

Cultural Sociology

difference

An Introduction

religion

class

Les Back, Andy Bennett, Laura Desfor Edles,
Margaret Gibson, David Inglis, Ronald Jacobs,
and Ian Woodward

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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An Introduction

Les Back
Andy Bennett
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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Notes on Authors

Les Back is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London, United Kingdom. His books include *The Art of Listening* (Berg, 2007), *Out of Whiteness* (with Vron Ware, University of Chicago Press, 2002) and *The Changing Face of Football: Racism and Multiculture in the English Game* (with Tim Crabbe and John Solomos, Berg, 2001). He is also a journalist, and has made documentary films.

Andy Bennett is Professor of Cultural Sociology and Director of the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. He has authored and edited numerous books, including *Popular Music and Youth Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), *Cultures of Popular Music* (Open University Press, 2001) and *Music Scenes* (with Richard A. Peterson, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

David Chaney is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Durham, United Kingdom. He has published extensively on aspects of cultural change in the modern era. His books include *The Cultural Turn* (Routledge, 1994), *Lifestyles* (Routledge, 1996) and *Cultural Change and Everyday Life* (Palgrave, 2002).

Laura Desfor Edles is Professor of Sociology at California State University, Northridge. She is the author of *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), *Cultural Sociology in Practice* (Blackwell, 2002), *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era* (Pine Forge Press, 2nd edn, 2010) and *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Pine Forge Press, 2nd edn, 2011).

Margaret Gibson is a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Sociology in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. She is author of numerous publications on death, mourning and material culture, including *Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2008).

David Inglis is Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. He is founding editor of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, published by Sage and the British Sociological Association. He is the author and editor of many books and papers, including *The Globalization of Food* (with Debra Gimlin, Berg, 2010), *Culture and Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2005) and *The Sociology of Art* (with John Hughson, Palgrave, 2005).

Ronald Jacobs is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. His most recent books include *The Space of Opinion* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Ian Woodward is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. He is the author of *Understanding Material Culture* (Sage, 2007) and co-author of *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism* (with Gavin Kendall and Zlatko Skrbis, Palgrave, 2009).

Preface

This book has been written by a diverse group of researchers who have in common a fervent belief that it is essential to give priority to cultural processes as a primary element of any social explanation. Moreover, the authors are committed to the development of a cultural sociology, which means that they give great weight to aspects and dimensions of social life that have received little or marginal consideration from previous generations of sociologists. To believe in the value of a cultural sociology is to perceive such matters as emotion, affect, discourse, narrative, reflexivity, and the visual and material basis of social life as crucial to social experience and indeed as basic elements of any considered, viable theory of social life. In addition, to believe in the value of cultural sociology is to understand that culture should not be reduced to other aspects of social explanation, or explained in terms of factors such as the economy or ideology, for example. Rather, culture is an independent force and deserves to be treated as central to the many and varied areas sociologists have traditionally studied.

While cultural sociology has become a very influential area of research, there are diverse ways of applying a cultural sociological approach. As we emphasize above, what the authors have in common is a belief in the value of studying culture, cultural forces and cultural processes as a way of understanding society. A broad distinction can be made between the general sociological study of culture and what might be called a 'cultural sociology'. The former can be taken to refer to the use of already widely used sociological methods and concepts to study cultural phenomena, while the latter refers to the belief that sociological approaches require a more systematic conceptual and methodological overhaul to account for the way contemporary society works. Although the question of the relative merits of each approach is a matter of some contention within the global field of cultural sociology, we believe that it is valid to call both of these styles of analysis 'cultural sociology', and to recognize advocates of each as providing a distinctive model for doing cultural sociology. These distinctions are elaborated further in the introductory chapters of this book. However, it is enough to say at the present time that the chapters in this book represent scholarship from across the spectrum of cultural sociological

analysis. Naturally, because of the book's diverse authorship, some chapters might seem closer to a sociological take on cultural matters, while others are firmly in the camp of a style of cultural sociology, which advocates a separation from older, conventional styles of analysis. We see this diversity as a strength of the book and a reflection of the fact that the global cultural sociology movement is indeed a product of researchers drawing upon plural theoretical and empirical traditions, each of which has been shaped in unique ways by the central sociological canon and also refracted by distinct forces within national and regional spheres of scholarship.

The book is divided into four general parts. The contents of and rationale for each are outlined below.

Part I of the book gives an introduction to the field and methods of cultural sociology. *Chapter 1* is a special feature of the book. In this scene-setting chapter, founding cultural sociologist David Chaney provides a critical reflection and commentary on the factors that gave rise to the emergence of cultural sociology as a distinctive element of sociological theory and research. His account constitutes a particular narrative detailing the growth of cultural sociology as a distinctive sub-field. In doing so, Chaney's chapter is also a valuable statement on the contemporary vitality of the field. Because it is written by a contemporary founder of the field, it gives a historical perspective on the way cultural sociology developed. We suggest that readers would benefit by coming back to Chaney's chapter a number of times as they progress through this text and as their understandings of the field develop. *Chapter 2* discusses the emergence of cultural sociology as a particular field of sociological inquiry. It outlines the way particular traditions of cultural sociology have developed, especially in British, European and American settings. The chapter also addresses the differences between cultural studies, cultural sociology and the sociology of culture. *Chapter 3* considers the methodological tools sociologists typically use in their analyses, as well as the particular types of conceptual frames which guide how they undertake their research and how they see social phenomena. Rather than being a guide to methods, which is the standard approach used in textbooks that inform the reader about the difference between the types of possible research interviews, or matters of sampling, for example, this chapter considers the special methodological toolkit from which cultural sociologists can draw.

Part II of the book is entitled 'new cultural identities'. In fact, what the chapters in this section of the book do is to take some of the very oldest and central ideas about identity from the traditional sociological canon and render them anew, in ways afforded through the cultural sociological lens. Thus, existing sociological understandings of basic identity categories – class, gender and race – have been challenged by cultural sociological perspectives which argue that contemporary socio-cultural identities are also informed by images, objects and attendant resources which exist within people's everyday lives. Such resources are appropriated from the media and cultural industries and function to problematize conventional sociological interpretations of identity as structurally determined. Although these fundamental categories of social life remain relevant, to a substantial degree their capacity to fix identities has also been significantly undone by processes of globalization, the spread of media and popular culture, and the individualization trends that have defined the last few decades. Moreover, skilful cultural analyses have shown that factors such as class, race and gender are to a large degree constructed or performed 'from the ground up', utilizing a range of everyday discourses

and practices. Appropriately, then, this section concludes with a chapter on theories of the human body as a cultural object. The body constitutes a new site for political intervention and governance, as well as offering potential for challenging and breaking hegemonic discourses.

Part III of the book looks to important realms of ideology and belief within the contemporary world in which there have been huge recent changes. These chapters highlight the way traditional forms of religious and political authority have been challenged by characteristic processes of late modernity, including the dissolution of traditional forms of authority, the rise of life politics and the politics of lifestyle, and the global spread of media, celebrity and opinion cultures which fundamentally alter the way we understand and experience political and civic life. Also included in this section is a chapter on globalization. If one wishes to understand the conditions in which different groups of people live today, it seems increasingly impossible to ignore the aspects of those conditions that are seen to be characterized, or influenced, by 'global' forces, movements and phenomena. Globalization intensifies the spread of hegemonic capitalist forms, but also sows the seeds for bubbling forms of cultural difference to take hold which complicate and possibly challenge Western modernity.

Part IV of the book analyses a variety of media, leisure and lifestyle forms including music, fashion, food and the media. Such cultural forms have become more prominent aspects of everyday life due to the onset of late modernity and the increasing prominence of consumerism and leisure. Thus, there is a need to apply cultural sociological perspectives in order to fully understand their role and significance as primary cultural forms in the context of contemporary everyday life. The cultural sociological perspective sets out not necessarily to endorse or celebrate fashion, popular music or television, or the pleasures of eating out, nor to analyse them just because they are important new industries. Rather, the cultural perspective shows how such cultural forms represent and embody diverse social ideals and provide resources for giving meaning and forging social solidarity or difference among people, how such cultural formations help to contour and narrate aspects of personal lives and social events, and how they provide us with entertainment, pleasure and a relationship with very basic human desires and energies.

Each chapter features a range of words that are highlighted in **bold text**. These words are defined in the glossary of terms included at the front of the book. At the end of each chapter you will find a list of carefully selected additional readings and a series of relevant discussion questions.

Glossary of Terms

Aesthetic. The socially communicative capacities of the decorative, visual and material dimensions of culture.

Aesthetic public sphere. Public discussions about entertainment media and matters of aesthetic concern.

Aestheticization. A general process by which the qualities of decoration, style and design have increasingly become important to individuals, the economy and society in general.

Category. A class of things or group of people. Categories are basic ways by which the world is ordered and organized. New categories emerge as a way of acknowledging changes or shifts in identities and group affiliations, family organization, and so on.

Class analysis. A mode of social analysis that focuses on categories of economic attainment and stratification to illuminate social inequality.

Codes. The pattern of underlying beliefs and modes of judgement, developed over a long period of time, that structure how individuals perceive events, objects and other people. Codes are relatively obdurate cultural structures, and provide the narrative material necessary for navigating everyday culture.

Collective consciousness. A concept developed by Émile Durkheim, referring to the commonly shared beliefs, values and ways of thinking that create and sustain social cohesion. The word 'consciousness' is etymologically linked to conscience, and the collective consciousness is both internalized in the development of a social conscience and externally enforced via institutionalized (laws) and non-institutionalized social rules (norms). In modern pluralistic societies, the collective consciousness is harder to create, sustain or claim at the level of mass individual forms of conscience, as diversities in religion, beliefs, values and identities fragment collective forms of solidarity and identity.

Cosmopolitanism. A mental condition whereby individuals understand themselves to be part of a world made up of people of multiple different cultures, all of whom are seen to be profoundly connected to each other; this situation is accepted and welcomed rather than feared and disliked.

Creolization. See Hybridization.

Cultural capital. A term developed by Bourdieu in examining the nature of contemporary social identity, taste and lifestyle as produced through aesthetic and ideological sensibilities associated with class and its impact on educational achievement and occupational status. Refers to valuable economic resources possessed by individuals, including their education or other cultural learnings, which constitute non-financial assets that may assist people in becoming socially mobile.

Cultural heterogenization. A process whereby cultural life becomes more complex and elaborate over time.

Cultural homogenization. A process whereby previously different and separate cultures become replaced by one single culture that is the same in every part of the world.

Cultural imperialism. A situation where one region of the world – usually the West – is seen to dominate and control the media, and cultural life more generally, of other parts of the world.

Cultural policy. Public policies and discussions about how to organize and regulate the cultural industries.

Cultural politics. Conflicts that occur over values and meanings rather than actual public policies.

Cultural racism. A form of racism in which the biological notion of race is replaced by a pseudo-biological definition of culture that is defined as incompatible with the host culture.

Cultural turn. The turn among a variety of academic disciplines to culture as a means through which to understand and interpret everyday life in contemporary social settings.

Culture. The systematic sets of code, narratives, discourses and practices which structure the interpretation of social life and social action

Deterritorialization. A process where cultural phenomena cease to be located in one particular geographical location and potentially are spread out across the whole planet.

Dialectical. Describes a situation involving the complex interplay of diverse social forces, all of which come to have unanticipated effects on each other.

Difference. A means to describe human variety that does not fix or reduce human beings to essential qualities or categories.

Discourse. The socially productive ideas, beliefs and codes of thinking which circulate in a culture and influence how people perceive aspects of the social world.

Disembedding. A process whereby people's social relations are no longer limited to particular geographical locations, but are lifted out of those contexts and stretched across long distances.

Disenchanted world. A world drained of magic.

Embodied. Refers generally to a feature of social life that is related to the display, performance or exhibition of the body.

Essentialist. When an argument or theory is *essentialist*, it rests on the proposition or assumption of a unique female or male nature that is always already there as part of biology.

Ethics. Notions of right and wrong.

Ethnographic. A tradition of sociological methodology that emphasizes the use of multiple qualitative modes of inquiry, which focus on the participation and immersion of the researcher within the environment or community they are researching.

- Field.** The everyday socio-cultural environment of research subjects, often situated as the 'other' – a somehow self-contained or at least 'definable' world in relation to that occupied by the social researcher.
- Fordism.** Assembly line production systems; *see also* Taylorism.
- Frame alignment.** The ability to make an argument that resonates with the public agenda of the time.
- Gender.** The learned differences between men and women.
- Gender identification.** The internalized image of oneself according to socially available images of gendered subjectivity. Gender identification is largely an unconscious inner process but this is inevitably shaped and mapped by cultural and historical context, and particularly family cultures and social interaction.
- Globality.** A condition whereby the world is regarded by most people on the planet as 'one place', and everyone's existence is seen to be profoundly connected with everyone else's.
- Globalization.** A contested term with various competing definitions. In essence, it refers to processes that make different parts of the world connected to and dependent upon each other in complex ways.
- Glocalization.** The commingling of more local and more global cultures, creating complex social and cultural forms that are neither purely local nor purely global.
- Habitus.** Habitual ways of seeing, acting and understanding that are socially and economically conditioned by class location.
- Hegemony.** The attempt by dominant groups to make their worldview seem like 'common sense' to the rest of the population.
- Heterogenization.** A process whereby previously similar things become more different from each other.
- Historical materialism.** A method associated with Marx and the Marxist approach to the analysis of history and changes in human consciousness. Historical change is understood in terms of class struggle and transformations in the dominant mode of production.
- Homogenization.** A process whereby previously different and separate things become uniformly similar to each other.
- Homology.** A concept that explains the acquisition of cultural taste as a reflection of structural circumstances – for example, class, gender and ethnicity.
- Hybridization (or Creolization).** A process through which new cultural forms are created by the mixing of previously separate cultural traditions.
- Informal public.** Small-group discussions that take place among regular individuals in everyday settings.
- Interactionist.** Refers to the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, pioneered by Erving Goffman and others, which emphasizes the way social and cultural values are continuously reproduced and performed in small-scale interactions between people.
- Intersexed.** Refers to combinations of chromosomal characteristics and combinations of internal and external genitalia that differ from female and male sexed bodies and chromosome configurations (XY – male, XX – female).
- Jim Crow laws.** The legal framework for racial segregation in the United States, enacted between 1876 and 1965, which divided all public facilities along racial lines.

- Legitimate authority.** The belief that those in power are acting in the public interest, or that they have the proper authorization to make decisions, or both.
- Life politics.** As opposed to the politics of class, which is premised on emancipation and class conflict, this contemporary politics is focused on self-actualization and self-realization – for example, through ethical eating practices or wearing green fashion.
- Life-course trajectories.** The established and patterned pathways and milestones of people's lives, as influenced by factors such as social class, educational opportunities and gender, as well as by chance factors such as illness.
- Lifestyle.** A term initially used by Weber to describe the articulation of wealth and social status by social groups. The term was later adopted and developed by Chaney in examining the appropriation and inscription of cultural commodities into lifestyle projects by individuals in late modern, consumer-oriented societies.
- Massification.** A process whereby previously small-scale phenomena become greatly enlarged.
- Material culture.** This term emphasizes how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity.
- Methodology.** The process of considering one's general approach to studying research topics and collecting evidence by highlighting the underlying normative assumption about research epistemology – for example, what *types* of knowledge do social surveys generate? How can we know if our interpretation of evidence is a valid one?
- Methods.** The particular techniques used by sociologists to collect data and evidence – for example, social surveys or visual analysis.
- Modernity.** The features of social and economic organization that consolidated in Western Europe and America around the 1850s and extended until late into the twentieth century. The bedrocks of modernity are to be found in the processes and ideologies encapsulated in scientific rationality, specialization and individualism, and commodification.
- Moral panic.** A heightened public fear of a group or public issue, usually created by those in power in order to maintain their control.
- Narratives.** Narratives consist of the accounts or stories people tell themselves, and others, in order to both *make sense of* – and *make through practical means* – their lives. Narratives can also have a collective orientation, referring to the way groups such as national collectives or identity groups have stories that help to define the nature of group beliefs.
- Official public.** Public discussions that take place between government officials, politicians, experts, journalists and other representatives of the public interest. Official publics are almost always organized within the largest media organizations: in major newspapers and television channels, and on web sites.
- Ontological security.** The feeling of psychological security a person must possess in order to experience his or her social world as stable and ordered.
- Organic intellectuals.** Individuals who are responsible for articulating the publicly held worldview of a particular group, and criticizing the competing worldviews being put forth by other groups.

- Performance.** The attempt made by an individual to authentically embody a particular set of meanings through a series of actions and symbolic activity.
- Positivism.** Positivist approaches make the assumption that aspects of the social and cultural world, such as a person's behaviours or attitudes, are amenable to description and measurement via approaches that adopt logical scientific procedures based on principles of empirical measurement.
- Post-materialist.** Refers to a shift in culture whereby people's behavioural and value orientations tend to be focused on matters of lifestyle and self-cultivation, rather than being directed towards matters of personal economic position and gain.
- Postmodernity.** A variety of rapid social and economic changes which have occurred predominantly in Western societies, but are also increasingly global in reach, since around 1970. Postmodernity is principally defined by the questioning of modern values and assumptions of progress, and questioning the values of scientific and economic rationality. Postmodernity also places an emphasis on matters of aesthetics and style in cultural life and on the importance of leisure and consumption in forming people's identities.
- Post-positivism.** Such approaches challenge the idea that scientific approaches can access a universally known external reality or truth, and suggest that the knower (the researcher) and ways of knowing (the methods employed) can never really be separated.
- Profane.** The everyday, mundane world.
- Public sphere.** Those places where individuals gather together to discuss matters of common concern. These spaces can consist of face-to-face or mediated discussion.
- Qualitative.** Refers to a variety of non-numeric data-collection techniques used by researchers, and includes visual, textual, discursive and narrative forms of research where data are preserved in their collected state, rather than being abstracted and assigned a numeric value.
- Quantitative.** Refers to data-collection procedures where numeric values are assigned to measure aspects of beliefs, values, orientations and sentiments, and where the data are aggregated and analysed in terms of statistical variance between sets of relevant variables.
- Race.** The classification of human beings into pseudo-biological types produced within European racial science, racial ideologies and common sense.
- Racism.** The ordering of humanity into racial hierarchies that confer on white racial majorities full political entitlements and civic and social rights while denying those same rights to racial minorities.
- Rationality.** The idea that people will give good reasons to justify their positions on an issue, and that the best argument will carry the day.
- Rationalization of society.** The increasing reliance on methodical procedures and calculable rules rather than tradition and emotion.
- Reflexivity.** The process through which individuals engage in social life, with a capacity to continually judge and evaluate the outcome of their actions, choices and motives.
- Ritual.** A series of events that are set apart from ordinary life, designed to convey a particular set of meanings. Rituals usually involve a heightened sense of emotional energy that binds people together.

- Sacred symbol.** Objects or ideas that are above and beyond the everyday world. Examples include the Christian cross, or the wine/wafer in the Christian Communion rite.
- Sex.** The biological differences between men and women.
- Social class.** A group of people within society who have a similar economic position and similar sets of political, cultural and social views and goals.
- Social imagination.** The set of cultural scripts that individuals use in order to make sense of themselves and the world around them.
- Socialization.** The sociological concept refers to the complex processes by which children become social beings. Socialization covers everything from toilet training and learning how to walk, speak and read to learning social manners, norms and values. Children learn by osmosis without consciously being aware that they are learning to become social beings.
- Sociology of culture.** A sociological model that emerged in the United States during the 1970s though pioneering work by, among others, Richard A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio in the study of forms of cultural production as these related to, for example, music, art and literature.
- Soteriology.** A 'right' relationship with a higher power.
- Status.** The honour or prestige attached to one's position or role within society.
- Strong program.** A conceptual framework associated with Alexander, Smith and other US sociologists to connote a meaning-centred cultural sociology that attempts to map out the internal logics of cultural systems.
- Structural determinism.** The contention that social life is governed purely by socio-economic determinants such as class, educational attainment and occupation.
- Surplus value.** The difference between the money wages earned by workers and the economic value they create in their work. This difference becomes the basis of profit-making and exploitation within Marxist theory.
- Symbol.** A word, image or object that stands in for a larger set of meanings.
- Symbolic boundaries.** Refers to the role of cultural categories, beliefs and elements of visual and material life to signify differences between social and cultural groups.
- Symbolic order.** The meanings, representations and ideas that constitute ways of acting, thinking and understanding our selves and others. It is a concept running through Durkheimian sociology as well as psychoanalytic theory. In psychoanalysis, the symbolic order is a turning point in the child's acquisition of language and meaning-making skill as it is able to symbolize or represent its own self and significant others through words, images and objects.
- Taylorism.** Involved the development of time and motion studies, which closely documented the amount of time it took for workers to complete tasks in order to develop ways of increasing production and efficiency.
- Theology.** An explanation for evil.
- Thick description.** All human actions exist within a broader culture structure, consisting of multilayered symbols, texts and meanings. Thick description supposedly allows for a reading of a culture and its practices according to that culture's own concepts and circuits of meaning.

Transgender. Refers to people who identify with and live a gender style that does not normatively match their sexed bodies. This includes men who live as women but are anatomically male and women who live as men and are anatomically female. It can also include intersexed people and the way they combine gender identity with their sexed-body profiles. Transgendering clearly subverts normative category matches between sexed bodies and gender styles. Many societies recognize transgender identities as part of their culture.

Trans-local. Not confined to a particular locale or region but spread across the nation or nations.

Transnational corporation (TNC). A large company, such as Nike or Coca-Cola, which operates in many countries, both in terms of making goods and selling them. Its business model involves operating across national borders to make profits.

Part I

Theory and Method

Starting to Write a History of the Present Day: Culture and Sociology

David Chaney

The ‘problem’ of culture

In the second half of the twentieth century, a major innovation in the syllabus of academic sociology was the study of **culture**. The new theme was not exclusive to sociology, so it was also explored and caused major revisions in a number of fields within the human studies, such as philosophy, art history and English literature, among others. The topic also spawned its own distinctive field of cultural studies (Chaney 1994).¹ The idea that all this was an innovation might seem paradoxical, as culture had been central to the human sciences and particularly anthropology for at least a century. Thus we need to consider how and why the sociological syllabus was reshaped by a turn to culture. I suggest that in turning to culture sociologists revised and developed the fundamental sociological project of the characterization of modernity. It can now be seen that these revisions amounted to the beginning of writing a history of the present day.

An initial suggestion could be that a particular distinctiveness of the new perspectives lay in their concern with the culture of contemporary post-industrial societies. This is in itself insufficient, however. More broadly, we need to consider how culture was changing in later modernity, the social relationships between those who made and/or commented upon culture and those who consumed it, and whether traditional distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture were being changed.

In this chapter, I explore how and why culture was ‘discovered’ in Britain as a topic after a century of sociological work. I will use this particular episode in cultural history to begin a more general discussion of universal sociological questions that must be posed in the study of culture. These are:

- *What* is the culture being seen as problematic?
- And by *whom* and *how* is it being discovered?

Answers to these questions will help us to understand the reasons why and the ways in which cultural sociology has become so central to the sociological syllabus at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In effect, this means looking at how sociological work has adapted to the cultural changes of late modernity. These are clearly major issues, and ones that this collection is intended to address. In this chapter, I say something about how culture came to be seen as distinctively problematic in the 1950s and 1960s in Britain – not just as academic study but in the broader politics of cultural and social change, as well as in terms of relationships between the heterogeneous **discourses** of cultural studies and the broader discourses of academic sociology.

As an introductory point, it is important to recognize that in certain respects the culture of the ‘masses’ had been seen as a problem by certain members of the intelligentsia and opinion-leaders since a new urban popular culture came into existence. To go back only to the first half of the twentieth century, culture was often considered as an element in wider concerns with ideological knowledge and the ways in which rationality could be defended and sustained in an era of mass demagoguery, particularly Nazism.

A central element in these fears over mass ideologies was the idea that new forms of mass entertainment and information (principally films and radio at the time) could easily subvert traditional forms of moral and political order. In the United States, for example, such a concern was focused by research known as the Payne Fund Studies on the effects of mass cinema attendance, particularly on the young. In Britain, an influential version of this concern was a book written on the dangers of popular literature by a Cambridge intellectual, Q.D. Leavis (1932; see also Eliot 1948).

These examples illustrate some of the ways in which sets of fears around ‘culture’ were being expressed at this time. In the immediate aftermath of the cataclysmic World War I, it was widely felt that a new society was emerging or would have to be made. In the process, there were concerns that much of what was romanticized as a shared culture between the ruling class and the lower orders was being undermined. It could be said, then, that culture was being seen as a problem because it was being threatened by mass audiences and mass tastes. These fears over the implications of cultural change persisted in the latter half of the twentieth century, although much of the work of cultural studies was to celebrate popular experience and cultural forms. To assume that fear was glibly replaced by celebration would be to miss much about the way the ‘problem’ of culture has more organically adapted in both academic discourses and the discourses of the wider society.

In part, this is because even those most dismayed by modernity have had to recognize that the culture of traditional pre-industrial society had been disappearing for a long time. As an often nationalist response, there had been a movement in several countries to collect and record the folk songs and traditions of a disappearing world (Storey 2003). This sense of a distinctive national culture under threat was further exacerbated by the early forms of a global mass culture such as the Hollywood film industry in the first half of the century. A concern to ‘civilize’ the new urban masses of industrial class society had been a recurrent theme in public discourse at least since the first popular national festival – the Great Exhibition of 1851. However, it was given new forms and a distinctive emphasis by the strength and vitality of a popular culture largely focused around forms of mass entertainment – radio, cinema and popular literature, and so on – that developed from 1900 onwards. In the British context, the perceived need to improve the culture of the masses was seen as the central role of the institution of public service broadcasting.