Cultural Sociology and Ethnography

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The aim of this paper is to discuss how cultural sociology may contribute to ethnographic writing. First, the paper will introduce the term "cultural sociology" and discuss how Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith distinguish it from the "sociology of culture" (2003). Then, it will discuss the similarities and contrasts between the current discourse of constructivist ethnography writing and that of cultural sociology. Finally, it will argue that cultural sociology, which promises to bring "analytic"[1] perspectives to sociology, may help ethnography writing to reformulate its discourse.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, a prominent cultural sociologist, draws the lines of demarcation between "cultural sociology" and "sociology of culture". He states that according to the former, culture is as an "independent variable," whereas, it is a "dependent variable" for the latter. (Alexander 2003: 12). He is also critical of the Marxist understanding of culture because it reduces culture to something that belongs to the superstructure and thus, to something determined by the "base" (Alexander and Seidman 1990: 2-3). By proposing that sociology of culture seeks to assign culture a space out of "the domain of meaning", he implicitly puts forward that meaning is important to cultural sociologists (Alexander and Seidman 1990: 2-3). Spillman also confirms the centrality of "meaning-making" to cultural sociology (2002: 1). The discourse of some ethnographical works that follow the constructivist approach and cultural sociology intersect in that both seek to avoid a reductionist view of culture;

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[1] Here I am refering to Jeffrey C. Alexander´s article which is titled "Analytic debates: Understanding the relative autonomy of culture" in  Alexander, Jeffrey C and Steven Seidman. (1990) *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

"meaning and interpretation are active and fluid processes", as Spillman puts it (2002: 4).

In light of the new perspectives in cultural sociology, in particular, the Strong Program, could ethnographic writing be enriched? As Spillman claims that it was formerly one of the studies that were presented with another name and, thus not directly associated with cultural sociology, although it is related to "collective meaning-making". (Spillman 2002: 6). Her main dissatisfaction with ethnographic writing lies in the fact that it only focuses on the "deviant and powerless" and somehow ignores the "mainstream culture" (Ibid). What seems plausible for ethnography studies is to accept the "autonomy of culture" and to seek to "discover the nature of internal and subjective structures", as discussed by Alexander and Seidman in their account of "hermeneutics" (1990: 3).

In parallel to Alexander's and Spillman's arguments, scholars such as Martiniello and Lafleur call attention to the independent comprehension of "cultural and artistic practices" and the way it people recognize it (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008: 1199). They allude to the contemporary music studies that dismiss the "passive" position of the public in experiencing music in the age of globalization, unlike some critical thinkers of the twentieth century. They mention the views of Bourdieu, Adorno and Gramsci, according to whom the "individual" does not have a chance to select his/her music. They imply that in today's cultural scene, it is problematic to apply Bourdieu's "habitus", Adorno's "culture industry" and Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" as if they were the determiners in the way music would be "imposed" (Ibid). Another significant argument they make about music is related to the meaning-making aspect. This is rather to do with making sense of self-orientation through music. Drawing from Martin Stokes, they stress the function of

music that is to offer the public a perception of "identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (Stokes cited in Martinello and Lafleur: 1199).

According to many constructivist ethnographic works, culture is "syncretic, bricolage, creolized, translated, crossover, cut'n mix, hybrid, alternate, mélange" (Kaya 2001: 80). In many cases, cultural sociologists will not oppose this constructivism unless the arguments are formed rationally. However, what distinguishes these two approaches is that the former seems to create a rhetoric that attempts to vindicate the challenge of the youth subcultures in the transnational field. [2] In other words, the works tend to side with the underdog. In the example of Kaya´s work, this rather optimistic but not necessarily questioning approach emphasizes that the transnational musical space Kreuzberg in Berlin means for the working-class Turkish hip-hop youth a "fortress against discrimination" (Kaya 2001:151). While Alexander acknowledges this kind of ethnography writing (in the example of the works of the Birmingham school) as having the potential of being "brilliantly illuminating", he finds it flawed due to the lack of interest in "the cultural autonomy" (Alexander 2003: 17). This kind of ethnographic writing is what Alexander calls "sociology of culture,"[3] which relates "cultural forms to social structure" in with the overtones of "hegemony" (Ibid). As it is expressed in Kaya's text like in the above-mentioned role of hip-hop in Kreuzberg against 'discrimination', that the identity claims due to the "violent ethnic conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s" (Moya and Hames-Garcia 2002: 2) brought about changes in cultural expressions. Kosnick, in this respect, refers to "German social work and cultural policy environment" which

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[2] The author writes a doctoral dissertation about the role of Turkish and Kurdish music into the lives of emigrants from Turkey in Germany. Much of the recent literature on the musical fields are ethnographic works, influenced by constructivist theories, thus it seems interesting for the author to compare this literature with the discourse of cultural sociology.

[3] Jeffrey Alexander, here also gives an example of "Paul Willis's ethnographic study of working-class school kids" (Alexander 2003: 17).

regards hip-hop as an ideal tool for the young migrants to articulate "their own marginalized experiences" (Kosnick 2007: 85).

**Analysis of Ethnographies from a Cultural Sociology' Perspective:**

Studying cultural sociology enhances scholars to read ethnographies according to the scopes of the weak and strong program in Alexanderian sense. Although making a clear-cut distinction and claim whether the ethnographies on the Turkish musical scene in Europe follow the "Strong" or "Weak"[4] programs, it is possible to interpret the literature according to these scopes and discuss the tendencies. The texts which accord with the cultural sociology and the Strong program should not at least, disregard the mainstream and meaning. In plain words, cultural sociologists can investigate the subaltern groups, such as the hip-hop youths however, they should perhaps also refer to the relationship between the subaltern and the mainstream. At the same time, cultural sociologists should be able to point out social class differences when it is necessary. Nonetheless, their chief interest in meaning should not keep in the background.

While focusing on meaning, cultural sociologists should pay attention to the meaning that arises primarily in the minds of the participants. This does not mean that he/she will use the same language or construct the same ultimate meaning with the participant. As Holloway and Wheeler reminds us:

> *The meaning of the participants differs from scientific interpretations. Researchers move back and forth, from the reality of informants to scientific interpretations, but they must find a balance between involvement in the culture they study and scientific reflections and ideas about the beliefs and practices within that culture* (Holloway and Wheeler 1996: 143).

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[4] I am referring to the chapter titled "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology" (Alexander 2003) and the sub–title "Weak Programs in Contemporary Cultural Theory", p.17.

This is important when the researcher constructs meaning from the data he/she receives from the fieldwork. In the works that correspond to the weak program, theoreticians sometimes have claims that reflect ideology-making in stead of meaning-making, thus they are not compatible with the goals of cultural sociology. This is clearly visible in Kaya's ethnography. In many ways, he follows a "weak program." In "Rhizomatic Diasporic Space: Cultural Identity of the Berlin-Turkish Working-Class Youth," he puts forward a very contestable argument that renders a Gramscian "organic intellectual" role to the Berlin-Turkish hip-hop youth[5] (Kaya 2001b: 15). Besides being a less important constituent for cultural sociology in terms of not relating chiefly to "meaning", Kosnick criticizes this simplistic attitude by reminding us that the Gramscian organic intellectual's task is to render its mass "an awareness of its function" (Kosnick 2007: 79). Another "weakness" of Kaya's theorization in the sense of Alexander's term of the "weak program" and from the perspective of cultural sociology dominates Kaya's text. The overtones of sociology of culture are highly visible when Kaya reduces Berlin-Turkish hip-hop youth to a subculture, which according to him, "establishes solidarity networks against the major clusters of modernity such as capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and militarism" (Kaya 2001b: 29).

Kaya makes it clear from the beginning of his account that his aim is to reveal an "alternative picture of Turkish youth, commonly portrayed as destructive, Islamic, fundamentalist and problematic by the majority society". (Kaya 2001b: 1) This kind of approach whose final goal is stated in the beginning runs the risk of overshadowing the partial rightfulness of the arguments or the dominant picture depicted in the other

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[5] Alexander (2003) notes that "neo-Gramscian theorizing exhibits the telltale weak program ambiguities over the role of culture"…(page: 17)

sources. It would not be unethical to put forward directly, for instance, the so-called "destructive" or "problematic" aspects of the Turkish youth. As Spillman accentuates, "ethnographic studies of subcultures 'were distanced from the mainstream concerns which engaged the field': ("others" might have culture, but mainstream culture was less visible)" (Spillman 2002: 6).

Kaya argues in a rather generalizing way that German-Turkish youth has the propensity to constitute a "bricolage of cultures and identities" (Kaya 2001b: 3). This is, in my view, partially true; however, it is not valid for all the social classes. More specifically, it is hardly valid for the working-class Turkish diasporic youth in Berlin that Kaya examines. Kaya gives an account of formal works that define, according to him, with "stereotypical notions" like "identity crisis", "in-betweennness", "lost generation", "split identities" and "disoriented children" and reasons that this is the logic that establishes "adaptation schools for the returnees children in Turkey with the co-operation of Turkish and German governments" (Ibid). This assertion might have grounds, but we as scholars do not have to follow that discourse in the same way that the governments use it. Rather we, as social scientists, should stick to the "category of analysis" in the Bourdieuian sense[6] and set aside what else has been done outside academia. Examining conflicts in identities will not eventually relegate scholars to becoming discriminatory politicians.

The straightforward, short and often generalized analyses, thus suspend the sociologists or anthropologists to reach "meaning". At this point, Geertz's "thick description" should guide the researcher, as Alexander points out, "of the codes, narratives and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning" (Alexander 2003: 13). As Geertz puts it, ethnographic narrative depends on "the degree to which

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[6] See: Brubaker, Rogers (2004) *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2004. p.31.

he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these?" (Geertz cited in Spillman 2002: 66-67). It is then a weakness that Kaya's work lacks textual support, which reveals the actors' ways of thinking. It is rather facile to state this without much elaboration, as such: "The second generation, often described in melodramatic terms as 'caught between two cultures but part of neither'" (Kaya 2001b: 3). During my ethnographic research in Hamburg, I have likewise heard so many times similar statement in the form of self-identification, not only from the second generation, but also from the third or fourth, from the persons involved in musical activity ranging from middle school to university graduates.

Despite its weaknesses, Kaya's text occasionally acquires a certain extent of value from the perspective of cultural sociology. When the text focuses on issues such as the "symbolic bridge" between Germany and Turkey by means of their summer vacation and their habit of listening to music that is produced in both lands (Kaya 2001b: 6), then it makes sense for cultural sociology. At the same time, there are issues such as "symbolic ethnicity" that the hiphop youth reflects in their understanding of religion by wearing or carrying certain "ethnic symbols". What it means to carry a "Turkish flag", "grey wolf with a crescent moon", and "Koran necklace" for the Right and "forked sword", the picture of the Chaliph Ali and or Pir Sultan Abdal for the Alevites", Kaya at least briefly explains these in his text (Ibid: 6-7).[7]

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[7] The importance of studying symbols in ethnography is discussed below within the framework of "denotation" and "connotation".

**Intimations of the Strong Program in Ethnography**

Following a Barthesian reading of the symbols, messages and statements provide the ethnographer the tool to describe the field with rich interpretations. Alexander names him among the authors whose "approaches remain too abstracted", and did not achieve to "specify agency and causal dynamics". However, he qualifies him as one of the contributors of "hermeneutic and theoretical resources to establish the autonomy of culture" and acknowledged him as one of the pioneers of "a strong program" (Alexander 2003: 16-17). Ethnographers should be able to offer multiple layers of the representations for cultural sociology in a similar sense with the semiologists. In this sense, there can be a parallel between the reading of the "myth" in Barthesian sense and the interpretation of actors' or institutions' discourses or symbols through connotations. Rojek refers to the "denotation" and the "connotation" that Barthes uses to describe the "myth". Accordingly he relates that denotation is associated with the "factual articulation of an idea or graphic image", whereas, the connotation is associated with "the chain of representations that the idea or graphic image signifies" (Rojek cited in Elliott and Turner 2001: 169). The study of "denotations and connotations" despite not being openly stated, is present in Maria Wurm's article, titled "Turkish Popular Music in Germany". The author, drawing from Ayse Caglar, addresses the way that the modern Turkish clubs are represented in German cities. She refers to the selection of the names of the clubs from the "metropolitan and urban places like Taksim Square in Istanbul". In this respect, if the clubs names are the denotations, the connotations of having such names refer to " the social rose of the owner and the guests of the place" (Wurm cited in Al-Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann 2008: 378).

Meaning-oriented ethnographic writing that combines openness to the mainstream has been actually recently present. The above-mentioned resentments of Spillman, due to the mainstream's keeping in the background, and the trend, supporting the active positioning of the public in making sense of the music in contemporary music studies seem to have found a voice in this ethnographic writing. Wurms'article in many aspects embodies with the characteristics of cultural sociology and the Strong Program. In Wurm's study, the author describes music as an instrumental "leitmotif", through which Turkish youth in Germany feel "affiliated" to certain groups and develop a sense of "safety". At the same time, she draws from Johannes Moser who dismisses the idea that today people still belong the classical "class" formations. In stead, she relates Moser's proposition that "contexts, necessities and needs" determine the "network" that people should join in parallel with the "individualization of life situations". (Wurm cited in Al Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann 2008: 388-389). At this point, it should be noted that this argument has mutual grounds with the above-mentioned "autonomy of culture" for cultural sociology, because it advocates the existence of fluidity in group memberships. Thereby, it also implies that the artistic taste steadily becomes a matter of individual choice and thereby freed from the confined class position. While Kaya's text as a "weak program" did not pay importance to the relationship between the Turkish hip-hop youth and the mainstream Turkish youth; Wurm emphasized the attitude of the Turkish mainstream youth toward the other "youth cultures". Wurm stresses the collective meaning of being mainstream among the Turkish youth in Germany is to seem "non-resistant and unobtrusive". Wurm maintains that the mainstream Turkish youth, thus distances itself from the subcultures and Turkish hip-hop youth. Their association with the mainstream, according to Wurm provides them "distinction" and

"expression of self-image" (Wurm cited in Al Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann 2008: 389-390). By doing this theorization, Wurm adheres to the participants' statements:

*These punks, for example [...], just because of their outward appearance tjey are written off somehow. I don't want to judge whether they are stupid or not, I don't know [...] Just because I think one shouldn't wall oneself off from society and only hang around with your own kind of people which doesn't mean that I'm a follower or want to suck up people.* (excerpt from the citation*).* (Wurm cited in Al Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann 2008: 389).

"Emotions" and its relation to music in terms of meaning-making process is perhaps one of the conspicuous domains about which sociology of culture cannot much speculate. However, Wurms text, seemingly from the cultural sociology perspective, pays attention to the concepts such as "home", and "family life" that are reminiscent of "emotional warmth" for the young Turkish music audience, who associates them as the constituents of the "Turkish context". It highlights the fact that "German or English context" is reminiscent of "school" and "job", therefore with the feelings of refusal and estrangement (Wurm cited in Al-Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann 2008: 383). The author does not intend to make essentialist claims by distinguishing Germanness or Turkishness, rather she attempts to interpret these feelings through how participants' statements. Similarly, I have also received answers during my ethnographic work in Hamburg such as, singing in the choruses of Turkish classical or folk music provides the chorus members the effect of a "therapy". The participants, however could not or did not want to express the meaning of this word. My interpretation is that, by means of choruses, the participants are able to establish collectivity and thus, in parallel to Wurm's suggestion above, they experience to be in a secure shelter by singing Turkish music.

To conclude, cultural sociology fulfills a significant role in offering well-organized perspectives that criticize the logic of the sociology of culture – which sees culture as a dependent variable. Ethnographic writing, as discussed above, has the potential to benefit from cultural sociology. In order to achieve this, cultural sociology implies that it should free itself from sociology of culture and the habit of forming arguments that are dependent on the base. Instead, cultural sociology suggests ethnographic works following a line of thinking that is chiefly meaning-oriented. In this paper, I have attempted to apply Alexander's concept of weak and strong programs to the ethnographical writing on the Turkish musical scene in Germany. The ideological overtones in Kaya's work and his fascination with the anti-hegemonic epithet of the Turkish working class hip-hop youth leave almost no space for meaning in Kaya's account. If the author followed a rather disinterested track and attempted to employ semiotics, he would approach the strong program. Whereas, Wurm's study, despite being a shorter article, contain much value in terms of focusing on "meaning" and acknowledging the "autonomy of culture"; thus, deserves to be categorized as a strong program.

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