Theorising Culture: Hermeneutical Themes in the Social Theory of Alain Touraine

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Abstract: One of the most conspicuous social theoretical developments of the past several decades has been a 'cultural turn' which has seen a shift away from the view that social life is something that happens in 'structures' or 'systems' to the view that social life is ordered by meanings and beliefs. The shift to more culturalogical modes of thinking, however, has gone in a number of directions, and the outcomes have been uncertain. In this paper, I argue that a hermeneutical conception of culture opens up more fertile avenues of analysis. The possibilities opened up by such an approach are explored through the unmistakable, but implicit and unfinished hermeneutical turn evident in Alain Touraine's recent social theory.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Culture, Alain Touraine, Paul Ricoeur, Subjectivity

Social theory has always distinguished itself from conceptions of 'social science' by stressing its essential connection to historical, anthropological and philosophical perspectives, and all three axes of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization have contributed to enriched understandings of the social world. In praise of such interdisciplinarity, I would like in this paper explore a contemporary case in which dialogue with philosophical concerns opens up fertile new avenues of sociological analysis. More specifically, I will argue that there are important insights to be gained from one particular current of philosophy in relation to a central but contested problematic in contemporary social theory. As Peter Wagner and Heidrun Friese have pointed out, a shift from the view that social life is something that happens in 'structures' or 'systems' to the view that social life is ordered by meanings and beliefs has been one of the most conspicuous social theoretical developments of the past several decades. The move to more culturalogical modes of thinking has, however, gone in a number of directions, and the outcomes have been uncertain. In what follows, I will argue that a philosophical hermeneutical conception of culture has the potential to transcend a number of the difficulties that the cultural turn has encountered. In section one, I use Wagner and Friese's survey of contemporary developments to delineate the multiple strands of the cultural turn, and to clarify the most significant difficulties that the cultural turn has encountered. In section one, I use Wagner and Friese's survey of contemporary developments to delineate the multiple strands of the cultural turn, and to clarify the most significant difficulties that the cultural turn has encountered. In section two, I outline the main features of the conception of culture which emerges from the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, and identify two themes which shed new light on the most urgent issues confronting culturalogical sociology. Finally, I attempt to show more concretely what could be gained from a specifically hermeneutical interpretation of the cultural turn, with reference to the recent social theory of the French social theorist, Alain Touraine. Touraine's historical sociology of modernity, I argue, is characterized by an implicit, but unmistakable, 'hermeneutical turn' which has opened up rich new lines of analysis for his culture-oriented theory of modernity.

1. In their survey of the field, Wagner and Friese outline the parameters of the shift to more 'culturalogical' modes of analysis which has characterised social thought over the past two or three decades. In this period, they argue, there has been a widespread shift away from the previously dominant view that human beings are defined by roles and interests which are derived from their position in the social order, to the view that human beings live together in 'cultures' and recognize the similarity or strangeness of 'the other' by their cultural identities. As they point out, however, despite widespread agreement on the need to pay more attention to the cultural dimensions of social life, this cultural turn has gone in a number of directions, with markedly different outcomes. They specify three distinct strands within the general trend, each with specific motivations and objectives. In the nineteen seventies, a number of theorists turned to a more culture-sensitive mode of thinking in an attempt to transcend the difficulties that the cultural turn has encountered. In section one, I use Wagner and Friese's survey of contemporary developments to delineate the multiple strands of the cultural turn, and to clarify the most significant difficulties that the cultural turn has encountered. In section two, I outline the main features of the conception of culture which emerges from the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, and identify two themes which shed new light on the most urgent issues confronting culturalogical sociology. Finally, I attempt to show more concretely what could be gained from a specifically hermeneutical interpretation of the cultural turn, with reference to the recent social theory of the French social theorist, Alain Touraine. Touraine's historical sociology of modernity, I argue, is characterized by an implicit, but unmistakable, 'hermeneutical turn' which has opened up rich new lines of analysis for his culture-oriented theory of modernity.

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3 See Wagner and Friese, 'Culture' and the chapter 'Modernity' by Peter Wagner in the same text.
beings give to their practices, insisted that social bonds are less clearly established and unequivocally identifiable than structuralist thinking supposed and, arguing for greater reflexivity, moved away from formalized and objectivist thinking. In a second current, postmodernists drew on the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to stress the linguistic construction of the world, and made contingency their central theme. They stressed the plurality of modes of representing the social world, and were involved in a more radical rejection of formalism. Most recently, cultural studies and cultural history — which emerged, Wagner and Friese argue, in response to the perceived over-emphasis on contingency — also rejected the notion of social structure, but stressed the solidity of ties of cultural belonging in the modern world. 4

Wagner and Friese suggest, however, that all of these approaches have encountered difficulties in their projects of theoretical renewal. The agency theorists' shift to a more cultural mode of analysis was both tentative and narrowly conceived. Other commentators' critiques of some of the key figures confirm this view; Anthony Giddens' cultural turn, it has been argued, was limited to an emphasis on reflexivity, while Juergen Habermas tended to reduce culture to knowledge and focused heavily on dominant patterns of rationality. 5 For its part, Wagner argues, the postmodern construal of the linguistic constitution of social life, focused on the analysis of the human sciences themselves as forms of writing, culminated in a critique of epistemology and ontology which threw into question the very possibility of providing a valid representation of the social world. 6 Finally, the concern in cultural studies and cultural history to counteract the postmodern over-emphasis on contingency led to the preservation of many of the premises of structural thinking; culture in these perspectives is often treated as an objective, quasi-structure, with clear-cut and firm boundaries and a tendency towards integration. 7

Against this background, Wagner and Friese insist that a more adequate development of the cultural turn depends upon a more systematic reflection on and clarification of the concept of culture. The key issue they identify in this regard can be read off the meta-theoretical concerns which have shaped evolution of the cultural turn. As they see it, the main role the problematic of culture plays in contemporary sociological thinking is to account for the linkages between human beings and the stability of human social behaviour. The crucial issue that is yet to be resolved satisfactorily is how to avoid the presumptions that such linkages are either purely contingent, or immutable. More particularly, they argue that two issues remain inadequately clarified. The first concerns the coherence of cultural frameworks; the prevailing tendency towards presumptions of coherence and integration must give way to a recognition of the empirical variability of degrees of coherence. The second concerns the temporality of cultural practices and human action, and the most urgent task is to transcend the twin traps of resorting to atemporal snapshots of the social world, or using history to explain the present in a deterministic way. 8 A more viable form of cultural sociology, they conclude, calls for a more systematic treatment of the heterogeneity and historicity of culture.

2. As I suggested at the outset, the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics sheds new light on the issues confronting the project of cultural sociology. To get an idea of the theoretical insights it offers in relation to the issues Wagner and Friese have identified, it will be helpful to begin with the perspective's founding premises concerning the constitutive role of cultural meanings in human consciousness and social relations. The central problematic in this regard emerged with the 'Copernican revolution' in the hermeneutical tradition with which Martin Heidegger's established philosophical hermeneutics. Heidegger's revolution shifted the focus of hermeneutics from epistemological and methodological questions about interpretation to an investigation of the ontological conditions which make understanding possible. Understanding, Heidegger insists, is not only a way of knowing, but also and more fundamentally, a mode of human being. In this context, the most significant outcome of his reflection on the nature of human understanding is the radical break he made with Cartesian premises about the relation between subject and object. Against Descartes' view of the radical separation of the subject of knowledge and the external and 'objective' reality which is presumed to be independent of it, Heidegger stressed the 'anticipatory' nature of all understanding. The world we encounter, he insists, is always an interpretation of reality, which takes place in relation to horizons of meaning which originate in the intersubjective realm of culture. Against the Cartesian idea that thought is autonomous in relation to its social, historical and cultural contexts, he insists that the ability of a subject to understand and reflect is dependent on the prior existence of a shared world of meaning.

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4 Wagner and Friese, 'Culture', p.121.
6 Wagner, A History and Theory of the Social Sciences, p164.
7 ibid., p.122.
8 Wagner & Friese, ibid. p.125-6.
We can readily see, then, that philosophical hermeneutics is particularly relevant to the project of cultural sociology; it presumes not only that all attempts to analyze the social world must be seen as interpretations which are located in particular social, cultural and historical circumstances, but also that the social world itself is partly constituted by culturally encoded patterns of meaning. There are, however, also more specific features of its account of the role of culture in social life that can shed light on the issues Wagner and Frieze identified. Two themes in particular, best brought out by later exponents of the tradition, are relevant.

The first is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s elucidation of the notion of ‘effective history.’ This notion arose in the context of his exploration of the epistemological consequences for the social sciences of Heidegger’s ontology of understanding. In Truth and Method, Gadamer’s overarching thesis is that the primordial relation of ‘belonging’ to the world in which we find ourselves renders the objectifying methods of the human sciences illegitimate. The ideal of objectivity in the human sciences is misplaced, he insists, because the anticipatory nature of human understanding Heidegger stresses means that we belong to the cultural traditions which shape our thinking in a way and to an extent which precludes taking an objective attitude towards them. And it is to justify this claim that he coins the term ‘consciousness of effective history’ to refer to the idea that consciousness is inescapably affected by history in the form of the cultural traditions into which we are born. The details of Gadamer’s argument are linked to his rehabilitation of prejudice, tradition and authority. For Gadamer, prejudices, in the sense of pre-judgments, are not simply the opposite pole of a reason without presuppositions, but a constitutive component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of the human being; authority cannot be simply identified with domination and violence, as its essence is not to do with obedience to command, but with recognition; and ‘that which has authority’ is that which is sanctioned by tradition and custom. As Gadamer sees it, the ontological significance of these interrelated phenomena is that ‘our consciousness is determined by a real historical process;’ the idea of ‘effective history’ refers to the inescapable fact that consciousness is affected by history in the form of the ‘authority of what has been transmitted.’

In this context, the most important aspect of his elaboration of the notion of effective history is that it highlights the formative influence of patterns of meaning and interpretive frameworks in shaping social action and relations, without constraining this influence in deterministic terms. He makes a number of points which are relevant in this regard. As he sees it, the traditions which transmit the past are not a fixed set of opinions and evaluations, but rather a horizon. This horizon includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point, but, he insists, horizons are mobile, and can contract or expand. There is from Gadamer’s point of view, moreover, no single, overarching horizon which affects consciousness. Nor are the horizons which affect consciousness closed — it is always possible to affect a ‘fusion of horizons’ with another point of view or another culture, and such fusions involve an expansion of pre-existing horizons. For us, the most important implication of this notion of effective history for sociological analysis is that it emphasizes the historical plasticity of the cultural meanings which influence social life and relations. As Gadamer has it, one of the most important instances of the fusion of horizons is that which takes place when traditions are reassessed in the light of new historical circumstances.

Gadamer’s notion of effective history is relevant here because it opens up fertile new lines of analysis for cultural sociology in relation to the issue of temporality. Among the most significant are those Johann Arnason has outlined in relation to attempts to analyze the formative role of culture in the historical evolution of large-scale socio-cultural configurations. The idea of effective history suggests a line of sociological analysis in which the key interpretive frameworks which shape social life have definite structuring capacities, but also have the capacity to acquire new meanings and develop in new directions as their potential is selectively realized in changing contexts. A more concrete notion of the theoretical advantages to be gained by such a conception of culture and its role in social relations can also be gleaned from Arnason’s work. The idea of effective history has two important advantages in relation to the analysis of modernity. It makes it possible to give due weight to the formative role of specific cultural heritages in the evolution of distinctive historical trajectories, without resorting to culturalist notions of the unfolding of self-enclosed cultural premises. Equally, it brings to the fore the complexities of unity and difference within a given cultural modes of modernity.


ibid., 249


ibid.
The second theme elaborated within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that is relevant here is Ricoeur's notion of the 'conflict of interpretations.' It is pertinent to the challenges confronting the project of cultural sociology which Wagner and Friese have identified because it offers an alternative to conceptions which see culture as a quasi-structure with a tendency towards integration. The idea of the conflict of interpretations emerged from Ricoeur's observation that language and meaning are polysemic, and its main import concerns the new light it sheds on the idea of the hermeneutical circle. Heidegger's emphasis on the anticipatory structure of understanding stressed the fact that interpretation is always the explication of pre-thematic or tacit understanding; interpretation is always grounded in interpretive frameworks in which we are always already immersed. Ricoeur's recognition of the polysemy of meaning, however, adds the idea that these horizons are permanently open to multiple, and rival, interpretations. We are, he insists, condemned not simply to interpretation, but to a conflict of interpretations.

Ricoeur's elaboration of the epistemological implications of the idea of the conflict of interpretations makes an important contribution to recent debate in the social sciences by justifying and legitimating the multiple and even rival interpretations of socio-cultural worlds. Theoretical frameworks operate, his analysis suggests, as structures of pre-understanding which determine how the socio-cultural world is understood; the phenomenology of religion deciphers the religious object in rites, myth, and faith on the basis of a problematic of the sacred, while psychoanalysis sees only that dimension of the symbol which derives from repressed desires, and considers only the network of meanings constituted in the unconscious. As Richard Kearney puts it, Ricoeur is suggesting that what Nietzsche interprets as the strength or weakness of a Will to Power, Freud interprets as a transposition of the repressed desires of the unconscious libido, the theologian as a cypher of divine transcendence, the poet as a projection of the creative imagination, and Marx as an ideological disguise of class domination. The fact that any interpretations of social phenomena can find only what it seeks is not a sign of the illegitimacy of the interpretation, but rather the unavoidable consequence of the anticipatory structure of understanding. On the contrary, by clarifying the point, Ricoeur has elaborated the idea of a 'second order' hermeneutical framework in which the rival interpretations are legitimated in so far as their claims to be an exclusive or definitive interpretation are abandoned.

For us, however, it is the implications of the idea of the conflict of interpretations for the understanding of culture and its role in shaping social life that is most relevant. In this regard, the pertinent point is Ricoeur's insistence that a given frame of reference is always open to rival interpretations foregrounds the possibility of multiplicity and internal differentiation within shared cultural horizons. The culturally embedded patterns of meaning and interpretive frameworks which deeply influence and even co-constitute social configurations, he insists, are always open to multiple, and even partly conflicting, interpretations. This theme offers a fertile starting point for an alternative to perspectives which overemphasize the homogeneity and coherence of cultural frameworks; if we take Ricoeur's notion of the conflict of interpretations seriously, it is possible to centre the idea of formative cultural frameworks around shared meanings while acknowledging that they are open to ongoing and divergent re-interpretation.

3. I suggested earlier that we can get a more concrete idea of the analytical advantages to be gained from a hermeneutical interpretation of the cultural turn by examining the recent social theory of Alain Touraine. The key text in this regard, I noted, is Critique of Modernity. This work is particularly instructive in relation to the issues confronting the project of cultural sociology because its theoretical innovations were prompted in part by the inadequacies of an earlier attempt to take the cultural dimension of social life seriously. Touraine's first theoretical synthesis was conceived as 'action theory' and for him, as for theorists like Giddens and Habermas, a stress on the meanings actors attach to their actions was a part of a strategy to 'bring agency back' in to social theory. A later recognition of the limitations of that theoretical framework led to an extended process of rethinking his perspectival premises which culminated in Critique of Modernity in a distinctive new intellectual formation. Touraine describes the outcome as a shift to 'sociology of the subject,' but as I have argued at length elsewhere, his thematization of the emergence of the subject is characterized by an implicit, but unmistakable, hermeneutical logic. The 'spontaneous' hermeneutic approach in this work has generated a number of highly fertile new lines of analysis for the theory of

16 Alain Touraine, Critique of Modernity.
modernity. In the limited space available here, I will outline the hermeneutical dimension of Touraine’s analysis, stressing the elements which connect with the themes of effective history and the conflict of interpretation, and give an indication of the contribution they make to his analysis of modernity.

The hermeneutical tenor of Touraine’s historical sociology of modernity is evident in the first instance in his mode of analysis; in *Critique of Modernity*, he analyzes the key features and successive phases of modernity through an analysis of the cultural orientations which partly constitute them. This starting point underlines the cultural dimension of Touraine’s analysis; as cultural orientations partly constitute modernity, they are central to his analysis and definition of modernity. Touraine’s analysis is not, however, culturalist in any sense which would presume that modern social formations can be analyzed as the unfolding of self-enclosed cultural orientations; he insists, rather, that the formative interpretive frameworks of modernity are always embedded in social practices and institutions, and are transformed by historical and structural dynamics. Before I outline the specifically hermeneutical dimension of his analysis in this regard, it will be helpful to consider his substantive analysis of the constitutive cultural orientations of modernity.

Touraine’s starting point in this regard is the idea that the emergence of a new consciousness of human creativity and autonomy is a crucial component of modernity. The idea that modernity can be defined in such terms itself has strong affinities with the philosophical hermeneutical perspective; the Canadian hermeneutical thinker Charles Taylor in particular has argued at length that the shift from conceptions which define the subject in relation to the cosmic order to the idea of the self-defining subject is a defining moment of the unfolding of modernity. The theme of the conflict of interpretations plays a central role in the development of the analyses of both Taylor and Touraine; for both, the conceptions of human agency associated with the advent of modernity have been understood in terms of the subject’s capacity for rationality on the one hand, and for self-expression, self-determination and self-interpretation on the other. And for both, it is the cultural orientations which underlie these interpretations of subjectivity which are the constitutive elements of cultural modernity.

As Touraine sees it, it is the cultural orientations of ‘rationalization’ and ‘subjectivation’ which determine the parameters of the modern condition. This argument is directed in particular against all versions of the rationalist conception of modernity as the ‘triumph of reason;’ against such monothematic conceptions, Touraine insists that the rationalization which has characterized the modern world is both dependent on, and relativized by, the social embodiments of subjectivation. The rationalization of the modern world depends upon the formation of subjects, (and the production of the subject is, likewise, dependent upon the appropriation of rationality. One of the important consequences of this analysis is the internally conflictual conception of modernity which emerges. Touraine insists that there is a tension between these elements of cultural modernity; rationality has been predominantly associated with the pursuit of wealth and the extension of control, while the striving for freedom which constitutes subjectivity has been harnessed to question and transform the apparatuses rationalization has created. The outcome is a conception of modernity traversed by an irreducible conflict. In contrast to conceptions based on contradictory forces which might be united, Touraine’s notion of modernity constituted by the tension between the cultural orientations of rationalization and subjectivation is, as Turner has put it, a social constellation which ‘cannot and should not be unified. If the idea of a conflict of interpretations is central to Touraine’s analysis of the formative cultural orientations of modernity, his understanding of their evolution has strong affinities with the hermeneutical notion of effective history. For Touraine, successive phases of modernity are defined by shifting interpretations of the orientations of rationalization and subjectivation, and as he sees it, the mutations involved take shape through ongoing and selective reactivations of the concrete traditions which embody the constitutive orientations in changing historical circumstances. Central to his analysis in this regard are the historical and intellectual developments widely associated with the emergence and transformations of modernity; the French revolution, the industrial revolution and globalization have all played a role. From Touraine’s vantage point, the primary significance of the transformations these historical developments have wrought upon the cultural traditions which have embodied the orientations of rationalization and subjectivation is to do with the way the

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19 *Touraine, Critique of Modernity*, p. 203.
tension between them is expressed. In the early modern period, he argues, there is an open and productive tension between rationalization and subjectivation, evident in the contrast between the Renaissance and the Reformation in the 16th century, and although progressively overshadowed, present up to the period of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, where it can be detected in the tension between the ideas of the general will, and of the rights man. However, when the French revolution introduced the idea of an historical actor, and industrialization transformed reason from an intellectual force into a force that could transform history, the constitutive cultural orientations of modernity took a new, and more self-contradictory form in historicist (and rationalist) visions of progress. In this era of 'modernity triumphant,' the productive tension between rationalization and subjectivation evaporated as the two currents of thought which had remained distinct in early modernity were fused into a single intellectual system; the historicist conception of history as a totality with a direction synthesized the liberalism of the rights of man and the idea of the general will, and identified the subject with that totality. More recently, the main impact of globalization has been an even more destructive fragmentation of rationalization and subjectivation which has resulted in the polarization of their impoverished forms of instrumentality and identity, embodied above all in the clash between 'the ghetto' and the market.

The analysis which results from Touraine's new, implicitly hermeneutical vantage point is immensely rich, but in the limited space available here, I will mention only two of the analytical insights which can be attributed to it. To begin with, the re-discovery of the 'early modern' period, characterized by a relatively open and productive recognition of the tension between rationalization and subjectivation, allows Touraine to argue more forcefully that the over- unified period of 'modernity triumphant' was a one-sided expression of the potential generated by the constitutive cultural orientations of modernity. The rationalist self-conception which came to dominate the latter period, which spanned most of the nineteenth century, succeeded for a time in retrospectively imposing its self-image onto the early modern period, but by uncovering the latter's more balanced dynamic, Touraine has highlighted the possibility of different—and potentially more productive—embodiments of modernities cultural constituents.

Secondly, Touraine's hermeneutical line of argument underlines the cultural specificity of the 'Western' model of modernity. This model has been widely disseminated, but far from representing the triumph of the universal over the particular, it is, Touraine's analysis stresses, the product of and shaped by the cultural and historical specificities of the circumstances from which it emerged. The origins of the tension between rationalization and subjectivation, Touraine argues are found in the break up of the specifically Christian world, it was the specificities of the Christian world, both created by a divine subject, and organized in accordance with rational laws which led to the separation of the realm of objective knowledge and the realm of the subject; the idea of the rational construction of the world was transformed into modern science, and the breaking of the link between the divine subject and the human subject set free self-expression. This strand of his analysis links up with the emerging paradigm of 'multiple modernities.' The new approach of theorists including Johann and Arnason and S N Eisenstadt, which stresses the multiplicity of forms of modernity co-determined by diverse civilizational heritages, is one of the most productive developments within social theory over the past decade, and Touraine's proto-hermeneutical analysis of the specificities of the Western experience is an important contribution to it.

About the Author

Dr Glenda Ballantyne

Glenda Ballantyne began teaching sociology at Swinburne, Lilydale in 2002. Her research interests include social movements, multiple modernities, identity and subjectivity and hermeneutics. Before moving to Swinburne, she taught and undertook a Phd at La Trobe University. She was a founding director of the feminist printing and publishing co-operative, Sybylla Press, and has been active in the women's movement and local initiatives

22 Touraine, Critique of Modernity, p.64.
23 ibid., p. 205. Touraine also makes the more common claim that the religious base of the West was well placed to facilitate the breakthrough to modernity because Christianity was, more than most religions, amenable to rationalisation and a positive reception of reason. ibid., p. 33. But although Christianity in general was an important factor in the transition to modernity, it is for Touraine, like Taylor, the distinctive Augustinian turn to the 'inter man' which played the most important role in generating the modern idea of the subject. The Augustinian idea that the meaning of living in God is to be found within the soul itself (as the basis not only for the idea of a personal relationship between the individual and God, but also for a modern conception of subjectivity that is anchored in the idea of personality)
to foster intercultural dialogue and political involvement. Recent publications include *Creativity and Critique: Subjectivity and Agency in Touraine and Ricoeur*, Brill, Leiden, 2006/7.
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