

DE GRUYTER  
OLDENBOURG

# SOZIOLOGIE - SOCIOLOGY IN THE GERMAN- SPEAKING WORLD

SPECIAL ISSUE SOZIOLOGISCHE REVUE 2020

*Edited by Betina Hollstein, Rainer Greshoff,  
Uwe Schimank and Anja Weiß*

DE  
G

Uta Karstein and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr

## Culture

**Abstract:** This article discusses the major currents in the analysis of culture in German-language sociology. First, it sheds light on the role of culture in the history of sociology. Second, it reconstructs the main fields of research in the last 20 years. The authors employ the distinction between sociology of culture and cultural sociology. With regard to the first, the article addresses new types of work in the creative sphere, the changing role of the public, as well as the relation between class and culture. With regard to the second, with its focus on social meaning, the article presents theoretical contributions as well as research from different fields in sociology, in which a cultural sociological perspective has proven to be illuminating.

**Keywords:** Cultural sociology, sociology of culture, social meaning

### 1 Cultural Sociology as a Sociology of Meaning

Writing about cultural sociology in German-speaking countries has long meant writing about *sociology* as such. The founding fathers of sociology were at the same time the classics of cultural sociology, and teaching cultural sociology means teaching sociological theory still today. Another characteristic of German-language sociology is that there has not been a sociological “family drama” comparable to the one that Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues determined within US-American sociology (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith, 2012: 6), a rift that was triggered in the US by the rebellion against Parsons’ sociology. An effect of this rebellion was that culture as a reference of sociological explanation largely disappeared. In Germany, by contrast, none other than Max Weber prominently addressed the “cultural significance” of social and historical phenomena, and Georg Simmel focused on the tension between subjective and objective culture. The legacy carried over to the next generation of sociologists: Karl Mannheim addressed the relationship between styles of thought and socio-cultural milieus (Endreß, 2019a; Corsten, 2010); Alfred Schütz laid the theoretical and methodological foundations of a phenomenological theory of culture (Endreß, 2019b);<sup>1</sup> Norbert Elias closely intertwined social analysis and cultural analysis in his works on the theory of civilization; and within the framework of the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen (Delitz, 2011), culture became the constitutional foundation of humans and their sociality. Even

---

<sup>1</sup> Both Mannheim and Schütz are usually associated with the sociology of knowledge rather than with the sociology of culture. For reasons of space, we unfortunately cannot further illuminate the connections between the two here. The sociology of knowledge has established itself institutionally independently in German-speaking countries, but the connections to cultural sociology are obvious. Below, we will consider some publications as examples.



today, this starting point distinguishes German-language sociology from that of other countries (Moebius, 2019: 64).

However, the history of German cultural sociology is not without ruptures. After 1945, cultural sociology led a shadowy existence in Germany up until the 1980s—a result of the dominant reception of structural functionalism and the resurgence of historical materialism. At times, cultural sociology was only mentioned within the framework of philosophical anthropology (cf. Fischer and Moebius, 2014: 12).

As elsewhere, the 1980s saw a radical change with the rise of the cultural turn, which again paved the way for cultural sociological perspectives in Germany. With the foundation of the Cultural Sociology section in the German Sociological Association in the mid-1980s, cultural sociology was able to establish itself in Germany. This “revitalization of cultural sociology” (Gebhardt, 2005: 23pp) took on a characteristic form in that founding figures such as Friedrich H. Tenbruck, Wolfgang Lipp, and Hans Peter Thurn deliberately tied in with “Max Weber and a decidedly historical view of the social and cultural” (Moebius, 2019: 74; our translation). The works presented in more detail in the following sections explicitly stand in this tradition.

Cultural sociologists such as Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Joachim Fischer, Heike Delitz, and Robert Seyfert continued the tradition of philosophical anthropology. Since then, other scholars have proposed conflict-theoretical (Rehberg, 2014), affect-theoretical (Seyfert, 2011), life-sociological (Fischer, 2015; Delitz, 2011), and historical-genetic (Dux, 2000) reformulations. They have given a specific character to research fields such as the sociology of architecture as well as the sociology of the body and the sociology of the senses and affects. The major work of Günter Dux (2000), who has brought together natural science (especially brain research) and sociology in a new way, is worthy of special mention here. In Dux’s work, *biological anthropology* replaces philosophical anthropology as the basic science of the humanities and social sciences.

Moreover, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School has remained an important point of reference in cultural sociology. It was above all Hartmut Rosa (2013) who adopted the critical impetus of the Frankfurt School. In his work, acceleration becomes the central concept of a theory of modernity and is cast as a form of alienation. In his works, which are in essence diagnoses of the contemporary period, Rosa pursues a normative theory of modernity, deliberately crossing the boundaries of academic sociology. In particular, his more recent work on resonance (Rosa, 2016) deals with the question of global relations in a society that moves beyond the growth imperative.

Cultural sociology in Germany has long been a sociology thoroughly oriented towards theory and its history. It was successful in this regard, especially after the return of Jewish exiles or the delayed reintegration of their work into German-language sociology. There was enough material to preoccupy the discipline with dealing with Germany’s own history and heritage (Gebhardt, 2005; Adloff et al., 2014; Moebius

and Albrecht, 2014; Schmidt-Lux et al., 2016).<sup>2</sup> However, there have also been movements away from this heritage. Niklas Luhmann (1995), for example, referred to “culture” as a semantics born from comparison and dealt with it from the perspective of a theory of second-order observation.

Hartmut Esser (2001) has also presented an original approach. The last volume of his six-volume textbook is dedicated to culture. There he aims to develop a unified theory of action in which he integrates the “normative” and the “interactionist paradigm,” which he rephrases as “interactionist-rational.” From a background of rational-choice theory, he approaches his goal through an extension of this theory. He thereby focuses on cultural frames, which, in Esser’s analysis, establish the code of subjectively and socially meaningful action. The essential place of acquisition of these frames, according to him, are various *social groups* in which people participate. Through this he intends to show that his model of sociological explanation is also suitable for “explaining the interactive genesis of commonly shared patterns and models of orientation and action—and thus the emergence of culture and social meaning as collective phenomena” (ibid.: XIV; our translation).

Over the last 20 years, the perspective of German-language cultural sociology has been increasingly broadened (cf. Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010). Scholars in this field have shown growing interest in both the French discussion and the Anglo-Saxon debates. Recent handbooks document this broadening of perspective but also the lasting influence of the German sociological tradition. One of them is the two-volume handbook by Stephan Moebius, Frithjof Nungesser, and Katharina Scherke (2019). It adopts a broad understanding of cultural sociology. Noteworthy is the view beyond the ‘Western’ context when, for example, contributions deal with cultural sociology in Japan (Morikawa), Latin America (da Mota), or in South Asia (Rehbein). In addition to the ongoing exchange with history (Scherke), what is evident is also a strong interest in the dialogue with philosophy, ethnology, and (social) anthropology, sparked by the interest in the relationship between nature and culture (Laux, Bogusz, Schützeichel).

Parallel to the re-establishment of cultural sociology as an academic discipline, qualitative methodology was elaborated as well—driven, for example, by authors such as Ulrich Oevermann, Fritz Schütze, and Hans-Georg Soeffner, who have also drawn heavily on sociology’s interpretive tradition. However, an integration of these two perspectives in a decidedly empirical turn in cultural sociology was still to come. Recently, a push in this direction has come from the “Empirical Sociology of Culture Network” (Böcker et al., 2018).

---

<sup>2</sup> The definition of the relationship between cultural sociology and cultural studies was also discussed (Albrecht, 2009; Moebius, 2010).



## 2 Cultural Sociology versus Sociology of Culture

Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues (Alexander et al., 2013) have—while promoting their “strong program”—distinguished between the sociology of culture and cultural sociology. Whereas the former sees culture as a subject area—such as art, popular culture, youth culture, and so on—that needs to be explained, cultural sociology represents an approach that addresses all social phenomena with regard to their meaning and significance and considers ‘culture’ as an explanatory factor. In the context of American sociology, this has been promoted as a fundamental change of direction. Against the backdrop of the German history of sociology, however, there was no need for such a fundamental reorientation. Nevertheless, the distinction proposed by our American colleagues is also suitable for the German context and will be applied in the following.

Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. A sociology of art, for example, can also address the cultural significance of the phenomena and objects under investigation, as Rehberg did with his analysis of the conflict between East and West German art, which he interprets as a representative social discourse on German reunification (cf. Rehberg and Kaiser, 2014). A similar perspective can be found in the study by Dominik Schrage, Holger Schwetter, and Ann-Kathrin Hoklas, who interpreted the popular music of the 1960s and 1970s—and thus its cultural significance—as a medium for the social-transformation processes of this period (Schrage et al., 2019).

In general, however, both perspectives are aligned with different sociological approaches and mostly with different methodologies as well. The sociology of culture often—though not always—relies on quantitative methods. Cultural sociology, on the other hand, has a certain affinity for qualitative approaches.

### 2.1 The current field (1): Sociology of culture

In the German-language sociology of culture, one primary interest lies in the conditions of the production and reception of culture, especially in aesthetic works and products.<sup>3</sup> With regard to production, interesting contributions have come from the sociology of professions and the sociology of work. In recent years, the conditions of work in the cultural and creative professions have repeatedly been the subject of research (Schnell, 2007; Henning et al., 2019). The respective studies, often influenced by the works of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 [1999]), Bröckling (2016 [2007]), and Reckwitz (2017 [2012]), stressed the adaptability of capitalism. The latter has recently adopted the working principles of artists and creative people in particular, who now function as role models for large parts of business and working world. Occupations in

---

<sup>3</sup> There are also sociological views in this field that explicitly position themselves against the cultural turn (Gerhards, 2010).

the cultural and creative industries are situated between the professions and dependent labor. We often find deregulated employment combined with a high degree of personal responsibility (Manske and Schnell, 2018: 435). Particularly in fields of work that are still relatively new, such as design or cultural education, one finds hybrid forms of employment that continuously alternate between dependent and self-employed work.

Contributions that are of relevance to the sociology of culture also came from differentiation theory. The basic assumption is that social spheres can also be determined by the relationship between experts as service providers and the public as their service consumers. Against this backdrop, Jürgen Gerhards (2001) has reconstructed a general trend of growing demands for inclusion on the part of the public since the 1960s. This becomes visible through the ongoing criticism of established cultural institutions that are perceived as elitist and the associated demands for cultural participation as well as through the reevaluation of cultural practices beyond high culture. Nicole Burzan et al. (2008) have also examined the relationship of different social spheres with their publics. They are interested in what they call different “inclusion profiles.” Accordingly, art belongs to those social spheres in which the public is rather weakly included through active (amateur art) or passive (art reception) participation (Burzan et al., 2008: 95). Furthermore, it has been shown that those people who experience above-average inclusion in the sphere of art generally also do so in other social spheres such as religion, politics, science, and education and that this cannot be causally attributed to socio-structural characteristics alone (ibid.: 94). People who fit this inclusion profile are generally characterized by a strong interest in what is happening in the world and how these events can be explained.

These studies indicate the strength of a sociology of culture, as it allows for the comparison of the cultural field with other areas of society by applying general sociological concepts such as profession, public, or inclusion.

Another focus of the sociology of culture is the analysis of social stratification and lifestyle. Here, two competing currents have developed in recent years. On the one hand is a type of research that primarily follows Pierre Bourdieu and perceives cultural preferences as an expression of social stratification and habitus (Otte, 2008; Rössel, 2005; Vester et al., 2001). On the other hand is a type of research that argues in terms of individualization theory. It emphasizes the choices and willful constructions of the subjects (Hitzler, Bucher, and Niederbacher, 2001). In addition, there have been ambitious attempts to mediate between these two poles (Otte, 2007; Gebesmair, 2001; Berli, 2014). In so doing, these endeavors seek to take the intrinsic logic of the cultural field into account, with its distinct discourses, structures of recognition, and economies according to the specific areas or scenes within the larger field of art.

Rainer Diaz-Bone (2002) and Nina Tessa Zahner (2006), among others, have dealt with the inner logic of artistic fields. They have also worked with, and expanded on, Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox. Zahner reconstructed the field of the visual arts in the 20th century and its transformation through the emergence of Pop Art, which could be classified neither in terms of a pure autonomous aesthetic nor as blatantly commercial



art. The economic rise of the American middle classes and their resulting access to the art scene led to the two dominant sub-fields described in Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*—that of pure production and that of mass production—being supplemented in the 1960s, as Zahner argues, by a “sub-field of expanded production” (Zahner 2006: 310; our translation). This sub-field incorporates mechanisms—innovation orientation, uniqueness of the work, and originality of the artists—from the other two sub-fields but also has mass-cultural characteristics such as low barriers to reception.

Diaz-Bone expands Bourdieu's “distinction” in terms of discourse theory. His central thesis is that “only the discursification of cultural objects and practices (of genres) creates a complete, lifestyle-related content so that genres as orders of discourse can have meaningful implications for the conduct of life” (Diaz-Bone, 2002: 17; our translation). Since the social significance of cultural objects cannot be determined either by their material constitution or by the socio-economic position of the social groups that appropriate them, the knowledge order of cultural fields must be given greater consideration. Against this backdrop, Diaz-Bone reconstructs the mechanisms of distinction, inherent to the field, of two music scenes by analyzing their most important magazines.

The problems of the autonomy of art and the epistemological significance of the concept of autonomy raised by these works were later examined both in terms of basic theory (Zahner and Karstein, 2014) and empirically for various subject areas (e.g., film, architecture) (Karstein and Zahner, 2017).

Finally, Anja Frank (Frank, 2018) has dealt with the collective orientations of volunteers in associations that support operas and theaters. In her aptly titled study *Große Gesellschaft in kleiner Gruppe* (*Society at Large in Small Groups*; our translation), she shows that these groups' specific understanding of the artistic work of the respective institution and their related engagement reflects the members' different concepts of self and society and thus infuses their work with a perspective attuned to the “larger society.”

## 2.2 The current field (2): Cultural sociology

The theoretical contributions discussed in the following are only a small selection of what can currently be found in German-language cultural sociology. We have chosen them primarily because they contribute to a theory of culture in a more specific sense. However, there are also other theoretical contributions that are worth exploring. The works on urban sociology and space by Martina Löw (2001; 2010; Berking and Löw, 2008) and Markus Schroer (2005), which are dealt with in a separate article in this issue, are particularly worthy of mention. Impressive works can also be found in the field of architectural sociology. While Heike Delitz (2009) in her sociology of architecture brings philosophical anthropology into dialogue with the French sociology and philosophy of life of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and others, Silke Steets (2015)

has extended Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's sociology of knowledge to the subject of architecture.

### 2.2.1 Recent explorations in cultural sociological theory

In addition to the continuation of existing theoretical traditions, the last two decades have also seen the emergence of new outlines of cultural-sociological theory, with Andreas Reckwitz's contribution certainly being one of the most highly regarded. His book on the transformation of cultural theories (Reckwitz, 2000) notes increasing convergences in this field. In these convergences, he sees the potential for the development of an integrated paradigm that should be grounded in practice theory (*ibid.*).

In recent years, Reckwitz has gained attention for his thesis of a comprehensive aestheticization of our society, including a specific culture of subjectivity (Reckwitz, 2006). According to this thesis, three essential thrusts in the direction of aestheticization since the 18th century have led to the implementation of the so-called *creativity dispositive*, which has affected more and more social strata and areas (Reckwitz, 2007). For Reckwitz, the typical phenomena of this development include the replacement of the work of art by the art event, the aestheticization of the economic, the culturalization of the city, and the aestheticization of lifestyle. The creative practice involved therein is an end in itself for the expressive subject and a means to an end for professional as well as private success. Reckwitz has further condensed this interpretation of modernity in his later publications, most recently *The Society of Singularities* (Reckwitz, 2020). Not only individuals but also larger social formations are thus under pressure to present themselves as something special, unique. Here we find parallels to Martina Löw's research program on the *Intrinsic Logics of Cities* (Berking and Löw, 2008). On the whole, Reckwitz wants to draw attention to the fact that modernity is not adequately understood as a "structural context of formal-rational objectification" (Reckwitz, 2015: 16). From its very beginnings, modernity also had a cultural-aesthetic side, without the energies of which it would not be viable because only the "expansion of aesthetic practices provides modernity with cultural legitimation and affective sources of motivation" (*ibid.*: 32; our translation). That this is a specific, albeit increasingly dominant form of middle-class culture, against which other cultural orientations position themselves in a mode of protest, is an issue that we will return to later.

Dirk Baecker takes a different approach to the concept of culture in his two volumes of essays, *Why Culture?* (Baecker, 2001; our translation) and *Cultural Calculus* (Baecker, 2014; our translation). He follows on directly from Niklas Luhmann's concept of culture within a theory of observation. In this perspective, culture is not the "sum of the values [...] with which a society is endowed but [...] an ongoing observation that keeps present the potential alternative to each value" (Baecker, 2001: 9; our translation). Following Luhmann, Baecker derives this concept of 'culture' from the



experience of cultural contact and the resulting comparative perspective. In this view, culture is always both unity and duality at the same time. It identifies differences but relates what is different to what is common and gains its identity only from its comparison with other possibilities. In the context of a world society, culture becomes the “formula for the observation of possible differences” (our translation) and thus a second-order concept. This perspective proves to be particularly instructive for the interpretation of current phenomena in the context of globalization and migration processes and the resistance to them, which is becoming increasingly identitarian. Identitarian self-assertion, however, cannot escape the experience of the contingency of the cultural that arises from comparison.<sup>4</sup>

The analytical framework developed by Stefan Hirschauer (2014; 2017) for comparative research on the construction, intersection, and neutralization of cultural differentiations of people—on the ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ of social affiliations—is also based on a theory of observation. This framework ties in with the internationally discussed concept of “boundary making” (Lamont) and with approaches in which multiple affiliations are discussed. At the center of his work is the contingency of social affiliations and thus also the competition and temporality of such categorizations. They are contingent not only because they are socially constructed but also because they can be used as well as ignored and dismantled. Each act of ‘doing difference’ is thus a meaningful selection from a set of competing categorizations that either creates a relevant difference in the first place or—as an act of ‘undoing’—neutralizes it again.

Finally, we present a more recent contribution to the sociology of knowledge, which is documented in Hubert Knoblauch’s work *The Communicative Construction of Reality* (Knoblauch, 2020). Even if the concept of culture is not at the forefront of this approach, it is nevertheless of interest, since the approach deals with the communicative generation of meaning—and in this sense with the “culture of communication.”

In a certain way, this contribution must be seen as the result of both a collective reflection on the reformulation of communication theory and the empirical turn of the sociology of knowledge initiated by Schütz as well as by Berger and Luckmann. In addition to the works by Knoblauch, this includes those of Gabriela Christmann (2015), Reiner Keller (2005) and co-authors (Keller et al., 2013), Jo Reichertz (2010), and Regine Herbrich (2011). The turn from the ‘social’ to the ‘communicative’ construction of reality is revealing and at the same time establishes a connection between sociological theory and empirical communication research. This connection is based on a theory of action, yet one that leaves behind the narrow confines of Habermas’ theory of communicative action. The ‘communicative construction’ approach conceptualizes communicative action not as free of domination and oriented toward

---

<sup>4</sup> From a different perspective, Friedrich Tenbruck (1992) pointed out that cultural comparison was not a sociological invention but rather emerged from comparisons within the lifeworld.

[reaching] a common understanding but instead as embodied and reciprocal action that may also contain strategic moments. Communicative action extends to the meso levels of social order as well. This approach views institutions or organizations as generated and legitimized by specific forms of communicative action, which are mediated and objectified in various ways. This reconceptualization of communicative action has thus made it possible to include the changes observed in society over recent decades that have been caused by the emergence of certain objects, technologies, and media that were necessarily omitted from the early writings in the sociology of knowledge, which, before the onset of digitization, were inevitably rooted in an analogous understanding of the lifeworld.

The concept of the communicative construction of reality also contains—like the works of Reckwitz and Rosa—an element of a diagnosis of the contemporary period, inasmuch as a communicative liquefaction of knowledge and action is understood as an increase in discursivity. In this respect, the turn to communicative construction is part of a social transformation in which communicative action gains in importance.

### 2.2.2 Cultural sociology as a sociological approach

In addition to these fundamental theoretical works, there are plenty of publications in which the cultural-sociological perspective provides orientation for interpreting the most diverse social phenomena, in line with cultural sociology as a “strong program.” This naturally brings a broad spectrum of social phenomena into view, only a small selection of which can be presented here. We have deliberately chosen areas that would not be considered genuine subjects of “cultural sociology” at first glance.

#### a) Economy as culture

One of the most interesting areas to which cultural sociology can turn is the economy. It reveals its potential primarily as a corrective to the often narrow economic perspective. Interesting interpretations can be found here, for instance, in relation to the financial crisis of 2008.

Claudia Honegger, Sighard Neckel, and Chantal Magnin used biographical case studies to examine the practices and styles of thought of bankers (i.e., their production of meaning) shortly after the crisis and attempted to “reconstruct the fatal developments in the financial sector through the looking glass of the perceptions and experiences of the actors involved” (Honegger et al., 2010: 26; our translation). The focus here is on the practical interpretations and everyday knowledge of the experts in the field of banking and the “‘fit’ between habitus, worldview, and professional practice” (ibid.; our translation). The authors reconstruct the inner logic of the “switchyard of responsibility” that characterizes the banking milieu (ibid: 305). However, despite all the mutual recrimination, the latter’s ideological glue was a



culture of success that made the creation of profits at any price socially acceptable (Honegger et al., 2010: 74).

The counterpart to this inner view is provided by Oliver Kuhn (2014) with his sociological analysis of lay discussions in Internet forums where responsibility for the financial crisis was debated. He shows that common-sense theories about the financial crisis participate in the same political and economic discourse that also organizes professional knowledge. What is different is the degree of complexity and morality with which the events are judged. The dominant perspective is overall one that turns on an “explanation of the crisis oriented towards the central political authority as the protagonist of the solution,” is “critical of the elites and tends to be statist” (Kuhn, 2014: 393; our translation). Kuhn’s analysis shows that the discursive order of the debates is structured along basic core values like productivity, order, freedom, and equality. One can easily imagine that his reconstructions of everyday theories conceived for the explanation of events might stimulate comparative research on the common-sensical interpretations of other social crises.

Birenheide et al. (2005) proposed an interesting cultural sociological explanation for changes in the savings behavior of ordinary people. Drawing on a qualitative survey of small shareholders, they argue that financial saving has broken away from the classical pattern of deferred gratification: “Saving as such has not disappeared, but it has lost its primary significance as a future-oriented delay in consumption. It has been replaced by the immediacy of credit-financed consumption on the one hand and by a speculative increase in financial resources on the other” (Birenheide et al., 2005; our translation). The authors see this change as being linked to the social process of individualization, accompanied by a “responsibilization” as a form of *disciplining through freedom*. The investors see themselves as subjects who fulfil the societal demand for self-responsibility (cf. Deutschmann, 2010: 646).

More fundamentally, Jens Beckert has analyzed economic processes such as value and price formation (Beckert, 2020) in specific markets, where prices are only marginally based on qualities inherent in the product and largely of a symbolic nature. The art market is a case in point. In other markets, product quality depends on future developments, which are chronically uncertain. Beckert looks at both of these cases to show that assessments of quality in markets are not primarily an information problem but are based on intersubjective processes of mutual observation “that unfold between market participants and are anchored in evolving institutions” (ibid.: 289). With reference to notions of “collective belief” (Durkheim) and “thought collectives” (L. Fleck), Beckert coins the term “valuation collectives.” The consensus regarding the appropriate price that emerges in these collectives can be seen as a “meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared [...] understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field [...], and the rules governing legitimate action in the field” (ibid.: 289). He calls this the “markets from meaning” model.

In this respect, the field of economics, as it is examined in these studies, is a good example of what Jeffrey Alexander has called the “autonomy” of culture, which can certainly be used here to *explain* social facts.

#### **b) Religion as culture**

The sociological analyses of religion by the first generation of sociologists like Max Weber or Emile Durkheim could certainly be regarded as standard works in the sense of a “strong program” of cultural sociology since the cultural significance of religion is at the heart of their work.

At present there are also a number of works in the German-language sociology of religion that are characterized by a tight interweaving of perspectives from the sociology of religion and cultural sociology. These include the extensive work of Wolfgang Eßbach (2014, 2019).<sup>5</sup> His systematizing interpretation of European religious history aims to break up what he considers the currently prevailing “bipolarity of Christianity and secularism” (Eßbach, 2014: 14; our translation). The starting point for his analyses is the assumption that there have been four dominant experiential periods since the Reformation: the post-Reformation religious wars, the revolutions of 1789 and thereafter, the establishment of the market society in the 19th century, and the increasing mechanization and aestheticization of the lifeworld since then. The collective experiences associated with these periods challenged the religious interpretative frameworks and led to their transformation. To show this, Eßbach reconstructs intellectual discourses and develops a typology of European religions, which by no means simply merge into denominational-ecclesiastical varieties thereof but also revolve around human reason, art, or science. This sociological-historical contribution need not fear comparison with Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.

Also clearly inspired by cultural sociology are the works of Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt on the sociology of religion (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012; Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013). Engaging with the international debate on secularization, inspired by Shmuel Eisenstadt’s concept of “multiple modernities,” and informed by differentiation theory, the authors distinguish between different ideal types of secularity (“multiple secularities”), which are understood as forms of symbolic distinction and institutional differentiation between religion and other social spheres and practices. These ideal types are conceived as solutions to social problems that become virulent in social conflicts. Each corresponds to a dominant guiding idea that represents the vanishing point of the respective response, lends it legitimacy, and plays a key role in shaping the dynamics of social conflicts. The authors speak of “cultures of secularity” (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012: 905). This perspective has

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matthias Koenig’s contribution on “Religion” in this volume.



become the basis of an international interdisciplinary research network (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2016).<sup>6</sup>

The proximity of the sociology of religion and sociology of culture is also evident when one looks at the sociological strand of cultural sociology in the tradition of Alfred Schütz. Its distinction between different degrees of transcendence was later fruitfully applied to the sociology of religion by Thomas Luckmann.<sup>7</sup> In the German-language sociology of religion, it is primarily Hubert Knoblauch (2009) who has taken up this idea. While distancing himself from Luckmann's anthropological concept of transcendence and basing it on communication instead, he follows him in the assumption that religion is undergoing a transformation, for which he proposes the term "popular religion." By that he means a cultural form that is produced and propagated by the market and the media. The dissolution of boundaries between religion and popular culture becomes visible in formats in which religious issues are addressed but that are borrowed from secular popular culture as well as in communication that bears the marks of religion while being adopted by popular culture (ibid: 196). Such popular religion is the cultural expression of a new spirituality, the characteristics of which include a pronounced anti-dogmatism, holism, and an anchorage in subjectivity, as well as a low degree of institutionalization.

### c) Social inequalities as cultural differences and distinctions

At first glance, diagnoses of social inequality might not necessarily be the subject matter of cultural sociology but rather that of the sociology of social stratification. Nevertheless, cultural sociology's interest in issues of social inequality has—probably not by chance—a long tradition especially in the US-American context. One need only think of Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Park's and Stonequist's works on "the marginal man," or Sennett's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and *The Corrosion of Character*.

In recent years, interesting books and essays have been published in the German-speaking context that focus on new lines of tension in which different socio-structural inequalities intertwine with conflicting mentalities. Some of these writings have analyzed a constellation that is currently becoming apparent on a global level in the new populist and identitarian movements, and in which precarious class positions (or those perceived as precarious) are intertwined with anti-migrant and increasingly also anti-Islamic positions. The background of this constellation is examined in analyses of the conflicts over upwardly mobile migrants and the negative classifications that are associated with them (Sutterlüty and Walter, 2005; Neckel and Soeffner, 2008). Jörg Hüttermann (2006) ethnographically examined the disputes over Islamic symbols and—following Norbert Elias—interpreted them as conflicts of hierarchy between estab-

<sup>6</sup> [www.multiple-secularities.de](http://www.multiple-secularities.de)

<sup>7</sup> Silke Gülker (2019) follows this distinction in her work on *Transcendence in Science* (our translation).

lished actors in urban society and Muslim immigrants. At that time, these disputes could still be interpreted as forms of a modern incorporation ritual and thus as a mode of integration through conflict. Since then, however, they have become increasingly overlaid by other dynamics. One of these is of a global nature and is articulated in the protest movements occurring around the world, especially the populist movements, in which socio-structural situations and threats amalgamate with cultural preferences and defensive attitudes.

On the basis of comparative ethnographic research of German and US-American protest movements, Nils Kumkar (2018) examined the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street as symptoms of the structural crisis of US capitalism and its class structure, as became evident in the financial crisis of 2008. The author argued that the protests were rooted in the crisis experience of the American petty bourgeoisie and that this discontent later played a crucial role in Trump's successful bid for the presidency. Also relevant here are the frames of interpretation that emerged during the crisis and were communicatively condensed, for example, into the trope of the constantly struggling individual who plays by the rules and patiently stands in line, while others, who do not care about the rules, come from behind and cut in line without having done anything to deserve it. This work relates to Arlie Hochschild's study on the American Right (Hochschild, 2016). Cornelia Koppetsch (2018) has also examined the connection between social and cultural declassification and political mobilization using the example of the supporters of the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

A second dynamic that overlaps with and exacerbates this first one reflects the German situation in a specific way. It is nurtured by the ongoing dislocations that followed German reunification. Against the backdrop of different socio-structural situations in the GDR and the Federal Republic, these dislocations provoke constant East–West comparisons. In these comparative assessments, the East German population gets chronically short-changed. A significant number of East Germans are those whom Reckwitz in his book *The Society of Singularities* (2020) had attested to be on the defensive against the new, highly qualified middle class with its urban lifestyle (what this middle class views as “the good life”) as the leading social group. The culturalization of the social and the appreciation of the creative and unique thus produce—according to his thesis—new forms of social inequality.

The “Lütten Klein” study by Steffen Mau (2019) on life in the East German transformation society provides a very interesting insider's view. Impelled by socialist equality imperatives, the GDR sought to equalize social stratification at a relatively low level of income. After 1989, this came into conflict with cultural developments, the “singularization” in West German society, which, to quote Ulrich Beck, had experienced an ascendant “elevator effect.” Coupled with the upheavals of the transformation period, which again closed off the channels of ascent already blocked in GDR society, additionally devalued the lifestyles and cultural patterns developed there, and were often experienced as cultural colonization, this resulted in an explosive mixture that has found an outlet in, among other things, the resentments of right-wing



populist movements and parties. Mau concludes: “In this sense, the East–West discourse can also be interpreted as a cultural conflict in which a more traditional milieu shields itself against changes perceived as threatening” (Mau, 2019: 231; our translation).

This conflict situation takes on a special dramatic character because it is communicatively linked to the memory of the 1989 protests and thus becomes part of a resistance narrative (Hartmann and Leistner, 2019).

### 3 Conclusion

The sociological analysis of culture—in its two different strands as an analysis of the cultural field and a cultural-sociological approach to social phenomena of different kinds—has proved to be an extremely fruitful field of theory-building and empirical research over the last 20 years. It is not only the paths laid by the sociological classics of the first and second generation that have proven to be stimulating. So too have the approaches based on differentiation theory and a theory of observation, on praxeology, a sociology of knowledge enriched with communication theory, as well as an extended version of rational-choice theory.

The strength of cultural sociology, however, is not least demonstrated by its competence in providing insightful diagnoses of the nature of the times, both historically and in view of current developments. Across different areas of research, new types of production and subjectivity, new forms of evaluation and normativity, as well as new social divisions along cultural lines have been fruitful areas of study in cultural sociology. The current research connects with and contributes to international trends but also addresses specific German constellations related to the ongoing unification process.

Much of this research in German-language cultural sociology could contribute a great deal to the international academic discourse had it been translated into English. Here, we find a clear generational divide. Whereas the younger generation is much more present in the international sociology arena, authors of earlier generations have often largely remained within the German-language debate. This is not a matter of quality but rather one of academic tradition and heritage. Honoring this heritage and its academic language should not prevent these works from becoming better known outside of Germany. These exciting books should be translated.

### References

- Adloff, F.; Büttner, S. M.; Moebius, S.; Schützeichel, R., Eds. *Kultursoziologie. Klassische Texte – Aktuelle Debatten*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2014.
- Albrecht, C. Die Halbwertszeit der Kultur. *Kultursoziologie zwischen Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaft. Sociologia Internationalis* 2009, 47, 39–55.

- Alexander, J.; Jacobs, R. N.; Smith, P., Eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013 [2012].
- Baecker, D. *Wozu Kultur?*; Kadmos: Berlin, 2001.
- Baecker, D. *Kulturkalkül*; Merve: Berlin, 2014.
- Beckert, J. Markets from Meaning. Quality Uncertainty and the Intersubjective Construction of Value. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 2020, 44, 285–301.
- Berking, H.; Löw, M. *Die Eigenlogik der Städte. Neue Wege für die Stadtforschung*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2008.
- Berli, O. *Grenzenlos guter Geschmack. Die feinen Unterschiede des Musikhörens*; transcript: Bielefeld, 2014.
- Birenheide, A.; Fischer, M.; Legnaro, A. *Kapitalismus für alle. Aktien, Freiheit und Kontrolle*; Westfälisches Dampfboot: Münster, 2005.
- Böcker, J.; Dreier, L.; Eulitz, M.; Frank, A.; Jakob, M.; Leistner, A., Eds. *Zum Verhältnis von Empirie und kultursoziologischer Theoriebildung. Stand und Perspektiven*; Beltz Juventa: Weinheim/Basel, 2018.
- Boltanski, L.; Chiapello, E. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*; Verso: London/New York, 2005 [1999].
- Bourdieu, P. *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*; Polity Press: Cambridge, 1996 [1992].
- Bröckling, U. *The Entrepreneurial Self*; Sage: London, 2016 [2007].
- Burchardt, M.; Wohlrab-Sahr, M. Multiple Secularities: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age – Introduction. *International Sociology* 2013, 28, 605–611.
- Burzan, N.; Löckenhoff, B.; Schimank, U.; Schöneck, N. M. *Das Publikum der Gesellschaft. Inklusionsverhältnisse und Inklusionsprofile in Deutschland*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2008.
- Christmann, G. B., Ed. *Zur kommunikativen Konstruktion von Räumen. Theoretische Konzepte und empirische Analysen*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2015.
- Corsten, M. *Karl Mannheims Kultursoziologie. Eine Einführung*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2010.
- Delitz, H. *Gebaute Gesellschaft. Architektur als Medium des Sozialen*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2009.
- Delitz, H. *Arnold Gehlen*; UVK: Constance, 2011.
- Deutschmann C. Die Finanzmärkte und die Mittelschichten. In *Unsichere Zeiten*; Soeffner H.-G., Ed.; VS: Wiesbaden, 2010, pp 639–655.
- Diaz-Bone, R. *Kulturwelt, Diskurs und Lebensstil. Eine diskurstheoretische Erweiterung der Bourdieuschen Distinktionstheorie*; Leske+Budrich: Opladen, 2002.
- Dux, G. *Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur. Instabile Welten. Zur prozessualen Logik im kulturellen Wandel*; Velbrück: Weilerswist, 2000.
- Endreß, M. Alfred Schütz und die Kultursoziologie. In *Handbuch Kultursoziologie. Band 1: Begriffe – Kontexte – Perspektiven – Autor\_innen*; Moebius, S.; Nungesser, F.; Scherke, K., Eds.; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2019a; pp 645–653.
- Endreß, M., Karl Mannheim und die Kultursoziologie. In *Handbuch Kultursoziologie. Band 1: Begriffe – Kontexte – Perspektiven – Autor\_innen*; Moebius, S.; Nungesser, F.; Scherke, K., Eds.; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2019b; pp 567–576.
- Eßbach, W. *Religionssoziologie 1. Glaubenskrieg und Revolution als Wiege neuer Religionen*; Wilhelm Fink: Paderborn, 2014.
- Eßbach, W. *Religionssoziologie 2: Entfesselter Markt und artifizielle Lebenswelt als Wiege neuer Religionen*; Wilhelm Fink: Paderborn, 2019.
- Esser, H. *Soziologie. Spezielle Grundlagen. Band 6: Sinn und Kultur*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2001.



- Fischer, J. Simmels Sinn der Sinne. Zum vital turn der Soziologie. In *Die Sinnlichkeit des Sozialen. Wahrnehmung und materielle Kultur*; Göbel, H. K.; Prinz, S., Eds.; transcript: Bielefeld, 2015; pp 423–440.
- Fischer J.; Moebius, S. Einleitung. In *Kulturosoziologie im 21. Jahrhundert*; Fischer, J.; Moebius, S., Eds.; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2014; pp 9–16.
- Frank, A. *Große Gesellschaft in kleiner Gruppe. Zum Eigensinn bürgerschaftlichen Engagements für Oper und Theater*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2018.
- Gebesmaier, A. *Grundzüge einer Soziologie des Musikgeschmacks*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2001.
- Gebhardt, W. Kulturwissenschaft und Soziologie. In *Kulturwissenschaft interdisziplinär*; Stierstorfer, K.; Volkmann, L., Eds.; Narr: Tübingen, 2005; pp 19–37.
- Gerhards, J. Der Aufstand des Publikums. Eine systemtheoretische Interpretation des Kulturwandels in Deutschland zwischen 1960 und 1989. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 2001, 30, 163–184.
- Gerhards, J. Kulturosoziologie diesseits des “cultural turn”. In *Kulturosoziologie*; Wohlrab-Sahr, M., Ed.; VS: Wiesbaden, 2010; pp 277–308.
- Gülker, S. *Transzendenz in der Wissenschaft. Studien in der Stammzellforschung in Deutschland und den USA*; Ergon: Würzburg, 2019.
- Hartmann, G., Leistner, A. Umkämpftes Erbe. Zur Aktualität von “1989” als Widerstandserzählung. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 2019, 35–37, 18–24.
- Henning, C.; Schultheis, F.; Thomä, D. *Kreativität als Beruf. Soziologisch-philosophische Erkundungen in der Welt der Künste*; transcript: Bielefeld, 2019.
- Herbrük, R. *Die kommunikative Konstruktion imaginärer Welten*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2011.
- Hirschauer, S. Un/doing Differences. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 2014, 43, 170–191.
- Hirschauer, S., Ed. *Un/doing differences: Praktiken der Humandifferenzierung*; Velbrück Wissenschaft: Weilerswist, 2017.
- Hitzler, R.; Bucher, T.; Niederbacher, A. *Leben in Szenen. Formen juveniler Vergemeinschaftung heute*; Leske+Budrich: Opladen, 2001.
- Hochschild A. *Strangers in their own Land. Anger and Mourning in the American Right*; The New Press: New York, 2016.
- Honegger, C.; Neckel, S.; Magnin, C., Eds. *Strukturierte Verantwortungslosigkeit – Berichte aus der Bankenwelt*; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 2010.
- Hüttermann, J. *Das Minarett. Zur politischen Kultur des Konflikts um islamische Symbole*; Beltz Juventa: Weinheim/Basel, 2006.
- Karstein, U.; Zahner, N. T., Eds. *Autonomie der Kunst? Zur Aktualität eines gesellschaftlichen Leitbildes*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2017.
- Keller, R. *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2005.
- Keller, R.; Knoblauch, H.; Reichertz, J.; Eds. *Kommunikativer Konstruktivismus. Theoretische und empirische Arbeiten zu einem neuen wissenssoziologischen Ansatz*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2013.
- Kleine, C.; Wohlrab-Sahr, M. Research Programme of the HCAS ‘Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities’. *Working Paper Series of the HCAS ‘Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities’* 2016, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:15-qucosa2-167272>
- Knoblauch, H. *Populäre Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2009.
- Knoblauch, H. *The Communicative Construction of Reality*; Routledge: New York, 2020.
- Koppetsch, C. Rechtspopulismus als Klassenkampf? Soziale Deklassierung und politische Mobilisierung. *WSI-Mitteilungen* 2018, 5, 382–391.
- Kuhn, O. *Alltagswissen in der Krise. Über die Zurechnung der Verantwortung für die Finanzkrise*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2014.

- Rössel, J. *Plurale Sozialstrukturanalyse. Eine handlungstheoretische Rekonstruktion der Grundbegriffe der Sozialstrukturanalyse*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2005.
- Schmidt-Lux, T.; Wohlrab-Sahr, M.; Leistner, A. *Kulturosoziologie – Eine problemorientierte Einführung*; Beltz Juventa: Weinheim/Basel, 2016.
- Schnell, C. *Regulierung der Kulturberufe in Deutschland. Strukturen, Akteure, Strategien*; Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2007.
- Schrage, D.; Schwetter, H.; Hoklas, A., Eds. "Zeiten des Aufbruchs". *Popmusik als Medium gesellschaftlichen Wandels*; Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2019.
- Schroer, M. *Räume, Orte, Grenzen. Auf dem Weg zu einer Soziologie des Raums*; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 2005.
- Seyfert, R. *Das Leben der Institutionen: Zu einer allgemeinen Theorie der Institutionalisierung*; Velbrück: Weilerswist, 2011.
- Steets, S. *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der gebauten Welt. Eine Architektursoziologie*; Suhrkamp: Berlin, 2015.
- Sutterlüty, F.; Walter, I. Übernahmegerüchte. Klassifikationskämpfe zwischen türkischen Aufsteigern und ihren deutschen Nachbarn. *Leviathan* 2005, 33, 182–204.
- Tenbruck, F. Was war der Kulturvergleich, ehe es den Kulturvergleich gab? In *Zwischen den Kulturen? Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs. Soziale Welt. Sonderband 8*; Matthes, J., Ed.; Otto Schwartz: Göttingen, 1992; pp 13–35.
- Vester, M.; von Oertzen, P.; Geiling, H.; Hermann, T.; Müller, D. *Soziale Milieus im gesellschaftlichen Strukturwandel. Zwischen Integration und Ausgrenzung*; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 2001.
- Wohlrab-Sahr, M. *Kulturosoziologie. Paradigmen – Methoden – Fragestellungen*; VS: Wiesbaden, 2010.
- Wohlrab-Sahr, M.; Burchardt, M. Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities. *Comparative Sociology* 2012, 11, 875–909.
- Zahner, N. T. *Die neuen Regeln der Kunst. Andy Warhol und der Umbau des Kunstbetriebs im 20. Jahrhundert*; Campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York, 2006.
- Zahner, N. T.; Karstein, U. Autonomie und Ökonomisierung der Kunst. Vergleichende Betrachtungen von System- und Feldtheorie. In *Autonomie revisited. Beiträge zu einem umstrittenen Grundbegriff in Wissenschaft, Kunst und Politik. 2. Sonderband der Zeitschrift für Theoretische Soziologie*; Franzen, M.; Jung, A.; Kaldewey, D.; Korte, J., Eds.; Beltz Juventa: Weinheim/Basel, 2014; pp 188–210.