

Culture and Social Change¹

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Our charge is to consider culture and social change across the disciplines. An overview seems daunting, and instead I will single out a few important themes. I will indeed talk about the way in which different disciplines make use of the idea of culture, situate it, contain it, debate it, and fit it into disciplinary agendas. And I will talk a bit about how some big questions about culture and social change today escape such disciplinary agendas. But at the same time, I will also consider the implications of the relatively undisciplined use of the idea of culture characteristic of much so-called “cultural studies” in the Anglophone world, a usage in which culture often seems to float free from social relations, political economy, and practical action—and from the academic disciplines of the social sciences. Finally, I will ask how thinking about culture is, or perhaps should be, shaped by one currently profound and multidimensional aspect of social change: shifting relations between notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ as these shape everything from how we think about risk, to the funding of health care or retirement, to the place of religion in contemporary life, to the mission of the university, so long central to cultural production and criticism and itself a shifting and problematic foundation for critical inquiry into cultural and social change. Having narrowed the inquiry so much, I am confident that I shall be able to explore each of these themes in the depth it deserves.

A good postulate in the study of social change is to distrust extrapolations from the rate of increase in anything. Such extrapolations remain, of course, staples of popular discussions of social change as much as of estate agents’ accounts of the property markets. We should be skeptical partly because of the many factors that can turn today’s trend into tomorrow’s bubble. But—and this is surprisingly often neglected—we should also pay attention to baselines. High rates of increase are easier from low starting points. And thus it is, that were we not the skeptical, critical thinkers we are, we might be led to think that economists and political scientists are in the forefront of contemporary cultural analysis.

There has, in fact, been a modest wave of attention to culture in each of these disciplines. In political science, Samuel Huntington is a leader, arguing that contemporary global politics is shaped by a ‘clash of civilizations’, that America’s cultural identity is at risk from an onslaught of Hispanic immigrants uninterested in assimilation, and, most generally, that ‘culture matters’ (to reference the title of a prominent collection he edited). Among Huntington—and colleagues like Frances Fukuyama and Alan Wolfe—culture matters largely as a set of basic value commitments. It is opposed both the instrumentalism of most rational choice analysis and the materialism of Marxism.

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In economics, culture has come onto the agenda not only through the ever-increasing frequency with which economists apply their standard analytic methods to seemingly non-economic topics—as in Stephen Leavitt’s analyses of the names parents give children and their effects. It is also, and more significantly, important to behavioral economics and the ‘new institutionalism’. Here the emphasis is on learning; psychology has been the primary interdisciplinary resource for economists. But what they engage—such as decision making under uncertainty or with imperfect information—leads them to recognize that culture shapes how individuals respond to risk, evaluate their options, decide how much additional information to seek, or understand how to use resources such as money that are creatures of conventions about which people must somehow learn. Institutions appear as, at least in part, stable patterns of reproduction of such learning.

This last notion is not altogether foreign, of course, to sociology’s own ‘new institutionalism’. In fact, new institutionalisms developed across the social sciences in the 1990s, though with somewhat different meanings to the common term. A substantial part of the sociological version focused on the ways in which organizational forms are produced and reproduced—as for example John Meyer and his colleagues studied the structure of schools and governments around the world and Woody Powell and Paul DiMaggio added a dose of Bourdieu to extend the theory as they addressed “institutional isomorphism” in the most-cited of all articles in the *American Sociological Review*. Attention to culture in certain senses, thus, is basic to economic and organizational sociology, today, as researchers as how much legal frameworks or imitation within industries shapes economic behavior and organizational forms. But this is generally at the fringes of what self-declared sociologists of culture have meant by the term.

More prominent has been a sociological approach to what might be thought of as the artifacts of culture—although including also the social organization of their production and consumption. Sociologists have studied the relationship of high and low, elite and popular, print and electronic, auratic and reproduced cultural goods. They have asked how the appropriation of these varies with education, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and other variables. They have traced their connections to projects of individual and collective identity. They have asked their relations to markets, state subsidies, and patronage. Sometimes these inquiries have been organized in terms of broader theoretical agendas—as for example many have drawn on Bourdieu’s account of field, capital, and habitus to situate the consumption of cultural products in relation to the production and reproduction of social inequality. Others have produced this sociology of specifically cultural phenomena as an end in itself. In America this was linked, at least for a time, to a passion for trying to make culture count in sociology by making these cultural phenomena countable in conventional sociological research designs. But often—and perhaps more often internationally--this work is pursued by interviews and ethnographies. It is at the heart of the recent boom in the sociology of culture. But note that while it is not at odds with older definitions of culture in terms of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes it represents a certain narrowing.

This sociology of the specifically cultural is also much narrower than some of the other main intellectual sources for what might be called, instead, a cultural sociology. Birmingham school cultural studies, for example, was the most prominent of several approaches rooted largely in the effort to overcome some weaknesses of conventional

Marxist analysis by taking culture more seriously. Althusser with his ideological state apparatuses was only one of many others influenced by Gramsci; Lukacs had a related influence on others; so too the Frankfurt School. In varying degree these Marxist and post-Marxist approaches also drew on Weber and other parts of the classical sociological heritage, and on the traditions of the sociology of knowledge and phenomenology. I don't have time to go into all of this, but I want to suggest three points:

1. This cultural sociology was broader than a mere sociology of the specifically cultural, and most especially it focused attention on the way in which culture helped shape all sorts of social phenomena from markets to states to class inequality—figuring in the material and giving it form, not standing outside of it as some sort of immaterial other.
2. Precisely as it lost this broader (and theoretically deeper) agenda, cultural studies began to lose both its critical edge and its intellectual direction. It became indistinguishable from the sociology of specifically cultural products and processes (and from the other, more Franco-American approach to cultural studies that derived especially from literature and extensions of the study of texts to other media). It could be drawn on high theory, notably poststructuralism and deconstruction, but even as it did so it typically became less and less sociological in the literal sense—that is, it separated culture from society and treated it largely as free-floating.
3. This work tended to a surprising degree to be contained by a kind of methodological nationalism, and inattentive to international structure and variation. It lost purchase on some of the most basic large-scale organization of socio-cultural phenomena, focusing instead on relatively “micro” variations inside nation states. It also became surprisingly “presentist” (given its roots in the highly historical interests of scholars like Raymond Williams). For these two reasons, among others, it did not connect as much as one might have expected with subaltern studies or the growing prominence of research into colonies and postcolonies or the rise of Atlantic history.

History, anthropology, and human geography brought a different set of engagements with culture. Sociologists in the US tended to engage much more with history and in empirical historical research. In Britain engagements were closer with anthropology and especially human geography. This is, I suspect, more familiar territory and so I want not to attempt any overview but offer only a couple of points:

1. The best work in these traditions was often that which attempted to look at patterns of social change, not only because change was and is important, but because this was a corrective to the otherwise widespread tendency to treat culture more as inheritance than as creative project.
2. It is important for these lines of work—which form, I think, a disproportionate backdrop to this conference—not to be insular but to engage the rest of the social sciences. They should not be contained by any imagination of a distinct subject matter, but bring a different intellectual orientation to topics of concern to all social scientists (and, indeed, the public).

3. It is ironic that this interdisciplinary renewal of engagements with ‘culture’ coincided with a crisis of the culture concept within anthropology. This may have contributed to a disproportionate prominence of literary theory in the interdisciplinary arena, though that also shaped the crisis about ‘writing culture’ within anthropology. The debates over the idea of culture in anthropology did, however, address three issues which need to be carried into the broader interdisciplinary discussion (even if anthropologists have not found entirely satisfactory answers themselves, or at least not a consensus):
 - a. Cultures are not discrete (a point sociologists have certainly noticed about societies, but for the most part failed to take very seriously in their research designs which remain methodologically nationalist)
 - b. Culture is a process of reproduction, renewal, and creative reshaping and outright innovation—not a matter of static inheritance.
 - c. Culture operates in a field of force shaped by power relations and structures of inclusion and exclusion, and this makes it not only unequally distributed or accessed, but internally complex and sometimes contradictory.

There are of course, a range of other disciplinary intellectual sources for contemporary engagements with culture and social change. Psychology has lately moved away from cultural inquiry, especially insofar as it has moved towards a more exclusive identity with the biological sciences and cognitive science. It nonetheless remains significant and if attention to questions of the meanings of personal identity, personal life, and the interpersonal constructions of the social is undermined by psychology’s movement towards a narrower model of experimental science, this is a loss for the larger field of cultural and social change. Psychoanalytic thought has long since migrated disproportionately from psychology and psychiatry departments towards not only independent institutes but literary studies. It continues to inspire significant research and reflection. But the fact that this comes from the humanities should remind us both of the arbitrariness of disciplinary identities and the blurred boundaries between humanities and social sciences. Cultural studies was and is greatly influenced by literary studies—in the US even more than in Britain. But the broader project of inquiry into cultural creativity and culturally specific constructions of meaning basic to humanistic scholarship remains important.

I will say little more about psychology or the humanities today, though, largely because I want to emphasize other themes. In particular, I have already argued that it is importantly debilitating for cultural inquiry to have weak connections to political science and economics—both as disciplines and as supports for the interdisciplinary project of political economy. If our work is to have the public significance it ought, we should seek to repair links to these disciplines and avoid a division of the culturally oriented social sciences from others in a new sort of *methodenstreit*.

At the same time, we need also to build new relations to fields of science and technology—and to make sure that inquiries into social and cultural change are not undermined by a lack of knowledge of some of the major advances in biology, information technology and other fields. These are important as topics of study, to be

sure. But I mean even more that if we work with exaggerated divisions of nature from nurture, or of the cultural from the material world we risk literally incapacitating ourselves, depriving ourselves of skills and knowledge we need to enter into interdisciplinary exploration of some of the most exciting (and sometimes worrying) of contemporary developments. I refer most of all to information technology and related fields like cognitive science and artificial intelligence and to genetic and related biomedical research. New capacity to use the human genome in research—based on the marriage of biology and IT—have an impact on understandings of ancestry and ethnicity, the identification of criminals, and the prediction of disease (and through this potentially the availability of insurance). We may worry over the reification of race, for example when geneticists assert not merely that inheritance of significant markers is demonstrable and readily traceable, but more contentiously that this somehow makes race objective. Insurance companies, doctors, and police forces may be making race “real” in new ways, but this is not the same as making it objective or showing social construction to be irrelevant. Yet if researchers into social and cultural change do not have knowledge of the basic science they—we—will be unable to enter important arguments about its meaning. It will be too often the case that as well as challenging and sometimes reshaping social science thinking about culture, biomedical scientists reinvent the social science wheel, usually in less sophisticated form.

Let me just sum up rather than deepen this overview of disciplines and interdisciplines, rather than deepening it. Speaking from the point of view of a sociologist, I see three main sets of neighbors. The future of studies of culture and social change will be shaped by how we relate to them (and I think a partially similar account could be given from the point of view of any of the other disciplines):

1. history, anthropology, geography
 - a. and cultural studies
 - b. and the partially overlapping humanities
 - i. though I would note historians’ ambivalence about the undisciplined interdiscipline of cultural studies, and the advocacy of many for more empirical discipline and sensitivity to historical context.
2. politics and economics, which are in turn closely related to
 - a. and business schools
 - b. and public policy programs
3. technological fields (e.g., IT, biotech)
 - a. and the scientific disciplines linked to these
 - b. including increasingly at least large parts of psychology (though many psychologists resist the narrowing of the discipline—and perhaps more in the UK than in the US).

Rather than deepening my overview, I want to turn to a brief consideration of different approaches to the study of social change that suggest different manners of integration with the study of culture. I shall then indicate what I think are three key ways in which a more critical engagement with historical research would help even in studies oriented to the present and certainly in theory. Finally, I will look briefly at some

examples of major contemporary instances of cultural and social change and suggest how they might be informed by these desiderata.

1. Social change as repeatable processes; this is the characteristic approach of
 - a. most economics (but not most economic history)
 - b. much political science
 - c. earlier sociology of patterns in social change—e.g., Ogburn on cultural lag, and
 - d. the current search for causal mechanisms (central to sociologists and political scientists seeking a stronger claim to “science” but willing to narrow social science inquiry in pursuit of it)
2. Master processes to history as a whole; these have been prominently sought in terms of
 - a. cycles
 - b. evolution
 - c. historical materialism
3. Historically specific transitions or transformations, which especially important insofar as they are
 - a. rare (like revolutions)
 - b. intrinsically interesting or influential for later history (like the industrial revolution)
 - c. of long duration and thus shaping of entire eras, and
 - d. crucially shaped by their specific contexts.

Historical sociologists—or historical social scientists more generally—may study historical social and cultural change in any of these ways or perspectives. Divisions in the field owe much to the *methodenstreit* with its overdrawn opposition of the idiographic to nomothetic inquiries. But historical sociology may better inform the development of critically adequate theory when it pays attention to some additional desiderata. Specifically, those of us concerned with making sense of historical social change in general, including contemporary patterns in social change, need history not merely as background, or for the sake of analogies and generalizations (important as these are). We need it also for:

1. Improving inductions. Social and cultural theory is full of empirical inductions—things we think we know about the world that shape how we continue to think about the world. Social scientists have often thought, thus, that it was a reliable fact about the modern world that it had been shaped by a process of secularization. The reality is more complex and in very significant ways different. We need to improve the empirical inductions embedded in our theories.
2. Overcoming false necessity. Too often social and cultural theories try to grasp the world as though what exists is what must exist. This is true especially of empiricist accounts that neglect underlying structures of possibility in favor of mere generalizations about the actual. This is especially common, perhaps, among social, political, and economic theories that don’t pay much attention to culture,

but even many students of culture approach it too much as inheritance and too little as an ongoing process of creativity, sometimes marked by contestation and struggle. It is important that contingency, contestation, and creativity be fully appreciated if we are to overcome the illusion of false necessity that marks many approaches to social life and limits many approaches to social change.

3. Grasping constitutive categories. By this I mean to point to the basic entanglement of culture in social change such that the very ways language constructs social life change—changing both the world around us and the ways we can understand that world. Think of the development of modern individualism, for example, and the ways in which transformations in the understanding of ‘person’ reshaped social life in various spheres from law to morality, economics to politics, as well as in what we call, after this transformation, “personal life”. Similarly the category of ‘nation’ is constitutive for the modern world—and is reinforced (often without the critical analysis it deserves) in “methodologically nationalist” research that assumes nations to be the natural categories of comparison. Or, finally, think of business corporations, which could not exist as they do were it not for both tacit and explicit cultural constructions. The law and everyday sociolinguistic practice frame as real legal agents—and indeed strong actors in the world—these creatures with “neither soul to damn nor body to kick” (in the words of the US Chief Justice Marshall, deciding a pivotal case in this history at the beginning of the 19th Century).

In my last comment, it should be especially evident that running through these remarks is criticism of the extent to which we allow the old opposition of ideal and material to structure disciplinary divisions of labor and problematically one-sided understandings of the social world. Part of the task of new research and theory on culture and social change should be to integrate rather than separate our inquiries into the allegedly ideal and apparently material. Corporations, after all, are certainly material and powerfully so, even though we cannot precisely reach out and touch them.

Cultural and social change is, of course, ubiquitous. What I want to do now is not to survey it, but merely in closing to point to a few domains in which I think the change is potentially transformative and of broad implications for society and culture generally. There are various common denominators among these, but I will stress the extent to which one prominent theme in contemporary social transformations, both domestically and globally, is reworking of what had once seemed the more or less stable distinction between public and private. Those categories—and their reciprocal relationship—played an important role in constituting the modern era and its characteristic contradictions. It has been an era of growth in the public role of the state and also of private property even in highly social forms of production.

1. Privatization (and the public sphere)
 - a. of risk (in arenas from old age insurance to healthcare to financial markets)
 - b. of institutions (from transport to education to even prisons)

- c. of knowledge (notably with the spread of claims to intellectual property; IPRs are prominent especially but not exclusively in
 - i. pharmaceuticals
 - ii. ICTs
- 2. Religion in the public sphere
 - a. inverting what had seemed to be the common patterns of
 - i. Overall secularization (that faulty generalization)
 - ii. Religious practice as essentially private
 - b. hard for secular social scientists to see (at least for a long time, though now a shock to many) and thus underestimated in a variety of fields
 - c. need to overcome the tendency to see it mostly in “othering” ways
 - ii. e.g., as extremism (“fundamentalism”)
 - iii. or mainly in terms of Islam
 - 1. esp. given growth in world Christianity
- 4. ICTs, media (including communications, data control, surveillance)
 - a. Transforming both public and private communications
 - b. Influencing identity formation
 - c. Largely creatures of regulatory regimes even though often approached as mere instances of private property
- 5. Securitization and Fear
 - a. Danger and policing in public places
 - b. Intensified regimes of border control simultaneous with increased global flows.
- 6. Sovereignty, citizenship, and identity
 - a. migration
 - b. state mediation of globalization
 - c. states and local order (the need for states)
 - d. class consciousness of frequent travelers
 - e. the reassertion of nationalism
 - f. the future of citizenship
 - i. public sphere (not least in the EU)
 - g. The simultaneous enormous expansion and crisis of “intervention” on the part of international public actors
 - i. The emergency regime
 - ii. Humanitarian action
 - iii. Human rights advocacy
- 7. Inequality, both global/international and domestic, which reshapes
 - a. Relationships to states as alleged bearers of a common publicness
 - b. Access to the public sphere (not only as consumers but as creators)
 - c. Relations to global actors that are ostensibly but unequally public.

I have stressed several major dimensions of social change that share a common entanglement in shifting but still constitutive categories of public and private. I should make clear that I do not think these exhaust the range of major transformations or are even the most important. I have wanted not only to assert the importance of studying the “big issues” in social change—which I think is basic if our culturally informed inquiries

are to matter as they should. I have wanted also to give a sense of how a particular, theoretically informed attention to the interrelationship of cultural and social change may be crucial—as is the case in all these arenas where shifting relations between public and private are basic to change. But of course cultural and social change are also caught up in various ways in other crucial global transformations that also demand our attention. Not least:

1. Environment and ecology
2. Disease and demography
 - a. AIDS and social transformation
 - ii. Structural transformation of populations
 - b. gender selection
3. Genomics
 - a. and other biotech
 - b. link to race
 - c. shift of leadership from physical to biological sciences

Finally, in closing, I want to urge us to make our inquiries reflexive. I think it is crucial that we pay attention to the social bases of social science and critical cultural inquiry. If nothing else, it would be a mistake to assume that universities will remain unchanged as bases for our work—or that their transformations will not affect the content of our work.

Universities have grown enormously in scale and changed in character in recent years. This is part of a broader transformation, but it is also a transformation in the way in which social and cultural knowledge is produced and transmitted. Whether we prefer open public debate or the advice of experts to policy makers, the enhanced dominance of universities over knowledge production in the postwar period transformed both—and of course much else. But now the world's university systems are themselves being transformed in ways not fully understood or adequately studied by social scientists.

This is certainly another important arena of contemporary change, and one in which the categories of public and private are once again constitutive and transformation in their relationship pivotal. Think just of funding, in which the proportionate role of governments is down around the world (though in different national patterns). Fees are up. Private gifts matter hugely for some universities. The commercialization of research is a goal for many and a reality for a few. Or think of new intensifications of competition. Fields within universities are newly competitive with each other—not least as professional schools and programs compete with traditional arts and science disciplines. And we need to ask how much of the work we think belongs to the social sciences will in fact be done by programs in media and journalism, policy analysis, or business—and whether the social sciences will benefit from playing a role in this or lose out by staying (or being kept) at arm's length. And this is not just a matter of training. Not only businesses but government agencies are apt to turn to market research firms or other consultancies, not academics, for reports on cultural and social change.

But competition among universities is also prominent, not least for prestige (which translates generally into resources). An obsession with rankings is widespread—and in the last couple of years has gone global, reflecting both the desire of governments to back ‘national champions’ and the growing importance of international flows of students. This is significant not just in terms of who gets the money, but of what fields are emphasized and how international standards are produced. Indeed, the very emphasis on a “world standard” (which is implicit also in regional standardization projects like the Bologna process) raises important questions about the future of critical engagement with national or local conditions.

The implications of all this surely raise questions about how and how well universities will support critical inquiries into sociocultural change. This should be a concern for all engaged in recent widespread discussions of “public social science”. Not only are there questions about the financial imbalances within and among universities, or about what happens to long-term intellectual projects amid pressures to deliver short term results. There are important potential problems for the very publicness of science. How much proprietorial control of research findings will be accepted? How will open debate among scientists be supported given the current crisis of academic publishing? Will the Internet offer adequate substitutes? Who will win and who will lose? Which sorts of work will prosper and which will decline? And how will this shape what universities are able to offer the public?

These questions are not only about how we disseminate knowledge, they are about how we produce it. If a public social science is our goal, problem choice is fundamental. Communication with relevant constituencies must go on before, during, and after research (not just in a dissemination phase). And there must be an active rational-critical public debate among scientists as well as scientific contributions to broader public debates. Where and whether and when and how and ultimately by and for whom are all key questions for—and in—the study of cultural and social change.