

Blackwell Readers in Sociology

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY



Edited by LYN SPILLMAN

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Cultural Sociology

Edited by

Lyn Spillman

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Preface

Even more than most books, an anthology of this sort is only possible because of the work of generations of dedicated scholars, some of them unrecognized. I'm thankful for all their work, which made shaping this collection something like the experience of sculptors who feel that they only release a form which already exists in their material.

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Introduction: Culture and Cultural Sociology

Lyn Spillman

Cultural sociology is about meaning-making. Cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination, and resistance. The readings collected here touch on many different topics – from television viewing to volunteering, from rock music to war memorials, from stories of violence to ideals of the public good – but they all contribute to understanding meaning-making processes, and they illustrate key themes and important perspectives in contemporary cultural sociology.

This field of scholarly inquiry is thriving, with an outpouring of innovative research in the last decades of the twentieth century, and promising work in progress for the future. I hope this sampler serves to convey some sense of that richness and possibility, and inspire some readers to look beyond these selections to the books and articles from which they are drawn, and to the other fascinating research which could fill several further volumes like this.

The selections are intended to provide a compact introduction to some classics, developments, and exemplars in cultural sociology for students and scholars unfamiliar with the field. This introduction provides some context for the general reader. I discuss first the slippery yet inescapable idea of culture, and contemporary cultural sociology's angle on it. On that basis, I explain the organization of this book, and conclude with a brief assessment of the opportunities and limitations now shaping cultural sociology. What is distinctive about cultural sociology as a perspective on meaning-making? What are its strengths and its blind spots? How does a cultural sociologist approach a topic like work, or politics, differently from other sociologists, or a topic like novels, or music, differently from scholars in the humanities? What are some of the unresolved issues and neglected topics that should be addressed by cultural sociologists in the future?

"Culture"

When we think about human groups, the idea of culture often seems commonplace and indispensable. But what exactly is "culture?" In common usage, the term has a number of overlapping yet sometimes contradictory connotations. And just as the idea of culture is comfortably capacious, if a little fuzzy, in everyday life, scholars in many different fields in the humanities and social sciences make culture their focus in different ways. Consequently, the idea of culture is notoriously difficult to define, and the concept can seem misty, all-encompassing, and ambiguous – to the extent that some social scientists have found the concept too fuzzy to be useful.¹

Yet however difficult it is to identify and think clearly about culture, it has seemed to cultural sociologists in the last few decades that the difficulties should be faced head on, rather than avoided. Here, I will sketch the various things we might commonly mean when we refer to culture, explaining why these ambiguities exist. I will suggest that contemporary scholarship on culture in the humanities and social sciences resolves earlier ambiguities by implicitly or explicitly treating culture as *processes of meaning-making*. Cultural sociology, combining interdisciplinary influences with sociological presuppositions, examines *meaning-making processes along three specific dimensions*; meaning-making in everyday action, the institutional production of meaning, and the shared mental frameworks which are the tools of meaning-making.

Culture as a Feature of Entire Groups and Societies

Sometimes we think of culture as something that connects us to other people in our groups, by contrast with outsiders. If we share with others certain ways of seeing the world, or habits, or shorthand codes and assumptions (for instance, about the way we eat meals, or the heroes we know and admire) we think of ourselves as members of the same culture or subculture.² Against this background, we are conscious of “cultural difference” when we encounter a new situation or a new group and find that our usual ways of seeing and acting in the world can no longer be taken for granted (for instance, when commonplace symbols like flags or flowers are used differently, or when informal rules about dating or drugs are different). When we think about culture in this way, we see culture as an attribute of entire groups or societies, and we draw contrasts between the cultures of different peoples.

This idea of culture emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. By that time, new reflection about differences among human populations had been prompted by European exploration and conquest across the globe. This gradually generated a comparative way of thinking about human society which ultimately became commonplace in modern life, and was also crucial to the formation of anthropology as a discipline.³ In this anthropological sense of the term, the entire way of life of a people is thought to be embedded in, and expressed by, its culture. Cultures are thought to be evident in anything from tools to religion; and different cultures are seen as distinct units.

In the nineteenth century, cultures were rated according to western ideals of social progress, and European cultures were placed at the top of a world hierarchy. But explicit claims about the superiority of western cultures gradually dissipated in the twentieth century. More recently, many scholars have challenged implicit as well as explicit assumptions about western superiority, assumptions embedded in colonial and postcolonial social relations and in relations between cultures of dominant and subordinate groups. Against the belief in cultural hierarchy, the concept of culture was gradually pluralized and relativized, so that different “cultures” were thought to have equal value.⁴ We see this connotation very frequently in common usage today, such as when we consider “multiculturalism,” or when tourists enjoy visiting “another culture.”

Culture as a Separate Realm of Human Expression

Another way we often think of culture has quite different connotations. We can label as “cultural” special activities or material artifacts characteristic of particular groups, like opera, rap music, folk song, novels or haiku, quilts or masks or building styles. In this usage, an implicit contrast is drawn between “culture” and other realms of social life, whether or not we also contrast different societies as well. And we might think of those specialized cultural practices and artifacts as what is most valuable about us or others, what needs to be preserved to express and represent the identity of a group.

Like the way the anthropological sense of culture echoes ideas which emerged in the big social changes associated with European expansion, this second sense in which we use “culture” today also echoes some important social changes, but in a somewhat different way. “Culture” came to refer to the practices and products of a special set of institutions in society in the course of the Industrial Revolution in England. The social differentiation and dissent generated in the transition from premodern to modern social organization accentuated a new contrast between the mundane, pragmatic, and conflict-ridden realms of economics and politics – the new worlds of capitalism, industry, democracy, and revolution – and an ideally purer realm of art and morality expressing higher human capabilities and values than could be seen in modern economic and political life. For some, this separate sphere of culture could serve as a basis for judging what was destructive and superficial in modern society.⁵ For others, considering culture as a differentiated realm of expression could encourage the opinion that culture was in some way more trivial, more “epiphenomenal,” and, perhaps, more “feminine” than the apparently more consequential spheres of politics or economics. And just as the first understanding of culture was associated with and elaborated by scholars in anthropology, this second sense was associated with and became the core of several forms of scholarship now considered “humanities” – such as the study of literature, art, and music.

When we talk about art, or popular culture, or folk culture, or even mass culture, then, we are echoing an idea which first emerged to help map the massive social changes occurring within European societies as modern economic and political institutions were born. (In earlier, less differentiated societies, “culture” could not be viewed as a separate sphere of life.) When we think of some complex and high status expressive cultural practices and objects – like opera, or sculpture – as “high culture,” we are echoing nineteenth-century claims that carved out a set of practices and products which could somehow be set against everyday economic and political life. If we deplore mass culture for its commercialization, we also appeal to a notion that culture is ideally a separate and purer sphere of life. This idea also leaves indirect traces in contemporary thinking which tends to question whether an attachment to “high” culture is anything more than a camouflaged claim to high social status, and in the converse emphasis on the interest and significance of popular or “folk” culture artifacts and practices.

Culture as Meaning-Making

So the commonsense meanings of culture still current today echo the history of the idea. In everyday life, the term might still refer either to that realm of human activity and special artifacts separate from the mundane world of practical social life, or to the whole way of life of a group or a people. And these connotations of the term throughout its history can still resonate dissonantly, adding to its apparent ambiguity or vagueness. Like other disciplines, cultural sociology has been shaped by this sort of wide-ranging difference and development in the understanding of culture.

Confusion can multiply when we consider that even if we restrict our understanding of culture to the sense in which it refers to attributes of whole groups of people, various scholars have taken that to mean many different things. For instance, different scholars might emphasize different analytic dimensions of meaning and value, stressing artifacts, norms, customs, habits, practices, rituals, symbols, categories, codes, ideas, values, discourse, worldviews, ideologies, or principles. And this list is not exhaustive; any list of cultural “things” will necessarily be incomplete, because meaning and interpretation are active and fluid processes. Moreover, such a list conceals some important theoretical disputes between those scholars who emphasize discourses and those who emphasize practices, those who focus on cognitive categories and those who stress values, those who analyze concrete products and those who analyze deep textual patterns – not to mention the many possible combinations of these options.

But many of these confusions and disputes can be resolved if we consider “culture” as referring to *processes of meaning-making* – such processes may operate in different sorts of social locations (in more specialized arenas or more generally) and may be evident in all sorts of social practices and social products. The central concerns of those who study culture are to understand processes of meaning-making, to account for different meanings, and to examine their effects in social life. This view can encompass both culture as specialized realm and culture as an attribute of groups, and can include all the various things, from artifacts to principles, which scholars have thought to be important parts of cultures. Cultural sociologists might investigate culture as “a separate sphere of society,” or culture as a “whole way of life” – the examples in this volume cover both territories – but they do it because their key goal is now formulated as understanding processes of meaning-making.⁶

Is this clarification itself too broad? And doesn’t that mean that the idea of culture is still confusing? As Eagleton has pointed out, in his discussion of similar problems with the term “ideology,” “any word which covers everything loses its cutting edge and dwindles to an empty sound.”⁷ But while anything may be viewed “culturally” in the sense that anything may indeed be endowed with shared meaning and become the object of human interpretation, other processes also shape and undergird human life. What is distinctive about focusing on culture can be seen if we contrast the study of culture with different sorts of accounts of human action. Most obviously, a focus on culture contrasts with accounts of human action emphasizing nature or biology. It also challenges accounts of social life which focus on universally shared psychological processes or principles. While not denying that biology or psychology pro-

foundly influence human life, creating universal and necessary conditions of social action, cultural explanation brackets those universal conditions and assumes that human forms of thought and ways of doing things are far too diverse and differentiated to be explained by universal features. In addition to differentiating cultural explanation from biological or psychological explanation, many sociologists also contrast cultural accounts with investigation of social structures shaping human life – so, for instance, a study of class consciousness differs from a study of class structure, and a study of organizational culture differs from a study of organizational forms.⁸

I suggest, then, that scholars in many fields concerned with culture all analyze processes of meaning-making, though they may examine different aspects of such processes and use a variety of different tools to do so. Contemporary cultural sociology often draws on anthropology, history, feminist scholarship, literary criticism, media studies, political science, cultural studies, and social psychology for approaches which generate better ways of understanding culture. Indeed, work in the field is often characterized by creative use of the approaches and findings of other fields, as the selections here demonstrate. More than for many areas of sociology, this interdisciplinary awareness seems integral to the vitality of sociological approaches to culture.

“Culture” in American Sociology

But a more specific set of intellectual influences and resources have also shaped cultural sociology. As Smith has pointed out, disciplinary history and institutional pressures have generated a set of sensibilities, assumptions, and questions which ultimately differentiate work in the field from related work in such areas as anthropology and cultural studies, and which also tend to distinguish what he calls “American cultural sociology” from work on culture by sociologists in other countries.⁹

Sociology, like anthropology, was formed in the nineteenth century when concepts of culture were still emerging. But unlike the situation in anthropology, “culture” remained a residual category full of analytic confusion well into the twentieth century in sociological thought. Sociology was especially concerned with conflicts between traditional society and emerging modern society – problems of individual and community, inequality, and power. Early sociologists certainly had a lot to say about culture: for instance, Marx’s notion of ideology, Durkheim’s ideas about ritual, symbol, and the sacred, Weber’s studies of how subjective meanings direct action, and Mead’s theory of “significant symbols” in interaction are still essential for research in cultural sociology. But these insights about meaning-making in the work of formative sociological thinkers did not gel to make a theory of culture central in sociological thinking in the way that theories of culture became fundamental to anthropology. Until quite recently, sociology textbooks introducing the idea of culture often turned to anthropology for definitions, explanations, and examples.¹⁰

Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century some influential traditions in sociological inquiry entirely bracketed reflection on collective meaning-making, and those which did examine culture were somewhat peripheral. Typically, sociology might examine