

SAMPLE RESEARCH PAPER-10

TOPIC- Sociology of Culture

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Introduction

The word culture is derived from the Latin cultura (from the root colere: to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve), which shows its affinity to “agriculture” and also to religious worship. Throughout most of history, culture has been virtually synonymous with religion. Prior to modern times, culture was not one arena of life but was a whole way of life inextricably bound up with religion. Weber has traced the roots of Western capitalism to the ascetic impulse of Calvinism and the idea of work as a calling. As capitalism came into its own, the religious impulse got detached from the work ethic, and religious asceticism gave way to the reign of unbridled hedonism. With the phrase “the disenchantment of the world,” Weber tried to capture the radical changes that attended the rise of Western capitalism. By the time of Henry Ford, work itself had become religion, and now for the “modern, cosmopolitan man, culture has replaced both religion and work as a means of self-fulfillment or as a justification—an aesthetic justification—of life” (Bell 1976:156). With the separation of the church and state and the secularization of culture, religion lost its public character and became instead a matter of personal belief and the private affair of each individual. Modernity thus marked a radical break with the past. It is precisely at the point when culture became detached from religion that both religion and culture became the subject matter for social scientific study. In short, culture has become a theoretical problem for the West only because it has already become socially problematic (Milner 1994:4).

Culture has been the master concept of anthropology since its very inception. But within the last hundred years, the sociological study of culture has also come into its own. A basic problem has been the lack of a common definition of “culture.” A half-century ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn ([1952] 1963:149) enumerated almost 300 definitions of culture in their critical review of this most significant concept in cultural anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown (1957) went farther and denied the very possibility of a science of culture, insisting that “you can study culture only as a characteristic of a social system. Therefore, if you are going to have a science, it must be a science of social systems” (p. 106). After noting the bewildering variety of definitions, and Radcliffe-Brown’s (1957) lament that

“the word culture has undergone a number of degradations which have rendered it unfortunate as a scientific term,” Leslie White ([1954] 1968) settled for a nominalistic definition: “Culture, like bug, is a word that we may use to label a class of phenomena—things and events—in the external world. We may apply this label as we please; its use is determined by ourselves, not by the external world” (pp. 15–16). As against Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s conception of culture as “intangible abstractions,” White ([1954] 1968) insisted on drawing a distinction between the conception of culture and what it stands for: “Culture as the name of a class of things and events in the external world” that are objective and observable, and “the conception of culture [that is] in the mind of the culturologist. Let us not mistake the one for the other” (p. 20). Anthropologists, however, have continued to be exercised by questions such as the following:

Is culture real or just an abstraction from reality? If real, then what is the nature of this reality, and where does this reality have its locus? If an abstraction, then how can we speak of it as influencing the behavior of individuals? (Kaplan [1965] 1968:20)

The long-standing opposition between Culture and Nature in the West was played out in the split between two divergent methodological approaches for studying sociocultural phenomena. While sociologists have continued to be of one mind that the discipline ought to be “scientific,” the question of methodology has divided the practitioners into two camps. On the one side were those such as Auguste Comte who treated man himself as a natural object and believed that the natural scientific method alone was appropriate for the study of social reality. On the other side were sociologists, such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) and Max Weber ([1904] 1949), who argued that the subject matter of sociological investigations is not nature but man himself—with his plans and projects, motives and intentions, culture and institutions—and therefore a method other than that of the natural sciences was needed to study and apprehend social reality. The sociological study of culture owes much to the great methodological contribution made by Dilthey through his contrast between the empirical-observational methods of the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the hermeneutic method of understanding of the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). As such, those who took the latter course claimed that “understanding” should be the central category of sociological analysis. They argued, in short, that sociology should be an interpretive science rather than a science in the manner of the natural sciences. Weber’s method of subjective understanding (*Verstehen*) and the symbolic interactionists’ and the ethnomethodologists’ “definition of the situation” focus attention on the crucial importance of understanding meaning structures and the meanings the actors attach to their own actions. The basic problem with this approach has been that having found it well-nigh impossible for one reason or another to understand what people do in terms of the meaning they themselves attach to their action or the way they define their own situation, the sociologist has been forced to “impute” a meaning to their action in terms of his or her own model of “rationally” acting subjects or homunculi. This has led to strenuous attempts to vouch for the validity of this operation (see, e.g., Schutz [1953] 1963:342–43).

One of the reasons for the relative neglect of the study of culture by sociologists is the generally accepted division of labor between sociologists and anthropologists, whereby the former have focused their attention on society and the social, and the latter have carved out culture and cultural practices as their special field of interest. Durkheim’s ([1895] 1938) insistence that all social facts

must be explained by other social facts also kept sociologists focused on the social to the neglect of the individual and cultural. Thus, in trying to explain suicide as a social fact, Durkheim's emphasis fell on explaining differences in suicide rates by other social factors while neglecting the part played by individual meanings, motives, and intentions in explaining why, under the same social conditions, certain individuals end up committing suicide while others do not. Since culture is above all symbolic, the positivist strain in sociology that abjured any concern with consciousness and meaning also militated against the study of culture. And functionalists such as Talcott Parsons (1951) looked at culture primarily as a source of norms and values that regulated society and kept it together and helped it adapt to the challenges and contingencies of the environment. Their focus on consensus and equilibrium made the functionalists neglect sociocultural contradictions and conflicts that mark the other face of society.

Finally, and no less important, the study of culture also got a short shrift from Marxist sociologists who were wedded to Marx's base/superstructure dichotomy that relegated all things cultural and subjective to the superstructural aspects of society. Whereas his study of religion and charisma had led Max Weber to emphasize the role of ideas and the individual in history, Marx subordinated both to the primary role played by productive forces and production relations within each historical period. As a dialectical materialist, Marx borrowed the dialectical method from Hegel but claimed that Hegel was wrong in giving primacy to the Spirit over matter. As Marx put it, Hegel was as a result standing on his head, and it was he (Marx) who put him back on his feet. Objective factors determine subjective ones, for, as Marx ([1904] 1959) declares in the oft-quoted passage from his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness" (p. 43). Marx thus asserts the primacy of the objective, material factors over ideas, consciousness, culture, and institutions, which are all treated by him as part of the superstructure. Culture here is reduced to economic factors and is again denied an independent role in Marxian theory. Much controversy still surrounds the exact nature of the relationship between the base and the superstructure: Does the base "determine" the superstructure, or is the superstructure a mere reflection of the base? In either case, does the superstructure react back on the base at all? The overall result has been that in Marxian theory, cultural factors have seldom been given their due or treated as central variables in their own right but have been included among other variables to round out or further specify the relationships being examined.

The Classical Heritage

Western sociology was born with the recognition that Christianity no longer provided the basis for an ordered social existence. Given his conviction that "ideas rule the world or throw it into chaos," Auguste Comte, the father of sociology, wanted the discipline to come up with the new first principles (scientific laws) of social order by applying the method of the natural sciences to the study of society. Realizing that a society is essentially held together by religion, both Comte and Durkheim put forward this new discipline of sociology as the new "religion of humanity." Although Durkheim was deeply troubled by the destructive consequences of modernity, he was much more sanguine than Weber about the future of modern society. Durkheim ([1915] 1965) saw religion as an indispensable integrative force, but, like Comte, was convinced that the old religion will not do, that

the future society needed a new “scientific” religion. He therefore set about to establish the synonymy of God and society, with God being nothing but society transfigured and expressed as a symbol. He harbored the conviction that once men had become sociologically sophisticated, they would transfer their allegiance from God to society and would hold society itself in awe and reverence.

Contra Marx, Weber recognized the autonomy and efficacy of religious ideas and the role of charismatic individuals in history. But capitalism, he said, had come into its own with the death of the religious impulse that had brought it into being and fueled its growth. And a secularized modernity for Weber spelled the death of true charisma, the very principle of creativity and rejuvenation that strikes roots and thrives in the religious soil of a traditional society. Weber saw the unending, universal process of rationalization as ultimately destructive both of society and the individual. The future of capitalism appeared to him bleak indeed—an “iron cage” in which the individual had been reduced to a mere cog in the bureaucratic machine. But while Weber had earlier placed great emphasis on the role of ideas in history, the reality of the First World War made him recognize the crucial role played by material factors in the success of ideas:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern man’s conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” which have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests. (Weber 1958:280)

Durkheim ([1915] 1965) had rightly understood that the real characteristic of religious phenomena lay in the division of the whole universe into the sacred and the profane. Religion was to him a unified system of beliefs and practices, wherein religious beliefs expressed the nature of sacred things. He defined the sacred as those things that are set apart and held in awe and reverence. He argued that since these beliefs and practices are unanimously shared by group members, they must be of social origin. And in keeping with his insistence on the autonomy and specificity of religious symbols, he went on to affirm the utmost importance of keeping the profane distinct and distant from the sacred, “Unless the profane [were] to lose its specific characteristics and become sacred after a fashion and to a certain degree itself.” And, given the “aptitude of society for setting itself up as a god or for creating gods,” Durkheim ([1915] 1965) notes that right at the beginning of the French Revolution, secular things, “things purely laical by nature were transformed by public opinion into sacred things: these were the Fatherland, Liberty, Reason” (pp. 244–45). Durkheim ([1915] 1965) thought that the reason why such ideas and ideals are not able to create the same ardor in us is not because they are profane symbols that have become, as he put it, “sacred after a fashion and to a certain degree,” but “because we are passing through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity” (p. 475). Weber had talked about modernization in terms of the separation of value spheres and the irreversible march of rationalization. But while Weber was full of apprehension about the future, Durkheim ([1915] 1965) was certain that “this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last forever,” for “there are no gospels which are immortal, but neither is there any reason for believing that humanity is incapable of inventing [italics added] new ones” (p. 475). In all this, sociology was to play a pivotal role as the new science of society.

The Structuralist Turn in the Study of Culture

The structuralist turn in the study of culture owes much to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). Drawing on the insights of Durkheim's later work regarding the moral and symbolic ordering of society and de Saussure's (1960) semiotic linguistics, Lévi-Strauss treats society like a language that has an "underlying grammar"—the "grammar of mythology which has its foundation in the universal nature of the human mind itself" (Walsh 1998:287). Myths represent collective problem-solving strategies, and one can decipher their meaning by "looking beyond their manifest content to the structures of symbolic opposition and sequence that organize these various narratives" (Norris 1991:37). The structuralist aim is to go beneath the surface differences among cultures to lay bare their common but deep underlying patterns that constitute their structure. As Tudor (1999) points out,

At its simplest, this [method] involves taking diverse myths, breaking them into their constituent units . . . and trying to show how their combinations and permutations, their inversions and transformations, can be understood [following de Saussure] in terms of fundamental binary oppositions such as those between Life and Death, Nature and Culture, Raw and Cooked. [In this account] both the social and the individual recede in the background [and] it is difficult to say anything about the social role of cultural forms except at the most general level. (P. 69)

And since rules and symbols are viewed as arbitrary by the structuralists, meaning in culture as in language becomes a matter of difference, with the cultural system now seen as having "the potential to realize an infinite range of realities" (Jenks 2005:196).

Jacques Derrida (1974), on the other hand, denies that language ever settles into a stable order of meaning. His methodology of deconstruction is "avowedly 'poststructuralist'" because it rejects the structuralist view of "the text as a bearer of stable . . . meanings and the critic as a faithful seeker after truth in the text" and denies that "the idea of structure [is] in any sense given or [is] objectively there in a text" (Norris 1991:3). Paul de Man (1979), on the other hand, has drawn attention to the dilemma faced by the interpreter engaged in deconstruction. As Norris points out, de Man shows that Derrida's "reading must open up an endless series of further deconstructions, each latching on to those rhetorical aspects that can never be expunged in its own performance." And the only way to get out of this "dizzying regress," then, is to exercise "a figural will power beyond reach of deconstruction" (p. 106).

As a Marxist, Althusser (1971) gives structuralism a materialistic turn. Going beyond a simple base/superstructure model, he attempts to show how through its dominant culture, the capitalist state and its ideological apparatus mold and channel individual consciousness and effort in the service of the system (Walsh 1998:287–88). It is then left to Gramsci (1971) to reaffirm the role of consciousness, culture, and human agency in explaining how capitalism maintains its status quo through its hegemonic culture. As a result,

Revolution can begin only by the proletariat challenging the dominant cultural apparatus to form a consciousness of its own in relation to its conditions within the capitalist system . . . Culture is [therefore] an arena of critique and struggle for Gramsci and not just a structural, collective and unconscious determinant of subjectivity. (Walsh 1998:288–89)

The Semiotic Turn in Marxist Theorizing

Twentieth-century attempts to salvage Marxism have not only turned Marx on his head, they have driven his ideas toward sheer irrelevancy. In trying to save what was essentially Marxist in Marx, these efforts have only succeeded in paving the way for destroying the whole edifice of Marxian theory. Declaring that “Marx is being turned on his head,” Albert Bergesen (1993) coined the term Semiotic Marxism to not only highlight the fateful reversal of the Marxist base/superstructure logic but to document how the logic of the cultural and ideological superstructure itself has now come to constitute the logic of the whole social formation. Bergesen’s own description of the four stages in this semiotic transformation of Marxism may be summarized as follows:

In the first stage, Gramsci inverts the base/ superstructure logic by transforming class rule into rule by the consent of the governed. Class relations now are no longer derived from the ownership of the means of production but from the control of the state apparatus. As a result, the functions of the hegemonic state “become coterminous with the cultural functions of civil society—legitimizing, socializing, in maintaining moral order,” and the class struggle itself becomes an ideological struggle for the control “over the structure of consciousness [as] the prerequisite for control over the structure of production” (Bergesen 1993:2–3).

In Althusser’s (see Althusser and Balibar 1970) theory of the “Ideological State Apparatus,” the ideological and the political merge and go on to absorb the logic of the economic in Stage 2. Bergesen uncovers a basic similarity between the logic of the ideological state apparatus (ISA) and de Saussure’s logic of language, whereby the “structural logic of language becomes the Althusserian logic of ideology” so that “to produce a ‘worker, a boss’ is to reproduce the social relations of production which now implicitly suggests the economic sphere is reproduced by the ISA, that is by the superstructure.” Bergesen (1993) goes on to show that “this logic of semiotic systems is implicitly applied [by Althusser] to social formations, and social class relations are now treated as relations between semiotic signs” (p. 5).

In the third stage, the now fused ideological/political superstructure is merged with the economic base in the work of Nicos Poulantzas (1973, 1974, 1978), and all three spheres are said to codetermine each other. As a result, “the tri-partite division of society into economic, political, and ideological spheres, is now reduced to three interdependent branches of the [capitalist] state apparatus: the Ideological State Apparatus, the Repressive State Apparatus, and now the Economic State Apparatus” (Bergesen 1993:6).

In the last stage, the “final unhinging of the sociological logic of Marxism” is accomplished by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau 1988; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 1979, 1988) by renaming the Marxian social formation as the “discursive formation,” thus “reflecting the now explicit semiotic assumption

that the substance of collective existence is 'discourse,' not social relations." The Marxian base/superstructure logic is then "not only inverted (by Gramsci, Althusser, and Poulantzas) but now completely dissolved as all economic, political, and ideological elements float in the weightless void that is the discursive formation." With all social relations dissolved into discursive relations, the post-Saussurian logic of signs formally becomes the new Marxian logic of classes (Bergesen 1993:8).

Bergesen (1993) interprets these developments as heralding the "complete triumph of the semiotic over the material" and the disappearance of all causation. The result is a "purely semiotic Marxism, where there is no difference between what one thinks of reality and reality itself." What this Semiotic Marxism completely disregards, though, is that in real life "we are no longer dealing with just signifiers and symbols, but with classes, groups, parties, organizations and institutions" (p. 10).

The Cultural Turn in Sociology

The problematic of a sociological study of culture derives from the very crisis of the social sciences, occasioned by the mounting critique and a failure of nerve regarding the Western "enlightenment project"—which promised peace, prosperity, progress, and the perfectibility of the individual—as well as the failure of Auguste Comte's positivistic sociology to provide adequate explanations, much less uncover the "scientific" laws of society and social living. As a result, the "epistemological, disciplinary, political, and even moral foundations of the social sciences are [now] very much at issue" (Bonnell and Hunt 1999:1). This critical state of affairs has brought about a marked shift in emphasis from the social to the cultural in the social sciences and has resulted in a "cultural turn," which has taken us back to the interpretive/hermeneutical tradition of a Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, or Alfred Schütz.

The history and the future direction of the cultural turn in the social sciences have been addressed in a series of essays included in the volume titled *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Bonnell and Hunt 1999), a central text in the new and emerging fields of cultural sociology and cultural history. The book was to be a part of a series of related publications that defined the concept of culture "in the broadest sense to encompass the study of mentalities, ideology, symbols and rituals, and high and popular culture" (Bonnell and Hunt 1999:ix). The cultural turn thus marked the ascendance of "culture" to a preeminent position, both as a central focus of academic interest and as an explanatory variable in its own right. Briefly, the intention behind the cultural turn, as expressed by Bonnell and Hunt (1999:1–27), was as follows:

To insist that culture was not just an appendage of the social structure or merely a reflection of more basic socioeconomic processes (such as industrialization or modernization) but that it made an independent contribution of its own to the sociohistorical process, and as a result, the "social" lost some of its privileged explanatory potential.

To recognize that the natural scientific approach was inadequate, even inapplicable to the study of culture and society and therefore to abandon the quest for positivistic explanations and objective laws in favor of interpretive understanding and the hermeneutic search for meaning; culture should be viewed as linguistic and representational.

To acknowledge the bankruptcy of all metanarratives or master paradigms and to insist that there is no exclusive methodology or preferred paradigms for studying cultural phenomena.

To acknowledge the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and recognize that the study of culture would have to draw from diverse disciplines and be truly interdisciplinary in nature.

To recognize that under present realities, the scope of such studies would have to range from the local to the global.

Bonnell and Hunt (1999:8) divide the historical period leading to the cultural turn broadly into three periods:

The 1950s and 1960s: The 1950s were marked by the “semiotic revolution” ushered in by the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “which traced all meaning to the functioning of signs or symbols” and insisted that “culture itself could be analyzed much like a language, and all behavior got its meaning from often unconscious or implicit structural codes embedded in it.” The turbulent 1960s, however, ended up placing both agency and history back again at the center of the intellectual agenda.

The 1970s: Hayden White’s (1973) argument that all historical texts are basically constructed by the author as a “poetic act” and Clifford Geertz’s (1973) conception of culture as text to be studied by the semiotic approach are singled out by Bonnell and Hunt as having had a radical impact on both theory and method in the social sciences. Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Marshall Sahlins, Raymond Williams, and Michel Foucault are mentioned as the other theorists who made a deep impact during the 1970s on how culture was to be approached and studied.

The 1980s and 1990s: The postmodernists and the poststructuralists, who dominated the field during this period, reduced all scientific explanations to “simply an exercise in collective fictionalization or mythmaking,” and undermined any remaining faith in objectivity and objective truth.

Geertz’s (1973) work has inspired an outpouring of interest in ethnographic field work after the cultural turn. His injunction that the anthropologist should “strain to read” culture as an “ensemble of texts” “over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (p. 452), however, points to the serious methodological and epistemological dilemmas created by the cultural turn itself:

If analysis of culture, as Geertz insisted, depended on the interpretation of meaning rather than a scientific discovery of social explanations, then what served as the standard for judging interpretations? If culture or language permeated meaning, then how could any individual or social agency be identified? . . . Could “culture” be regarded as a causal variable and did it operate independently of other factors, including the social or institutional? [In short,] the cultural turn threatened to efface all references to social context or causes and offered no particular standard of judgment to replace the seemingly more rigorous and systematic approaches that had predominated during the 1960s and 1970s. (Bonnell and Hunt 1999:9)

However, it appears that the sociologists who have been influenced by the cultural turn have been unwilling “to accept the obliteration of the social implied by the most radical forms of culturalism or postculturalism” (Bonnell and Hunt 1999:11).

But this is hardly the end of the story, for as Dirks (1996) emphasizes, “the debate continues [with] textuality . . . seen less as a metaphor inviting a new range of critical interpretive practices than an invitation to nihilism and relativism. . . . If historical reality is a text, then it can neither be important nor real” (p. 33). In a section titled the “Perils of the Text,” Ian Davies records that

the temptation, always, even in pre-Marxian days, was to find salvation in the text. But what text? . . . Much of the debate was around the status of “text” in the analysis, its relation to the context of both production and consumption, and to the analysis of audience. (Davies 1995:120, 122)

And by focusing “on anthropological texts as literary creations, fictions which present themselves as facts but which have no priority to that claim over other potential orderings of the world” (Linstead 1993:108), postmodern ethnography presents the frightening prospect that “we may be developing a semiotic ethnography [where] there are no texts, no audiences. There is only an instance of the process of making and circulating meanings and pleasures” (Fiske 1988:250, quoted in Davies 1995:123). The postmodernist and poststructuralist critique has thus been so thoroughgoing that it is highly unlikely that social sciences will again find a secure foothold. Bonnell and Hunt (1999) have summed up the predicament as follows:

The cultural turn and a more general postmodern critique of knowledge have contributed, perhaps decisively, to the enfeebling of paradigms for social scientific research. . . . The failure of Marxism has signaled a more general failure of all paradigms. Are the social sciences becoming a branch of a more general interpretive, even literary activity—just another cultural study with claims only for individual authorial virtuosity rather than for a more generally valid shared knowledge? (P. 4)

Among sociologists engaged in the study of culture, the work of Jeffrey Alexander invites close attention. His call for a cultural sociology, which he defines as the study of cultural structures, is framed within the context of “the linguistic turn in philosophy, the rediscovery of hermeneutics, the structuralist revolution in the human sciences, the symbolic revolution in anthropology, and the cultural turn in American historiography” (Alexander 2003:6). The distinction between the analytical (or heuristic) autonomy of culture and its concrete (or empirical) autonomy is maintained in this approach. So is the distinction between reality and appearance, for cultural sociology is given the task of bringing “the unconscious cultural structures that regulate society into the light of the mind.” Cultural sociology thus attempts to bring the social unconscious for view to “reveal to men and women the myths that think them so that they can make new myths in turn [italics added]” (Alexander 2003:4).

Between tradition and modernity, the choice for Alexander is clear. He places himself squarely on the side of the latter and invokes the social constructivist notion of “man, the myth-maker” to underwrite the task assigned modern men of making new myths. That is a worthy goal indeed but leaves as many questions unanswered: What myths? Whose myths? Would any do? Anyhow, in keeping with the self-defined vocation of sociologists as the new “myth-makers” (see Greer 1969), Alexander’s (2003) own work is rooted in “pragmatic, broadly normative interests” (p. 6), admittedly to serve the interests of a capitalist democracy and to defend modernity against those conservative “friends of culture [who] have betrayed a nostalgia for the organicism and solidity of traditional life” (p. 9). A similar commitment, we are told, leads him to bracket the reality claims of other intellectual groups as well as to relativize the reality claims of intellectual-cum-political authority (p. 7).

To establish continuity between the past and the present, Alexander (2003) wants to establish how the new discipline of cultural sociology can help bridge the gap left open between religion and social structure in the work of Weber and Durkheim. He pursues this goal in a series of essays on topics such as cultural trauma and collective identity, a cultural sociology of evil, the discourse of American civil society, and Watergate as a democratic ritual. He tries to accomplish his goal by extending Durkheim’s ideas on primitive religion to demonstrate how “the love of the sacred, the fear of pollution, and the need for purification have continued to mark modern as much as traditional life” (pp. 7–8). And, contra Weber, he points out how “faith was relevant [not] only to the creation of modernity, [but also] to the project of its ongoing institutionalization,” and “how practical meanings continue to be structured by the search for salvation,” with “fantasies and myths [continuing to] inspire giant efforts at practical transformation” (p. 8). These “giant efforts at practical transformation” and the unceasing global attempt to remake the world and to recast it in the modern Western image have historically been part and parcel of the self-defined telos and destiny of the modern man.

What mattered to Durkheim, as a classical functionalist, was the integrative function performed by the various beliefs and practices, regardless of the truth of their content. On this reckoning, though, any beliefs and any practices would do, for, as he put it, “The only thing necessary for a society to be coherent is that its members have their eyes fixed on the same goal, concur in the same faith” (see Farganis 2004:84). Since religious forces for him were human forces, he was quick to note how modern society has come up with its supporting myths, symbols, rituals, and rites. And it did not take long for later sociologists, such as Robert Bellah (1970), to declare “civic religion” as the functional equivalent of traditional religious beliefs:

On this view, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and our democratic institutions affirming human rights represent the fundamental moral consensus of society. The national anthem, the flag, and the national holidays are contemporary symbols and common rituals of unity in the presence of diversity and differentiation. (Farganis 2004:58)

By the 1980s, however, Bellah noted that this consensus seemed to have all but evaporated as aggressive individualism took off on its own in the age of greed, greatly weakening the sense of community and the civic society and creating a critical “crisis of meaning.” As Seidman points out,

“in the aftermath of the enfeeblement of the American civil religion and the failure of the new religions to move beyond sectarianism,” Robert Bellah turned “cynical toward his earlier argument that national civil religions might function as socially cohering symbolic configurations” (Bellah 1975; Bellah et al. 1985; Seidman 1990:222). Recognizing the contingent character of intention and interpretation, Alexander and Smith (1993) attempt to bypass the problem of consensus by focusing instead on commonly shared cultural codes that allow people to “speak a language.”

It is the essence of a symbol, which is not merely a sign, that behind the representation there always stands the represented. But for Robert Wuthnow (1987), it is the form that determines content. Since what is of importance to him is the relationship between symbols, and not what the symbols themselves represent, he would not hesitate to disregard the content of these symbols as long as they do their job of maintaining moral boundaries (see Rose 1999:221–22). The alleged continuity between tradition and modernity, between the past and the present, posited by Alexander is based also on the same conviction that whatever serves or could serve the function of religion is religion. Expressing her strong opposition to the functionalizing of all concepts and ideas by social scientists and disparaging the widespread tendency to regard communism, for instance, as a “new religion” — “notwithstanding its avowed atheism, because it fulfills . . . the same function traditional religion fulfilled and still fulfills in the free world” — Hannah Arendt ([1954] 1968) declares that

their concern is only with functions, and whatever fulfills the same function can, according to this view, be called the same. It is as though I had the right to call the heel of my shoe a hammer because I, like most women, use it to drive nails into the wall. (P. 102)

Furthermore, she points to the bankruptcy of such an argument, for

if it is only a question of function and how a thing works, the adherents of “false religion” can make as good a case for using theirs as I can for using my heel, which doesn’t work so badly either. (P. 102)

Her stricture about all these so-called functional equivalents is well taken. She is also convinced that the break between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity, is final and not subject to debate and that none of the modern revolutionary attempts, or sustained efforts to substitute the thread of historical continuity for tradition, have been successful in bridging this gap (p. 19). Gallagher (1979) and other modernization theorists also support this notion by holding that modernity and its basic tenets (pragmatism, relativism, high mobility, etc.) are “diametrically opposed to the basic tenets and world views of all traditional societies, no matter how much the latter may differ among themselves” (p. 10).

As against sociologists who posit a radical, dichotomous break between the present and the past, Alexander (2003) rejects the contention that “only in simple, religiously ordered, undemocratic, or old-fashioned societies do myths, and narratives and codes play a fundamental role.” Still asserting that there is “continuity between the religion of early societies and the cultural life of later more

complex ones," he makes a series of continuity assumptions between the postmodern and modern, and between modern and traditional societies (pp. 5–9). As "the tradition of the new," modernity for others, however, implies a clear break with the past. As Daniel Bell (1976) has pointed out, "The old concept of culture is based on continuity, the modern on variety; the old values tradition, the contemporary ideal is syncretism" (p. 100).

Modern thinkers seek in vain to find a principle of continuity and coherence that would provide meaning to life and its pursuits in a fragmented culture that has lost its traditional legitimacy. Sewell (1999:52) would like to view culture in terms of a dialectic between system and practice, a move he believes would help counter the attempt to treat culture as a coherent, self-enclosed system. But unwilling to give up on all sense of coherence, he prefers to opt for a thin coherence that is "as much the product of power and struggles for power as it is of semiotic logic" (p. 57). Such an approach, of course, makes sense within the context of modern and modernizing societies in which coherence is always problematic and a difficult, unstable, even rare achievement. Alexander (2003) comes up with another major difference between the past and the present: "In our postmodern world, factual statements and fictional narratives are densely interwoven. The binaries of symbolic codes and true/false statements are implanted one on the other" (p. 5). In fact, the very distinction between truth and fiction is obliterated in the modern/postmodern world when simulations are consciously used to mask, subvert, and replace the real (see Baudrillard [1981] 1994).

In her take on the cultural turn, Sonya Rose (1999) has provided an insightful critique of Jeffrey Alexander's ideas pertaining to continuities in the vocabularies of moral discourse. In addition to questioning the assumed continuity between the past and the present, she also deals with the question of the presumed autonomy of culture. Rose points out that while Jeffrey Alexander and Phillip Smith (1993), for example, argue that the continuity in the "discourse of civic society" is ensured by the "underlying consensus as to the key symbolic patterns of American civil society," they fail to indicate how the underlying consensus was created in the first place: "The idea that this structure is historically durable because it enjoyed such widespread consensus is neither directly demonstrated empirically nor explained theoretically" (Rose 1999:225). Rose (1999) also draws attention to the circular nature of their argument regarding durability or continuity:

Their formulation, while appealing because it seems to suggest that particular cultural forms endure because they are deep, in the end relies on circular reasoning. If a cultural form or practice endures, it is deep. It is deep because it is part of common sense and it is pervasive. It is part of common sense and pervasive because it is structured in a particular way. But if all cultural forms are structured by antinomies, why are some durable and others not? (P. 226)

These concerns prompt her to reject "a formal analysis that theorizes cultural processes as fully autonomous from patterned social relations and practices, a theoretical position that . . . places cultural forms outside of history" (Rose 1999:233–34).

The most pertinent question these concerns raise is related directly to the study of culture. While Alexander (2003) believes that understanding cultures demands the understanding of “the true power and persistence of violence, domination, exclusion, and degradation,” he is also convinced that “we can separate knowledge from power and not become only a servant to it” because cultural sociology tells us that “reflection and criticism are imbedded in myths that human beings cannot be entirely reflective and critical about” (pp. 7, 9). Rose (1999), on the other hand, raises the related but most basic question of “how . . . a particular discourse becomes dominant—and how are meanings fixed, however temporarily? How is it possible for discourses to produce systematic effects?” (p. 230). She endorses Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) argument that at the back of a discourse lay the attempt “to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a center” (p. 112). These considerations lead her to conclude that

moral discourses specify a single standard of virtue, while denigrating or marginalizing alternative practices. . . . Morality, in other words, is elaborated in a struggle over symbolic power, which is ultimately the power to define social categories and groups and to establish as legitimate a particular vision of the social world. (Rose 1999:230)

There is therefore a persistent danger that “knowledge” in the service of “pragmatic” interests may merely be “power in disguise: the power to impose one’s beliefs and, ultimately, one’s values on others who do not share them and are thereby both marginalized and dominated by this imposition of a particular view of the world” (Martin 1992:418, quoted in Schwartz 2000:111). To paraphrase Dirks (1996), one should say that cultural analysis is not just a game; it has real stakes and real effects (p. 36).

The Practice Turn in the Study of Culture

The term practice has come to acquire a privileged position in the discourse on culture. Briefly stated, two central ideas undergird practice theory: (1) “that the forms of human activity depend on the practices in which people participate” and (2) that not individuals, but “practices are the source and carrier of meaning, language, and normativity,” which opens them up “to determination by the social factors that affect practices, for example, power and politics” (Schatzki et al. 2001:11–12). In his introduction to *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Theodore Schatzki specifies the threefold thrust of practice theory as the attempt to “free activity from the determining grasp of objectified social structures and systems, to question individual actions and their status as the building block of social phenomena, and to transcend the rigid action-structure oppositions” (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001:1).

While “action” has been recognized as a central category, and even a basic unit of analysis by most sociologists, the problem of understanding “action” has proved intractable from the beginning. Sociologists have tried to handle the problem by attempting (a) to substitute “imputed meanings” for the subjective meanings of the actor, and to judge his/her actions against the model of a “rational actor” (Weber); (b) to use the rational “meansends” schema to understand action, thereby

reducing action to work or labor (Parsons); (c) to use the sociologist's own rational puppets (or homunculi) to interpret action (Schutz); (d) to understand action in terms of taken-for-granted activities, thereby reducing action to routine practices (the ethnomethodologists); and, finally, (e) to bracket the actor's intentions, meanings, hopes, fears, and so on and replace action with conditioned responses or with automatic, unconscious routine behaviors/practices (behaviorists; the practice theorists).

In her contribution to the volume on the practice turn in contemporary theory, Ann Swidler (2001) tries to figure out what it is that anchors cultural practices. The focus of attention in practice theory is on the "unconscious," "automatic," and "un-thought" practices embedded in taken-for-granted routines. As a result,

Practice theory moves the level of sociological attention "down" from conscious ideas and values to the physical and the habitual. But this move is complemented by a move "up," from ideas located in individual consciousness to the impersonal arena of "discourse." (Swidler 2001:75)

Swidler (2001) notes Stephen Turner's (1994) serious concern about the notion of practices being silent and hidden but rejects his focus on "habit" as too individualistic. She also finds the individualistic imagery underlying Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "habitus" and Sewell's (1992) concept of "cultural schemas" as less appealing. She finally comes to the conclusion that "it is the practice itself that anchors, and in some sense reproduces, the constitutive rule it embodies" (pp. 82–83). However, this focus on culture as practices in interaction, which she says is quite in line with "Lévi-Strauss's notion that animals are good to think with" (Swidler 2001:75), reduces human action to behavior and the human actor to an automaton or an unthinking animal. Contra Parsons or Weber, she insists that culture is not the result of "some abstract stuff in people's heads":

Rather, cultural practices are action, action organized according to some more or less visible logic, which the analyst need only describe . . . [I]f one studies "practices," whether linguistic or not, one is already studying behavior and the problem of the causal connection between one form of behavior and another is at least staved off, if not resolved. (Swidler 2001:76)

In addition to conflating action and behavior, Swidler (2001) also admits that even after bracketing the individual actor and his actions and disregarding the content of what he or she says or has to say, the practice theorist still cannot entirely escape the subjectivist demand for interpretation. He or she still needs to figure out and make "implicit claims about what the symbols mean to individual actors or group of actors." The only saving grace, then, seems to be that at least the "discourses and practices are concretely observable in a way that meanings, ideas, and values never really were" (p. 76). However, such an exercise may very well conceal the personal and cultural biases of the researcher who now assumes a superior authorial position with regard to his or her subjects. Another problem relates to the fact that the "structure/practice contrast recognizes only one kind of structure—synchronic connections among signs—to the exclusion of structures (and thus ways of making meaning) that are lodged in the processual execution of practice" (Biernacki 1999:74). To

make matters worse, a further problem for research and interpretation is raised by the fact that “the same belief can support varied practices [and] the same practice [can] be supported by different beliefs” (Biernacki 1999:75). And if culture is viewed as a symbolic “tool kit” that individuals use for choosing effective strategies of action to cope with the world (Swidler 1986), then it would be pertinent to ask, What determines their differential access to this tool kit? Does its effective use by one group negatively affect its use by other groups? And would the academic users of this kit be as eager to see their own practices historicized? Historians, for one, we are told, “have bridled at the historicization of their own ground” (McDonald 1996:12; see also Dirks 1996:40–41).

The Global Turn in the Study of Culture

The study of culture took a global turn in the early 1980s when the term cultural globalization replaced the term cultural imperialism that had gained special currency during the 1970s (Elteren 2003:170–71). As a result, the new metanarrative of globalism came to replace the earlier imperial and colonial metanarratives (Filmer 1998:242). At the same time that the worldwide commodification of the postmodernist cultures of consumption threatens to absorb the cultural into the economic, globalization also furthers a culture of performance and expressive individualism at home that “fits into a more general shift of emphasis from narrative to performance as the primary source of meaning and gratification in contemporary Western culture. [As a result,] McWorld threatens local democracy and, more generally, civil society” (Elteren 2003:180).

In addition to the critical problem of the very survival of local traditional cultures, Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak’s ([1985] 1988) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” identifies representation as the central problematic of global culture. An Eurocentric discourse on the “Other” raises serious concerns of its own, and what is true of the discourse on history is equally true of the discourse on culture:

Insofar as the academic discourse of history . . . is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity: one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history. (Chakrabarty 1992:1, quoted in Davies 1995:98)

Davies (1995) adds that

One reason for all this is that historians, by and large, write for other historians and that the dominant historical institutions, associations, and research resources are in the West. Thus history from below, even though it uncovers a layer of experience that was formerly absent in historical research, creates an appropriation of its subject-matter that makes “representation” essentially

tokenish. ... In the end, the issue of representation is related directly to the question of who is being represented by who to whom, and under what auspices." (Pp. 98, 105)

Rather than effecting a separation of knowledge and power, this last sentence again places knowledge cultures squarely within an all-encompassing logic of power (see Foucault 1980).

Commenting on E. P. Thompson's (1963) focus on conflict and difference and his attempt to rescue the marginalized and the bypassed from "the enormous condescension of posterity," Davies feels, "It was, perhaps, more of an appropriation of these people to another cause (Thompson's own) than to fully reveal them as they were." "Was 'history from below,'" Davies (1995) goes on to ask, just "another form of 'Orientalism,' to use Said's ([1978] 1995) language, a grasping for the 'people' to validate one's own culture?" (p. 96). Dirks (1996) points out that "the operations of difference . . . seem always to produce hierarchical relations between 'us' and 'them' (however these categories are constructed) and never exist outside of representation itself" (p. 30).

Modernity and postmodernity have already passed a death sentence on traditional societies and cultures, the wholesale destruction of aboriginal (and all other) spiritual traditions having been a key element of the process of colonization (Kulchyski 1997:622). The fragmentation and destruction of the cultural coherence of traditional societies is well documented in Feierman's (1999) study of the brutal colonial suppression of public healing practices in Africa. To underwrite the inevitability involved in the disappearance of traditional societies and to explain why the world has come to consist of "culturally homogeneous pools" called nation-states, Ernest Gellner invokes the "sociological necessity" of the industrial world having "room only for a limited number of nation states" (Gellner 1979, cited in Gallagher 1979:58). The argument is especially specious when "under conditions of postmodern discourse, sociological theory itself as a discourse on the social necessarily loses all viability" (Camic and Gross 1998:467).

Methodological Approaches to the Sociological Study of Culture

The major turns during the past several decades have given rise to a diversity of methodological approaches to the study of culture. With its crisis of representation and rejection of metanarratives, the emphasis on self-reflexivity, and the focus on multiple voices in a polysemic world, postmodern ethnography has itself played a leading role in the fragmentation of the field.

In keeping with our emphasis on the developments since the cultural turn of the 1980s, the following discussion is limited to more recent methodological approaches in the field. Vaillancourt (1986), however, provides a good reference for those interested in exploring the various research strategies employed by the Marxists that have general application. These include the qualitative, subjective strategies used by philosophical Marxists; strategies that draw on the resources of dialectical and historical materialism; the strategies employed by the structuralists, with or without Althusser; and, finally, the research done by the materialists. A good introduction to the rational

choice theory approach is provided by Coleman and Fararo (1992). Hall and Neitz (1993) identify institutional structures, cultural history, production and distribution of culture, audience effects, and meaning and social action as the major frames around which theoretical and methodological work on culture has been focused. Wuthnow and Witten (1988), on the other hand, identify public moral discourse, science, organizational culture, and ideology as the main substantive areas that will have an important bearing on the future course of cultural analysis.

The cultural turn in particular has aroused a great deal of interest in the study of cultural beliefs and practices. Mohr (1998) reviews a wide range of techniques and methods, including semantic differential, survey, content analysis, symbolic interactionism, and participant observation, that have been used by the researchers. He also identifies research studies that explore the role of culture in the prediction of status attainment, the study of organizations and their environment, the study of social movements, and the processes of identity formation. A central concern in the study of culture has been the measurement of the underlying structures of meaning attached to symbols and various cultural productions. While a large number of studies have been ethnographic or qualitative in nature, quantitatively oriented scholars have also been turning their attention to researching meaning to deal with the increased interest in bridging the divide between culture and social structure. In an overview of some of the quantitative research being done in this area, Mohr (1998) has focused on studies that have used a structural approach to interpret institutional meanings or have relied on advanced statistical techniques (such as multidimensional scaling and clustering, network analysis, correspondence analysis, Galois lattices, and hierarchical classification models) to facilitate the understanding of complex meaning structures. Tilly's (1997) study of the parliamentarization of British politics is identified as one of the several others that have employed structural methods for measuring meanings. Mohr singles out Karen Cerulo's (1988, 1995) treatment of national anthems (and national flags) as cultural meaning systems to exemplifying the central principles of this type of comparative structural analysis. Mohr also draws attention to Griswold's (1987, 1993) attempt to formulate rigorous empirical approaches that try to bridge the gap between the understanding of meaning contained in literary and other texts and the study of social structure.

Clifford Geertz's work has provided the model for the ethnographic study of discourse and practice "either through micro observation of largely mute and unnoticed practices [or] through 'thick description' of the publicly observable symbolic and ritual practices" (see Swidler 2001:76). Lewandowski (2001), however, is uncertain whether Geertz's reading is "deep" or is merely perspectival/local. Roseberry (1982) has criticized Geertz's approach for its lack of concern with the material and the historical context of cultural performances such as the Balinese cockfights, but by focusing only on the material dimension, Roseberry unfortunately ends up subordinating culture to history (discussed in Dirks 1996:25–28). Sewell (1997) on his own has tried to add a diachronic dimension to Geertz's approach. Since cultures for Lewandowski "are not so much deep texts or manuscripts as contexts in which the social critic and social practices are embedded in various ways," he is very concerned that "Geertz's method of text reading is in his own characterization one way—we only hear from him" (Lewandowski 2001:12–13). Geertz's (1983) exclusive focus on publicly available symbols and practices rules out any direct concern with the "native's" point of view and raises questions about the validity of his own interpretations. All such attempts to interpret the cultural/religious meanings and practices of "others" through "asymmetrical translations and transcreations of non-Western texts . . . by reframing and re-encoding [indigenous] signs precisely within a Euro-centered imaging of the world" raise disturbing questions regarding "how or what

does one compare if categories in the typology of belief, crucial to understanding one side of the symbolic system being juxtaposed, are decisively absent in or irrelevant to the other tradition or system" (Bilimoria 2003:346).

Paula Saukko (2003) has recently taken a fresh look at both the classical and the new methodological approaches to the study of culture. Given the fact that the phenomenological/hermeneutical approach to understanding other people's lived experience is contradicted by the poststructuralist critique of "discourses" that mediate the world of multiple realities and that "cultural studies can no longer know the whole truth, or even claim to approach it" (Clifford 1986:25), Saukko (2003) gives up the old criterion of validity as "truthfulness" and settles instead for the notion of multiple validities to identify "good" or valid research (pp. 11–35). And taking into account Grossberg's (1998) criticism of "cultural-turn" methodologies for neglecting to address material and economic developments and the increased sensitivity to the voice of marginal groups (women, minorities, non-Western people), Saukko recommends combining Marcus's (1998) "multisited ethnography" with Appadurai's (1997) notion of "scapes" as the best strategy for dealing with the contemporary realities of a globalized culture that has breached the boundaries between experience, culture, and reality—or "lived experience," "texts," or "discourses"—and the social/ global context (Saukko 2003:176–96). At the same time, Appadurai's concept of "flows" ("of people, media-images, things, money, etc.") helps her to study social issues and events from different locations and perspectives by combining the two dimensions of multiple locales ("sites") and the different spheres of life (financescape, mediascape, ethnoscape, etc.). To come to grips with the problem of representation, she then counts on Hannah Arendt's (1958) notion of the agonal nature of public/political discourse rather than the Habermasian (1992) notion of rational public discourse to provide the theoretical underpinnings of her multisited/ multiscaped qualitative strategy

that carefully listens to the specificity of individual perspectives both in terms of content ("take" or opinion) and their form (the way in which they relate to the world ...) while aiming to bring them into conversation with one another . . . not for the sake of difference, but in order to bring . . . into dialogue different research and social points of view. (Saukko 2003:192)

The shift in attention from grand theory to more empirical but qualitatively oriented studies in sociology since the 1980s continues to further the trend toward embracing ethnographical fieldwork as the preferred approach for studying culture. There is also a greater appreciation of the historical or the time dimension and a consequent interest in specifying the diachronic character of cultural change, especially among social historians (see Sewell 1997). In addition to continuing the traditional emphasis on comparative and cross-cultural research, the twenty-first century is likely to witness a concerted drive to further expand disciplinary boundaries and to draw freely from theories and methods being developed in a wide range of disciplines ranging from the social sciences to humanities and literary studies.

Future Directions in the Sociology of Culture

Displacing the nineteenth-century concept of “race” as a way of differentiating people, “culture” proved to be “one of the most useful intellectual tools of the twentieth century,” even as the cultural field became “a critical domain of intellectual and of social struggle” (Kulchyski 1997:605). By the late 1980s, culture had already emerged as a “major growth industry” (Wuthnow and Witten 1988:49). The vast intellectual outpouring of interest in the study of culture, especially since the cultural turn of the 1980s, now directs our attention to where it is headed in the twenty-first century.

The cultural studies approach of the Birmingham Centre was one of the first on the scene. Although Marxist in orientation, it moved away from a rigid base/structure dichotomy to focus on its Gramscian concern with conflict over discourses that reflect different power positions. Following Williams’ (1981) injunction that culture is always implicated in relationships of dominance and submission, this approach viewed culture as the site where language and the meaning of words and symbols are always in contention. While the central thrust of cultural studies has been the study of popular culture, its focus on the political and race-class-ethnicity-based dynamics of culture (see Hall 1992) made these discourses politically salient, and cultural studies “soon mushroomed to cover diverse interests involving women’s studies, gay and lesbian studies, multicultural studies, etc.” (Bonnell and Hunt 1999:11).

Reflecting on the wrong turn Marxist and sociological scholarship had taken at the end of the twentieth century, Bergesen (1993) noted with obvious distress that

the theoretical corpus of Marxism has fled the intellectual terrain of social structure (class relations in material production) to be re-invented in the sphere of culture/ideology as the discursive formation with class relations re-theorized as signed subject relations governed by the linguistic logic of symbolic difference [and] that [the earlier] faith in social structure—Marxian, Durkheimian, Weberian—now seems shattered. (P. 11)

He pins his hope on another surge of paradigmatic theory about the structure of human existence—not theory of the ideas or discourse about structured human life—not semiotics/hermeneutics/meaning analysis/discourse analysis (although for the realm of ideas that is fine)—but theory about the global web of relations that entrap and ensnarl human existence, is hopefully on the horizon. (P. 11)

To bridge the gap between cultural and structural analysis, Anne Kane (1991) has drawn a useful distinction between the analytical and the concrete forms of cultural autonomy. To accomplish this task, Kane (1991) asks that the cultural analyst “must demonstrate that the culture structure he or she has found at the analytic level is the one which the social group truly shares and acts on in the specific historical situation being studied” (p. 55). Apart from the empirical problem of finding a concrete culture structure that a group actually shares in common and acts jointly on, the proposal

raises again the old problem faced by Alfred Schutz ([1954] 1963:342–45), namely, that of relating the first-order constructs of the culture structure by the group members to the analyst's second-order constructs, however constructed, of the culture structure at the analytical level. She is right though in criticizing Robert Wuthnow (1987) for "giving up 'the problem of meaning' in cultural analysis in order to cure its illness of subjectivity," Ann Swidler (1986) for her culture as a "tool kit" vision that "denies both the logic of cultural systems and the role of a coherent belief system in concrete social action," and Archer (1988) for neglecting meaning and for making culture fully dependent on the social system (Kane 1991:67). Ann Swidler's practice approach does not obviate the need for interpretation and the imputation of meanings by the analyst either. The structuralist and linguistic/semiotic approaches, as Allan (1998) points out, also neglect agency and affect-meaning by making human action and interaction dependent on the structural dynamics of the sign system; postmodernism, on the other hand, not only celebrates the death of the subject but also effects a decisive break between the sign and reality (pp. 8, 10).

Coming from the other direction, Eisenstadt (1989) had expressed his serious reservations about the growing disjunction between the study of culture and the study of social structure and had noted with great concern the increasing marginalization of some of the central areas of sociology of culture (sociology of knowledge, religion, and the arts). He claimed,

The conceptualization of culture, social structure, and personality as "real" ontological entities, the mutually exclusive deterministic approaches, the neglect of the analysis of rules, norms, or of the emergent systemic qualities of social structure—pointed to the inability of most analyses to address themselves to the central questions of sociological analysis which were . . . opened during this period, particularly the relations between the different constituents of social order, of the ways in which culture is constitutive, as an inherent component of social order and structure (even if it does not constitute it), and, conversely, the degree to which social structure is constitutive of culture. . . . Accordingly, all of these developments were also unable to resolve the classical problem of the order-maintaining as opposed to the order-transforming functions of culture, as well as the related problem of the degree to which social structure determines culture or viceversa— i.e., the extent of mutual determination of culture, social structure, and social behavior. (P. 9)

Alexander (1990) has rightly emphasized the critical importance of understanding both subjective meanings and structural constraints in the study of culture, but his attempt to distance himself from the traditional sociology of culture approach, which has been concerned with "the significant effects of cultural meanings," and to nurture instead the new field of cultural sociology, focused on "interpreting" collective meanings, reflects a longstanding rift between the positivist and interpretive approaches within the field of sociology (p. 26). By the late 1980s, however, a major rift had appeared within cultural sociology, between

those who have thought of culture as an implicit or subjective facet of social life [and] those who portray culture in terms of specific kinds of discourse, texts, or other symbolic products. Moreover, competition has arisen between those who regard cultural sociology as more legitimately concerned with the social contexts in which culture is produced and those who wish to focus attention more

clearly on the content of these products themselves. It is, in fact, this intellectual competition among contending orientations that promises to animate innovative work in cultural sociology in the immediate future. (Wuthnow and Witten 1988:65)

Somers has used the concept of “knowledge cultures” to document how a metanarrative, such as that of citizenship theory, strives to take on “the role of an epistemological gatekeeper—by defining not only the range of rational argument and worthwhile questions but also the rules of procedure by which those questions can rationally be answered” (Somers 1999:145). The current fixation on “difference” will ensure that cultural analysis, of whatever hue, will continue to focus on the perceived threat or promise of “the other” (Brantlinger 1990:163). However, as the twenty-first century rolls on, all universalizing master narratives will increasingly be called into question as previously submerged voices become assertive and clamor to be heard. And whatever may be the merits of Samuel Huntington’s (1996) forebodings about an imminent clash of civilizations, the proper understanding of the knowledge/ power nexus (see Foucault 1980) and of the most pressing political and moral struggles being waged around the world acquires a new urgency.

A quarter-century ago, an exhaustive overview of the different approaches to culture had led Peterson (1979:160) to conclude that none of the perspectives he had considered had come up with a convincing paradigm to relate culture and society. The sociological task for the study of culture in the twenty-first century remains the same it has been all along: of how to reconnect culture and social structure and to explore the way they affect one another and human relationships and the human condition, both locally and on the global landscape. In addition to the long-standing ideal/material, macro/micro, structural/ conjunctural, quantitative/qualitative divisions, this task will continue to divide those who wish to hold on to the positivist generalizing/empirical mission of the conventional sociology of culture from those who feel called on to pursue in one form or another the new and emerging interpretive/textual approaches of cultural sociology. Unwilling to let go of the first for the second, most sociologists would perhaps find it congenial to carve out a position between the two extremes.

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