

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

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Summary

This article explores approaches to studies of culture and cultural analyses within the social sciences, drawing on histories and current practices which have contributed to the development of Cultural Sociology and the infusion of sociological approaches to cultural analysis across disciplinary borders. Specific attention is paid to the politics of representation, drawing on examples of writing, and the perceptions and analyses of culture that they embody, critique and mobilize, to highlight the emergence of influential new critical perspectives on theoretical, methodological and technological developments. Moves away from social science studies of given social domains and geographical areas, a shift significantly influenced by postcolonial and poststructural theory encouraged more explicit engagement by authors with theoretical perspectives in social and cultural theories which were emerging *across* and not just *within* disciplines. Institutionally, the implementation of interdisciplinary programs in gender studies, sexuality studies, diaspora studies, critical race theory, queer studies, health studies and so forth resulted in close encounters between different approaches to the concept of culture(s) and thus the various methodologies informing its analysis. Culture, while never static, became subject to deconstruction alongside other analytical tools and concepts. Culture in its nominative state became increasingly *cultural* – a linguistic shift that emphasizes the descriptive, transitional and relational dimensions of “culture”. Thus, in examining the study of culture in the social sciences, this article highlights the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary characteristics of studies of culture; even when these studies are ascribed to particular disciplinary perspectives (cultural studies,

cultural sociology, cultural geography, cultural anthropology, etc.).

1. Introduction

Articulating a definition of culture has been the occupation of many scholars (see especially Raymond Williams and Clifford Geertz). What is culture, when it is culture that is studied? How does one study culture or do cultural studies? “Culture” has been and often still is associated with particular people, with a specific place, with social organizations and institutions, and with “difference”. Researchers affiliated with cultural sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural geography, as well as interdisciplinary programs in cultural studies, women’s and gender studies, critical literary theory, science and technology studies and so forth, attend to myriad formations of culture and culturally-mediated processes.

Studies of culture emerging in the humanities focused on popular and “high” culture, semiotics and the subaltern (see, for example, the work of Homi Bhaba (*The Location of Culture*) and Gayatri Spivak (*In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*)). The focus was predominantly on texts. In the social sciences, scholars influenced by the “linguistic turn” or the “cultural turn” strove to develop new methodological approaches to the study of culture as enacted and produced through relations, power, inequality and so forth. Cultural Sociology is viewed at times as a “new” subdiscipline of Sociology reflecting an emphasis on the entwinement of social and cultural processes or as a response particularly by scholars in North America, Australia, New Zealand and European countries to the field of “British Cultural Studies.” In other situations, Cultural Sociology is perceived to be interchangeable with the Sociology of Culture, Cultural Studies, and cultural studies in the social sciences. This article, thus, is not written as an explicit framing of a unified history of Cultural Sociology, but instead explores approaches to studies of culture and cultural analysis, as they have been developed especially in sociology, anthropology and cultural studies since the early 1970s, which inform and shape new programs in Cultural Sociology and sociological approaches to so-called Cultural Studies and Cultural Theory. Drawing on examples from texts which have been influential in shaping new methodological and theoretical engagements with culture in its myriad formulations, this article highlights the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary characteristics of studies of culture – even when these studies are “located” within particular disciplinary frames.

During the 1980s and 1990s a number of publications brought together new critical perspectives on theoretical, methodological and technological developments, greatly influencing the development of the study of culture. Transitions from the study of distinct social domains and geographical areas in sociology (and related disciplines such as anthropology and geography) to “issue-centered” studies encouraged more explicit engagement by authors with a variety of theoretical perspectives which were emerging *across* and not just *within* disciplines. Institutionally, the implementation of interdisciplinary courses and programs in gender studies, sexuality studies, diaspora studies, critical race theory, queer studies, health studies and so forth resulted in close encounters between different approaches to the concept of culture(s) and the myriad methodologies informing its analysis. Culture, although it had never been static, became the subject of deconstruction alongside other analytical tools and concepts (such as

gender, race, class, etc.). “Culture” became increasingly “cultural” – a linguistic shift that emphasized its descriptive, transitional and relational dimensions.”

In, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies*, Paula Saukko traces the development of her academic work alongside her own biography of intellectual belonging, writing: “My intellectual commitments are not however, shaped by my research alone but they are also guided by the history of cultural studies and the way in which this history has played out in places I have worked or studied.” Saukko studied in Finland at a time when “cultural studies was no longer a marginal enterprise but [...] becoming [...] mainstream and taking over departments in Scandinavia” and later in the “Mecca of the American version of cultural studies” at the University of Illinois in Urbana Champlain. She worked at the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester and at the time of writing foresaw a move to Egenis (the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society) at Exeter University in the UK. This pattern of mobility reflects diversity in practices of naming “cultural studies” within academic circles over the past few decades and points to the very processes of institutionalization and disciplinary boundary reconfigurations that have taken place in the light of interdisciplinary engagements. It also, though, highlights cycles of university growth and decline. The multi-methodological approach to cultural studies that Saukko identifies marks key transitions in sociology, anthropology, geography, women’s studies, and so forth. The politics, though, of assigning particular work to “Cultural Studies” (written with capital letters), or cultural studies in its broader sense, and the assumed accompanying meanings should be acknowledged. The intellectual biographies of many individuals associated with key contributions in the inter- and trans-disciplinary fields of cultural analysis trace the emergence and decline of funding for specific forms of academic engagement. The history of cultural studies, the interest in cultural sociology, the changing face of cultural anthropology departments, and even the integration of intercultural communication courses or cultural diversity programs in business education may be viewed as part of a narrative of cultural politics. The naming of research and writing which focuses on cultural analysis is linked to the ebb and flux of support for the development of critical social theory, focused fieldwork-based research, policy-oriented research, etc.. Thus, the rest of this article which follows highlights “impulses” to the study of culture which emerged from different directions, in order to address some of the key areas of critical thinking and development in social theory,

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Biographical Sketch

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