



On the Intellectual Origins of the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology (and Its Links with Sociology at Masaryk University)¹

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I am deeply honored to be awarded this honorary doctorate from Masaryk University, not only generally, because of Masaryk's scientific reputation, but specifically – because I have for many years closely collaborated with sociologists at this university. The focus of our working together has been the development of cultural sociology, a non-reductive approach to the study of collective meaning that is known as “the strong program.” I would like to take this opportunity to trace the intellectual origins of this research program. I will conclude by indicating, all too briefly, how the strong program became a topic of collaboration with my colleagues here in Brno.

The strong program in cultural sociology emerged from the intertwining of two classical sources. One is the *Geisteswissenschaft* tradition originating with Wilhelm Dilthey, in Germany, in the late nineteenth century. Dilthey sharply put the distinction between the sciences of nature and the sciences of the spirit. He explained that the human sciences orient themselves toward the inner rather than outer, toward subjectivity, meaning, and experience. Their method has, therefore, to be interpretive, or hermeneutic. The hermeneutic method is shared between the interpretive social sciences and the humanities, where the focus is the written text. As Paul Ricoeur would later put it, if meaning is our first concern, then the social scientific analyst must find a way to “convert” meaningful social action into an interpretable text. This text reveals the “inside” of action. In cultural sociology, we call this textual inside a “culture structure.” The first goal of any strong program effort must be to find the culture structure, or structures, that inform an individual, group, or institutional action, and to give this structure as much force and integrity as the other, more material (organizational, political, economic, demographic) kinds of structures that social scientists usually find.

It is Dilthey (as amended by Ricoeur) who provides the broad orientation to meaning and the defense of interpretive method that has allowed a cultural form of macro-sociology to emerge – as compared with the micro-sociologies inspired by phenomenology and pragmatism, which are subjectively oriented but do not reveal “structures” whether of a cultural

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or material kind. To understand this philosophical foundation for a macro-cultural sociology, it is vital to read Max Weber considering Dilthey, for it was from this founder of the *Geisteswissenschaften* that Weber took so many of his cultural cues. Weber's most important work of cultural sociology is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He insists, following Dilthey, that there is an inner meaning to *capitalism*, its spirit, and with the help of Benjamin Franklin, and Weber's own family history, he reconstructs this economic cultural structure as a form of disciplined asceticism. Once this culture structure of economic action is revealed, a new problem of causal understanding appears. For, instead of asking simply, "what caused *capitalism*?" we must ask, "what has caused the capitalist *spirit*?" Once this new question is on the explanatory table, it allows Weber to look outside the laws of economic life – the kind of laws to which Marx attributes capitalism's origins in *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* – to religious life. He finds that the "Protestant ethic" contains quite a similar culture structure to that of modern capitalism, and he establishes that the centers of early British capitalism were also centers of Puritan activity.

In Weber's comparative studies of world religions, we find other impressive exercises in hermeneutic reconstruction, e.g., his comparison between the meaning structures of prophetic religion and modern social criticism in *Ancient Judaism* or the comparison of the Confucian gentleman and the Puritan saint in *Religion of China*. The great paradox of Weber's legacy, indeed its tragedy, is that, with some minor if significant exceptions, he does not extend this Dilthey-inspired interpretive approach to the political, organizational, and historical sociology he developed in *Economy and Society*. This tragedy is compounded by Weber's ideological conviction that modernity is so deracinated that the meaningful patterning of action has become well-nigh impossible – "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling, we are forced to do so." According to Weber's cultural pessimism, the narrative telos of traditional societies had been displaced by the efficient causality of mechanism. We live in a rationalized world without meanings or gods. I established this interpretation of Weber in the third volume of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1983) – *The Classical Attempt at Synthesis: Max Weber*. This interpretation set forth the challenge: To find a way of continuing Weber's cultural sociology in a manner that goes against the instrumental insights of the broad thrust of his comparative, historical, and macro-sociological work.

It is Emile Durkheim and the tradition he established (see Smith [2020], *Durkheim and After: The Durkheim Tradition, 1893-2020*) that allows us to meet this challenge, providing the corrective that allows us to establish a meaning-centered sociology for the modern age. The early and middle writings of Durkheim had been interpreted in a structural and functional manner, and his writings on so-called primitive societies had been read as complementing the conviction, shared by Weber and Marx, that such phenomena as mechanical solidarity, collective conscience, ritual, and symbol were relevant primarily to simpler societies of pre-modern times. In the second volume of *Theoretical Logic* (1982), I challenged this interpretation, arguing that the later Durkheim, particularly that of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, was not so much an effort to lay the groundwork for an anthropology of simple societies as an effort to construct the basic concepts for understanding the "religious," or meaning-centered nature of modern life. I continued to elaborate and develop this interpretation, for

example in *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (1988) and, with Philip Smith, in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (2005).

In his later work, Durkheim explained that, at the heart of every group, whether small or wide, there exists a symbolic order of collective representations, which is sharply divided between the sacred and profane. In orienting themselves to this meaning pattern, social actors create solidarities, engage in rituals, and circulate powerful collectively structured “mana,” or meaning-feelings. It was because Ferdinand Saussure attended Durkheim’s lectures in Paris that he created what would later come to be called the structural understanding of linguistics, which Saussure defined as one part of a *general* “semiotics” that could be applied to investigate the “signs” that make meaning, not only in language, but in social institutions writ large. Through the work of the master of the Prague School, Roman Jakobson, his mentee Claude Levi-Strauss, and most critically Roland Barthes, these Saussurean insights were elaborated into a thriving interdisciplinary study of how sign systems work in traditional and contemporary life. Thinkers from Althusser and Baudrillard to Foucault took this legacy in different ways, but their debt to the late Durkheim remained. Most important for the strong program, however, were other late-Durkheimian manifestations – the three key figures of 1960s and 1970s symbolic anthropology, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz.

Geertz is the key figure who not only adumbrated but directly inspired the strong program approach to cultural sociology. The reason is that he combined so seamlessly the hermeneutic Dilthey-Weber tradition with the semiotic-structuralist one. That Geertz was able to do so in such an elegant manner was due in no small part to the fact that he had been trained by the most sophisticated sociological theorist of the mid-century period, Talcott Parsons. Parsons’ work provided the bridge between the classics of Weber and Durkheim and the more culturally sensitive strong program approach of the present day, though in Parsons’ own hands this bridge became a dead-end.

When I began to be interested in sociology and culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was inspired by a Marxian variant of the classical traditions I have just described. I became an intellectual under the nourishing, if also often distorting, umbrella of “New Left” Marxism, a cultural form of Marxism developed from a Hegelian reading of Marx. This Hegelian reading was inspired by Gramsci’s ideas about cultural hegemony, ideas that were themselves rooted in Croce, who had been deeply influenced by Dilthey and also Weber. It was also nourished by Lukacs’s ideas about commodification as reification, which drew from Weberian theory, and by semiotically inspired theories of ideology such as those of Althusser and Baudrillard. The focus was on the relative autonomy of superstructural ideology and the role of symbols, not material experience, in shaping consciousness.

As my ideological commitments changed, Parsons provided a bridge back to the classical traditions from which cultural Marxism had itself emerged. Reinterpreting these classical texts, I “passed through” the great American structural-functional theorist on the way to developing a more cultural social theory, inspired not only by symbolic anthropology and semiotics but by the linguistic turn in philosophy, the narrative turn in literary theory, and by performance studies – which taken together inspired the “cultural turn” that swept through the human sciences in the second third of the 20th century. I moved away from the values- and institutions-based theories of Parsons and conceptualized a sociological way to take up, to

“sociologize,” the revolutionary innovations that were transforming other, non-sociological disciplines.

There were, of course, other significant sociological responses to the cultural turn outside the strong program. In Europe, these were primarily neo-Marxist innovations, like the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in the UK, Bourdieu’s practice theory in France, and Habermasian critical theory in Germany. In the US, while these European take-ups of the cultural turn did wield significant influence, there were home-grown, more pragmatist-inspired responses as well, most notably neo-institutional organizational sociology and the production-of-culture school. Each of these European and American efforts were “weak programs” in the study of culture. They took up the cultural turn, not to incorporate the relative autonomy of culture, but rather to overcome it. They were about the sociology of culture, not cultural sociology.

In my view, the “strong program in cultural sociology” is the only systematic theoretical effort to make meaning central to a macro-sociology of modernity. The strong program began as a critical reading not only of classical but of modern sociological theories, e.g., my *Twenty Lectures* (1987) and my book-length essay critiquing Bourdieu (1995). The strong program came to life, during the late 1980s and 1990s, as a broad set of theoretical postulates and dense empirical studies – conducted by myself, my collaborators, and my students – of the manner in which codes, narratives, and ritual processes structure modern cultural life. In the last two decades, this theoretical approach crystallized into a series of research programs about collective traumas, the civil sphere, social movements, war and violence, race and gender, political campaigns and scandals, and material symbols, or icons. The general premises of the strong program have been reformulated in the model of cultural pragmatics, which emerged from speech act theory and performance studies and provides an analytical model for relating structure and agency, the ideal and material, power and meaning. Cultural pragmatics continues the decades-long effort to “modernize” the foundational ideas of Durkheim and Weber that have energized and propelled the strong program cultural sociology up to the present day.

Despite the special significance I attribute to the strong program, contemporary sociology has produced other serious and productive efforts along the same lines. William Sewell, Jr., Viviana Zelizer, Robin Wagner-Pacific, and Michele Lamont are only the more prominent American sociologists who have also explored the relative autonomy of the deep meanings that sustain the inner life of so-called material social structures in modern times. These efforts draw upon the same sources as those that inspired the strong program – Dilthey, Weber, Durkheim, Saussure, Barthes, Turner, Douglas, Geertz, and Parsons. It is no wonder there are so many significant homologies between our efforts, and such striking differences between our work and the weak programs that reduce meaning to social structure or agency.

Let me now return briefly to the links between strong cultural sociology and Masaryk. If one can find in the Sociology Department of Masaryk University some of Europe’s leading cultural sociologists – and that is most certainly the case – I would trace the origins of this unique collaboration to a visit that Radim Marada made to Yale’s Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) in 2005. In 2006, I wrote a special Forward to Marada’s edited collection *Ethnic Diversity and Civic Unity*, which contained translations of two of my texts on ethnic

incorporation. Soon after, I made the first of several visits to Masaryk's burgeoning department that Marada then headed, offering lectures and seminars, and, in 2010, an "intensive course" in cultural sociology to graduate students and doctoral candidates. In 2012, Marada spent eight months at Yale CCS, and Csaba Szalo, Radim's successor as Chair, participated in the annual CCS "Spring Conference." Under their joint leadership, Masaryk's Sociology Department launched a joint graduate training program in cultural sociology with Trento University (Italy), Graz (Austria), and Zadar (Croatia).

During these years, some of my closest colleagues – like Bernhard Giesen, Ron Eyerman, Giuseppe Sciortino, and Carlo Tognato – and some of my most notable students – like Philip Smith, Jason Mast, and Isaac Reed – visited Brno. (Mast returned for a visit only weeks ago.) These growing institutional links, along with special EU funding, led directly to Masaryk post-doctoral appointments for Nadya Jaworsky and Dominik Bartmanski, both Yale PhDs, and for Werner Binder, who had taken his degree with Bernhard Giesen at Konstanz University. Binder and Jaworsky eventually became members of the faculty – which has just voted to make Nadya a full professor. This impressive cultural sociology cluster, further enriched by Pavel Pospech, who has also visited Yale CCS, soon began to train outstanding doctoral students of their own. Some of these, like Vanda Cernohorska and Jan Vana, made long term visits to CCS as well.

In a perceptive 2021 article, "The Recurrent Motif of Cultural Autonomy in the Development of Czech Sociology of Culture," Charles University sociologist Marek Skovajsa singled out Masaryk's department for "accumulat[ing] the essential institutional and, above all, intellectual resources" that have allowed it to become a visible participant in "the internationalized research programme of cultural sociology." Skovajsa argued that this sociological achievement built upon a broad interest in matters cultural that had long marked Czech intellectual life, from Masaryk's philosophical investigations of literature and Blaha's "federal functionalism" to Petrusek and Alan's post-communist writings of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

But that is another story, which I certainly have neither the space nor the linguistic competence to take your time up with today. Let me conclude, then, by expressing, once again, my appreciation for the fact that you have honored both me and the strong program in cultural sociology with the bestowal of this honorary degree.