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# Making Culture, Changing Society: The Perspective of ‘Culture’ Studies

Tony Bennett

## Abstract

Drawing on the perspectives of science studies and actor-network-theory, this paper develops the perspective of ‘culture studies’ to offer an account of the ways in which culture, understood as a specific form of public organisation, is produced and sustained through the assemblage of materially heterogeneous elements. This is related to an account of the ways in which culture acts on the social through the distinctive ‘working surfaces on the social’ that it organises. The distinctiveness of the perspective of ‘culture studies’ is highlighted by comparing it with more familiar traditions of analysis within cultural studies and cultural sociology. Francis Mulhern’s account of cultural studies’ relations to the practice of *Kulturkritik* associated with the formation of *Bildung* and the programme that Jeffrey Alexander proposes for the development of cultural sociology are paid particular attention in this regard. The paper concludes with a consideration of the forms of analytical attention that are needed to investigate the ways in which cultural and social science disciplines interact in the production of ‘working surfaces on the social’ through which their modes of action on the social are coordinated.

**Keywords:** culture; social; *Bildung*; assemblage; actor-network studies; science studies

In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour offers the following account of how and where culture is made:

Culture does not act surreptitiously behind the actor’s back. This most sublime production is manufactured at specific places and institutions, be it the messy offices of the top floor of Marshal Sahlins’s house on the Chicago campus or the thick Area Files kept in the Pitts River (sic) museum in Oxford. (Latour 2005, p. 175)

He goes on, immediately afterwards, to contrast this close attention to the sites where culture is produced as a characteristic that has distinguished the work of science studies from that of ‘sociologists of the social’ who aim to bring to light hidden structures – of language, of class relations, or of ideologies – in order to account for social actions in ways that social actors themselves are not consciously aware of. In what follows I want to turn this argument in a different direction by exploring its implications for the ways in which questions concerning the relations between culture and the social have been posed within (some traditions of) cultural studies. My purpose in doing so is to suggest that science studies and, more generally, actor-network-theory (ANT) provide useful models for the development of forms of cultural analysis – which, analogically, I shall call ‘culture studies’ – that provide productive ways of displacing some of the central, but in my view questionable, assumptions and preoccupations of cultural studies.

There will be four stages to the argument. First, I elaborate more fully what I take to be the key features of science studies and actor-network-theory and identify their implications for the perspective of culture studies. Second, I apply this perspective to provide the rudiments of an alternative to existing accounts of the processes through which, understood in a specific historical

sense, culture's autonomy has been produced and sustained. This account will be focused on the role played by the fabrication of autonomous cultural entities in custom-built settings, such as those which Latour identifies in the passage cited at the head of this paper, in providing specific conditions for culture's action on the social. My attention here will focus on how the fabrication of culture's autonomy in these ways simultaneously organises distinctive 'working surfaces on the social' through which culture's action on the social is modulated. I then explore the implications of these arguments by contrasting them to the conclusions that Francis Mulhern draws from his account of cultural studies as a form of metaculture that has not entirely escaped the tradition of *Kulturkritik* associated with the historical formation of *Bildung* (Mulhern 2000). Finally, I outline the respects in which a focus on culture's role in the production of 'working surfaces on the social' calls into question the programme that Jeffrey Alexander proposes for a cultural sociology.

## Culture studies

To look to Latour's work for guidance in analysing the relations between culture and the social might seem a paradoxical undertaking given his opposition, since *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993), to the model of the two-house collective dividing the assembly of things (nature) from the assembly of humans (society) that he attributes to the settlement of these relations produced by early modern science and political thought. For the concern to distinguish culture from the social, or society, as a subdivision within the assembly of humans, is clearly a further aspect of the 'modern settlement' that Latour has worked to assiduously to unsettle. Latour makes this clear in *Politics of Nature* where he articulates the need to do without the idea of culture just as much as the ideas of nature and of society in order to focus instead on the processes through which humans and non-humans are assembled into collectives whose constitution is always simultaneously natural, social, cultural, and technical. Yet Latour also helpfully qualifies his position when he goes on to argue that while the division between nature and society as incommensurable realms has no valid epistemological foundations, it has had and continues to have real historical force if understood as referring not to 'domains of reality' but to 'a quite specific form of public organisation' (Latour 2004a, p. 53).

Similarly, in *Reassembling the Social*, Latour is less iconoclastic in relation to the concept of the social than in many of his earlier formulations (Latour 2002, 2004). The central difficulty, he argues, lies not in the concept of the social if this is thought of as a stabilised bundle of connections between human and nonhuman actants that might be mobilised to account for some other phenomenon: the connections between the middle-classes and works of art, and the organisation of class distinctions for example.<sup>1</sup> Rather, problems arise when the social is also thought of as a specific kind of material – as if there were, as Latour puts it, a distinctive kind of 'social stuff' that can be distinguished from other 'non-social' phenomena and then be invoked, in the form of an encompassing social context or social structure, as an explanatory ground in relation to the latter (Latour 2005, pp. 1–4). In place of this conception of the social as a set of realities that is always already there, awaiting discovery in order then to be able to function as the 'drivers' of other phenomena (as in the forms of the sociology of science that science studies pitted itself against), Latour recommends that the social should be thought of as an assemblage of diverse components brought together via a work of connection on the part of a varied set of agents. John Law's formulations point in a similar direction in seeing the social as the outcome of varied processes of translation through which different 'bits and pieces' of the socio-material world are brought into association with one another in the context of relationally configured networks of people and things, a process that involves the deletion of other similarly constituted

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<sup>1</sup> I offer this example as similar to one Latour gives at a later point in his discussion (Latour 2005, p. 40).

networks and their being held in place long enough to produce such durable effects as the social (Law 1994, pp. 102– 5).

While it is not a move that either Latour or Law makes, the case for seeing culture as made up not of a distinctive kind of ‘cultural stuff’ (representations, say) but as a provisional assembly of all kinds of ‘bits and pieces’ that are fashioned into durable networks whose interactions produce culture as specific kinds of public organisation of people and things is readily perceptible. So, too, is the possibility of accounting for the historical emergence of culture as a result of the production of new assemblages of human and non-human actors through which its differentiation from the social and the economy was effected. Before pursuing this line of inquiry further, however, I want to consider some of the more general aspects of science studies and actor network-theory with a view to identifying the respects in which they enable forms of cultural analysis (the perspective of ‘culture studies’) that differ in a number of significant respects from the more familiar forms of cultural analysis associated with cultural studies. I shall focus on three issues here.

(i) The first concerns what Law characterises as the ‘semiotics of materiality’ of ANT in which the focus is on the ‘relational materiality’ constituted by different assemblages of human and non-human actors in which what matters is the way the elements of such assemblages work together to order and perform the social (Law 1999, p. 4). Such practices of social ordering are, as Law puts it elsewhere, ‘materially heterogeneous’, made up of bits and pieces of talk, architecture, bodies, texts, machines, etc., all of which interact to construct and perform the social. This relational materialism has much in common with the accounts of discursive or ideological articulation which, through the work of Stuart Hall (1986) and that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe 1988), have played such a significant role in cultural studies. In both cases, the identity and effectivity of elements derive not from their intrinsic properties but from the networks of relations in which they are installed. In Hall’s conception, particular ideologies, like the operation of signifiers in signifying systems, may assume different political valencies as they are disarticulated from particular ideological ensembles and articulated to others with different forms of class connectedness. For Law, similarly, the same objects might operate in quite different ways in performing the social depending on the overall organisation of the networks into which they are assembled. Yet, notwithstanding these similarities, there is an important difference between these two positions, one which, in my view, should be counted in ANT’s favour. It concerns the expanded, and more convincingly materialist, field of analysis that results from ANT’s incorporation of non-human actors into the networks that go to make up and perform the social and the ways in which it accounts for their action in terms of the adjustments of the relations between other actors that they occasion. This has several advantages over the view that social relations are essentially cultural because they take the form of meta-linguistic articulations of social positions and identities. For it makes possible a non-tautological account of the constitution of culture, understood as a distinctive public organisation of things and people. When those whom Latour characterises as ‘sociologists of the social’ try to account for the durability of social ties, Latour argues, they typically appeal to the role of social norms and values, thus engaging in the ‘tautology of social ties made out of social ties’ (Latour 2005, p. 70). A good deal of work in cultural studies proceeds similarly by defining culture’s effects in terms of its properties: culture as a meaning-making system that makes meanings, for example. This is avoidable in an approach which focuses on culture as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements whose ‘culturalness’ derives from, rather than preceding, their assembly.

(ii) I take my second point from Andrew Pickering’s characterisation of the adjacent field of practice studies as amounting to a ‘social theory of the visible’ (Pickering 2001, p. 164) that does not look for any deeper or hidden structures beneath the ‘the visible and specific intertwinings of the human and the nonhuman’ (Pickering 2001, p. 167). This commitment to the analysis of

natural/cultural/social/technical networks and assemblages of actants as consisting only of visible surfaces, a single-planed set of wholly observable events, actions and processes with no hidden, deep or invisible structures or levels, stands in contradistinction to the dualistic ontologies of the social that still characterise those versions of the cultural turn that have most influenced the development of cultural studies. Such ontologies provide the basis for ANT's opposition to the language of 'constructivism' since the very notion that culture constructs the social is at odds with ANT's focus on the complex entanglements of people and things in the intersecting networks through which the social is performed without any prior distinction between what might be allocated to culture and what to society. An important corollary of this is that it locates intellectual work on a single-planed reality, affording no purchase for intellectual practices which aim to organise their own authority and distinctive forms of political intervention by claiming insight into another set of hidden or invisible processes and realities that take place behind the backs of other actors. While Pierre Bourdieu's work has been the primary target of this aspect of Latour's work,<sup>2</sup> its import is obviously more generalisable. The nature of intellectual work and the ways in which its effectiveness is secured is differently conceived within science studies and ANT, consisting in the fabrication of new entities and their mobilisation in the context of the material-semiotic networks through which the social is made and performed. It construes intellectuals not as seers but as mobilisers and transformers, movers of things and people.

(iii) The strong focus of work in these traditions on the specific settings – most notably laboratories – in which scientific work is conducted, and on the transformations (purifications, reductions, translations, etc) to which scientific practice subjects the materials it works with so as to produce new entities in the field of knowledge, comprises an exemplary materialism in the attention it pays to the material settings and instruments through which such entities are made and mobilised. There is, as Law notes, a good deal of common ground here between ANT and those readings of Foucault's concept of discourse which stress its material and institutional properties.<sup>3</sup> But there is, he argues, also a difference to the extent that ANT places a greater stress on analysing the processes through which things are put together to form, and re-form, those ordering strategies that Foucauldian analysis calls discursive but whose formation – the processes of their making and remaking – it tends to occlude (Law 1994, pp. 18– 26). It is this that opens up the space for a productive interchange between ANT and Foucauldian theory in its potential to add a denser materiality to Foucault's insistence on the need for an 'ascending analysis of power' that would 'begin with its infinitesimal mechanisms, which have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then look at how these mechanisms of power, which have their solidity and, in a sense, their own technology, have been and are invested, colonised, used, infected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination' (Foucault 2003, p. 30). In a similar vein, Latour argues that 'power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation. Power and domination have to be made up, composed' (Latour 2005, p. 64). The task that this enjoins analytically is one of tracing the networks of associations through which particular forms of power are assembled, aiming for as dense a description as possible of the capacities that are folded into and accumulate within them.

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<sup>2</sup> Latour (2004, 2005) clearly views Bourdieu as the primary representative of the kind of sociologist who seeks to organise and mobilise power by producing – through the fields that he constructs by means of varied forms of abstraction from the real (surveys, their statistical manipulation, etc) – an invisible social structure on whose behalf he then claims to speak in championing the claims of sociology over those of other disciplines. These charges drew forth an irritated and largely unproductive response from Bourdieu which fails to differentiate science studies from the sociology of science, and disposes of Latour by mere caricature (Bourdieu 2004, pp. 21– 30).

<sup>3</sup> I use this formulation as there are good reasons for doubting that Foucault's own use of discourse ever stressed such qualities. These are rather ways of describing discourse that gloss his earlier formulations of the concept in the light of the more materialist emphases of his later work (see Sawyer 2002).

What is involved in looking at culture as the result of such processes of assemblage? It is to this question that I turn in the next section.

### **Assembling culture**

In his *Rule of Experts*, Timothy Mitchell takes issue with Karl Polyani's influential account of the historical emergence of the economy as a result of the separation out of market relations from the wider social networks in which they had previously been embedded. 'The economy came into being not by disembedding market relations from a larger social ground that previously contained them', he argues, 'but by embedding certain twentieth-century practices of calculation, description, and enumeration in new forms of intellectual, calculating, regulatory, and governmental practice' (Mitchell 2002, p. 118). In developing this argument, Mitchell also identifies its implications for Foucault's account of the emergence of the economy as an effect of the birth of government and of the focus on population that marked the emergence of biopolitics. If, by the economy, we mean 'a self-contained, internally dynamic, and statistically measurable sphere of social action, scientific analysis, and political regulation' (Mitchell 2002, p. 4), Mitchell argues, then we should date its emergence from the twentieth century rather than from the early nineteenth century, as suggested by Foucauldian accounts focused on the emergence of political economy, or even from the late nineteenth century in association with the development of neo-classical economics. And he is clear that 'the economy' should be conceived and accounted for not as a cultural construct or 'invention' but as the result of a process of making, of the fabrication of new entities and relations, that results from the deployment of new forms of enumeration, calculation, and visualisation (maps, censuses, surveys) by new kinds of experts working within new centres of calculation whose capacity to visualise and represent 'the economy' as a whole depends on their distance from the multiplicity of transactions through which it is constituted.

If, for Mitchell, the period between the 1930s and the 1950s is when 'the economy' as 'the realm of a social science, statistical enumeration, and government policy' (Mitchell 2002, p. 81) is finally produced, he sees this as a distinctive moment in a longer historical process through which the economy, in being produced as a separate realm, also operates as a key point of reference against which other spheres are differentiated and in relation to which a new division between the real and its representations emerges. As statistical representations of 'the economy' circulate publicly, then so it becomes possible to 'conceive of the gap that seems to set this circulating body of information off from the processes and activities it refers to' as a 'divide between two worlds, a sphere of figures, numbers, facts, and trends on the one side, and the world to which these refer on the other' in which the latter serves as 'the realm of the material, the real' (Mitchell 2002, p. 103). Mitchell argues that it was only when the economy had been fixed into place in this way as, in Latour's terms, a specific form of public organisation, that it then became possible for a number of other spaces to be conceived 'in terms of their relations to this hermetic field: the sphere of politics or the state; the sphere of law (previously at the centre of political economy); the sphere of science and technology; and the sphere of culture' (Mitchell 2002, p. 82).

Whatever the historical merits of Mitchell's account of the production of the economy (for his contentions concerning the lateness of its arrival are questionable), he surely leads us astray in suggesting that the production of culture only followed on once 'the economy' had thus been fixed into place as a sphere or realm from which that of culture could then be differentiated. This is no more convincing than it would be, in the case of Donzelot's account (Donzelot 1979), to view the production of 'the social' as a sequel to the production of the economy. And it is a somewhat surprising conclusion to reach since it seems to rest on an acceptance of the set of

distinctions between the real and its representations, the material world and culture, which Mitchell sees as a by-product of the processes through which the economy came to be fixed into place.<sup>4</sup> However much it might be true that this is how the relations between culture and the economy were often conceived – and Marx’s conception of the relations between the economic base and the ideological superstructure is sufficient testimony to this – this does not mean to say that the actual processes through which culture, as a distinctive public organisation of things and people, was shaped into being can be understood as the result of a secondary, follow-on set of processes of the kind that Mitchell’s formulations imply.

The perspective of ‘culture studies’ suggests a different approach in which questions concerning the relations between different levels of reality, or the historical precedence of some processes of making (of the economy) in relation to others (of culture), are displaced by attending to the heterogeneous processes through which culture is assembled as resting on similar mechanisms to those involved in the production of the economy: the assembly, to paraphrase Law, of ‘materially heterogeneous’ networks, made up of bits and pieces of talk, architecture, bodies, texts, machines, etc., all of which interact to construct and perform ‘culture’ and to organise its relations to ‘the economy’, ‘the social’ and ‘the political’. What would it mean to account for the production of culture in these terms? I cannot attempt a comprehensive answer to this question here, and not the least because different processes of making and assembling would need to be considered in relation to different types of culture in what is now a highly differentiated form of public organisation. However, the issues that are stake can be illustrated by brief commentaries on two issues: first, the implications of this perspective for the history of *Bildung*, and second, its implications for the ways in which the production of culture simultaneously involves the ‘formatting’ of the social for distinctive kinds of action through the ‘working surfaces on the social’ that it organises.

### **The space of *Bildung***

In his classic essay ‘On the anthropological and semantic structure of *Bildung*’, Reinhart Koselleck identifies three main ways in which *Bildung*, as a practice of self formation, was connected to social and political programmes: first, through its implication in training the new corpus of experts, administrators, scientists, etc., who formed the nucleus of the bureaucratic state; second, its role in the internal forms of socialisation through which the bourgeoisie – in marriage, in social life, in clubs, and at home – secured a specific identity for itself; and third, its political mobilisation in programmes of public education (Koselleck 2002, pp. 172–3). However, Koselleck offers little sense of what this work of connecting *Bildung* to public pedagogy amounted to or of the densely material processes that it involved. Yet it is clear that it entailed both the deletion of earlier networks and the organisation of new ones, work in which the role of new cultural knowledges (of art history and archaeology, for example) was centrally, if, at times, conflictually implicated. The articulation of *Bildung* as a programme of public education thus involved a new ensemble of institutions (public libraries, concert halls, museums and art galleries, exhibitions) that organised new networks of relations between human and non-human actors through the new publics they assemblages and brought in relation to one another through their connections to new assemblages of things in specially contrived architectural spaces.<sup>5</sup> And,

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell’s account of the making of the economy is woven into, and complicated by, an account of a split between the real and its representation which, in earlier work, Mitchell (1988, 1989) clearly views as both a wider and primary rift with a longer history than that of ‘the economy’, as he defines it.

<sup>5</sup> My formulations here recast aspects of Larry Shiner’s (2001) account of the production of the autonomy of art and culture.

as Patrick Joyce (2003) shows, these spaces were themselves parts of new forms of socio-spatial ordering associated with the moral economy of the liberal city in which *Bildung* was hard-wired into the material environment. These new cultural assemblages were produced through the (partial) deletion of earlier networks in which particular configurations of the relations between people and things, between human and non-human actors, had organised differently structured networks. The material economy of the nineteenth century city of culture thus depended not only on a new partitioning of urban space but on the severance of the nexus of the relations between people and things that had been inscribed in the quite different institutional nexus that characterised the spa city and sustained its practices (Borsay 1989).

This material economy of culture depended equally on the relocation of varied objects from their previous location in private settings (aristocratic and royal households) and, in thus being detached from earlier purely decorative functions or from their role in the spectacularisation of power, on their acquisition of new properties that enabled them to be refunctioned for new purposes. If this was the work of the new cultural knowledges which, from the late eighteenth century, played a key role in disassembling earlier organisations of the artefactual field and assembling new ones, these new assemblages of objects were often in competition with one another not just in the classifications on which they rested but on the ways in which they sought to mobilise the powers produced by their assembly and to connect these to the forms of self-development of the person that different interpretations of *Bildung* aspired to effect. The relationship between the development of art history and that of art museums in producing a new in-depth interiority on the part of the subject that opened up an inner space within which a developmental relationship to the self of the kind required by *Bildung* could be constructed is well documented (see, for example, Belting 2001, and Bennett 2005). The late-nineteenth century development, in Anglophone contexts, of pre-historic archaeology, natural history and ethnological collections provided an alternative assemblage of objects which, in accumulating a quite different set of powers within them, laid out the person quite differently as a series of developmental layers that served as the locus for ways of fashioning the self that grafted evolutionary conceptions on to the architecture of the self produced by earlier formations of *Bildung* (Bennett 2004).

It was in these ways that these different productions of culture simultaneously involved different ways of formatting the social, laying it out and opening it up to particular ways of being acted on. The respects in which the programme of *Bildung* was differently deployed in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century German ethnology museums are a good example. In assembling artefacts from non-European cultures in non-evolutionary frameworks as a testimony to the manifold differences of humanity, these were intended to serve as adjuncts to *Bildung*, providing a comparative analysis of mankind's many variations that would allow the German middle classes to probe their own constitution and, in distinguishing their own characteristics from those of other peoples, to fine-tune their self-development in the light of their awareness of their distinctive position vis-à-vis other peoples (Penny 2002). That the conception of cultures as plural thus emerged from within *Bildung* is central to the historical role it played in reformatting the social as a set of non-hierarchically organised, equivalent differences. This key historical shift was later carried into the English speaking world by Franz Boas in the course of translating the lessons of his training in German ethnology museums, and his deep formation in the culture of *Bildung*, into what was to prove the most significant and influential principle for reorganising the artefactual field – and its interfaces with the social – in early twentieth-century America (Bunzl 1995).

Here, then, are the rudiments of an account of the processes of assembling culture as a distinctive historical formation that is made up of specific networks of relations between human and non-human actors and which, through the distinctive assemblages that it effects, organises and works



through different ‘working surfaces on the social’. Its modes of engagement with the social, however, are not with a set of realities and processes that are somehow prior to those through which culture is assembled, or which in some way underlie these. They are rather forms of engagement with realities and processes of similar kinds, made up of similar kinds of stuff, whose differentiation from one another (the economy, the social, culture) is sectoral rather than substantive. For the materials from which they are assembled are all of a piece ontologically speaking: they are made up of the same kind of heterogeneous elements. Where they differ is in the form of the public organisation into which they have been assembled, and it is this that ‘culture studies’ should concern itself with.

To help clarify and further amplify what this might mean I now contrast its implications with Francis Mulhern’s account of the relationship between cultural studies and *Bildung* understood not, as I have proposed, as a historically produced space in which culture is assembled apart from the social in order that it might then act upon it, but as a form of metaculture.

### **Metaculture and the politics of cultural studies**

By ‘metaculture’ Mulhern means that tradition of thinking about culture, in the narrow and restricted sense of high culture, which, first forged in the context of German *Kulturkritik* and the programmes of *Bildung*, also shaped the development of the ‘culture and society’ tradition discussed by Raymond Williams (1963). The distinguishing characteristic of this tradition, Mulhern argues, consists in its mobilisation of “‘culture’” as a principle against the prevailing authority of “‘politics’” in the disputed plane of social authority’ (Mulhern 2000, p. 86).<sup>6</sup> Breaking ranks with those ‘insider’ accounts of cultural studies which view it as a break with this tradition, Mulhern instead construes cultural studies as ‘a popular-leftist mutation of metacultural discourse’ (Mulhern 2000, pp. xix–xx). While acknowledging the force of its criticisms of the elitist assumptions underlying the concept of culture on which the project of *Kulturkritik* rested, Mulhern argues that cultural studies is still caught in the historical undertow of *Kulturkritik*. Its ‘predominant tendency’, he says, ‘has been to negate the specific social values of *Kulturkritik*, while retaining their deep form, which it therefore repeats as the pattern of its own strategic imagination’, especially in its own version of the “‘cultural’” dissolution of politics’ (Mulhern 2000, pp. xviii–xx). Yet if, in this regard, an incomplete revolution, Mulhern contends that cultural studies did lay out two claims which have significantly challenged the assumptions and procedures of *Kulturkritik*. The first of these, as Mulhern describes it, consisted in ‘a radical expansion of the corpus’ so as to include the role of the symbolic in everyday life in an expanded definition of culture, while the second consisted in ‘the unification and procedural equalisation of the field of inquiry’ (Mulhern 2000, p. 78) that this expanded understanding of culture produced.

It is the second of these perspectives that I want to focus on here. This has two aspects: first, it asserts relations of value equivalence between all kinds of culture, whether ‘high’ or ‘low’; and second, it asserts that similar principles of analysis can be applied in studying all forms of culture and their role in the constitution of social relationships. These are two rather different claims. If we grant, for the moment, the argument about the parity of value of all cultural practices, disputing, for example, that they can be sorted into universally valid hierarchies of moral or aesthetic worth, it does not follow from this that the field of cultural analysis can be procedurally equalised in the sense that the same methods of analysis can be applied to all forms of culture – or that these should be regarded as relating to the social in the same way – irrespective of other considerations. The perspective of ‘culture studies’ that I have proposed differs both in both

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<sup>6</sup> Mulhern’s book occasioned an extended debate with Stefan Collini and others in *New Left Review*: see Collini (2001, 2002), Mulhern (2002, 2003), and Simpson (2004).

disputing the cogency of this form of procedural equalisation while substituting two other ways of procedurally equalising the field of cultural analysis. There are three aspects to my argument here.

The first concerns the different light the perspective of ‘culture studies’ throws on the relations between *Kulturkritik* and *Bildung*. *Kulturkritik*, for Mulhern as for Williams, is a second-order discourse whose object is culture, understood in its restricted sense as aesthetic culture, which is to be investigated in terms of its relations to other practices within the context of an embattled account of the relations between culture and society. *Bildung*, in its turn, is understood as an abstract programme of civilising that is conducted through the normative hierarchies it organises as a purely mental set of self-reflexive practices. I have argued that, to the contrary, the programmes of *Bildung* are made possible only as a consequence of the material histories through which objects from distant locations are brought into new assemblages and relations to one another in collecting institutions of various kinds. The new – and contending – configurations of the relations between objects, and between objects and persons, that were brought about by the deployment of new cultural knowledges in such custom-built settings constructed new cultural entities which could then be mobilised and connected up to other networks for acting on the social: networks connected to programmes of bourgeois self-management, to the formation of administrative cadres, to extension movements intended to extend the action of culture to the working classes, or to civilising programmes in the context of colonial regimes. In all of these cases, these newly assembled networks produce and sustain culture as a new kind of public organisation that is orientated in a putatively transformative relation to the traditions, beliefs, and ways of life that are customarily brought under the heading of Williams’s extended definition of culture. Their operations in this regard are thus located in the historically sculpted space between the forms of culture they organise and the habits, customs, and traditions – the lived cultures – they construct as the ‘working surfaces on the social’ to which those forms of culture are to be applied in transformative programmes. To the degree that this is so, the ‘unification and procedural equalisation of the field of inquiry’ that Mulhern derives from cultural studies critiques of the normative aspects of cultural hierarchies can find no methodological purchase in the form of historical analyses that such programmes require. The extent to which aesthetic knowledges, for example, have constructed and mobilised art objects and practices in distinctive ways as parts of programmes directed at the transformation of ways of life questions the validity of simply placing these on the same plane of analysis for all purposes. To implement Mulhern’s rule of the procedural equalisation of the field of inquiry in this way would fail to grapple with the historically distinctive orderings of the relations between different components of the cultural field that have been produced by those forms of cultural knowledge and expertise whose development has been bound up with the distinctive assemblage of things and people characterising this historical formation of culture. Or, to put the point more directly, it would simply converge culture and the social when the historical challenge is to understand their differentiation and, in the light of this, the distinctive forms of their action and interaction.

The second implication of the methodological perspective I am recommending concerns the different interpretation of the call for the ‘unification and procedural equalisation of the field of inquiry’ that it proposes. What it brings together and places on the same level for theoretical and methodological purposes are not all cultural practices irrespective of their place within conventional hierarchies of value, but the operations of all cultural knowledges. This involves, I have suggested, an expansion of the field of analysis beyond the discourses of *Kulturkritik* to encompass all cultural knowledges (including anthropology, art history, heritage studies, folk culture studies, archaeology, history, natural history, aesthetics, and literary studies for example) in the discursive/institutional forms of their use and deployment and the consequences of these for the ways in which the cultural artefacts and practices they nominate are enrolled and connected to the social via the networks in which they are assembled and through the powers that

are accumulated in those networks. This involves placing side-by-side a wide range of different intellectual and technical procedures for classifying, ordering and arranging cultural objects and practices – and their producers, performers and audiences – and examining these from the point of view of the ways of acting on the social they make possible and their mobilisation in the context of varied governmental strategies. This opens up the field of analysis to the contestations that take place between the different ways of ‘making culture’ and ‘changing society’ that arise from the different ‘working surfaces on the social’ that such knowledges construct.

Third, and as a corrective to a widely misunderstood aspect of governmentality theory, the same principles of analysis are applicable to the ways in which counter-knowledges are mobilised in the context of what are sometimes called ‘bottom-up’ forms of governmentality. The literature on the relations between Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous governmentality is especially interesting here. For while there can be no doubt that the relations between these and Western knowledges and the governmental programmes in which they are implicated are structured by the dominance of the latter, Indigenous engagement with these is best understood as resistances that take the form of counter-governmentalities that aim to ‘make culture’ and ‘change society’ in different ways through the ‘working surfaces on the social’ they work to organise. The challenges to Western archaeology arising from the mobilisation of Aboriginal concepts of heritage and their implications for the management of Aboriginal heritage sites, and of Aboriginal objects and human remains within museums, is, as Laurajane Smith and Cary Campbell have shown (1998), a case in point. In a more detailed study, Fred Myers (2002) shows how the processes through which Aboriginal acrylic dot painting was transformed into fine art involved a complex series of adjustments between Aboriginal art knowledges and practices, the operations of Western art markets, the expectations of international arts audiences, government programmes aimed at the transformation of dependent Aboriginal reserves into self-reliant communities, and the interfaces between these and Aboriginal forms of community self governance – a whole set of processes, in short, in which the movement of Aboriginal painting along new networks functioned, like one of Michel Serres’s quasi-objects (Serres 1982, pp. 224– 34), to orchestrate a series of moves and counter-moves among diverse groups of actors. In these ways, then, the perspective of ‘culture studies’ opens up ways in which resistances can be accounted for in single-planar terms, operating on the same level and by the same means as the forms of power they counter.

The political conclusions to which Mulhern’s concerns point are different. They derive from his contention – correct in my view – that the ‘deep logic’ of cultural studies is akin to that of *Kulturkritik* to the extent that ‘both urge ‘culture’ as the necessary, unregarded truth of society, whose curse is the inadequacy of the prevailing form of general authority, the political’ (Mulhern 2000, p. xix). This takes the form, in the case of *Kulturkritik*, of ranking the values of culture more highly than those of the compromised pragmatism of politics and a whole series of necessarily thwarted attempts to substitute the former for the latter. The particular substitution that was involved in the case of 1980s and 1990s British conceptions of cultural studies as a political programme, Mulhern argues, consisted in their conception of the political as a field of differences and antagonisms that arise from the relations between discursively produced identities and counter-identities. Mulhern’s main example of this substitution effect is the discursive relationality of positionalities that characterises Stuart Hall’s account of ethnicities as a set of unfixed differences or, one might add, for the logic is the same, his account of the role of ideological articulation in the struggle for hegemony. For, Mulhern argues, this leads to a view of ‘politics as a motivated disturbance in and of the identity-complex that is culture, and not ostensibly anything other than that’ (Mulhern 2000, p. 124): that is, to a view that political action primarily takes the form of discursive interventions calculated to influence where the lines of alliance and division between different actors (whether classes or ethnicities) actually get drawn. However much it might have ‘been renounced, negated, turned upside down and inside out’, the legacy of *Kulturkritik* is, Mulhern suggests, ‘not quite overcome’ in such formulations in the

respect that particular kinds of commentary on and modes of intervention in the political are still authorised by cultural means (Mulhern 2000, p. 131). Whereas, in the case of *Kulturkritik*, such claims rested on the ability of the cultural critic to acquire a superior knowledge of society through its cultural manifestations, the claim of cultural studies is that social and political relations can be read, like a cultural artefact, as a set of relations between discursively produced identities – thus opening up a space for cultural commentary as itself a directly political act in view of its capacity to reshape the discursive ground on which the relations between identities are shaped.

Mulhern's purpose in questioning the substitution of culture, as a practice of intervention, for politics concerns the consequent underestimation of the significance of specifically political institutions, actors and processes to which it gives rise. This is not to suggest that culture and politics should be regarded as hermetically separate from one another. Rather, Mulhern argues, the relations between them are more likely to be clearly formulated if we start from a recognition of their nature as distinct practices: culture as the moment of sense-making inherent in all social relations and social practices, and politics as the process through which specific social programmes and strategies transform particular social relationships into friend-enemy antagonisms. Culture, thus understood, certainly informs political processes but without substituting for or overdetermining them, while specific fields of cultural practice may be constituted politically by being drawn into particular fields of friend-enemy antagonisms. If this allows for what Mulhern calls a 'cultural politics' that arises out of the criss-crossing effects of the ways in which such antagonisms affect the conduct of cultural practices, the implications of his position for how we should understand the relations between culture and the social are less clear. For, in opting for a linguistic definition of culture (all practices of sense making), he closes down any gap between the two within which distinctive forms of interaction between them might be produced. Since this is also a difficulty with Jeffrey Alexander's programme for a cultural sociology, and since Alexander claims science studies as the methodological inspiration for that programme, it will be instructive to conclude by briefly reviewing Alexander's account to highlight the different logic underlying the relations between science studies and the perspective of 'culture studies' that I have argued for here.

### **The ontological politics of culture**

In elaborating his proposals for what he calls 'the strong programme in cultural sociology', Jeffrey Alexander singles out, as its most important characteristic, the way in which it secures its recognition of the autonomy of culture (Alexander 2003, p. 13). It is here, he contends, that science studies constitutes a useful model. Just as the 'strong programme' in science studies was pitched against the sociology of science, taking issue with its construction of science as being determined by underlying social structures to insist, instead, on the active role of scientific practices as independent forces in their own right, then so the 'strong programme' in cultural sociology rebuts the determinist premises of earlier approaches in the sociology of culture to focus on the respects in which culture shapes social life rather than being shaped by it. The way Alexander then formulates this 'strong programme' for cultural sociology, however, depends on an essentially 'weak interpretation' of science studies as an enterprise in which 'science is understood as a collective representation, a language-game that reflects a prior pattern of sense-making activity' (Alexander 2003, p. 13). And it is in this way, by understanding it analogously as an autonomous form of sense-making activity, that he interprets culture's role in shaping social actions and institutions 'providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces' (Alexander 2003, p. 12). This being so, the two methodological imperatives that Alexander adds to his first (the recognition of culture's autonomy) are that cultural sociology should undertake a Geertzian 'thick description' of such practices of sense-making and, rather

than relying on abstract formulations of culture's causality in relation to social life, should seek to 'anchor (its) causality in proximate actors and agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens' (Alexander 2003, p. 14).

I characterise this as a 'weak interpretation' of science studies for two reasons: first, because it ends up simply 'recognising' culture's autonomy without giving an account of how that autonomy is produced. Culture, for Alexander, comprises practices of sense-making, understood largely on a semiotic/linguistic model. As such, its autonomy is assumed as pre-given and historically invariant: what matters is to describe its action, not to account for the historical production of the possibility for such action. This stands in sharp contrast to science studies in which the stress has been placed on the historically specific, highly circumstantial and situation-bound mechanisms through which new objects, entities and actants in the field of science have been produced. Alexander's differentiation of culture from 'material and instrumental forces' also stands in sharp contradistinction to science studies, the broader field of STMS and actor-network-theory in which, of course, the fabrication of new entities is precisely the result of the application of material and instrumental forces in specific settings and occasions – be they those of scientific institutions or, in the case of the extension of science studies to 'cultural economy' approaches to the organisation of economic life, economic organisations (Du Gay & Pryke 2002). Chandra Mukerji provides a better distillation of the message of these traditions when she draws on their perspectives to stress the importance of 'unearthing fundamental cultural dimensions of material relations whose consequences are not much mediated through thought or language as located in an ordering of the material world itself' (Mukerji 1997, p. 35). It is for this reason that, in elaborating the perspective of 'culture studies', I have placed the stress on the material processes through which the historical differentiation of culture from the social and the economy was brought about by the assemblage of distinctive networks of people and things and the accumulation within these of distinctive kinds of power and effectivity as a consequence of the ways in which they open up the person to distinctive kinds of action and locate the person within specific productions of the social.

For if Alexander's is a weak account of science studies that gives rise to a weak account of the modes of production of culture's autonomy, it gives rise to an equally weak account of culture's mode of action on the social as essentially concerning the influence of systems of meaning on the subjective frameworks organising forms of social interaction. What this misses from the science studies account is any sense of the much stronger forms of the production of new social agents and 'working surfaces on the social' that arise from the intellectual and technical procedures of particular systems of knowledge. John Law and John Urry have usefully distilled the import of this perspective when applied to the social sciences in stressing their performative role in 'enacting realities' in the sense of helping to bring into being, and to sustain, the realities they 'discover'. The role of social science research methods in producing 'public opinion' as a new agent and mode of action on the social is a case in point.<sup>7</sup> The consequence of this, they suggest, is the production of multiple realities, multiple socials, arising from different traditions of the social sciences so that what has to be assessed, in considering the relations between these, are the forms of 'ontological politics' to which they give rise: that is, the particular ways of constructing and acting on the social that their theoretical and methodological procedures produce and enact (Law & Urry 2004, p. 404). It is with a similar eye to their 'ontological politics' that the operations of the cultural knowledges connected to the historical assembling of culture need to be considered alongside the work of the social sciences and other disciplines of the social. For it is the interactions between cultural and social disciplines that need to be attended to in order to show how the 'working surfaces on the social' that the former organise are, in their turn,

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<sup>7</sup> Law and Urry cite the recent work of Osborn and Rose (1999) on public opinion. However, this line of argument was developed much earlier by Pierre Bourdieu in his probing study of the ways in which public opinion research produced its own reality effects: see Bourdieu (1979).

significantly shaped by the forms of the social that the social sciences produce and enact. It perhaps goes without saying that the same principles apply to the subsequent processes through which culture has subsequently been dis- and re-assembled to produce new working surfaces on the social that are shaped by the relations between different cultural and social knowledges. What is worth remarking, though, are the respects in which such procedures would provide a point of purchase outside cultural studies that might suggest new ways of accounting for, and engaging with, its own histories.

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