

Talking about Culture

Philip Smith (2001)

Cultural Theory: An Introduction. Massachusetts: Blackwell. ISBN: 0-631-21175-6.

This is another excellent offering from Blackwell's 21st Century Sociology Series edited by Steven Seidman. Providing a timely, accessible and concise account of classical and contemporary social theory it will undoubtedly become an essential text for teachers and undergraduate students.

The preface opens on a striking note: 'As we enter a new millennium, "culture" seems to be one of the things that everybody is talking about' (p.vi). Smith uses our preoccupation with culture and cultural identity to link classical social theory, mainly discussed in sociology and the social sciences, with contemporary 'cultural theory' mainly discussed in cultural studies. In a neat move, Smith's focus on 'cultural theory' seeks to overcome both the confines of many sociology texts, which tend to completely disregard the enormous significance of cultural studies work, and the limitations of many cultural studies texts, which are blind to their own intellectual heritage in the sociology.

Smith quite rightly suggests that familiarity with cultural theory will help us to understand a world that is now shaped by sights, symbols, media and images; a world where inequalities and participation are shaped by ideas about who is and is not included in culture, and where political challenges are 'as much about identities and cultural recognition as about economic inequality and legal rights' (p.vi).

The book's account of cultural theory is intended to offer a toolkit for students of sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies by explaining the changing circumstances that inform our choices. General intentions aside, it is difficult to ascertain precisely what Smith means by cultural theory and how it differs from social theory. To get around the messiness of the fields of social and cultural theory, Smith focuses the early chapters of the book (mainly dealing with sociologists who were preoccupied with questions of 'society' and social theory), on their understanding of culture, while the latter sections – from the poststructural turn onwards, have less need to foreground the significance of culture, even though their understandings of culture may well be equally submerged and difficult to get to grips with.

For Smith, culture refers to all aspects and levels of social life, not just intellectual or artistic activities, or ways of life, activities, beliefs and customs but:

- a) something that is more abstract and distinctive than material, technological and social structural 'ways of life';

- b) patterned beliefs, values, symbols and signs and discourses pertaining to the realm of ideal, spiritual and non-material;
- c) an emphasis on the autonomy of culture from economic forces distributions of power or social structural needs;
- d) the attempt to be value neutral (p.4).

Unfortunately, however, Smith's sparse four page introduction to cultural theory does not expand on its more problematic assumptions and this is the only chapter of the book that does not include suggested further readings. His account of the complexities of the term 'culture' and exploration of various theoretical approaches do not explain why we should favour the term 'cultural' theory over the more commonplace 'social' theory.

The book proceeds chronologically and is organised around various theories and theoretical movements. The introduction opens by distinguishing culture and cultural theory. Subsequent chapters focus on 1) Culture in Classical Social Theory; 2) Culture and Social Integration in the Work of Talcott Parsons; 3) Culture as Ideology in Western Marxism; 4) Culture as Action in Symbolic Interactionism, Phenomenology, and Ethnomethodology; 5) The Durkheimians: Ritual, Classification, and the Sacred; 6) Structuralism and the Semiotic Analysis of Culture; 7) The Poststructural Turn; 8) Culture, Structure, and Agency: Three Attempts at Synthesis; 9) British Cultural Studies; 10) The Production and Reception of Culture; 11) Culture as Text: Narrative and Hermeneutics; 12) Psychoanalytic Approaches to Culture and the Self; 13) The Cultural Analysis of Postmodernism and Postmodernity; and 14) Postmodern and Poststructural Critical Theory. Each of these chapters offers a concise overview of its main arguments, brief biographies of central thinkers, key concepts and terms, and a brief critique of the theoretical perspective.

Although Smith acknowledges that raised political challenges have been raised by feminism, queer theory, and 'racial' and Indigenous minorities studies, a major shortcoming of the book is the absence of theories generated out of these new social movements. Indeed, I would argue that work undertaken in these areas contributed to our dissatisfaction with traditional social theory and has thereby assisted the intellectual rise to prominence of 'cultural theory'.

Overall, this book offers a readable account of some very difficult theories and approaches, and so will be a welcomed by teachers and students alike.

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