

## Cultural Studies and Sociology of Culture in Germany: Relations and Interrelations

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### Abstract

Over the last three decades, attitudes towards cultural studies in Germany have developed within contexts of contact and conflict with a variety of disciplines, e.g. ethnology, anthropology, sociology, as well as the sociology of culture, literary studies and *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*. On the one hand there is a strong academic interest in how cultural studies perceives and analyzes media culture, popular culture and everyday life. On the other hand boundaries with humanities and social science remain, which leads to criticism and conflicts with cultural studies and its achievements.

I will discuss some of the problems concerning the perception and reception of cultural studies among representatives of *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* and sociology of culture. Furthermore I will draw on the role of cultural studies in thematizing cultural change and conflicts, and its ability to do so in a way that shows the importance of culture and politics.

**Keywords:** Sociology of Culture, Kulturwissenschaft, Geisteswissenschaft, Media and Cultural Studies, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity.

## Pinpointing Cultural Studies in the German-speaking Region

We can distinguish three different phases of the reception of cultural studies in the German-speaking region as well as in Germany itself over the last three decades.<sup>1</sup> The first phase started in the 1970s and focused on questions of ideology and the analysis of youth culture with emphasis on forms of resistance and styles in youth culture that developed off the beaten path in ethnography, educational science and sociology of culture in the 1980s (cf. Göttlich & Winter 1999).<sup>2</sup>

During the late 1980s, the focus of the second phase turned more and more on popular culture as a whole, as well as on media and television studies in the early 1990s. Television texts and audiences became a contested area for cultural studies and the established media- and communication studies. Especially the implementation of Hall's "encoding/decoding" model, the analysis of an "active audience" in the work of Morley, Ang and Fiske as well as questions of media reception were a site of struggle for cultural studies and media- and communication studies.

The third phase, beginning in the late 1990s, is characterized by a scope on the culture of everyday life and questions of identity, perpetuated by different research projects in the fields of European ethnography and *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*. These questions of identity and power in a global media sphere became a central topic in media studies at the turn of the new century as well. Besides these main areas of interest that show strong relations to media- and communication studies and *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*, cultural studies placed particular interest on gender studies and on the record of qualitative research methods. This reception is paralleled by the reception of the "cultural", "practice" and "performative turn", that is more or less judged as cultural studies related, even when it is not.

Taking this short sketch of the reception of cultural studies in the German-speaking region as a starting point for my discussion on the current relationship of cultural studies with *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* and/or *Kultursociologie* (sociology of culture), one can say that attitudes toward cultural studies have developed in contact as well as in conflict with a variety of disciplines, e.g. ethnology, anthropology, educational science, sociology, the sociology of culture as well as media and literary studies.

Generally speaking, this broad reception of cultural studies over the last thirty years indicates a strong academic interest in how cultural studies perceives and analyzes popular culture, media culture and everyday life. Against this background, cultural studies in Germany as well as the German-speaking region cannot be considered as a "newcomer". However strangely, not a single German university institute, chair or professorship exclusively dedicated to cultural studies can be found. Instead, there are university institutes and research projects, mainly within the field of media studies, which make use of cultural studies in an interdisciplinary understanding. In short: Whereas cultural studies, although it is not a discipline in itself, has achieved an identity of its own in the UK, Australia and

the US, cultural studies in Germany as well as in the German-speaking region has not yet reached that state.

Despite the broad reception, there are still remaining boundary lines between cultural studies, humanities and social science, which still lead to criticism of cultural studies and result in conflicts about its achievements. Even though most of the conflicts seem to be resolved, still many theoretical and methodological problems remain. Especially when we focus on the relationship of *Kultursoziologie* with cultural studies within the field of German sociology, we also encounter different traditions of cultural criticism. Beneath these differences that become evident through reflecting on this relation, lies the assumption that “of all sociology’s ‘strange others’, cultural studies is perhaps the least unfamiliar” (cf. Inglis 2007: 99), as Inglis had pointed out for British cultural studies.

The reason for the ongoing existence of struggle with these differences in cultural criticism is interesting as it originated from the cultural studies’ way of dealing with questions of culture, which generated new interest in the sociology of culture at the beginning of the late 1980s. For many students of sociology a new perspective on culture was brought forth, whereas the *Kultursoziologie* in the tradition of Weber, Simmel or Mannheim, as well as the critique of the Frankfurt School were deemed to be “too special stuff” even for the academic teachings of many universities at that time. The problems that grew out of this special situation lead to different questions of possible disciplinary combinations, despite the ongoing opposition of cultural studies with the sociology of culture as well as *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*. The process of managing the challenges between the different academic cultures is by no means trivial.<sup>3</sup>

The underlying question, why cultural studies has to face such a bold opposition from other disciplines, can be answered in two ways. On the one hand it is argued that cultural studies is still a “young” and emerging field, which has yet to find its own identity and particularly a German perspective. On the other hand it is argued that there are already many fields in German academia that deal with questions of culture and communication and whose divergent perspectives cannot be easily combined. Nevertheless, these different concepts of culture are still helpful for theorizing cultural developments or problems. However, they hinder scientific research and development, when they are used as ideological “entrance requirements”. Considering these fault lines of argumentation, I propose a sociology of culture *within* cultural studies. Through this, it is possible for all sides in this game to benefit from each other.

To do so, we briefly have to look at the specific ways *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* and German sociology recognizes cultural studies, in order to understand the ongoing oppositions. Based on this, I will point out how to handle these different positions and discuss the role of the sociology of cultural studies for further research.<sup>4</sup>

## What is Culture Anyway?

Up to now, as many of you know, the term “culture” is not used lightly, especially in Germany and the German language. In German academia, the *Geisteswissenschaft*, i.e. the humanities, claim to hold definitory power on questions on culture. Hence, the term culture serves as a theoretical concept and sometimes certain kinds of “*Welt-Anschauung*” are connoted. This defines the first borderline between cultural studies and (I) *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* as well as (II) *Kultursoziologie* in the traditional understanding:

(I) According to *Geisteswissenschaft* – whose offspring is *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*, and which has designated this “youngster” as its legitimate heir – cultural studies are only narrowly interested in phenomena of “everyday life”, and social practices, rather than focusing on broader questions of “*Sinn*” [“meaning”]. But can this be considered the main reason for the opposition or is this only a surface, which conceals the “true” reasons for this antagonism towards cultural studies’ way of dealing with culture?

For example, in an introductory-level textbook on *Kulturwissenschaft* by Hartmut Böhme and colleagues (2000), intended to give students orientation in the field of *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*, there are only three pages on cultural studies, given in the form of opening remarks that indicate the still existing borderline. Scrutinized closely, these pages revitalize stereotypes of cultural studies and position them in opposition to culture – i.e., to culture in the sense in which the *Geisteswissenschaften* normally use the term. In my opinion this does not contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural studies.

The further arguments of this textbook emphasize that cultural studies

is [after all the years of academic success in the UK and USA; UG] no theoretical concept or theory that is solid and that stands against the backdrop of a consensus. Terms like “contextualization” signal, with respect to method, that only heterogeneous elements are combined. “Othering” is just another term for the alliance of ethnography and cultural anthropology. “Mapping” tends to give cognitive maps of cultural phenomena and the discourse on minorities works as an instrument to differentiate and to particularise the collectivised individual culture [*Kollektivsingular*; UG].

For the authors “the risks of this development are evident” because

within the sphere of influence of ethnic and minority groups, the term culture tends to lose its analytical and synthetical function within ideological critique. The place of the traditional canon is taken by a poorly considered new canon of particularities combined in an additive way. (Böhme et al. 2000: 13)

In my opinion, this passage gives a good impression of how cultural studies are perceived by the *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* and how in a certain way the inherent problems of the term “culture” remain unresolved.

(II) Apart from this opposition with *Kulturwissenschaft(en)*, there are only slight differences in cultural studies’ relationship with sociology. Once more In-

glis can be cited, as he hints that cultural studies and the sociology of culture are but warring twins. For him,

[t]hey ‘agree to have a battle’, because the battle brings certain gains in identity for them both. But beyond rhetorical displays of dissimilarity between them, once one examines their shared epistemological assumptions, one sees that it is actually their very likeness that compels them to engage in the ritualized conflicts they embark upon. (Inglis 2007: 118)

This situation came to fore, when cultural studies was heavily criticized by sociologist working in the phenomenological tradition in the early 1990s. One argument was that cultural studies does nearly the same sort of ethnographic research of everyday practices that in the end must be judged as a certain drift from the sociological trail while looking for the politics of the everyday life. Further arguments for the conflicts emerging from this “similarity” cannot be discussed here. Instead, I will give some hints on how to overcome the conflicts and opposite positions both sides stick to when the term “culture” is mentioned – even when there is a common ground. I will show that there is a special sociology of culture within cultural studies. From this vantage point, it is possible to overcome the above-mentioned problems: we can start to build a formation of cultural studies in Germany as well as a transdisciplinary setting for the study of culture.

## **A Formation of Cultural Studies in Germany?**

Generally speaking, the reception of cultural studies is symbolic for the opening of German-speaking academia towards new horizons in the *Kulturdebatte* (cultural debate and criticism) over the last thirty years. This serves as a good starting point not only to discuss the specifics of sociology of culture within cultural studies. Furthermore, if cultural studies deals with questions of culture, we have to make clear, why the ongoing critique of cultural studies in Germany is based on assumptions that *Kultursociologie* has to say more about culture than cultural studies.

The problem stems from the term “culture” itself and its associations. To prevent further misunderstandings, we can refer to Grossberg’s latest book, in which he rejects the idea that cultural studies is about *culture* (cf. Grossberg 2010: 8). If that is the case, I doubt that things might become clearer in the German-speaking region. If cultural studies is not about culture anymore, it must be about power, as this is cultural studies’ second object of research, which is highlighted in many discussions. And many practitioners of cultural studies highlight this aspect too. As a result, the concepts of “power” and “culture” are often dealt with in an essential or substantial understanding. By turning to the question of culture, cultural theory can help to foster a sociological understanding of power and culture, instead of turning backwards towards essential or substantial definitions.

One way to “sociologize” the term “culture” for cultural studies is to put an emphasis on an understanding of culture as ongoing processes, or as practices. This point of view is provided by Raymond Williams and further perpetuated by Stuart Hall. In this perspective, cultural studies’ methodological value derives from Williams’ basic principle of avoiding language that massifies others (Williams 1958: 306). Williams’ suggestive formulation relates “culture” to the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences. Shortly, this is the point where cultural studies deals with questions of cultural practices in a sociological way, regarding the understanding and thematizing the production and reproduction of everyday social life. This prospective comes along with questions or problems of power and hegemony, already described in the early works of Thompson and Williams. In line with this understanding, we can follow Grossberg’s arguments a little bit further:

Cultural studies [...] is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways cultural practices are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structure of power. (Grossberg 2010: 8)

And following these self-imposed tasks, cultural studies itself becomes a certain kind of practice. Taking these arguments into consideration, we have to discuss a way that allows us to deal with the problem of power within cultural theory (next to a bundle of sometimes more important questions than power). For example, questions of how these practices reproduce culture and society come to mind. At this point, we are dealing with the core questions of *Kultursoziologie* as well as parts of *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* – despite of them being the “opposite” of cultural studies. Based on the historical reception of cultural studies in Germany, it now becomes evident why many scholars have overlooked cultural studies. It is not *about* culture or power, it is about *different practices* of culture and power. To achieve an initial turn towards this perspective, we can reformulate this special understanding, as (once again) Grossberg did in his book *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. “Culture” is the deepest and most solid rock of our common sense.

Instead, too often, the concept of culture – and other related categories – is assumed, appropriated, generalized and even universalized. (Grossberg 2010: 169)

In my opinion, this holds true for the notion and concept of power as well. If we consider these arguments, we can imagine how the academic struggle for the term “culture” leads to nothing more than to fortified oppositions. The main difference between cultural studies and sociology of culture cannot be found in their definitions of the terms “culture” or “power” or in their forms of cultural criticism, but it can be found in the disciplines’ ideas on cultural processes, practices, contexts, power and everyday life.

If we compare the agendas of the sociology of culture and of cultural studies under these terms, we can start to consider if it is worthwhile to search for an

agenda based on compromises and interdisciplinarity or to dismiss that thought and continue with one's own ways.

If "[...] cultural studies is not about interpreting or judging texts or peoples, but about describing how people's everyday lives are articulated by and with culture", then "(c)ultural studies is about the historical possibilities of transforming people's lived realities and the relations of power within which those realities are constructed and lived, and it is about the absolutely vital contribution of intellectual work to the imagination and realization of such possibilities." (Grossberg 1999: 24)

From this point of view, only cultural studies can be defined as political in the strict sense of the term; namely as proactive. That means that cultural studies do not work in a way that Meaghan Morris criticized by telling us

that cultural studies, in spite of its self-conception as inclusive, was at best a sieve that sorted the fragments of everyday experience into those it could collect into a particular narrative of celebration/resistance and those it could not. (Couldry 2007: 14)

If this development proves true, the outcome is not far away from the ideas brought forth by the adversing perspectives. But we can argue that *Kultursoziologie* as well as *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* place themselves "above the battlefield" and abstract themselves from the phenomena of everyday life. Given this description, one has to ask if the need exists to bring together cultural studies and sociology of culture and/or *Kulturwissenschaften* in the German-speaking region to reach the aim of building an own formation. Perhaps cross-fertilization with regard to intellectual questions is beneficial; if this is the case, these questions can only be addressed by defining how this intellectual work matters. The powerful position held by traditional perspectives on culture like *Kulturwissenschaft* is deeply rooted in the history of the German university system, and therefore has a certain impact on the role and self-perception of scholars in this field. From this point of view, cultural studies in German-speaking countries have to face the problem that the *Kulturwissenschaften* in some ways tries to substitute itself for cultural studies in order to evade, to efface, the political implications of the newer discipline.

## Conclusion

If there is to be a chance for a cultural studies formation in Germany, then there can be no trivial answers to the above-mentioned questions. The idea of cross-fertilization with *Kultursoziologie* or *Kulturwissenschaft* brings up more questions than it can answer. And the way to discuss the sociology of cultural studies is faced with the assumption that sociologies "strange others" are not of sociology (cf. Göttlich 2007).

While the question of how the positions of sociology of culture and cultural studies can cross-fertilize each other seems to be a logical one, I doubt that bring-

ing together such different intentions can help to overcome the academic borderlines. Individual scholars can cross, or even abolish these for them – but these rifts are still maintained – directly behind the backs of scholars who decide to meet with open minds.

Through such combinations, cultural studies runs the risk of becoming one item in the academic “garbage can”, as Dirk Baecker (1996) points out with regard to *Kulturwissenschaften*. And – even if there is a good reason to combine the positions of sociology of culture and cultural studies – we further have to face the question of how this may help academic circles in the German-speaking region to overcome their “fear” of the popular (culture), especially when cultural studies is seen as popular culture’s strongest agent.

In my opinion, it would be better to appreciate cultural studies as a constant demonstration of what can be contributed by this sociologically concerned and active position, rather than to search for a cross-fertilization that will not help to overcome the borderlines between both traditions. Cultural studies cannot provide another discipline based on an excuse for losing touch with the phenomena of everyday life and its politics. It is, like Nick Couldry pointed out, a concern to hear the range of voices that characterize the social terrain, and not to reduce their complexity. But this concern overlaps with cultural studies’ “politics”: its aim of responsibly accounting for others in its account of the social world (cf. Couldry 2000: 126-130).

It is not my intention to create unnecessary borders. But considering the long history of the reception of cultural studies in the German-speaking academia, one can only be astounded by the arguments in this confrontation, which go around in circles and do not reach the next step that lies in the challenge of transdisciplinarity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Speaking of cultural studies in Germany or the German-speaking region is not coincidental. There are substantial differences in the reception of cultural studies in Austria, Switzerland and Germany. These are due to different occasions that lead to the contact with cultural studies and different university systems, although the perspective on culture often shares the same disciplinary roots within the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Nevertheless, it cannot be avoided to use the unifying term “region”, although the problems of cultural studies are referred to,

treated and considered differently in accordance to the countries' academic institutions. When discussing the relationship of cultural studies with the sociology of culture, I will mostly refer to the situation in Germany.

<sup>2</sup> These findings account for the academic reception of cultural studies in Western Germany and can only be partly transferred to the reception of cultural studies in the GDR. These took part in the 1970s and early 1980s with a special interest in the analysis of youth culture and the work of Raymond Williams. After the fall of the Berlin Wall this special Marxist-related perspective on cultural studies was not continued.

<sup>3</sup> We have worked on this topic in different academic circles and on different occasions in conferences and workshops within the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* as well as the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft* since the 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> I will focus only in the main lines of argumentation in the reception of cultural studies over the last thirty years.

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