1 Cultural Sociology and the Study of Emotions

> "*Structure of feeling* . . . is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization . . . I do not mean that the structure of feeling, any more than the social character, is possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community. But I think it is a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communication depends."
>
> Raymond Williams (1961, 48)

The notion "structure of feeling" was developed by Raymond Williams to give an account of people's responses to changes they were undergoing in English society since the eighteenth century. This was, in fact, a period of "decisive change" in almost all of social life, in literature and painting, in industry and engineering, in new conventions and institutions. People's creative activities, he argued, especially in the beginning of the nineteenth century, included far more than art, embracing "miracles" of human creative skill found in industry and engineering. "These are our poems," Thomas Carlyle said in 1842, looking at one of the new steam locomotives (R. Williams 1961, 71; cf. Emerson and Emerson, 1909). So, for example, Williams places the locomotive engine as central to the entire culture of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, a fact so important to the time and so often overlooked since then.

In this chapter and the following, like Williams, I intend to show that in our time, extraordinary creative forces of media and communication hold out to us a new and different structure of feeling from those of our predecessors living only a century ago, and only now becoming apparent to many of us. As Williams argued, this developing structure of feeling is our culture today. It is to be found in our most visible institutions—in our forms of mass media, in our forms of pleasure and entertainment, in the brute facts of our economy, in

our forms of work, and in our social classes. But it is also discovered in our notions of community and nationhood, our beliefs in individuality and in family, and in the emotions we feel and those we seek out in our daily lives with others. It is in some of the new collective forms of public life and entertainment that I will seek out our very own structure of feeling: our Super Bowls and reality TV, our public displays of grief and mourning at sites of violence and human disaster, our political campaigns and conventions, our new forms of leisure like mountain climbing and movie tourism ("Put an Everest in your life!" or "Ride the streets of San Francisco with Bullitt!").

I will study emotions throughout as part of culture, a culture discovered in what we do as much as what we think, a culture that is deeply emotional and driven by the new forms of mass media and the environments media creates for us: an environment found on the many screens we incessantly watch and inhabit in our daily lives, the near-endless sounds and music we hear or are plugged into at our gyms, the digital conversations we hold with multiple others in our daily lives.

Long regarded as the province of psychologists, the study of emotions by sociologists was infrequent. Regarded as intruders, sociologists who studied emotions were violators of the rules of disciplinary segregation. This situation has changed considerably in recent decades as we have witnessed a number of disciplinary walls tumbling down and with that a "blurring" of academic genres. Today there is a new breed of "psychological anthropologists" as well as a good number of prominent philosophers writing about the emotions. As well, there are psychologists writing about "culture," and in my own field of sociology, the sociology of emotions continues to flourish and to take root in Europe after decades of research in the United States.[1]

The subject matter of the sociology of emotions is remarkably broad and diverse, covering studies that range from various group and institutional "cultures" of emotion to works on the role of emotions in the consumer economy. In this—its diversity of subject matter—the

sociology of emotions reflects the direction that the discipline as a whole has taken for several decades. Once distinguished by a unitary theory and common set of assumptions, sociology has quickly become, in the relatively short span of a few decades, a field of diverse and conflicting approaches, while its purview has expanded to include fields as different as comparative historical studies and the phenomenology of everyday life. In many ways, the new diversity that has marked sociology for about four decades now has grown out of a movement of all the social sciences—economics, political science, and sociology—distinguished by a turn from a scientific to a more historical and critical stance to the study of societies and social change. This movement has also brought the study of culture to the forefront of these disciplines while advancing the interpretive approach to the study of human society and undermining the long-standing social-scientific claim to universal relevance and validity. Today, the various schools of social science have been formed relative to these controversies concerning culture's place in the social sciences, in particular whether or not the model for social-scientific inquiry is—as the culturalists would claim—language, the system and process for the study of representation, meaning, and interpretation (Rabinow and Sullivan [1979] 1987; Rabinow and Marcus 2008; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013).

Into this environment of change the sociology of emotions was introduced with early influential statements by Hochschild (1979; 1983), Heise (1977), Kemper (1978), Shott (1979), Collins (1981), and Gordon (1981, 1989). From these beginnings, this field reflected the methodological diversity of its host discipline and included leading authors and texts that drew from a range of sociological perspectives and a diversity of psychological models.[2] For the discipline as a whole, the new sociology of emotions also signified a turn to topics that resonated with the political and cultural ethos of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Sociology has always been a discipline that is peculiarly permeable to changes in the moral and political temper of the time, which in the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s resonated with

antinomian themes, celebrations of social conflict, deviant subcultures, and human liberation from social "roles," from political "oppressions," and from "society" itself (Kemper 1990, 3–4). The emotions could be seen as a topic that intuitively belonged in the vicinity of these concerns, whether because the emotions represented the domain of nature or the unsocialized or because the emotions served as a data for exposing that ever-elusive authentic self—themes I will return to later.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

But the social study of the emotions represented far more than this, however much these preoccupations about "selfhood" and "identity" weighed on our collective minds and souls. This vibrant new field of the sociology of emotions became one of the places for testing the new approaches identified with the movement called "social constructionism" and the burgeoning and influential fields known as "culture theory" and "cultural studies." Both fields have become the loci for investigations in linguistics, the humanities, and the social sciences whose common focus has been the interpretation of culture and its operations (Rabinow and Sullivan [1979] 1987; Alexander and Seidman 1990; Denzin 1992; Crane 1994; Cerulo 2002). While the early work in the sociology of emotions reflected the methodological diversity of sociology itself, more recently the sociology of emotions has taken a rather sharp "cultural turn" and has been dominated by a number of constructionist works.[3]

In fact, precisely at the same time that the sociology of emotions emerged in the early 1980s, the field of the sociology of culture was gaining ground to become one of the leading sections of the American Sociological Association, a fact that can be seen as a register of the growth of culturally based approaches to a wide range of sociological studies. This is not to say that the concept of "culture" was marginal to American sociology throughout its development. More accurately, for most of its history mainstream sociologists held "culture" as one

of its key concepts while conducting much of its work without reference to its actual operations. In the influential terms of Thomas Kuhn, "normal sociology" operated without reference to culture's importance, while a number of social theorists gave it a central place within the discipline's official perspective.[4]

Then, along with a number of other disciplines, from about the period of the 1970s to the present, the study of culture shifted to become sociology's central theme. This has required a rethinking of what "culture" (the sociological concept and theory) means, a reinvention of its main features and operations, and a repositioning of a number of subfields—the sociology of science, knowledge, art, religion, and popular culture—from the margins to the center of sociological investigation.[5] Among the many things this "cultural turn" (Robertson 1992; Bonnell and Hunt 1999) signified for social science was that social phenomena do not exist in their own right, but are *produced* and *communicated*, their meanings derived in and through culture and its operations. This claim has brought the exploration and use of language theory (e.g., linguistics, semiotics) to the forefront of social-scientific inquiries. It is summarized in the "constructionist" premise that every aspect of a society is something communicated and reproduced, including the domain of the psychological, a society's notion of personhood, and the prevailing discourses through which human beings experience and articulate the meanings of feeling states. In sociological studies of American character and identity, a field that has enjoyed a rich and long history in American social psychology (Bell 1991, 167–83; Inkeles and Levinson 1969), constructionism effectively shifted this field's focus from the formative role of social institutions (social structure) in shaping the American character to studies of the cultural features of "selfhood" and "identity," reflecting the relatively new approaches offered by the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and semiotics.[6]

Central to constructionism is the claim—a claim also found in works of the American pragmatists and "interactionists" (Shalin 1986)—that the objects of social science are neither neutral nor

unchanging. They are part of a meaningful universe, one that envelops both social-scientific observers and the actors they observe. This proposition led to the idea that social science is—both in its methods and in its theories of social meaning—cultural to the core (Reed and Alexander 2009). Accordingly, the very methods of studying social objects (whether persons or things) must account for their social and historical formation and reformation. This idea has been with US sociology throughout its history: it was what the early American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley had in mind when he described the institutions sociology studies as "definite and established phase[s] of the public mind, not different ... from public opinion." They are "apperceptive systems" or collective attitudes. Only by abstraction do we regard them as "things in themselves" (Cooley [1909] 1962, 313–14). Similarly, the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead formulated the idea that the "things" human beings produce are "social objects"; their status—their reality—is determined in the process of interaction in particular "situations" (sociocultural contexts): an object is a part or phase of an experienced world (Mead 1934, 77–9; Dewey 1936, 67). We find in these early and influential constructionist arguments the idea that the social world is made up of "social objects," *social* because they have no existence except for the specific contexts of social relations and language within which they emerge and in which they flourish or wane (Mead 1934, 78); their meaning also exists objectively within these fields (McCall and Simmons 1966, 49–52). This constructionist emphasis has effectively engaged the social scientist in three fields of study: the *language and speech* (discourses, social idioms, public opinion) in which social phenomena—whether collective practices or entire social worlds—are generated and sustained; the *knowledges* that communicate them as real; and the *social and group relations* within which they develop and occur. This cultural and cognitive emphasis that characterized many of the leading statements of the early social thinkers of the Chicago School and the "symbolic interactionist" tradition of sociology was an emphasis not given to the dominant schools of US sociology until recently.

Sociology's newfound interest in culture and communication (knowledge, language, speech, media) has been especially important in bringing sociologists into conversation with other disciplines—literary studies, communications, cultural anthropology, studies of popular culture, and the "new cultural history" (Hunt 1989; Bonnell and Hunt 1999)—as well as for taking on subject matters that require interdisciplinary approaches like the emotions. Examining the conceptual implications of structuralism and semiotics (a project sociology shares with many of these fields of inquiry), scholars have given greater attention today to studies of the *forms of signification*, including signs, symbols, texts, images, and ideologies. These types of inquiries have ushered in changes in the ways that many sociologists today understand and conceptualize culture and its operations, as well as changes in the foundational assumptions and presuppositions of the social sciences (Sewell 1999; Eagleton 2000; Alexander 2003). Yesterday's "attitude of analysis" was causal and explanatory, and its privileged model was natural science. Today's attitude is increasingly interpretive and conversational, seeking to enlarge the universe of human discourse. This is the aim of a *semiotic concept of culture*, by which I mean one directed toward the study of the symbolic and signifying systems through which a social order is experienced and communicated.[7]

My intention in this introductory statement on the study of emotions is to demonstrate what a cultural sociology can look like—how its object can be construed and what it can study—and, at the same time, to argue for its return to current works in emotion studies, whether inside or outside of sociology proper. This argument takes up and advances some of my early statements on emotions—"Emotions Are Social Things" (1989), "The Social Construction of Emotion" (1994), and "Emotions: Senses of the Modern Self" (2002)—on the importance of culture in understanding emotions and feelings, an emphasis that seems today to have been lost in my own field of sociology, where cultural approaches are set alongside of other sociological approaches to emotions as if they are either similar or equally

valid approaches to emotion studies (Turner and Stets 2005, 23–5). On this point I disagree: theories and methods in emotions studies do not exist on equal or the same footing; to elaborate how culture matters where the emotions are concerned means, inter alia, that the object of our emotion studies changes just as its methods of inquiry change. No other field than cultural sociology rests on this presupposition.

In putting forward a cultural approach to the study of emotions in these pages, I am arguing, contrary to many others, that the most important features of our current landscape can only be understood by taking culture seriously: our emotional lives today are our own, culturally and historically unique to our time and place in the postmodern world; emotions, as with all our experiences, are shaped by our ideas of what a person is and can be. Emotions are inextricably linked to what we call identity; emotions have become part of "being emotional" and "acting emotional," meaningful phrases in our current vocabulary. And these are not phrases familiar to the everyday vocabulary of either my mother or my grandmothers.

My argument, in a nutshell, is that emotions are—as objects of our sciences—inescapably and without remainder cultural objects, however much we know and feel them "as our own" (or as someone else's). Put differently, emotions are social things because they belong to the entire domain of culture and human meaning. But let me now get on with the business of advancing this argument.

Arguably, the most significant feature of this new cultural (semiotic) disposition for the social sciences has been its root metaphor of *construction*: the idea that the realities we study are socially *produced*. If emotions, for example, are "social constructs," then their construction and constructors can be looked into (Hacking 1999; Gergen 2009; Lincoln and Guba 2013). Culture, in all its complex and many-layered facets, is something (actually, many things) explicit or recorded (Crane 1994, 2–4); that is, culture exists in *things* such as print journalism, electronic media, and an entire range of artifacts from art to food, from clothing to scientific data. This has been one

of the culturists' most consequential claims: namely, that culture, in all of its forms—its aesthetic tendencies and its material artifacts, its bodily dispositions, its sacred and profane iconography, its laws, and its sciences—are things produced or constructed. Here I am alluding to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) influential treatise in the sociology of knowledge, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Since its publication almost five decades ago, the idea of a "constructed reality" (or realities) has summarized and advanced further a number of contemporary themes in social science. Among these themes, undoubtedly its most consequential for sociology, is *the problem of meaning and the use of philosophical, literary, and historical approaches to the study of the social construction of meaning* (McCarthy 1996, 20–2).

As I argue here, interest in the problem of meaning, an interest that effectively redefined the fundamental premises on which most of sociology has been built, is linked to a methodological framework that is neither causal nor explanatory but one that is semiotic. Accordingly, a society or social order (and, indeed, a self, an identity, and what we refer to as an emotional life) is viewed as something communicated and reproduced through a people's collective practices, particularly their symbolic and signifying systems. These signifying systems and practices are what make up a culture and its structure of meaning. Culture, then, is not something derived from "society" or "social structure," as earlier sociologists claimed. Rather, culture—in the form of a society's signifying systems—is the means through which a social order is established and maintained. In the words of Raymond Williams (1981, 12–13), an early and influential proponent of this position:

> "Cultural practice" and "cultural production" . . . are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution . . . It sees culture as the *signifying system* through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.

With this twofold interest, *first*, in the semiotics of culture and, *second*, in its production, the field of cultural studies has examined the observable properties of knowledges and symbols in texts, modes of communication, and forms of speech, each of these linked to specific institutional frameworks (Peterson 1976, 1994). Culture is studied in the many and diverse symbolic products of particular institutions and groups, such as those of religious practitioners, journalists, psychoanalysts, social workers, scientists, academics, and lawyers. So whatever else we do through our sciences and our professions (and, surely, a "whatever else" of profound consequences), cultural studies examines how what is produced through these knowledges *is* culture: how cultural practices, artifacts, and texts are hammered together, whether elaborate religious cosmologies, cuisines, forms of bodily decorum, organized games and sports, but also our psychologies and anthropologies; *all of these phenomena communicate and signify cultural meanings and messages*. For every aspect of social life can serve as a cultural form providing messages and meanings: all aspects of human life serve as *modes of signification* that dispense collective images and ideas. This is no less true of our everyday or unofficial cultural forms—those of the popular and the mass—as of our official ones—like religion, science, literature, and law (McCarthy 1996, 25–6).

EMOTIONS AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

In the study of the emotions, constructionism's emphasis is on the cognitive and cultural features of emotion, an emphasis it shares with many cognitive psychologists working in emotion studies (see Reddy 2001, ch. 1) and with those identified with early works in the social constructionist movement in psychology (Gergen 1985; Gergen and Davis 1985; Averill 1980, 1986) and its early and influential statements on the philosophy and psychology of emotions (Harré 1986), as well as with a number of early emotion studies in cultural anthropology (Lutz 1988; Shweder and LeVine 1984) and philosophy (de Sousa 1987; Rorty 1980; Solomon 1976, 1984) of the same period.[8]