Traditionally the province of either anthropology or the humanities, culture has become increasingly central to sociology, both as a subject of study, and as a theoretical challenge to sociology’s self-conception. The sociological definition of and approach to culture, which refers to the form, content, and effects of the symbolic aspect of social life, has emerged out of a critical encounter with the two more traditional definitions.

In the definition of the humanities, culture refers to intellectual and artistic activity and the artifacts produced thereby, to what Matthew Arnold (1822-88) called “the best that has been thought and said.” Culture is taken as the highest moral and aesthetic achievements of civilization. The sociology of culture has always provided critical distance from the pretensions of culture so understood and its ensuing enshrinement in the literary, dramatic, and musical canon. By showing the links between social status maintenance and taste, but also by carefully examining the aesthetics of both popular cultural artifacts, and the creative cultural activities of social classes, races, and genders traditionally excluded from the realm of high arts production, the sociology of culture has been essential to the deconstruction of the high/middle/lowbrow culture typology. In approaching culture as a social object of study, the sociology of culture forms a subfield alongside the sociology of religion and the sociology of science, and takes within its purview both high literature and pulp fiction, Fellini films and Hollywood schlock, art music and rock ‘n’ roll. With the advent of the production of culture perspective in the 1970s, centered around the work of Richard Peterson, and the concepts of field and cultural capital, drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this subfield has gained both empirical purchase and theoretical sophistication.

In the anthropological definition, culture is expected to do the comparative work of differentiating the peoples of the world, and thus also to unify their study; it forms the counterpoint to physical anthropology’s theories of human nature. Historical sociology, however, has shown the connections between the anthropological imagination and various nationalist and colonialist projects of nineteenth-century Europe, whereby the totalizing concept of culture was complicit in the exoticization and simultaneous subordination and colonization (and sometimes extermination) of native populations. Extensive debates about the political valences and historical guilt of the concept of culture have ensued. But perhaps more importantly for ongoing empirical research, sociologists have found the anthropological concept of culture to be underspecified; for sociology, differentiating culture from nature is not enough. Rather, culture must be defined in relation to society, history, and individual psychology, and, furthermore, the differentiation between culture and nature must itself be examined historically with an eye towards its varying social effects (many anthropologists have also come to this conclusion). Thus, while sociology has drawn extensively on symbolic, structuralist, and linguistic anthropology for its own studies of culture, it has resisted the temptation to conflate culture directly with the social as such, and the culture/society distinction has been a productively unstable one. And it would be fair to say that social constructionist forms of cultural research have distanced themselves significantly from the “essentializing” concepts of an earlier era.

However, both the sociology of culture and the critique of culture inside and outside of anthropology beg fundamental questions. Why are social actors so interested in cultural artifacts in the first place,
as opposed to other, functionally equivalent, status markers? If cultural difference cannot be grasped inside scientific anthropological theory, does that mean that it cannot be grasped at all? What is the role of meaning and symbolic structures in modern and late capitalist societies? To answer these questions outside of the confines of the humanist tradition and postcolonial anthropology has been the central task for cultural sociologists, who since the 1960s have developed a set of increasingly subtle and nuanced approaches to this contested term of culture.

For sociology, then, culture refers to the symbolic element of social life, which has been variously conceptualized, identified, and studied: signifiers and their signifieds, gestures and their interpretation, intended and unintended meanings, written discourse and effective speech, situational framing and scientific paradigms, and moral and political ideals. Concretely, culture refers to those social objects and activities which are primarily or exclusively symbolic in their intent or social function, such as art, music, and sports. Analytically, culture refers to the symbolic and ideational element of any social action, social relationship, or historical pattern. In modern and postmodern societies, these two senses of culture are increasingly intertwined in ways that must be studied empirically: people may learn how to conduct intimate relationships from poetry or romantic movies, and rock stars may endorse politicians.

The methodologies for studying culture so conceived range widely, and include surveys of attitudes and beliefs, participant observation, ethnography, structured and unstructured interviews, textual analysis of written and visual media, and conversational analysis. Ultimately, however, all of these methods involve the interpretation of meaning, and thus cannot be mapped directly from the methods of the natural sciences, though the extent to which scientific methods can be adapted to the study of culture is a matter of significant dispute. Furthermore, culture not only requires interpretation, but the meanings of symbols have to be understood in a holistic manner, which is to say that any given sign or symbol takes its meaning in relation to those with which it is contrasted and figuratively related. The meaning of the term culture is not an exception to this, and as culture has become central to sociology, its meaning has emerged in relation to three central concepts, namely social structure, action theory, and critical theory. After discussing these, we will briefly discuss the ways in which the consideration of culture has affected other aspects of the sociological field.

The distinction between culture and society is, like culture itself, contested and controversial, and, since it often conflates the analytic and concrete dimensions of culture, it is perhaps better to discuss the relationship of culture to social structure. Talcott Parsons distinguished the cultural from the social system in a strictly analytic fashion (his student Niklas Luhmann would later claim that this should in fact be a concrete distinction). And Parsons suggested that the study of culture in all its symbolic elaborations could be left to anthropology, and that sociology could focus on the place where culture and social structure met, namely, on the institutionalization of values and norms. Structural-functionalist suggested that culture, through the normative interpenetration of society, could perform an integrative function in the service of social equilibrium, and thus that social change came with a breakdown in value consensus (as in Chalmers Johnson's (1931-) theory of social revolution).

These assertions were then subjected to relentless ideological attack for suppressing the role of strife and domination in society (and in the use of culture). However, it is perhaps more instructive, now, to notice a deeper problem with structural-functionalism, namely its interpretive deafness. By approaching culture as "norms and values," structural-functionalism not only projected certain liberal ideals onto its model of society, but more significantly, evacuated meaning from culture, robbing its
analysis of nuance and empirical specificity. For an engagement with the multiple layers of the symbolic immediately reveals that culture in modern societies is neither homogenous nor consensual. Rather, the size and makeup of collectivities that share certain symbolic articulations vary significantly (from small religious cults to large voting populations), and these symbolic articulations are contested both within and without collectivities.

Mid-century Marxism and post-1960s conflict theory insisted that culture was more of a guarantor of hierarchy, exploitation, and inequality, and thus saw culture as ideology. And though the political commitments and theoretical presuppositions of conflict theory were fundamentally at odds with those of Parsonian functionalism, one can discern in the studies of the objective basis of systematically distorted communication, and in references to the political and economic functions of ideology, very similar problems to those that plagued the structural-functional approach. Here too, culture is assumed to be relatively uniform, at least in its social effects, and its study is guided by theoretical intuitions about the workings of the social system, in particular the exploitation of labor, and for a contemporary example see David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). Thus Marxist repudiations of culture as ideology also suffered from a lack of musicality, and inattention to the empirical details of culture’s varied production, performance, and reception.

In both cases, these problems were exacerbated by imagining social structures as hard, real, and external to the actor, in opposition to culture as a more pliable and less efficacious possession of individual minds. Furthermore, both structural-functionalism and Marxism were embedded in teleological philosophies of history and social evolution that enabled them to locate the appropriate relations between social structure and culture in an a priori theoretical manner. As these teleologies came to be seen as more the meaningful, ideational constructions of sociologists’ own cultures than ontological certainties about actual societies, the strict scientific distinction between social structure and culture began to break down, as did the various conceptions of their relationship. This breakdown created an opening for sociology to develop the tools necessary for a more sensitive and empirically sophisticated approach to culture in its collective forms. This has been accomplished by studying culture as a structure in its own right, a theoretical development that has taken three main forms.

First, the study of symbolic boundaries, associated with the work of Michele Lamont (*Money, Morals and Manners*, 1994) and her students, has shown how actors construct and maintain meanings as a mode of ordering, including, and excluding their fellow humans, over and against the exigencies of social structure. Thus, the economic basis for class is overwritten by an attribution of certain moral qualities to certain humans, based on criteria (including religion, race, and so forth) that may crosscut the expectations of more reductively minded sociologists that would map class consciousness directly onto economic position, and so on.

Second, the study of discourse and its relationship to power, based on the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, has enabled sociologists to examine not only articulated boundaries, but also unstated exclusions, and more generally the cultural construction of certain taken-for-granted “positivities” of modern life. Thus one can examine from a reflexive historical perspective how certain kinds of human subjects (for example, insane people and medical patients) and social problems (for example, homosexuality) came to be of such great concern, and how their meaningful construction effected the way they were dealt with, inside and outside mainstream society. Though Foucault’s work has been largely appropriated in the humanities as a set of theorems concerning power and knowledge more
appropriate to critical theory than to empirical sociology, his early studies of madness, medicine, and the episteme of the classical and modern ages are in fact rich historical reconstructions of landscapes of meaning, and their essential role in the social processes of treatment, exclusion, and philosophical understanding. These issues are developed in Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (1961 [trans. 1971]) and Chandra Mukerji, *A Fragile Power: Scientists and the State* (1990).

Finally, the conception of culture as a structure in its own right has enabled the sociological transformation of a set of tools from literary theory and semiotics. Culture can be studied as a social text, replete with codes, narratives, genres, and metaphors. Then, culture can be examined in both its concrete and its analytic autonomy from social structure, which enables us to isolate and make clear its effects (and its varying political valences) from a sociological point of view. So, for example, the long struggle for women’s rights in the United States can be seen as a discursive battle for civil inclusion, according to which a new set of actors came to be coded in a democratic and morally positive way (Jeffrey Alexander, “The Long and Winding Road: Civil Repair of Intimate Injustice,” 2001). This conception of culture suggests, moreover, that social structures themselves are interpreted variably by social actors, and thus must be attended to hermeneutically by cultural sociologists, with an eye to their meaningful aspects, their locality, and their historical specificity (see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973, and Jeffrey Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life*, 2003).

If culture was often contrasted to social structure, and furthermore associated with subjectivity, then it should not be surprising that it has often been erroneously conflated with action and its related terms: agency, reflexivity, and consciousness. However, as culture has become recognized as a structure in its own right, the relationship of culture to action has become a key component both of sociological action theory and of sociological research more generally. The ongoing debate about culture and action has its roots in two different sociological traditions, both of which contribute to the contemporary understanding of culture within sociology.

On the one hand, the analytic tradition, descending from Parsons’s formalization of Max Weber’s means-ends approach to action, approached culture in terms of the ways culture sets the ends of action. Action is thus structured not only by interests, but by norms as well. Originally opposed to economistic accounts of social action, the strictly analytic approach to purposive action has been revived in contemporary sociological debates about agency and rationality. But a deeper understanding of the role of culture for action has been developed from within this tradition by recognizing culture as an internal environment for action, arguing thus that culture orients action by structuring subjectivity. Social actors respond to sets of internal typifications of the social world and thus are dependent upon meaningful symbolization in setting their goals, and in imagining how they can go about meeting them. By reintroducing the symbolic as an environment of action full of rich narratives and morally and emotionally loaded oppositions, this approach integrates the expanded approach to culture-as-structure elaborated above.

On the other hand, the pragmatic tradition, descending from George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, rejects the means-ends characterization of action outright, and suggests instead that actors constantly negotiate situations in an improvisatory way, attempting to make sense of and solve both social and physical problems as they arise. Originally, because of its distance from the analytic abstractions of the Parsonian tradition, and its tendency towards methodological individualism, this tradition was not really oriented towards culture per se, though it had a conception of the use of
symbols and framing on the micro level. Increasingly, however, the descendants of this tradition have developed a conception of culture-as-use that conceives of the knowledgeable agent as the link between culture and society. It is actors, in social situations, who draw on culture when institutional consistency breaks down.

Thus the contemporary debate is structured by two positions, that of culture-in-action which is illustrated by Ann Swidler in "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies" (1986), and that of culture as thick environment for action by Jeffrey Alexander in *Action and Its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis* (1988). Both approaches have significant insights to offer. The first emphasizes that actors continually work to render coherent and solvable discursive and institutional problems that arise in the flow of social life. The second emphasizes the way in which the social world is constructed for the actor by previous interpretations and collective languages. In either case, these approaches suggest the importance of culture for the study of social life. For example, we should perhaps discuss the discursive repertoires of politicians, and the resonance of these repertoires with the shared codes of their audience-electorates, as opposed to the "revealed preferences" of either. The contrasts between the two approaches have, however, produced significantly different forms of theory and research.

One important manifestation of the symbolic interactionist tradition has been Gary Fine's development of the concept of idiocultures, whereby small groups develop an idiosyncratic set of meanings (beliefs, knowledge, and customs) that forms the basis for mutual understanding and further interaction and action. Thus, cooks in various classes of restaurants develop an aesthetic language that enables them to communicate with each other concerning the manifestly practical problems of smell and taste.

Alternately, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, in *The Moro Morality Play* (1986) and *Theorizing the Standoff* (2000), has developed the concept of social drama within the more analytic tradition of action and its environments, so as to enable the study of social situations where symbolic and physical violence interact. In studying terrorist kidnappings, standoffs between government and its discontents, and surrenders, she develops a deep understanding of morally loaded environments for action. When the social fabric is breached, actors must work within certain dramatic frameworks, and with certain obtainable identities. Thus, in a standoff between the Freemen of Montana and the United States Government, it was a mediator who had fought in Vietnam and, like some of the leaders of the Freemen, had formed his core identity in the crucible of that experience and its subsequent narration who was able to bridge the symbolic gap between the antagonists. Action was deeply structured by the symbolic environments of traumatic memory and the enactment of masculinity.

The specificity of the kinds of meanings that are enacted, however, points both to the possible misinterpretations of the relationship between action and culture, and to the way forward in the theoretical debate. For the exclusive emphasis on culture as it is used by actors can support the naturalistic approach to social structure and thus an understanding of culture as unstructured and primarily the possession of individuals. In this conception, it is meaningless institutions that set the parameters of the action problem, and culture is merely the way actors make sense of things as they are solving it - perhaps important for filling out an explanation, but not essential to it. The environments to action approach is faced with a similar danger, for, insofar as it retains vestiges of Parsons's action frame of reference, it can be taken to indicate that sociology can produce, in theory alone, a mechanistic explanation of the interaction of norms and interests that will apply everywhere,
regardless of cultural differences.

Perhaps most significantly, it is important that action theory be prevented from becoming a sort of existential meditation on the capacities (or incapacities) of human freedom, rather than a way to examine the social contingencies of actually existing meaning. If the knowledgeable agent becomes a sort of philosophical and methodological hero, whose reflexivity about her location in structure ultimately makes her the master of the cultural formations in her head, then the sociological purpose of examining cultural structures is vitiated, as collective meaning formations melt away in the face of agency and knowledge as developed by Anthony Giddens in *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

Thus, the way forward in the action-culture debates lies in the development of a meaningful account of action through a theorization of social performance, by linking action theory to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology and Kenneth Burke’s literary theory, but also to Judith Butler’s reconception of the poststructuralist tradition of social thought. By thinking of social situations of varying scope (from small-group interactions to media events watched by millions) as dramas being played out on a public stage, with certain actors and audiences, props and social powers, emergent scripts and cultural backgrounds, we can conceive of the exigencies of social action in a thoroughly cultural way that does not reduce meaning to social structure. Action, then, involves putting certain intended and unintended meanings into the social scene. This is to say that the theorization of action not only has to take into account cultural structures, but must further focus on how actions are themselves interpretations of these structures, and thus respond to logics of meaning and identity underneath the interests and norms that were once supposed to do the analytical work of explaining these actions; this argument is developed in Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason Mast (eds.), *The Cultural Pragmatics of Social Performance* (2006).

The sociological critique of culture used to be based almost entirely on references to the social as existing outside of culture itself. It was thus diametrically opposed to the sense of criticism associated with the detailed reading of the literary canon, and with humanistic studies more generally. The obvious exception was Marxist literary criticism, in particular that of Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, which entered into literary texts themselves to find the logics of ideology in the content and form. While their work foreshadowed the development of Cultural studies, it remained nonetheless within the discourse of suspicion about culture, usually understood as bourgeois culture (and its discontents). Increasingly, however, sociology has brought its normative concerns with democracy, social inclusion, and the critique of power to the interpretation of culture, as well as to the debunking of ideology. This is to say that the project of hermeneutics, once associated with the conservative aesthetic hierarchies of the German philosophical tradition, can now be seen as a rich source of critique in a post-positivist and post-orthodox-Marxist age, as exemplified by the work of Michael Walzer, Luc Boltanski, and Laurent Thevenot. The epistemological implication of their work is that sociological critique must abandon its pseudo-scientific assumption of an exterior stance or view from nowhere, and develop critical distance through extensive engagement, dialogue, and interpretation. They develop critical perspectives on contemporary societies that share some of the empirical purchase of cultural sociology, but have as their ultimate goal the articulation of new normative understandings of justice and equality. More generally, in so far as sociological critique is no longer beholden to scientific certainty, revolutionary upheaval, and the genre of debunking, its normative repertoire of critical tropes, subtle ironies, and imagined ideals can be expanded.

That culture has become a central theoretical term in sociology means that it has had significant
effects on the sociological imagination as a whole, extending beyond the study of culture as a set of socially produced artifacts. “Culture,” in sociology, indicates a perspective as well as an object of study, and as such has addressed itself to nearly all of the classic and varied problems of sociological research. We cannot do the wide variety of cultural research in sociology full justice here, rather we will point to a few particularly telling examples.

Sociology’s ongoing occupation with modernity, and the history of state formation, has led to a focus on the constitution of nations as collective identities. In explaining economic takeoff in western Europe, the consolidation of the power of states, and the emergence and importance of democratic publics and the free press, sociologists have increasingly focused on the construction of nations as “imagined communities,” or “discursive fields,” and nationalism as “a unique form of social consciousness,” for example in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991), Lyn Spillman and Russell Faeges, “Nations,” in Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (eds.), *Remaking Modernity* (2005), and Liah Greenfeld’s *Nationalism* (1992).

The sociology of sex and gender has likewise experienced a cultural overhaul. While feminist and queer theory have questioned the naturalness of the sex/gender distinction, sociological research has examined the effects of actually existing cultural schemas of gender and sex for social outcomes, including family structure, women’s tendency to join or opt out of the workforce, and the ongoing existence of sexism in wage levels and status attainment. These studies examine both gender as a highly rigid structure of meaning, and its varying enactment by women and men who attempt to negotiate the political and economic contradictions of modern society, for instance in Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families* (1990); Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996); and Mary Blair-Loy, *Competing Devotions* (2003).

Finally, sociology’s longstanding normative concern with democracy and its incipient populism has also taken a cultural turn. For example, analyses of American political participation and activism have investigated how certain meanings either enable or discourage civic participation. The results have often been counterintuitive: doctrines of individual empowerment encourage activity and public responsibility, while norms of civility and politeness discourage political conversation and involvement, a theme which is developed in Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics* (1998), and Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (1996).

Culture has thus moved towards the center of sociological discourse, as both a topic of study and a perspective from which to view the social. As re-interpretation is a primary form of theoretical advance, the perhaps predictable result of this is that, simultaneously, the classics of social theory have come to be seen in a new light. New readings of Karl Marx, Weber, and Émile Durkheim have emerged.

While all twentieth-century Marxisms have given more importance to culture and ideology than did the crude economic Marxist orthodoxy that followed Marx’s death, the turn to culture in the 1960s and 1970s is evident in the increasing attention given to Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, as well as to the importance of the early, humanist, and perhaps even idealist-Hegelian Marx. Either way, Marx is read as attentive to the capacity of meaning as a social force. One important result of this has been the way structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language have merged with Marxist historiography to produce a central thesis concerning postmodernism, namely that the postmodern age is one in which the workings of capitalism are increasingly dependent on signifiers.
as well as signifieds, that is, on the relational field of social symbolism. These approaches are illustrated by Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), and Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972 [trans. 1981]).

Likewise, since the mid-1960s, we have seen a recovery of Weber’s sociology of art, as well as continuing debate on the Protestant Ethic thesis. However, most significantly, the concern with culture has also entered into Weberian debates about the consolidation of state power and the institutionalization of rational bureaucracy. Here, sociologists have increasingly read Weber as a hermeneutic student of rationality as a cultural form specific to western history. In doing so, Weber’s concerns are read as not so different from Foucault’s, and bureaucracy as less a mechanism to be uncovered than a form of symbolic action to be interpreted. This interpretation is developed in Philip Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution* (2003).

Finally, the cultural turn in sociology has seen a renaissance and reconsideration of Durkheim’s later works, and, in particular, of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912 [trans. 2001]). This work has come to be seen as a key prolegomena to the symbolic study of society as a general project, as well as to the study of the role of culture in modern, industrial societies. Durkheim is thus read as uncomfortable with the materialist interpretations given to *The Division of Labor in Society* and as having made a key epistemic break in the years between the publication of *Suicide* (1897 [trans. 1951]) and that of *Elementary Forms*, an argument developed by Jeffrey Alexander in “Rethinking Durkheim’s Intellectual Development II” (1986). As a result, Durkheim can be seen as a precursor to cultural structuralism in his emphasis on the autonomy of symbolic forms, and the importance of belief and ritual for the organization of society.

If culture has become central to sociology (though some may not hold this opinion, or at least be unhappy with this development), it has also remained a controversial subject. And as empirical research on culture has exploded, the theoretical presuppositions of this work, which often does not fit the model of positivist or scientific-realist sociology, have been left relatively unexplored. This is to say that, in the future, social theory must address not only culture, but its accompanying methodological and epistemological term: interpretation. This can be done by returning to the fundamental questions of the philosophy of social science, as well as by articulating the immanent epistemological self-consciousness of cultural research in sociology. There are two fundamental concerns central to the question of sociological interpretation, broadly understood.

The first regards the role of the investigator in social analysis. Though most cultural sociologists accept neither scientific norms nor postmodern normlessness as the parameters for their truth claims, what norms they do accept is an important issue to discuss in the abstract. In particular, it seems clear that sociologists want the meanings they reconstruct to be translatable, so that cultural comparison is possible, not so much so as to determine active and latent mechanisms, but so as to perceive more clearly the varied relationships of meaning in action. Thus, even single case studies or ethnographies implicitly contain a comparison, at least to the investigator’s own meaningful social contexts, and this comparative consciousness forms an important basis for the development of theory and research in cultural sociology.

The second question concerns how much the methods and modes of explanation common to cultural sociology may apply outside the domain of what is analytically or concretely called culture. A lot of work within poststructuralist theory has examined the symbolic and discursive basis for what
sociologists are more likely to call social structure, namely, institutional formations, social sanction and exclusion, and even violence, as argued in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1989). But the extent to which these aspects of social life can actually be explored empirically remains to be verified by an epistemology more comfortable with the possibility of truth claims that are relatively autonomous from power. Thus, for example, we need to ask how even the reconstruction of political strategies and economic exigencies involves the interpretation of highly reified and strictly executed meaning.

Ultimately, then, the advent of culture in sociology and the study of its subtleties and social contestations leads to fundamental questions about sociology itself. If culture is a perspective from which to examine society, it is also a perspective from which to examine the meaning-formation called sociology. As such, its most important effect will be to push the central concepts of sociology (structure, action, critique), empirical research topics, and the readings of sociological classics towards the interpretation of meaning.

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