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Autor: Müller, Hans-Peter

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FATEFUL ENCOUNTER? GERMAN SOCIOLOGY MEETS CULTURE

Hans-Peter Müller, Humboldt University Berlin

1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century sociology in Germany seems to have arrived back at where it once took off: culture. In the wake of the *fin-de-siècle* the founding fathers of German sociology moulded this discipline as a cultural science (“Kulturwissenschaft”). The studies resulting from this paradigm are now classics: Georg Simmel’s “Philosophy of Money” (1900), Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic” (1904), Werner Sombart’s “Luxury and Capitalism” (1913) and Alfred Weber’s (1912) triad of “societal process, civilizational process and cultural movement”. Despite capitalism, class struggle and the social question, German sociology received a cultural grounding from the outset. The basic concerns underlying the different approaches of the founders of sociology were the sense and meaning of modern culture and history on the one hand, the impact of social change on individual ways of life on the other hand.

The cultural meaning of history for society and individuality is, I think, equally the major driving force behind the enormous interest in culture, sociology of culture and cultural science currently evident in Germany. One may very well speculate on the reasons for this interest particularly today. It surely is a *fin-de-siècle* syndrome since all certainties have vanished on the eve of the 21st century. What looked like the happy “end of history” (Fukuyama) in 1989 bringing the struggle of capitalism and socialism to a close in favor of the final victory of liberal democracy has by now been replaced by the disenchanted view that the Western model of culture, society and individual way of life is no paradigm for the new “one” – yet by no means unified – world. Even if it were possible, the American way of life instituted on a global scale would entail the immediate ecological collapse of the world. This insight as well as the disillusion, however, was prepared for by the so called “postmodern discourse” in the 80ies. The “end of metanarratives” and a Babylonian pluralism of positions and visions killed even the most moderate belief in “progress” and remedial politics for the amelioration of society. Interestingly enough, this apparent “insight” of philosophy and philology corresponded nicely with the German sociological discussion on the deconstruction of class society and the individualization and pluralization of ways of life in Western “Risk” and “Event”-

societies (Ulrich Beck 1986, Gerhard Schulze 1992). Although the empirical evidence for this interpretation (Müller 1992) remained contested it fostered the impression of “postism”: the post-class society, the post-working society, the post-conventional styles of life etc.

Historical caesura, postmodern discourse and “sociological unclearness” (Habermas 1985) converged on one point – despite their heterogeneity: the growing demand for sense and meaning. It is a truism that every society, advanced as it may be, needs a symbolic inventory for its own self-image. Such cultural knowledge is necessary to delineate the signs of the time, the course of history and the direction of societal development. Conventional mainstream sociology as a “normal science” (Kuhn) – methodologically, a science of society and, substantially, a doctrine of social structure – seems to lose interpretative power in times of social and cultural transition. Why? On the one hand, this has to do with history itself – the “simultaneousness of the dissimultaneous”. The paradigm case is Germany attempting to reintegrate a capitalistic and socialistic society into one nation – a delicate “experiment of reunion” (Giesen, Leggewie 1991). On the other hand, this is a consequence of the paradigmatic orientation towards a structural sociology whose cultural horizon has become full of cracks. Given this background it is by no means surprising to see new ways and paradigmatic attempts emerging with a decidedly “culturalist” bent (Müller 1994a). A number of publications on “culture and society” (Neidhardt *et al.* 1986, Soeffner 1988, Tenbruck 1989) have recently appeared, the 24th German Sociological Association’s meeting in Zurich in collaboration with the Austrian and Swiss sociological societies in 1988 (Haller *et al.* 1989) focussed on this topic, a European theory conference looked at the relationship of “social structure and culture” in 1987 (Haferkamp 1990) and the specialized sociological fields are gradually trying to incorporate “culture” into their traditional (i. e. structural) explanatory design.

2. Studying Culture

Without being able to examine these developments in detail¹, I would like to highlight the main thrust of the empirical studies on culture in German sociology and then move on to its theoretical modelling. There are five major areas in which the culture business flourishes: 1. *Culture and religion*: Although said

¹ For an overview of recent trends and tendencies of the new sociology of culture, see the special issue “Kultur und Gesellschaft” (No. 2/1994) of the “Berliner Journal für Soziologie”. For an extensive bibliography cf. Müller (1994a).

to be completely secularized, in an advanced society like Germany, the religious needs of people (Kaufmann 1986) have neither disappeared nor have they been met by a profane media and consumer culture. This is illustrated by the success of new religions and sects on the one hand, the revival of fundamentalism in various guises (Bergmann, Hahn, Luckmann 1993) on the other hand. Particularly now, with the demise of socialism and the apparent end to all secular utopias, new religious visions find an attractive market with great demand – the revival of religion in Eastern Europe provides ample evidence.

2. *Law and morality*: The rapid transition we face in Germany engenders massive inequities which are regarded as “unfair”. In Germany, the uneven distribution of the burdens and profits of the transition process and the uneven charging with the costs of transition (500 billion DM cash flow from the West to the East since the *Wende* in 1989) among different status groups in our society have led to a debate on the so-called “justice gap” (Müller, Wegener 1994). This public debate is accompanied by a more theoretical and philosophical discourse on law and social justice, particularly regarding in what sense and to what extent a social order can be regulated by law (Habermas 1992, Luhmann 1993). Furthermore, after the me-decade of the 80s and in the wake of American communitarianism, a discourse on a new morality is still going on that could strengthen solidarity, individual self-reliance and civil society (Brumlik, Brunkhorst 1993, Hondrich, Arzberger 1992, Honneth 1993, Zoll 1993). In addition, the processes of migration in and the immigration pressure on Germany have aroused a debate as to the future character of our country: more “German” or more multicultural, a so-called “multikulti” (Leggewie 1990, Cohn-Bendit, Schmid 1992)? Violent assaults on foreigners in Germany by skinheads and Neonazis in turn triggered the discourse on the relationship of the native-born and the foreign people, the conditions for a peaceful co-existence of different cultures and ethnic groups as well as the character of contacts “between cultures” (Matthes 1992) with the goal of fanning xenophobia and violence in Germany. The debates on social justice, communitarianism and multiculturalism have a significant cultural impact as they indicate continuity and discontinuity in the cultural self-image of a society.

3. *Culture and politics*: Although democracy, more than ever after the breakdown of socialism, has come to be seen as the embodiment of and the promise for a “good society”, severe criticism of the representative system of parliamentary democracy and a critique of the new “political class” has led to the demand for more political participation and a new “political culture” (Beyme 1993, Leggewie 1994).

4. *Culture and media*: It was Max Weber who pointed out the importance of inquiries on the press; but studies on media and mass communication are the most neglected fields of research in German sociology (Kaase, Schulz 1989, Merten et al. 1994); what prevailed was the so-called “Kulturkritik” criticizing the apparent manipulative

impact of the media. Very recently, a new section was founded in the German Sociological Association on “sociology of the media” which looks at the role of the “public” as a fourth power in times of a “mediacracy” and at the relationship of democracy, media and public. (Gerhards, Neidhardt 1991; Müller-Doohm, Neumann-Braun 1991, Merten *et al.* 1994, Münch 1992, Neidhardt 1994, Schmidt 1994) 5. *Culture and agency*: The last area includes collective and individual actors. The new social movements are by far the best studied type of collective actor in Germany (Brand 1982, Eder 1994, Neidhardt, Rucht 1991, Raschke 1985, Roth, Rucht 1987) and are said to articulate social problems and cultural currents and to enable cultural innovation by the formulation of new ideas, the mobilization of protest and the introduction of new styles of life. A similar role though apparently of minor importance today is usually attributed to intellectuals as influential individual actors. Yet, what is the fate of the intellectual (Giesen 1993, Lepenies 1992, Lepsius 1990, Müller 1994b) after the end of his once proclaimed grand visions and, above all, what is left of the leftist intellectual? Though social movements and the intelligentsia are prominent minorities with a salient voice in society it is the silent majority that attracted most of sociology’s attention in the 80ies. In the wake of Beck’s intriguing thesis of the destructurement of class society and the individualization as well as pluralization of life styles, much research has focused on this area. Social structural analysis traditionally leaning towards the distribution of life-chances and the uneven distribution of material resources was more and more “culturalized” and studied the structure and relational make-up of life-styles. Is there a “de-coupling” of material class position and way of life (as Beck would argue) or are there still elective affinities between material situation and the choice of life-styles (as Bourdieu in “Distinction” would have it)? Consequently, social research looked at culture and life-style of the working class both historically (Brock 1991, Mooser 1984) and empirically (Herlyn *et al.* 1994, Rosenbaum 1992) and tried to detect new milieus, values and ways of living (Klages 1993, Schulze 1992, Vester *et al.* 1993, Zoll 1993). In order to gain a picture of the cultural make-up of life-styles, hitherto unrelated sociological fields were suddenly merged with the study of social inequality (Kreckel 1992, Müller 1992): the sociology of leisure (Gluchowski 1981, Lüdtke 1989), consumption (Rosenberger 1992), housing (Herlyn, Herlyn 1983, Häußermann, Siebel 1991), gender, love and family life (Beck, Beck 1990, Bertram 1991+1992, Burkhart, Kohli 1992, Kaufmann 1988, Nave-Herz 1988). Furthermore, the old relationship of city and life-style (Dangschat, Blasius 1994, Hauff 1988, Noller *et al.* 1994) was rediscovered, forms of “new urbanism” (Häußermann, Siebel 1987) as well as processes of gentrification (Blasius, Dangschat 1990) were studied and in addition to the sociology of space, the sociology of time focused on new arrangements of work and private life and time as pioneering life-styles in

small life-worlds (Hitzler 1988, Hörning et al. 1990, Neckel 1991). In short, “between consciousness and being” (Hradil 1992), to use old notions of Marx, class analysis and stratification research acquired a cultural touch by concentrating upon ways of life, styles of life and what Weber called “Lebensführung” (Vetter 1991, Voß 1991) of different status groups.

Beyond this vast array of empirical research in various fields, however, it is tempting to consider the question whether these developments are just due to a heightened interest in the field of culture or whether there is a new or renewed sociology of culture or, even, a cultural sociology in the making? Arguing cautiously in favor of the second alternative, I would like to highlight some of the requirements necessary for a viable theoretical approach.

3. Towards a New Theoretical Approach

First of all, it is necessary to develop a new concept of culture. Surveying sets of recent definitions reveals a plethora of different conceptualizations. Yet all attempts stress the symbolic dimension of social life and underline the relevance of sense and meaning. To give just two illustrations: Friedhelm Neidhardt (1986, 11, my translation) defines culture as “the system of collective constructions of meaning with which people define reality – that complex of representations with which they distinguish between important and unimportant, true and false, good and bad as well as beautiful and ugly.” And Anthony Giddens et al. (1994, 2) conceptualize culture as “sets of *signifying practices* – modes of generating meaning – that create *communication* orders of one kind or another.” The first definition stresses the cultural system, the second cultural praxis and practices. Integrating these two notions I would like to define culture as an ensemble of symbols, rituals and practices in order to underline the symbolic, processual and action oriented moments of culture. This abstract definition allows one to separate analytically the relevant dimensions of “culturality”: the level of symbols, i. e. signs and their meaning, that may be condensed into a cultural system to varying degrees; the processual level that gives cultural elements durability through institutionalization, socialization and social control; and the level of practice with sociocultural action that may be in accordance with or in confrontation to the dominant cultural system.

This abstract definition has to be enriched by a set of notions expressing the social reality of cultural differentiation today. A first, already established distinction pertains to high, popular and mass culture. One particularly interesting question for future research is how “popular and high culture” (Herbert Gans)

change under the impact of mass culture and how the “blurring of genres” (Clifford Geertz) leads to a new configuration of different cultural segments. A second distinction concerns the level of aggregation of cultural phenomena. On the macro level there is a rich body of research on national cultures and national character. This usage of culture has been applied above all in historical-comparative research on nation-building, political culture and value change. Basic to this research tradition is the assumption that societies have a common culture. It is interesting to see how advanced societies in Europe while steadily developing a multicultural setting, are reviving notions of national, ethnic and regional identity. At the meso-level, the research on culture in organizations and corporate culture as an important factor of organizational development has become fashionable. Equally situated on the meso-level is the culture of groups and milieus, be it in the traditional vein of aristocratic, bourgeois and proletarian culture or, in the wake of the cultural revolution of the 60ies, the role of subcultures, countercultures and alternative cultures. Particularly in Germany, the role of new social movements as cultural actors and carriers of new styles of life has attracted considerable attention in social research. At the micro-level the major interest of sociology, social research and marketing is directed at the way of life, style of life and “life-styles” of social groups and individuals.

Beyond the conceptualization of culture and a set of related distinctions the most important task is to develop a model that is able to represent the structure and functioning of sociocultural processes. Despite the long sociological tradition of thinking in terms of culture in Germany the theoretical progress in this domain is modest. What prevails is the dominant perspective of culture as coherence, integration and consensus. In this perspective the role of power, conflict and change can not be properly conceptualized. Margaret Archer's (1988, 1) statement that cultural sociology is the “poor relative of structural sociology” is straight to the point. Yet recently, there have been some quite promising attempts of theoretical modelling (Archer 1988, DiMaggio 1987, Gottdiener 1985, Haferkamp 1990, Münch, Smelser 1992). What these approaches have in common is that they trace the interrelationships between the production of cultural goods, their material distribution, their institutional mediation and consumption as well as the group-specific modes of appropriation and usages of culture, i. e. cultural praxis and forms of praxis. For future cultural analysis it will be crucial to elaborate the interplay of cultural production and distribution, cultural institutions and media, cultural consumption and socialisation. Only if this is successful, can analytical tools of explanatory power comparable to those of structural sociology gradually emerge.

Yet it should be self-evident that this cultural programme neither is meant to develop new visions and utopias nor will it be able to create new meaning – although *fin-de-siècle* periods inveterately try to do so. But a successful cultural sociology may provide a synthetic view of the patterns of meaning in a society. And by relating the sociological reflection on the development of society to the sociological reflection on religious, intellectual, moral and aesthetic developments, a cultural sociology should be able to locate the cultural opportunities of a society. The attempt to develop a synthetic perspective and to “measure” the developmental chances of one’s own culture – this was and still is the true legacy of the classical sociology of culture – and this should and will be the true thrust of the new sociology of culture.

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Written in English; edited by Martha Baker, Munich.

Author's address:

Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Müller
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Soziologie
Unter den Linden 6, D-10099 Berlin