

Culture – the elephant in the room

Detailed Analysis, Grand View Synthesis, and their Oscillations

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Abstract

Cultural studies became a fashionable field of research some decades ago. Why? It is interesting to take a closer look at the possible reasons. Of course, scientific fashions like any other field of modern human activity is characterized by the need to attract financial support; and financial support is more likely to be received if something new, a new fashion with a fancy name enters the stage. But there is more: As part of the wide field of social sciences, cultural studies at first sight promised to fill a gap. But which gap, in between which borders of the scientific hole are we talking about?

This paper tries to give some tentative answers to this question by shedding spotlights on problems of three traditional sub-disciplines of the social sciences: sociology, economics, and political sciences. Following a methodology proposed by Descartes science proceeds by starting to investigate the respective phenomenon by ever closer *analysis* of its details, and then to recapitulate the findings by an overarching *synthesis*. The analytic fabric woven by the above mentioned three approaches evidently has some visible holes. The paper sketches the major shortcomings of these approaches and finds that these do not connect to build holes in a scientific coverage of social science that in principle is adequate. Quite to the contrary these sub-disciplines have started *to create holes* in what social science should be! In restricting analysis to their respective toolset they started to lose sight of what their common object of investigation is, in other words they miss the second step of Descartes: synthesis. Thus the wish for regaining oversight was a major stimulus for pushing cultural studies. The word 'culture' acted as a mythical catalyst, collecting all kinds of behaviour remaining unexplained by the standard approaches. What remained as a hallmark of scientific method was just the close link to historical evidence. The implicit hope was that by taking a more holistic view (synthesis) on a particular culture (analysis), and then comparing cultures (meta-synthesis) a grand picture of social evolution could be regained.

The last part of the chapter discusses successes and failures of the attempt of cultural studies. Today the majority of research in the large three sub-disciplines carries on its business-as-usual methodologies – it remained unimpressed – while cultural studies are marginalized. At best they survive as politically nurtured 'European studies', almost invisible for mainstream research. But with the deep global crisis of 2008 the prestige of the 'queen of social sciences', of economic theory, has faltered. Also most too specialized sociological theory has wasted its reputation; either due to the nitty-gritty issues it deals with or due to impotent self-invented language it uses. Political theory degenerated to strategic consulting of prevailing political parties, or even to journalism. Of course, in some dark corners not devastated by the mainstream some useful research survived. But nevertheless time seems ripe for a revival of the tenets of 'cultural studies', though certainly dressed in new clothes and with a new name.