

Interactive comment on “Die kulturelle Übersetzung als symbolische Gewalt: Über die Beobachtung des Kultur/Gesellschaftsverhältnisses in der Kulturgeographie” by P. Dirksmeier

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This is an interesting paper, addressing an important problem with an innovative blend of ideas drawn from recent cultural theory. Peter Dirksmeier's project of clarifying relations between 'the cultural' and 'the social' in everyday as well as scholarly discourse and practice regarding the socio-cultural world is valuable and promising. Particularly his carefully derived characterization of 'symbolic violence' in the practice of 'cultural translation' can help frame the growing recognition, evidenced in many contributions to this Special Issue, that 'translation' is never politically innocent. Andreas Pott has

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already delivered a thorough and constructive assessment of the paper's substantive claims and argumentative strategy (Pott 2009). I would like to echo one of Pott's suggestions, expand on another, and finally, raise a broader, more open-ended issue about distinctions between terms.

First, I agree fully with Pott that the paper would be improved if the meanings Dirksmeier gives to the terms "Beobachtungsschema", "Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung" and so forth were more clearly specified. (Pott 2009, C77) On the one hand, as Pott notes, Dirksmeier appears to be deploying these terms somewhat differently than Pott himself has done. More generally, however, it would be helpful to see at least a brief explicit discussion of what this entire categorical schema of first- and second-order observations adds to the substantive argument Dirksmeier seeks to make. What does the reader gain by having the argument presented in these terms?

Pott raises a second important issue as well, namely that Dirksmeier appears to rely, in his discussion of 'cultural' versus 'social' distinctions, upon the kind of unified notions of 'the cultural' and 'the social' that are challenged by (among others) the very postcolonial theorists on whose work Dirksmeier bases his own argument. (Pott 2009, C77-78) Pott goes on to spell out in some detail the problems Dirksmeier 'leaves hanging' in this respect, but restricts himself chiefly to the paradoxical meaning of 'the cultural'. He does ask about 'the social' as well, specifically, why it is that the distinction between 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' is 'social'. (Pott 2009, C78)

However, more needs to be done on the issue of the social. From the various passages in Dirksmeier's text it appears that 'the social' has to do with issues of power, institutions and practices. The general thrust of his argument is that understanding 'cultural translation' as 'symbolic violence' allows us to see how what appear to be 'merely discursive' distinctions become supports for more institutional and practical divisions imposed by one group upon another. This is a valuable claim. But in addition to the questions raised by Pott, it would be helpful to see an explicit discussion of the relation between 'the social' and 'the political'. The independent significance of the social' can

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be seen as coming under threat not only from the apparent ubiquity of 'discourse' and 'culture' but also from the argument that what used to be understood in terms of 'structural determination', 'agency' or 'structuration' is better seen in terms of 'domination', 'struggle', 'identity politics', etc.

Nevertheless, even with a more detailed definition of both the cultural and the social, Dirksmeier's argument would need to explain more clearly how a distinction between these terms might actually address the problems with postcolonial cultural geography noted on pages 182 and 183. How would a clearer distinction between the cultural and the social, for example, allow postcolonial geography to stop reinforcing Western belief in progress or perpetuating colonial discourses? There are too many intermediate steps in the argument being taken for granted here.

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There is a more general question lurking behind all this, however, one which also haunts Pott's assessment and my own suggestions in the preceding paragraphs. All of us reproduce a conviction that more clarity in distinguishing terms is better. But what precisely is gained by defining concepts such as 'the social' or 'the cultural' with as much clarity as possible? Both Dirksmeier and Pott accept the prima facie validity of calls from their geographical colleagues to provide clearer definitions. But, especially in view of current critiques of stable categorical distinctions, we should ask about the specific effects of such calls, not simply assume that clearer definitions are always better than 'fuzzy', 'aporetic' or 'paradoxical' ones.

Academic debate is fuelled to a significant degree by the fact that it is always possible to demand a better or clearer definition or distinction. Yet this perpetual possibility is available to us precisely for reasons laid out by theorists of deconstruction, namely, that the meanings of terms can never be closed, are always based upon networks of lateral associations between 'signifiers' that have no clear outer limits. It is this that renders language both super-individual and performative, and that provides the

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backdrop for theorizations of 'third spaces'. In using a concept, we 'activate' certain of its possible associations based on our pre-existing sense of what it means, and our interlocutors or readers perform their own activations, usually partly overlapping with ours. The project of clear definition, then, is a project of maximizing the degree of overlap between intended and received associational activations.

This is undoubtedly all familiar. However, in my view human geographers and many other scholars influenced by deconstruction and the 'cultural turn' have fallen into a trap in our conceptualization of this situation. This trap is rooted in our tendency, perhaps encouraged by a Deleuzian emphasis on rhizomatics, to assume that because a concept is 'borderless' as a network of associations, it is also 'centerless'. Many scholars throughout the human sciences have tended to assume that the disappearance of the illusion of terminological borders has automatically brought with it the disappearance of the illusion of stable centers.

As Pott notes in passing, however, the apparent 'paradox' that concepts of 'the cultural' are both taken as a starting point and portrayed as performatively produced may in fact be a 'necessary' paradox. It is possible to approach this situation from a variety of different angles. Here I would like to suggest one approach built upon a different topological image of the web of language. This is not in any sense to be taken as a strict analogy or metaphor for what goes on in our linguistic practice but only as a broad model to orient thinking. Rather than a centerless web, I think we can better conceive of the relations between terms as analogous to the relation between two (or more) adjacent spider webs joined at their outer edges. A doorway thus covered with multiple joined webs presents a picture of centers without borders: anyone looking at it can clearly distinguish different centers, where the strands of the various webs are most tightly clustered, and where the spider often waits. However there are no unambiguous borders between the webs, and any attempt to locate their edges precisely could always be challenged. On such a topology, we not only can but must simultaneously rely upon conceptual distinctions and remain incapable of drawing a precise border

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between them in any definitive and unassailable way. This is one way to interpret Pott's suggestion noted above. It may also provide an alternative to the category of 'third space', which in some readings might itself fail to escape the problem of boundaries. (What are the borders between a 'third space' and the two other 'spaces' it is not?)

To return to the subject of Dirksmeier's paper, the question becomes one of whether the terms 'the cultural' and 'the social' are 'distinct enough'. That there is some systematic difference between the two, that there are at least two identifiable centers in the continuous web of their respective associations woven into language by its ongoing performative reproduction / transformation, still seems to be accepted among many (though not all) social scientists. It is for this reason, for example, that postcolonial cultural geographers can expect to be broadly understood when they list 'social' factors such as power and institutions as distinct from 'cultural' factors (see Dirksmeier 2009, 182-183), or that Dirksmeier himself can expect to be broadly understood when he relies on this same distinction.

The point of Dirksmeier's argument is to explore the 'border regions' of the continuous web of associations joining cultural and social concepts, to see how 'symbolic violence' is at work in cultural translation. But in this context, how necessary is it for him to provide the cleanest possible distinction between the cultural and the social? The most interesting thing about the interwoven practices of distinction he seeks to theorize is not necessarily how we categorize their different elements but perhaps how they fit together as articulated practices with specific effects. Thus, although this may seem an odd note on which to end, perhaps the best recommendation to Peter Dirksmeier is that he make 'reasonable' or 'modest' efforts to address the specific issues raised by Andreas Pott and myself. More broadly, Dirksmeier's paper provides a good opportunity to recall that our practices of discussion, debate and critique should always be accompanied by reflections on the epistemological assumptions we are making and theories of science we implicitly or explicitly deploy.

Literature cited

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