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The Power of Culture: Glossaries and Footnotes to Peter Beilharz

Abstract: Culture has become one of the keywords of sociology. It is nowadays a central concept and an indispensable dimension of this discipline. Yet it is dispersed, institutionally and empirically. There seems to be a degree of confusion regarding how it works and even what it really is. In social life, many of us still tend to locate our problems and salvation in our bodies, minds and respective therapies, rarely going beyond the traditional notion of the self, fetishizing economic performance and political spectacle. Cultural patterns, however, permeate the workings of all those domains. That's why it is worth asking time and again: What made culture both reappreciated and troubling, powerful and diffuse? And why should we care about it now when late modern formations seem in crisis and post-human ones begin to loom large?

Keywords: culture, cultural sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, materiality, meaning

Peter Beilharz's essay about the "power of culture" is aptly titled and neatly traces its key academic genealogies. Culture is now seen as an autonomous and therefore powerful dimension of social life, but how culture exercises its power, "where" it resides, and why it works the way it does are still contentious issues. Different approaches thrive. Cultural controversies abound and keep many scholars and pundits busy both in life and science. Yet, despite its widely acknowledged social force, culture as a humanistic field seems less popular among students than psychology or marketing, even though *psyche* and *market* are not necessarily more concrete, nor are they more controllable than culture. Likewise, at least in Anglophone academia, sociology attracts less attention than economy and psychology. Despite recent advances in the latter disciplines that indicate pernicious consequences of bracketing socio-cultural factors, this situation has not really changed. Embeddedness, performance, meaning, myth, symbol and narrative have entered vocabularies of late modern reflexivity. And yet culture seems dispersed, institutionally and empirically. In social life, many of us still tend to locate our problems and salvation in our bodies, minds and respective therapies, rarely going beyond the self to consult the influence of collective representations

that profoundly frame our expectations and direct our perception. Nonetheless, "culture — the word and its phenomena — seem to become universalized", as Beilharz observes. The scientific concept of culture looms arguably larger than ever. What should we make of it all? What is the fuss about culture?

For one thing, *culture as explanans* rather than *explanandum*, i.e. an independent rather than dependent social dimension, has become attractive as a robust response to materialistic reductionism and positivistic fetishization of quantification, in science and in life. Beilharz importantly notes that this autonomy of culture has been emphasized by the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology since its inception in 2001, but it had been thematized explicitly also outside it, for example by Edward Said[1], and by Alexander himself as early as the late 1980s[2], although he developed it as his flagship concept only a decade later[3]. Because the course and significance of human life are hardly reducible to numbers and linear causality, a new set of methods and vocabularies has been proposed. Human life is meaningful, and culture is the repository of meaning. As the *spiritus movens* of Yale Center for Cultural Sociology Jeffrey Alexander would put it, it is an *environment* in which our deeds make sense, in which behavior is turned into action[4], and communication gets intertwined with experience[5]. More concretely, culture is an overarching structure of signifiers and their manifold references through which human affairs are comprehensible as value-laden actions and sense-making stories. But this structure is more than a simple sum of its signifiers. Stories demand interpretation, both on the part of the actors and the observers (while the observers can never really escape being actors themselves too). Although not unlimited, interpretations vary and may change over time and space contexts. All this makes culture admittedly hard to pin-point, or — as Beilharz suspects — the so conceived culture might seem to be everything, i.e. potentially nothing. It may come across as a "messy" subject. Admittedly, the more desire to order and supervise social reality, the more frustration may result in dealing with culture.

In academia, the linguistic turn mentioned by Beilharz decisively put the questions of meaning at the center of human sciences and categorized it as derivative of relational discursive structures. Thus it helped systematize cultural scholarship. Yet, it was a blessing and a curse at the same time. It worked, because it offered a sophisticated and parsimonious model of culture as text and applied elaborate hermeneutic methods to the slippery themes of culture. All of a sudden everything could be revealed as a discourse with its own logic. Society was seen

[1] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York 1993, p. XII.

[2] J. Alexander, *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies*, Cambridge 1988.

[3] 'Paradoksy socjologii. Kilka uwag o znaczeniu i odbiorze dzieł Jeffreya Alexandra', [in:] *Znaczenia społeczne. Studia z socjologii kulturowej*, ed. J.J. Alexander, Kraków 2010.

[4] J. Alexander, *Action and Its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis*, New York 1988.

[5] J. Alexander, 'Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26, 2008, pp. 782–794.

as resembling a book, internally coherent and full of interconnected characters, something that could be decoded and understood. It seemed as if for the first time since Bronisław Malinowski the question of the meaning of meaning was exciting and pivotal again. The seminal works of the linguistic turn stipulated that *meaning-making* is a discursive enterprise, *story-telling*. Whatever we do, we speak and listen, interpret and read between the lines. Our actions can be broken down to such elements as narrative plot, style, genre, tone, and consitutive metaphors. The resulting meanings are not strictly additive or measurable. Rather, they are emergent property gaining their sense from within a set of contrastive connections and contingent references. It is all relational.

Great academic results followed from that recognition. Thousands of books and articles mapped the new field and they may have also given cultural scholars a certain sense of power. Apparently, they recognized and described something independently powerful, and thought they could model its dynamics from behind the desk. As Beilharz nicely put it, the fuss about culture boils down to the collective feeling that culture "allows us to obtain some sense of purchase on the practices of everyday life".

But this sense of purchase reached a point of diminishing returns some time in the mid-2000s. Alexander may have been the last paradigm-building social theorist to persuasively anchor a whole sociological program in the classic tenets of hermeneutics and structuralism. He himself knew that there were shortcomings in prioritizing such a language-based map of modern society, hence his performative turn designed to attenuate weak spots of "pure hermeneut"[6]. In a nutshell, the problem of language as an exclusive model of culture is that it does not exhaust the complexity of its object — meaning-making. The linguistic turn masterfully and usefully reduced what Ulf Hannerz[7] called cultural complexity, but the focus on discourse left too many things aside. I developed this critique elsewhere, both as an epistemic meta-argument[8] and in a series of substantive papers[9]. Suffice it so say, language is not anymore seen as the model, and the associated methodologies are not hegemonic. In addition to the logic of text, we recognize entropy of context[10], phenomenological subtext and sensuous texture of meaning-making. Ideas

[6] *Social Performance*, ed. J. Alexander, B. Giesen, J. Mast, Cambridge 2006.

[7] U. Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, New York 1992.

[8] D. Bartmański, 'Sociological Theory as Image and Map', *Theory: The Newsletter of the Research Committee on Sociological Theory, ISA*, Spring/Summer 2013, pp. 7–12.

[9] E.g. D. Bartmański, 'Refashioning Sociological Imagination: Linguality, Visuality and the Iconic Turn in Cultural Sociology', *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 1(1), 2015, pp. 136–161; D. Bartmański, W. Binder, 'Being and Knowledge: On Some Liabilities of Reed's Interpretivism', *Czech Sociological Review*, 3, 2015, pp. 499–511.

[10] T.E. McDonnell, *Best Laid Plans: Cultural Entropy and the Unraveling of AIDS Media Campaigns*, Chicago and London 2016.

and ideologies have recently been more systematicaly confronted with practice[11]. The life of the mind, to use Hannah Ardent's phrase, is juxtaposed with the life and histories of the senses[12]. While constructivist epistemology has been heralded as the key domain of sociological theory by Alexander[13], who strongly criticized reductive materialism of sociology, it is also true that ontological and phenomenological aspects proved indelible too[14]. Things and networks of objects, images and pictures, screens and atmospheres, in sum all the interfaces, environments and sensualities of our massively mediated social experience crucially shape what we call the *power of culture* and *meaning-making*. Words and things are co-constitutive, ideas and experiences are reciprocally conditioned. This also means that it is not enough to update the old base/superstructure metaphor with hardware/software distinction. Medium deeply inflects the message as well as our processing of it; things concretize ideas, and new ideas breed new things; languages have dialects and accents, places and objects still matter despite the alleged deterritorialization and dematerialization of life in our virtual age. It is now clearer that realist and constructionist stances are compatible[15] and that surface and depth are deeply intertwined[16]. Last but not least, culture powerfully intersects with such variables as gender, class, race, and age, hence intersectionality as a key term in cultural critique today.

For this reason multiple *cultural turns* followed the linguistic turn. Doris Bachmann-Medick[17] lists — among several others — the performative, spatial and iconic turn. There are also powerful material and sensual turns[18], as well as their specific incarnations, e.g. the auditory culture turn[19], or haptic culture studies[20], each of which seeks to explore in depth previously neglected, integral registers of meaning-making. To the extent that these turns are established within contemporary academic landscape, talking about one "cultural turn" that followed the linguistic turn is an oversimplification. But we can perhaps accept Beilharz's char-

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[11] A. Reckwitz, 'Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(2), 2002, pp. 243–265.

[12] *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, D. Howes, Oxford 2005; M. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York 1993.

[13] J. Alexander, *Fin-de-Siecle Social Theory*, London 1995; *idem*, *Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*, Oxford 2003.

[14] D. Elder-Vass, *The Reality of Social Construction*, Cambridge 2012.

[15] Ibid.

[16] D. Bartmański, 'Modes of Seeing, or Iconicity as Explanatory Notion: Analysis, Interpretation and Criticism After the Iconic Turn in Social Sciences', *Sociologica*, 1, 2015.

[17] D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. Neuorientirungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Reinbek 2007.

[18] *Materiality*, ed. D. Miller, Durham and London 2005; *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. D. Howes, Oxford 2005.

[19] M. Bull, L. Back, *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Oxford 2005.

[20] C. Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*, Urbana 2012.

acterization as a heuristic synthesis of the intellectual climate in the last decades of the 20th century. After all, the aforementioned authors write cultural theories, cultural histories, auditory and sensual culture readers, and they establish material culture studies as a separate field. Culture is undoubtedly the keyword. The ramifications of this general shift towards culture are indeed widespread, spilling over the boundaries of sociology and cultural studies (how far they in fact reach is another matter).

Beilharz is right when he insists that strong interest in culture as *explanans* is relatively recent and when he credits the Yale School with making an essential manifesto-like case for culture in sociology. Although culture was important already among the sociological classics, for example for Simmel and especially for Znaniecki who explicitly dealt with relatively autonomous "cultural reality", it has never been dominant across the discipline afterwards. It was present in many different studies as an object, not an approach. But culture as a concept that denotes sociological meaning-structure indeed cannot be conflated with entertainment, tradition, or else naively reduced to aesthetic expressions. Nor can we simply accept — as Beilharz cautions — such distinctions as high/low culture, although these expressive manifestations and binaries continue to exist as significant everyday life references. Insofar as this non-reductive, structural notion of culture has become commonplace, it is due to the seminal culturalist works of the second half of the 20th century, from Raymond Williams to Jeffrey Alexander and beyond. However, it is now clearer that we can fully appreciate culture as *explanans* when the multiplicity of its registers is recognized and theorized, not just the multiplicity of its applications.

Reflecting on this rich legacy, we can understand better why Beilharz begins his text by writing that we are nowadays living *after* the hard distinctions and dualisms, irreversibly so, encountering much more complicated and intertwined landscapes of meaning, power, and accompanying technological entanglements. Although Beilharz's concise theoretical account seems spread evenly across influential academic spheres, i.e. British, American and Continental, it omits two vital issues: (1) the paths of correspondence and influence between disciplines, especially between sociology and anthropology, and (2) the meaning of works coming from non-Western/non-Anglophone thinkers and their role in culturalist debates. Symptomatically, no anthropologists are mentioned, except for Geertz in the context of the Yale School, who indeed was treated there as "an iconic intellectual for the cultural turn'' and honored as such in a separate volume[21]. Since the early 1970s when Geertz published his seminal book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the theoretical cross-pollination between different academic disciplines, especially between cultural sociology and cultural anthropology has been paramount to the present emancipation of culture. Transdisciplinary inspirations have

[21] *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences*, ed. J. Alexander, P. Smith, M. Norton, New York 2011.

become common and crucially important, even if interdisciplinarity remains an extraordinary ideal rather than ordinary practice. Again, the example of Alexander's theory provides a template: inspired not by fellow sociologists but largely by anthropologists (Turner, Douglas), philosophers (Wittgenstein, Austin, Ricoeur, Foucault), semiologists (Saussure, Barthes) and literary critics (Frye, Bakhtin), it influences mainly sociological audiences, as well as certain strands of other disciplines, especially through the three conceptions rightly singled out by Beilharz as Alexander's flagship research areas: political sciences (via his civil society and trauma theory), arts and aesthetics (via his performance theory) and visual and material culture studies (via his iconicity theory).

The case of anthropology in relation to the topic of the power of culture is particularly important. Traditionally, anthropology was the discipline most closely connected to the concept of culture, and from Malinowski's functionalism to Geertz's use of the idea of cultural system it strongly affected sociology, especially via Parsons and Alexander respectively. Later it came under criticism for being largely a part of ethnocentric, imperialist project but it worked through that challenge and branched out into new directions. Today there is a variety of anthropological approaches and few if any hegemonic figures. Beilharz is of course right to assert that much has changed in broadly conceived cultural sciences since Raymond Williams, especially following the establishment of the Birmingham School, the rise of British cultural studies and then the arrival of multifaceted American cultural sociology. However, cultural anthropology, like sociology, was never standing still, going through intergenerational revisions and experimental phases, profoundly contributing to more fine-grained and supple understandings of culture and of itself as cultural critique[22] and as intellectual performance[23]. Perhaps it has done so in a more durable and probably more concrete ways than social philosophies practiced by once fashionable postmodern thinkers. Likewise, there has been simultaneous progress in linguistics since the original linguistic turn. In the British sphere, the so called material turn represented prominently by Daniel Miller is one among several powerful strands of retooling anthropological vocabulary. His focus on consumption was not randomly chosen, since in the world of tight interdependencies it has been patterns of consumption that increasingly defined individual identities and cultural communities. This school in turn remains in a dialogue with recent advances in archaeology and their impact on the theories of culture and community[24]

[22] G.E. Marcus, M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences (Second Edition)*, Chicago and London 1999.

[23] D. Bartmański, 'How to Become an Iconic Social Thinker. The Intellectual Pursuits of Malinowski and Foucault', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15(4), 2012, pp. 426–452.

[24] I. Hodder, *Entangled. An Archaeology of the Relationship between Humans and Things*, Oxford 2012; M.H. Feldman, *Communities of Style*, Chicago and London 2014.

that overlap in some important respects with anthropological critique of structuralist legacies in cultural research[25].

Furthermore, such researchers as Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, thematize intercultural contact, clash and exchange, offering reflexive perspectives of their own, pluralizing the notion of culture, and thus engaging culturalist presuppositions of globally dominant Anglophone academia. Here anthropological explanation is less preoccupied with ideology and more concerned with modalities of lived practice, because "a culture is not a system of beliefs, but rather — since it must be something — a set of potential structurations of experience, capable of supporting varying 'traditional' contents and of absorbing new ones"[26]. In a manner that rings both sociological and up-to-date, de Castro suggests we study "the conditions that allow certain cultures to give foreign 'beliefs' a status of supplementarity or alternativity in relation to their own 'beliefs'".

Sociologists have traditionally been quite well equipped to investigate a set of vital social conditions that interact with culture, especially class structure and religion. After the aforementioned developments in cultural thought, especially various kinds of material turns, they are perhaps more prepared to comprehend the current complexities and changes than ever. As anthropologist George Marcus admits, sociologists like Latour have been more likely to be cited by his colleagues than the anthropologists of the previous generations, like Geertz[27]. However, the new forms of globalized production, consumption, exchange, experience and identity seem greatly accelerated, fragmented and fluid. Cultural scholarship is at a cross-roads again. Economic crises surprise and damage societies, catching economists off-guard. Certain key distinctions and institutions seem to be melting into air. Thus, Beilharz proposes to employ Bauman's term "liquid modernity" in the capacity of "a canopy for culture". It seems to me, however, that the social liquidity our societies now witness is a specific late capitalist condition with calibrated effects, not a general enduring structure of meaning that determines cultural life. Importantly, there are different capitalisms[28], as Beilharz once wrote himself. Therefore we are likely to observe different kinds and degrees of social "liquidity" inflected by localized culture structures. Entrenched ideological binaries persist (despite repeated pronouncements that left/right dualism is exhausted), just like exploitative class divisions and their symbolic distinctions do (despite be-

[25] E.g. W. Keane, 'Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things', [in:] *Materiality*, ed. D. Miller, Durham and London 2005, pp. 182–204.

[26] E.V. de Castro, *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul. The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in 16th Century Brazil*, Chicago 2011.

[27] G.E. Marcus, 'Geertz's Legacy Beyond the Modes of Cultural Analysis of His Time: Speculative Notes and Queries in Remembrance', [in:] *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences*, ed. J. Alexander, Ph. Smith, M. Norton, New York 2011, p. 132.

[28] A. Anievas, K. Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, London 2015, p. 9.

ing morally stigmatized and socially exhausting). Mobility of the few continues to happen at the expense of many others. Liquid freedoms have their rigid footprint.

Why does it matter? Because it is the footprint of our actions that defines our predicament and verifies our rational powers. Cultural categorizations do get shifted and redefined, but they are not discarded as such, and they are vehemently adhered to, for better or worse. To the extent that culture is a meaning structure in Alexander's sense, or a similar entity of "potential structurations of experience", "the liquid modernity" does not strike me as a potential umbrella term for sociology. Culture as a collective life form is an analytically broader term than modernity as a social formation (that is why we talk about modernity as culture), and it does have formidable autonomy vis-a-vis socio-economic formations (that is why we talk about multiple modernities). Again, as Beilharz himself had pointed out[29], "after the fall of the Wall, the comparative focus shifts to the real and significant differences between capitalisms, or else to the guiding curiosity now called alternative or multiple modernities". It is quite hard to imagine a canopy effectively covering such radical plurality.

Cultures as symbolic structures and phenomenological structurations have not necessarily become liquid in toto in late modernity. Certain unevenly distributed aspects of socio-material conditions have. If anything, we are more controlled, supervised, and aware of control than ever before, although somehow always 'behind the curve', increasingly relying on whistle-blowers and suspicious toward authorities. It is another embodiment of the binary struggle between civil society and the state, as Alexander might say. We are also increasingly more unequal as societies, with gaps growing bigger and harder to bridge. The Weberian cage of modern bureaucracy is not less but more elaborately woven, within and beyond the nation state. Security regimes and the extent of legal control over citizens seem more rigid, not more lax. One could perhaps try to argue that it happened in response to growing liquidity brought about by technological, economic and demographic changes. But such a mechanistic explanation would ignore the role politics and political cultures play in deploying resources, mobilizing symbols and channeling human energy[30] (including science) in directions desired and framed by the powerful.

Many of those topics get extensively treated in the works of Zygmunt Bauman and for this reason Beilharz's choice to include him rather than any other outstanding cultural sociologist or anthropologist can be accepted. Insofar as Bauman sociologically ''defamiliarizes the familiar" and unmasks the latent structures of society, he is a close ally of Alexander who also defined his own mission in terms of sociological estrangement, cautioned against cultural conventions that tend to insidious-

[29] P. Beilharz, 'Introduction', *Thesis Eleven*, 73, 2003, p. 3.

[30] D. Sarewitz, 'Saving Science', *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*. Accessed on August 30, 2016 at: http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/saving-science.

ly naturalize themselves, and described his cultural sociology as a foil against the "naturalistic fallacy"[31]. Both sociologists oppose essentialism, and if anti-naturalistic critique has been the default setting in much of recent cultural theorizing it is because they made it powerful, alongside such thinkers as Judith Butler or Edward Said. What the subsequent cultural turns changed in this discussion, especially the material and the iconic, is a more nuanced treatment of the relation between nature and culture, object and representation, signifier and referent, physical and virtual, analog and digital[32]. The cognitive turn in American cultural sociology has recently done it in its own ways too. Beilharz does not discuss these turns, and instead argues that with Bauman we can understand culture better as a kind of "second nature". As he admits, this is a metaphor with a long history, not Bauman's invention. In fact, as a descriptive trope it is present in contemporary cultural works as well, being employed alongside new problematizations of old dualisms. For example, anthropologist Michael Taussig, sharing with Bauman and Miller the interest in late modern consumerist culture, works with nature/culture binary to re-evaluate the central role of commodity beyond its symbolic, fetishistic and utilitarian meanings:

> The commodity does more than yield the measure of history as time. It is also the petrified historical event where nature passed into culture, where raw material combined with human labor and technology to satisfy cultured design. Standing thus at the crossroad of nature and culture, the commodity is hardly a sign or symbol […] The commodity is both the performer and the performance of the naturalization of history, no less than the historicization of nature. In other words, the commodity is the staging of "second nature" [33].

Beilharz concludes that "culture remains central to Bauman's sociological project from beginning to end, even after socialism has lost its bite". But isn't it the case that to the extent that culture remains important for Bauman and elsewhere on the left, it is not so much *despite* the decline of socialism after 1989 but rather *because of* it? I would like to leave it as an open question. However, the so called Autumn of Nations that swept across Eastern Europe in 1989 was indeed a historical threshold whose meanings and ramifications, often paradoxical ones, cannot be fully comprehended without strong cultural analysis and thus they inspired bringing culture back in[34]. I assume it was partly for this reason that the journal *East European Politics and Societies* added "and Cultures" to its name. It is now rather incontrovertible

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[31] J. Alexander, *Meanings of Social Life*…

[32] D. Bartmański, 'Modes of Seeing, or Iconicity as Explanatory Notion: Analysis, Interpretation and Criticism After the Iconic Turn in Social Sciences', *Sociologica*, 1, 2015, p. 22; D. Bartmański, I. Woodward, 'The Vinyl. The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 15(1), 2013, pp. 3–27.

[33] M. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*…, pp. 233.

[34] D. Bartmański, 'Successful Icons of Failed Time. Rethinking Post-communist Nostalgia', *Acta Sociologica*, 54(3), 2011, pp. 213–232; D. Bartmański, 'Iconspicuous Revolutions of 1989. Culture and Contingency in the Making of Political Icons', [in:] *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, ed. J. Alexander, D. Bartmański, B. Giesen, New York 2012, pp. 39–65.

that culture effectively underwrites failures and successes of political and economic projects, big and small. To Alexander, these ups and downs of politics and economy may be more or less liquid, more or less detrimental, but they are always explainable as performative fusion or lack thereof. This is partly why we do not find any specific theory of socialism in Alexander, as Beilharz notes, nor do we see a theory of capitalism in his prolific oeuvre. Just like culture is a broader analytic term than modernity, performance and signification are more epistemically fundamental than any specific formation in Alexander's view. And just like culture is not reducible to art or entertainment, performance is not reducible to mere manipulative spectacle and signification is not reducible to linguistic reference. Rather, according to Alexander, social performance is a kind of 'deep' Geertzian play, and signification occurs between material surface and discursive depth. Cultural power is often experiential iconic power[35]. There are always actors and audiences locked in structures of mutual interpretation, coded through icons, binaries and boundaries, in which something can be 'liquid' because notions and experiences of the rigid exist, in which discursive forms make sense because they have experiential content.

Finally, while Beilharz's claim that ''socialism has lost its bite" is probably correct, especially outside cultural sciences, the critique of capitalism and cultural structurations it is associated with seem to remain alive, especially inside cultural sciences. That is why if he was accurate when he wrote in his 2003 *Thesis Eleven* editorial that ''Marx remains central", this appears even more accurate today when capitalism's excesses wreak havoc globally. However, Marx persists not necessarily as the solution but as the cultural signifier of critique and resistance to capitalism. Beilharz is probably right that what differentiates Alexander from Bauman and Birmingham style of cultural studies[36] is precisely the kind of critical distance to capitalism. Alexander remains indeed more affirmative than other liberal intellectuals despite modernity's all-too-obvious dark sides. His conception of culture is rooted in such notions as myth and semiotic spiral, whereby social life is seen through the eternal return of constitutive binaries. He sees enchantment next to disenchantment, civil repair, not just social damage, solidarity amidst exploitation, communities alongside corporations, all symbolically coded vis-a-vis each other. As he writes in the introduction to *The Dark Side of Modernity*, "culture structures remain anchors for collective meanings without which social and individual life is impossible to conceive. Rather than evicting meaning, modernity reformulates cultural structures and subjects them to new strains"[37].

So culture seems to prevail, its structural elements unassailable, its mythical repertoires persistent, its regenerative capacity available. This may make Alexander's

[35] J. Alexander, *Iconic Conscuousness…*; *Iconic Power…*

[36] E.g. G. McLennan, 'The New American Cultural Sociology: An Appraisal', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 22(6), 2005, pp. 1–18.

[37] J. Alexander, *The Dark Side of Modernity*, Cambridge 2013, p. 3.

position closer to another great thinker who, like Bauman, started his illustrious intellectual career in communist Poland, left his country in the late 1960s and then found a new professional position in England, namely Leszek Kołakowski. Already in the 1960s, Kołakowski systematicaly theorized centrality and continued presence of mythologico-symbolic dimension of human societies, although his conception was published in English only in 1989[38]. Both theorists acknowledge that social life (repeatedly) questions inherited rigid distinctions, and introduces new, sometimes more civil notions and practices, yet even then the respective binaries remain as background representation, or reappear under new guise. Ambivalence, as Bauman adds, can hardly be eradicated from our changing cultures, and yet we return to their ''old resources''[39]. Culture has its powerful gravity. Therein the three thinkers meet.

Berlin, September 2016

Siła kultury: glossy i przypisy do Petera Beilharza

Abstrakt

Kultura stała się jednym ze słów-kluczy w socjologii i centralnych pojęć oraz nieodzownych wymiarów tej dyscypliny. Niemniej jednak zdaje sie ona rozproszona, zarówno instytucjonalnie, jak i empirycznie. Wciąż nie jest do końca jasne, jak kultura funkcjonuje, a nawet czym właściwie jest. W życiu codziennym wielu z nas skłonnych jest łączyć nasze problemy i ich rozwiązanie z ciałem, umysłem i właściwych im terapiom, rzadko wybiegajac poza tradycyjne rozumienie osoby, fetyszyzując gospodarcze wyniki i polityczny spektakl. Wzory kultury i kolektywne znaczenia są jednak aktywne, będąc źrodłem tych ważnych obszarów rzeczywistości. Z tego względu ma sens ponawianie pytania, co zrehabilitowało pojęcie kultury w socjologii, a co odpowiada za trudności i niejasności z niej wynikające? Co czyni ją potężną siłą, a co zdaje się ją rozpraszać w naszej percepcji? I w końcu, dlaczego mamy się nią przejmować właśnie teraz, gdy późnonowoczesne formacje społeczne są w kryzysie, widocznym zwłaszcza gdy się go ogląda z posthumanistycznej perspektywy.

Słowa-klucze: kultura, socjologia, antropologia, znaczenie

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[38] L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, Chicago and London 2001.

[39] Z. Bauman, *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Oxford 1995, p. 286.

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