Throughout the world, culture has been doggedly pushing its way onto the center stage of debates not only in sociological theory and research but also throughout the human sciences. As with any profound intellectual shift, this has been a process characterized by leads and lags. In Britain, for example, culture has been making headway since the early 1970s. In the United States, the tide began to turn unmistakably only in the mid-1980s. In continental Europe, it is possible to argue that culture never really went away. Despite this ongoing revival of interest, however, there is anything but consensus among sociologists specializing in the area about just what the concept means and how it relates to the discipline as traditionally understood. These differences of opinion can be usefully explained only partly as empirical reflections of geographical, sociopolitical, or national traditions. More importantly, they are manifestations of deeper contradictions relating to axiomatic and foundational logics in the theory of culture. Pivotal to all these disputes is the issue of "cultural autonomy" (Alexander, 1990; Smith, 1998a). In this chapter, we employ the concept of cultural autonomy to explore and evaluate the competing understandings of culture currently available to social theory. We suggest that fundamental flaws characterize most of these models, and we argue for an alternative approach that can be broadly understood as a kind of structural hermeneutics.

Lévi-Strauss (1974) famously wrote that the study of culture should be like the study of geology. According to this dictum, analysis should account for surface variation in terms of deeper generative principles, just as geomorphology explains the distribution of plants, the shape of hills, and the drainage patterns followed by rivers in terms of underlying geology. In this chapter, we intend to apply this principle to the enterprise of contemporary cultural sociology in a way that is both reflexive and diagnostic. Our aim is not so much to review the field and document its diversity, although we will indeed conduct such a review, as to engage...
in a seismographic enterprise that will trace a fault line running right through it. Understanding this fault line and its theoretical implications allows us not only to reduce complexity, but also to transcend the kind of purely taxonomic mode of discourse that so often plagues handbook chapters of the present kind. This seismographic principle will provide a powerful tool for getting to the heart of current controversies and understanding the slippages and instabilities that undermine so much of the territory of cultural inquiry. Contra Lévi-Strauss, however, we do not see our structural enquiry as a disinterested scientific exercise. Our discourse here is openly polemical, our language slightly colored. Rather than affecting neutrality, we are going to propose one particular style of theory as offering the best way forward for cultural sociology.

THE FAULT LINE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The fault line at the heart of current debates lies between "cultural sociology" and the "sociology of culture." To believe in the possibility of a cultural sociology is to subscribe to the idea that every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive, or coerced vis-à-vis its external environments (Alexander, 1988), is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning. This internal environment is one toward which the actor can never be fully instrumental or reflexive. It is, rather, an ideal resource that partially enables and partially constrains action, providing for both routine and creativity and allowing for the reproduction and transformation of structure (Sewell, 1992). Similarly, a belief in the possibility of a cultural sociology implies that institutions, no matter how impersonal or technocratic, have an ideal foundation that fundamentally shapes their organization and goals and provides the structured context for debates over their legitimation. When described in the folk idiom of positivism, one could say that the more traditional sociology of culture approach treats culture as a dependent variable, whereas in cultural sociology it is an "independent variable" that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces.

Viewed from a distance, the sociology of culture offers the same kind of landscape as cultural sociology. There is a common conceptual repertoire of terms like values, codes, and discourses. Both traditions argue that culture is something important in society, something that repays careful sociological study. Both speak of the recent "cultural turn" as a pivotal moment in social theory. But these resemblances are only superficial. At the structural level we find deep antinomies. To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that culture is something to be explained, by something else entirely separated from the domain of meaning itself. To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that explanatory power lies in the study of the "hard" variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more "real" and tangible social forces. In this approach, culture becomes defined as a "soft" not really independent variable: it is more or less confined to participating in the reproduction of social relations.

A notion that has emerged from the extraordinary new field of science studies is the

1Alexander (1996) posited this dichotomy, and it was further elaborated in Alexander and Smith (1998). The present chapter builds on this earlier work.

2Here lies the fundamental difference between a cultural sociology and the more instrumental and pragmatic approach to culture of the new institutionalism, whose emphasis on institutional isomorphism and legitimation would otherwise seem to place it firmly in the cultural tradition. See the forceful critique of this perspective "from within" of Friedland and Alford (1991).