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Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences: Introduction to Special Section Cultural Sociology and Journalism

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The essays that follow in this Special Section were initially formulated as contributions to a forthcoming book, *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered*: *Cultural Power* (Alexander et al. 2015). They are its three pivotal essays, presenting the most theoretically developed and empirically grounded exemplifications of the cultural-sociological approach that makes the volume distinct. As the reader will see, it is because these essays are cultural-sociological that they are able to bring a dramatically different perspective to bear on the contemporary crisis of journalism. Rather than seeing technological and economic change as the primary causes of current anxieties, each essay draws special attention to the role played by the cultural commitments of journalism itself. Each links the professional ethics to the democratic aspirations of the broader societies in which journalists ply their craft, insisting that new digital technologies are being shaped to sustain value commitments rather than undermining them.

In this brief introduction to the Special Section, I provide a broader context for the distinctive perspective that informs these three essays. First, I contrast the cultural-sociological approach with the reductionism that marks other contemporary approaches to journalism. Second, I situate cultural sociology theoretically in the broad historical arc of social thought.

Introduction to the Special Section on "The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Cultural Power" in the *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences.*

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1 Reductionism in Media Studies

In recent decades, there has been an unfortunate split between the core social sciences and media studies. While journalism has virtually disappeared from the agenda of disciplinary sociology, a massive new discipline has emerged around mass communication, sporting its own journals, paradigms, global meetings, and graduate schools. The tens of thousands of teachers and students in this new global discipline certainly constitute a potentially huge audience for innovative contributions to the field. But there is an inward-looking quality to debates in "media studies" that make much of its scholarly activity orthogonal to social theorizing and empirical sociology in their contemporary forms. The challenge for contemporary sociology is to find a way of speaking to the crisis of contemporary journalism in a language that is relevant to the vast and still-expanding discipline of media studies—while remaining true to its disciplinary self.

Among popular media studies devoted to the current crisis in journalism, explanations have been one-sidedly focused on technology and economics—and, as a result, decidedly gloomy in their predictions. Merely to peruse the titles of these books is revealing enough: *The Vanishing Newspaper*: *Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Meyer 2009); *Losing the News*: *The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy* (Jones 2009); *Can Journalism be Saved? Rediscovering America's Appetite for News* (Mersey 2010); *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights*: *The Collapse of Journalism and What Can be Done to Fix It* (McChesney and Pickard 2011).

Recently, a small number of more carefully conducted academic studies have emerged that speak more broadly and sometimes more hopefully about the continuing role of journalism in democracy: *The Changing Business of Journalism and Its Implications for Democracy* (Levy and Nielsen 2010); *Media*, *Politics and the Public* (Lloyd and Winter 2011); *Rethinking Journalism*: *Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape* (Broersma and Peters 2013); *The Future of Journalism*: *Developments and Debates* (Franklin 2013). Yet, these more academic volumes share the broad theoretical weaknesses of more popular works. For example, *The Future of Journalism*, which includes key contributions from a number of "Future of Journalism" conferences—the proceedings of which were originally published as special issues of leading journals in the journalism studies field—rarely moves beyond techno-economic explanations of current problems. By looking only at distinctive national, political, and social contexts, the volume reveals the shortcomings of such noncultural frames. Its understanding of contextual variations is responsive only to material factors, and the result is a decidedly determinist outlook.

Similar problems narrow the contribution of Levy and Nielsen's cross-national collaborative work, even if they approach the crisis from a more nuanced, less dramatic, and longer-term viewpoint. While rightly insisting that journalism remains crucial to democratic discourse, the book approaches the current crisis primarily in terms of new technological and economic forces, ignoring the democratic culture of professional journalism that we underline in our book.

It is not only books about the crisis in media studies that are one-sidedly materialist, but most recent works on media inside the discipline of sociology itself.

Pierre Bourdieu's neo-Marxist approach to journalism, exemplified in his polemic *On Television and Journalism* (1996), explains the practice of journalism as a struggle for domination inside and outside the journalism "field," determinedly reducing the independent power of cultural discourses and the link between professional journalism and political democracy. Some of the most influential younger journalism scholars in American sociology have followed in Bourdieu's path, e.g., Benson and Neveu (2005), and Klinenberg (2007).[1]

Such understandings are light years away from the cultural-sociological perspective that Breese, Luengo, and I deploy here. We see the "crisis in journalism," not as the reflection of an objective reality, but as narrative, something culturally constructed by the long-standing, firmly entrenched moral codes. This cultural construction is relatively independent of the material forces that roil the economic and organization field of journalism today. Insisting on the relative autonomy of culture is central to the "strong program" in cultural sociology, but it is also deeply imbedded in the history of Western social theory and cultural thinking.

2 The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology

The strong program in cultural sociology emerges from the intertwining of two classical sources. One is the *Geisteswissenschaft* tradition that originated with Wilhelm Dilthey in Germany in the late nineteenth century. Dilthey sharply put the distinction between the sciences of nature and the sciences of the spirit. He explained that the human sciences orient themselves toward the inner rather than outer, toward subjectivity, meaning, and experience. Their method has, therefore, to be interpretive or hermeneutic. The hermeneutic method is shared between the interpretive social sciences and the humanities, where the focus is the written text. As Paul Ricoeur later would put it, if meaning is our first concern, then the social scientific analyst must find a way to "convert" meaningful social action into an interpretable text. This text reveals the "inside" of action. In cultural sociology, we call this textual inside a "culture structure." The first goal of any strong program effort must be to find the culture structure, or structures, that inform an individual, group, or institutional action, and to give this structure as much force and integrity as the other, more material (organizational, political, economic, and demographic) kinds of structures that social scientists usually find.

It is Dilthey (as amended by Ricoeur) who provides the broad orientation to meaning and the defense of interpretive method that has allowed a cultural form of macro-sociology to emerge—as compared to the micro-sociologies inspired by phenomenology and pragmatism, which are subjectively oriented but do not reveal "structures" whether of a cultural or material kind. To understand this philosophical foundation for a macro-cultural sociology, it is vital to read Max Weber in light of Dilthey, for it was from this founder of the *Geisteswissenschaften* that Weber took

[1] A significant exception is Jacobs and Townsley, *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere* (2011), whose cultural-sociological approach and democracy-related theorizing is limited only by its neglect of the news side of journalism.

so many of his cultural cues. Weber's most important work of cultural sociology is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958 [1905]). He insists, following Dilthey, that there is an inner meaning to capitalism, its spirit, and with the help of Benjamin Franklin, and Weber's own family history, he reconstructs this economic cultural structure as a form of disciplined asceticism. Once this culture structure of economic action is revealed, a new problem of causal understanding appears. For, instead of asking simply, "what caused capitalism," we must ask, "what has caused the capitalist spirit?" Once this new question is on the explanatory table, it allows Weber to look outside the laws of economic life—the kind of laws to which Marx attributes capitalism's origins in *The Communist Manifesto* (1906) and *Capital* (1962 [1848])—to religious life. He finds that the "Protestant ethic" contains quite a similar culture structure to that of modern capitalism, and he establishes that the centers of early British capitalism were also centers of Puritan activity.

In Weber's comparative studies of world religions, we find other impressive exercises in hermeneutic reconstruction, e.g., his comparison of the meaning structures of prophetic religion and modern social criticism in *Ancient Judaism* (1952 [1920]) or the comparison of the Confucian and the Puritan in *Religion of China* (1968 [1920]). The great paradox of Weber's legacy, however, is that, with some minor but significant exceptions, he does not extend this Dilthey-inspired interpretive approach to the political, organizational, and historical sociology he developed in *Economy and Society* (1978 [1925]). This tragedy is compounded by Weber's ideological conviction that modernity is so deracinated that the meaningful patterning of action has become well nigh impossible—"The Puritan wanted to work in a calling, we are forced to do so." According to Weber's cultural pessimism, the narrative telos of traditional societies had been displaced by the efficient causality of mechanism. We live in a rationalized world without meanings or gods. I established this interpretation of Weber in the third volume of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology—The Classical Attempt at Synthesis*: *Max Weber* (1982). This interpretation set forth the challenge: to find a way of continuing Weber's cultural sociology in a manner that went against the instrumental insights of some of his own work.

It is Emile Durkheim and the semiotic tradition he established that allows us to meet this challenge, providing the corrective that allows us to establish a meaning-centered sociology for the modern age. The early and middle writings of Durkheim had been interpreted in a more structural and functional manner, and his writings on so-called primitive societies had been read as complementing the conviction shared by Weber and Marx that such phenomena as mechanical solidarity, collective conscience, ritual, and symbol were relevant primarily to simpler societies of premodern times. In the second volume of *Theoretical Logic* (1982), however, I challenged this interpretation, arguing that the later Durkheim, particularly that of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), was not so much an effort to lay the groundwork for an anthropology of simple societies as an effort to construct the basic concepts for understanding the "religious," or meaning-centered nature of modern life. I continued to elaborate and develop this interpretation, for example, in *Durkheimian Sociology*: *Cultural Studies* (1988) and, with Philip Smith, in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (2005).

In his later work, Durkheim explained that, at the heart of every group, whether small or wide, there exists a symbolic order of collective representations, which is sharply divided between the sacred and profane. In orienting themselves to this meaning pattern, social actors create solidarities, engage in rituals, and circulate powerful collectively structured "mana," or meaning-feelings. It was because Ferdinand Saussure attended Durkheim's lectures in Paris that he created the structural understanding of linguistics, which he described as one part of a general semiotics that could be applied to investigate the structures of meaning far and wide. Through the work of Jacobson and Levi-Strauss, and then, most critically, Roland Barthes, these Saussurean insights were elaborated into a thriving interdisciplinary study of how sign systems work in contemporary life. Thinkers from Althusser and Baudrillard to Foucault have taken this legacy in different ways, but their debt to the late Durkheim remains. Most important for the strong program, however, was other late-Durkheimian manifestations—the three key figures of 1960s and 1970s symbolic anthropology, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz.

Geertz is the key figure who adumbrated and, in fact, directly inspired the strong program approach to cultural sociology. The reason is that he combined so seamlessly the hermeneutic Dilthey–Weber tradition with the semiotic–structuralist one. That Geertz was able to do so in such an elegant manner was due in no small part to the fact that he had been trained by the most sophisticated sociological theorist of the mid-century period, Talcott Parsons. Parsons' work provided the bridge between Weber and Durkheim and the more culturally sensitive, strong program work of the present day, though in Parsons' own hands this bridge became a dead-end.

When I began to be interested in sociology and culture, I was inspired by a Marxian variant of the classical traditions I have just described. I became an intellectual under the nourishing, and sometimes distorting, umbrella of the "New Left" Marxism of the late 1960s and 1970s. This was a cultural Marxism, developed from an Hegelian reading of Marx. It is vital to remember, however, that this Hegelian reading was inspired by Gramscian ideas about cultural hegemony, ideas that were themselves rooted in Croce, who had been deeply influenced by Dilthey and also Weber. It was also nourished by Lukacs' ideas about commodification as reification, which drew from Weberian theory, and by semiotically inspired theories of ideology such as those of Althusser and Baudrillard. The focus was on the relative autonomy of superstructural ideology and the role of symbols, not material experience, in shaping consciousness. As my ideological commitments changed, Parsons provided a bridge back to the classical traditions from which cultural Marxism had itself emerged. Reinterpreting these classical texts, I "passed through" the great American structural-functional theorist to develop a more cultural theory. Via symbolic anthropology, I then found my way back to the origins of the semiotic tradition.

In order to take up the cultural turn that swept through the human sciences in the second third of the twentieth century, I moved away from the values- and institutions-based theories of Parsons and mapped out a sociological way to take up, and sociologize, the traditions I have sketched above. Obviously, there were other significant sociological responses to the cultural turn. In Europe, these were primarily neo-Marxist responses, the Birmingham school of cultural studies in the

UK, Bourdieu's practice theory in France, and Habermasian critical theory in Germany. In the USA, all these were influential, but we had our own, distinctive, and more pragmatist-inspired responses as well, most notably neo-institutional organizational sociology and its variant, the production-of-culture school. Each of these European and American efforts were "weak programs" in the study of culture. They took up the cultural turn, not to incorporate deep meaning in a serious manner, but to overcome it. They were about the sociology of culture, not cultural sociology.

The strong program in cultural sociology is the only systematic theoretical effort to make meanings central to a macro-sociology of modernity. The strong program began as a reading not only of classical but of modern sociological theories, e.g., my *Twenty Lectures* (1987) and my book-length critique of Alexander (1995). It came to life, during the late 1980s and 1990s, as a broad set of theoretical postulates and dense empirical studies of the manner in which codes, narratives, and ritual processes structure modern cultural life. Over the last two decades, it has matured into a series of research programs, investigations into collective traumas, war and violence, gender, political campaigns and scandals, cultural geography, transitions from authoritarianism, race, media, civil society, technology, social and intellectual movements, and material culture. Most recently, the general premises of the strong program have been reformulated in the model of cultural pragmatics, which I and my students and colleagues developed from performance studies. The theory of social performance provides an analytical model for relating structure and agency, ideal and material, power and meaning, and it continues the decades-long effort to "modernize" the ideas that Durkheim and Weber originated and that have energized and propelled cultural sociology up to the present day.

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