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The SAGE Handbook of
Cultural Sociology

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The field of cultural sociology has blossomed remarkably over the last several decades. Concerns with ‘culture’, and analytical orientations which foreground cultural matters in their analysis of human social life, have gone from being relatively marginalised in the discipline of sociology, to enjoying in recent years an importance and centrality that would probably have been unthinkable a few decades previously. If at certain times and places in the past sociology was thought to be primarily the study of ‘society’, or the ‘social’ dimensions of human life, while it was anthropology that took ‘culture’ as its central focus, today no one could plausibly claim that sociology was not profoundly oriented towards both the social and cultural elements of human existence. Nor could they convincingly say that specifically ‘cultural’ approaches to such matters, which seek to complement or go beyond older analytic traditions in sociology, are any longer peripheral within the discipline. Cultural sociology is now a field of sociology that exhibits the vibrancy, multiplicity and lively fractiousness that characterise an intellectual domain constantly growing and mostly in good health.

Within the intellectual terrain this Handbook covers, there are disputes as to whether we are dealing more with ‘cultural sociology’ or ‘sociology of culture’, a terminological division explained in more detail below. For the purposes of non-sectarian balance and comprehensiveness, we have included here chapters on material that falls more obviously under one heading or the other. Nonetheless, if we use the phrase ‘cultural sociology’ in a broad way, to encompass all types of sociological engagements with culture, the field can be characterised in various different ways as follows.

One can depict it simply as a sub-field within sociology. One can understand it as a challenge to what are conceived by its proponents as older, more staid and conventional forms of sociology, and thus as a set of mechanisms for rejuvenating existing fields of study, creating new problems, research questions and methods of analysis (for example, in the sociology of religion – see Chapter 26; also in general, Back et al., 2012). One can view it as a privileged meeting-point between different sociological sub-fields, where, for example, political sociology and historical sociology meet in novel and productive ways (Chapters 15, 30, 31; Friedland and Mohr, 2004). One can think about it as a location where social scientific foci and methods particularly meet and meld with ideas from the humanities. One can praise its success in learning from, or lament its failure to engage fully with, neighbouring intellectual fields like cultural studies (Chapter 22),
visual studies (Chapter 23) and gender studies (Chapter 24) (Wolff, 1999).

One can view its undoubtedly multiplicitous and diverse nature as a great strength, and as testament to a vital proliferation of intellectual energies, or conversely as a notable weakness, where different sorts of people, all apparently talking about ‘culture’, in fact lack a common language and thus talk past each other. One can criticise it as particularly prey to passing intellectual fashions and fads (Patterson, 2014). One can accuse it of relative superficiality vis-à-vis other types and domains of sociology and of being sometimes methodologically suspect (Rojek and Turner, 2000).

One can regard it not as a coherent intellectual field at all, but rather as a loosely bounded site of messy combat between rival sociological paradigms and orientations. One can praise it as a cosmopolitan space of transnational discursive interchange, or as badly bound by the parochial concerns of each of the national sociological spaces within which cultural sociology is practised. One can regard it as too closely reflecting the typical concerns and institutional structures of each national sociological field. One can write it off as a primarily American and British set of concerns and orientations (each of these national fields being quite different from the other), which have problematic relationships with other sites of sociological and extra-sociological knowledge production around the world.

In sum, there is absolutely no uncontroversial consensus view as to what cultural sociology is, what it does or what its benefits and disadvantages may be, either to wider sociology or to the sum of human (self-)understanding.

Nonetheless, sociology tells us that usually in the midst of apparent chaos there are in fact certain discernible patterns and recurring motifs. So although cultural sociology can be construed as ‘a field that embraces everything from the application of theories of narrative to the study of social movements through to ethnographic studies of youth subcultures’ (de la Fuente, 2007: 123), and may seem to involve anything and everything, there are still clear patterns to be identified. This applies both at the level of the epistemological foundations of the field, and of the various institutional bases within which it operates (and sometimes helps transform). This book is both a depiction of those patterns, epistemological and institutional, and also an attempt to map many of the most important, productive and telling contributions to the field.

It is testament to the burgeoning popularity since the 1970s of studying ‘culture’ in some social scientific manner or another, that it has become an apparently endlessly repeated cliché both to note that ‘culture’ is an exceptionally polysemic and complex word, which appears in 19th-century Europe for specific socio-historical reasons, and also to invoke Raymond Williams’ (1976) classic statement on such matters. As what ‘culture’ means varies – either modestly or hugely – from one linguistic or organisational context to another, then obviously what counts as ‘cultural sociology’ will also vary across settings.

This is certainly the case in terms of variance between different national contexts of sociological production. Obviously whether something called ‘cultural sociology’ exists in a particular national setting or not, and the degree to which it thrives or struggles, depends on both the long-term intellectual history of that environment, and past and current institutional arrangements (e.g. see for Japan, Satō (2013); for Germany, Göttlich (2013)).

‘Cultural sociology’ in the UK is in many ways very different from that in the US. Much of sociology as a whole in the UK today is concerned with discernibly cultural matters, even if many practitioners would not describe themselves as cultural sociologists or sociologists of culture. This is in part due to the strong, if uneven and contested, influence in certain sectors of the sociology of European Marxist theory and its inflection by the Birmingham School of cultural studies (Chapter 22). The ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s – involving increasing scholarly interest in both the symbolic and affective aspects of human agency and identities, and post-structuralist and post-modernist philosophical and literary theorisations of these – was particularly strong in UK sociology (Chaney, 2002). This led both to a widespread ‘culturalisation’ of sociological thinking and practice in the 1990s, to the extent that in Britain one could argue that ‘cultural sociology’ refers to major swathes of sociology per se, rather than to a defined sub-field as such. It also involves the reworking in more explicitly ‘cultural’ directions of existing areas of study, notably social class analysis, which took on a strongly Bourdieus-inspired hue in the 1990s (for Bourdieu, see Chapters 7, 18, 41).

By contrast, in the US both ‘cultural sociology’ and the ‘sociology of culture’ exist more as defined sub-fields, which exist in complex relationships with other sociological sub-fields and the discipline more broadly. The story of these sub-fields is usually narrated by participants in one of two ways, and that is to a significant extent dependent on whether a particular author self-identifies as a ‘cultural sociologist’ or ‘sociologist of culture’. A thumbnail sketch would depict ‘sociology of culture’ as encompassing epistemological and methodological orientations for the most part drawing from, and comfortable with, the customary ways
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The works of other key thinkers, which have become what Crane (2010) calls ‘free-floating paradigms’ that act as central intellectual reference points for scholars in many different geographical and institutional locations, include the writings of structuralists and post-structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, Butler and Baudrillard; critical theorists like Adorno, Gramsci and Habermas; hermeneuticians like Geertz; Science and Technology Studies figures like Latour and Haraway; and cultural studies figures like Raymond Williams. All of these figures are now canonised in an international intellectual terrain also drawn upon by humanities scholars, albeit in somewhat different ways from sociologists. More generally, one might add that the planetary diffusion, and concomitant reformulation, of cultural sociology is itself a cultural process worthy of reflexive self-analysis (Jacobs and Spillman, 2005).

The remarks above show that one important feature of ‘cultural sociology’ is that those who think that they are involved in the doing of it, are engaged in ongoing debates about what the term refers to, what ‘culture’ should be understood to mean, and what this means for developing and using appropriate modes of sociological investigation. ‘Cultural sociology’ is therefore a field both feature points for scholars in many different geographical and institutional locations, including the writings of structuralists and post-structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, Butler and Baudrillard; critical theorists like Adorno, Gramsci and Habermas; hermeneuticians like Geertz; Science and Technology Studies figures like Latour and Haraway; and cultural studies figures like Raymond Williams. All of these figures are now canonised in an international intellectual terrain also drawn upon by humanities scholars, albeit in somewhat different ways from sociologists. More generally, one might add that the planetary diffusion, and concomitant reformulation, of cultural sociology is itself a cultural process worthy of reflexive self-analysis (Jacobs and Spillman, 2005).

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Conversely, it would be wrong to assert that such processes are organised only or mostly on national bases. The circulation of the themes and procedures pioneered by Bourdieu in the French context across many different national sociologies shows the capacity of ideas to travel across borders, even if they are then indigenised and reworked in light of more local needs (Robbins, 2008). In a certain sense, there is a ‘British Bourdieu’, an ‘American Bourdieu’, a ‘German Bourdieu’, and so on, and often more than one appropriation of his work within particular national sociologies, as well as subsequent appropriations of each of these in other contexts – the taking-up of British understandings of Bourdieu in Australia being a good case in point.

The most forceful expression of ‘cultural sociology’ as critique of both ‘sociology of culture’ and mainstream sociology is the Yale School, involving Jeffrey C. Alexander and his associates, and their ‘strong program’ of neo-Durkheimian sociology. This strongly rejects what it sees as the unacceptable reduction of culture to social structural and organisational factors in ‘sociology of culture’ paradigms and mainstream American sociology, and instead insists on the relatively autonomous power of cultural forms to shape social life (see Chapter 5).

To the uninitiated, the terms ‘cultural sociology’, ‘sociology of culture’ and ‘cultural studies’ may seem like innocuous labels describing much the same things, but they are in fact terms used for often highly polemical processes of academic differentiation and labelling, of self and of others. Such disputes help to constitute and reproduce the entire set of relations involving all of those who believe themselves to be involved in one sort of sociological analysis of culture or another. But the labels mean different things in different places or may even be meaningless, as Heinich (2010) implies for the French situation, where the term ‘sociology of art’ seems far more pertinent in describing what scholars actually do, and think of themselves as doing, than allegedly ethnocentric Anglo-American terms like ‘cultural sociology’.
Definitions of, and orientations towards studying culture are many and manifold in the field, but beneath the apparent chaos, certain broad patterns emerge when we consider the key fracture lines between different positions and schools of thought. These lines of fracture can be captured in seven sets of central questions, which animate both the field itself and this Handbook’s representation of it:

1 Questions concerning the term ‘cultural sociology’ (and ‘sociology of culture’), and how people in the field understand it and themselves

Is ‘cultural sociology’ the best term to describe the intellectual constellation we are dealing with? Is ‘sociology of culture’ a more accurate term, or one so negatively defined by self-identifying ‘cultural sociologists’ that it is now highly problematic? Are there more appropriate terms to use? (Certainly this is a field that above all involves disputes about how to name and describe itself.)

Should ‘cultural sociology’ be construed primarily as the study of what seem obviously ‘cultural’ domains of human activity, such as music (Chapters 28, 38), news media (Chapter 32), architecture (Chapter 34), cinema (Chapter 35), museums and art galleries (Chapter 36), fashion (Chapter 37)?

Should cultural sociology be regarded as a special kind of sociological perspective, foregrounding matters of discourse, symbolism, affect and so on, in analysing potentially any aspect of human existence? Or is cultural sociology essentially an analytic perspective (or set of perspectives), rather than something defined by its ‘cultural’ subject matter and the substantive topics it studies?

2 Questions about what ‘culture’ is

What are we talking about when we speak of ‘culture’ – language, symbols, artefacts, values, beliefs, norms, practices, cognitive maps (Chapter 9), representations, symbolic boundaries (Chapter 25), discourses, repertoires…? All of these, or just some? How do we fit them together?

What should get counted as ‘culture’ and ‘cultural’, and what should not? Does it make sense to say that some things are ‘less cultural’ or ‘more cultural’ than others?

Is cultural sociology essentially centred on the analysis of human meaning-making, or something else (Spillman, 2002)?

Is ‘culture’ different from ‘society’ or the ‘social’? If so, how and why? Or are they the same thing, and are they mutually embedded? Should we meld them together or separate them out?

Should ‘culture’ be seen as shaped by ‘society’ (e.g. social structures, institutional contexts, social networks, forms of power, etc.), or should causality be understood as running the other way, from ‘culture’ to ‘society’?

Is culture a ‘thing’ in itself (a neo-Durkheimian position – see Chapter 5), or merely a word certain interested parties – including sociologists – impose onto a more complex reality (a position associated sometimes with Actor Network Theory – see Chapter 10)?

Is ‘culture’ one variable amongst others (e.g. the political, the economic), or is culture a constitutive element of all aspects and domains of human life?

Can we still speak of unitary ‘cultures’, within which all group members think and act in generally the same ways, or should we see culture rather as bundles of practices and cognitions (Chapter 9) enacted by individuals in everyday settings (Lizardo, 2011)?

Which metaphors should we use to describe what culture ‘is’ and does? Is culture best construed as a ‘toolkit’ upon which individuals selectively draw (Swidler, 2001)? Is it a series of ‘culture structures’ which exist beyond the consciousness of individuals and which profoundly underpin their actions (Chapter 5)? Is it something else again?

3 Which intellectual sources and resources should scholars in the field draw upon?

Which classical sociological authors and paradigms are still worth drawing upon today? Which classical analytical orientations – including Marxist (Chapter 2), Weberian (Chapter 3), Durkheimian (Chapter 5), Simmelian (Chapter 6) and Symbolic Interactionist (Chapter 8) streams, as well as the sociologies of culture proposed by Alfred Weber and Karl Mannheim (Chapter 4) – constitute living traditions today? And which of the classics are construable as analytic dead-ends, as some contemporary positions, like Actor Network Theory, like to allege (Chapter 10)?

Which streams in more recent sociological thinking and research – such as cognitive sociology (Chapter 9), neo-institutionalism (Chapter 11), the new French pragmatic school (Chapter 12), systems theory (Chapter 13), and theories of agency and practice (Chapter 28) – should cultural sociology draw upon and contribute to?

4 Questions of disciplinarity

How does culture relate to core sociological issues of individual and collective action and agency?
Can a focus on cultural matters help to overcome key problems of sociological thought, such as the structure/agency relationship?

How should one understand the relationships between culture and social power?

5 Questions of interdisciplinarity

What new things does cultural sociology tell us about, for example, economic phenomena and markets (Chapter 40), that other sorts of sociology and social science do not or cannot see?

Given that cultural sociology studies domains that other disciplines also examine – e.g. media (Chapter 32 – an area also investigated by communications and media studies) – how does cultural sociology relate to those disciplines, and what can it say that differs from their insights?

Given that there exists today a series of inter-disciplinary intellectual fields – such as Memory Studies (Chapter 33), Material Culture Studies (Chapter 39) and Science and Technology Studies (Chapter 10), what does cultural sociology contribute to them, and what does it productively take from them?

6 Questions of method and methodology

How can cultural sociology engage with macro-level (Chapter 11), meso-level and micro-levels (Chapter 8) of analysis?

Should one regard the most important analytic foci for cultural sociology as the production, distribution and consumption of culture, or are there better terms we can use to focus our attention (see Chapters 41, 42, 43; Griswold, 1987)?

Should cultural sociology be especially attuned to the analysis of the dynamics of everyday life, what would that involve both epistemologically and methodologically, and what insights has it or could it yield? (Chapter 27)

What are the most appropriate methodological strategies for cultural sociology in general, and for dealing with particular phenomena and research problems? Does cultural sociology need special methodologies and methods, given the allegedly special nature of its ‘cultural’ subject matter, or can it draw directly on existing techniques used in other areas of sociology? (See all the Chapters in Part II of the Handbook, covering both quantitative and qualitative possibilities.)

7 The extra-academic purposes of cultural sociology

Beyond its scholarly contributions, what does cultural sociology contribute to ‘real-world’ matters of politics and citizenship (Chapter 29), and how can it effectively intervene in particular socio-political domains and discourses?

As with any intellectual constellation, cultural sociology constantly demands, generates and faces the question what comes next? And the answer is provided by differing manifestoes and diagnoses which pinpoint what they define as the current pathologies of the field and the way to solve them. In a recent diagnosis of cultural sociology in the US, Patterson (2014) notes some problems that arguably apply to all national versions of cultural sociology at the present time: a tendency towards the production of agenda-setting proclamations which are overly dismissive of other positions and of earlier forms of analysis, and which unwisely seek to throw out perfectly serviceable concepts for the sake of fashion, and an over-emphasis on some issues and the partial or complete omission of others. One could add to this list of woes the quite noticeable parochialism of nationally-based cultural sociologies, where scholars often fail to engage with relevant work produced in other countries (US sociology arguably being a particularly striking culprit in this regard). One can also note here the industrial (over-)production of orthodox types of analysis, which keep reproducing standard ways of thinking without any clear indication of conceptual innovation. The ‘Bourdieu industry’ which has sprung up in UK, US, Canadian, Australian, Nordic and Netherlands sociologies over the last few decades is now at a point where there may seem little more to be usefully added about class, consumption and alleged omnivorousness in tastes (Chapter 41), because such matters have been so exhaustively documented and debated already in a wide and apparently ever expanding range of national contexts. But the industry will trundle on for a good while yet, in part because it is so important in generating sociological careers.

It is natural enough that in a period where Bourdieu-inspired sociology is so dominant in many national cultural sociological (or perhaps more accurately, sociology of culture) fields, that some scholars should seek to overthrow that hegemony. If the field is to continue, these are necessary rebellions and attempted revolutions, of the kind Bourdieu himself analysed so acutely in particular cultural fields. But current attempts posthumously to dethrone Bourdieu – which are particularly to be found in British cultural sociology today – also bring the risk of throwing out various babies with the bathwater.

Perhaps the most-cited figures in cultural sociological circles across the world are Bourdieu and Howard S. Becker, the former known for
his work on fields of cultural production and means of cultural consumption, and the latter famous for analyses of the ‘art world’. Although strongly critical of each other, they are now put together by some critics as exemplifying all that is wrong about a sociological understanding of culture which fails to grasp the latter’s distinctive aesthetic properties and the ‘affordances’ by which cultural objects can ‘make a difference’ in social life, either by assisting human agency or through their own capacities to act. Such themes can be found in the contemporary works of action theorists like DeNora (Chapter 28) and Actor-Network Theorists such as Hennion (Chapter 10). For DeNora, what needs to happen now is a move away from a conventional sociology of music towards a sociology with music which does not ignore music’s ‘discursive and material powers’. A ‘new sociology of art’ (and by implication, ‘culture’ more broadly – de la Fuente, 2007) has appeared over the last decade or so, and aims to show how people use cultural objects, and how these in turn affect people and make possible particular forms of practice. This resonates with claims that it is no longer good enough to try to connect the ‘social’ and ‘aesthetic’ domains of human activity, because to use such terms already implies the primacy of a possibly mythical realm of ‘the social’ over aesthetics and meaning. Cultural forms must now be seen as much more than just a proxy of the supposedly determining ‘social’ realm.

While in their own ways in the 1960s and 1970s Bourdieu and Becker aimed to ‘demystify’ the role of art and culture in social life, today’s critics argue that their analytic orientations destroy what is actually specifically ‘cultural’ about culture, namely the aesthetic and agential specificities of cultural objects, and the possibility that aesthetic value is more than a hidden expression of social power relations (Born, 2010). Many contemporary critics draw upon the work of a newly-consecrated intellectual authority figure, namely the Actor-Network theorist Bruno Latour (see Chapter 10), who dismisses the previous generation of critical sociologies of culture:

Apart from religion, no other domain has been more bulldozed to death by critical sociology than the sociology of art. Every sculpture, painting, haute cuisine dish, techno rave, and novel has been explained to nothingness by the social factors ‘hidden behind’ them. (2005: 236)

But there are several problems associated with these contemporary turns towards ‘aesthetics’ and ‘objects’. In the first place, as the sociologist of art Janet Wolff (2008) notes, while it may well be a laudable enterprise to seek to construct a new kind of ‘sociological aesthetics’ which does not reduce – as Bourdieu, Becker and the ‘production of culture school’ allegedly do – the aesthetic elements of objects simply to considerations of power and social structure, it is very easy for this project inadvertently to revert back to false aesthetic universalisms that sociologists very effectively pulled apart a generation ago. The challenge is to build upon the achievements of one’s predecessors, while acknowledging the inevitable flaws in their thinking, while also not relinquishing in fits of over-enthusiasm the better, and most likely invaluable, elements of their analytic procedures. Likewise, a focus on the powers of cultural objects and on the alleged efficaciousness of human agency beyond social-structural constraints, not only runs the risk of in the near future looking rather faddish, being beholden to the current fashion for Actor-Network Theory in certain circles, but it also potentially means obscuring or ignoring altogether understanding of the sorts of power relations which in their own different ways Bourdieu and Becker were so effective at discerning.

Current attempts to find some sort of middle path between the older approaches and the newer, and between considerations of power and social structure on the one side, and forms of agency on the other, seem sensible but as yet inchoate and conceptually under-developed (Prior 2011; Schwarz, 2013). This question then should be posed: what will a post-Bourdieu terrain of cultural sociology look like, when it seems that wholly to ditch Bourdieusian concerns would be unwise? After all, Bourdieu did not have an exclusive patent on central sociological issues of class, power and inequality, as some of his critics rather perversely seem to imply. Can there in fact be a truly post-Bourdieu cultural sociology at the present time and in the near future? Of all the major thinkers of the (recent) past, Bourdieu’s influence will remain most unavoidable for many years to come. What the future of cultural sociology might look like after Bourdieu’s influence has definitively waned might possibly be more effectively guessed at after one has read all of the richly diverse materials that we have sought to present together in this book.

REFERENCES
