

8 Cultural Codes

Normative orders in social systems, which are characterized by autopoietic and homeostatic structures, are manifested through practices and discourses that reflect the human propensity to prioritize and communicate the accentuation of personal values and goals. These orders establish criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of individuals or groups, defining the extent and nature of membership. These orders are inherently pluralistic, continuously in conflict with competing ideas and deeply embedded within hegemonic contexts. Therefore, they are not a neutral, blank slate. Building on discussions of social systems, system justification, and macro-social anthropological constants, an overarching question emerges regarding the nature of human differentiation practices:

What are the ways in which members of social systems recognize and influence the semantics, practices, and associated emotions, both intuitively and consciously, in order to actively contribute to the dynamics and stability of their system?

While the human tendencies discussed so far provide a foundation for understanding the processes of group assignment and exclusion, they do not fully capture the specific dynamics of differentiation and attribution, nor do they account for the multidimensional and pivotal role of affects and emotions in complex systems. To address this, a conceptualization of cultural codes is proposed, drawing on insights from anthropological, emotion-theoretical, systems-theoretical perspectives, as well as semiotic theories and post-structuralist views on subjectivation. This transdisciplinary theoretical perspective acknowledges the importance of *cultural codes as mediators of normative orders within the structural coupling* (see Chapter 2.2.7) between individuals and social systems. This approach integrates seamlessly with the autopoietically conceived schemata and, in contrast to strictly system-theoretical approaches, recognizes individuals as independent and sentient beings capable of agency. This perspective permits a detailed examination of the relationship between individual actions and social structures. By elucidating the dynamic interplay between personal experience and collective norms, it contributes to a more profound comprehension of the processes through which social realities are

constructed and reconstructed. Moreover, this perspective recognizes the pivotal function of affective and cognitive processes in the formation and evolution of social bonds and identities. It underscores the intricate nature of human sociality and the multifaceted mechanisms that underpin its reproduction and transformation. Cultural codes and affective-cognitive-bodily schemata facilitate the influence and adaptation of systems to one another through structural coupling. These mechanisms facilitate the dynamic generation of meaning by interpreting differences through schemata deeply rooted in cultural codes, thereby influencing how information is understood, felt, and physically experienced. These processes determine which reactions and evaluations are culturally deemed appropriate, thus fostering nuanced interactions between systems. Such codings establish a common language that articulates individual and collective meanings and facilitates the co-construction of social realities. The process of meaning generation is therefore a dynamic exchange imbued with individual experiences and cultural contexts. Cultural codes function as intermediaries in the formation, sustenance, and evolution of social orders. They delineate the boundaries and possibilities of individual and collective identities and actions within the systems in question. Additionally, they act as normative matrices that not only delineate boundaries and shape identities but are also deeply embedded in the mechanisms of social reproduction and subjective experience. As a result of continuous interaction and internalization of these codes, individuals are equipped to navigate the complexities of social worlds and engage in the collective creation and maintenance of social realities through the interplay of schemata. Although these processes are inherently intertwined, a model-like division into three components of cultural coding facilitates the establishment of a more coherent theoretical framework. This structured approach facilitates the elucidation of the intricate mechanisms through which meanings are conveyed, thereby fostering the creation of lines of difference and avenues for identification. The model-like classification is instrumental in understanding the multifaceted and often intersecting ways in which cultural codes are mediated and internalized, underscoring the necessity for a structured approach to analyzing cultural dynamics. An understanding of the processes of cultural coding is essential for grasping the ways in which humans differentiate themselves and for critically examining the autopoiesis of social systems. These mechanisms, which construct and sustain social orders and individual identities, are incorporated into our understanding of how cultural codes function and impact these systems in a systematic manner.

Cultural codes are conceptualized along three different dimensions and defined as follows:

Cultural codes:

- A. are configurations that assign meanings to signs while simultaneously defining specific lines of differentiation that delineate systems from their environments. Through the strategic encoding of particular semantics, these practices foster possibilities for cultural identification and solidify corresponding social realities (see Chapter 8.1);
- B. function as autopoietic elements within social systems, ensuring their self-preservation and self-reproduction by reducing entropy. Analyzing their structural coupling with the environment points out their pivotal role in actively shaping and sustaining social orders (see Chapter 8.2);
- C. create specific meanings that not only stabilize but also legitimize the social system by integrating these meanings into the system's structures through processes of subjectivation. These processes facilitate the internalization of codes by individuals, thus promoting the continual self-reproduction of these codes within the system (see Chapter 8.3).

8.1 The Strategic Coding of Specific Semantics and Lines of Difference (A)

Part (A)

Cultural codes are configurations that assign meanings to signs while simultaneously defining specific lines of differentiation that delineate systems from their environments. Through the strategic encoding of particular semantics, these practices foster possibilities for cultural identification and solidify corresponding social realities.

The first dimension (A) of cultural codes addresses two different aspects of coding practice: on the one hand, the purely semiotic practice of assigning signs to meanings (Chapter 8.1.1) and, on the other, the establishment of identification possibilities through lines of difference (Chapter 8.1.2).

8.1.1 Mapping of Signs to Meanings

The first aspect addresses the widely discussed semiotic perspective, where a code denotes the assignment of a specific sign (signifier) to a meaning (signified). In this framework, an intended meaning—what is to be expressed—is substituted by a specific sign, akin to replacing a word with a symbol that holds the same meaning for all participants within a particular context. This exchange process occurs in direct

communication between two individuals, governed by stringent rules that dictate how messages are encoded and decoded. The relevance of such codes is intimately connected to the social context and varies depending on where and among whom the communication transpires.

8.1.2 Constructing Lines of Difference through Strategic Coding Logics

The second aspect of the first dimension in definition (A) explores the formation of lines of difference that extend beyond the fundamental semiotic assignment of signs to meanings. These lines of difference provide meaningful opportunities for identification for both complex social systems and individuals. These lines are fostered by meanings and are mediated by specific cultural codings, including language, media, social networks, art, education, and other social practices, as well as memes. These codes encapsulate values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and role expectations, and determine what is considered “normal,” “desirable,” or “deviant” within a particular system through the meanings they ascribe. Concurrently, they delineate the boundaries of the system, thereby establishing a clear regime of belonging. In consequence, cultural codes play a pivotal role in the delineation and perception of boundaries between constructed groups within social systems. The necessity to reduce complexity, understood in terms of entropy, justifies the creation of these lines of difference, as detailed in section 8.2. The mediation and internalization of these codings occur through a complex interplay of different processes that are closely linked to the coding practices introduced at the beginning of this chapter. To ensure clarity and maintain the theoretical coherence of the model developed here, the specific process of subjectivation or conditioning is explored in greater depth in Chapter 8.3.

This raises the question of which logic currently governs the operation of cultural codes in Western, high-tech, affluent, and democratic societies with a high level of education, such as Germany. The aforementioned lines of difference represent constructed boundaries that play a pivotal role in the differentiation of individuals and groups on the basis of a multitude of characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, physical ability, age, and religion. The manner in which these lines of difference are coded may vary depending on the context and application. In the theory of human differentiation developed here, with particular reference to the aforementioned Western context, the focus is on primordial and neoliberal coding. These two coding logics function as fundamental lenses that facilitate the observation of specific codings, such as postcolonial, feminist, ecological, technological, multicultural, and socio-economic approaches, and enable their decoding. While these specific codings offer unique perspectives and analyses, they are deeply embedded in the structures of neoliberal and primordial logics and are significantly influenced by them. To illustrate, while feminist coding emphasizes specific aspects

of gender justice and power, it is deeply embedded in primordial logic due to its focus on fundamental issues of identification and belonging that underpin this coding logic. This foundational anchoring in primordial logic, coupled with neoliberal emphases on individual freedoms and market mechanisms, demonstrates the complex interplay between these coding strategies in shaping avenues for identification. Similarly, issues such as postcolonial dynamics or ecological challenges can be examined through the lens of neoliberal coding, particularly with regard to resource utilization, market dynamics, and global interdependencies. This intersectional integration provides a unified framework for examining the interplay between neoliberal and primordial coding logics, offering a robust approach to understanding the complexities and dynamics of differentiation within the context of this study. Therefore, a comprehensive framework is established that enables the understanding and analysis of all pertinent systems of meaning that generate differentiation.

In addition to the primary coding practices of neoliberal and primordial logics, a distinctive form of coding emerges, characterized by the use of *empty signifiers*. These do not represent conventional coding practices; rather, they function as flexible tools that are imbued with varying meanings, which are used to shape the possibilities for political identification and the formation of social solidarities. The distinctive quality of empty signifiers is their capacity for universal applicability. They transcend the boundaries of primordial and neoliberal coding logics, functioning as connectors that enhance diverse coding practices. Consequently, they introduce new dimensions of meaning attribution that extend beyond the traditional confines of existing coding logics, thereby enriching the analytical landscape with their versatile utility.

8.1.2.1 Overview of Primordial and Neoliberal Codings in Social Systems

Primordial coding is predicated on the assumption of immutable phenotypic and “original” characteristics (Vivanco 2018). It distinguishes between those who are considered insiders and outsiders within a social system based on a constructed and logically flawed understanding of “nature” and physical constitution (ibid.). A significant limitation of primordial coding is the assumption that certain characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation, are immutable, innate, and fundamental to an individual’s identity. This misconception stems from the essentialization and naturalization of socially constructed categories, which ultimately functions as a mechanism for normalizing social hierarchies. The substantive foundation for the patterns of differentiation inherent to primordial codings is drawn from various ideologies, including those that are sexist and racist in nature. A comprehensive examination of this subject is provided in Chapter 9.

The *neoliberal coding system* employs market logic and competitive principles to evaluate and categorize individuals and groups. This method is predicated on the assumption that market values and efficiency are the primary criteria for determining the value and social position of individuals within social systems. It encourages

self-optimization, individual accountability, and a focus on performance, which collectively contribute to a culture of differentiation where success and social status are strongly associated with economic achievement and competitiveness. However, differentiation within social systems does not adhere to a simple insider-outsider scheme; rather, it results in the formation of various classes and vertical stratifications. This results in a classist logic that subjugates the economically disadvantaged and those who rely on wages to a class that has privileged access to essential resources. This system of classification is based on the meritocratic ideology that values are to be evaluated according to financial and economic standards. As a result, the social sphere is being commodified. This reinterpretation of social relations in accordance with market efficiency results in the marginalization of those who fail to meet the neoliberal performance criteria, thereby further entrenching the naturalization of inequalities by presenting them as outcomes of individual effort or ability. Chapter 9 presents a critical examination of these mechanisms.

Primordial and/or neoliberal codes function as an interpretative meta-framework wherein differences among humans are not only perceived but also evaluated and hierarchized, subsequently influencing processes of social inclusion and exclusion. This meta-framework of differentiation practices reflects the intricate and multifaceted nature of human social structures, characterized by a complex interweaving of power relations and identity politics. The diverse coding of lines of difference not only establishes and negotiates possibilities for identification and group affiliations but also reproduces and legitimizes social hierarchies and inequalities.

8.1.2.2 Strategic Deployment of Emotional Markers

The first dimension is discussed in terms of the mediation of cultural codes of specific and influential semantics that refer to established patterns of internalization and specifically address and/or activate certain schemata. The strategic deployment of cultural codes to strengthen and legitimize normative orders through the utilization of emotional markers is a phenomenon that occurs across a range of contexts. In particular, the strategic generation and evocation of affects such as feelings of threat, resentment, fear, and disgust, which trigger immediate neurochemical reactions, are employed (see Chapter 5). This immediacy arises because the evocation of affects targets the cerebellum and can only be revised and modified through strenuous and energy-intensive reflections in the cerebrum. As previously stated, the concept of multidimensional schemata was introduced and explained in order to demonstrate the inextricable link between specific emotions and the normative framework of social systems. The minimal group paradigm, the theory of system justification, and the approach of macro-social anthropological constants are useful models for understanding certain group dynamics. However, these instruments do not permit an evaluation of the dynamics in question from a moral standpoint. The role of emotional reactions triggered by emotional markers within cultural codes in

the formation of distinguishing features within social structures is of central importance. These markings, whether experienced as approval or rejection, are pivotal in determining how individuals adapt or reject the meanings conveyed in the codes. The term “emotion marking” is used to describe the process by which specific emotions are deliberately linked to certain cultural codes with the intention of controlling their acceptance or rejection and thus influencing the normative orientation within the social structure. The association of emotions such as shame, pride, or fear with specific behaviors or identities enables the control of social dynamics and individual self-perception through the use of cultural codes. These affective reactions function as mechanisms that facilitate conformity or the condemnation of deviant behavior. It is therefore evident that they are of crucial importance in maintaining or challenging social orders. For example, primordial coding can be associated with emotions such as pride in a “natural” affiliation or shame if the individual in question does not conform to the “original” characteristics.

An empirically well-documented example of primordial coding of lines of difference and corresponding evocations of affect is that of the construction of white superiority. In both media and educational materials, historical achievements and cultural accomplishments are predominantly attributed to white people, while contributions from people of other ethnicities are marginalized or ignored. Such codings may result in individuals developing a sense of pride in their affiliation with the white majority community. Conversely, those who do not align with this image may experience feelings of shame or inferiority. This serves to reinforce the perception of white superiority and the demarcation from the “others” who are coded in this way and excluded from the social system. Primordially coded white superiority manifests not only in the media and educational materials but is also deeply rooted in geopolitical constellations of exploitation that have evolved historically and in the fossil fuel-dependent lifestyles of the West. These issues will be explained in the course of the book using various contexts.

Another pertinent context for the discussion of emotion labeling, particularly the *evocation of feelings of disgust* and the associated activation of the insular cortex, as previously outlined in Chapter 5, will be the focus of this section. The method of triggering disgust reactions with great rapidity and ease in the context of foreign group labeling is a phenomenon that has existed since the advent of humanity. One of the most extensively documented historical instances of the utilization of disgust labeling can be observed in its deployment as an anti-Semitic practice. The historical roots of anti-Semitic ideas and actions can be traced back to ancient Egypt (Mermelstein 2022, 344). Nevertheless, a discernible pattern of hostility towards Jews emerged, characterised by social classification, accompanied by pronounced value judgments and emotive responses, which reached a crescendo in aggressive conduct

and misanthropic sentiments. It is particularly noteworthy that Jews were accused with great vehemence of performing human sacrifices in their temples and of being descended from leprous slaves (Koller 2009, 9; Jankrift 2019, 27). In the Middle Ages, Christian communities, in particular, intensified these accusations by blaming Jews for a number of catastrophic events and epidemics, including the plague. During the Reconquista, the Christian reconquest of Spain from the Muslim Moors, the concept of “purity of blood” was established, marking the advent of racial discrimination in Spain that persists to this day (Koller 2009, 17). The extensive conversion of Spanish Jews to Christianity resulted in the emergence of numerous anti-Jewish ideologies, with the attribution of “impurity” representing a central and enduring component of stigmatization. In the context of the Spanish Reconquista, allegations were made that male Jews menstruated weekly. Furthermore, the Forced Conversion Edict of 1492 marked the first instance of Jews being classified as a “race,” a testament to the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in historical contexts and its continued evolution over time. The characterization of Jews as “cockroaches” in the German Empire provides an illustrative example of how dehumanization and emotional marking by disgust were employed as tools to facilitate exclusion and persecution. This rhetoric was designed to systematically exclude Jews from the human community and establish the foundation for state-sanctioned discrimination, exclusion, and ultimately, extermination. In this context, the function of emotion-marking exclusion was to serve as a powerful tool for intensifying collective feelings of dislike and hatred. The transition from dehumanization to physical persecution exemplifies the tragic consequences of such markers of disgust. These practices of emotion-marking, though in altered forms, have persisted and continue to require ongoing efforts to combat such mechanisms of differentiation and exclusion. In contemporary German society, there is a notable mobilization of feelings of disgust, resentment, and threat directed towards Muslims. However, similar sentiments continue to persist towards Jews, as evidenced by the continued presence of stereotypical associations with physical characteristics such as large noses or conspiracy theories related to the financial sector. These forms of demonization are not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, centuries ago, Immanuel Kant made disparaging remarks about Jews, referring to them as “vampires and devils” (Brumlik 2016, 46). These remarkably candid declarations by a philosopher bring to light the pervasive superstitious and simplistic perspectives of the era, which are evident in various discourses and among their proponents. Contemporary discourses within the political sphere that describe Muslim migration as a “flood” or “wave” evince an uncontrollable, contaminating force that threatens the “purity” of national identity. In addition to the insinuation of an inherent inability to integrate and the assertion that Muslims would be fundamentally unable and unwilling to adapt to “Western values” and ideas of freedom—a topic that is discussed in further detail in the chapter on schemas of indifference and in Chapter 9.4.3—there are numerous markers of disgust that defame

Muslims as a homogeneous group. Among the markers of disgust in contemporary German discourse are associations with dirt and impurity. The use of language that associates Muslim communities with “ghettos” or “slums” indirectly implies a lack of attention and resources. A notable illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the media portrayal of specific districts, such as Berlin-Neukölln or analogous neighborhoods in other metropolises, including Paris, London, and Brussels. Moreover, the portrayal of refugee accommodations as overcrowded and lacking in hygiene represents a form of disgust labeling. The pejorative use of language, such as the term “Islamization” in a negative context, indicates a perceived fundamental threat posed by Muslim life in Germany. Moreover, the utilization of caricatures or political rhetoric that dehumanizes Muslims serves to reinforce this negative imagery. Such depictions and linguistic expressions are not merely rhetorical devices; rather, they serve as a potent instrument for emotional labeling and differentiation. This is based on deep-rooted evolutionary-biological mechanisms that activate the emotion of disgust when individuals are confronted with tainted food or potential danger. In contrast to other living beings, humans also experience moral and aesthetic feelings of disgust, as discussed in Chapter 5. These reactions are not limited to physical danger or decay; rather, they are shaped by social norms and cultural values, such as the revulsion toward behavior deemed immoral or the rejection of representations considered aesthetically unappealing. Such responses are elicited by the interaction of the insular lobe with the amygdala, as evidenced by the activation of disgust responses when individuals are presented with visual representations of drug addicts or extremely unhygienic conditions. These complex responses are not merely subjective sentiments; rather, they are employed strategically within the context of emotional labeling to stigmatize and exclude specific groups. The use of these mechanisms for discriminatory purposes demonstrates the significance of neurobiology in the cultural coding of “otherness” and in the maintenance and consolidation of social systems and their hierarchies. It is also worth noting the indication of a persistent threat from Muslim individuals in the *security-terror dispositive* (M.d.M.C. Varela 2016, 65). This dispositive is reiterated in an obsessive and reflexive manner, evoking primordial fears and addressing the population’s fundamental need for security. A particularly insidious aspect of these practices is that they are frequently accompanied by expressions of affiliation and friendship. Such expressions do not improve the situation but rather serve to confuse people further. These ostensible expressions of belonging and friendship, such as emphasized gestures of solidarity or symbolic invitations to participation, may appear integrative at first glance but often stand in stark contrast to the simultaneously fueled fears and negative stereotypes broadly attributed to Muslims. These emotional markers ultimately serve to legitimize marginalization by inevitably linking demands for greater security with a constantly generated fear of terrorism and crime. A number of additional exam-

ples could be provided to supplement this account, but they will not be discussed in detail here.

In examining the cultural coding of emotional markers, particularly as they pertain to the heterogeneous and diverse groups of Muslims, a distinction between the factual and social dimensions offers insights into the mechanisms behind their dissemination and influence. An examination of the factual dimension reveals how the deliberate generation and utilization of specific emotions, such as disgust and threat, are employed in a targeted manner within well-defined discourses. This includes the thematic emphasis in media and political discourse, which frequently portrays Muslims in a negative light, as well as the functional aspects of such portrayals, which are designed to incite social apprehension and advance political agendas. An analysis of the communicative strategies deployed to reinforce specific images and narratives illustrates the impact of emotional markers on the formation of social perceptions and attitudes. An analysis through the lens of the social dimension reveals the complex network of relationship structures and affiliation constellations that are shaped by emotional markers directed towards Muslims. This approach evinces how individual and collective identities are shaped and transformed in the context of social interactions with groups that are perceived as foreign or threatening. The intensification of social dynamics through the use of negative emotions, such as disgust and threat, serves to promote the demarcation and exclusion of Muslims. This, in turn, affects the formation of self-group and out-group identities. These mechanisms serve to reinforce the social distancing between the groups in question and provide a rationale for discriminatory actions and political measures, thereby offering an apparent justification for exclusion and marginalization. The examination of these sociotechniques demonstrates the significant influence of emotional markers on the social fabric, indicating their function in reinforcing social hierarchies and inequalities. The deployment of emotional markers in the construction of enemy images rooted in primordially coded, ethnocentric and polarizing negative stereotypes plays a pivotal role in the upholding of violence-based affective orders. By entrenching discursive power that serves to consolidate social hierarchies and to aggressively defend privileges, such practices become a central instrument of hegemony and contribute to intensify social inequalities. Cultural narratives are employed as a means of legitimizing existing power structures. The concept of “epistemic violence,” as defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak 2008), is used to describe the ways in which certain discourses are utilized to exert power and marginalize minority groups. The privileged position of certain patterns of interpretation serves to normalize existing social orders and justify the oppression of specific groups.

The aforementioned dynamics substantiate the assertion that cultural coding can be conceptualized as autopoietic, exhibiting self-reinforcing and self-reproductive characteristics. The processes of cultural codification associated with

white supremacy are maintained and reproduced through a variety of social and institutional mechanisms, including educational systems, media, and geopolitical practices. Such systems establish a system of values and norms that serve to normalize and legitimize white supremacy (primordial coding), while simultaneously portraying other ethnic and cultural groups as inferior. In this manner, they play a substantial role in the maintenance and reinforcement of social hierarchies. One illustrative example is the ritualized appeals for donations for the “Third World,” in which black children are depicted in a state of apparent starvation, seated in the dirt. These codes are also evident in the repeated portrayal of individuals adhering to the Islamic faith, who are often perceived as being associated with backwardness. This is typically achieved through the reference to the oppression of women and the portrayal of certain practices as being “medieval.” However, there is a lack of analysis in this regard, particularly in terms of shedding light on the selective nature of these portrayals and their historical and geopolitical context. It is nearly ubiquitous that this context is embedded in hegemonic and exploitative relationships in which Western powers have contributed to the establishment of criminal gangs and bandits through coups and wars, who now act as government leaders and politicians.

Practices of primordial coding can also be understood as a mechanism for maintaining system stability. The *theory of system justification* (see Chapter 4.5) posits that individuals accept and defend existing social and economic inequalities because these structures fulfill basic human needs for knowledge, security, and interpersonal relationships. In other words, they serve to mitigate uncertainties, threats, and social disagreements (Jost 2020, 293). From an evolutionary perspective, inclinations could contribute to the justification of the system of social bonding and order, as the acceptance of inequalities can be interpreted as a sign of commitment to social harmony (Watts et al. 2016). Just as religious ceremonies have ensured the stability of social structures for centuries (Flannery and Marcus 2012), the rituals of self-valorization and external devaluation described above generate a sense of legitimacy within the social system by systematically neglecting essential contextual information and causal relationships. This is evident in appeals for donations for the “Third World” or in campaigns in which white people help non-white women to emancipate themselves from their husbands. Further examples will be examined in the context of the explanation of primordially coded regimes of difference ordering (Chapter 9). While such primordial emotional markers serve to strengthen identification with the group and reinforce boundaries against “others,” neoliberal codings often manipulate emotions such as fear of social relegation or feelings of guilt in cases of perceived individual failure in competition. The role of reward and punishment in this context is pivotal. Success in the market economy is rewarded with the evocation of positive emotions, whereas failure triggers the evocation of

negative emotions. These emotional markers reinforce the meritocratic ideology, which holds that each individual is responsible for their own success or failure..

The role of emotion markers in facilitating the comprehension of cultural codes and their integration into our collective consciousness is a crucial aspect of their function. By specifically evoking certain emotions through cultural codes, they reinforce the power of these codes and make a decisive contribution to social cohesion or division by significantly controlling the depth of identification with or distancing from predetermined role models and norms. Cultural codes and the affective reactions they elicit serve as foundational normative orders, establishing lines of difference. The autopoietic nature of cultural codes necessitates conscious effort to challenge and reshape the underlying structures and assumptions that support them when changes in these patterns are to be made.

In social science research, the perception of a threat from immigration has been identified as a significant predictor of racist attitudes and prejudices towards migrants. This perception influences not only individual prejudices, but also public opinion regarding restrictive migration policies and the development of migration-specific legislation (Schlueter, Schmidt, and Wagner 2008; Pettigrew, Wagner, and Christ 2010; Schlueter 2013; Zappulla et al. 2023; Sniderman, Peri, and de Figueiredo 2022; Blinder and Lundgren 2019; Wagner et al. 2006). The strategic linking of immigration with emotions such as fear represents a key tactic employed by political actors and the media to promote narratives that function as mechanisms for legitimizing restrictive measures. The utilization of affective-cognitive-somatic schemata in political communication to influence collective attitudes and policy decisions exemplifies the autopoietic nature of cultural coding, situated as it is in the dynamic interplay between social emotions, cultural coding, and policymaking. In connection with the regimes of orders of difference and the associated socio-technical methods, the strategy of presenting non-facts as suggestive triggers will be discussed in detail below on an analytical level. This will demonstrate how primordial and neoliberal logics converge and how networked, non-linear levels delineate and reinforce differences.

One striking example of the use of cultural coding and emotional markers in political communication is the ridicule of refugees by government officials. At a press conference in July 2018, the German Minister of the Interior made a jovial remark, noting that on the occasion of his 69th birthday, precisely 69 Afghan asylum seekers had been deported (Süddeutsche 2018). He presented this information with a smile, as it were, in a seemingly amused manner. Notwithstanding the incendiary nature of his remark, it did not precipitate a significant political upheaval or his resignation. With the exception of a few critical voices from the opposition, the comment was largely accepted. Notably, even the Federal Chancellor did not take personal action but maintained the Interior Minister in office, despite isolated—and thus insignificant—public expressions of outrage over the latter's comment. The

public mockery of refugees by a high-ranking political official demonstrates the strategic deployment of cultural coding and emotional markers to advance specific narratives. The minister's amusement at the deportations employed emotional markers that implied a dehumanization of the individuals involved and communicated complex social issues in a simplified, emotionally charged manner. This incident demonstrates how communication within the political system is employed to serve particular systemic functions, as evidenced by the legitimization of a restrictive migration policy. By employing humor to frame a serious political decision, the minister was able to shift public perception and mitigate potential criticism. He triggered cognitive schemas that resonate with preexisting ideas and prejudices about refugees in the public consciousness. His smile and jovial demeanor conveyed an affective stance that downplayed the gravity and implications of the situation. The absence of a significant political scandal or resignation in response to this statement lends further support to the proposition that political discourse and social dynamics are shaped by deeply entrenched cultural codes and affective resonance within the population. This indicates that such narratives and representations are either accepted by certain segments of society or fail to elicit sufficient resistance to result in significant political consequences. From the perspective of systems theory, the incident provides an example of second-order observation, whereby the manner in which migration and political decisions are discussed becomes the subject of observation and reflection itself. The reactions to the incident—both the absence of a major scandal and the presence of critical voices—reflect diverse observations and interpretations within the social system, illustrating the autopoietic nature of social systems that sustain their structures through self-referential processes. The way the political system managed this incident and sustained its operations is grounded in its self-referentiality and operational cohesion. Moreover, this episode portrays the capacity of political authority to be deployed in conjunction with cultural norms and emotional cues for the purpose of reinforcing established social structures.

In the early months of 2024, a study that examined the economic aspects of migration in Germany received considerable attention (Raffelhüschen, Seuffert, and Wimmesberger 2024). The authors of the study suggested that migration was not beneficial for Germany, particularly in consideration of its fiscal effects. The authors proposed that the country could be in a more favorable financial position in the absence of migration. However, this conclusion is primarily based on an analysis of the direct economic effects and thus fails to take into account other important aspects. For instance, the study does not sufficiently consider the fact that a purely fiscal analysis is unable to account for the full range of social, cultural, and societal contributions made by “migrants.” Despite the far-reaching implications of the study, a nuanced examination of its methodology and the constraints of its perspective was largely absent in the majority of media outlets. This resulted in a simplistic representation of the issue that did not accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of

migration and its varied impact on society. The suggestion of a loss of prosperity can be understood in the context of cultural coding and emotional labeling as a trigger that evokes feelings of threat and insecurity, thereby fueling fears within the population. The roots of this insecurity are frequently attributed by such studies to places and people who are perceived in this context as exploited. From this perspective, however, this appears to be a form of rhetorical sleight of hand, a strategy designed to deflect attention away from the actual causes and responsibilities and instead create scapegoats. This approach not only serves to perpetuate existing prejudices and misunderstandings, thereby perpetuating the status quo that serves to justify the system, but it also prevents a constructive discussion of the actual socio-economic challenges. It is noteworthy that numerous other studies offer more profound and multi-layered insights into the issue of migration yet have not received a comparable response. The selective use and interpretation of study results by different systems represents a form of complexity reduction, which enables the complexity of information processing and dissemination in society to be managed. The inclination to prioritize certain narratives over others not only exemplifies the interconnectivity between systems but also invites scrutiny of the criteria governing the visibility and relevance of scientific findings in public discourse.

Another noteworthy development within this context is the response of German politics to the growing number of refugees in 2022/23, which was partially attributable to the conflict in Ukraine. In their statements, prominent politicians, including the Federal Chancellor, articulated the imperative of preventing a recurrence of the events of 2015. They advocated for the implementation of rigorous migration control measures and the intensification of deportation policies. One aspect of these discourses that is frequently overlooked is that deporting a smaller number of rejected asylum seekers would have no impact on Germany's underlying social and economic challenges. The majority of rejected asylum seekers are unable to be deported to conflict zones due to a lack of the necessary documentation. It appears that the primary objective of these political maneuvers is to assuage conditioned fears and convey a sense of security, rather than to address the actual problems effectively. By Fall 2024, as a result of the growing influence of far-right groups and parties, a consensus was rapidly reached among Germany's major political parties in September to suspend the Schengen and Dublin Agreements, reintroduce border controls, and exacerbate concerns about the potential influx of migrants. This represents a short-term strategy aimed at gaining popularity, but without any medium- or long-term plans. As such, it is a measure taken at the expense of the most vulnerable members of the social system, offering no real solutions to the structural issues at hand.

The targeted emotional labeling evident in these examples, when considered alongside the selective perception and interpretation of information as a means of reducing complexity, serves to reinforce the empirically proven tendency that

individuals who perceive immigration as a threat tend to espouse more restrictive immigration policies and are opposed to granting rights to immigrants (Heizmann 2016). By invoking deeply entrenched fears that are intrinsic to our evolutionary psychological and neurobiological makeup (see Chapters 3 and 5), these mechanisms address a vast array of fears prevalent in post-democratic societies, including the fear of poverty, social decline, isolation, and a disregard for one's personal values (Foroutan 2021, 17). This strategy employs targeted emotional markers to transform complex social phenomena into simple narratives that reinforce existing fears and insecurities. By eliciting particular emotional reactions, they facilitate the acceptance of limiting policies and diminish the strength of support for immigrants' rights. In order to achieve this, they mobilize a wide range of social concerns and exploit them for political gain.

8.1.2.3 Selection of Significant Features

A fundamental element in comprehending the nuances of cultural coding is the process of identifying and prioritizing significant features. These may be defined as salient key features that differentiate and inform social systems. This selection is of great consequence to the processes of social differentiation and identity construction. These features encompass both visual markers and abstract concepts that function as pivotal indicators of social differentiation and belonging within and between social groups. They illustrate the complex interplay of cultural, psychological, and social dynamics at both the individual and collective levels. The deliberate focus on these traits as core values of a group is evident in various cultural practices, including styles of dress, specific pieces of jewelry, and other significant symbols. These features are closely associated with specific emotions and behavioral patterns that are shaped and reinforced by a number of factors, including cultural traditions, educational influences, and media exposure. This targeted emphasis serves not only to reinforce group cohesion but also to accentuate differences from other groups, thereby contributing to the formation of "us versus them" dichotomies. The transformation of neutral signifiers into culturally charged identity symbols illustrates the impact of cultural coding and symbolic orders on the formation of social realities. The meanings ascribed to objects and practices frequently extend well beyond their material or functional significance. These processes of meaning assignment are not neutral or natural; rather, they are the outcomes of social and political negotiations that reflect and potentially reinforce existing power structures. To illustrate, initially neutral signifiers such as the headscarf, the kippa, or national flags can rapidly become culturally charged symbols. In social systems, linguistic markers such as accents and languages serve as salient indicators of group membership. The manner of pronunciation of a word can, therefore, act as a significant indicator of social identity, frequently associated with stereotypes and societal expectations. Similarly, names are imbued with meanings that extend beyond their function as

mere identifiers. The selection of a name for a child frequently reflects deeply entrenched cultural preferences and encapsulates the values and aspirations that parents wish to impart to their offspring. Consequently, names operate as cultural signifiers that reveal insights into ethnic origin, social status, or religious affiliation. Culinary traditions and dietary practices, which are deeply entrenched in cultural heritage, serve as markers of group identity. The acceptability of a food item may vary significantly between cultures, with certain items considered delicacies in one culture being regarded as taboo in another due to religious or cultural norms. These discrepancies in culinary traditions not only indicate a sense of belonging but also differentiate one group from another, potentially complicating the process of integration into new cultural environments. The selection of significant features—such as physical attributes, behaviors, languages, styles of dress, or other recognizable signs—plays a crucial role in human differentiation practices. These features are central mechanisms through which cultural codes and schemas operate, influencing the way individuals categorize and define themselves within a social context. These features, when considered meaningful within a cultural context, facilitate the categorization of the world, the definition of identities, and the signaling of membership in social groups. These features are crucial indicators for the assignment and perception of roles, status, and group identities, thereby facilitating navigation within social structures. By selectively emphasizing certain traits as significant, cultural codes and schemas facilitate the formation of social orders through the development of lines of distinction. These characteristics are imbued with specific meanings and values that are not only culturally transmitted and interpreted but are also emotionally and motivationally internalized. The conscious and unconscious recognition of these characteristics exerts a substantial influence on social interaction, the formation of group identities, and the dynamics of social differentiation. Therefore, these significant characteristics become symbols of social identification that are culturally coded in various ways, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail later in the discussion.

8.1.2.4 Cultural Coding Through Empty Signifiers

The concept of “empty signifiers,” derived from post-structuralist theory, pertains to widely utilized terms or symbols that have become so versatile that their precise meanings are obscured. This enables them to act as placeholders for a multiplicity of meanings and contexts (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These signifiers are regarded as “empty” due to their lack of fixed meaning, which renders them as projection surfaces for a range of ideas and ideologies. This fluidity presents a challenge to their identity, prompting efforts to anchor them within coherent conceptual frameworks of unity. In this sense, the term “empty signifiers” can be understood as a concept or symbol that evinces meanings that are open-ended or ambiguous within the domain of social communication. Such concepts frequently emerge in political and so-

cial discourses, where they can encapsulate a spectrum of meanings and function as catch-alls for a range of ideas, beliefs, and values. The concept elucidates the manner in which such terms or symbols operate to unify or identify disparate groups or individuals within a society, despite the lack of a clearly defined and specific meaning. In complex societies, *empty signifiers play a pivotal role in facilitating the identification of different groups and individuals with shared concerns or identities*, even in the absence of explicitly defined content and goals. They function as mediators in discourses, unifying and representing a multiplicity of interests, demands, and worldviews without being confined to a single, narrow meaning.

The investigation of the concept of “empty signifiers” draws upon and synthesizes insights from a multitude of theoretical frameworks, with particular emphasis on their relevance in the context of contemporary discourse analysis.¹ When examining the ways in which humans differentiate themselves from one another, it is not always feasible to explore the full scope of theoretical perspectives. In lieu of this, the analysis focuses on Laclau’s conceptualization of empty signifiers. Laclau postulates that empty signifiers represent junctions within discursive structures, amalgamating disparate concerns, ideas, or social elements despite lacking a definitive meaning (Laclau 2007, 63). These signifiers provide a forum for the negotiation and reshaping of diverse interpretations of identity. Frequently associated with expansive yet ambiguous concepts such as freedom, justice, or equality, these malleable symbols facilitate social identification and cohesion despite their potential ambiguity or controversial foundations (*ibid.*, 69). The subject under discussion is the function of symbols associated with broad yet frequently undefined concepts such as freedom, justice, or equality. These symbols are inherently flexible and open to a multitude of interpretations, enabling them to assume varied meanings for different people or

1 In particular, Lacan’s concept of the master signifier, introduced as an alternative metaphor to the “point de capiton,” aligns with the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe, who treat “points de capiton” and master signifiers as synonymous (Zicman de Barros 2023, 2). The master signifier imbues the entire chain of signifiers with meaning, ensuring the coherence and comprehensibility of discourse. Without this anchoring element, signifiers remain in a “floating” state, leading to a discourse that is incoherent, chaotic, or even psychotic. This phenomenon highlights the role of discursive flexibility through the substitution of a master signifier, which halts the unrestrained movement of signifiers and anchors meaning by referring back to itself.

From a political perspective, the master signifier functions as the ultimate reference point for meaning—an ineffable “full” meaning that cannot be directly articulated in words but instead establishes its own foundations and legitimacy. Zicman de Barros further notes that this notion of an ultimate reference point for structuring discourse has been extensively explored by philosophers and political theorists. Among these are Karl Marx, with his concept of the “Point d’Honneur”; Claude Lefort, who examines the “repères de certitude” in the dissolution of modernity; Richard Rorty’s “final vocabulary”; Derrida’s transcendental signifier; and Spivak’s masterwords.

groups depending on their cultural, social, or personal perspectives. Notwithstanding the ambiguity or controversy surrounding their precise meanings and foundations, these symbols facilitate social identification and enhance group cohesion. The capacity of symbols associated with concepts such as freedom and justice to unify remains significant despite the lack of universal acceptance of the concepts themselves or the ambiguity surrounding their precise meanings and underpinnings. They facilitate the formation of collective identities and the unification of individuals and groups around shared values or goals, even as the specific interpretations of these values may vary significantly. These symbols thus function as catalysts for social bonding and solidarity, facilitating a wide range of identification and engagement through their multi-layered interpretability. In the process of subjectivation, empty signifiers serve as instruments through which individuals interpret and negotiate their identities and social positions. They influence how individuals perceive themselves and others within a complex network of social categories. By uniting disparate, often antithetical concepts under a seemingly unified banner, they facilitate the coexistence and negotiation of various identities and groups.

The significance of empty signifiers cannot be understated, as they operate as important elements in the process of human differentiation, influencing the way distinctions are established, apprehended, and experienced. They facilitate the legitimization of social hierarchies and justify mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion by conveying vague yet impactful notions of “normality” or “otherness.” Consequently, empty signifiers are efficacious instruments for the formation of identities and the exertion of influence. They offer the possibility of encapsulating multifaceted social, political, and cultural issues under a concept that presents an illusion of coherence while fostering broad identification and mobilization among diverse individuals. Concurrently, they obfuscate the ambiguity and arbitrariness inherent to social categories and identities. Consequently, empty signifiers are characterized by their indeterminacy and openness, offering no definitive explanation or justification (Castoriadis 1997, 240).

The significance of empty signifiers lies in their capacity to function as a foundation for the formation of collective identities, facilitating the transcendence and realization of diverse meanings. Examples of this phenomenon can be observed in the case of universal concepts such as God or the notions of justice that are embodied in human rights. These universalistic codes influence the formation of group self-images and facilitate engagement with their diverse interpretations. The utilization of empty signifiers in political and social discourses enables dominant groups to impose their norms of normality and legitimacy, thereby contributing to the stabilization of social order and the perpetuation of existing power structures. In this context, the role of affective bonds through emotional markers is of crucial importance. The emotional responses of affiliation, pride, and rejection contribute to embedding the selected significant characteristics within the individual and collective psyche,

thereby enhancing the psychosocial impact of group identity. Affective bonds ensure that social categorizations and the resulting identity constructions are not only cognitively processed but also emotionally experienced. They promote cohesion within the group and differentiation from others, but they can also escalate social tensions and conflicts. A crucial element of the discourse on empty signifiers, as examined by Chantal Mouffe, is the confrontation between diverse and frequently contradictory empty signifiers, which are shaped by intricate “us-versus-them” dichotomies. For the purposes of this analysis, it is crucial to consider the paradox created by competing forms of group identification. This is evidenced by the provision of disparate avenues for identification within an imagined collective, such as a nation. This antinomy is particularly evident in the discordance between two pivotal empty signifiers within liberal democracies: equality and freedom (Mouffe 2010, 66). This seemingly contradictory phenomenon is in fact a continuous effort to achieve democratic equality. This struggle manifests in two distinct forms: firstly, as civil rights within a state, and secondly, as human rights with claims to universal validity. The challenge is to achieve a balance between individual freedom and collective equality, while acknowledging and addressing the inherent tensions within the democratic framework. Mouffe posits that freedom and equality represent central yet potentially conflicting values in democratic societies. The pursuit of maximum freedom for all individuals may conflict with the achievement of equality, as unrestrained freedom can result in social and economic disparities that undermine equality. As a concept that is not bound by a singular, fixed definition, the term “society” is capable of encompassing a multitude of meanings and values. The use of the term “society” in this manner encapsulates the paradox between freedom and equality, providing a framework for negotiating these potentially opposing values. “Society,” as a general term encompassing a multitude of disparate concepts pertaining to social order, encapsulates the persistent tension and effort to reconcile freedom and equality. In this way, the concept of “society” emerges as a dynamic forum for negotiating the meanings and priorities of these foundational values. As an empty signifier, the term “society” allows different groups within society to imbue it with their own, often conflicting, interpretations, thereby articulating their specific notions of normality, legitimacy, and belonging. This flexible utilization is a consequence of the complexity of social realities and the ongoing debate surrounding the core values of democratic societies. In terms of the factual dimension, the fluidity of the term “society” adeptly navigates the simultaneity of difference, both concealing and revealing the complex, multi-layered nature of social realities (Nassehi 2021, 220). The term serves as a repository for the diverse, overlapping, and often conflicting narratives and identities that collectively constitute the social fabric. As Nassehi notes, the concept of “society” exemplifies the dynamic interplay between diverse social narratives and identities (*ibid.*). It simultaneously conceals and reveals the intricate and multifaceted nature of these realities. As a repository of varied, often conflicting

narratives and identities, this concept reflects the fundamental, continually evolving nature of identity formation. Identity is inextricably linked with the dynamic interplay of differences and the practices of marking them. It is a construct that is in a state of constant evolution and is never definitively fixed. It is subject to a multitude of influences and is continually overdetermined, as postulated by Althusser. These reflections contribute to our understanding of identity as a construct that is not merely demarcated from a “constitutive outside” (Laclau 1990, 10), but also engaged with in relation to social fluidity and inherent differences. The necessity of an “outside,” which is crucial for defining the boundaries of one’s identity and culture (Mouffe 2010, 130), is inextricably linked with the fluidity and openness of the concept of “society.” This interaction between society as a whole and the formation of individual and collective identities exhibits the interdependence of the processes of identity construction and navigation within society. Both processes are distinguished by a continuous dynamic and a negotiation of meanings that are deeply embedded in social structures and discourses. The generation of alterity, or the creation of difference, emerges as a fundamental process within social group structures, whereby a collective is distinguished from those designated as “constitutive outsiders.” Concurrently, specific meanings must be defined and established at the internal or ideological level. A significant element of collective formation through cultural coding is the continuous (re)production of an empty signifier. Identities are thus indispensable to the functioning of any society, as the notion of unity cannot be sustained without them. Indeed, in the absence of this conceptual cohesion, the society in question would cease to exist. Therefore, a definitive resolution is unattainable (Marchart 2013) because any fixation of identity is inherently provisional, incomplete, and contingent upon the prevailing hegemonic-discursive structures that shape it (Hall 2018b, 185). Every form of collective identity necessitates an act of collective narration that discursively constructs and maintains the exclusion of “others” deemed marginal in the sense of the constitutive outside.

In accordance with systems theory, communication represents the foundational mechanism that both constitutes and maintains social systems (see Chapter 2.2.4). The creation of alterity and the demarcation from a “constitutive outside” occur through communicative processes that delineate identities and differences within and between social groups. These processes are not static; rather, they are dynamic and recursive. This implies that identities and their associated demarcations are continuously renegotiated and constructed. This lends further support to the systems theory perspective that social systems and their boundaries are defined by communication, rather than by fixed properties or substances. The continuous reproduction of empty signifiers and the practice of so-called second-order observation are inextricably linked and play a central role in the reflexive construction of social realities. Social systems use second-order observation to examine the ways in which identities and social orders are constructed and continually renegotiated

through discursive mechanisms. This level of meta-observation enables systems to undertake a critical assessment of their foundational assumptions and processes of identity formation. This demonstrates that any apparent coherence and unity within social orders are, in fact, the result of ongoing discursive negotiations. These negotiations are shaped and influenced by the relentless rearticulation of empty signifiers, which provide a framework for understanding the interactions and relational dynamics among various social categories. A key aspect of these renegotiations of meaning is the intersectional concept of articulation, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 9.1. The concept of articulation examines the ways in which identities are subject to dynamic transformation as a result of interactions with a multiplicity of social forces, including economic interests, political ideologies, and cultural norms. These forces are interconnected through a network of differential relations that are culturally encoded and communicated, thereby continually transforming the possibilities for identification and the meanings associated with social categories. These transformations also impact human differentiation, influencing the articulation of binary and hierarchical evaluations. These include the dichotomous distinctions between beautiful/ugly, domestic/foreign, and rich/poor, among others. It is important to understand these binary-coded differentiations in the context of BCAS (see Chapter 6.4). Concurrently, the concept of empty signifiers in hegemony theory serves as a mechanism for the temporary stabilization of meanings within a fluid and contested discursive field. These signifiers act as nodes where diverse identity claims and ideological currents temporarily align under a seemingly coherent yet inherently flexible banner. This dynamic is fundamental to the tenets of intersectional theory, which posits that identities are shaped by a multitude of social forces. The strategic use of empty signifiers enables the formation and renegotiation of collective identities, facilitating ongoing identity re-articulation and the definition of identities in opposition to others. This mechanism is of great consequence for the continuous negotiation and adaptation of meanings, playing a pivotal role in the organization and mobilization of the diversity addressed by intersectionality. The ongoing dynamics of social categorization and the resulting collective identities necessitate constant redefinition, which in turn gives rise to discontinuities and disputes over the definition of group identities. The conventional terms used to describe social associations, such as “groups,” “nations,” “ethnicities,” and “cultures,” often prove to be reductionist when considered in the context of the actual heterogeneity and complexity that exists within the assumed unity. Recognizing this leads to the need for a nuanced understanding of social identities that accommodates the fluid and contested nature of these categories, acknowledging the diverse and dynamic interactions that shape them (Brubaker 2022). Cognitively and emotionally formed affiliations do not necessarily coincide with physically manifested collectives. These identity constructions are diverse and should be seen as a continuum of identification possibilities. Herein lies a paradox:

despite the actual and potential constraints that collective identities can impose in present-day contexts, there is an enduring appeal to them. This attraction lies at the heart of the complexity and deep embeddedness of collective identity constructions in social reality.

Particularly in times of uncertainty or crisis, political actors strategically exploit this tendency to form collective identities to advance their agendas and reinforce existing power structures (Arditi 2007). In liberal democracies, identities—especially those reinforced by the rise of populist movements—lead to increased polarization and the consolidation of stereotypes, significantly undermining efforts at integration. These populist movements, often right-wing, have proven inadequate to address the challenges posed by neoliberal policies. These policies contribute to post-democratic tendencies (W. Brown 2016), where democratic ideals are eroded by market-driven logic and political disenfranchisement, thereby complicating the social and political landscape (Crouch 2020; A. Allen et al. 2022). The prevalence of populist, simplistic political communication is a long-standing phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with the fact that collective identities are shaped by cultural and affective construction processes. These identities are anchored in a variety of ideas that are constantly reinforced by symbolic and cultural artifacts and their meanings. The affects and emotions associated with these ideas are also culturally constructed, based primarily on symbolic representations. Codes that employ both empty signifiers and primordial or neoliberal content are central to the construction of social realities and identities. All of the approaches discussed play a critical role in articulating and negotiating meanings within social and political discourses, shaping collective identities, setting political agendas, and defining the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. What they have in common is that they function as discursive mechanisms that actively shape social meanings and structure the arena for social negotiation processes that are central to social meaning-making and identity formation. It is through these processes that groups and individuals define their relationships and interactions. However, different codings offer different approaches to shaping lines of difference and meaning within social and political discourses. Empty signifiers such as “society” facilitate multiple interpretations, aiding in the negotiation of power and identity while reflecting the complexity of social realities. Primordial encodings root identity in seemingly immutable, “natural” characteristics, while neoliberal encodings frame individuals as economic actors within an ideology that purports to bridge all differences and be universally inclusive. These coding strategies vary in their flexibility and the range of interpretations they allow, each uniquely influencing how social inclusion, exclusion, and the distribution of power are negotiated.

8.2 Autopoiesis and Minimization of Entropy (B)

Part (B)

Cultural codes function as autopoietic elements within social systems, ensuring their self-preservation and self-reproduction by reducing entropy. Analyzing their structural coupling with the environment points out their pivotal role in actively shaping and sustaining social orders.

The second dimension of our definition is comprised of two distinct aspects. The first is the autopoietic character of cultural codes, and the second is their function as entropy minimizers. The concept of structural coupling (Chapter 2.2.7) elucidates the function of cultural codes not only in their internal structuring but also in their dynamic interactions with the environment. This situates them at the core of social construction, and as a result, they manifest as outcomes of the social orders they facilitate. Cultural codes are shown to enhance the stability and predictability of social orders through their adaptability and capacity for reinterpretation, which minimizes entropy while promoting effective communication and meaning-making within social systems. The autopoietic nature of cultural codes is corroborated by their demonstrated capacity for self-organization, self-reproduction, and adaptability. These systems are not merely static sets of rules; rather, they are dynamic, self-sustaining entities that actively respond to change and continually renew themselves. Such systems evolve over time, adapting to new social, economic, and political conditions. The generation of independent structures demonstrates the manner in which cultural orders emerge and organize themselves in the absence of centralized control. Their autopoietic nature enables the emergence of novel patterns that drive cultural innovation and creativity, thereby enhancing the resilience of social systems. This autopoietic perspective shifts the focus to the active role of cultural codes in influencing social dynamics and their capacity to manage stability and change.

Information, as understood in relation to the construction of messages (Eco 2002, 57), constitutes a fundamental component of autopoietic systems. It endows the system with the capacity to select from a multitude of potential states and interactions with the environment, thereby ensuring its structural and functional integrity. The reduction of equal probability states represents a fundamental process in the preservation of order and organization within a system, as evidenced by the minimization of entropy. In this context, the term “entropy” is employed to describe a *reduction in disorder* or randomness (Trinn 2015, 186). Entropy, a concept derived from thermodynamics, is employed to quantify the level of disorder or randomness within a system. Nevertheless, the concept of entropy has been applied in metaphorical contexts in a number of fields beyond its original scientific context,

including information theory and the social sciences. In these disciplines, entropy is frequently employed as a synonym for unpredictability or the absence of structured order within a system. A state of high entropy is defined as a situation in which numerous states are equally probable and lack discernible patterns or structures (Eco 2002, 58). In autopoietic systems, the term is employed to describe the intrinsic unpredictability of the system's states. As a measure of disorder or informational loss, entropy provides insight into the difficulties of maintaining order and facilitating efficient meaning transmission within cultural encodings. These encodings serve as interfaces in the structural coupling between diverse social systems or between social systems and their environments. They provide a common "language" or repertoire of symbols through which information is conveyed and meanings are co-constructed. In light of this framework, it becomes evident that the development of mechanisms capable of counteracting the intrinsic tendency of systems to devolve into disarray and ambiguity is of paramount importance. It is imperative that such mechanisms be designed in a way that ensures the clarity, stability, and predictability of meanings conveyed through cultural encodings. In light of this perspective, it is clear that cultural encodings must be designed and sustained in a manner that ensures their continued efficacy as conduits for communication and meaning-making within and across systems. Moreover, the concept of entropy provides a link between information theory and social phenomena, offering insight into the informational content of messages and the uncertainties inherent in such content (Trinn 2015, 137). In the context of cultural coding as structural coupling, it draws attention to the intricate and information-rich nature of cultural messages and their impact on the comprehensibility and interpretability of social systems.

In contrast to entropy, complexity is contingent upon the number of components comprising the system and the nature of their interactions. A complex system is defined by a dense network of components and interactions, which often gives rise to emergent properties—that is, properties that are not evident at the level of the individual components but emerge when the system as a whole is considered. Complexity implies an inherent structure or order, which, despite potential difficulties in analysis or prediction, maintains discernible regularity or pattern formation. In contrast, the term "entropy" is used to describe the degree of disorder or randomness within a system. It indicates a lack of structured order and unpredictability. This distinction is of great importance for the comprehension of how cultural codes effectively reduce entropy by selecting and defining meanings that enhance communication and comprehension within social systems (Trinn 2015, 138). In discussions pertaining to the maintenance of order and organizational structure in autopoietic systems, entropy provides a precise framework for addressing the challenges of minimizing disorder and enhancing predictability. The delineation between complexity and entropy is an important one, as it signifies *two interconnected perspectives of a system*. While the complexity of a system can be managed through the imple-

mentation of suitable strategies and models to promote emergence and adaptability, entropy necessitates active reduction to prevent information loss and ensure efficient, goal-oriented processes. The strategic application of the entropy concept enables the development of targeted methodologies for the management of disorder and the promotion of order and stability within complex systems. Although the distinction between complexity and entropy may initially seem complex, its importance becomes more apparent when viewed through the lens of structural coupling. Complexity can be defined as the richness and diversity of connections and interactions within a system, which foster new possibilities and potentials. In contrast, the concept of entropy highlights the difficulties associated with maintaining clarity and purpose in these interactions, particularly in light of the inherent tendency towards disorder and information loss. By focusing on entropy in the context of meaning transmission and cultural encoding, facilitated by structural coupling, it becomes imperative to devise mechanisms and strategies that mitigate the natural drift of systems toward disorder and ambiguity. It is of the utmost importance to preserve the clarity, stability, and predictability of communicated meanings in order to ensure the effectiveness of communication and interactions among systems. Therefore, the distinction between complexity and entropy is not merely an academic exercise; it is a crucial element in the effective management of autopoietic systems. This approach allows for the harnessing and promotion of complexity where it offers adaptive potential, while also minimizing entropy to maintain the clarity and functionality of the system. In the context of social systems, the concepts of complexity and complexity reduction are more prevalent. Social systems are continuously confronted with an influx of information that threatens to exceed their processing capabilities. The reduction of complexity is beneficial to these systems, enabling them to maintain their focus and functionality. This prevents the systems from descending into chaos or paralysis. The centrality of complexity reduction in social systems theory is linked to the intrinsic ability of these systems to generate and process meaning. The capacity to discern meaning is a fundamental tenet of the selection process. It enables systems to identify and prioritize relevant information from a plethora of possibilities while disregarding the rest. This selective process is crucial for ensuring the continued operational effectiveness and resilience of social systems.

Therefore, every act of sense-making—whether an interpretation, an understanding, or an assignment of meaning—represents a selective process whereby specific information, actions, or interactions are deemed relevant in the context of the vast array of stimuli present in the external environment, while others are excluded. Therefore, meaning is not only a foundational element in the process of making selections; it is also a product of selective processes that filter certain aspects of reality. This selection is of great consequence for the maintenance of the system's internal order and its capacity to adapt to its environment. Complexity reduction is an ongoing process that enables social systems to maintain their identity while

responding to change in a dynamic manner. The selection process within the context of meaning production and processing in social systems is closely intertwined with the binary-coded affective meaning attribution within schemata, which is referred to as BCAS (a detailed discussion of which can be found in Chapter 6.4). This model proposes that understanding and cognition are fundamentally reliant on the transformation of differences, with information and meaning emerging through the differentiation of these differences. This differentiation process is inherently selective, as the identification and interpretation of differences entail a deliberate selection from a range of possible perceptions and interpretations. Both concepts—selection as conceptualized in social systems theory and BCAS—are centered on the reduction of complexity and the generation of meaning. This is accomplished by filtering pertinent information from a multitude of potential sources. While the BCAS framework identifies the importance of differentiating between elements in the generation of information and meaning, social systems theory emphasises the role of selective processes in rendering the complexity of the environment manageable and providing guidance for social systems. This intertwining of selective meaning-making processes and mechanisms of complexity reduction is inextricably linked with the adaptive capacities of social systems, enabling them to navigate and flourish within fluctuating and often chaotic environments. The interconnection between these perspectives can be elucidated by recognizing that both the differentiation of differences and the selection of meaning act as mechanisms through which systems reduce complexity. This reduction is achieved through the filtering out of certain environmental elements as significant, while others are disregarded. The selection of information is contingent upon the identification of differences that are deemed significant, which subsequently form the foundation for the formation of meaning and significance within social systems. The concept of difference transformation, as postulated by Gregory Bateson, elucidates the manner in which selections transcend mere randomness or arbitrariness. Instead, they function as informed processes that generate information and meaning by distinguishing pertinent differences.

While entropy is a relevant concept in specific contexts, such as information transmission and encoding, where it signifies the risks of disorder and information loss, complexity reduction is a broader process that relates to the selection and sense-making involved in the operation and evolution of social systems. The discussion of entropy and complexity reduction in the context of cultural coding brings to the fore the various aspects of a single underlying process: the manner in which social systems navigate the challenge of establishing and sustaining order and predictability in the face of a vast array of potential outcomes (Trinn 2015, 144). This dual focus allows us to comprehend not only how systems maintain coherence and functionality in the face of potential chaos but also how they harness and interpret informa-

tion to encourage continual adaptation and growth. This framework is predicated on the notion that a dynamic interplay between maintaining stability and embracing change is essential for the resilience and vitality of social systems. The perspective of cultural codes as instruments for complexity reduction elucidates their function in differentiating pertinent from irrelevant information, stabilizing meanings, and thus constructing a coherent meaning system that guides actions. Concurrently, the issue of entropy requires the implementation of measures to counteract the proclivity towards disorder and meaning loss, which are essential for the maintenance of the integrity and functionality of the meaning system. As previously stated, an equal probability distribution indicates a state where each element of a system has an equal likelihood of occurring. This results in maximum entropy, making it impossible to make linear predictions, as no states are preferentially established. Therefore, reducing entropy is crucial for maintaining order and organization within the system, as it increases the likelihood of specific states occurring and establishes a recognizable pattern. In autopoietic systems, the reduction of entropy through the implementation of established rules or codes facilitates the development and preservation of organized structures, which are crucial for the sustenance of vital processes. These codes restrict the range of possible actions, direct the flow of information and interactions along specific pathways, and thus contribute to the management of complexity, the maintenance of orderly dynamics, and the preservation of functional coherence within the system. Codes delineate relevant content and its processing, thereby facilitating autopoiesis. In consequence, they operate not only as conduits for the transfer of information, but also as indispensable elements in the regulation of the system's self-organization and self-regulation. They determine the system's responses to environmental alterations, instigate internal procedures to maintain its structural integrity, and regulate the distribution of resources. As a result, these codes reflect the system's preferences by determining which actions and interactions are prioritized to ensure its survival and development. This comprehensive role of cultural codes illustrates the significance of their impact on the shaping and sustenance of the operational and developmental trajectories of social systems.

8.3 Subjectivation—Conditioning—System Justification (C)

Part (C)

Cultural codes create specific meanings that not only stabilize but also legitimize the social system by integrating these meanings into the system's structures through processes of subjectivation. These processes facilitate the internalization of codes by individuals, thus promoting the continual self-reproduction of these codes within the system.

In examining the third dimension of cultural codes, post-structuralist perspectives on subjectivation are integrated with system-theoretical approaches and the theory of system justification. This integration is intended to conceptualize subjectivation as the conditioning of members within a social system. Such conditioning establishes normative orders that are continuously reconstituted through cultural coding, thereby normalizing existing social structures. This analysis of the internalization of normative meanings through cultural codes calls into question the conventional dichotomy often assumed between social order and disorder. This dichotomy frequently emerges from a linear cause-and-effect logic. In contrast, this perspective suggests that novel structures may emerge from circumstances perceived as fragile or chaotic, facilitated by cultural coding. The *inevitability of exclusions* within social systems, the *tendency to deny them*, and the *semantics associated* with them (see chapter 2.2.9) form the foundation for the subsequent examination of the subjectifying and conditioning properties of cultural codes. In the context of intricate social systems, these unavoidable exclusions and their proclivity for denial inevitably give rise to internal tensions and contradictions. The failure to acknowledge or suppress exclusions can result in the emergence of latent conflicts with the potential to destabilize the system and generate chaotic dynamics. The subjectifying and conditioning properties of cultural codes exacerbate these processes by influencing individual perceptions and actions in specific directions, thus affecting the feedback loops within social systems. As a consequence of these non-linear interactions, minor disturbances have the potential to be amplified, leading to unpredictable developments and chaotic patterns in the social fabric. The intrinsic property of complex social systems to operate at the threshold of chaos enables the generation of emergence. The concept of emergence refers to the capacity of a complex social system to generate novel and unpredictable structures that cannot be fully derived from existing structures (see Chapter 2). This process is significantly influenced by affectivity, which demonstrates the dynamic and transformative power of cultural codes in the formation of social realities. The mutual influence of individuals and social structures gives rise to non-linear dynamics, wherein minor triggers can have a substantial im-

pact. Consequently, affective reactions and cultural impulses in complex social systems can precipitate phase transitions, whereby novel patterns and orders emerge.

8.3.1 Subjectivation and Conditioning

Culturally and socially constructed notions of human diversity function as instruments of power, molding thoughts, emotions, and behaviors through their distinctive codification. The interplay of these conceptions with power structures facilitates the formation and preservation of social orders, which are sustained by the continuous reiteration of hegemonic relationships. These heterogeneous power structures are perpetually recreated through media and discourse, thereby fostering the construction of “normality” and the establishment of normative knowledge and behavioral norms. This transformative process subjects individuals to a process of subjectivation, as described by thinkers such as Foucault (Foucault 1994; J. Butler 1997). The term “subjectification” is defined as the process through which individuals become representative subjects of a social order, subjected to the prevailing norms and expectations of that social order. Normative requirements encompass the expectations, rules, and standards that are recognized within a society or group and are benchmarks for appropriate, desirable, or obligatory behavior. These norms encompass a spectrum of explicit rules and laws, as well as unwritten conventions and behaviors that are socially accepted. By delineating what is considered normal, morally correct, efficient, or socially acceptable, these requirements regulate social life, influencing individual and collective behaviors and reinforcing social order through the promotion of conformity and the sanctioning of deviations. This dual process of subjugation and conscious self-formation is, in turn, grounded in the inherent ambiguity surrounding the concept of the subject. The term “subject” refers to both a subjugated individual and a self-aware agent within the complex interplay of autonomy and control in the shaping of human identities. The construction of “normality” that results from these processes legitimizes discrimination by categorizing identities according to the specific requirements of the social system. These codes are deeply embedded within historical and social contexts and exert a profound influence on our perception and interpretation of the world. The complex interrelationship between cultural codes and the dynamics of subjectivation will be examined in greater detail in subsequent sections. The process of subjectivation is a comprehensive one, whereby individuals are shaped and standardized through their subjugation to social norms. This process should not be viewed as mere passive compliance with external standards; rather, it entails the active appropriation and internalization of these norms by individuals. This dual dynamic enables individuals to define and position themselves within their social milieu, thereby exemplifying the reciprocal interaction between individuals and their social environment. In this interac-

tion, cultural codes and normative demands are not only externally imposed but are also actively processed and enacted by the individual.

Therefore, the “subject” is not merely shaped by social norms and values; rather, it actively self-forms within the ongoing interplay with and the constraints imposed by these factors. Moreover, consideration is being given to the complex interplay between autonomy and control, whereby the formation of individual identities is shaped by both external influences and personal agency. The discursive power inherent to subjectivation exerts influence through the construction and enforcement of notions of “normality” through the use of social sanctions and rewards. The term “subject” encapsulates two pivotal dimensions. Firstly, it denotes individuals as objects of subjugation within prevailing power structures. Secondly, it simultaneously denotes these same individuals as subjects who, through engagement with these power dynamics and through reflective self-awareness, forge their identities, shaped by these very subjugations (Reckwitz 2021, 32). Subjectivation processes invariably emerge from power-laden dynamics, unfolding within binary and hierarchically structured “orders of difference” (Dirim and Mecheril 2018, 18). The legitimization of specific orders of difference, along with the associated self-conceptions and perceptions of others, contributes to the establishment of a sense of naturalness surrounding hegemonic patterns of order when they are widely recognized. The internalization of these normative orders requires the continuous replication of the associated structures of belonging and hierarchy, which in turn leads to the uncritical perception of significant distinctions between individuals and constructed groups as “normal.” These mechanisms amplify critical differentiation processes across a range of societal levels. The schemas they disseminate exert an influence on individuals and groups alike, establishing hierarchies and classes that are systematically disparate in terms of access to crucial resources. They regulate and shape experiences, interpretations, and behaviors by maintaining the perception of social conditions as normal or natural, thereby embedding these distinctions deeply within societal consciousness. All forms of discrimination are legitimized through the ascription and distribution of identities based on the needs of one’s own group. To disseminate such distinctive forms and configurations of “naturalness” across broader groups and collectives, the content must be communicated through specific cultural codings. In this process of influence, meanings are situated within the context of both historical processes and social frameworks (Giesen and Lüter 2000, 26). Cultural codings operate not only to establish and maintain distinctions and boundaries between the in-group and the external world, encompassing other groups and their members, but also to create and define intricate classification systems within the established groups themselves. The process of becoming a subject is an ongoing and never fully completed one, reflecting the dynamics and development of the individual over time. This indicates that subjects are not static entities; rather, they undergo continuous evolution and development

as a result of sustained interactions with their social and material environments (Färber 2022, 233). This process is propelled by a series of practices that encompass both physical actions and cognitive-affective processes. The approach proposed here places significant emphasis on the role of feelings, thoughts, and reflection in the process of becoming a conscious subject. It acknowledges the importance of mental activities in shaping the self. This perspective is of great consequence to the ongoing discourse on human differentiation, as it portrays schemata as cognitive-affective-bodily frameworks (see Chapter 6) that mirror this process of internalization and continual processing in humans. The concept of becoming a subject is an appropriate means of describing the process through which an individual evolves into a subject over the course of their development. However, the terms “conditioning” and “normalization,” though less commonly used in this context, also encapsulate the essence of the phenomenon, particularly in regard to human differentiation. These terms are intricately connected to the concepts of affective-cognitive-bodily schemata, which illustrate, at a deeper level, what subjectivation entails in a cultural and sociological sense. This entails the conditioning, through incessant repetition, of what is deemed “normal” or deviant within a specific cultural context. The conceptualization of subjectivation as conditioning enhances our understanding of social systems by elucidating the specific mechanisms that influence individuals. This approach incorporates concepts from behavioral psychology, such as learning through reinforcement, emphasizing the proactive role of social systems in shaping identity and behavior through the use of rewards, punishments, and recurrent interactions. The concept of conditioning elucidates the processes through which social norms are internalized and individual behaviors are molded, thereby providing deeper insights into how individuals adapt to their social environment.

8.3.2 Critical Junctures in Social Complexity: The Role of Bifurcation Points

A more detailed examination reveals that the purported “normality” of established social orders and the associated notion of social stability are, in fact, a dynamic process of negotiation, with a focus on critical turning points. As stated at the outset, the social order is exceedingly fragile and, as a result, cannot be considered to be genuinely stable. Indeed, social systems frequently exhibit characteristics that are more accurately described as chaotic. In systems theory discourses, this phenomenon is often referred to as “complexity” (Stäheli 2018, 120). The notion of social complexity implies that the constituent elements of a system are linked in non-linear patterns, rendering the traditional methods of deduction and prediction inapplicable. Complex systems are invariably situated at so-called *bifurcation points*, at which the future trajectory of the system is contingent upon a decision regarding the direction of its continued development (Urry 2005, 5). In such pivotal moments, even minor

changes or fluctuations can produce extensive impacts on the system as a whole, thereby disclosing the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of social dynamics. The moment at which systems reach a critical point and possible states are decided is closely linked to the process of subjectivation and the internalization of specific meanings through cultural coding. Such turning points mark phases in the system where minor changes or fluctuations can have significant effects on the system dynamics, which are reinforced by feedback loops. At points of bifurcation, social systems are confronted with the challenge of selecting one of several potential states. The selection processes in question are not solely determined by logical or normative considerations; they are also influenced by a spectrum of emotional states. Bifurcation points demarcate phases of heightened openness and uncertainty within a system where the future trajectory remains undetermined. The concept of *structural coupling*, which refers to the interconnection and mutual influence between systems or components within a system (see Chapter 2), is of paramount importance during these phases. This process is mediated by *cultural codes* (see Chapter 8) and *affective-cognitive-bodily schemata* (see Chapter 6), which are activated at such critical moments and facilitate the reproduction of specific patterns within the system. These codes and schemata provide a framework for understanding the environment and the potential courses of action available to actors, thereby influencing decision-making processes. In the context of subjectivation and the internalization of meanings, these critical points represent moments in which the acceptance or rejection of cultural codes, norms, and values by individuals and groups is determined. Such decisions may be reinforced by social feedback loops that either stabilize the prevailing cultural norms and values or lead to significant changes in the social order. To illustrate, an augmented perception of social inequality may precipitate a bifurcation point at which society elects to enhance social cohesion through inclusion or to exacerbate inequality through exclusion. Subsequently, this decision is influenced by social dynamics and feedback loops, including public discourse, media coverage, and individual behavior, which either reinforce or weaken it. The formation of collective identities is inextricably linked with critical turning points in social systems. In such pivotal moments, decision-making is influenced not only by the existing cultural codes but also by the way individuals and groups redefine or reaffirm their collective identity. This frequently occurs in response to social crises or significant occurrences that necessitate a renegotiation of values and norms. Furthermore, the advent of digitalization and the pervasiveness of social media have markedly accelerated the dissemination, examination, and alteration of cultural codes and norms. The advent of advanced technologies has enabled the accelerated dissemination of information and ideas, which in turn has amplified the dynamics at critical bifurcation points, leading to a more rapid and extensive societal resonance. From this perspective, critical turning points—moments of bifurcation—play a pivotal role in the development and transformation of social systems. They represent critical junc-

tures at which the potential for the emergence of novel social structures and orders is unleashed. These novel formations are shaped by the affective, cognitive, and bodily mediation of schemata and their internalization through specific cultural codings. The approach presented here is fundamentally opposed to the use of reductionist concepts that attempt to grasp powerful processes of subjectivation exclusively from a discursive, emotional, or cognitive perspective. In contrast, this approach prioritizes the multidimensional interweaving of these aspects and their synergistic effect in the constitution of social realities. A comprehensive analysis of social systems requires an understanding of the complex processes of subjectivation and social structuring that occur at multiple levels. It illuminates the dynamic interplay between individual actions, collective practices, and cultural norms, which invariably operate within a field of tension between stability and change. In conclusion, social orders are shaped by the internalization of cultural codes and the active participation of individuals in social dynamics. The permeable boundaries between the individual and the collective, as well as between order and chaos, are of paramount importance in the cultural coding of human differentiation.

8.3.3 Collective Identities

The examination of bifurcation points in social systems—those critical junctures where the trajectory of system development is decided, and new structures emerge—provides insights into the non-linear dynamics of social (dis)orders. At these points, it becomes evident that there are possibilities for change and transformation of social structures, as well as the mechanisms through which collective identities are formed and reconfigured. Driven by affective-cognitive processes and interactions with cultural codes, moments of bifurcation present opportunities for either redefinition or reinforcement of group identities. These pivotal moments call attention to the fact that collective identities are not static; rather, they are in a state of constant flux, shaped by the interplay between individual and social contexts, as well as ongoing negotiation and adaptation to new social, political, and cultural conditions. In essence, we may conclude that the formation of social order and differentiation is largely contingent upon the processes of subjectivation and the internalization of meanings that are culturally mediated. These meanings are subject to continuous renegotiation as a result of the sustained interaction between individuals and the collective. In the context of previous discussions, collective identifications and affiliations emerge as relational and interwoven phenomena. These constructs are shown to be in a state of constant evolution and, as a result, should not be viewed as fixed entities. Instead, they are understood to be subject to a continuous process of (re)emergence and reconstruction (Delitz 2018, 33). This understanding illuminates the almost obsessive compulsion to develop and maintain fears of the “other,” regardless of the specific context in which this strategy

is employed and the associated negative stereotyping, as previously discussed in relation to epistemic violence (section 8.1.2.2). Furthermore, it clarifies the relentless fascination with discussing collective identities and the issues associated with them, ultimately conceptualizing them as homogeneous entities. The use of categorization rubrics by collectives is often driven by a desire to achieve stability, even in the absence of any divisive intent. The importance of establishing collective identities through the creation of historical unity and continuity is evident when considering the symbolic power of cultural artifacts such as flags, symbols, or significant architectural structures. These elements are not merely visual representations; they also serve to forge identity through their affective resonance and integration into cultural narratives, thereby helping to form and solidify collective memories. Consequently, these affective connections and narratives necessitate continuous confirmation and reorientation to maintain their stabilizing function. There is a mutual influence and symbiotic relationship between the individual and the collective. The emotional attachment to nations is inextricably linked with the depth of cultural codes within social systems. These codes not only transcend physical borders but also manifest in communities without a fixed territory, such as the Roma or Kurds. This exemplifies the concept of nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006).

The transformation of individual ideals into collective ones, frequently exemplified by charismatic leaders, depicts the convergence of individual and collective identities and idealizations (Mentzos 2002, 127). However, this does not apply universally across all individuals within a collective. Some individuals may resist the adoption of these collective ideals, maintaining their personal aspirations and values while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from dominant collective narratives. Nevertheless, the process contributes to the homogenization of identities and strengthens social cohesion. Cultural codes function as mediators that shape both individual and collective identities and delineate and reinforce the boundaries between “us” and “the others.” The adoption of collective ideals by some individuals facilitates their integration into the social fabric, simultaneously driving processes of differentiation within and between societies. Once more, the function of cultural coding in influencing and guiding human perceptions and behavior unconsciously becomes evident. Emotional markers (see Chapter 8.1.2) play a crucial role in fostering affective attachments to collective symbols and narratives, thereby facilitating the construction and maintenance of collective identities. This perspective is further reinforced by the assertion that communication and mutual observation play a constitutive role in the formation and evolution of social systems and collective identities. As previously stated, communication is of paramount importance in the formation of social systems that differentiate themselves through the mutual observation of their members. The formation of collective identities is not merely a consequence of individual feelings of belonging; rather, it is an

emergent phenomenon that arises from communicative networking within the community. Such systems and the associated identities are to be understood as continually evolving constructs, characterized by a dynamic tension between stability and change, as well as order and chaos. By managing their own complexity through the selection and processing of information (i.e., meaning), social structures establish an internal order that aids in orienting and asserting themselves within a contradictory environment, thereby minimizing entropy and ensuring systemic stability. Collective identities help streamline social complexity by delineating clear boundaries and affiliations in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. Such identities provide orientation, security, and a stable self-image, which explains why they are continually emphasized and reconstructed. From the perspective of systems theory, these identities function as stabilizers of social systems, fostering a common basis for communication and interaction, thereby strengthening social cohesion and solidarity and aiding in the management of systemic complexity. The formation of collective identities is an ongoing process that is shaped by the actions of individual members and the broader cultural and social structures. It is therefore crucial to understand human differentiation as a consequence of intricate interactions between cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural factors, all situated within the dynamic processes of social systems. These interactions demonstrate that collective identities and social orders are emergent properties of these processes, continuously (re)constructed through the structural coupling between the mental systems of individuals and the social systems in which they interact.

8.4 Culture

In light of the aforementioned discussion regarding the characteristics of cultural codes, their disparate logics, and the mechanisms of influence, it becomes evident that a more precise designation would be to refer to “cultures” in the plural. Cultures manifest as complex autopoietic networks that evolve through a process of co-evolution. These networks are constituted by content produced by schemas and are structurally coupled with social systems through codes, thereby facilitating dynamic interactions between the resultant meanings and the operational logics of these systems. This structural coupling gives rise to mutual influence and co-evolution, whereby cultural patterns and social structures reciprocally inform and transform one another. Cultures are conceptualized as autopoietic networks that utilize cultural codes to delineate the boundaries between systems and their environments with specific meanings, thereby influencing social realities and facilitating identity formation processes. These codes act as self-referential mechanisms that ensure the continuity and self-regeneration of social systems by establishing distinct meanings and distinctions. Their capacity to minimize entropy and initiate self-preservation

is a significant factor in the sustenance and evolution of social orders. The structural coupling of these codes with social systems, integrated into processes of subjectivation and conditioning, functions as a mechanism for enhancing the legitimization and stabilization of social structures. The internalization of these codes by individuals facilitate the perpetual renewal and dynamism of the cultural network. Cultural codes delineate the boundaries between systems and their environments through the assignment of specific meanings, thereby influencing the formation of social realities and facilitating the processes of identification. This perspective acknowledges that cultures are not static entities; rather, they are engaged in a continuous process of self-organization, self-referentiality, and adaptation, which gives rise to a vast array of expressions and meanings through the schemas and codings that underpin them. These elements result in behaviors that are directly correlated with the underlying schemata. In the course of these processes, artifacts and social institutions emerge, develop, and are shared within social groups, and are transmitted to subsequent generations via social learning. While the cultural matrix has its origins in a particular locale and thus has spatial constraints, it is not confined by these boundaries and transcends specific territorial boundaries. The intricate framework is inextricably linked to emotions and human desires, which are deeply embedded in our biological and evolutionary psychological makeup. Emotions operate as motivational forces that initiate, direct, and regulate both individual and collective behaviors, playing a key role in cultural creation practices. They significantly impact social interactions and group dynamics, for example, by fostering cohesion and cooperation or by delineating ally-adversary relationships. Human desire, which is characterized by attractions and aversions, the pursuit of rewards, and the avoidance of punishments, is essential for the development, dissemination, and transformation of cultural contents and practices. The role of human desire in these processes cannot be overstated. It is fundamentally rooted in bodily reward mechanisms that are governed by hormones and neurotransmitters (for further details, please refer to Chapter 5). These mechanisms, though susceptible to conscious intervention, naturally reinforce and persist through autopoietic resonance and recursion dynamics. The outcomes of reward and punishment are also expressed through emotions and emotional markers such as shame and disgrace, which have a profound impact on social interactions and cultural imprinting. Recursion, defined as a process where actions and developments within a cultural system reflect its historical states and provide a foundation for new iterations, allows the system to self-organize and self-regulate. This dynamic attests to the critical role of emotional responses and markers in autopoietic self-organization and cultural evolution.

The autopoietic dimension of schemas is evident through the dynamic, self-organizing structures that have been extensively documented across multiple disciplines. These structures are of vital importance for the sustenance and evolution of cultural networks, and they are continually transformed by the interplay between in-

dividual experiences and collective beliefs and practices. Such structures are shaped and reshaped by internal dynamics and interactions with the external environment. The phenomenon of recursion within cultural schemas illustrates how past experiences influence future perceptions and actions within a culture, thereby substantiating the recursive nature of cultural evolution and self-regulation. Each novel experience is interpreted through the lens of preexisting cultural schemata, which may be conceptualized as collective cognitive, affective, and bodily structures. The resulting perceptions or actions are integrated into these schemas, thereby modifying them and setting the stage for future events. This ongoing cycle of experience, interpretation, and adaptation exemplify recursive processes in both biocultural and social evolution. These recursive processes are of great importance for the comprehension of the genesis of cultural identification processes. They elucidate the manner in which historical and cultural contexts shape contemporary social dynamics and distinctions. The continuous application and adaptation of cultural schemata in response to new experiences within specific cultural or historical contexts gives rise to individual and collective identification processes and the corresponding social structures, which then evolve. These processes facilitate cultural adaptation to changing conditions while maintaining the integrity of the core identity, integrating new elements, and reinterpreting existing ones. In this sense, cultural schemas, along with the emotions and desires they channel, are essential components that perpetually cycle through and reshape the autopoietic network of culture, thereby contributing to the co-evolution and dynamic adaptability of cultures. The self-referential and autopoietic traits of this cultural concept do not imply absolute self-sufficiency or a propensity for cultural isolation. Instead, the intrinsic dynamics and the impact of differentiation regimes, mediated by cultural coding and, on occasion, coercion, demonstrate the intricate intricacy of cultural dynamics, which are actively engaged with external influences. From this historical perspective, it is erroneous to view culture as a self-contained, monolithic entity. Rather, culture functions as a network, characterized by dynamic interactions and vibrant exchanges between different cultures and their environments. This perspective directs attention to the human capacity to develop and sustain cultural networks as a means of navigating increasingly complex social structures. An acknowledgment of the network-like nature of cultures and their interactions with the environment allows for a transcendence of a purely introspective understanding of culture. This enables an exploration of the diverse ways in which cultures are shaped, adapted, and reinterpreted over time in order to meet the challenges of a complex world. The matrix-like composition of cultures, which includes both immaterial aspects like ideas and meanings, as well as material elements such as artifacts and ritual practices, represents an integral aspect of its inherent complexity. This composition also encompasses the integration of both these elements through cognitive, affective, and bodily schemas. This approach renders evident that the distinction between “inside”

and “outside,” which may have been viable tens of thousands of years ago in smaller, more manageable group sizes, is no longer applicable in the present context. This insight is derived directly from the preceding discussion of schemata and the matrix-like nature of cultures. Cultures are constituted by a complex network of immaterial and material aspects. The former includes ideas and meanings, while the latter encompasses artifacts and rituals. These components are not only present in the external world but are also experienced and processed internally through cognitive-affective-bodily schemata. The integration of both material and immaterial aspects into individual and collective perception demonstrates that cultures are not isolated entities with a clearly delineated inner life separate from the external world. Conversely, cultures, despite their systemic boundedness and the inescapable dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (see Chapter 2.2.9), are distinguished by a considerable degree of permeability, whereby external influences are persistently absorbed, processed, and integrated into one’s own cultural matrix. Concurrently, cultural practices and meanings extend outward, affecting other cultures and social contexts. The permeability and interconnectedness of cultural boundaries make it untenable to view cultures as isolated entities where a distinct “inside” can be distinguished from an “outside.” Accordingly, this approach recognizes that cultures are not only shaped by power structures but also by mutual influences, whereby dynamic adaptation to and interaction with the environment is of paramount importance. This perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis of power relations and demonstrates how cultural norms and values are influenced and reshaped by social, economic, and political forces. By elucidating the dynamics of exchange relationships and the permeability of cultural boundaries, this approach helps address the risks associated with overestimated self-sufficiency and the insufficient acknowledgment of power structures and inequalities. This means that cultures are neither isolated, autonomous systems nor untouched by internal hierarchies, but are instead embedded in dynamic power relations and intercultural interactions. Concurrently, it challenges the assumption that cultures can be reduced to single, simple concepts. Instead, it emphasizes the complexity, ambiguity and contradictory nature of cultural phenomena. By acknowledging the necessity for empirical verifiability of its assumptions, it paves the way for research into the dynamic interactions between cultures and their social, economic and political contexts.