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The new American cultural sociology: an introduction

Philip Smith

Over the past ten to fifteen years "culture" has developed to become one of the most popular and important areas within sociology in the United States. This increasing awareness attests to both the scope and the quality of contemporary cultural work. As this new wave of discourse matures, and as its practitioners and ideas become more central to the discipline, the need grows for an overview of the area. This collection of papers is intended to provide such a guide. The contributions to this book illustrate the variety of work that is now being done by American cultural sociologists. But they also do more than this. Sometimes the whole can be greater than the sum of its disparate parts, and in combination the work presented here suggests and documents a distinctive, new, American tradition in cultural sociology. The aim of this introductory essay is to indicate the genesis and form of this tradition. The first section positions contemporary American cultural sociology in an historical context, via an exploration of the shifting theoretical tides of the discipline. The second part documents the cluster of family resemblances which constitute the discursive field, drawing contrasts with other modes of socio-cultural inquiry. I turn first to the issue of genesis.

The new-found appreciation of culture in American sociology can be explained in terms of a pendulum effect linking intellectual cohorts with theoretical positions. This has seen culture swing back into the analytic spotlight from a dark exile at the margins of the profession. During the late 1960s and the 1970s there was a massive reaction against cultural explanation in American sociology. Culture was tainted by its association with Parsonian normative functionalism. During this period it was argued, with sometimes more, sometimes less justice, that the elaborate model of society developed by Talcott Parsons contained a number of theoretical and empirical errors. It was held to emphasize harmony over conflict, structure over agency and integration over fragmentation. Uniting all these themes

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was the central role given by Parsons to an overarching system of values and norms. This cultural system directed and coordinated both personality and social systems so as to produce a stable, "functioning" society. It is not surprising, then, that the various reactions against Parsons all refused normative explanation.[1] The need to confront the obvious inadequacies of Parsons's structural theory was fatefully conflated with a need to abandon, rather than refine, the project of elaborating the role of culture in society.

Resulting from this rebellion against norms was the rapid ascent of a series of profoundly anti-cultural social theories. In the "macro" field there was a vogue for "conflict sociology" which drew upon Marx, Simmel and a Max Weber who was now interpreted as a kind of neo-Marxist historian rather than as a forefather of hermeneutic sociological inquiry.[2] As conflict sociology hit a theoretical dead-end it gave birth to the fruitful, if clumsily named, field of "comparative and historical sociology" which highlighted the omnipresence of struggle and oppression to social process. Studies in this field placed a relentless emphasis on power and social structural resources as the ultimate determinants of historical outcomes in processes like state formation and imperialism and in forms of collective action such as revolutions and social movements. Such work respecified its objects of study in radically anti-cultural terms. In the work of Skocpol and Tilly, for example, the state was no longer seen through the lenses of contract theory as the legitimate guardian of a collective order invested with normative authority. Rather it was depicted as the arena of class struggle or as the locus of class rule, or as a selfish, predatory bureaucracy, intent on consolidating its own power. Under this rubric, culture could be variously understood either as a system of more or less cynical ideological frameworks for establishing claims to legitimacy, the unconscious product of social structural (usually class) locations, or as completely irrelevant to sociological explanation. Whichever scenario one chose, it was hardly worth investing any time in the study of a weak, almost irrelevant, dependent variable.

Those not attracted to quasi-materialist thinking could find other, equally anti-cultural, theoretical traditions to work in. It is true that the new "micro" perspectives that emerged during the 1960s were initially somewhat cultural. Garfinkel's work on trust, Sacks's work on membership categorization devices, and early conversation-analytic analyses of adjacency pairs, for example, held out the promise of linking a collective moral order to the exigencies of individual practical action. Yet during the 1970s micro theories became increasingly antithetical to normative explanation and quasi-cultural theorizing. The muscular new fields of conversation analysis and ethnomethodology gained support most rapidly when they offered ways of relating action to meaning without recourse to collective

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norms or common symbolic structures. This theoretical coup was achieved by demoting "norms" as a valid topic of inquiry and by insisting on the purely "local" production of social order. The theoretical resources for accomplishing this came from a synthesis of an American pragmatist tradition that emphasized individual experience and local contexts and a German phenomenological tradition which understood meaningfulness primarily in cognitive, not evaluative terms. The rational choice theories which also gained in popularity, especially towards the end of the 1970s, went even further in rejecting culture. By positing a society made up of rational, selfish actors they abandoned all pretence of studying meaning in favor of refining the mathematical equations and game scenarios that, in their view, best explained profit-maximizing social actions.[3]

Many of the intellectual generation that rose to prominence during the 1980s embraced culture, swinging with the pendulum into an almost empty field. Career opportunities began to open up as the previous generation of Parsonian cultural theorists moved towards retirement and attractive new theories of culture became available for empirical deployment. Moreover, culture offered a way for promising scholars to differentiate themselves from their mentors and peers in the academic marketplace. This embrace of culture was neither unreflexive nor nostalgic, for the new wave of cultural theory has been anxious to avoid the perceived theoretical mistakes of Parsonian "normative consensus" theorizing. At the same time it has been positively influenced by the research agendas and models of the social put into play by Parsons's immediate critics. And so the assumption of consensus has been replaced by an examination of the role culture plays in struggle and inequality. Studies of sub-cultures and organizational cultures replaced the examination of a purportedly overarching, unified "cultural system." In the same spirit explorations have been made of the highly fractured, contested, multilayered, sometimes even self-contradictory nature of symbolic and cultural systems. Studies of the dynamics of the production and reception of culture have confronted the idealism of the more or less free-floating Parsonian value system. The critiques of the micro theorists have also been taken seriously with scholars stressing the contingent, negotiated, multifaceted qualities of action with respect to culture and the ways in which agents use culture in concrete interactional settings.

In a sense, then, we can say that America now displays a genuinely post-Parsonian cultural sociology. Surprisingly few contemporary practitioners of cultural sociology in America make reference to Parsons in either a positive or negative context. This fact reflects not only the pervasive influence of European cultural theory (discussed below), but also the fact that today (notwithstanding the recent work of neofunctionalists) Parsonian theory

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sets neither the terms of debate, nor the questions to be explored, nor even the tenor of argument. Yet we should use the term "post-Parsonian" with some caution – a caution flagged by the "in a sense" at the start of this paragraph. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, an earlier generation of scholars like Geertz, Shils, and Bellah had confronted Parsons's cultural theory from within his camp. They argued that Parsons's approach was insufficiently hermeneutic and that in tying culture too closely to structure and function, it prescinded consideration of the autonomous textuality of social life. Because these scholars remain important figures for almost all contemporary American cultural sociologists, Parsons can be seen as still exerting a force on current scholarship via his students. Secondly, the voices and agendas of Parsons's critics during the 1960s and 1970s still inflect the work of contemporary cultural sociologists.[4] Here, then, we can discern a dialectical process at work in which Parsons plays the part of the now almost invisible "other" through which knowledge-producing discourses have asserted their identity and purpose. In so far as the contemporary sociological field in America has been decisively shaped by these anti-Parsonian positions, one can see his influence persisting at two steps' remove.

The fall of Parsons and the turn away from and then back towards culture provide only a partial explanation of the current form of American cultural sociology. Such an analysis can go quite a long way towards explaining why culture has come back in, but it cannot tell us much about how meaning *itself* is conceptualized. To understand this we have to turn towards Europe, and then, like Henry James or Alexis de Tocqueville, explore tensions between European ideas and their translation into an American idiom.

During the 1960s and 1970s, just as Parsonian normative analysis in America was on the ebb, Europe produced a massive intellectual tide of structuralist and poststructuralist thought. Major scholars within the social sciences like Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Dumont, Douglas, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Bourdieu emphasized the role of discourses and myths, symbols and signs, codes, rituals and beliefs in shaping social life. Contemporary American cultural sociology can be understood as a product of the intersection of these European movements with its own disciplinary history and theoretical traditions (Lamont and Wuthnow 1990).[5]

The attraction of the European theorists for American sociologists has been not so much their methodological rigor (often perceived to be lacking) or their contribution to understanding ongoing sociological debates about substantive empirical issues (often understood as marginal due to a European preference for philosophical abstraction), but rather their cre-

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ative thinking and the tools that they have provided for a dynamic new style of cultural analysis, most particularly in decoding culture itself. During the heyday of functionalism in the 1950s and 1960s cultural analysis was stunted by a rudimentary tool-kit consisting of concepts like "norms," "values," and "beliefs." Although capable of operationalization by survey researchers and social psychologists, these concepts could only produce a wooden and lifeless form of cultural sociology that was profoundly unsatisfying from a hermeneutic point of view. That is to say concepts such as "values" failed to capture the structures and meanings of the cultural system in a rich, textured, and analytically powerful way. The functionalist cultural model was also difficult to link up to action and process convincingly. In consequence, studies produced using this tool-kit (for example, those of national cultures, peasant attitudes, democratic beliefs, and so on) now strike us as often absurdly general, at times somewhat dull, and usually profoundly ahistorical.

As American sociologists embraced culture once again, they found that European structuralist and poststructuralist thought provided the models of culture they needed. These were new, exciting, exotic. Aside from these positive virtues European thought was attractive because it was untainted by the vice of association with functionalism. In a Durkheimian sense this new knowledge was "pure" rather than "polluted" and allowed theorists to conduct cultural research without fear of stigma. Yet although foreign ideas about culture were taken up with the greatest enthusiasm, they were reworked in a distinctive, American style. This style arose from the organization and culture of the American sociological field. Its characteristics can best be identified through contrast with two other modes of cultural inquiry. The first of these is the continental European tradition of "high theory" associated with names like Habermas, Foucault, and Lévi-Strauss. The other is the approach of British cultural studies. This school of thought, which is at present growing in influence in the American tertiary sector, is linked to scholars like Stuart Hall, John Fiske, and Lawrence Grossberg.

Sweeping comparisons between forms of discourse can, of course, be dangerous in that they obscure diversity and conflict within each field. The geographical tags through which these schools have been identified must also be treated with caution as they tend to mask the existence of "outliers" – researchers in particular geographical locations who conduct research according to the norms most associated with another tradition. Finally, we have to be aware of the perils of comparing phenomena of different orders. European cultural theory, British cultural studies, and American cultural sociology are different animals almost by definition. It

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is therefore hardly surprising that we can detect significant points of divergence. But, although imperfect, the contrasts developed here offer a foundation upon which we can later construct a more nuanced understanding about particular types of research enterprise. In particular, they afford the intellectual distance from which we can begin to construct a reflexive understanding of the cultures that guide research activity.

A useful starting point for this three-way comparison is the issue of disciplinarity. The research of American cultural sociologists remains very strongly tied to disciplinary themes and debates, with the primary audience a peer group of scholars within the same sub-area of the same discipline. Links with other disciplines are weakly developed, with the strongest links being perhaps with the field of social and cultural history through figures like William Sewell, Jr. (see Wacquant and Calhoun 1989). By contrast the European model demands an interdisciplinary and occasionally mass audience. Academic prestige comes from exerting the widest possible influence on intellectual life through becoming a "total intellectual" who is able to engage in multiple spheres of public debate and even, in some cases, various media of cultural production (e.g., novels and drama as well as academic texts).

The contents of scholarly texts reflect these contrasting expectations and audiences. In the works of European sociologists like Habermas or Bourdieu, for example, we find frequent references to core problems in philosophy and borrowings from fields like linguistics and aesthetics. Whilst the American cultural sociologist might draw upon these fields in developing theory, few would feel motivated or qualified to develop a sustained critique of a Noam Chomsky or a Susan Sontag or a Sigmund Freud. The American cultural sociologist is also less likely to produce work as an "intervention" in ongoing political and social movement struggles. In the American discipline of sociology, academic work is narrower in scope, more limited in its ambitions, more cautious in its claims, and more precise in its formulations, if less visionary in its diagnoses. It is concerned more with issues in the specifically sociological tradition rather than with engaging the icons of Western thought or producing a global theory of how the world works. And so most textual debate is about focusing issues within academic sub-fields rather than taking on major intellectual and political movements located in other disciplines or wider society.

Like the European mode of inquiry, the British cultural studies model (e.g., Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1991) is also strongly interdisciplinary in orientation. Although early texts by sociologists centered on traditional sociological fare such as work, the state, or crime and deviance, the British model of cultural studies has always been strongly inter-

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disciplinary. The ongoing destabilization of disciplinary boundaries in recent work marks a continuation of an existing trend rather than a break with the past. Collaboration is common between scholars in different traditional disciplines and books are often aimed at broad audiences and market segments in general areas like media, culture and society, or women's studies. This interdisciplinary edge is now being reflected in academic organization, with new departments of "cultural studies," "culture and media studies," or "cultural studies and cultural policy" being set up in many universities. These departments will typically be staffed by academics with backgrounds in a number of traditional disciplines, such as history, sociology, communications, English, and anthropology.

The British cultural studies tradition also shares with the European model a concern with social engagement, usually from a radical political perspective. A major consequence of this has been a presuppositional commitment to a power-based frame of analysis. Culture is to be analyzed in terms of the extent to which it supports or confronts existing social inequalities patterned around race, class, and gender. From an American perspective such an approach has been perceived as unduly restrictive (Sherwood, Smith, and Alexander 1993) and in particular as circumscribing the range of theories that can be drawn upon in investigating the role that culture plays in society. Consequently if the analysis of power and engagement with the problematics identified by critical theories remains central to the European and British models, in the American tradition these have far less influence (Lamont and Wuthnow 1990). Weberian and Durkheimian ideas about issues of religion, symbolism, ritual and social structure, solidarity, salvation, and charisma continue to exert a powerful influence on American cultural analysis (see Emirbayer 1996; Smith and Alexander 1996). This ongoing connection with foundational debates reflects, yet again, the strongly disciplinary character of American cultural sociology.

Differential rates of participation in disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-academic fields are also embodied in the forms of self-identification that scholars display. Whilst the self-description as a "cultural sociologist" is common in the American context (imagine the exchange at an ASA convention: "What kind of work do you do?" "Oh, I'm a cultural sociologist"), this term would have little meaning or currency in continental Europe. There a researcher in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Bourdieu, or Barthes is likely to see themselves as simply a "sociologist" or perhaps, in some cases, as an "intellectual" or a "philosopher." Similarly, a practitioner writing in the Birmingham tradition with a sociology Ph.D. is likely to identify themselves as doing "cultural studies," not as a "cultural

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sociologist," thereby pointing to the subject matter of their research, rather than their disciplinary background, as a primary source of professional identity.

In understanding the development and nature of this disciplinary collective identity among American cultural sociologists it is important to acknowledge an institutional base. Within American sociology the American Sociological Association constitutes an immensely powerful force. The division of this organization into "sections" promotes the empirical and perceptual division of its members into specialisms each with their own territory. The designation of a Culture Section in 1987 must therefore be considered a foundational moment. It provided for the identification of cultural sociology as a distinctive form of sociological enterprise (much like "stratification research," "social studies of science," or "health") that has to carve out its own niche in the marketplace of ideas if it is to survive. Associated with this institutional trend towards formal differentiation is the idea that cultural sociology is a specialism with its core of canonical texts (e.g., Geertz on the Balinese cockfight, Shils on charisma, and Bellah on civil religion) and central debates (e.g., structure and agency). Familiarity with these texts and debates is required if one is to be called a competent cultural sociologist. A final symptom and cause of solidarity among American cultural sociologists have been the relatively dense social networks that tie people together who work in the field. These are also sustained, in no small part, by the ASA Culture Section through its conference activities, newsletters, and e-mail discussion groups.

With this emerging identity and growing institutional differentiation in America there have come a series of arguments on behalf of cultural sociology within the discipline as a whole. These claims center on the issue of the "autonomy of culture." Such arguments are to some extent the atavistic legacy of European structuralist rhetorics, especially those of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault. To some extent they mimic both the "relative autonomy of the state" propositions used, with great success, by political sociologists in the early 1980s and the somewhat earlier claims of "micro" sociologists for the autonomy of the "interaction order." Such assertions undoubtedly have a strategic dimension in that they seek to legitimate a space for cultural sociological inquiry. But they also reflect the genuine theoretical concerns of the line of interpretive inquiry that runs from the hermeneutics of Dilthey to the poststructuralism of Derrida. So they can be correctly understood as the authentic manifestation of an emergent, solidaristic collective identity "for culture." What is easy to overlook in the search for origin and motivation is the fact that these claims are made within a disciplinary context. That is to say they really amount to a call for

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space and status recognition within the framework of mainstream sociology. They point, in other words, to the fact that American cultural sociology is conservative rather than revolutionary in its academic program, unlike the British cultural studies model which has attempted to transgress disciplinary boundaries and create a completely new academic and discursive field.

Calls for the autonomy of culture also signpost the influence of positivism on American cultural sociology. In the American context these calls often take the form of demands that culture be taken seriously as an "independent variable." Yet at the same time there is a competing dynamic against transcendental idealism. This position, arising in part from post-Parsonian anxieties about overvaluing culture, has precluded the Lévi-Straussian option of bringing culture back in as the sole significant variable, thereby treating the social world as the product of free-floating myths and texts. The result has been widespread endorsement of a middle-ground position calling for multidimensional explanations that provide space for social structure, culture, and individual actors as simultaneous "causes" of the same events and processes. Therefore debates between cultural sociologists often concern the relative weights that are given to each level of analysis. In a curious, roundabout way this concern for multidimensionality reiterates Parsons's call for the mutual interpretation of social, cultural, and personality systems. However, causality tends to be proximate and grounded rather than abstract and systemic as in Parsons's own work.

Assertions about the autonomy of culture also characterized British cultural studies during its salad days. Today this sort of discourse has all but disappeared. As cultural studies has shifted towards the arts for its institutional support and academic market, and as cultural studies has become a self-supporting intellectual field, there has been less need to engage in debates or polemics against social structural or material determinism or against instrumental views of social action. Field autonomy has brought with it the luxury of being able to assume, rather than needing to demonstrate, that culture is worth taking seriously. It is possible that American cultural sociology will also follow this path as it becomes more central to the discipline.

The European tradition differs again when it comes to thinking about culture and causality. Here, thinking in terms of variables is alien to the discourse, with greater emphasis being placed on exploring the fusion of the cultural, the social, and the material than on bringing about their analytic separation. This differing style of discourse explains the frustration American scholars and students often experience in reading Europeans like Foucault or Lévi-Strauss, where discrete "variables" and lines of cause and

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effect are almost impossible to identify. This kind of writing is also to be found in ancestral figures like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and it accounts for the range of interpretations to which they have been subjected, with each of them having been described on the gamut running from idealism to materialism. Disjunctures between European cultural theory and American modes of thinking often lead American researchers to translate European cultural theory into a workable set of propositions so they can "test" it. A telling exception here is the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Although the philosophical and Marxist elements of Bourdieu's theories have found little favor in America, much of his work is already structured in a positivistic guise with relatively clear hypotheses and elegant empirical tests. It is no accident, therefore, that Bourdieu has exerted a profound influence on American cultural sociology.

A final defining characteristic of American cultural sociology is the preference for empirically grounded, middle-range research. The European tradition of "high theory" assigns prestige to the ability to speak in global and abstract terms about how culture works. In American cultural sociology and British cultural studies far greater attention is paid to exploring how culture works in specialist topic-fields. This preference reflects, yet again, the continuing importance of the Anglo-American empiricist tradition in shaping academic life in the United States and Britain, as opposed to the more speculative, literary, and discursive style of European intellectual output. Culture tends to be conceptualized in terms of its concrete interplay with institutions, organizations, and specific historical sequences rather than in terms of the grand historical meta-narratives and philosophical abstractions which dominate the European mode of discourse. The result has been a form of discourse which usually anchors analysis in empirical materials, with even papers of a purely theoretical bent providing brief examples to illustrate their point. Evidence for this preference for empirically grounded, middle-range work can be seen, once again, in the reception of European works and scholars in Britain and America. Empirical studies have been more influential than purely theoretical tracts. Foucault is most accurately thought of as a philosopher, yet the data-rich *Discipline and Punish* has been far more widely read than abstruse texts like *The Order of Things* or *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Similarly Habermas's slender empirical study of the public sphere now stimulates more interest than his difficult *magnum opus* on communicative action.

Perhaps inevitably this attention to concrete, middle-range, real-world detail has seen both British and American traditions introduce agency into inquiry, stressing the way that actors mediate cultural codes in particular

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