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Tony Bennett

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The Work of Culture

Tony Bennett

Abstract

The formulations of cultural sociology have a tendency to merge culture and the social so closely that they become indistinguishable from one another. Drawing on Foucauldian governmentality theory and actor network theory, this article argues that it is preferable to examine the processes through which culture is separated off from the social via the production of distinctive cultural assemblages. The kinds of issues that need to be taken into consideration to account for the work that goes into making culture as a publicly differentiated realm are identified. Attention then focuses on the kinds of work that culture does in being brought to act on the ‘working surfaces on the social’ that are organized in the relations between social and cultural knowledges. The argument is exemplified by considering how the assemblages of Aboriginal culture produced by Baldwin Spencer enabled the production of a new surface of social management through which the relations between white and Aboriginal Australia were organized in the context of the Aboriginal domain.

Keywords: Aboriginal domain, absolute racism, actor network theory, assemblage, governmentality, the social

Introduction

The launch of a new journal under the title *Cultural Sociology* is as good a moment as any to reflect on the terms in which sociology and culture have been related to one another, and to ask whether the time is now ripe for new terms of theoretical and methodological engagement between the two. I want to suggest, though, that this should include some consideration as to whether the rubric of ‘cultural sociology’ is necessarily the best one for this purpose. Its value as an open-ended title for a journal that aspires to serve as a venue for broad debate on these questions is, of course, clear. It serves this purpose better than ‘the sociology of culture’, and not just because this formulation implies a field of inquiry that is limited to the institutions and practices comprising the arts, cultural industries and media sectors. It is rather the theoretical implication that ‘society’ is to be invoked as an explanatory ground in relation to those institutions and practices that is the problem.

‘Cultural sociology’ is much looser and more pliable in these respects. It encompasses the arts, cultural and media sectors but as parts of a broader sociological canvas which, indeed, is often stretched so as to be coterminous with that of sociology as a whole. Resonating to the logic of ‘the cultural turn’, it implies that as there is no determining ground of the social that exists outside culture, with the implication, in many formulations, that the very idea of a

noncultural sociology would be an oxymoron. It is also a formulation that establishes useful historical affiliations. After all, wasn't 'the sociological tradition', from Durkheim to Parsons, concerned precisely with the role of norms, beliefs, customs, etc. – and so, in its extended sense, culture – in the organization of social life?¹ And, finally, it makes good international connections with both the French and American schools of cultural sociology.

Yet I do have some doubts about the theoretical value of bringing culture and sociology together on these terms chiefly because they often bring in tow a tendency to merge culture and the social so closely together that they become indistinguishable. This is not to dispute the prevailing contention that, in a general sense, cultural practices are implicated in the make-up and organization of social relationships – although this has become so familiar a claim that its value is now more-or-less doxological, a ritual invocation that occludes more than it reveals. For, if analysis does not push beyond such general formulations to consider more closely the varied mechanisms through which culture and the social are connected, it can only too easily result in a set of ghostly, disembodied agents – values, beliefs, meanings, narratives – being credited with the ability to perform heroic tasks: securing social cohesion, or bringing about civic renewal, for example. Moreover, it often seems that this is to be accomplished quite effortlessly without any distinctive kind of work being involved in either producing culture as a specific realm with identifiably specific and concrete actors, or organizing the interfaces through which culture is able to connect with and act on the social.

As a corrective to this, then, I want to propose some principles for analysing the relations between culture and the social that will, first, accord significant attention to the work of making culture. This involves, I shall suggest, a focus on the material processes through which culture has come to be, and continues to be, differentiated from the social, the latter understood, like culture, as itself a historical rather than an anthropological reality. It also involves attending to the further work through which culture, in its varied differentiated forms, then acts on the social through the 'working surfaces on the social' that it produces. These are organized by specific cultural knowledges and techniques of intervention which operate either directly, or in combination with the operation of specific social knowledges, to format the social for specific kinds of action and intervention.²

It is, then, these two aspects of the work of culture – the work of making it, and the work it does – that I think need to be placed at the centre of any programme for the analysis of the relations between culture and the social.³ I shall, in developing this perspective, put three theoretical traditions into play as a means both of identifying a somewhat fractured genealogy for the arguments I shall propose and of elaborating their implications. They comprise, first, the rapidly emerging field of post-Bourdieuian sociology which, shaped by its interactions with Bourdieu's key concepts, is currently poised somewhere between proposing a series of internal corrections to and qualifications of Bourdieu's work, and going beyond it to map out

¹ This is Göran Therborn's (1976) contention in his influential account of classical sociology's differentiation from Marxism in terms of its focus on the role of cultural and ideational factors – what he called 'the imagined community' – in contradistinction to Marxist materialism.

² I borrow the notion of 'formatting' here from Timothy Mitchell's (2002) account of the relations between theories and techniques of economic regulation and the economy as preferable to more conventional accounts of the economy and the social as discursive constructs.

³ The sketch for such a programme that is offered here is deliberately somewhat abstract and schematic, even manifesto-like in some places. However, the main planks of the argument are ones I have discussed at greater length elsewhere (see Bennett, 2005, 2007).

a theoretical territory that is constructed on different premises. I include here Bernard Lahire's work on the sociology of individuals and its critical implications for Bourdieu's understanding of the concept of habitus (Lahire, 2001, 2003, 2004), and the work of Antoine Hennion and others in its concern to find a place for things in the networks of relations that Bourdieu theorizes as fields (Hennion, 1997; Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Hennion et al., 2005).⁴ Second, I shall draw on the work of Bruno Latour, and the traditions of actor-network theory, science studies, and practice studies as well as those tendencies in anthropology – the approaches to art developed by Alfred Gell, for example (Gell, 1998) – which focus attention on tracing the socio-material networks of relations through which heterogeneous elements (including human and non-human actors) are brought together in specific forms of action and interaction. While there are close connections between these traditions and post-Bourdieuian sociology, they clearly depart from the explanatory logic of Bourdieu's work in which a hidden structure, brought to light by the sociologist, is invoked to account for the phenomenal level of observable differences in dispositions and practices – differences in cultural tastes, for example.⁵ In lieu of this, actor-network theory proposes a single-levelled reality which, since there are no hidden depths or structures to be fathomed, merges the process of explanation with that of description: to describe how socio-material networks of relations are assembled, disassembled, and reassembled in new configurations is – if the range of the networks that are thus traced is extensive enough – also to explain how those networks are made up and operate. And third, I shall draw on two aspects of Foucault's work. In the first instance, I draw on his concept of *dispositif* or apparatus in view both of its influence on actor-network theory and of the respects in which Foucault's understanding of such apparatuses as always somehow ready made is usefully corrected by actor-network-theory's focus on the processes through which heterogeneous elements are assembled into specific apparatuses.⁶ In the second instance, I explore the implications of Foucault's work on governmentality (Foucault, 1991) which, in historicizing the relations between culture, the economy and the social, offers an account of the social that has a sharper political focus than the status that is accorded it in Latour's work.

Culture and the Social: Principles of Analysis

Let me now, in the light of these general remarks, advance five principles through which the terms for analysing the relations between culture and the social to which they point might be put into effect:

⁴ See Albertsen and Diken (2004) for an excellent discussion of these tendencies.

⁵ The issues here are complex, particularly when Bourdieu's interpretation of field theory is viewed in conjunction with his concept of habitus and the role that the relations between these play in his concern to overcome the bifurcation of structure and agency by positing, in the notion of field, a relational structure that is operated through the cultural unconscious of the habitus. While the *illusio* of those who commit to the stakes of the game which define any particular field is an essential aspect of a field's constitution, so that the field cannot be defined as a pre-given structure, only the objectifying and distancing procedures of the sociologist can bring to light the relations between different capitals that are in play in different fields and which, in the social field as a whole, organize the relations between different fields. I draw here on John Levi Martin's (2003) discussion of field theory.

⁶ In one of his clearest definitions of the *dispositif* Foucault states that the *dispositive* is both a structure of heterogeneous elements and a 'certain kind of genesis', but he is vague as to what the latter is and does not provide any specific tools for its analysis. See 'The confession of the flesh' in Foucault (1980).

(i) First, we need to rule out the possibility that culture might be distinguished from the social in terms of a special kind of cultural stuff that is distinct from a special kind of social stuff of which the social is made up. This makes no more sense than it does to suggest, as is the case with those versions of the cultural turn that are still in thrall to the linguistic turn, in either its structuralist or post-structuralist guises, that culture and the social should be merged because they are said to be made up of the same kind of stuff (organized structures of meaning).⁷ To follow Latour's contention that the social cannot be designated as 'a special domain, a special realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling' (Latour, 2005: 7) entails that we cease to look for ways of differentiating culture and the social as different realms made up of different kinds of things (representations, say, versus material social relations). To the degree that both (and, indeed, the economy too) are made of similar heterogeneous elements, the differences between them have to be sought in the manner and locations in which they are assembled. Their status as different is thus not ontological but public: they are distinguished from one another as different public organizations of things, texts and humans that are able to operate on and in relation to each other through the differences that have thus been historically produced between them.

(ii) The making of culture and its differentiation from the social is, above all else, the work of institutions. It is here that the work of making culture is enacted and through which the work it accomplishes is performed. To analyse the work of making culture entails attending to all those processes of accumulation, classification and ordering to which varied practices are subject and through which their 'culturalness' is conferred on them. It is clear, for example, to put the point historically, that the bringing together of varied kinds of writing to form literature or of painting to constitute art is the result of the work of classification and codification performed by literary and artistic institutions, and the forms of cultural knowledge which they marshal, work which always involves the differentiation of the ensembles it assembles from other assemblages of knowledges and practices. It is equally clear that the 'culturalness' that is produced in this way is not the same as culture in some general semiotic sense (culture as meaning-making practices) but rather involves the production of specific relations between the objects and practices that are thus brought together and, as a consequence, the organization of distinctive meta-semiotic properties arising from their inscription in specific, institutionally produced zones of cultural action. However, I do not mean to suggest that such 'culturalness' can be only aesthetic in form or that the work of making culture is limited to the institutions of aesthetic culture. We can, indeed, witness the same process in relation to culture understood as 'ways of life'. For apart from themselves being assembled from heterogeneous bits and pieces, ways of life can be and frequently are also subjected to distinctive institutional processes of accumulation and assemblage that give rise to distinctive forms of 'culturalness' which serve as means for acting on and regulating the relationships between ways of life. This is clear from the history of the relations between anthropology and collecting institutions in which the assembly of ways of life, in varied forms, from Franz Boas's life groups to Henri Rivière's *ensemble écologique* and the eco-museum, has been closely related to the development of ways of managing populations. Boas's life groups and the distinctive regionally defined and differentiated cultures these made visible, for example, played a key role in the move

⁷ I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (see Bennett, 2002).

away from general stadial models for the administration of the native peoples of North America to culturally specific programmes of administration that took greater account of tribal differences.⁸ Ways of life are equally susceptible to varied forms of ethnographic or statistical collection in ways that have had significant implications for the management of populations. The history of Mass Observation provides one example of this in setting in motion a process of gathering ‘the masses’, their views and their habits, that opened up new ways of acting on popular opinion in the context of the wartime and immediately post-war administrations.⁹ Pierre Bourdieu’s work provides another such example, *Distinction* (1984) serving as a model for ways of netting different habitus statistically which have been connected to ways of acting on those habitus via education and cultural policies that are calculated to equalize life opportunities.¹⁰ The second principle, then, concerns the need to attend to the institutional mechanisms, and the forms of expertise that they marshal, through which varied things, texts and humans are brought together and, through this work of collection and assembly, acquire new properties derived from the operations of the different forms of cultural expertise which bring them together.

(iii) The work that culture does as a consequence of being assembled in these ways depends on how, once such assemblages have been stabilized into institutionally durable forms, it is connected to the social from which it has thus been differentiated. The key issues here concern (a) the respects in which the forms of cultural knowledge that are involved in such processes of separation and assembly simultaneously fashion specific properties for the forms of culture they assemble (the designation of specific bundles of objects, buildings, and customs as world heritage sites, for example), (b) the forms for knowing, probing, investigating and formatting the social that are made available via what Law (2004) calls the ‘method assemblages’ of the social sciences, in which distinctive epistemological positions and practical techniques of knowing make the social knowable in ways that are always-already connected to ways of acting on it, and (c) the respects in which the relations between these cultural and social knowledges produce distinctive ‘working surfaces on the social’, comprising both ways of formatting the social conceptually and distinctive technologies of intervention, through which culture’s action on it can be modulated. The historical processes through which Culture (in the sense of Western high culture) was made tangible, visible and performable in new settings (museums, art museums, concert halls, libraries, literary and scientific associations) which assembled texts, artefacts, techniques and persons in new relations to each other under the superintendence of new cultural knowledges, has thus to be approached alongside an analysis of the development of the social sciences and their role in laying out the social in forms which made it amenable to corrective action via cultural means. Embryonic social survey data thus played a key role in identifying male drunkenness as the key point of action through which family life might be acted on and ameliorated in late 19th-century Britain, just as it was the previous sequestration of art and the new values produced for it in the history of post-Kantian aesthetics that made it intelligible to propose that the social could be successfully managed by building new networks for

⁸ I draw here principally on the account in Hinsley (1981).

⁹ See *New Formations* 44, a special issue on Mass Observation, and, on this point in particular, Hubble (2001).

¹⁰ There are, however, significant differences in the kind of policy adjustments to the relations between habitus that Bourdieu envisaged at different points in his intellectual career. See Ahearne (2004) for a useful discussion of these.

art into the social via outreach and extension programmes.¹¹ The production of ethnographic collections of castes in the context of the English colonial governance of India similarly played an equally important role in the development, after 1857, of the caste system as the ‘working surface on the social’ through which the subordinate sections of the Indian population were to be managed (Dirks, 2001). The current practices of world heritage similarly offer ample evidence of the ways in which earlier cultural assemblages are disassembled as they are broken down into their constituent heterogeneous elements by being disconnected from the more local assemblages that had characterized their status as merely national or regional heritage. For it is only by being disassembled in this way – and often quite violently, in the face of local protest and opposition – that such ‘heritage elements’ can then be inscribed in new networks as global actors that are thus hauled into the emerging spheres of economic and civic action that are produced in the relations between world heritage sites (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006).

(iv) It follows from these first three principles that particular attention needs to be paid to the different forms of ‘culturalness’ that are produced by different institutional assemblages if the kinds of action and interaction – of the self on the self, of varied agents on each other – that are integral to the ‘working surfaces’ through which their work on the social is organized, are to be adequately understood. This means that questions concerning the agency of non-human actors – of objects and texts or, more generally, what I shall call presentations – should be accorded an important place in analysing the processes and mechanisms through which particular zones of action and effectivity are organized for particular cultural assemblages. Work in the traditions of science studies and practice studies is more helpful here than the general formulations of actor-network theory, owing to the attention that these traditions have paid both to the processes of fabrication through which new entities are produced in custom-built scientific settings and to the specific qualities that attach to these as a consequence. The same is true of the anthropology of art owing to its focus on the ways in which art acts as an operative mediator of social relations, and to its view that objects acquire their artfulness by being mobilized in the context of specific social relations rather than possessing this as an immanent quality. The potential for treating custom-built cultural settings as places where distinctive cultural entities are produced through processes of working that are particular to them is evident in a good deal of recent work focused on museums, particularly anthropological ones (see, for example, Bouquet, 2001), and, in the case of contemporary media, on film and television studios (Hemming, 2006). What is less evident, however, is a widespread appreciation of the respects in which such analyses can be taken further to examine the new forms of alliance between human and non-human actors that such new entities make possible and the ways in which these are harnessed to new ways of acting on the social. The nexus of relations between community art, the institutions in which this is produced, stored and accumulated, the forms of expertise that are involved in its production and dissemination, the ways in which both these and community art practices are enrolled in governmental programmes aimed at, variously, including excluded communities, building up community identity as an interface between the political system and the individual, and the ways in which such initiatives call on sociological accounts of community and the role of social capital in its formation and maintenance: all of these are pointers to the form that such analysis might take.

¹¹ See, for more detailed elaborations of this argument, Bennett (1995, 2000).

(v) Finally, there is no question in all of this of looking to develop an account of culture as an anthropological constant that operates in the same way in all kinds of societies. The remit of the programme outlined above is limited to the forms of cultural assemblage that are associated with the development of secular forms of cultural knowledge, the institutions in which these are set to work, and the ways in which their operations – viewed in the light of the parallel development of the social and economic sciences – are related to the historical separation of culture, the social and the economy as different public organizations of people and things. This is not to suggest a distinction of a fundamental kind between modern and pre-modern knowledge formations and the manner of their functioning. Similar principles of analysis can be used to study the make-up and operation of other knowledge systems and their implications for regulating social conduct. David Turnbull has thus interpreted medieval cathedrals as knowledge spaces which, like laboratories, brought together specific resources, skills and labour in operating as ‘powerful loci of social transformation’ (Turnbull, 2000: 67) and he makes the same case for the knowledge assemblies of indigenous peoples. The distinctiveness of the ways of interrogating the relations between culture and the social that I am proposing thus consists in the focus on the operations of, and the interactions between, historically new forms of cultural and social knowledge in the context of the public differentiation of culture, the social and the economy that is both their outcome and – so long as these differentiations remain durable – their condition.

The Limits of ‘Cultural Sociology’

I have suggested elsewhere (Bennett, 2007) that ‘culture studies’ might serve as a useful banner for this programme of work. This is partly because its focus echoes that of science studies in seeking to effect a series of transformations in relation to the sociology of culture similar to those which science studies has carried through in relation to the sociology of science. If I am hesitant about ‘cultural sociology’ as a broader rubric in which to situate these concerns, this is partly because many of the formulations of cultural sociology are implicated in the organization of the ‘working surfaces of the social’ that analyses of the kind I am proposing would need to take as their object. The role played by the concepts of social and cultural capital as well as by new, non-essentialist conceptions of ethnicity in reformatting the social in ways that have had significant consequences for the organization of the working surfaces on the social that contemporary cultural policies and the practices of cultural institutions now work with and through, is a case in point. For, in all these cases, what we confront are ways of reformulating the social theoretically by injecting relational values and meanings into its very sinews with the consequence that it is these – an always-already ‘culturalized social’ – that provide the surfaces through which the social can be connected with and acted on.

However, my hesitancy about the currency of ‘cultural sociology’ is also partly prompted by the consideration that when cultural sociologists have engaged with the traditions of science studies and actor-network theory, the results have often illuminated very little except a determination to hold on to established theoretical positions, or to carve out seemingly new ones, at the price of a lamentable failure to accord those traditions proper theoretical attention. In staking out his claim for a strong programme in cultural sociology, for example, Jeffrey Alexander annexes science studies to a general statement about the need to secure

culture's autonomy in relation to the social even though the form in which he conceives that autonomy is clearly at odds with both the theoretical formulations and methodological procedures of science studies.¹²

Bourdieu's discussion of Bruno Latour's work and the tradition of laboratory studies more generally is equally dispiriting in this regard, although for the opposite reason. Clearly unaware of the distinction between science studies and the sociology of science, he equates Latour with the latter, and entirely misreads his account of the role of inscriptions (that is, things translated into signs) as particular kinds of 'immutable mobiles' (capable of travelling yet remaining the same) by interpreting this as a semiological vision of the world in which reality appears as the adventitious fabrication (in the sense of invention) of signs (Bourdieu, 2004: 8–9, 21–9). He then proceeds to insist on the need for an objective sociology of science in the form of field analysis to account for the processes through which the autonomy of the scientific field is organized without paying any heed whatsoever to the different ways in which science studies accounts for the production of autonomous scientific entities and their differentiation from the social.

These misunderstandings are all the more surprising to the degree that Latour has, on a number of occasions, clearly indicated that his conception of the forms of displacement to which science studies subjects the sociology of science is modelled on certain traditions of cultural analysis which he considers to have been ahead of the game in this respect (see, for example, Latour 1998). This is especially true of one of his more extended discussions of the concept of immutable mobiles which he illustrates with reference to Svetlana Alpers's account of the production of the 'distance point' method of Dutch landscape painting, Elizabeth Eisenstein's account of the new mobility of inscriptions associated with the development of the printing press, and Johannes Fabian's account of anthropology's visual mapping of the relations between moderns and primitives (Latour, 1990).

Latour is attracted just as much to what these accounts *don't do* as he is to what they *do*. What they don't do, he argues, is to try to account for the phenomena they are concerned with by referring them to some already socially determined set of interests or structure and read them, in however indirect or mediated a way, as an expression of these. These are not, then, sociologies of culture. But they are not cultural sociology either, concerned in some vague way with the dissemination of meanings and values or compressing culture and the social into an undifferentiated whole. Rather, what Latour values about them is their concern with craftsmanship: that is, with particular ways of doing and making, conducted in particular settings (the artist's studio, the anthropological field site), through which new immutable mobiles are produced, mobilized, and subjected to forms of inscription which – combined with or conscripting other mobiles and inscriptions – open up new ways of acting on the social. His focus, that is to say, is on the work of culture in the two senses that I have defined it: on the work through which new cultural entities are produced, and on the work that these then do in being mobilized to act on the social through the working surfaces that are produced by the intersections between particular social and cultural knowledges.

Accumulating Culture, Working on the Social

¹² I refer here to the discussion in the first chapter of Alexander (2003). I have developed my criticisms of Alexander's position here at greater length in Bennett (2007).

I want, however briefly, to offer a worked example of the principles for analysing the relations between culture and the social that I have advanced to this point. I shall do so by taking my bearings from *Pandora's Hope* in which Latour notes the significance, in the case of many sciences, of the relations between expeditions and museums to the processes through which 'nonhumans are progressively loaded into discourse', citing the galleries of the *Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* and the collections of the *Musée de l'Homme* as places in which 'all the objects of the world are thus mobilised and assembled' (Latour, 1999: 99–101). The relations between Baldwin Spencer's and Frank Gillen's various collaborative expeditions to the desert regions of Central Australia and the collections of Aboriginal materials that Spencer was thus able to amass at the National Museum of Victoria (which he directed) offer a good means of exploring the implications of this perspective.¹³

Three aspects of these expeditions are worthy of note. First, they formed part of a key moment in the development of the fieldwork phase in anthropology which significantly reorganized the relations between a range of agents compared to those that had characterized the earlier phase of anthropology. In the latter, collections had typically been accumulated via networks of commercial or amateur collectors either plying their wares independently or acting on instructions, with museums in colonial contexts acting as intermediaries for the transit of objects from local sites of collection to metropolitan centres for their interpretation and synthesis by 'armchair anthropologists'. Fieldwork anthropology substituted a new set of relations which, as Howard Morphy puts it, combined 'theorist and ethnographer in the same person' (Morphy, 1996: 138). Second, this meant that the distance travelled by the immutable mobiles Spencer collected was considerably shortened: in the main, from Central Australia to Melbourne rather than from Central Australia to London via Melbourne. While continuing to trade duplicate specimens with European and American museums, Spencer was a leading figure in staunching the free-flow of Aboriginal objects to Europe and America by supporting the introduction of export licensing requirements, and he contributed considerably to their local accumulation by donating his own collections to the National Museum of Victoria whose ethnographic holdings increased from 1200 to over 36,000 items during his period as director (Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985: 252).

Spencer was thus able to install the immutable mobiles he accumulated at the National Museum of Victoria in two sets of relations at once. So far as the international scientific community was concerned, they provided the material basis and warrant for the inscriptions through which, in journal articles and books, the various kinds of data that he and Gillen had accumulated were recombined in accounts of Aboriginal culture that had considerable influence on the development of European anthropology and, via Durkheim, sociology.¹⁴ However, the *in situ* presence of the collections in his museum also gave him a large number of, in Latour's terms, 'well aligned and faithful allies' that he could 'muster on the spot' (Latour, 1990: 23) in the context of specifically national political and administrative fields.

¹³ Spencer, a product of Mancunian liberalism, was originally trained as a natural historian and was an early supporter of Darwinism. His substantive position at Melbourne was as professor of biology but his interests progressively shifted to anthropology. Spencer met Gillen, a postmaster at Alice Springs, during the 1894 Horn expedition to Central Australia. They subsequently developed a lifelong collaboration in which the distinction between the roles of field collector and university-based interpreter, while remaining intact, was also significantly blurred.

¹⁴ The role of Spencer's work on the Arunta in shaping Durkheim's account of the elementary forms of religious life has been subject to extensive commentary and is discussed by both Wolfe (1991) and Morphy (1996).

Third, if all of these conditions made it possible for Spencer to become a political actor on the international and national stages, it is because they made it possible for him to make and to mobilize a specific *production* of Aboriginal culture. By bringing together artefacts, photographs, films, and sound recordings from diverse locations, combining these in new ways, simplifying and condensing them by subjecting them to further processes of inscription, Spencer produced something that had not existed before: Aboriginal culture, not as a set of autochthonous realities that preceded his inquiries, but as a new surface of connection between white and black Australia, a surface that organized new sets of governmental and administrative interfaces through which the former might act on the latter and which, in turn, made Aboriginality performable in new ways.

His activities were, of course, by no means unique in this regard. However, Spencer's role was a particularly significant one in contributing to the development of what Tim Rowse has called 'the Aboriginal domain': that is, the domain of institutions, practices, customs, languages, etc., which, by organizing a zone of interaction between them, provided the means through which different Aboriginal communities were absorbed into the colonial state (Rowse, 1992). Rowse identifies the development of rationing to compensate for indigenous food supplies displaced by cattle grazing as a key moment in the development of this domain (Rowse, 1998). Introduced in 1894, rationing was the basis for the development of a new mode of government that regularized (unequal) exchanges across the colonial frontier and, in place of racial violence, substituted an administrative infrastructure for managing these exchanges.

Spencer was to become directly involved in the administration of 'the Aboriginal domain' through his role as Special Commissioner for Aboriginals, Northern Territory. What concerns me here, however, are the more general aspects of the influence he acquired through the ways in which the Aboriginal culture that he produced contributed to the organization of the exchanges that took place between the white and black in the Aboriginal domain of the early 20th century.¹⁵ There are three main issues here. The first concerns his racialization of Aboriginality in the role he accords race, rooted rigorously in bloodline and skin colour, to account for the shared substratum of Aboriginality that gives Aboriginal culture its underlying unity in spite of the differences in customs and practices that characterize its variants among different tribes. The second has to do with the dual temporality that is attributed to Aboriginal culture as a result of the contradictory way in which he inserts it into evolutionary time. For, on the one hand, it is a culture that lacks an inner temporality having been – in Spencer's view – more-or-less static for millennia. This is the consequence of its grounding in a race which, lacking any competition owing to Australia's isolation from other races and from aggressive fauna, had allegedly failed to evolve. On the other hand, once confronted with such competition as a result of European occupation, the Aborigine, Spencer argues, faces annihilation. Aborigines thus enter into evolutionary time for only a split second, at the very moment they are destined to leave it by being driven to extinction. Third, however, Spencer provides for a different temporality at the level of the individual. While the laws of racial competition destine 'full-blood' Aborigines to extinction, managed miscegenation provides a route through which half-castes and their offspring might survive, but only on the condition that they cease to be Aboriginal in the sense that is, for Spencer, defining and constitutive: that is, racially.

¹⁵ I have discussed aspects of these elsewhere: see Bennett (2004: 154–8).

Spencer was not, of course, unique in holding such views. The importance of his work consisted rather in the manner in which he assembled artefacts, photographs, and recordings from diverse locations into a production of Aboriginal culture as racially grounded that had scientific authority.¹⁶ The key role that he accorded the tribe as a major unit of analysis and the manner in which he construed its relations to race are especially important in this regard and, as Kevin Blackburn (2002) notes, a significant departure from earlier traditions in Australian anthropology. These were typically concerned to identify the existence of different nations at the supra-tribal level: not, though, nations as sovereign political entities but nations in the biblical sense of cultural groups sharing a common descent. Spencer's erasure of this level of analysis deprived such supra-tribal relations of any political or administrative significance. In their place, he substituted a racial conception of Aboriginality as the common factor which cohered the customs and practices of different tribes into a single (albeit tribally differentiated) whole and, thereby, produced the race as such, even if through the mediation of different tribes, as the surface that government was to act upon.

Patrick Wolfe (1991) has argued that it was this racialized production of the Aborigine as an absolute and undifferentiated other that underpinned the development of new strategies of assimilation in the context of the early-20th-century development of the Aboriginal domain. The polar opposition it constructed meant, Wolfe argues, that everything that was only 'part-aborigine' had to be counted as 'non-aborigine', thus opening up a space in which 'halfcastes' could be plucked off from the 'full-blood' and absorbed into white society through a programme of epidermal-cum-cultural transformation that would eventually prepare them for citizenship. These distinctions provided the crucial terms in which the relations between the Aboriginal domain and the distribution of citizenship rights and duties were managed in the context of the independent polity that was developed in the first two decades following the 1901 Federation of Australia (Clarke and Galligan, 1995). However, it was not until the inter-war period of the 20th-century that the biological incorporation of 'half-castes' into the wider population was, from being regarded as a more or less natural process, adopted as a strategy requiring coordinated state intervention, most notably in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Building on the developmental gap that had been opened up between the 'half-caste' and the 'full-blood' through casual miscegenation, by promoting a combination of 'interbreeding between White and part-Aboriginal Australians, and the curtailment of unions between full- and part-Aborigines' (McGregor, 2002: 288), such policies instituted programmes of managed miscegenation that aimed to take the Aborigine through a series of way-stations that were defined in terms of both skin colour and the modes of segregated abode that Spencer came to favour in the Northern Territory. The intelligibility of these programmes was the result of the new presentations of Australia's indigenous peoples as a racial unity that rolled out from the ways in which they and their artefacts and rituals had been assembled to form a 'working surface on the social' through which such peoples could be acted on by means of civilizing programmes which formatted the social in terms of essentialist racial divisions inscribed in contradictory relations to the vectors of evolutionary time.

Conclusion

¹⁶ There are many texts here but for an economical and representative example of the ways in which he assembled Aborigines from different tribes, their tools, weapons and rituals into a racially defined common Aboriginality, see Spencer (1914).

One of the more memorable of Frederic Jameson's many injunctions, and the guiding principle of his *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson, 1981), is that we should, as social and cultural analysts, always aim to historicize. Although, for reasons that I won't go into here,¹⁷ Jameson was unable to put this methodological maxim into effect except abstractly, the maxim itself has always seemed to me an impeccable one. The key questions on which its implementation turns concern the level of analysis at which it is to be put into effect and, consequently, what it is that most needs to be historicized. My contentions in this article propose two answers to these questions. The first, in line with my reading of the implications of governmentality theory, is that our understandings of both culture and the social need to be radically historicized if we are to produce an adequate basis for understanding the specific contemporary forms of their interrelations.

The programme that I have proposed would, in this respect, find its place as part of a historical sociology (in the end, the only kind worth having or aiming for) that would seek to offer a more detailed and nuanced understanding of historically varied orderings of the relations between culture, the social and the economy – and of the mechanisms producing and sustaining their separation as distinctive public organizations of the relations between people and things – than are available from the generalized accounts of modernity and postmodernity. The second contention is that, to do this, it is also necessary, now, to historicize the doxological formulations of those tendencies, strongly associated with the rubrics of cultural sociology, to merge culture and the social into one another. It is, I have suggested, only by looking to those heterodox tendencies emerging both from within sociology and outside it that it will prove possible to unclasp culture and the social in ways that will make clear both the work that goes into the making of the former and the work that it performs in relation to a social that is not simply its *doppelgänger*.

¹⁷ I have discussed this aspect of Jameson's work elsewhere (see Bennett, 1990: 205–17).

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