Issues in Sociology

Rethinking the Relationship Between the Social and the Cultural

Gary Wickham wrote this article in response to Phillip Smith's piece on culture which appeared in the February 2002 edition of Nexus.

In the last issue of *Nexus,* Phillip Smith challenged sociologists and social and cultural theorists more generally to pay greater attention to the complex relationship between 'the social and 'the cultural.' He did so by offering three possibilities for rethinking this relationship. He cast each of the three as a distinct response to that 'older' thinking that led to a separation of a 'cultural sociology' from a 'sociology of culture.' The first possibility sees no further need for such a distinction, but not because this possibility is a peacemaker, seeking a compromise between the two older positions. Rather, it is a victory chant, based on the conviction that cultural sociology 'has unambiguously won' the war against the sociology of culture. The second possibility is based on the argument that for all their 'fancy word games and denunciations of classical Marxism', the proponents of the first possibility 'have yet to produce a deeper analytic sea change'; here, the sociology of culture is doing the chanting. The third possibility rejects the 'binaries' of the first two: 'A process of theoretical synthesis and reconstruction has seen new theories emerge and old theories revitalize'; 'New thinkers and new concepts' are employed to find 'creative ways to rework our understandings of culture.' Smith concludes that 'there is a strong feeling that exciting things are happening' in debates about the relationship between the social and the cultural. (Smith 2002:11)

While I very much admire Smith's grasp of the complexities of these debates, I do not agree with his upbeat conclusion. I think none of the three possibilities contains the seeds of a new way of thinking about the relationship between the social and the cultural. For me, they are three expressions of the one dominant approach to the study of the social and the cultural. In being this, they assume the existence of a 'special' dimension to the study of human interaction and its traces: a moral dimension. For this dominant approach, 'social,' 'cultural,' and 'moral' are overlapping and inextricably-linked terms. The overlapping and inter-linking take place around the idea of 'pure rational being,' though not in a straightforward way. Rather, the dominant approach is the outcome of a particularly nineteenth-century development, whereby Kant's doctrine of rational being was historicised by Hegel and re-emerged as a teleological theory. This teleological theory still retains the core of the Kantian metaphysics, but now treats the recovery of rational being or spirit as something that will take place, however long it takes, via the dialectical development of society and/or culture.

In calling this approach 'the dominant approach to the study of the social and the cultural,' I am trying to succinctly capture both the spirit and the practice of the great bulk of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Western academic research into the social and the cultural. It will be noted, however, that I am doing no more than asserting that this approach is dominant. That is all I have room to do here. Indeed, stringing together assertions into a provocative package is what this short article is all about. I do no more than offer some hints about the 'civil science' direction I think the study of the social and the cultural should be taking, and some (more) critical remarks about the 'dominant approach'.

In doing these things, I rely upon Ian Hunter's (2001) recent book, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany,* especially upon his efforts in retrieving a brand of civil philosophy from the second half of the seventeenth century. This brand of philosophy, featuring, particularly, the work of Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius, worked as a dedicated rival to metaphysical philosophy. In saying this, I stress that I am thereby aware, via Hunter, of the noteworthy paradox entailed in the post seventeenth-century history of this version of civil philosophy.

This paradox concerns intellectual behaviour in the modern West. Modern university disciplines in the West, especially in the humanities and social sciences, owe much of their current form to the rise of secularism and the secular state. Without the separation of church and state (and all the other statist developments for which Pufendorfian and Thomasian civil philosophy is responsible, directly or indirectly), the capacity to pursue knowledge free from the dogmas of various religions would be sadly lacking. However, many, probably most, intellectuals working in the humanities and social sciences in modern Western secular universities pay no more than lip-service to the importance of secularity. Indeed, they usually seek to conduct themselves and their disciplines as guardians of moral, or politico-moral, positions. These positions, of course, have differing contents, but they are, by and large, unified in being against the 'amoral' instrumentalising of the secular state, against, that is, the very 'amoral' instrumentalising that serves to guarantee their 'intellectual freedom.'

I also rely on the Epicurean basis of civil philosophy, especially its account of human happiness. Epicurus (341-271 B.C.) believed that the search for human happiness involves an attempt to balance pleasure and pain, the two elemental emotional states with which we are born (as are all beasts) (Epicurus 1993:1994). The pleasure and pain is generated not just by our desires for food, sex, water and warmth. For Epicurus, a good deal of our unhappiness stems from our passions, especially our religious passions. Epicurus was strongly opposed to the effects of believing in other-worldliness and the possibility of life after death. This is probably the main reason he has been much vilified since his era, with the exception of a few periods, such as the seventeenth century. By his account, we do not realise that the very act of passionate pleasure-seeking (whether in this life or, especially, in the hope of some future life) causes pain, to ourselves and others. The seventeenth-century revival of Epicureanism allowed Pufendorf and Thomasius, among others, to use Epicurus' conception of passionate man as a weapon against the metaphysical philosophers and their anthropology of rational being. Hunter says that Pufendorf, in building his version of natural law, developed a decidedly Epicurean position on sociality:

> [Pufendorf] characterises natural man as a creature whose weakness ... necessitates sociality for survival but whose "vices render dealing with him risky and make great caution necessary to avoid receiving evil from him instead of good". Unlike the beasts, man's appetites for sex and food are limitless and impossible to satisfy. Moreover: "Many other passions and desires are found in the human race unknown to the beasts, as,

greed for unnecessary possessions, avarice, desire of glory and surpassing others, envy, rivalry and intellectual strife. It is indicative that many of the wars by which the human race is broken and bruised are waged for reasons unknown to the beasts" ... Man's petulance, his capacity for giving and receiving offence, combined with his extraordinary capacity for violence, makes his natural condition a very dangerous one, particularly when one takes into account the great divisions in human beliefs and ways of life. (Hunter 2001:171-2, quoting Pufendorf)

From this, I draw a very important distinction. On the one hand, we have an Epicurean basis for non-dialectical accounts of society and culture: those modelled, we might say, on Pufendorf's (or Hobbes's) kingdom, where persons are understood to be in a condition of permanent and inescapable mutual predation such that agreement between them comes from their fear of their neighbours, and from the sovereign appointed to deal with this fear; those for which the state is an historical institution improvised to rule over the societies and cultures it contains. On the other hand, we have a Christian-Platonic/Christian-Aristotelian basis for dialectical accounts of society and culture: those modelled on Kant's kingdom of ends as a community of saints, living in a world of economic scarcity and social inequality; those for which the state is an historically-formed obstacle to the dialectical unity of the moral solidarity of society and culture.

The dominant approach to the study of the social-cultural is definitely in the second of these two camps. It operates on the back of the assumptions of metaphysical anthropology (*homo duplex*). These assumptions, born in the Christian-Platonic/Christian-Aristotelian tradition, have us understand 'man' as a perfectible rational being, always potentially striving to break free from the brute empiricism that is his baser nature - 'man as a being of pure reason temporarily mortgaged to the experiences and inclinations of his sensible nature' (Hunter 2001:20).

An important, indeed vital, role for the dialectical aspect of the dominant approach, as suggested above, is to serve as a means of self-justification for the intellectuals who operate this approach (and are simultaneously operated by it). 'Under these intellectual conditions, the [intellectual] views the [object] in terms of ... unreconciled oppositions ... and finds his or her own ethical impulse in the need to repeat the moment of their Kantian reconciliation.' (Hunter 2001:ix-x) By insisting that these intellectuals be always engaged in acts of intellectual reconciliation, this is to say, the dialectical strategy has the effect of reassuring them that they are most definitely within the elite of 'pure rational beings,' they are most definitely 'properly developed' intellectuals. It is this capacity to allow intellectuals to understand themselves and their work as not just morally and politically important, but also morally and politically independent, I am suggesting, that is the driving force behind the dominance of the dominant approach.

Finally, where the dominant approach welcomes the richness of social and cultural life as a source of the 'natural' goodness and happiness associated with the pure rational being to which the governance of the modern secular state must be reconciled, the Epicurean element of the study of the social-cultural as a civil science necessitates a very different tack. The dominant approach insists that the richness of social and cultural life organically achieves the widest possible human happiness via individual and group activity undertaken against the grain of the modern secular state, at best, or, at worst, undertaken in direct opposition to the state. For the study of the social-cultural as a civil science, on the other hand, the richness of social and cultural life can only achieve the widest possible human happiness if and to the extent that such happiness is dependent upon the secular modern state. The richness of social and cultural life, this is to say, cannot be assumed to be automatically a means to the widest possible human happiness. Indeed, in the light of the fact that this approach was born as part of a response to a period of shocking religious strife that is an example of the all-too-present darker side of the richness of social and cultural life, it is hardly surprising that the study of the social-cultural as a civil science adopts a more cautious stance on the question of how best to account for such richness.

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Journal of Sociology

Vol 38, No 2 June 2002

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