

THE MEANINGS OF (SOCIAL) LIFE

On the Origins of a Cultural Sociology

Modern men and women go about their lives without really knowing why. Why do we work for such a long time every day? Why do we finish one war only to fight another? Why are we so obsessed with technology? Why do we live in an age of scandal? Why do we feel compelled to honor those, like the victims of the Holocaust, who have been murdered for an unjust cause?

If we had to explain these things, we would say “it just makes sense” or “it’s necessary” or “it’s what good people do.” But there is nothing natural about any of this. People don’t naturally do any of these things. We are compelled to be this way.

We are not anywhere as reasonable or rational or sensible as we would like to think. We still lead lives dictated more by unconscious than conscious reason. We are still compelled by feelings of the heart and the fearful instincts of the gut.

America and its allies are waging today a war against terrorism. This is said to be necessary and rational, a means to attain the end of safety. Is the war against terrorism only this, or even primarily this? No, for it rests on fantasy as much as on fact. The effort to protect the people of the United States and Europe is shrouded in the rhetoric of good and evil, of friends and enemies, of honor, conscience, loyalty, of God and country, of civilization and primeval chaos. These are not just ideas. They are feelings, massive ones. Our leaders evoke these rhetorics in solemn tones, and we honor the victims of terrorism in the most rhetorical of benedictions.

These rhetorics are cultural structures. They are deeply constraining but also enabling at the same time. The problem is that we don’t understand them. This is the task of a cultural sociology. It is to bring the unconscious cultural struc-

tures that regulate society into the light of the mind. Understanding may change but not dissipate them, for without such structures society cannot survive. We need myths if we are to transcend the banality of material life. We need narratives if we are to make progress and experience tragedy. We need to divide the sacred from profane if we are to pursue the good and protect ourselves from evil.

Of course, social science has always assumed that men and women act without full understanding. Sociologists have attributed this to the force of social structures that are “larger” and more “powerful” than mere individual human beings. They have pointed, in other words, to the compulsory aspects of social life.

But what fascinates and frightens me are those collective forces that are not compulsory, the social forces to which we enthusiastically and voluntarily respond. If we give our assent to these, without knowing why, it is because of meaning. Materialism is not forced on us. It is also a romance about the sacrality of things. Technology is not only a means. It is also an end, a desire, a lust, a salvational belief. People are not evil, but they are made to be. Scandals are not born from the facts but constructed out of them, so that we can purify ourselves. We do not mourn mass murder unless we have already identified with the victims, and this only happens once in a while, when the symbols are aligned in the right way.

The secret to the compulsive power of social structures is that they have an inside. They are not only external to actors but internal to them. They are meaningful. These meanings are structured and socially produced, even if they are invisible. We must learn how to make them visible. For Freud, the goal of psychoanalysis was to replace the unconscious with the conscious: “Where Id was, Ego shall be.” Cultural sociology is a kind of social psychoanalysis. Its goal is to bring the social unconscious up for view. To reveal to men and women the myths that think them so that they can make new myths in turn.

In the middle 1980s, in the lunch line at the UCLA Faculty Center, I was engaging three sociology colleagues in a heated debate. An assistant professor was struggling for tenure, and the faculty were lining up pro and con. Those skeptical of the appointment objected that the candidate’s work could not even be called sociology. Why not, I asked? He was not sociological, they answered: He paid more attention to the subjective framing and interpreting of social structures than to the nature of those social structures themselves. Because he had abandoned social-structural causality, he had given up on explanation, and thus on sociology itself. I countered: While his work was indeed different, it remained distinctly sociological. I suggested that it might possibly be seen as a kind of “cultural” sociology.

This remark did not succeed in its intended effect. Instead it generated a kind of incredulity—at first mild snickers, then guffaws, and then real belly laughs. *Cultural* sociology? my colleagues scoffed. This idea struck them not only as deeply offensive to their disciplinary sense but intellectually absurd. The very

phrase “cultural sociology” seemed an oxymoron. Culture and sociology could not be combined as adjective and noun. If there were a sociological approach to culture, it should be a sociology *of* culture. There certainly could not be a *cultural* approach to sociology.

My colleagues were right about the present and the past of our discipline, but events did not prove them prescient about its future. In the last fifteen years, a new and specifically cultural approach to sociology has come into existence. It never existed before—not in the discipline’s first hundred and fifty years. Nor has such a cultural approach been present in the other social sciences that have concerned themselves with modern or contemporary life.

In the history of the social sciences there has always been a sociology *of* culture. Whether it had been called the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of art, the sociology of religion, or the sociology of ideology, many sociologists paid respect to the significant *effects* of collective meanings. However, these sociologists of culture did not concern themselves primarily with interpreting collective meanings, much less with tracing the moral textures and delicate emotional pathways by which individuals and groups come to be influenced by them. Instead, the sociology-of approach sought to explain what *created* meanings; it aimed to expose how the ideal structures of culture are formed by *other structures*—of a more material, less ephemeral kind.

By the mid-1980s, an increasing if still small number of social scientists had come to reject this sociology-of approach. As an enthusiastic participant in this rejection, I, too, accused sociology of basic misunderstanding, one that continues to hobble much of the sociological investigation into culture today. To recognize the immense impact of ideals, beliefs, and emotions is not to surrender to an (unsociological) voluntarism. It is not to believe that people are free to do as they will. It is not to lapse into the idealism against which sociology should indeed define itself, nor the wish-fulfilling moralism to which it is a welcome antidote. Cultural sociology can be as hardheaded and critical as materialistic sociology. Cultural sociology makes collective emotions and ideas central to its methods and theories precisely because it is such subjective and internal feelings that so often seem to rule the world. Socially constructed subjectivity forms the will of collectivities; shapes the rules of organizations; defines the moral substance of law; and provides the meaning and motivation for technologies, economies, and military machines.

But if idealism must be avoided, the facts of collective idealization must not be. In our postmodern world, factual statements and fictional narratives are densely interwoven. The binaries of symbolic codes and true/false statements are implanted one on the other. Fantasy and reality are so hopelessly intertwined that we can separate them only in a posthoc way. It was the same in modern society. In this respect, little has changed since traditional life. Classical and modern sociologists did not believe this to be true. They saw the break from the “irrationalities” of traditional society as radical and dichotomous. One needs to

develop an alternative, more cultural sociology because reality is not nearly as transparent and rational as our sociological forefathers believed.

My sensitivity to this reality, and my ability to understand it, has been mediated by a series of critical intellectual events: the linguistic turn in philosophy, the rediscovery of hermeneutics, the structuralist revolution in the human sciences, the symbolic revolution in anthropology, and the cultural turn in American historiography. Behind all these contemporary developments has been the continuing vitality of psychoanalytic thinking in both intellectual and everyday life. It has been in response to these significant movements in our intellectual environment that the slow, uneven, but nevertheless steadily growing strand of a genuinely cultural sociology has developed.

These essays do not aim at building a new model of culture. They do not engage in generalizing and deductive theory. In this respect they are postfoundational. I see them, rather, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, as adventures in the dialectics of cultural thought. They move back and forth between theorizing and researching, between interpretations and explanations, between cultural logics and cultural pragmatics. They enter into interpretive disputes with some of the exemplars of classical, modern, and postmodern thinking.

Even when they offer models and manifest generalizing ambitions—aiming toward science, in the hermeneutic sense—these essays are also rooted in pragmatic, broadly normative interests. As a chastened but still hopeful post-sixties radical, I was mesmerized by the Watergate crisis that began to shake American society in 1972. It showed me that democracy still lived and that critical thought was still possible, even in an often corrupted, postmodern, and still capitalist age. More fascinating still was how this critical promise revealed itself through a ritualized display of myth and democratic grandeur, a paradox I try to explain in chapter 6.

In the decade that followed this early political investigation, my interest turned to the newly revived concept of civil society. Over the same period, as my understanding of the mythical foundations of democracy became elaborated more semiotically, I discovered that a deep, and deeply ambiguous, structure underlies the struggles for justice in democratic societies. When Philip Smith and I discuss the binary discourse of American civil society, in chapter 5, we show that combining Durkheim with Saussure demonstrates how the good of modern societies is linked to the evils, how democratic liberation has so often been tied to democratic repression. As I suggest in chapter 4, these considerations point us to a sociology of evil. Like every other effort to realize normative ideals, modernity has had a strong vision of social and cultural pollution and has been motivated to destroy it.

In chapter 2, I try to come to grips with the event that has been defined as the greatest evil of our time, the Holocaust. This evil is a constructed one, for it is not a fact that reflects modern reality but a collective representation that has constituted it. Transforming the mass murder of the Jews into an “engorged”

evil has been fundamental to the expansion of moral universalism that marks the hopeful potential of our times, and it is paradigmatic of the way cultural traumas shape collective identities, for better and for worse.

Indeed, the very notion of “our times” can itself be construed as the creation of an ever-shifting narrative frame. It is with this in mind that in chapter 8 I offer a cultural-sociological approach to the venerable topic of intellectual ideology. Comparing intellectuals to priests and prophets, I bracket the reality claims that each of these groups of postwar intellectuals has made.

A similar commitment to relativizing the reality claims of intellectual-cum-political authority inspired chapter 7. When he first came to power, President Ronald Reagan embarked on the hapless quest to create an impregnable missile defense shield for the United States. Tens of billions of dollars were spent on this pursuit, which formed a backdrop to Soviet President Michael Gorbachev’s suit to end the Cold War. While personally resistant to President Reagan’s claims, sociologically I was fascinated by them. To understand their mythical roots, I have tried to reconstruct technology in a fundamentally cultural-sociological way.

But more than pragmatic-political and scientific-empirical interests have guided me in approaching the topics in this book. My aim has always also been theoretical. By applying the cultural-sociological method to a widely dispersed range of topics, I wish to demonstrate that culture is not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but a thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of, every conceivable social form. These essays enter into thick description. They tease out overarching grand narratives. They build maps of complex symbolic codes. They show how the fates of individuals, groups, and nations are often determined by these invisible but often gigantically powerful and patterned ideational rays.

Yet, at the same time, these investigations also pay careful attention to the “material factor”—that terrible misnomer—in its various forms: to the interests of racial, national, class, religious, and party-political groups; to capitalist economic demands; to the deracinating pressures of demography, the centralizing forces of bureaucracy, and the geopolitical constrictions of states. Such “hard” structural factors are never ignored; they are, rather, put into their appropriate place. Once again: To engage in cultural sociology is not to believe that good things happen or that idealistic motives rule the world. To the contrary, only if cultural structures are understood in their full complexity and nuance can the true power and persistence of violence, domination, exclusion, and degradation be realistically understood.

With the exception of the programmatic first chapter, written also with Philip Smith, I have tried not to overload these essays with theoretical disquisition. Some orienting abstraction there certainly must be. Yet in selecting the essays to be included in this book, and in editing them, my goal has been to make the theoretical ideas that inspire cultural sociology live through the empirical

discussions, the social narratives, the case studies. In fact, from several of these chapters I have expunged large chunks of theoretical discussion that accompanied them in their originally published forms. Much of my academic life has been devoted to writing “pure theory.” This book is different. Its purpose is to lay out a research program for a cultural sociology and to show how this program can be concretely applied to some of the principal concerns of contemporary life.

A great aporia marks the birth of sociology—a great, mysterious, and unexplained rupture. It concerns the relation between religion and rationality, tradition and modernity. The extraordinary German founder of sociology, Max Weber, devoted a large part of his maturity to the historical-comparative study of world religions. He showed that the human desire for salvation became patterned in different ways, that each difference contained a practical ethic, and that these ethics, carried on the wings of salvation, had enormous impact on the social organization of practical life. With the other part of his energetic maturity, however, Weber devoted himself to laying out the concepts of a much more materialistic economic and political sociology, one that emphasized instrumental motives and domination, not ideas about salvation and moral ethics. Weber never explained how these two parts of his work could be reconciled. Instead he finessed the issue by suggesting, via his rationalization thesis, that faith was relevant only to the creation of modernity, not to the project of its ongoing institutionalization.

We must go beyond this disconnect, which has merely been replicated by more contemporary theories of social life. If we are to understand how the insights of Weber’s *religion-soziologie* can be applied to the nonreligious domains of secular society, we need a cultural sociology. Only by understanding the nature of social narrative can we see how practical meanings continue to be structured by the search for salvation. How to be saved—how to jump to the present from the past and into the future—is still of urgent social and existential concern. This urgency generates fantasies and myths and inspires giant efforts at practical transformation. We must respectfully disagree with Weber’s contention that modernity has forced charisma to become routinized in a fateful and permanent way.

It is striking that the French founder of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, suffered from a similar theoretical affliction. There is a great divide between Durkheim’s early and middle studies of social structure on the one hand and the symbolic and ritual studies that occupied his later work on the other. Durkheim called this later work his “religious sociology,” and he promised that his study of Aboriginal societies, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, would be the beginning, not the end, of exploration of society’s symbolic dimensions. Was it Durkheim’s premature death or some more fundamental ideological or theoretical inhibition that prevented him from fulfilling this promise, from demonstrating the continuity between the religion of early societies and the cultural life of

later, more complex ones? If the love of the sacred, the fear of pollution, and the need for purification have continued to mark modern as much as traditional life, we can find out how and why only by following a cultural-sociological path.

In the history of social science, the “friends of culture” have tended to be conservative. They have betrayed a nostalgia for the organicism and the solidity of traditional life. The idea of a cultural sociology has foundered on this yearning, on the idea that only in simple, religiously ordered, undemocratic, or old-fashioned societies do myths and narratives and codes play a fundamental role. These essays demonstrate the opposite. Reflection and criticism are imbedded in myths that human beings cannot be entirely reflective and critical about. If we understand this, we can separate knowledge from power and not become only a servant to it.