

abstract Cultural sociology aims at incorporating the central role of meaning-making into the analysis of social phenomena. This article presents an overview of cultural sociology, focusing on its main theoretical frames, methodological strategies and empirical investigations. It compares two different ways of connecting cultural codes and social interactions in the analysis of social phenomena. The interplay between the cultural and the social and the focus on meaning variations are two central principles of analysis from which cultural sociologists seek to revitalize the notion of culture in sociology.

keywords ♦ cultural sociology ♦ cultural studies ♦ culture and social life ♦ meaning ♦ sociology of culture

Introduction

Cultural sociology can be understood as an emerging field of investigation entirely dedicated to analysing the centrality of meaning-making in social life. Generally speaking, cultural sociologists develop a robust conception of culture, which enhances the most reflexive underpinnings of sociology. As an emerging field of investigation, cultural sociology covers a wide and diverse range of conceptual and methodological tools. In this article, I compare two different ways to define cultural sociology. On the one hand, cultural sociology is presented as an approach that places culture as an independent variable of sociological analysis. Often, the authors supporting this approach argue for the analytical separation of culture and social structure. This trend is mainly sustained by the Yale approach, which defines itself as against the sociology of culture and its focus on culture as a dependent variable (Alexander, 2003). On the other hand, I also focus on another conception of cultural sociology, which is thought of as a synonym of sociology of culture *lato sensu*. In this case, cultural sociology is conceived as a broad field encompassing all sociological approaches on culture. Thus, its boundaries are set by non-sociological approaches, such as

cultural studies. The main concern of the authors in this approach is to explore the amalgamations between culture and social structure. This trend was recently strengthened by the creation of the British journal *Cultural Sociology* (Inglis et al., 2007). Both conceptions of cultural sociology are intended to place the notion of culture as foundational for sociology in so far as they seek to explore the interplay between cultural codes and social relationships.

Rather than an exhaustive genealogy, what is proposed here is a selective and partial review of this field. The term ‘cultural sociology’ has been increasingly employed in a diverse range of theoretical traditions in sociology throughout the world. The main objective of this article is to analyse the different meanings ascribed to this term with a special emphasis on its most recurrent contexts: the American and British sociologies. In the first section, I briefly outline the main theoretical frameworks associated with the exercise of such cultural sociology. Next, I draw on several empirical analyses. The third section presents a short assessment of these works, while the fourth section concludes the article with a few suggestions for developing cultural sociology.

Cultural sociology: theoretical frames

During the last decades, sociologists have increasingly focused upon the notion of culture as a way of reframing sociological thought. This has been done in order to deal with the new analytical challenges faced by sociology throughout history. Many subjects that used to be treated as secondary and residual are now raising central questions for the future of the discipline. The case of cultural sociology is particularly revealing. Instead of considering culture as an epiphenomenal effect of social relations, cultural sociologists are more likely to stress the centrality of meaning in the production and the reproduction of social life. Often, but not always, this involves calling into question some well-established sociological approaches that seek to unveil the underlying power relations that supposedly determine the meanings of social life (Alexander, 2003; Litcherman, 2007; Madsen et al., 2001; Robertson, 1978).

The main task confronting cultural sociology is to incorporate the central role of meaning-making into the analysis of social phenomena. In this sense, cultural sociologists are involved in theorizing culture as a central dimension of the sociological approach (Alexander, 2003; Robertson, 1978). Nonetheless, there are deeply different ways for them to proceed towards this analytical revitalization of the notion. On the theoretical ground, by refusing to consider culture as an epiphenomenal effect of 'non-cultural factors', cultural sociologists investigate the dynamic interactions between the cultural and the social. However, on the methodological ground that links theory to empirical processes, the strategies for relating cultural and social structures entail two different ways of grasping culture as foundational for sociology, two different ways of addressing the interplay between cultural codes and social relationships. At this point, either cultural sociologists *analyse cultural codes in the light of social relationships* or they do precisely the opposite, which is to *analyse social relationships in the light of their cultural codifications*. In order to account for this variation, I begin with a brief overview of the American and the British contributions to the debate. These are the most articulated and influential modes of addressing this issue in terms of what they call cultural sociology. Although I am not primarily concerned with the specific national character of these approaches (indeed, one could argue for their internal heterogeneity), a disposition in these two national frames is fairly representative of the current state of the art in cultural sociology and, consequently, may be helpful to organize its major theoretical standpoints. My task is not to explain the why of this national alignment,

but rather to examine how the concept of cultural sociology varies in the two contexts.

Yet, before presenting cultural sociology against the background of the American and the British scenes, it is worthwhile to briefly recall its classical roots. The works of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim have laid down the theoretical foundations for any 'sociology of meanings'. Durkheim's interest in culture is particularly emphasized in the later part of his life, when he becomes attracted to the problem of social representations, taking religion as an object of study (Durkheim, 2008; Lukes, 1973). Durkheim finds in religion a form of symbolical power which allows a community to be represented to itself in its relations with all the objects affecting it. He states that symbolical processes are self-sustained, which means that social life events have in religion a model (Alexander, 1988; Durkheim, 2008). In turn, Max Weber's interest in meaning-making goes beyond his sociology of religion and is also central to his political and methodological questions. Weber focuses on values and beliefs to provide a sociological theory that seeks to understand the links between power and culture in the way social relations are constructed. Culture and reflexivity are two fundamental starting points for Weber's approach, which allow him to reconcile traditionally opposed philosophical influences such as Immanuel Kant (1999) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1978), for example. Thinking with Kant, Weber concedes that there is no 'essence of things' or 'reality-in-itself' in the phenomena of social life. Rather, what 'exists' is the subjective activity creating meaning. However, contrary to Kant, the potency creating meaning is not the human mind with its pure intuitions, but divergent values that come into conflict in and through human action. In this sense, Weber takes up the Nietzschean critique of values to assert that the way in which conscience reacts to empirical stimuli is not merely rational, but above all *culturally* conditioned. While in Kant's view reason should recognize itself as reason in order to point out its own internal limitations, for Weber values need to recognize themselves as values in order to evaluate their own implications. Indeed, this is indicative of his very idea of objectivity, which is also a value, the greatest value that scientists promote (Weber, 1949).

After the pioneering work of these classics, interest in the cultural approach in sociology underwent a relative decline. In the Anglo-American context this omission was still more pronounced. Through the following periods, the objects and research questions that prevailed in the discipline were primarily related to themes of modernity and national society. However, in some specific niches such as sociology of

religion, symbolic interactionism and the ethnomethodology, interest in meaning did not wane. Considering sociology of religion, authors like Robert Bellah (1964), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1963) and Roland Robertson (1978) furthered the interest in culture by considering religion as the primary source of meaning in human societies. In these works, religion was regarded as an empirical resource from which analysts tackled a specific theoretical question, namely the production of meaning in social life. Through a fruitful dialogue with sociology of knowledge, these sociologists of religion problematized the social dimensions of belief and analytically strengthened the conception of meaning-making as a condition for social life.

Among these authors, the works of Bellah and Robertson were pivotal in defining the first outlines of what would come to be called cultural sociology in the USA and the UK at the end of 20th century. Arguing against the reductionism of religion as something to be explained by 'external' social constraints, Bellah (1970) introduced the concept of 'symbolic realism' to deal with symbolically constituted realities that are mutable and that transcend particular individuals and groups (Madsen et al., 2001: xi). In turn, Robertson's interest in religion lies in understanding daily life's 'taken-for-granted realities'. The author draws on religion to analyse how individuals share fundamental beliefs that confer meaning to their daily practices. More specifically, Robertson's sociology of religion posits the exercise of comparative analysis to argue that what is considered as taken-for-granted varies significantly from one cultural context to another (Robertson, 1978: 20). While Bellah drew on the Durkheimian and the Parsonian traditions to understand religion as an intrinsic attribute of social life (Madsen et al., 2001; Thomas and Flippen, 1972), Robertson built on the Parsonian interpretation of Weber to stress the ways in which world religions interpret the meanings of the world, both as cosmovision and human concreteness (Robertson, 1970; Turner, 1992).

In the American scene, Bellah was not alone in promoting the cultural turn. Clifford Geertz, among other key thinkers, also developed a cultural analysis dedicated to the hermeneutic reconstruction of social texts. Through a semiotic perspective, Geertz (1973) attempted to interpret meaning from within the cultural categories into which it is constructed. Taking up from Parsons in a different direction, both Bellah and Geertz worked out the structural integrity of culture without sustaining a monolithic conception of it. In doing this, they initiated the first steps towards contemporary American cultural sociology (Alexander and Sherwood, 2001; Smith, 1998). From the 1980s onwards, their seminal works

were reappropriated by several sociologists such as Ann Swidler, Michèle Lamont and Jeffrey Alexander. By the late 1990s, cultural sociology's theoretical frameworks were firmly rooted in the American sociology, a process that became increasingly institutionalized in the following years.

The underlying premises promoted by these diverse approaches inspired by the work of Bellah and Geertz tend to concentrate on the task of *analysing cultural codes through social interactions*. Thus, Swidler (1986, 2001) understands culture as a 'tool kit', or repertoire of meanings upon which people draw to make sense of their lives. The metaphor of 'tool kit' is thought of as 'useful in understanding how culture is actually brought to bear on experience' (Swidler, 2001: 39). In turn, Lamont (2000b; Lamont and Molnar, 2002) is concerned with examining how symbolic boundaries are drawn across the varied situations of social life. The author develops a similar approach with 'cultural repertoires' as elementary grammars by which people construct symbolical boundaries that can turn into constraint properties and then legitimate social differences. However, she focuses on 'the factors that push individuals to select certain tools rather than others' (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000: 20). Generally speaking, both Swidler and Lamont focus on taken-for-granted cultural understandings that are embedded in the meaning-making practices of daily life, so that culture is understood through social actions.

One of the main references of cultural sociology as the analysis of cultural codes through social interactions is the 'strong program', or Yale approach, defended by Jeffrey Alexander, the most discussed author in the field. Alexander's seminal work brings to sociology the study of the internal dynamics of symbolic systems related to social performances of secular life. This task is undertaken by postulating the theoretical autonomy of the cultural processes, instead of reducing symbols to their interactional bases (Alexander, 1988, 2003; Cordero et al., 2008; Eyerman, 2004; Hess, 2005). The author combines structuralism and hermeneutics to develop an approach in which culture is considered both as a pre-structured system and a reflexive practice (Alexander, 2003: 22). In order to do this, he stresses the close connections between his cultural sociology and the anthropological literature on ritual and secular life by developing 'a macro model of social action as cultural performance' (Alexander et al., 2006: 77). Through the key concepts of 'culture structure' and 'performance', Alexander aims at defining the elementary formal procedures of meaning-making. While the author separates the cultural and the social structures in decomposing the analytical elements of symbolic action, he also posits that

the moral abstraction involving meaning-making must always be referred to concrete objects and power relations in order to attain its symbolic efficacy (Alexander, 2008; Alexander et al., 2006).

Alexander opposes cultural sociology to the sociology of culture and its focus on organizational and institutional settings. One of the main targets of his criticism is the production-of-culture approach, led by the work of Richard Peterson. On the one hand, this approach was decisive for institutionalizing culture as a sociological object, as it posits that cultural objects are continuously shaped by their social contexts rather than merely a coherent set of normative values (DiMaggio, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Santoro, 2008). On the other hand, the production-of-culture approach does not extend the focus on culture to the methodological foundations of sociology. Instead, it conceives culture as a productive research field for testing and developing the various sociological theories (Hirsch and Fiss, 2000: 98). In turn, Alexander (2003: 12–13) posits that speaking of such sociology of culture amounts to suggesting that culture is something to be explained by something else totally out of the realm of meaning. In short, while the Yale conception of cultural sociology places culture as an independent variable in sociological analysis, the production-of-culture approach attempts to explain culture as the result of other relations in social life, making it a dependent variable in sociological analysis (Cordero et al., 2008; Santoro, 2008; Eyerman, 2004).

Another perspective on cultural sociology is that of *analysing social interactions through their cultural codifications*. Contrary to the American version, the emphasis of this trend of cultural sociology turns to merging culture and social structures. One can trace the origins of this definition back to the pivotal work of Roland Robertson. In his early works on sociology of religion, Robertson (1970, 1980) presents religious beliefs and institutions as starting points to tackle the most varied problems of meaning, such as the fundamentals of ethics, morals and values. Later in his cultural theory of globalization, Robertson draws again on the Weberian notion of 'world images'. He proposes to consider globalization not merely as the 'compression of the world', but above all, as an 'intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole' (Robertson, 1992: 8). Robertson formulates a systematic conception of 'cultural variation', criticizing the more conventional models of sociology of culture and consolidating the theoretical guidelines that had been nurtured since his early works. Whether in his sociology of religion or in his analyses on globalization, the chief concern is always to evaluate how cultural variations make tangible the different epistemic correlations between the

universal and the particular in specific historical contexts. Robertson (1988, 1992) thus suggests that a quite substantive and circumscribed definition of culture should be replaced by a systematic conception not of culture proper, but of the terms in which its variation occurs in the social world.

Besides Robertson's seminal work on religion in the 1970s, another starting point for this conception of cultural sociology was the emergence and the consolidation of the British cultural studies. From the late 1960s onwards, the sociological inclination experienced by cultural studies in Birmingham was based on a criticism of the 'mainstream' sociological approaches that tended to consider culture merely as an epiphenomenal byproduct of social life (Bennett, 2008; Inglis, 2007). The works of Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams are well known contributions to this field. Currently, the legacy of cultural studies for contemporary cultural sociology is the object of attention of scholars like David Inglis (2007), for whom the disciplinary boundaries between these approaches is not well-worth consideration in so far as it overlooks their shared epistemological assumptions. Inglis (2007: 118) states that both cultural studies and sociology are designed to make 'culture and power closely related, if not in fact almost synonymous'. The intellectual multiplicity and the strong political engagements of cultural studies are presented as a stimulus to the development of cultural analysis in contemporary sociology. Nevertheless, there are other quite different ways of perceiving and evaluating the contribution of cultural studies to cultural sociology. Rojek and Turner (2000), for instance, consider that heterogeneity and over-politicization of cultural studies are worthless as they overestimate literary-oriented approaches in spite of sociological methods.

Whether as a productive source of dialogue or as a tendency to avoid, cultural studies set the boundary of this conception of cultural sociology. The main difference between cultural sociology and the various forms of cultural studies is that the first is necessarily driven by the centrality of sociological theory and methods in the study of culture (Inglis et al., 2007). In this sense, cultural sociology is not a particular position but refers to a broad field encompassing all sociological positions vis-a-vis culture. Cultural sociology is then connected to a culture of sociology, which means that its focus lies on differentiating sociological approaches on culture from other approaches on the same subject. The production-of-culture approach, for instance, has also been incorporated into this large conception of cultural sociology (Santoro, 2008). Especially when it is emphasized its shift towards consumption (the change of metaphor from production to auto-

production of culture), this approach builds on meaning issues to analyse how individuals and collectivities reappropriate previous symbols in order to produce changing identities (Hirsch and Fiss, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Santoro, 2008).

How about the other contexts, outside the US and UK? In France, despite all its richness and important contributions to the field, the designation 'cultural sociology' has rarely been applied to sociological analysis (Cefaï, 2009; Lichterman, 2007). Considering that symbolical thought was always a major concern in French social sciences, one might even question the extent to which it is possible to talk about a cultural turn in France (Alexander, 2003: 11; Cefaï, 2009; Inglis et al., 2007). Regarding sociology, the heritage of Durkheimian late sociology has been widely preserved through the attention that sociologists paid to the symbolic dimension of social phenomena. The legacy of Bourdieu is likewise a valuable contribution to the reinforcement of French cultural analysis, as one can note in Nathalie Heinich's sociology of art (Heinich, 2001). Besides, the blurred boundaries between sociology, anthropology and philosophy in France brought the works of scholars like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault to the core of sociological analysis, and also influenced the cultural turns of elsewhere (Cefaï, 2009; Smith, 1998). Yet, there is currently one branch of contemporary French sociology that intends to promote a specific dialogue between the American cultural sociology and the French pragmatist sociology (Cefaï, 2009; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Lichterman, 2007). These approaches endorse the interplay between the cultural and the social realms by focusing on how different moral criteria of evaluation are validated by individuals in their everyday lives (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000). In turn, cultural sociology is acquiring growing importance in the Australian sociology. Taking advantage of the Australian cultural studies, authors here seek to appropriate the existing literature on the European cultural theories and the American and British cultural sociologies so that they can further new theoretical approaches (De la Fuente, 2008). This has been partially achieved in several works that take Australian social life as a laboratory for either improving or reformulating the European and Anglo-American references. For instance, Osbaldiston (2010) has built on Smith's (1999) analytical classification of place with regard to its sacred, profane, mundane and liminal characteristics in order to understand Australian citizens' perceptions about the city, the countryside and the beach. In turn, T Bennett (also an important reference in the British context) builds on science studies and actor-network-theory to criticize Alexander's conception of

the autonomy of culture. He stresses the material processes through which culture has been made an important dimension of social life (Bennett, 2007, 2013). Although one cannot deny the development of cultural sociology within Australian cultural studies, it still has a long way to go to consolidate itself as a distinctive approach on culture.

Taken together, these theories of cultural sociology are linked by a few shared issues upon which their main differences are built. Generally speaking, cultural sociologists share the task of developing meaning-centred approaches that call into question the fallacy of social structure's concreteness. The goal is to analyse meaning variations ascribed to historical phenomena, so that meaning is considered as endemic to social life. Without endorsing culture either as a 'consequence' or as a 'cause' of social phenomena, cultural sociology seeks to avoid both the trap of reducing culture to social powers and the trap of treating culture in a paralysing relativism. On the one hand, the authors that answer this challenge by focusing on *culture through interactions* tend to separate the symbolic and the social, claiming for the *autonomy* of culture. This analytical separation is thought of as a precondition to understand their empirical connections. On the other hand, the authors interested in analysing the *social interactions through the cultural codes* tend to *merge* the symbolic and the social, so that its empirical linkage is transplanted to the theoretical front.

Both ways of conceiving cultural sociology provide analytical tools to interpret the ongoing process of its consolidation as a subfield in sociology. Despite the national constraints that are surrounding this debate, the analytical tendencies studied here refer to interpretative schemes that cannot be reduced to any national belonging, or even to the individuals themselves. Nothing can prevent someone from using both lenses of cultural sociology in the same work. Besides, within each of the main two trends, one can find quite different approaches to cultural sociology, such as the understanding of Alexander and Lamont, for example. If, on the one hand, both of them are dedicated to study culture through social interactions, on the other hand they pursue this goal in different ways. Alexander proposes the analytical autonomy of culture and conceives cultural sociology as distinct from sociology of culture. Lamont is concerned with the cultural codes that inform social hierarchies. She stresses a broader definition of cultural sociology as the all-encompassing sociological approaches on culture. Both the lenses of culture through social interactions and social interactions through culture may be associated with any of these two conceptions of cultural sociology.

Cultural sociology on the ground: empirical matters

Race, arts, politics, the media, education, gender, literature, sports, music, the list of empirical objects analysed by cultural sociology is almost interminable. The proliferation of edited collections and journals' special issues about cultural sociology embraces a wide and varied range of theories, methods and empirical objects. Consequently, there is no self-evident theoretical or methodological correspondence among the works identified as contemporary cultural sociology. In the previous section I outlined a way of addressing this heterogeneity by introducing two theoretical trends towards the analysis of the dialogical relations between culture and social action. In the present section, I maintain this perspective in order to expose some empirical matters that are being addressed by cultural sociologists.

Considering the approaches that inform the perspective here broadly referred to as *understanding social interactions through its cultural codes*, the work of Robertson is an important reference and it offers a varied set of empirical finds. In his sociology of religion, he argues that different civilizational matrixes, the world religions, developed varied cultural codes to relate individuals and communities (Robertson, 1978, 1980). Turning to the studies on globalization, his main purpose is to analyse the particular ways in which different social groups work up and interpret the fact that they live on the same planet. In this sense, Robertson is concerned with the formation and the intensification of images of world order, that is to say, with the diverse conceptions of global order which, although generally assimilated to the 20th century, are as old as millenarian civilizations and religions. Therefore, the concept of globalization is used to analyse how social actors work out meanings, identities and institutions in their elaboration of the 'image of the world as a whole' (Robertson, 1992). His work on football (Robertson, 2006; Robertson and Giulianotti, 2007), for example, considers the social aspects of globalization through its cultural domains. Robertson (2006: 173–4) examines American-based supporters of Scottish football teams, who 'prefer to transplant their old cultural allegiances and identities into this new territory, while typically cultivating little or no serious interest in the indigenous sporting cultures'. The extension of these Scottish identities across North America reveals important sociocultural dimensions of globalization, such as the construction of intercultural practices and glocal identities.

Many empirical analyses have attempted to understand the social through the cultural focus on mass and popular culture. These last are not taken as

a mere consequence of capitalism, but rather as a legitimate and also creative way of producing meaning in social life. Thus, drawing on popular music, Bennett (2008: 429) seeks to explore the localized and subjective ways in which music and cultural practice align in everyday contexts. In order to do that, he invokes Robertson's notion of 'glocal' to stress that the different local contexts in which rap music and hip hop culture are experienced end up shaping specific social meanings (Bennett, 2008). In a similar vein, Inglis questions the alleged superiority of art and high culture over mass and popular culture. The author is concerned in showing that everyday life bears as much upon art as upon popular culture, so that 'what counts as "art" depends on context; what is viewed very positively at one time and place can be viewed very negatively at another' (Inglis, 2005: 84). Turning to the domain of cultural policy, Anwar Tlili (2008) develops another example of this trend of cultural sociology by considering the dialogical social relationships that assigned meaning to the concepts of social inclusion/exclusion in recent British museum policies. In order to entrench their main cultural policies into the museums, the government had to come up against different world views held by the museum professionals, and this ended up reframing their main directives.

Considering the perspective of analysing *culture through the social interactions*, Alexander presents a wide range of empirical problems related to his theory. He seeks in events of social trauma the heuristic validation of his cultural-performative theoretical model. Here I mention only his work on the cases of Watergate and the Holocaust. In both phenomena, the author emphasizes two significant changes occurring in the North American collective consciousness. The case of Watergate, the initial perception of which had been one of 'mere politics', or an example of how tortuous the pursuit of political objectives can be, came to be seen as a 'fundamental violation' of moral life. As to the perception of the Holocaust, it went from being seen as a common event in the context of war atrocities to the perception of a horrifying crime against the whole of humanity. In order to explain these variations, the author first reconstructs the variation of the meanings assigned to each phenomenon and then he relates this dynamic cultural structure with the political and economic aspects of social life (Alexander, 2000: 40, 2007: 24). This macro-theoretical framework combining structuralism and hermeneutics allows Alexander to reconstruct the symbolic transformations which confer different meanings to the one same historical event (Alexander, 2000, 2003).

The publication of *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1986) may be considered as another strong point

of American cultural sociology. In this book, a team of five scholars examines the moral foundations of individualism in contemporary USA by focusing on everyday matters such as private and economic lives, religious practices and political participations. They argue that the utilitarian and expressive forms of individualism have developed with relative independence from the biblical and republican forms of individualism traditionally associated with civic and religious life in America. Another example of this trend towards *understanding culture through the social interactions* is the contribution of Swidler (2001), who explores the various ways in which love is tied to middle-class American's lives. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the author seeks to understand how people use the cultural resources about love that they have at their disposal in their personal lives. Swidler argues that the extent to which culture can redirect individuals' strategies of action depends on the settled or unsettled circumstances upon which one's life is based. Love is thus considered as 'a perfect place to study culture in action' (Swidler, 2001: 4). In turn, Lamont (2000a) develops a similar approach concerning the cultural repertoires from which lower-middle-class working men in France and the USA draw to create their sense of self-worth. In the USA, she considers black and white American workers, while in France she focuses on white French workers and North African immigrants. Through these social groups, Lamont identifies several patterns of mobilizing the moral criteria that frame the symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in each group. In the same vein, the volume that she edited with Laurent Thévenot (2000) builds on cross-national analysis between France and the USA. The main objective of that book is to analyse the different ways in which moral criteria such as market performance or civic solidarity are legitimized by individuals in everyday life.

Amidst the works that are not usually classified as cultural sociology, sociology of culture or cultural studies, one can find additional inspiration to face the challenges posed by such a renewed approach on culture and social life. Bjorn Wittrock (2000), for instance, presents an insightful contribution to this debate as he states the impossibility of thinking about modernity and its main projects (democracy and liberalism) without taking into account the modern epistemic changes that inaugurated in the 18th century a still ongoing process of wide cultural implications for both social life and sociology. Concerning the weight of history, one can mention Elisa Reis's important work about the interplay between historical phenomena and sociological theory. Either focusing on the cultural construction of poverty and inequality (Reis and Moore, 2005) or

analysing the state building process in Brazil (Reis, 1998), her main task is always to focus on the open-ended construction of 'society' as a cultural and historical phenomenon. Nilüfer Göle also provides an imaginative approach that could further cultural sociology, as she revisits the classical discussion on public space, taking into account the current interrelationships between Islam and Europe. Göle (2005, 2010) draws on the notion of visibility and performance to analyse the inclusion of religious cultural codes into the formation of the emerging European public space. Last but not least, William Sewell, Jr (1992) proposes to analyse the mutual influences of meaning and power in the consolidation and transformation of any social structure, whether it be a single couple, a factory, a national army or a language. His study on the political structures of the French revolution (Sewell, 1996) is highly inventive as he tackles the meaning variation that was associated to the taking of the Bastille, from its planning on 12 July to its assessment by the National Assembly on 23 July. An unintended result of this process was the articulation of the ideas of popular violence and popular sovereignty, giving rise to the modern conceptualization of social revolution.

Evaluating cultural sociology

The diversity of themes, theories and empirical objects that are associated with contemporary cultural sociology is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, authors further the discipline by promoting a rich dialogue through multiple disciplinary boundaries. The influences of traditions such as poststructuralism, symbolic anthropology, various versions of sociology of culture and cultural studies were of crucial importance for the formation of this renewed debate about culture in sociology. On the other hand, the growing number of edited collections with reference to cultural sociology in their title is too heterogeneous a body of theoretical and methodological issues. Usually, the diversity is such that the task of explaining the merits of these contributions for the consolidation of cultural sociology is restricted to the editors' introductions. Beyond these differences, there are several assumptions shared by these diverse approaches, as I have argued in the above sections. The interplay between the cultural and the social and the focus on meaning variations are two central principles of analysis from which cultural sociologists seek to revitalize the notion of culture.

If cultural sociology has been hailed as a promising and influential mode of addressing the centrality of meaning in social life, it has also been subject to various criticisms. These criticisms are as varied as

their targets. Nevertheless, most of them concern the place of power in cultural sociology's analytical and research agenda. Depending on their targets, the critics point out either the underestimation or the overestimation of the role of *power relations*. In the first case, it is argued that the separation of meaning and social life neglects the weight of the social hierarchies and the power mechanisms that are inextricably linked to meaning-making. The main object of this line of criticism is the 'strong program' defended by Alexander (Joas, 2005; Kurasawa, 2004). The second general line of criticism is directed against approaches that tend to merge the cultural and the social, especially to those proposing to include cultural studies as a valuable contribution to cultural sociology. The lack of historical depth and comparative research and the over-politicization of the debate on culture are presented as obstacles to include cultural analysis in cultural sociology (Rojek and Turner, 2000). In short, the greatest pitfall for those who attempt to separate culture and social structure is to deal with the notion of power in the same way their opponents have dealt with the notion of culture. In turn, those who attempt to merge the cultural and the social risk replacing a substantial conception of the social with an essentializing conception of the cultural.

The apparently contradictory elements of these two lines of criticisms only reinforce the heterogeneous backgrounds from which cultural sociology springs. The different ways of relating culture and power into a sociology of meaning produces a varied repertoire of what is, and what is not, cultural sociology. What is regarded as 'internal criticism' from one standpoint can also be considered as 'external criticism' from another. The contribution of Bourdieu to cultural sociology is indicative of this heterogeneity. His approach figures as both enabling and constricting (Kurasawa, 2004; Rojek and Turner, 2000). Bourdieu's sociology appears as a valuable contribution to cultural sociology to the extent that he focuses attention on the problem of internalizing social structures through practical schemes of perception and appreciation (Bourdieu, 1997). However, in the methodological ground of linking theory to empirical phenomena, the cultural potential of Bourdieu's analysis seems to be restrained by his obsessive focus on the market logic of distinction that structures social fields (Bourdieu, 1979, 1998). As it was mentioned early, the border demarcation between cultural sociology, sociology of culture and cultural studies is another open discussion that comprises distinct and even antagonistic positions (Alexander, 2003; De la Fuente, 2008; Hays, 2000; Inglis, 2007; Rojek and Turner, 2000).

Cultural sociology and future directions

The fact of being overly based on the American and British contexts is one of the main obstacles that cultural sociology needs to overcome in order to achieve its analytical potential. Several collected volumes have overlapped the boundaries between these two contexts by bringing together a range of works representative of diverse conceptions of cultural sociology (Back et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2010). Nevertheless, with the exception of Australia and France on a smaller scale, it is quite rare to hear about cultural sociology outside the American and British scenes. Cultural sociologists from elsewhere could reinterpret this debate from within different sociological traditions. This would not only increase cultural sociological conceptual tools, but may also create new ones.

Besides crossing the national lines that frame the current effort to define cultural sociology, another important challenge for its future concerns the consolidation of a more homogeneous framework of theoretical and methodological procedures that make it possible to further the discipline without jeopardizing the dialogue with border disciplines. Cultural sociology should not be thought of either as a theory that precedes the historical phenomena in conceptualizing how the symbolic mechanisms of meaning-making work out, or as a style of analysis that renounces disciplinary borders in favour of an indiscriminate interdisciplinarity. I contend that cultural sociology should be thought of as a sub-discipline situated at the intersection of other disciplines and sub-disciplines (such as anthropology, historical sociology, sociology of culture and political sociology), but this should not lead to a lack of a coherent set of theoretical and methodological tools. Even if it still has a long way to go, cultural sociology has been successful in establishing a particular direction to deal with its endemic heterogeneity. On the one hand, the traps of culturalism are partially avoided, as the focus has not been to build on a radical relativist generalization of culture, but rather to use the notion of culture in a kind of sociology of sociology. What matters is to consider culture as a starting point for the understanding and explanation of historical phenomena. Thus, the task is to avoid limiting the reach of culture to any factor other than its very symbolic autonomy. In other words, the focus is mainly on the variation of the meanings that are ascribed to historical phenomena. Considering the empirical level, there are several inventive uses of cultural sociology in sociological research. Lamont is concerned with applying cultural sociology's analytical frames as a way of exploring new themes of analy-

sis, as in the recent debate on the concepts of evaluation and valuation (Lamont, 2012). The author analyses a number of works that explore the ways values are produced, diffused, assessed and institutionalized across a range of settings. She is especially concerned with the definitions of worth and the systems of evaluation that are shaped by different types of constraints such as the law, the body, notions of fairness, etc. Although there is no systematic dialogue between the works that she labels as sociology of evaluation and valuation, this dialogue could be achieved by cultural sociology's analytical tools.

The aforementioned studies about the notion of cultural trauma are another promising way of developing cultural sociology, especially if one considers the culture through power trend. Most of these works reveal the symbolical shifts that encompass the construction of cultural traumas. The transformation of discrete events into a cultural trauma is made possible by narrative plots which drive the transformative potential of these events within the taken for granted perceptions of collective identity (Eyerman, 2011, 2012). Although most of these analyses concern political issues, it would be inventive to apply these analytical models to the study of religious belonging, professional ethics and other forms of public discourses that are not primarily related to politics. This does not need to lead to any form of culturalism inasmuch as the focus on actors' performances and power constraints is maintained.

I would like to finish these brief remarks by recalling the importance of Max Weber's concept of culture as a fruitful way to work out cultural sociology's dilemmas in relating the cultural and the social. Taking culture as synonymous to social values, Weber presents this notion as a requisite for both individuals, who assign meaning in their everyday interactions, and for sociologists, who select specific events and designate them as 'social-historical phenomena'. Sociology, thus, elects its criteria of internal validation among the cultural and historical contexts upon which it operates. By treating culture simultaneously as object and method of analysis (Alexander and Reed, 2009; Lima Neto, 2007, 2013; Robertson, 1978), cultural sociology is already deeply committed to this dialogical perspective. As far as it refers to itself as a product of contemporary shifts that have occurred in sociological theory, and considering the current reviews of classical concepts within sociology, cultural sociology offers a real possibility to turn into solid ground the analytical shifting sands on which we are presently evolving.

Annotated further reading

Bonnell VE, Hunt L (eds) (1999) *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

This edited volume is dedicated to analysing history and historical sociology under the general rubric of the cultural turn. Bonnell and Hunt's well-known introduction discusses the intersection between culture and social life without accepting the obliteration of the social that is implied by the most radical forms of culturalism. In order to escape the reductionism of culturalism, the scholars that contribute to this book seek further causal explanations for cultural analysis in their different social science traditions.

Friedland R, Mohr J (eds) (2004) *Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This edited volume presents 14 essays by scholars who are committed to advancing different approaches to cultural analysis in sociology. The editors' introduction offers a critical review and assessment of the cultural turn in American sociology. The following chapters discuss a variety of subjects related to cultural sociology, both theoretically and empirically.

Inglis D, Hughson J (2003) *Confronting Culture: Sociological Vistas*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

This book presents a detailed analysis of how particular sets of themes in sociology of culture were developed over time in Germany, France, Great Britain and the United States. In addition to this, Inglis and Hughson also devote one chapter to the great contribution of classical sociology to the contemporary debate on cultural sociology.

Sahlins M (2000) *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays*. New York: Zone Books.

This book is a collection of articles written by the author between the 1960s and 1990s. Sahlins examines from various perspectives the different symbolic logics that inform social practices and perceptions of the world in everyday life, whether in societies organized around the principle of totemism or economic rationality. Through concepts such as metaculture or structure of conjuncture, Sahlins develops an approach about the cultural variations that is an important source of inspiration for scholars in cultural sociology: 'Physical things have causes, but human things reasons – symbolically constructed reasons even when they are physically caused' (pp. 28–9).

Wedeen L (2002) Conceptualizing culture: Possibilities for political science. *American Political Science Review* 96(4): 713–28.

This article explores several possibilities to consider culture as an independent variable in political analysis. Instead of thinking about culture as a reified and fixed system, such as the political culture oriented analyses, Wedeen focuses on meaning-

making practices in order to understand how actors invest political phenomena with meaning. The intelligibility of political phenomena is then analysed in the light of the interplay between practices and signs.

Wray M (2013) *Cultural Sociology: An Introductory Reader*. New York: WW Norton.

This volume gathers a range of classical and contemporary texts which are important references to understand the debate on cultural sociology. The selection of texts is quite successful in encouraging a reflection on the relationships between the classical parameters and the present challenges with regard to the sociological approach on culture. Texts are preceded by an introduction that explores complex themes of social theory in a simple language, accessible to non-specialist readers.

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résumé La sociologie culturelle vise à intégrer le rôle central de la production de sens dans l'analyse des phénomènes sociaux. Cet article présente un aperçu générale de la sociologie culturelle, en se concentrant sur ses principaux axes théoriques, méthodologiques et empiriques. Il compare deux différents façons de lier des codes culturels et des interactions sociales dans l'analyse des phénomènes sociaux. L'interaction entre le culturel et le social et l'accent mis sur les variations de sens sont deux principes centraux de l'analyse à partir de laquelle les sociologues culturels cherchent à revitaliser la notion de culture en sociologie.

mot-clés culture et vie sociale ♦ études culturelles ♦ sens ♦ sociologie culturelle ♦ sociologie de la culture

resumen La sociología cultural tiene por propósito incorporar el papel central de la construcción de significado en el análisis de los fenómenos sociales. Este artículo presenta una visión general de la sociología cultural, centrándose en sus principales marcos teóricos, estrategias metodológicas y investigaciones empíricas. Se comparan dos maneras diferentes de conectar los códigos culturales y las interacciones sociales en el análisis de los fenómenos sociales. La interacción entre lo cultural y lo social y la atención a las variaciones de significado son dos principios centrales de análisis de sociólogos culturales, que buscan revitalizar el concepto de cultura en la sociología.

palabras clave cultura y vida social ♦ estudios culturales ♦ sentido ♦ sociología cultural ♦ sociología de la cultura