

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bennett M. Berger. *An Essay on Culture: Symbolic Structure and Social Structure.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20016-6; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20017-3.



Reviewed by Bill Mullen (Youngstown State University)

Published on H-Ethnic (August, 1995)

The sociologist Bennett Berger's distinguished career work has at least two persisting themes. One is an attempt to continue the tradition of critical interpretation of culture as a tension between "ideal" and "material" value that is at the heart of work by his intellectual influences and mentors, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu most prominently.

The second is more unique and idiosyncratic to Berger's own sociological method: the articulation of what he calls "ideological work," defined as the apparent or covert self or group interest manifested both in the public sphere during processes of cultural production and debate and within the discipline of academic sociology itself.

These two themes appeared in nascent form in his first book, *Working-Class Suburb* (University of California, 1960) in which Berger both confirmed and challenged the prevailing ideological bias in emerging sociological scholarship about the evolving American suburbs. A study of auto workers in a newly-formed California suburb, the book argued that despite the apparent status of affluence and creeping hegemony attached to suburban living auto workers there retained a strong sense of working-class culture and identity: material and ideal values were in apparent conflicting ascent. At the same time the book challenged the sociological con-

sensus about the expanding American middle-class already hardening around the massively influential work of William Whyte, offering an example, albeit a limited one, of how sociologists needed to study dissenting "subcultures" within their categorization of social phenomenon if those categorizations were to be upheld.

Berger's other books, including *The Survival of a Counterculture* (University of California, 1981), a study of rural communards in California, have elaborated and persuasively demonstrated the usefulness of these ideas, marking him as both a major figure and a minor rebel in the discipline at the forefront of what he calls the democratization, relativization and differentiation of culture. Throughout, Berger has remained a materialist on cultural matters, a self-described "interpretive humanist" (p. 70) with determinist leanings, and a progressive culturologist with a keen sense of intellectual play. Put another way, Berger is something of a disinterested academic populist.

Having retired from the University of California at San Diego in 1991, Berger has now written what he says could be his last book. It is, fittingly, quirky and prescient, and sometimes modestly brilliant. *An Essay on Culture* is both a casual summation of lifelong intellectual pursuits and a salvo in the "culture wars" both academic and otherwise. At its heart, the book intends to

prod sociology and its practitioners to, in Jeffrey Alexander's words, "reintegrate subjective voluntarism and objective constraint" (p. 75) by unpacking the relationship between culture and society, the "symbolic structure and social structure" of the subtitle. Put as plainly as he does it, Berger wants to describe and create a "sociology of culture." His method is analysis and rumination, c.f. Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, on the evolution of historical definitions of culture, their relationship to sociology as presently practiced, and more broadly, the present historical and intellectual moment. While that moment is never brought into clear focus, its features are recognizably postmodern. The book proposes that culture is increasingly undistinguishable from ideology, and that the best sociological work (Howard Becker and Bruno Latour, for example) foregrounds that transformation. "By connecting social structures to symbolic structures," he writes, "They promote the transformation of culture into ideologies, consent into contest, unity into diversity, and traditional consensus into points of view that need to be defended with reason and evidence" (p. 131).

Berger offers contemporary debate about multiculturalism as his paradigmatic example of the postmodern culture war, where tensions between unity and diversity, consent and contest are writ large. Berger astutely notes that the debate pits two historical notions of culture transformed by discursive heat into blatant ideology. On one side is the social scientist notion of culture as "normative ways of life," the lynchpin of pro-multiculturalist argument for inclusion of marginalized, obscured and subaltern cultural texts and practices; on the other side is "humanist" culture, the line spawned by Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as the "best that has been thought and said," a definition to which Great Books advocates like Allen Bloom are permanently beholden.

Berger wades cheerfully into this debate offering critique and encouragement to both sides. "The culture wars" he writes, "are now apparently a permanent part of the social process, and ideological work has become a major occupation" (p. 52). Yet rather than take sides, he accentuates what is virtuous and clear-headed about both camps. His objective, he notes, is not polemic but an interrogation of freedom, to which a sociology of culture can and should best work. Indulging himself in what he calls "metaphysical pathos," he earnestly, grandiosely proposes this: "we conceive culture, ideology, and interests as analytic elements of a continuous historical process through which societies, with blood, sweat, and

tears, struggle toward their concepts of the true, the beautiful, and the good" (p. 39).

This curious blend of Weberian cultural critique and romantic Hegelianism inspires Berger to search out and identify constructive sites of such struggle in both contemporary culture and academic sociology. Several are named in the least inspired part of the book, section two, where Berger offers brief reviews of relatively recent sociological studies which, by his schema, do virtuous cultural work by amplifying understanding of the nexus between social and symbolic structure. Recent books by Kristin Lukin, Paul Willis and, somewhat distractingly, Berger's colleague/wife Chandra Mukerji are presented as examples. Berger also undergirds this section with high praise for the lasting contributions of both Herbert Gans and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work on the relationship between status, culture and ideology gives Berger his best models of a proactive sociology of culture.

But Berger's most useful and broad-reaching argument for humanities scholars is his re-framing of culture, and cultural debate, within a wide, interdisciplinary matrix. He cites both Cultural Studies' close readings of cultural artifacts and multiculturalists' expansive definitions of the "normative" as new phases in the cyclical reevaluation of culture that work against determinist models, be they biological, material, or New Critical. Yet he also chastises both for too narrowly defining culture as "art," urging humanities scholars to cross-talk towards integrative definitions. Too, Berger often brilliantly decodes contemporary political debate as a mask for cultural ideology: religion and nationalism/patriotism, on the rise in the U.S., "probably constitute the most powerful examples of culture exercising apparently independent symbolic force" (p. 153). Berger's healthy anti-hegemonic spirit also offers up salient old/new left insights. America, he notes, is an "idealist" country where "I believe" carries more weight than "I am a product of" (hence the difficulty and challenge of selling structural analysis to the masses). And in a post-Reagan era of laissez-faire theology, Berger notes, "Freedom of choice is increasingly framed, in the U.S. at least, as consumer choice" (p. 151).

Berger is at other times apparently unfamiliar with texts and ideas that would both bolster and undermine some of his arguments and interpretations of culture. His discussions of cultural studies, for example, elide that discipline's foundation in analysis of "social structures" (particularly working-class ones) that provide excellent models for a "sociology of culture" Berger is clamoring for. He also rarely cites scholarship at the fore-

front of “multicultural” debate: Gerald Graff, Stanley Aronowitz, Janice Radway, Fredric Jameson, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Gayatri Spivak, Nellie McKay, Paul Lauter, Catherine Stimpson, Lizabeth Cohen, Ron Takaki and Werner Sollers are just some of a much longer list of missing names whose career writings have been very much devoted to the kind of “interpretive humanism” Berger longs for. These omissions are particularly glaring in a section where Berger seems to endorse Russell Jacoby’s argument in his much-debated *The Last Intellectuals* that post-60s intellectual discourse has moved out of the public sphere, into the University, and hence away from an experiential investment in the “world.” Contrarily, both the feminist claim that the “personal is political” and the multiculturalist insistence on identity politics, autobiography and critical “positionalities” (see queer theory, for example) are precisely reformed examples of intellectual discourse AS public discourse: the wedding of ideas and artifacts to the social order; symbolic structure as social structure.

By himself staying too firmly within the historical

boundaries of sociology as a discipline, Berger fails to connect up with and benefit from the specific works and practices of these potential allies in the struggle for a “sociology of culture.” Yet his book still makes a valuable contribution to their projects of close examination of the interrelated formation of political and cultural consciousness and calling to account the constant interpellation and interpenetration of ideology and “everyday life.” In doing so Berger reminds us that culturology and cultural studies are in many ways the realms where the most complex and productive arguments and understandings are made about what he has presciently called throughout his admirable career “ideological work.” *An Essay on Culture* is a fine contribution not only to all humanities disciplines invested in identifying this work, but an original rumination on one possible way to begin to map their interrelations.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ethnic>

Citation: Bill Mullen. Review of Berger, Bennett M., *An Essay on Culture: Symbolic Structure and Social Structure*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. August, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=145>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.