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CULTURAL
SOCIOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTORY READER

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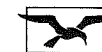
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FOREWORD

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To produce a good reader is not an easy task. By definition, the intended audience is made up of undergraduates studying in English-speaking colleges and universities. Typically, the imagined conversation partners have little interest in disciplinary traditions. Instead, they are intrigued by the world at hand, and are seeking answers and tools for thinking through both ordinary and challenging experiences. The best readers provide these tools, as well as new puzzles and some answers.

A good reader also offers a distinctive cut into a field of research. It identifies key elements of an ongoing conversation that brings together researchers across a few generations, where the classics inspire the young, and where in selected cases, younger scholars keep older research questions and agendas alive.

The best readers also make a case for a set of questions, or an integrated field of knowledge, by offering evidence of its dynamism and liveliness, of the process by which one line of inquiry opens up to the next, while also providing at least provisional conclusions concerning burning issues. Such readers make the audience want to know more, to purchase the books that extend and amplify ten-page offerings of Clifford Geertz or Pierre Bourdieu. They speak to the audience by tackling real world problems, questions that are significant to the lives of the public—for instance, why is upward mobility so difficult for those at the bottom? And what determines musical tastes?

By these various standards, the present volume is a successful experiment. But it is more than that. It is also *de facto* a reflection on the conditions of production of knowledge as well as on the current or ideal (“the best of the best”) state of a subfield.

By some respects, research problems change over time not because they are solved as much as because they no longer remain puzzling or “interesting.” What items figure in a grouping of authors and contributions is predicated by where the field stands now as much as by what each individual scholar brought to past conversations. Knowledge does not advance so much as it moves to novel questions and new approaches. The cumulation of knowledge is accomplished practically when generations of scholars perform the moral duty of acknowledging what comes from where and what is the added value of their contribution given the current state of a field.

For the past thirty years I have taught cultural sociology to undergraduate and graduate students, moving from a large public university to elite institutions, where I have spent most of my professional life. During these years, I have attempted to use my teaching to alert promising young people to the existence of analytical tools that can make a difference to their ability to apprehend the world systematically and critically, and to help them gain a better understanding of how people, institutions, and resources hang together (or not).

Most of the authors brought together in this reader by Matt Wray have figured on my syllabi over time. For many colleagues and for me, they represent “the best of the best” that cultural sociology has to offer not only to our discipline, but also to neighboring fields. At the end, the proof is in the pudding, i.e. success can be measured by whether authors have been successful at creating disciplinary and supra-disciplinary conversations (as manifested in citation rates, for instance). Of course, others who are not included here have been influential as well. But at the very least, the present reader offers one very well-informed take on what American cultural sociology has stood for over the past exceptionally dynamic decades.

In the broader intellectual landscape, many characteristics differentiate cultural sociology from neighboring disciplines. It is more multi-method and cumulative in orientation than cultural anthropology, and less influenced by Foucault and by post-modernism. It is less exclusively textual than cultural studies, more attuned to institutions, and it is concerned with explanation as well as with description. It is also more skeptical of explicit political involvement than other areas of critical studies, including queer, race, or legal theory.

Within sociology, cultural sociology has grown to exercise a deep influence on other subfields over the last forty years, on areas such as the study of race and ethnicity, education, social movements, economic sociology,

and political sociology. And indeed, in a context where the American Sociological Association (ASA) is organized around substantively-based sections *qua* subfields, “Culture” is currently the largest section of all the sections, ahead of historically more popular areas such as medical sociology and the sociology of gender. This is an indubitable measure of the success of the enterprise, particularly among younger generations, as this section also includes more graduate students than any other section of the ASA.

Finally, by some accounts, cultural sociology has brought about a revolution within American mainstream sociology, which has moved from being largely conducted as a quantitative enterprise concerned with structural changes, to being a multi-method endeavor often concerned with the various social processes participating social change, including processes that are largely meaning-based (such as evaluation or racialization). As such, cultural sociology has facilitated a cross-Atlantic dialogue among American sociology and other sociological traditions, including the more hermeneutic and interpretative traditions found in Germany and France (as well as on other continents, Latin America especially).

These are just a few of the reasons we can celebrate the publication of Matt Wray’s exceptional reader. Not only should it prove to be a useful tool in the education of younger generations, but it should also become a powerful arm against the balkanization of American sociology. Finally, may it also help experts and lay people alike move beyond a strict dichotomy between culture and structure and come to comprehend how meaning making is indeed a crucial collective enterprise, on par with the competition for material and symbolic resources.