

[Nick Couldry](#)

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SOCIOLOGY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: AN INTERRUPTED DIALOGUE

NICK COULDRY [5018 words]

Nearly half a century ago, Raymond Williams (1961: 10) wrote that there was no academic subject which allowed him to ask the questions in which he was interested: questions of how culture and society, democracy and the individual voice, interrelate. The early tradition of cultural studies emerged into this gap, drawing in part on the resources of sociology. Looking back, the historical parallel between Williams and the critical sociology of C. Wright Mills was not accidental, since that too privileged the role of power in culture and cultural analysis (1959: 33, quoted Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003: 2). From the beginning, then, the robustness of cultural studies' relationship with sociology was crucial to cultural studies' possibilities of success. This relationship has been interrupted, but can, I suggest, still be revived in today's very different circumstances.

What are the two poles of this interrupted dialogue? On the side of sociology, we must distinguish, first, between the field of sociology as a whole and domains of sociology more specifically interested in culture. Within the latter, I would distinguish between a formal *sociology of culture* (that places 'culture' within a macro-model of social organisation) and a *cultural sociology* that takes a sociological approach to various aspects of cultural production and consumption. A dialogue between 'sociology of culture' and cultural studies has never begun and perhaps was never feasible. In spite of some sympathetic calls for cultural studies to be 'reintegrated' into sociology (Crane, 1994; Long, 1997), formal sociology of culture explicitly rejected a 'power-based framework of analysis' (Smith, 1998: 7), and so turned away from one of the key emphases common to all cultural studies. The position with cultural sociology is very different: the pluralism of cultural sociology as represented by this volume derives from an attempt to mobilise the term 'culture' across many domains of social analysis, foregrounding and certainly not suppressing issues of power. As a result, a dialogue between 'cultural sociology' and cultural studies is without question feasible, even if for various reasons it has been interrupted.

What then do I mean by 'cultural studies'? An important reference-point remains the Birmingham school of cultural studies, with its origins in the earlier work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, even if it is important to emphasise that from the beginning this vision of cultural studies had international parallels (see Couldry 2000: 26-28 for discussion). But other important developments were under way also: from the 1980s onwards, aspects of the Birmingham school of cultural studies (particular its adoption led by Stuart Hall of semiotics and Gramscian hegemony theory) were adopted in broader literature and humanities in the US and elsewhere (Turner 1990); longer-term, aspects of cultural studies became internationalised (Chen 1998). Given this huge expansion, you might ask: does 'cultural studies' still stand for anything specific beyond a particular trajectory for introducing cultural analysis into academic work? If that were all the term stood for, then resuming at this late stage a dialogue between 'cultural studies' and sociology would be of limited interest. So let me distinguish three ways, stemming from the early history of the Birmingham school of cultural studies, in which 'cultural studies' might still mean something substantive enough to be put into a productive dialogue again with sociology, particularly cultural sociology.

The first substantive strand of cultural studies that we *might* identify for this purpose focussed on giving serious attention to the forms and dynamics of contemporary *popular* culture. For

all its initial impetus, however, there are sociological problems with isolating the ‘popular’ as the focus of cultural studies in this way. For one thing, this excludes many important areas of taste and cultural consumption, for example the cultural experience of the old (Tulloch 1991; Riggs 1998), ‘middlebrow’ culture (Frith 1986), the cultural experience of elites (Lamont 1991), indeed any cultural experience that is not ‘spectacular’ or ‘resistant’ (for further discussion, see Couldry 2000; 58-62). Another point is that old debates about popular versus elite culture have failed to keep up with the de-differentiation of cultural taste, and the possibility, indeed importance, today of cultural omnivorousness (compare Strinati 1996 with Peterson and Kern 1992). Finally, an exclusive emphasis on ‘the popular’ ignores the need to deconstruct the relation between what is designated ‘popular’ and everyday ‘experience’ (Hall 1981).

The second strand within early cultural studies that we might identify as a potential contact-point with sociology is the strand that prioritised ways of *reading* culture, especially those derived from semiotics and versions of post-structuralism. This is the strand most frequently emphasised in histories of cultural studies (Turner 1990; Barker 2003; Tudor 1999). But here too there are difficulties. On the one hand it becomes, in some versions, an attempt to read all culture as, indeed *only as*, text, an approach which is resolutely non-sociological and so inadequate to understand the multilayered but structured complexity of culture (Hannerz 1992). On the other hand, the use of semiotics and post-structuralist approaches to reading culture has largely been absorbed across all cultural sociology and humanities work (Hall, Heizert and Bettani 2003), so no longer comprises a distinct strand of its own.

More promising for my purposes is a third strand within early cultural studies that tried to focus cultural analysis on the particular question, and problem, of *democratic culture*. It is this strand that develops furthest the concern for hidden power relations within culture, both inclusions and exclusions, that marked off cultural studies from the start. The early work of Raymond Williams did so by identifying a culturally-embedded democratic deficit at the heart of societies such as late 1950s Britain (Williams 1958, 1961). Yet this strand has recently received less attention. Because of its concern with the broader conditions for sustaining something like a democratic culture, this strand had from a start a *particular affinity with sociology*; so it was that early cultural studies work developed a cultural sociology within an intellectual legacy dominated by Marxism (Williams 1981). However the only recent work with this strand of cultural studies (Hartley 2003) works exclusively through the analysis of texts, not a broader sociological approach to analysing democratic culture.

Can this third stream of cultural studies provide the starting-point from which we *rebuild* a dialogue between cultural studies and sociology? This will be my argument. In the chapter’s first main section, I explain how early cultural studies suffered from a ‘holism’ that we must move beyond if a productive dialogue beyond cultural sociology and cultural studies is to be renewed today. In the chapter’s second section, I explore some recent developments that promise to reconnect cultural sociology and this third stream of cultural studies in ways that relate closely to *today’s* challenges for a democratic culture. Those challenges can be summed up in three words: neoliberalism, mediation and globalization. It is not difficult to see how concern with the conditions of democratic culture might have renewed relevance to a time of profound economic crisis and neoliberal discourse’s prolonged closure of democratic culture. In addition, democratization is today inseparably linked with the emerging opportunities of digital media culture, while no account of the conditions of democratic

culture can be adequate today unless it thinks beyond the scale of the national, and takes account of the multiple pressures of globalization (Beck 2001; Garcia Canclini 1995).

Before moving on, I should clarify one point. How is it that the potential dialogue between cultural sociology and cultural studies, particularly its third stream, has been so seriously interrupted? One reason is methodological choice. Some work within cultural studies that foregrounded democratic culture, at the same time, because of its refusal of disciplinarity, seemed uninterested in any specific dialogue, say, with sociology. Indeed an overwhelming commitment to exposing the contradictions of the current 'conjuncture' can sometimes seem to leave any questions of disciplinary method entirely to one side:

cultural studies always and only exists in contextually specific theoretical and institutional formations [which] are always a response to a particular political project based on the available theoretical and historical resources. In that sense, in every particular instance, cultural studies has to be made up as it goes along. (Grossberg, 1997: 252, original emphasis).

My own work within cultural studies has aimed to move away from this suspicion towards disciplinarity (Couldry 2000, 2006); fortunately, Grossberg's recent work (2007) returns to terrain that is more plausibly sociological. Meanwhile other institutional factors have also worked to obscure possibilities for dialogue. Work from outside traditional disciplines, for example in queer theory and post-colonial studies, has generated fundamental insights into the hidden exclusions at work within our understandings of culture and politics (Berlant 1997; Warner 2002; Ganguly 2001; Gaonkar 2001). Such work has often been comfortable identifying with the broad label of 'cultural studies', and its insights into power and the complexities of democratic culture certainly qualify it to contribute to the third stream of cultural studies I identified earlier. But for reasons not yet fully disentangled, where such work *has* acknowledged links with the traditional disciplines, these have generally been anthropology, geography or literary analysis, not sociology. So if it is a dialogue between cultural studies and *sociology* that we want to revive, we will need to look elsewhere.

The sociological limitations of subcultural theory

Raymond Williams' political and theoretical project was focussed around one central insight, that 'the making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions' (1989: 4 [1958]); we should therefore see 'the theory of culture as a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life' (1958: 11-12, added emphasis). This approach inspired the attention in early British cultural studies to questions of cultural exclusion, particularly the studies of primarily male, working-class cultural life known as 'subcultural' theory: Cohen (1997) [1972], Hall and Jefferson (1974), Hebdige (1979). Initially, this work focussed on explaining subcultural style (Mods, Rockers, skinheads, and so on) as a resolution, on the cultural level, of conflicts experienced by British working-class youth at a material level. From the outset, this depended on seeing cultural experience and expression as systematic 'unities'. Phil Cohen's study of working-class culture in London's East End was typical, seeing 'subcultures' as 'attempt[ing] to work out through a system of transformations, the basic problematic or contradiction which is inserted in the subculture by the parent culture' (Cohen, 1997: 100-101 [1972]). This reflected the legacy of Marxist functionalism. Dick Hebdige's analysis of popular style and music was more complex, emphasising the role of ethnic relations to Britain's urban cultures and seeing the connection between popular culture and underlying social conflicts as mediated and to some extent arbitrary. Even so, Hebdige

discussed subcultures such as British punk as systematic unities that 'share[d] a common language' (Hebdige, 1979: 122). Later critiques pointed to the highly gendered and 'raced' nature (McRobbie 2000; Gilroy 1987) of the 'unities' assumed by these early studies.

So far, the story is familiar. But early cultural studies' 'holism' - its understanding of culture as a relationship between various unified systems - had other problematic consequences that we need to understand. Even at its most sophisticated, cultural studies' discussions of 'the popular' formulated issues about culture exclusively at a structural level that ignored the complexity of individual cultural experience. The Australian cultural theorist, Meaghan Morris, formulated the difficulty well, arguing that the British cultural studies tradition failed to 'leave[] much space for an unequivocally pained, unambivalently discontented, or momentarily aggressive subject' (Morris, 1990: 25). In the mid 1980s Richard Johnson, Stuart Hall's successor as head of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, criticised the structuralist approaches that then dominated cultural studies for being silent on 'how . . . social subjects . . . produce accounts of who they are . . . that is, constitute themselves politically' (Johnson, 1996: 103 [1985-6]). Given this, it is hardly surprising that no links ever developed, for example, between cultural studies and the culturally sensitive work in France on the sociology of 'actors' (Touraine 1981). Indeed for cultural studies, 'identity', far from being a dimension of everyday life that we might investigate sociologically, became, under the weight of poststructuralism, the site of a theoretical problem of integrating psychoanalytic and sociological models that remains unresolved to this day (Hall 1996; Butler 1997).

There were exceptions. Carolyn Steedman's extraordinary double biography (1986) of her mother's life and her own childhood insisted on 'a sense of people's complexity of relationship to the historical situations they inherit' (1986: 19). A crucial dimension of inequality, Steedman suggested, is precisely whether you are 'outside' or 'inside' the central narratives of your society and culture; being of higher social status *is*, broadly, to be closer to those central narratives. So here was an account of inequality which identified the power relations at work in the distribution of symbolic resources that *constitutes* cultures, and their boundaries. But by the mid 1990s it was clear most cultural studies work that foregrounded power relations through cultural analysis was largely inadequate to analyse people's positions inside culture.

As 'cultural studies' as an institutional site came under increasing, and often unfair, attack (Ferguson and Golding 1997), the momentum for enriching our understanding of the interrelations of culture and power increasingly came from *outside* cultural studies. In terms of *class*, critical psychologist Valerie Walkerdine's work on young girls and popular culture argued against the assumption that working-class lives are 'boring' unless interpretable as spectacular 'resistance' to wider power structures (1997: 19), insisting on the complex experience of 'coping and surviving' with material and symbolic inequalities (ibid.: 21). For Walkerdine, the relations of individuals to popular culture are anything but 'natural', shaped as they are by the *lack* of other means of legitimated self-expression. In terms of *gender* and *class*, sociologist Beverly Skeggs (1997) analysed English working-class women's attempts to achieve social 'respectability', for example through what she calls 'passing': working-class women passing, more or less successfully, as middle-class through various forms of performance. This is not simply self-directed social advancement, but a consequence of something deeper: the fact that those women did not have available to them narratives through which they could speak positively about themselves *as* working-class women (1997: 95). Performing another class position represented not so much a desire to be middle-class, as

a desire *not* to be regarded as ‘merely’ working-class (ibid.: 87). Skeggs saw this as a complex ‘disidentification’ (Skeggs, 1997: 93) that operated within a highly unequal class-based society, an insight that remains of great relevance given that class inequalities in Britain (as well as the USA) have increased in the era of neoliberal democracy; yet such processes of disidentification could not in principle be grasped within the cultural ‘holism’ of early cultural studies. In terms of *ethnicity* and ‘*race*’, Pierre Bourdieu’s important collection of interviews, *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1999), demonstrated that, without individual stories, our picture of the social terrain is inadequate. Meanwhile, sociologist Les Back’s work on multiethnic London showed the value of listening closely to young people’s reflections on cultural identity and the complexity of their identifications with ‘black’ culture, music and fashion (Back 1996). In relation to the apparently banal practice of *media* consumption, Ron Lembo, a US cultural sociologist, showed how the cheap, always available resource of television can provide a site of ‘disengaged sociality’ for those whose tough work lives and lack of other resources give them few opportunities for engagement (Lembo 2000). Once again, this greatly complicates our view of popular culture as something with which people simply ‘identify’.

So in spite of its initial opening up of the implications of studying culture, cultural studies’ early promise to contribute to a broader sociological understanding of culture stalled because of an implicit early functionalism and a diversion from the mid 1980s into excessive theory. Innovative empirical research on individuals’ complex place in wider cultural formations was left to be conducted elsewhere. Let’s now consider some more recent work, in cultural sociology and cultural studies, which develops these issues in ways that connect back to the third strand of early cultural studies’ concerns with the possibilities for democratic culture.

The promise of recent cultural sociology and cultural studies

The themes of mediation, globalization and neoliberalism were already implicit in the work, for example, of Skeggs, Back and Lembo just discussed and they provide the new dialogue between cultural sociology and cultural studies that is starting to become visible.

The intensified *mediation* of everyday life – particularly through digitalization which enables a vast intertext across multiple interfaces - promises to intensify the de-differentiation of cultural taste that has been progressing since the 1960s. At the very least, the increasing saturation of everyday life by media outputs requires us to find new ways of analysing media cultures, and the ways in which such cultures acquire ‘depth’. Sociologist Brian Longhurst’s recent book *Cultural Change and Ordinary Life* (2007) helpfully clarifies the difficult issues here, attempting a wider reconciliation sociology and media/cultural studies (2007: 4). As he puts it: ‘media and cultural studies . . . are still not social enough . . . by the same token, many aspects of sociological study have been insufficiently cultural’ (2007: 121). Longhurst’s approach, influenced by the sociology of taste (Peterson and Simkus 1996) and by sociology and media studies’ work on fandom (Harrington and Bielby 1995), identifies important areas where a cultural studies attention to the experience of cultural consumption can be enriched by detailed sociological attention to everyday forms of performing/acting-out audience engagement (compare Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998); also by studying the huge diversity of taste patterns across multiple media and the continued role of class in shaping taste and cultural capital (compare for Australia Bennett Emmison and Frow 1999). Instead of limiting his analysis to the ‘popular’, Longhurst is clear that the object of cultural analysis must be the whole field of taste and the ways in which value is generated right across social space.

Working at the boundary between cultural sociology and media/cultural studies, David Hesmondhalgh (2007), like Longhurst, looks to detailed fieldwork, in this case long reflective interviews with people about the trajectory of their musical taste. Hesmondhalgh opens up an interesting new area for cultural sociology by exploring ‘what kinds of sentiments of social solidarity might lay within and beneath people’s everyday discussions of what they value in music’ (2007: 523). Hesmondhalgh wants to avoid the standard reduction of talk about aesthetics to the play of power or distinction; he argues this requires close attention to ‘the actuality of how people tend to talk about what they like and dislike’ (2007: 524). Again, this offers a plausible expansion of cultural sociology via detailed fieldwork that goes beyond some cultural studies’ previous narrow focus on celebrating ‘the popular’.

Already from these two examples, it is clear that mediated cultural consumption is sociologically very rich, but much more remains to be done to understand its changing dynamics in a digital age. Meanwhile the challenges posed by *globalization* go even deeper, affecting not only *what* we are doing with culture, but the boundaries of belonging and community on which previous territorial notions of ‘culture’ implicitly relied. Particularly important here in opening out a common space of inquiry for cultural sociology *and* cultural studies in the face of globalization is Les Back’s recent book *The Art of Listening* (2007). This book responds to the sociological challenges of today’s ‘global war on terror’, intensified cross-border migration, and fear; it is striking also in its methodological sensitivity, drawing *both* on cultural studies’ origins in a commentary on democracy (2007: 167, discussing Raymond Williams) and recent calls by Michael Burawoy for a ‘public sociology’ (2007: 114, quoting Burawoy 2005). For Back, the methodological challenge for contemporary cultural analysis comes from the sheer *difficulty of getting a perspective* on the dense packing of stories and lives in multicultural cities such as London. This requires ‘look[ing] for the outside story that is part of the inside story’ (2007: 9), cultivating a ‘global sociological imagination’ (2007: 11) that is sensitive to underlying economic, political and security pressures and the ordinariness of multicultural exchange. ‘There is a need’ Back argues, ‘to find a language to speak of the unspectacular ways in which people live with and across the cultural complexities of sameness and difference’ (2007: 148). Here, drawing on the resources of detailed fieldwork within the sociological and anthropological traditions, Back offers a way of reconnecting with Raymond Williams’ vision of academic original work that addresses the promise of democracy.

At the same time, as cultural sociology revises its modes of analysis and styles of discourse, we must recognise certain forces –above all, *neoliberalism*’s absolute prioritization of market values over all social or political values – as a challenge to the projects of critical cultural analysis and democracy. Recent cultural studies that stays obsessed with the issue of the ‘popular’ necessarily misses this wider development. However, within cultural studies, there have been three recent contributions by writers within the original tradition of cultural studies, that challenge neoliberalism directly. Larry Grossberg’s recent book *Caught in the Crossfire* (2007) uses a variety of sources (sociology, documentary analysis, policy and economic data) to clarify the history and provenance of neoliberal policies that in the USA have discounted youth and education. Henry Giroux (2008) in his book *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* has identified the evacuation of politics and the devaluing of youth under neoliberalism as a key object of analysis for cultural studies. Angela McRobbie (2008) in *The Aftermath of Feminism* discusses contemporary womens’ and girls’ media and argues that feminism’s suppression has produced a melancholia; the resulting loss of feminist voices reworks feminist freedoms into a consumerist rhetoric of sexualised performance.

In various ways, each of these writers is challenging the adequacy of today's democratic cultures through arguments that, even they do not always draw if on actual sociological fieldwork, imply the need for sociological inquiry into the workings of contemporary cultural experience on the ground. The potential dialogue between cultural sociology and cultural studies is already therefore being revived: will it continue?

Conclusion

It is clear that there has been plenty of work within broader cultural sociology (sketched here) that would provide a basis for reviving the dialogue between cultural sociology and one strand within early cultural studies and, in doing so, reviving the momentum of cultural studies itself. For this potential dialogue to develop, perhaps an adjustment is needed on the side of cultural studies. Cultural studies needs to rediscover a focus that requires, once more, its distinctive attention to the power-laden complexity of culture. While many claim that cultural studies is 'dead', I have tried here to give a different sense of where those interested in reviving its fortunes should turn. The way forward lies in developing a renewed empirical understanding of how culture is lived that is adequate to the challenges of contemporary politics, of which one stands out: the threatened closure of democratic politics by neoliberal discourse that gives absolute priority to market values over social or political values. I have argued elsewhere that there is a crisis of voice under neoliberalism (Couldry 2008). Cultural studies' may have a role in helping us to analyse and think beyond that crisis. If so, the third and largely neglected strand in cultural studies' origins – the analysis of the problems of democratic culture – would return centre stage.

Fortunately this moment of potential crisis for democratic culture (and cultural studies) is also a good time for cultural sociology to return to dialogue with cultural studies. Not only has there, from many directions, been revived interest over the past decade in analysing the symbolic dimensions of politics (Melucci 1996) and their exclusion (Eliasoph 1998, Croteau 1995); rethinking the sites and purposes of democratic politics has itself become a topic of increasing urgency (Hardt and Negri 2004; Balibar 2004). Meanwhile, a new culturally-oriented political sociology has emerged which problematises the concept of 'political culture' in ways that are quite compatible with the strand of cultural studies emphasised in this chapter (Somers 1995). While some versions of this latest cultural turn may, once again, prove inhospitable to cultural studies' emphasis on power - for example Alexander's work that continues, even if in ever more complex ways, to see culture as 'system': Alexander 2007; Alexander and Smith 1993: 196 - others may prove more fruitful.

I have tried to see what signs of emerging dialogue can be discerned from the recent landscape of cultural research, but we must wait and see. Certainly this is no time to give up on the long-promised dialogue between sociology and cultural studies, however interrupted its trajectory. Indeed, its resumption may never have been more necessary.

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