

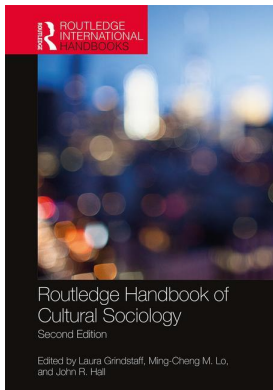
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Sociologies of culture and cultural studies

Reflections on inceptions and futures

Jon Cruz

Installations

The *sociology of culture*, *cultural studies*, *cultural sociology*, and *cultural analysis* are critical analytical developments that have achieved an important place in sociology and kindred fields. These developments have now had at least a half century to build in breadth and depth, and this chapter explores their significance and lasting effects in light of some key transformations that took place during the second half of the twentieth century.

The post-war years were permeated with Cold War worries that a far more tragic form of war – nuclear – could occur (Mills 1961; Nutall 1968). While a political culture that stressed anti-communism induced political quietism and conformity, powerful social and economic changes heralded new public problems that could not be silenced or ignored. The period saw an expanding middle class that complemented the explosion of consumer goods. New levels of mass consumption offered release from earlier restrictions based on depression and wartime limitations, but the celebration of the cornucopia of material abundance was challenged by the long-simmering problems of racial inequality and a Civil Rights Movement that called critical attention to racism, political disenfranchisement, poverty, and civic as well as state-tolerated repression. A new socio-demographic – the teenager – came into being and with it a new youth culture.

In Western societies, particularly in the US, the expansion of the “culture industries” produced new relationships among cultural forms as well as between and among producers and consumers. Older media forms were absorbed and overlaid by new ones. Radio, already well established, continued to flood the sonic sphere with news and music – commercially underwritten. Cinema and radio competed with the innovation of television, which merged audio-visual symbolic production made for the private home. Popular literature, particularly paperback books and magazines, proliferated. Popular music assimilated older genres (drawing from the abundance from Tin-Pan Alley, country music, jazz, and rhythm and blues), and yielded “rock ‘n’ roll” – a hybrid constellation that drew from white working-class country music and the music of black Americans rooted in blues, gospel, jazz, and rhythm and blues. At the same time that US society was steeped in the mores of anti-miscegenation, the popular cultural sphere, especially the realm of music, encouraged aesthetic miscegenation. Although such developments and

the social tensions they refract had their precursors – after all, this period is well into cultural modernity – the popular forms were novel as were their production processes, content, circuits of dissemination, and their consumers, audiences, and publics.

It is in this context that social critics and social scientists began to take stock of the cultural landscape. Rosenberg and White's edited book, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957), and Whannel and Hall's *The Popular Arts* (1965) captured the attempt to account for the rapidly shifting terrain. These titles are noteworthy; they belied an older ideology clashing and commingling with the new, and they signaled the early crossing of traditional boundaries between elite and popular culture. Consider the terminology: "culture," "arts," "mass," and "popular" all joined in proximity, reconceptualizing relationships among cultural forms. In the older view, "popular arts" was an oxymoron and though it persisted, it was also in full challenge. Borders between "high" and "popular" were becoming increasingly porous and gatekeepers were relentlessly shrill as a result, but there was no reversing what was being culturally released. In this early scholarship was a new sensibility; innovation, expansion, and proliferation within the cultural sphere – propelled by technological change and rapid commodification – warranted serious attention. The juncture was variously theorized as transformations in "taste" (Gans 1974; Peterson and Kern 1996), as a tighter grip of market ideology (Marcuse 1968), and a condition conducive to new expressivities (Denisoff 1972).

An invigorated sociology of culture and cultural studies thus emerged, with older views adapted, recombined, and carried forward with burgeoning variations. Having changed rapidly, the cultural sphere had to be comprehended, fathomed, and charted. The context demanded new accounting and an accounting of the new. In this fecund milieu, older classical social theory was newly tested, but it, too, hosted new (and for some, unwelcomed) mergers and paradigms. Marxism, with an established view of culture as a reflection or epiphenomena of the economic realm, was resynthesized in dialogic engagement with Weberian, Durkheimian, Freudian, and linguistic-semiotic theories. Let us recall that when Marx published the first volume of *Das Kapital* in 1867, systems of communication meant *railroads*, the *telegraph*, and the materiality of discrete and tangible *print*. But in the post-WWII social formation, an explosion had taken place within mass communication and the systems of symbolic (and thus social, political, cultural, and ideological) production. It was no longer easy to transpose the lessons of the nineteenth-century political economy as a way to account for the economic and cultural conditions that had emerged by the mid-twentieth century. In highly industrialized Germany, Italy, and Japan, populist authoritarianism flummoxed the earlier notion that advanced proletarianization would yield an inexorable myth-busting revolutionary historical subject. Mass culture, mass communications, new demographics, and new social movements presented a more complex set of cultural developments that linked older concerns of alienation and exploitation to new problems involving mass consumption but also increased social fragmentation. Marx never got to witness the rise of the Disney Corporation, but we can read Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) for an approximation of what his assessment might have been. Mass culture, the immensely productive technologies and apparatuses that enabled it, and its thorough enmeshment in society challenged the ideals of rational, participatory, and critically engaged *publics* (Habermas [1962] 1989). These new formations were not as class transparent as they arguably were in earlier stages of industrial capitalism. The social and cultural sphere, in tandem with the economy, had generated an entirely new cultural terrain with which theories had to contend.

Marxism was complemented by – but was also pushed from – the cultural side by critical dialogue with a sociology of culture that drew from Weber and Durkheim. Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–1905] 1958) did not displace the Marxian view of alienated labor as foundational to modern capitalism; it did, however, argue that

capitalism could also have roots in a cultural-religious crisis. Durkheimian sociology was enlisted to endorse the notion of a functionalist normative order, systems maintenance, and the progressive institutionalization of civil society (Parsons 1949; Bellah 1967). The symbolic roots of domination took on a different accent charted in the passage from Saussure to Lévi-Strauss (culture worked like language), and then brought back into conversation with Marxism in the writings of Barthes and Althusser, both of whom grasped a functionalist “*solidarity as dominant ideology*” paradigm. The emphasis shifted not just to people’s consent to be ruled but to the operations of cultural repression backed by recourse to system-generated violence (Saussure [1916] 1959; Barthes [1957] 1972; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Althusser 1971; Foucault 1977). The functionalism drawn from Durkheim was thus recast as a form of social reproduction rooted in a dominant culture. These interventions illuminate something fundamental in the development of social theory: an incessant, historically engaged, unfolding conversation of interpretive assessments and analytical arguments, schisms, and compromises.

A more contemporary challenge springs from arguments of a “Strong Program” that has *finally* been achieved, which pivots on the proposition of *cultural autonomy* (Alexander and Smith 2001). Upon close examination, the idea of “cultural autonomy” is a split concept: there is the posited idea of an underlying, ahistorical, transcendent domain of culture, but one evident through its modes of enactment and manifestation. In other words, the autonomy of culture is constantly subjected to the modes of its articulation and forms of expressivity. Indeed, the forms that make it discernable are the evidence for its a priori essence. This raises many questions. Curious cases abound.

If an ahistoricist autonomous culture is pre-given, for example, why would a society move rapidly from one taken-for-granted and widely accepted division of labor to another, necessitating a thorough recalibration of gender ideology? This is what happened in the wake of World War II in the US, when the men who filled the vast majority of stable, relatively high-wage manufacturing jobs were called into the armed services and women replaced them in the factories (the so-called Rosie the Riveter program). If there were an underlying culture that was so autonomous, how could something as deeply systemic and structural as the gendered division of labor be altered so quickly? Or one could ask why the Germany we knew at the beginning of the twentieth century – renowned for its intellectual freedom and creativity – became in just a few decades a military state engaged in a racialized pogrom that killed millions of innocent people? And what do we make of the Black Lives Matter movement, a spontaneous (albeit long-simmering) eruption of anger that mobilized thousands of bodies across space and place to protest the killing of unarmed black men and boys by police? The movement was not the product of (although it was eventually embraced by) formal organizations and institutions; rather, it arose out of the emotion/affect generated by images captured on cell phones circulating online. If culture is autonomous, how do its modes of articulation prompt individuals and groups to spiral and veer toward major collective action so swiftly? The notion of “autonomous culture” appears to beg the question: it is always “there.” But what is *that* that is “there”? The autonomous culture proposition requires a constant trail of evidence to function as *operational definitions* – culture is there because it is being *symbolized, expressed, refracted, enacted*, and so forth.

The problem continues to challenge functionalist and structural theorizing, their Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian inflections, and their more modern extensions and elaborations that move toward specificities involving new complexities of class, race, sexuality, gender, and other shifting identity formations not easily reducible to a priori categorical enclosures. Bourdieusian cultural sociology (which is an exceptionally good example of how modern social and cultural theory draws itself out of deep *conversation* with, and *assimilating/accommodating appropriations* of, many earlier theoretical perspectives) gets at the hierarchies and pluralities of

a culture by discerning the matrices and positions that govern *fields, habituses, dispositions, and practices*. But fields are not forever fixed; they develop over time. Like habituses, dispositions, and practices, they may rise, and then unravel – which makes the weighty currency metaphor of *capital* in Bourdieusian theory problematic when subjected to historical perspective (cf. Somers 2005). We are left with historical problems: Where do these configurations come from? How do they work? What keeps them operative? Why do they unravel, lose efficacy, and give way to reinvention? When are substantive changes the result of distinct people and their actions? When might change be induced by technological innovation? When does it result from well-positioned organizations or corporations making decisions that become socially altering? When is change the result of natural – and, these days, man-made – calamity? The problem lies in explaining how some cultural formations and not others interrogate, challenge, upend, and transform the meanings of social life. Cultural autonomy thus appears not so much an entity unto itself but rather a social plasticity capable of vast permutations and combinations. A point, then, to remember: theories were never – and are never – stand-alone ideational moments in themselves. They absorb and challenge antecedents, and are, in turn, challenged by ensuing views. Horizons in flux invariably host cross-fertilization. This statement may seem banal. But cross-fertilization is something to argue for, as it is an argument against theoretical closures, standpoints, and convictions that appear as struggles over intellectual property rights.

The narcissism of small differences – or who's got the best goods?

The points raised thus far may appear as obvious rehash. But this is purposive. I want to revisit the problem of grasping culture by coming through a back door: the mid-twentieth century changes came with a watershed of theorizing culture. It was a socio-historical situation that could not be ignored. It is the very juncture that set us up. And yet, much of cultural theorizing has moved forward by assimilating the conditions that generated the very problems that we now define as “cultural.” Profiles – the care given to grasp culture(s) in transformation – emerge. When we enter into the rich and vast realm of social theorizing, and its applications in the sociology of culture and cultural studies appearing after the 1970s, several observations crystallize. By the early 1980s, the American Sociological Association's “Culture Section” was one of the fast-growing sections in the discipline and it remains vibrant today. The interest corresponds to the cultural transformations noted earlier, which demanded critical responses. One notable development was a growing tension over “culture” as a term, which appeared as competitive struggles over intellectual property. The telltale sign was how the term fractured into pluralized appropriations – the *sociology of culture*, *cultural sociology*, *cultural studies*, and *cultural analysis* – signaling different inflections, adoptions, and identifications. The “sociology of culture” and “cultural sociology” came to be associated with sociologists working in departments of sociology while “cultural studies” became identified with the work and legacy of scholars affiliated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK in the 1970s (also known as the Birmingham School). Terms carry identifications and investments; they are seldom happenstance. In the last three decades of the twentieth century such terms were pushed more toward entrenched standpoints reflecting theoretical divisions, as conflicts over the modes of theoretical appropriation, over preferred *theorists*, and in some cases over “schools” of thought emerged (cf. Hall 1978, 1980; Long 1997; Bonnell and Hunt 1999). Particularly critical positions were taken by Sherwood, Smith, and Alexander (1993) and Alexander and Smith (2001), who viewed much of cultural theory and case-based examples as “weak” from the perspective of the “Strong Program” grounded in assumptions of *cultural autonomy*. British cultural studies was especially problematic (see Cruz 2012). I note the singling out of the Birmingham School by the advocates

of a “Strong Program” because the posture represents something of an ideal type in comparative theorizing, with cultural studies occupying the negative, other pole.

Yet when the various standpoints are explored more fully, and when we get beyond the trench-like arm wrestling over intellectual property, the surface scuffles give way to deeper continuities, cross-referential terms, framing similarities, kindred questions, and shared concerns. Likenesses – at first obscured by intellectual dislikes – are discernable among purportedly different and incommensurate theories and approaches in the *sociologies* (from here on I use the plural term) of culture and cultural studies. This recalls a phrase used by Freud: the “narcissism of small differences.” Freud attempted to get at how conflict may result not from vast differences between people and their dispositions but rather from the compressions and intimacies among individuals who are so very similar that a premium develops in seeking exaggerated difference (cf. Freud [1930] 1962). Bourdieu reiterates the principle (though with no attribution to Freud): “social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat” (Bourdieu 1984:479). We might even reach back to Durkheim: under population expansion, increased pressure is put upon older forms of like-minded solidarity which has to accommodate more potential variations. Durkheim referred to the rise of “moral density” as the result of material and psychic expansion. The solution was for social systems to allow for *differentiation* and *individuation*. When we look at the longer arc of the sociologies of culture and cultural studies as they arise and proliferate in the second half of the twentieth century, we see something similar: the narcissism of minor differences yields “theoretical density,” and resulting boundaries and enclosures within a relatively small number of people who are members of a vast academic world – and who are, to paraphrase Bourdieu, a *dominated fraction within a dominant class* (weep now; then let’s move on).

When one reads astute overviews of cultural analyses, with detailed literature reviews and careful comparisons and contrasts, the descriptive terrain appears diverse and sprawling. But if we shift the foci to consider the historical juncture as intellectual terrain, we see that distinctions and firmly stated standpoints have continuities and similarities, even as they remain capable of hosting (in the closer look) the nuance and variation noted. Shared and overlapping questions, similarities of social terrain, and historically bounded contexts reveal key, consistent frames. Concerns with prerequisite premises and causes, observations, cases, questions, and practices seem to coagulate around familiar problems: How do socially situated and embedded individuals, groups, classes, and more complex combinatorial formations involving ideological dispositions act in ways that appear to order their inherited and immediate worlds? What are the extant dynamics – histories, systems, social structures, and ideologies – that presumably shape social inheritances? How do people (in distinct contexts) come to assimilate pre-existing symbols, practices, ideologies, rituals, and scripts, and to what extent do they adopt and adapt to them, or alter them, or feel compelled to interrogate them, and transform them to fit different needs – or, in some cases, antagonistically reject them in lieu of different needs? How are people “set up” by social and cultural conditions? When do they act in ways that reset such conditions, thus transforming what has been bequeathed to them? How are the domains of immediate, discrete, everyday life the result of entrenched cultural histories and social structures? When do such inheritances lose efficacy? These are rather generic questions, but they span a great range of social and cultural theorizing. When dialing back the lens, the continuity, consistency, and similarity is remarkable – regardless of the appearance of emphatic and at times vociferous declaration of difference.

An excursion in to the *manifest* differences yet *latent* similarities can be useful (I am thinking of Merton’s lesson [Merton 1957]). Cultural studies is often flagged by American sociologists for its lack of canonical orientation. Yet if we look at a seminal study by Raymond Williams, one

of the key founders of British cultural studies, and compare him to Max Weber, we begin to see important similarities that are elided in the divisive boundary work between sociology and cultural studies. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–1905] 1958) is the classic study of the cultural-religious crisis that helped install modern capitalism; Weber complicated rather than debunked Marx's proclivity to reduce the cultural sphere to class dynamics via the labor theory of value. He pours over the *textual* track record (or what Foucauldians and Deconstructionists later would call the *discursive forms*) of theological anguish and its shifting standpoints, tracing how early Protestantism worked its place in and against the rise of modern acquisitiveness and capital accumulation. It is a long hike from Luther and Calvin, who held profound disdain for worldly possessions, to a contemporary Christian conservative embrace of republican virtue and corporatist trust, conflating market freedoms with religious freedoms. The Marx-Weber synthesis would become a crucial strand of social and cultural theory, weaving into Lukacs's seminal *History and Class Consciousness* ([1923] 1999) and winding its way into important critical perspectives launched by members of the Frankfurt School.

Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) is an intellectually rich study of the formation of the ideologies that emerge constitutively with the development of the English state and modern capitalism. Williams explores the historical arc and trajectory of how key ideas (*industry, democracy, class, art, and culture*) were forged in tandem with the rise of capitalist modernity and the installation of corresponding dominant ideologies. He exemplifies the application of what Weber called *elective affinities* – how historical processes invariably entail individuals and groups constantly putting together inherited “ideas” with contemporary “interests.” His work informs cultural studies, yet it also has much in common with Weber's sociology of culture. Both scholars carry out something familiar – key individuals, writings, and theoretical confrontations are viewed through the lens of their textual production, with their dispositions carefully linked to the transformations that intersect language, arguments, and ideologies, thus grounding historically what eventually became the dominant forms of social, economic, political, and cultural life. In comparison with Weber, Williams is arguably much more *canonically* in tandem with *founding* problems in sociology than perhaps many more recent sociologists of culture – who come of age embracing the study of culture shaped by technically refined methodologies that arguably *really get at culture*.

To note another parallel: Weber's theorizing does not settle for a singular causal force, condition, or formation. In this regard he is ontologically different than Marx or Durkheim. Weber argued that societies are knitted together by multiple rationalities (*traditional-oriented, value-oriented, goal-oriented, and emotional-oriented*). Each of these is present, but their relationship and combination differ according to historical specificity, and they tend to produce their own forms of political legitimacy. The *quality of the mix* thus gives the society its cultural feel, meaning, and horizons of sentiment, sensibility, and experience. Yet horizons of meaning may register differently among individuals, groups, classes, and identity formations – since such domains of lived experience will likely have different relationships to the cultural mix of rationalities (e.g., a society at one point may appear settled in traditional Catholicism but be challenged by the value-oriented insurgency of Protestantism). Weber held a wild card: traditional-oriented, value-oriented, or goal-oriented rationalities could fail; they could run out of steam, lose control, or fumble in ways that undermined their legitimacy. When such failures reached a crisis, *emotional rationality* could present itself as the crisis-engendered default. And it is in such circumstances that the emotionally charged forces of *charismatic* impulse could rise as irruptive force and offer urgent solution. In this regard it is instructive to note how Williams travels similar theoretical terrain, though with much less elaboration. Elsewhere Williams (1977) sketches multiple impulses in society: *traditional, residual, emergent, dominant, and oppositional*. Like Weber, these are co-present sensibilities; the similarities and the historical fluidity they signal are formidable.

The preceding excursion is admittedly selective, but my purpose is to highlight the obvious likeness, overlap, and continuity that can be extrapolated among the various interests, motivations, concerns, and typologies of problems that intersect the sociologies of culture and cultural studies. This is evident despite the intellectual orientations that, over time, are associated with standpoints that occupy different sides of presumed chasms. Other examples could be considered, such as the kindred relationship between the critical ethnographic studies of the Chicago School in the US and the ethnographic work central to British cultural studies, or the Chicago School tradition of reframing questions of “deviant behavior” and the focus of Birmingham School scholars on subcultures and youth cultures (Cruz 2012).

Our juncture – our challenge

Writing in the mid-1920s, Karl Mannheim ([1929] 1936) noted that subjectivities and personalities as well as social systems intersect, shaped by grids that are vertical (hierarchically stratified and organized with power) and horizontal (the spread and sprawl of societal configurations over spatial patterns). However, vertical or horizontal systems can undergo major change; older, power-based, stratified systems of authority and control can unravel; established relationships (within communities, among institutions, etc.) can be destabilized; anxieties can abound (to this we must add rapid developments that degrade the quality of life and escalate human suffering). Such changes may offer new opportunities to escape (or expand access to) the effects of power for some groups. When both vertical and horizontal systems undergo unraveling, the sense of crisis, erosion, indeterminacy, instability, doubt, and insecurity constitute serious problems that churn without clear solutions. This was the world for Mannheim in Germany in the 1920s. It was a juncture of tremendous upheaval, a condition that pulled the complexity of society into focus: things hitherto obscured were revealed. Such a juncture was ripe for a new mode of social and cultural theory he called the “sociology of knowledge.”

In the spirit of Mannheim’s challenge, what kind of knowledge lies ahead for the study of culture? An invigorated interest in the cultural sphere took hold in the second half of the twentieth century; it has fired the remarkable expansion we now associate with sociologies of culture and cultural studies. But our juncture now is equally critical. Our world is morphing and changing rapidly such that we cannot spell out for our students what their lives will be like even a few years from now. The digital turn has transformed much – from ways of packaging knowledge to the reconstitution of experience through personalized use of “social” media. Institutions that once governed news and information are undergoing rapid transformation – some are waning, some are disappearing, and others are reconfiguring their place; cultural and symbolic goods, once material possessions (think music), are displaced by momentary *access-experience*; mass protests coagulate through “tweets” that transcend formative face-to-face conditions; identities take on qualities facilitated by temporal and spatial mobilities; and subcultures (whose meanings stem from relatively contained notions of mid-nineteenth-century folk culture) are now traversed by technologies that allow identification with distant subjects. The promise of technocultural innovations expands democratic impulses yet also inspires nefarious hijacking, surveillance, and manipulation – actions carried out along the spectrum from isolated individuals to corporations to the largest nation-states.

The challenges that installed our sociologies of culture and cultural studies over the past half decade have now metastasized into forms that outstrip yesteryear’s orientations. Which theories will continue to have traction? Which will be necessarily modified? What theories beg to be born? And which veins of the sociologies of culture and cultural studies will remain woefully disconnected from the massive transformations that now unfold? Answers are illusive.

The juncture we are in today, like that of the mid-twentieth century, presents us with a cultural sphere arguably shifting the very terrain we inhabit. We should ask the question posed long ago by Robert Lynd (1939): “*knowledge for what?*” The tedious narcissism of small differences will not generate the kind of new, critical understandings demanded by the present and what lies beyond. Instead we need *trans-theoretical* and *trans-methodological* dialogue – to generate vibrant, relevant, and critical knowledge of what the cultural sphere is coming to be. . . .

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