

## Cultural Sociology

ISAAC REED AND JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

A foundational principle of cultural sociology is that meaning is relational – that the meanings of symbols, words, tropes, metaphors, ideologies, and so on emerge in concert and contrast to other meanings of social import. This is as true of the terms “culture” and “cultural sociology” as it is of anything else. In particular, cultural sociology in its current use and meaning emerges both diachronically in contrast to the humanities, anthropology and the sociology of culture, and synchronically in relation to the core sociological terms of structure, action, and critique.

### FROM THE HUMANITIES TO CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY, VIA THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

The old-fashioned definition of culture, which had as its institutional locus the humanities departments of elite Western universities in the early and mid-twentieth century, referred to what Matthew Arnold called “the best that has been thought and said.” Culture was, according to this definition, intellectual and artistic activity and the artifacts produced by this activity, and to have culture was to possess the ability to interpret these artifacts, and the taste to distinguish the good ones from the bad ones. Simultaneously, Western anthropology developed a totalizing concept of culture that was expected to do the comparative work of differentiating the peoples of the world. Culture was thus the counterpoint to the concept of “human nature” which formed the subject of physical anthropology.

Over and against these definitions, the sociology of culture has developed a more nuanced, and more critical, account of the role of the symbolic and the artistic in society. The pretensions of the humanities’ definition of culture, and the construction of the literary, dramatic, and musical canon that went along with it, were revealed as the tools of social exclusion and the maintenance of hierarchy. Furthermore, by carefully examining the aesthetics of both popular cultural artifacts, and the creative cultural activities of classes, races, and genders traditionally excluded from the realm

of high arts production and appreciation, the sociology of culture has been essential to the deconstruction of the high/middle/lowbrow culture typology. Meanwhile, historical sociology has shown the connections between the anthropological imagination and various nationalist and colonialist projects of nineteenth-century Europe, whereby the totalizing concept of culture was complicit in the exoticization and simultaneous subordination and colonization (and sometimes extermination) of native populations. Extensive debates about the political valences and historical guilt of the concept of culture have ensued. But perhaps more importantly for ongoing empirical research, sociologists have found the anthropological concept of culture to be underspecified; for sociology, differentiating culture from nature is not enough. Rather, culture must be defined in relation to society, history, and individual psychology, and, furthermore, the differentiation between culture and nature must be itself be examined historically with an eye towards its varying social effects (many anthropologists have also come to this conclusion). Thus while sociology has drawn extensively on symbolic, structuralist, and linguistic anthropology for its own studies of culture, it has resisted the temptation to directly conflate culture with the social as such, and the culture/society distinction has been a productively unstable one.

In approaching culture as a social object of study, then, the sociology of culture forms a sub-field alongside the sociology of religion and the sociology of science, and takes within its purview both high literature and pulp fiction, Fellini films and Hollywood schlock, art music and rock “n” roll. With the advent of the production of culture perspective in the 1970s, centered around the work of Richard Peterson, and the concepts of field and cultural capital, drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this sub-field has gained both empirical purchase and theoretical sophistication. In taking culture as its object of study, however, the sociology of culture tends to bring to bear both methods and theories which were designed for the study of other sociological phenomena, and tends, still, towards the inclination that social structure and the actions of individuals can be used explain culture, as opposed to the other way around. This is the basic meaning of “reduction” which, by tracing culture’s “reflection,” “mediation,” “expression,” “determination by,” “isomorphism with,” or “homologous relation to” deeper and more real social networks, class tensions, or material realities, explains culture and gives the sociology *of* culture its name.

Yet the sociology of culture so constituted begs certain questions, and remains theoretically incomplete, and it is in the encounter with this incompleteness that one finds the origins of cultural sociology. Why are social actors so interested in cultural artifacts in the first place, as opposed to other, functional equivalent, status markers? Does the role of culture in modern and late capitalistic societies exceed its use as a tool for buying and selling, and status differentiation? Despite their suspicions about how modern rationality emptied the world of meaning, both Durkheim and Weber had moments where they viewed the construction and use of social meaning as the most basic social process in all societies, and Marx made clear in his passage on commodity fetishism that the supposed difference between a “civilized” Englishman and an African “savage” was an illusion – both worshiped at the altar of something that, for them, gave life meaning.

It is thus that cultural sociology emerges from the opposition between the humanities and the sociology of culture to offer both a concrete and an analytic definition

of culture. Concretely, culture refers to those social objects and activities which are primarily or exclusively symbolic in their intent or social function, such as art, music, and sports. Analytically, culture refers to the symbolic and ideational element of any social action, social relationship, or historical pattern. Culture is signifiers and their signifieds, gestures and their interpretation, intended and unintended meanings, written discourse and effective speech, situational framing and scientific paradigms, moral and political ideals, and so on. The methodologies for studying culture so conceived range widely, and include surveys of attitudes and beliefs, participant observation, ethnography, structured and unstructured interviews, textual analysis of written and visual media, and conversation analysis. Ultimately, however, all of these methods involve the interpretation of meaning, and thus cannot be mapped directly from the methods of the natural sciences, though the extent to which scientific methods can be adapted to the study of culture is a matter of significant dispute.

What must be remembered, however, is that non-reductionist cultural sociology remains interested, ultimately, in the explanation of social action – it is not a return to the full, un-ironic engagement of aesthetics, and it is not a version of *de gustibus non est disputandum* (on this, see Born, forthcoming). The point is not to give up on the explanation of taste – or on the explanation of any other social phenomenon – but rather to approach this task of explanation from a perspective that makes meaning central, and refuses to set the relationship of meaning to society *in advance* as one in which real interests, structures, and opportunities drive the ephemeral imaginations of those who interpret culture.

This brings us the central terms of sociological theory in relation to which cultural sociology defines itself, and which, in its more ambitious theoretical moments, it attempts to reform: structure, action, and critique.

## CULTURE AS STRUCTURE

Repeatedly in sociological theory and research, culture is distinguished from social structure. Talcott Parsons distinguished the cultural from the social system in a strictly analytic fashion (his student Niklas Luhmann would later claim that this should in fact be a concrete distinction). And Parsons suggested that the study of culture in all its symbolic elaborations could be left to anthropology, and that sociology could focus on the place where culture and social structure met, namely, on the institutionalization of values and norms. Structural functionalism suggested that culture, through normative interpenetration, could perform an integrative function in the service of social equilibrium, and thus that social change came with a breakdown in value consensus (as in Chalmers Johnson's theory of social revolution).

These assertions were subjected to relentless attack for suppressing the role of strife and domination in society (and in the use of culture). However, it is perhaps more instructive, now, to notice a deeper problem with structural functionalism, namely its interpretive deafness. By approaching culture as "norms and values," structural functionalism not only projected certain liberal ideals onto its model of society, but, more significantly, evacuated meaning from culture, robbing its analysis of nuance and empirical specificity. For, an engagement with the multiple layers of

the symbolic immediately reveals that culture in modern societies is neither homogeneous nor consensual. Rather, the size and makeup of collectivities that share certain symbolic articulations vary significantly (from small religious cults to large voting populations), and these symbolic articulations are contested both within and without collectivities.

Mid-century Marxism and post-1960s conflict theory insisted that culture was more of a guarantor of hierarchy, exploitation, and inequality, and thus saw culture as ideology. And though the political commitments and theoretical presuppositions of conflict theory were fundamentally at odds with those of Parsonian functionalism, one can discern in the studies of the objective basis of systematically distorted communication, and in references to the political and economic functions of ideology, very similar problems to those that plagued the structural-functional approach. Here too, culture is assumed to be relatively uniform, at least in its social effects, and its study is guided by theoretical intuitions about the workings of the social system, and in particular the exploitation of labor. Thus Marxist repudiations of culture as ideology also suffered from a lack of musicality, and inattention to the empirical details of culture's varied production, performance, and reception.

In both cases, these problems were exacerbated by imagining social structures as hard, real, and external to the actor, in opposition to culture as a more pliable and less efficacious possession of individual minds. Furthermore, both structural functionalism and Marxism were embedded in teleological philosophies of history and social evolution that enabled them to locate the appropriate relations between social structure and culture in an *a priori* theoretical manner. As these teleologies came to be seen as more the meaningful, ideational constructions of sociologists' own cultures than ontological certainties about actual societies, the strict scientific distinction between social structure and culture began to break down, as did the various conceptions of their relationship. This breakdown created an opening for sociology to develop the tools necessary for a more sensitive and empirically sophisticated approach to culture in its collective forms. This has been accomplished by studying culture as a structure in its own right, a theoretical development that has taken three central forms.

The study of symbolic boundaries, associated with the work of Michele Lamont (*Money, Morals and Manners*, 1994), has shown how actors construct and maintain meanings as a mode of ordering, including, and excluding their fellow humans, over and against the exigencies of social structure. Thus, the economic basis for class is overwritten by an attribution of certain moral qualities to certain humans, based on criteria (including religion, race, and so forth) that may cross-cut the expectations of more reductively minded sociologists who would map class consciousness directly onto economic position, and so on.

The study of discourse and its relationship to power, based on the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, has enabled sociologists to examine not only articulated boundaries, but also unstated exclusions, and more generally the cultural construction of certain taken-for-granted "positivities" of modern life. Thus one can examine from a reflexive historical perspective how certain kinds of human subjects (for example, insane people and medical patients) and social problems (for example, homosexuality) came to be of such great concern, and how their meaningful construction affected the way they were dealt with, inside and outside of mainstream

society. Though Foucault's work has been largely appropriated in the humanities as a set of theorems concerning power and knowledge more appropriate to critical theory than to empirical sociology, his early studies of madness, medicine, and the episteme of the classical and modern ages are in fact rich historical reconstructions of landscapes' meaning, and their essential role in the social processes of treatment, exclusion, and philosophical understanding. These issues are developed in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1988 [1964]) and in Mukerji (1990).

Finally, the conception of culture as a structure in its own right has enabled the sociological transformation of a set of tools from literary theory and semiotics. Culture can be studied as a social text, replete with codes, narratives, genres, and metaphors. Then, culture can be examined in both its concrete and analytic autonomy from social structure, which enables us to isolate and make clear its effects (and its varying political valences) from a sociological point of view. So, for example, the long struggle for women's rights in the United States can be seen as a discursive battle for civil inclusion, according to which a new set of actors came to be coded in a democratic and morally positive way (see Alexander 2006). This conception of culture suggests, moreover, that social structures themselves are interpreted variably by social actors, and thus must be attended to hermeneutically by cultural sociologists, with an eye to their meaningful aspects, their locality, and their historical specificity (see Alexander 2003; Geertz 1973).

### Culture in action

Since culture is often contrasted to social structure, and furthermore associated with subjectivity, then it should not be surprising that it has often been erroneously conflated with action and its related terms: agency, reflexivity, and consciousness. However, as culture has become recognized as a structure in its own right, the relationship of culture to action has become a key component of sociological theory and research. The ongoing debate about culture and action has its roots in two different sociological traditions, both of which contribute to contemporary cultural sociology. On the one hand, the analytic tradition, descending from Parsons's formalization of Max Weber's means–ends approach to action, approached culture in terms of the ways culture sets the ends of action. Action is thus structured not only by interests, but by norms as well. Originally opposed to economic accounts of social action, the strictly analytic approach to purposive action has been revived in contemporary sociological debates about agency and rationality. But a deeper understanding of the role of culture for action has been developed from within this tradition by recognizing culture as an internal environment for action, arguing thus that culture orients action by structuring subjectivity. Social actors respond to sets of internal typifications of the social world and thus are dependent upon meaningful symbolization in setting their goals, and in imagining how they can go about meeting them. By reintroducing the symbolic as an environment of action full of rich narratives and morally and emotionally loaded oppositions, this approach integrates the expanded approach to culture-as-structure elaborated above.

On the other hand, the pragmatic tradition, descending from George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, rejects the means–ends characterization of action outright, and suggests instead that actors constantly negotiate situations in an

improvisatory way, attempting to make sense of and solve both social and physical problems as they arise. Originally, because of its distance from the analytic abstractions of the Parsonian tradition, and its tendency towards methodological individualism, this tradition was not really oriented towards culture per se, though it had a conception of the use of symbols and framing on the micro level. Increasingly, however, the descendants of this tradition have developed a conception of culture-as-use that conceives of the knowledgeable agent as the link between culture and society. It is actors, in social situations, that draw on culture when institutional consistency breaks down.

Thus the contemporary debate is structured by two positions, that of culture-in-action (illustrated in Swidler 1986), and that of culture as thick environment for action (see Alexander 1988). Both approaches have significant insights to offer. The first emphasizes that actors continually work to render coherent and solvable discursive and institutional problems that arise in the flow of social life. The second emphasizes the way in which the social world is constructed for the actor by previous interpretations and collective languages. In either case, these approaches suggest the importance of culture for the study of social life. For example, we should perhaps discuss the discursive repertoires of politicians, and the resonance of these repertoires with the shared codes of their audience-electrates, as opposed to the "revealed preferences" of either. The contrasts between the two approaches have, however, produced significantly different forms of theory and research.

One important manifestation of the symbolic interactionist tradition has been Gary Fine's development of the concept of *idiocultures*, whereby small groups develop an idiosyncratic set of meanings (beliefs, knowledge, and customs) that forms the basis for mutual understanding and further interaction and action. Thus cooks in various classes of restaurants develop an aesthetic language that enables them to communicate with each other concerning the manifestly practical problems of smell and taste.

Alternately, Robin Wagner-Pacifici has developed the concept of social drama within the more analytic tradition of action and its environments, so as to enable the study of social situations where symbolic and physical violence interact. In studying terrorist kidnappings, standoffs between government and its discontents, and surrenders, she develops a deep understanding of morally loaded environments for action. When the social fabric is breached, actors must work within certain dramatic frameworks, and with certain obtainable identities. Thus, in a standoff between the *Freemen of Montana* and the US government, it was a mediator who had fought in Vietnam and, like some of the leaders of the *Freemen*, had formed his core identity in the crucible of that experience and its subsequent narration who was able bridge the symbolic gap between the antagonists. Action was deeply structured by the symbolic environments of traumatic memory and the enactment of masculinity.

The specificity of the kinds of meanings that are enacted, however, points to both the possible misinterpretations of the relationship between action and culture, and to the way forward in the theoretical debate. For the exclusive emphasis on culture as it is used by actors can support the naturalistic approach to social structure and thus an understanding of culture as unstructured and primarily the possession of individuals. In this conception, it is meaning-less institutions that set the parameters

of the action problem, and culture is merely the way actors make sense of things as they are solving it, perhaps important for filling out an explanation, but not essential to it. The environments to action approach is faced with a similar danger, for insofar as it retains vestiges of Parsons's action frame of reference, it can be taken to indicate that sociology can produce, in theory alone, a mechanistic explanation of the interaction of norms and interests that will apply everywhere, regardless of cultural differences.

Perhaps most significantly, it is important that action theory be prevented from becoming a sort of existential meditation on the capacities (or incapacities) of human freedom, rather than a way to examine the social contingencies of actually existing meaning. If the knowledgeable agent becomes a sort of philosophical and methodological hero, whose reflexivity about her location in structure ultimately makes her the master of the cultural formations in her head, then the sociological purpose of examining cultural structures is vitiated, as collective meaning formations melt away in the face of agency and knowledge as developed by Anthony Giddens in *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

Thus the way forward in the action-culture debates lies in the development of a meaning-full account of action through a theorization of social performance, by linking action theory to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and Kenneth Burke's literary theory, but also Judith Butler's reconception of the poststructuralist tradition of social thought. By thinking of social situations of varying scope (from small group interactions to media events watched by millions) as dramas being played out on a public stage, with certain actors and audiences, props and social powers, emergent scripts and cultural backgrounds, we can conceive of the exigencies of social action in a thoroughly cultural way that does not reduce meaning to social structure. Action, then, is the putting into scene of certain intended and unintended meanings. This is to say that the theorization of action not only has to take into account cultural structures, but must further focus on how actions are themselves interpretations of these structures, and thus responds to logics of meaning and identity underneath the interests and norms that were once supposed to do the work of explaining them; this argument is developed in Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006.

## CULTURE AND CRITIQUE

The sociologically inspired critique of culture used to be based almost entirely on references to the social as existing outside of culture itself. It was thus diametrically opposed to the sense of criticism associated with the detailed reading of the literary canon, and with humanistic studies more generally. The obvious exception was Marxist literary criticism, in particular that of Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, which entered into literary texts themselves to find the logics of ideology. While their work foreshadowed the development of cultural studies, it remained nonetheless within the discourse of suspicion about culture, usually understood as bourgeois culture (and its discontents). This, in the course of twentieth-century criticism and the invention of cultural studies, was expanded into the study of the many varieties of hegemonic culture, to the point where Gramsci's term was no

longer associated with a specifically Marxist perspective, but rather used as the touchstone of cultural criticism from the perspective of almost any dominated or oppressed social group.

There is, in this form of cultural study, a deep and ongoing tension between the process of debunking ideology, and the more diffuse and obscure process of “deconstruction.” The latter term – taken from Derrida but usually combined with a Foucauldian analysis of power/knowledge – has, at times, produced an overarching suspicion of all norms and normalcy, and indeed the very process of making normative claims about how society should be ordered. This has had a strange effect on the academic left, introducing a strand of extreme skepticism which would be entirely incomprehensible to Marxists with a strong sense of the utopian promise of revolution. In reforming the project of critique, cultural sociology attempts to avoid this aspect of the postmodern turn.

Instead, cultural sociology aims to connect the normative orientation towards democracy, social inclusion, and the critique of power with the interpretation of cultures, asking what the basis is, in extant social meaning, for the improvement of the conditions under which humans live together. The project of hermeneutics, once associated with the conservative aesthetic hierarchies of the German philosophical tradition, can now be seen as a rich source of critique in a post-positivist and post-orthodox-Marxist age, as exemplified by the work of Michael Walzer. The epistemological implication of his work is that sociological critique must abandon its pseudo-scientific assumption of an exterior stance or view from nowhere, and develop critical distance through extensive engagement, dialog, and interpretation. Thereby, critical perspectives on contemporary societies will share some of the empirical purchase of cultural sociology, and will attend to the communicability of new normative understandings of justice and equality. More generally, insofar as sociological critique is no longer beholden to scientific certainty, revolutionary upheaval, and the genre of debunking, its normative repertoire of critical tropes, subtle ironies, and imagined ideals can be expanded (for a fuller version of this argument, see Reed 2007).

### THE CULTURAL TURN IN SOCIOLOGY: EMPIRICAL MANIFESTATIONS

Ultimately, then, the theoretical reorientation implied by cultural sociology has enabled sociologists to approach a variety of sub-fields of empirical research from a different perspective. This is what is known as “the cultural turn.” Though the end goal is often the same – the explanations of sets of patterned social actions – the means to that end now involve ferreting out the varied meanings of a dominant discourse, examining the signification systems embodied in rituals, and asking how social life is lived according to symbolic frameworks.

Sociology’s ongoing preoccupation with modernity, and the history of state formation, has led to a focus on the constitution of nations as collective identities. In explaining economic takeoff in western Europe, the consolidation of the power of states, and the emergence and importance of democratic publics and the free press, sociologists have increasingly focused on the construction of nations as “imagined



communities” and “discursive fields,” and nationalism as “a unique form of social consciousness” (for example in Anderson 1991; Greenfeld 2007 [1992]; Spillman 1997).

The sociology of sex and gender has likewise experienced a cultural overhaul. While feminist and queer theory have questioned the naturalness of the sex/gender distinction, sociological research has examined the effects of actually existing cultural schemas of gender and sex for social outcomes, including family structure, women’s tendency to join or opt out of the workforce, and the ongoing existence of sexism in wage levels and status attainment. These studies examine gender as both a highly rigid structure of meaning, but also its varying enactment by women and men who attempt to negotiate the political and economic contradictions of modern society (for instance in Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996; Stacy 1990).

Finally, sociology’s longstanding normative concern with democracy and its incipient populism has also taken a cultural turn. For example, analyses of American political participation and activism have investigated how certain meanings either enable or discourage civic participation. The results have often been counterintuitive: doctrines of individual empowerment encourage activity and public responsibility, while norms of civility and politeness discourage political conversation and involvement which is developed in Eliasoph (1998) and Lichterman (1996).

### REINTERPRETING THE CLASSICS

Culture has thus moved towards the center of sociological discourse, as both a topic of study and a perspective from which to view the social. As reinterpretation is a primary form of theoretical advance, the perhaps predictable result of this has been that, simultaneously, the classics of social theory have come to be seen in a new light. New readings of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim have emerged.

While all twentieth-century Marxisms have given more importance to culture and ideology than did the crude economic Marxist orthodoxy that followed Marx’s death, the turn to culture in the 1960s and 1970s is evident in the increasing attention given to Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, as well as to the importance of the early, humanist, and perhaps even idealist-Hegelian, Marx. Either way, Marx is read as attentive to the capacity of meaning as a social force. One important result of this has been the way structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language have merged with Marxist historiography to produce a central thesis concerning postmodernism, namely that the postmodern age is one in which the workings of capitalism are increasingly dependent on signifiers as well as signifieds, that is, on the relational field of social symbolism. These approaches are illustrated in Jameson (1992) and Baudrillard (1981 [1972]).

Likewise, the last 40 years have seen a recovery of Weber’s sociology of art, as well as continuing debate over *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. However, most significantly, the concern with culture has also entered in to Weberian debates about the consolidation of state power and the institutionalization of rational bureaucracy. Here, sociologists have increasingly read Weber as a hermeneutic student of rationality as cultural form specific to Western history. In doing

so, Weber's concerns are read as not so different from Foucault's, and bureaucracy is less a mechanism to be uncovered than a form of symbolic action to be interpreted. This interpretation is developed in Gorski (2003).

Finally, the cultural turn in sociology has seen a renaissance and reconsideration of Durkheim later works, and in particular, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). This work has come to be seen as a key prolegomenon to the symbolic study of society as general project, including to the study of the role of culture in modern, industrial societies. Durkheim is thus read as uncomfortable with the materialist interpretations given to *The Division of Labor in Society* and as having made a key epistemic break in the years between the publication of *Suicide* and *Elementary Forms* (see Alexander 1986). As a result, Durkheim can be seen as a precursor to cultural structuralism in his emphasis on the autonomy of symbolic forms, and the importance of belief and ritual for the organization of society.

### CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY: "NEW CLASSICS"

Another aspect of this process of reinterpretation has been the emergence of new classic texts, required reading for any cultural sociologist. Though the cultural sociological canon, if there is one, is a dynamic and expanding group of texts, here we mention three.

Wilhelm Dilthey's essay, "The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Sciences" (1976) marked the author's departure from psychologism and entry into the study of meaning as itself a structure. It thus sets the stage for twentieth-century hermeneutics, and, eventually, for cultural sociology itself. Dilthey begins from German Romanticism's emphasis on the internal self and the complexities of subjective experience, and thus rejects any equation of the social and natural sciences. But he also rejects the notion that the human sciences and the interpretation of history are thus doomed to be unsystematic and arbitrary in their conclusions. Rather, he suggests that the interpretation of society and history must look towards the shared, background meanings which make individual subjectivity and experience possible, and that these meanings will contain the key to producing explanations of historical events and social phenomena.

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1998) provided the essential tools for the task Dilthey had set. In his structural theory of language, linguistic signs are divisible into signifier and signified, and meaning is determined relationally and is thus "arbitrary and conventional." Saussure's ideas on language – already intended, in his writings, to describe processes of symbolization more broadly – became the basis for structural anthropology, and more generally, the theoretical movements of structuralism and poststructuralism. Saussure's theory of meaning provides cultural sociology with the ability to study chains of signification empirically, and thus map in detail the collective representations to which Durkheim attributed so much force.

The essays collected in Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) brought Saussure's and Dilthey's insights together, and helped launch the contemporary cultural turn. Geertz's controversial concept of "thick description" articulated the methodological inclination of cultural sociology to get inside actors' meanings. But

it was what Geertz brought to his own efforts at thick description which expanded indefinitely the scope of cultural sociology. Geertz was able to use the concepts of humanistic and aesthetic criticism – such as genre, trope, metaphor, etc. – to describe social phenomena such as sporting events, the performance of state power, and religion. In his later work, Geertz suggested that this effort represented a “blurring” of genres of academic writing – between literary criticism and anthropology, for example. This may be so. But what Geertz’s work also suggested was a new, self-sustaining, and coherent genre of sociological writing, in which the tools of criticism were put to a different, and distinctly sociological use, namely, the development of understanding for the purpose of social explanation.

### FURTHER THEORETICAL QUESTIONS FOR CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY: REFRAMING “INTERPRETATION”

As a burgeoning paradigm for empirical research, cultural sociology – which began as an argument against the reductionisms of the sociology of culture and the cynicism of Marxist literary criticism – must confront its own positive knowledge claims, rather than rest content as a counterpoint or “alternative” to the mainstream sociological instinct to be suspicious of culture. This is to say that, in the future, cultural sociology must come to a fuller self-understanding, through an examination of the epistemologically and methodologically fraught term *interpretation*.

First, cultural sociology must provide a self-consistent account of the role of the investigator in social analysis. Though most cultural sociologists accept neither scientific norms nor postmodern normlessness as the parameters for their truth claims, what norms they do accept is an important issue to discuss in the abstract. In particular, it seems clear that sociologists want the meanings they reconstruct to be translatable, so that cultural comparison is possible, so as to perceive more clearly the varied relationships of meaning in action. Thus even single case studies or ethnographies implicitly contain a comparison, at least to the investigator’s own meaningful social contexts, and this comparative consciousness forms an important basis for the development of theory and research in cultural sociology. Thinking along these lines intersects with advances in the sociology of knowledge, and in particular with the sociology of science in the form of the “strong program” associated with David Bloor.

The second question concerns how forms of interpretation common to cultural sociology may apply outside the domain of what is either analytically or concretely called culture. A lot of work within poststructuralist theory has examined the symbolic and discursive basis for what sociologists are more likely to call social structure, namely, institutional formations, social sanction and exclusion, and even violence, as argued in Butler (1989). The extent to which these aspects of social life can actually be explored empirically, however, remains to be explored in terms of the philosophy of social science. Thus, for example, we need to ask how even the reconstruction of political strategies and economic exigencies involves the interpretation of highly reified and strictly executed meaning.

Finally, cultural sociology – which frequently claims the importance of local knowledge, the contingency of interpretation, and the constructedness of social reality over

and against the more standard forms of social structural analysis – must come to terms with the historical dimension of sociological analysis. Both “culture” and “history” are terms which, in academic discourse, tend to be used to defy the universalist claims of sociological theories that aspire to scientific status. Thus it is not surprising that many of their theoretical concerns and epistemological quandaries overlap. History, as a profession, has taken on board – to a certain degree – the claims of culture. Cultural sociology, likewise, should take on the great problems of comparative-historical sociology – the transition to modernity, the origins and maintenance of capitalism, the nature of the colonial encounter, the causes of social revolutions – which have for so long been comprehended under the aegis of political economy.

### Bibliography

- Alexander, J. (1986) “Rethinking Durkheim’s Intellectual Development II: Working out a Religious Sociology.” *International Sociology*. 1(2): 189–201.
- Alexander, J. (1988) *Action and its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Alexander, J. (2003) *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, J. (2006) *The Civil Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, J., Giesen, B., and Mast, J. (eds.) (2006) *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso.
- Baudrillard, J. (1981 [1972]) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos.
- Baudrillard, J. (2006) *The System of Objects*. New York: Verso.
- Blair-Loy, M. (2003) *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Born, G. (forthcoming) “The Social and the Aesthetic: Methodological Principles in the Study of Cultural Production,” in I. Reed and J. Alexander (eds.), *Meaning and Method: The Cultural Approach to Sociology*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Butler, J. (1989) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Dilthey, W. (1976) “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” in H. P. Rickman (ed.), *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eliasoph, N. (1998) *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1988 [1964]) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gorski, P. (2003) *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenfeld, L. (2007 [1992]) *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Hays, S. (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1992) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lamont, M. (1994) *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lichterman, P. (1996) *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mukerji, C. (1990) *A Fragile Power: Scientists and the State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Reed, I. (2007) "Cultural Sociology and the Democratic Imperative," in I. Reed and J. Alexander, *Culture, Society, and Democracy: The Interpretive Approach*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Reed, I., and Alexander, J. (eds.) (2007) *Culture, Society, and Democracy: The Interpretive Approach*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Reed, I., and Alexander, J. (eds.) (forthcoming) *Meaning and Method: The Cultural Approach to Sociology*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Saussure, F. de (1998) *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Open Court.
- Spillman, L. (1997) *Nation and Commemoration*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stacy, J. (1990) *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swidler, A. (1986) "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review*. 51(2): 273–86.
- Wagner-Pacifici, R. (2000) *Theorizing the Standoff: Contingency in Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.