophisticated infrastructure, attracting other investments for the neighborhoods and the attention of local inhabitants and leaders to the person of the coordinator, whose interests were coherently also to include economical and political goals rather than only pedagogical ones. The limited alternative professional options to tobacco in the region (the coordinator himself was an ex-producer) were suddenly widened for him and his group, who progressively introduced an organizational model coherent with emerging aspirations, imposing the rest of the staff their reformulated mission and vision for the project. During three years, the program suffered with precarious systematization of pedagogic processes, negligence of educational goals (due to a policy of being blindfolded to kids’ indiscipline), while the coordinator offered permanent assistance to local residents through simple but lacking services. By allowing unlimited freedom and emphasizing leisure and future financial advantages in exchange of cohesion and loyalty, the coordinator could keep in the group youths not at the moment interested in educational activities. By doing so, he pretended homogeneous development and success in face of absent sponsors, guaranteeing further investments although leading to routine conflicts and constant indiscipline that seriously threatened the interests of those participants really wishing to develop.

The functional revaluation of Cedejor’s proposals led by the coordinator and participants was a process reproducing local culture. The coordinator assumed a very
traditional political strategy in the region, promoting infrastructure investments but undermining human development goals, deepening local dependence from few political agents. By attracting investments, managing resources, promising to finance business plans and supplying needy services, the coordinator acted as a politician and gained regional visibility, which rendered him invitations for joining established political forces. Simultaneously, Cedejor’s proposals were attractive for the youths only if they guaranteed better family budgets, either by free financing or by leveraging employability. However, although the arrival of Cedejor was coherently reinterpreted according to previous cultural categories and priorities, implementing the project put these very categories and expectations at risk. As the project’s original proposals were broadly reinterpreted in terms of traditional concepts, priorities and interests (families required objective advantages for joining, youths participated instrumentally, worried with their CVs, and leaders reformulated the project’s mission), conflicts were unforeseen consequences potentially transforming these concepts.

As development of the youth was obstructed, those who were interested in Cedejor’s original mission saw themselves totally unprepared in face of the coordinator’s insistent calls for elaborating the business plans, the sponsor’s criterion for evaluating the project at its third year. However, due to a strategic repositioning, at this moment the sponsors were no longer absent, and the deviations and reinterpretations led by the coordinator were finally noticed. Dishonest proposals made in order to have the plans delivered on time and the later denial of financing these projects caused great anger among families and participants, who were suddenly left unassisted and frustrated. As these youths saw themselves unprepared for being financed, they strived reintegration to the program since the staff had been replaced and a second youth group had begun activities. Along this process, a new revaluation of Cedejor’s proposals was promoted by those interested youths, who now rejected considering it instrumentally in favor of new understandings that assumed the need of more proactive and effective roles for building up alternatives of life in the region. It was then clear that youths wouldn’t have achieved their diversification goals, as cultural expectations (such as the meanings assigned to complementary educational opportunities and the short term focus on free financing, on leisure and freedom) denied this possibility.

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At this moment it is possible to suggest that, if leaders, participants and families initiated the educational process reproducing culture, this later revaluation had implications to the youth’s worldviews, and the new understandings would alter relations between cultural categories. For those willing to remain in the rural area, the new emphasis given to Cedejor suggested the relevance of complementary educational opportunities to alternative careers in the countryside, and not only to professional strategies that include the city. Developing alternative activities in familiar properties required wider approaches on education and competence building than traditionally assumed. Actually, as a requisite for implementing Cedejor’s original mission, this was an incipient but very important cultural innovation.

**Culture Dynamics within a Structural and Historical Approach**

Within a structural and historical approach, culture change is a phenomenon dependent on culture, taking place in an intractable world that may deny cultural concepts and expectations as interested social agents pursue their interests. In a balky world, meaningful action is driven by cultural expectations, but novel phenomena can deny these expectations as meanings can be contradicted along historical course. Cook was taken as Lono by the Hawaiians, but his and his goods’ spectacular arrival impelled nobles and ordinary people to new alliances, calculations and manipulations as to domesticate the foreigner, eventually transforming local culture. Cedejor’s coordinator and participants coherently interpreted the project as a possible strategy for change. However, as social agents assumed their own culturally grounded action strategies to pursue their goals, they faced unforeseen
consequences as history denied actors’ intentions and concepts, and social agents were impelled to revise their cultural categories. Moreover, within structures of conjuncture culture change is triggered by reinterpretations, or discontinuities between consolidated culture categories and intentional values attributed to them by social agents living events (*functional revaluation*). As Cedejor mobilized local agents in pursuit of their interests, implementing it was a process leading to successive functional revaluations, reproducing as well as reinterpreting cultural contents, altering relations of cultural categories. Interested youths participating at Cedejor revised their original understandings of the project’s proposals (and, more broadly, of the role of learning and education for advancing rural activities) as they realized this reinterpretation was useful for pursuing their immediate goals.

Given these concepts, culture dynamics entails reciprocal processes of “practice of structure” and “structure of practice” (Sahlins, 2001) taking place within and between structural orders. This means pragmatic events are interpreted in the light of previous cultural categories (practice of structure) within processes that might unpredictably change the cultural system (structure of practice). In the highly differentiated, ethnically diverse, multi religious and mobile contemporary world, structures are “spheres or arenas of social practice of varying scope that intertwine, overlap, and interpenetrate in space and time” (Sewell, 2005: 206). As culture embraces continuity and change simultaneously, culture dynamics could be analyzed in terms of simultaneous and intertwined processes promoting reproduction (continuity) and transformation (change) of cultural contents. Although the two cases analyzed are cross-cultural episodes, these concepts are valid for any culture context, not being restricted to this kind of conjuncture. Within a structural-historical approach, culture change depends neither on conflicts and struggle (as to Marxism-inspired social change approaches), nor on people having radically different views of the world (although these may be important elements of cultural dynamics). Rather, it might simply happen when people try to enhance their particular positions as opportunities come up, deploying to new phenomena traditional action strategies available for them, which do not respond in traditional ways, so that change may be understood as unintended consequence of human action (Ortner, 1984). This was the case of Cedejor, as the coordinator implemented educational proposals in a way consistent to local political strategies, facing unforeseen effects that led to the reformulation of the youth’s worldviews.

As a major mechanism driving culture dynamics, the analysis of processes of *functional revaluation* implies the investigation of cultural ambivalence, or the “clash of cultural understandings” (Sahlins, 1981:68). In praxis, people associate cultural contents to their projects, which are the context for social practice. We may say that historical agents revise cultural categories according to their *interests*, suggesting them specific functional values that, when objectified, may transform culture content relations. According to Sahlins (2001:141), “interest” and “meaning” are two sides to the same coin, the cultural category. If culture change is triggered by functional revaluations, these processes are still based on culture’s original logics. Interest refers to how individuals engage cultural contents, evaluating them functionally according to their life projects. Revaluations depend on the possibilities given by the original system, as individuals cannot rename things around them if not based on these possibilities unless by becoming unintelligible and incommunicable. In Hawaii, the functional revaluation of taboo was an extension of its original ritual purposes for commercial purposes, but still reinforcing traditional social cleavages. Meanings are then submitted to risks as socially enabled people assume their interests and bend these meanings to their own ends within their immediate action contexts (Sahlins, 1990; Sewell, 2005). A cultural category assumes then specific intentional values depending on historical circumstances and the agents’ objectives. The exchange of goods inaugurated by the British made rearranged interests emerge; taboos were transgressed by normal people who wished to
have privileged contacts with the divine, as well as functionally revaluated by the nobles, whose interests included keeping people away from their new signs of social differentiation. Culture changed as these revaluations were objectified. In this case, society incorporated events contingent to culture, reproduced itself flexibly, suggesting their high vulnerability to change.

In fact, when used in action, cultural categories are subject to processes of human intelligence and manipulations, capable of analysis and recombination from which unforeseen meanings arise, imposing social agents contradictions that may or may not be incorporated into the cultural system. In Rio Pardo, educational proposals were functionally revaluated as to serve the coordinator’s interests, imposing interested kids contradictions that undermined traditional cultural understandings, leading to their reformulation. In Hawaii, the interested engagement of nobles and normal people in the emerging commercial system unexpectedly made traditional social cleavages manifest, opposing the projects of these two Hawaiian groups. As nobles functionally revaluated the taboos, using them as a sign of property and material right, their interests were seen as being in opposition to those of normal people. This contradiction was incorporated into the cultural system as social cleavages progressively emphasized class oppositions to the expense of traditional gender oppositions.

**A Structural and Historical Approach to Culture and Organizations: Theoretical and Methodological Implications**

A structural and historical approach to culture and organizations complements the emphasis on culture as contextual constraint by addressing questions of the type “how is culture produced and reproduced”. The events related to Cook landing in Hawaii and to Cedejor arriving in Rio Pardo can inform us about structural-historical suppositions about culture, suggesting a set of theoretical and methodological implications for advancing research on culture and organizations.

First, theoretically saying, culture cannot be understood as an entity apart from history. Rather than a virtual entity to be interpreted as researchers live events “in the field”, or still, a detached and permanent entity to be mapped as researchers hand out questionnaires in search of differences and similarities, culture is real as it concretely manifests itself within events, that is, in the course of history. Methodologically saying, as we take culture as history we should frame the study of culture dynamics as to emphasize the interpretation of events within certain structures of conjuncture. This shift suggests the relevance of longitudinal and historical studies of how cultures overlap and evolve. These were the cases of Hawaii and Rio Pardo, or cultures in transformation that can only be understood as dynamic interplay of traditional concepts and external influences as they were manifested within those structures of conjuncture.

Second, theoretically saying, a structural and historical approach allows recognizing that culture dynamics is intimately related to the dynamics of resources. More broadly, issues such as the emergence, change and negotiation of meanings are inextricably related to the dynamics of cultural resources, material or nonmaterial. It is true that cultural values of material resources are given by pre-existing cultural schemas; however, other dynamics rather than only cultural categorization govern the marking and deployment of resources in real life (SEWELL, 2005: 216-17). Cultural values of Cook as Lono and of the goods he brought were determined by pre-existing Hawaiian cultural schemas. However, these goods were of unprecedented types, implicated in the emerging capitalist system, and could not be governed solely by Hawaiian cultural schemas. In Rio Pardo, the recent decadence of tobacco monoculture, which dropped the levels of profit made by the families, was the conjuncture alarming them and giving the project a sense of urgency. The investments in the communities attracted the attention of local inhabitants. Culture change is related to the pursuing of...
diversified interests that emerged and surrounded the resources available. In fact, unexpected flows of resources may transform cultural schemas, as it happened in Hawaii and in Brazil, suggesting the dynamic, dialectical relationship between cultural schemas and resources. Methodologically saying, culture should not be understood only as contextual constraint on thought and behavior (Sahlins’ assertion number 1), but also as the source of pragmatic action strategies deployed by individuals and groups engaged in their projects (Sahlins’ assertion number 2), in such a way that history becomes the social realization of the effective resources marked and deployed by individuals. This means investigating culture as history implies not only looking for structural meanings but also considering how people engage these meanings within certain historical contexts suggesting possibilities of strategic action. In Rio Pardo, investigating culture dynamics imposed a double methodological focus: capturing local culture in transformation implied the interpretation of traditional local concepts and meanings, the lens through which the coordinator implemented the project, including the local political agenda how these concepts became the source of his personal priorities given the opportunities brought by Cedejor.

Third, theoretically saying, focusing on culture dynamics through a structural and historical approach allows more realistic and useful framing of organizational cultural phenomena through delineating mechanisms of culture production (ADLER, 1983; BOYACIGILLER, ADLER, 1991). As culture-as-constraint approaches often depict it as an aggregate of shared values, researchers and practitioners find themselves stereotype rich and operationally poor when understanding culture dimensions meeting their contexts. Differently, emphasizing culture dynamics allows the recognition of multiple cultural identities and affiliations interacting around cultural resources, as typical of today’s organizational settings of rising complexity and diversity (SACKMANN, PHILLIPS, 2004). Methodologically saying, traditional premises and modes of analysis for studying culture cannot be justified if we assume structural-historical proposals. Investigating a structure of conjuncture means interpreting the “practical realization of cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested actions of historic agents, including the microsociology of their interaction” (Sahlins, 1990: 15). If considering ambiguity and material dimensions as inherent to culture were major issues debated by organizational researchers (see MARTIN, 2002, for example), we may now presuppose the centrality of ambiguity, contradictions, resources and interests, as they are manifested within events and embedded in cultural dynamics (YOUNG, 1989). Within a structural-historical approach, these would be essential phenomena to effectively understand organizations and the evolution of organizational culture, so that searching for consensus, permanence and convergence appears as an effort resulting in the complex cultural dynamics being ignored.

Conclusion

In this paper we suggested that, although organizational culture has been a topic of academic and practical interest for at least three decades, the available theoretical anchoring of culture dynamics needs further developing. These studies not only avoid well-known shortcomings of traditional culture-as-structure approaches (e.g. cultures being reified and “frozen”), but also set up paths to contextually richer and theoretically more useful views of culture through delineating the underlying processes along which culture is produced. Pursuing this goal, this paper aimed at delineating a structural and historical theoretical framework to studies on culture and organizations, suggesting its potential contributions and research implications. According to this approach, culture cannot be understood as an entity apart from history, and culture dynamics is wrapped up with the dynamics of cultural resources. We highlighted the relevance of longitudinal studies of how cultures evolve and
overlap, suggesting the centrality of ambiguity, contradictions, resources and interests, as they are manifested within events and embedded in cultural dynamics.

Drawing on Sahlins’ seminal work on cross-culture contact and his followers, we define and discuss four main structural-historical concepts: *history, structure, functional revaluation* and *structure of conjuncture*. We illustrated them with Sahlins’ classical interpretation of Captain Cook visiting Hawaii in late eighteen century, and with Cedejor Project arriving in Rio Pardo, Brazil. We showed how, in both historical processes, external influences triggered culture reproduction and change as they were interpreted according to consolidated cultural categories, but simultaneously rearranged local interests as historical agents assumed culturally grounded action strategies to enhance their particular positions in relation to the resources made available, imposing other interested groups contradictions that eventually had to be incorporated into cultural order.

References


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1 Within anthropology, Sahlins' interpretation of Cook in Hawaii launched a decade-long hot debate as Obeyesekere (1992), a Sri Lankan anthropologist, sharply attempted, in his *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, to discredit Sahlins' thesis, questioning what he claimed was a perpetuation of imperialist European myths as western social scientists speak in the name of natives. Obeyesekere's arguments were densely and effectively responded by Sahlins (1995). Although this scholarly duel has been very relevant for the issues it has brought, Obeyesekere (1992) does not question Sahlins' arguments on the relations between structure and event, which are the focus of this paper.
These latter interpretations are consistent with other studies (interpretive and non-interpretive) on the realities of rural populations in South America. See, for example, Abramovay (1998), Abramovay, Camarano (1999), Durston (1996) and Stropasolas (2006).