

Afterword

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

As the years of intense arguments about nationalism attest, sociology is the field *par excellence* for theoretical debates whose consequences structure the lines of empirical social scientific investigation. For the last three decades, the role culture plays in modernity, or whether it plays any role at all, has been fiercely debated inside American sociology. After the death of Parsonian functionalism, American practitioners turned their collective back on culture, stigmatising norm-and-value talk as inherently associated with conservatism, consensus and an inability to conceptualise social change. In Europe, these misguided associations were challenged by Foucault and Bourdieu, who linked culture to institutional and class power, as well as by the emergence of critical cultural studies, which linked culture to resistance. Many American sociologists followed these European responses, but the influence of cultural anthropology – Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, but especially Clifford Geertz – opened up a different post-Parsonian path. Perhaps culture should be allowed more, not less, autonomy from the functional demands of systems, whether the latter emanate from the requirements of equilibrium or from the interests of domination.

It was this path that the strong program in cultural sociology took up. It set out in the 1980s with the cultural rereading of classical and modern traditions. Not the social structural Durkheim of the 1890s but the late Durkheim mattered – the ‘religious sociology’ of sacrality, pollution, solidarity, ritual and symbol. Not the putatively ‘modern’ Weber of rationalisation, state bureaucracy and status conflict, but the struggle for religious salvation that motivated social struggles in preindustrial times. Rather than systems analysis in mid-century social thought, what mattered was the linguistic turn of Wittgenstein and Austin, the symbolic structuralism of Levi-Strauss, and Barth’s social semiotics.

At stake was an issue that also sat at the core of the nationalism debate. Do modern industry and rationalism make culture irrelevant and meaning merely the plaything of functional demands? For those making the cultural turn in sociology, nothing could be further from the case. Meanings in modern societies are relatively autonomous. To make concepts from the humanities – code, narrative, symbol and performance – into tools for social science, the first move must be hermeneutical reconstruction. The internal structure of meaning must be established before such beliefs can ever be related to non-cultural factors. To see culture as cause rather than product is to move from the older ‘sociology of culture’ to contemporary ‘cultural sociology’.

What initially distinguishes the cultural-sociological studies of nationalism presented here is their emphasis on the centrality of meaning. Mira Debs, Gulay Turkmen and Jonathan Wyrzten show that anti-imperialist movements in India, Turkey and Morocco were not only after state independence and institutional power but also after cultural salvation. Their collective identities had suffered grievous humiliation, their traditional religious and political narratives were blocked, and their heroic protagonists were undermined and opposed. The narrative and coding of independence movements was all about cultural trauma, the triumph of abject victims over polluted perpetrators, the restoration of purity, the creation of progressive narratives and modern cultural identities. Just so, Fiona Rose-Greenland reveals the interests of imperialists to be firmly rooted in the meaningful as well. Conceiving their nation as heir to not only Roman but also Greek classicism, the British aristocracy needed to experience their political, military and economic grandeur aesthetically, as heroic and symmetrical, as beautiful and sublime, as morally right.

But if powerful culture structures are, indeed, at the center even of modern societies, it is not because of some ethereal process of idealist emanation. If early strong program work developed theories about modern meanings and methods for reconstructing it, more recent work has sought to place such meaning structures into a dynamic frame. Conflicts over meaning are portrayed as endemic, narratives as open-ended and the connection of symbolic signifiers to social signifieds contingent.

This framework for dynamising meaning draws from understandings of performance. The broad structures of meaning are conceptualised as background representations, scripts as the action-specific subsets of meaning actors establish in specific situations. Meaning-making is a project, an effort to project cultural scripts from actors, whether individuals or carrier groups, to audiences that are structurally and spatially at some remove. In so far as performances can fuse actors, scripts and audience, they will succeed; actions will seem natural, performers authentic. But as modernity fragments and differentiates societies, the elements of performance become more and more de-fused. Successful refusion becomes more difficult, and contemporary performances often appear strategic and artificial, more like spectacles than rituals.

The cultural-sociological studies presented here thoroughly implant this cultural-pragmatic frame. While Wyrzten remains deeply interested in the cultural force of Islam, he traces the syncretic innovation that allowed the traditional *Latif* to versify public suffering in a newly politicised religious frame. A generationally distinctive carrier group of anti-imperialist intellectuals projected this script to the unlettered Moroccan masses. Local mosques, which French power had unwittingly insulated from outside intervention, became stages for the performance of insurrection, and the calls and response of *Latif* established ritualised routines that powered the anti-imperialist movement over two decades.

The same sort of flexible and dynamic approach to postcolonial meaning-making informs Debs's and Turkmen's contributions. They demonstrate that the collective identities of independent India and Turkey, while deeply structured and widely resonating, were always projects in the making. Even as carrier groups constructed these narratives in specific times and places, they became deeply invested in their continuing performative success. Forging their modernist narrative of secular progress and triumph, the creators of India's origin myth ignored the tragedy of the Partition, with its bloody, religious-inspired communalism. Gandhi's assassination encouraged these leaders to go beyond cultural denial to the state repression of Hindu nationalists, creating a festering sore that would later become grist for the mill to the antagonistic trauma stories performed by a newly redolent, anti-Islamic and anti-secular Right. Turkmen shows that, when Ataturk and his secular Turks narrated their nation's post-Ottoman trauma, they engaged in a similar narrative erasure. Certainly there were instrumental reasons for denying the Armenian genocide, but the cultural interest in sustaining the new nation's symbolic purity against past and present enemies was massively more significant. How could the new Turkish state bring salvation if the central protagonists of its origin myth were polluted by Armenian blood? Many decades later, public remorse over the assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dinks created an opportunity for rewriting the national script. When the revised performances of Turkish nationalism were rehearsed, however, outraged members of the citizen-audience quickly shouted them down.

Rose-Greenland shows an opposite causal sequence in the iconic construction of the 'Elgin Marbles'. When Lord Elgin brought his spoils back to imperial Britain, the sculptures generated tepid public attention; they were represented as aesthetically unworthy and economically valueless. In response, Elgin and his network of elite supporters organised hundreds of publicly staged performative utterances testifying to the contrary. Artistic authorities, journalists and parliamentary committees claimed that 'monochromy, martial imagery and the Phidian' style spoke to the very essence of Britain's universalising imperial virtues. Soon, the classical sculptures were placed at the center of the newly opened British Museum, and hundreds of thousands of Britons experienced this new iconic consciousness at first hand.

In their Introduction to this special section, Eric Taylor Woods and Mira Debs suggest that the strong program in cultural sociology can add something even to traditions of nationalism scholarship that have devoted long-standing attention to the role of culture. In this Afterword, I have tried to show just how, in the empirical-cum-theoretical studies presented here, this value-added has taken place. In characterising his own contribution, Jonathan Wyrzten translates the study of nationalism into the language of cultural sociology. When scholars examine the separate elements of performance, Wyrzten writes, they are '*isolating the processes through which elites define a nation*'. Defining the nation is a performative accomplishment. Conceptualising it in strong program terms provides an analytic precision that allows greater causal specificity.