

## Doing sociology and culture: Richard Peterson's quest and contribution<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Within the discipline of sociology, approaches to studying culture have shifted markedly over the last forty years. In this article, we review these changes as well as Richard Peterson's contributions to the field, arguing that his work played a vital role in developing the study of culture as a legitimate subject. While studies of culture were marginal during sociology's structural period of the 1960s, the 'production of culture' perspective of the 1970s established the arts as a legitimate topic by applying structural analysis to the popular culture industry and focusing on the organizational processes that constrain aesthetic choices. This depoliticizing of culture opened up the field for the developments of the 1980s and 1990s, which saw a rapid growth of interest in the analysis of cultural meaning as well as a broader conceptualization of culture. By considering Peterson's contributions along this time line, we show how his work contributed to current theories of culture, and how these theories have been applied to the arts in general, and to the music industry in particular. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

Since early in his career, when he first walked into the jaws of sociology's confusion over how to address culture, Richard 'Pete' Peterson has been one of our foremost interpreters and proponents of new frameworks to navigate the shoals of culture and social structure. For thirty years, Peterson has been at the crossroad between

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sociology and the arts. While the discipline and its approaches to culture and the arts have gyrated markedly over this period, Pete has been a constant. During his time as one of sociology's most visible advocates and effective exemplars for engaging the discipline in the study of the arts, he has undertaken and accomplished an impressive multitude of actions and established a community of like-minded colleagues. As a frequent organizer, critic, and devoted teacher, he engaged in studies of numerous aspects of the arts and supported and inspired several generations of scholars, both in sociology and related disciplines. All of the authors in this volume have benefited substantially from Pete's pioneering activities and his insights into the relationship between culture, agency, and social structure.

This is no mean feat, for while hard to imagine it is only recently that speaking (much less writing) about culture within sociology did not require an excuse or explanation. An important aspect of Peterson's contribution has thus been his ability to show the larger field of sociology how the arts are a productive research site for testing and developing the theories of the day, whatever they are. For example, Peterson's discussion of authenticity in country music (1997) appears at time when cultural studies place enormous emphasis on issues of collective identity, collective memory, and originality. This concern for the social construction of meaning shows how far we have come from the time when sociology was much more structural, associating market structure with stratification and competition between organizations. When this was the dominant framework in which to present research, Peterson brought the record industry to the discipline with the still-influential finding (Peterson and Berger, 1975) that competition among record companies is associated with the degree of diversity among musical styles and the number of labels producing them. The *production of culture* school blossomed from that formulation, and to this day remains one of the most influential perspectives in the sociology of culture.

Like many of the other sites we visit to test out the discipline's models and theories, studies of the fine arts and popular culture have needed to be connected to something more 'serious' in order to qualify for inclusion in the major journals of the field. Another of Peterson's major contributions for those who have followed his pioneering example is to show how to do this – that studying the arts and publishing the results in serious journals are not mutually exclusive! Pete's articles connecting the arts to theories which resonate with the field have appeared in all the major journals of the discipline and have by now spanned a period of three decades, thus testifying to his extraordinary skill of addressing the current concerns of the discipline.

This admirable accomplishment of keeping the discipline's eye on the arts invites a broader consideration of how the discipline of sociology has framed culture during the time Pete has been making this series of contributions. A review of the frameworks he has helped create and extend, by showing how music as well as other art forms exemplify and clarify their propositions, will (a) cast a light on how the discipline's formulations about culture have changed dramatically, as well as (b) celebrate Peterson's ability to consistently get the discipline to attend to his focus on the popular arts. In the following discussion, we roughly delineate sociology's depiction of culture from the 1960s to the present. We will consider Peterson's contributions along this time line, showing how he creatively extended these perspectives while

keeping our eye on the applications of each to the arts in general, and to country music in particular.

## 2. Early on: Contextualizing and de-politicizing culture

During the 1960s, culture was effectively a non-issue within sociology. In Parsons' scheme, it was too abstracted to enable empirical investigation, and the discipline's Marxist tradition continued to view culture as an epiphenomenal reflection of the more serious realities of production modes and social structure. The only excitement surrounding a cultural form rested in Merton's approach to the sociology of science, which drew attention to the social contexts in which its findings were produced – a framework which Peterson credits as one inspiration for what became his more general 'production of culture' approach.

A focus on these contexts, which impact the content and quantity of what is produced, became the framing through which Peterson could help initiate the re-entry of cultural concerns back into the discipline. While avoiding the more dangerous topics of meaning and symbol systems, the ingenious and more compatible solution he arrived at was to present non-material goods as a structural, more material topic for analysis. Referring back to the success of his early work on the record industry, Peterson observed that the "early formulation suggested that working within the production perspective should be seen as a necessary, if temporary, retreat from confronting the unanswerable questions about the causal links between society and culture" (1994: 185).

A second obstacle to moving culture, and especially popular culture into the discipline during this early period, was the widespread belief that it was not only junk, but also the *industrial production of superstructure*. As the reflection of the more serious life-determinants of social structure, the activities of what Powdermaker (1950) called the 'Happiness Factory' of Hollywood and Adorno (with a much more critical meaning) the 'culture industry' were not deemed serious or valuable topics for examination. 'Mass culture' could be examined in this political context, as a social problem – though hardly as a social good.

While policy oriented sociologists like Gans (1975) initiated the more 'value neutral' sociological critique that 'high' versus 'popular' culture was a more class-based than political red herring – a perspective which takes hold later, in the 1980s – the most effective strategies to de-politicize the topic turned out to be treating it (1) less as an aesthetic or social problem, and (2) less as a matter for societal concern, than as, as noted above, (3) just another challenge for economic and organizational analysts to examine, in terms of (4) how does the market work, what is efficient here, and how are its products affected by this market structure? In short, the entry vehicles into the sociology of the day, to gain legitimacy for cultural studies, were precisely to apply a structural analysis to novel sites, treating 'nonmaterial' goods in much the same way as material ones (perhaps anticipating Becker's later Nobel Prize-winning analyses (Becker, 1981) of marriage and other 'non-material' topics as all economic).

Peterson and Berger's contribution along these lines, in the *American Sociological Review*, burst on the scene in 1975. It opened the door to enabling sociologists to analyze the popular arts *descriptively* and *nonpejoratively*, leaving the normative and critical aspects to other fields. In keeping with the discipline's focus of that time, here was a connection to social structure and markets, but no longer critical of its capitalistic framework (as 'mass culture' formulations had been), and enabling the field to approach aesthetics without judging their quality. In fact, the content or quality of the product is irrelevant, or simply a 'matter of taste' that remains external to the framework. Whether leisure time is spent on wrestling matches or opera or baseball is immaterial.

To make this point, Peterson and Berger took the number of labels in a given year (not the contents of the music) as their dependent measure. Others of us who joined Pete in this formation of the 'production of culture' perspective also utilized the economic frameworks of market structures and organizational sociology, where the term 'industry' is a description, not a dismissal. Hirsch (1972: 641), for example, simply combined and equated all 'cultural products' as "nonmaterial goods directed at a public of consumers, for whom they generally serve an aesthetic or expressive, rather than utilitarian function". In sum, the 'production of culture' approach to cultural objects, while strongly rooted in the social structural traditions of studying production and consumption, de-politicized this social area as well as ruled out of bounds considerations as to the comparative aesthetic value of the objects being produced.

### 3. The 1980s: Moving culture into focus

During the 1980s, sociology became more interested in the issues of symbols and meaning which it had been ignoring. Feminist scholarship and multiculturalism raised serious concerns about the textual content of cultural products, and multicultural studies focused on the uses to which they are put. In addition to adding how cultural works come to be created and used to the 1970s more organizational focus on how they are produced and distributed, the new decade also expanded the concept far beyond its initial association with nonmaterial, aesthetic products. Conceiving the use of culture as a toolkit, Swidler (1986) framed research on culture to encompass organizational and occupational cultures, as well as the rules of law that become institutionalized (Scott, 1987). Bourdieu's (1984) addition of reproduction and cultural capital further bridged the more traditional separation of culture from social structure by linking culture back to social stratification. With the expansion of interest in culture, Peterson took a leading role in creating a section on the sociology of culture in the American Sociological Association. Altogether, the concept had expanded significantly, though it also became more ambiguous as to where its boundaries begin and end vis-à-vis other subfields of the discipline.

During this period (1979–1989), Peterson returned to some of his earlier interests and further developed them, particularly what may be called the 'microfoundations' of the production of culture perspective. His Simplex model (Peterson and White,

1979, 1981) provided a close-up view of the occupational culture of Nashville's country music community, showing how collaboration between studio musicians provided a protective mechanism against the forces of perfect competition. This theme was further developed in his collaboration with Ryan (Peterson and Ryan, 1983) on career entry into the country music songwriting business. Linking back to Merton's work on anomie and deviant innovation, this study showed how organizational cultures reproduce themselves and develops many of the ideas on work routines and organizational rhetoric that were by then prevalent in the growing literature on culture in an organizational context. However, Peterson remained a critical observer of this literature, pointing out that the explanatory power of group cultures may frequently be questionable, especially if the focus on culture neglects the role and contribution of the structural features of a career path (Peterson and Wiegand, 1985).

At the same time, Pete's monitoring of the uses made by consumers of popular culture also expanded (Peterson, 1981). In the studies of this period, he reported on the lyrics of country music songs and their changing degrees of class consciousness, and more generally, on the problem of 'accounting for taste', which he studied in association with the National Endowment for the Arts. These were precursors to the remarkable accomplishment to come in his later article on changing taste (Peterson and Kern, 1996). Peterson's culture work during the 1980s harmonized with some of the discipline's movement in these new directions, which he had predicted in an important *Annual Review of Sociology* chapter on perspectives to revitalize the culture concept (Peterson, 1979). In this contribution, he bridged the two worlds of (1) framing the 'Culture' (specific nonmaterial products) embodied in the 'production of culture' school, and (2) the more generic "culture", with its broader series of symbols, scripts and routines, applicable in any setting (Fine, personal communication).

#### **4. The 1990s: Meaning and authenticity**

The 1990s saw a continuation of the cognitive turn that began in the 1980s. As the field shifted to a broader conceptualization of culture, the discussion continued to move from a focus on the mechanisms of production to the political and cultural negotiations around meaning structures. In a sense, this changing focus represented a renewed interest in the input and reception stages of the creation of cultural meaning, rather than retaining the emphasis on the middle stages of organizations processing cultural products.

This shift is noteworthy, since it signifies a new quality in the discipline's thinking about the role of culture. As we have pointed out, Peterson had proposed the 'production of culture' as a way to avoid 'the unanswerable questions' about the causal connections between society and culture (1994: 185). By excluding such questions from his framework and instead focusing on the structural part of culture creation, he had been able to open up the field for the issue of culture, even – or perhaps because – this did not include all of the potential universe of issues. But with the field maturing and culture gaining in legitimacy as an explanation, it was now

both intellectually appropriate and more acceptable to expand into Pete's areas of interest over and above what the production formulation had already contributed.

The 'production of culture' perspective had focused on the organizational decisions and processes that constrain aesthetic choices. One stream of works that now emerged expanded this view by moving to what Fine (1996), reversing the older formulation, called the 'culture of production', a perspective that stresses the role of aesthetic choices in affecting the nature and quality of products. Such a view does not deny the role of organizational and market constraints, but gives a more active role to the meaning creators and points to the expressive side of the creation of cultural objects and the meaning that is embedded in them. In this perspective, the workers involved in the creation of cultural products are no longer outside the process, but enter as active agents with a sense of identity and craft that transcends the narrow goal of producing things (Fine: 1996, 178).

Peterson's studies of audience reception and the consumption of cultural objects expand out of the production framework into the meaning and uses of cultural objects to their consumers. His important finding (Peterson and Kern, 1996) that high-brow individuals tend to be much more 'omnivorous' in their cultural tastes than predicted by earlier works sparked a lively debate on cultural stratification (Bryson, 1996; Gebismair, 1998; Warde et al., 1999; van Eijck, this volume).

Focusing even more on the social construction side, another stream of works in sociology has focused around the idea that the structures and resources influencing the production process are themselves the result of a process of meaning creation. Here, we attend more to the evocation and discussion of collective and cross-cutting identities, as well as to individualized solutions and cultural scripts (Sewell, 1992). Models of organizational forms are the result of choices and have been conceptualized as "organizational repertoires" (Clemens, 1993). Similarly, markets are framed as arenas for institutionalized action (Fligstein, 1996) or as belief systems that determine attributes and values in the minds of buyers and sellers (Rosa et al., 1999). These views of culture as social construction take the concept to yet another level, arguing that structure is not meaningful by itself, but has to be placed in the context in which actors perceive and manipulate it.

Peterson's scholarship has been a significant catalyst of this development and has left a lasting impression on current sociological theorizing on the role of culture. He has been an active contributor to these advances in conceptualizing culture, as reflected most notably in his most recent work on the music industry, on the social construction of authenticity in the country music genre (Peterson, 1997). With this work, Pete now presents his own framework for the study of an industry, connecting the three aspects of meaning creation, organizational processing, and audience resonance together in a multi-level analysis of a popular culture. Peterson remains true to his interest in the role of structural aspects, but links these to a greater focus on the quality and resonance of the meanings created, thereby implying that the market will depend on the fit between meaning production by cultural agents and audience perception of cultural objects. Showing the full breadth of his knowledge of the music industry, Peterson demonstrates that country music as a genre did not emerge 'naturally'; it took almost two decades of active collaboration between performers, record

companies, and movie producers to create and establish the genre in the field of popular culture. In this context, Peterson uses the expression ‘fabricating authenticity’ to refer to the process by which collective representations of the past come to be accepted as genuine and authentic, thus tying his work to the growing literature on collective memory and the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Schwartz, 1996) as well as institutional theory (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

With this link between the cognitive and structural aspects of an organizational field, Peterson is able to offer a mature and convincing model for the study of industries, a model informed by his insight that “in the production process, culture and social structure are so entwined that it is meaningless to ask whether society causes culture or vice versa” (Peterson, 1994). His insistence on the importance of looking at the mechanisms of culture production, as well as the cognitive structures, presents a welcome counterweight to current theorizing on culture, which too often tends to neglect the structural aspects in favor of the cultural side of meaning creation.

## **5. Conclusion and future directions**

Over the years, Peterson has on several occasions commented on the growth of cultural studies and the different ways in which culture as a concept has been utilized within the field of sociology (Peterson, 1979, 1990). He was among the first to survey the field and find it lacking in conceptual rigor. His call to revitalize the culture concept (1979) was a challenge to fellow scholars to demonstrate the utility of the conceptual relationships between culture and society provided by their theoretical perspectives. He was not satisfied with the state of the discipline and what he saw as sociology’s inability to forge a convincing paradigm that provided the study of culture the standing and legitimacy it deserved.

As the sociology of culture moved into the decade of the 1990s, Peterson’s concern for the discipline’s treatment of culture shifted its focus. Given the rapid growth of the field, there was now less concern with establishing culture as a topic worth studying and a concept that carried explanatory power; the question became whether the rapid spread of culture was going to produce equally abundant insights into the nature of society, or whether the field rather resembled an ‘umbrella construct’ whose tent was becoming too large and inclusive (Hirsch and Levin, 1999). Peterson pointed out that the revitalized interest in culture had given rise to a proliferation of different usages but not yet resulted in a new orthodoxy or consensus over its use. To bring some order into this abundance, Peterson (1990) himself suggested a rough classification of these usages according to whether they draw on the anthropological tradition – of culture as codes of conduct – or that of the humanities – focusing more on the symbols and classification systems that help organize our world and encode its meaning. At present, it appears that even this distinction is losing its classificatory grip on the rapidly growing field of studies invoking the concept of culture.

One reason the culture area benefits from expanding beyond any one formulation of it is that any one, by itself, at best can only explain a part of the total variance we observe. At present, questions regarding the audience resonance of cultural products

still largely remain open – why does one set of cultural objects enjoy wide popularity while another does not? These questions continue to move us beyond the production aspect of culture and ask for a better integration of the public and wider meaning structures into the study of popular culture. Much work remains to be done here, and encouraging moves have already been made in this direction (e.g. Griswold, 1987; Griswold and Engelstad, 1998).

Whichever ways the discipline develops from here, we will continue to find Peterson's influence – from his extensive body of research, direction and commentaries up until now, and still more to look forward to. We are all in his debt for these accomplishments. Peterson has long been, and remains our best indicator of where the discipline is in this important area, as well as the instigator who keeps moving it along.

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