But culture can be dangerous:
An Outline of a Research Project
Gary Wickham & Barbara Evers

In his recent piece in the Journal of Sociology, Eduardo de la Fuente (2007) argues cogently that the relation between culture and the social needs to be returned to sociology’s main menu. We fully support this idea, but we are concerned that an important element is missing. It is not just missing from de la Fuente’s piece, it is missing from the work of all the main players in the field he describes so well: the Romanticists, the Classicists, and the group of which he himself is a part, the group which wants to employ greater reflexivity in seeking to move the debate beyond the Romanticism versus Classicism debate.

The missing element is danger. The fact that culture, as well as enriching the social, is, in many senses, its enemy, that which it has to overcome if it, the social, is to survive as a separate sphere. A document just released provides a timely and dramatic example: the New York Police Department’s Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat (NYPD 2007). Featuring detailed studies of three U.S. cases (in New York, Oregon, and North Virginia) and five cases from elsewhere in the world (Madrid, Amsterdam, London, Sydney/Melbourne, and Toronto) this document seeks to explain the cultural production of terrorists: ‘the radicalization process in the West that drives “unremarkable” people to become terrorists’ (NYPD 2007: 5). One of the factors it identifies as a key component of the ‘radicalization process’ in Europe is that continent’s ‘failure to integrate the 2nd and 3rd generation of its immigrants into society, both economically and socially’ (NYPD 2007: 8).

Rich pickings, we think, for those who would seek to have sociology pay much more attention to the culture-social relation than it currently does. The project we have designed will see us exploring this relation with an eye to the sort of culture-is-dangerous theme captured in the NYPD document (we will also examine similar sources from America, Europe, and Australia). This means, of course, that we are employing a very particular understanding of culture and a very particular understanding of the social.

Our way of understanding culture
Our understanding of culture is that used in the literature sometimes referred to by the term ‘person formation’. In other words, for us, culture is the sum total of enculturation, no more and no less. Culture is the process by which the actors who inhabit societies are produced in their particular roles, in, that is, their personae. For this way of thinking, stripped of their Kantian clothing, the moral positions actors take up are not given to them by their higher nature, their reason, or by some other higher source, like God. Instead, the morality involved here is a this-worldly morality.

Crucially, then, while culture involves: the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of modern capitalism (Weber 1989); the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of the philosopher (Hunter, Condren, and Gaukroger 2006); the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development in ancient Rome of the successful husband (Foucault 1986); the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of the well-mannered individual (Elias 1994); the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of the strong political leader (Weber 1994), and; the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of the powerful and persuasive late-antique Christian (Brown 1988), to name just some prominent examples from the literature. It also involves the formation of a certain style of personae suited to the development of the terrorist, the personae for which killing on a mass scale is a religious duty.

Our way of understanding the social
Our understanding of the social is expressed in some of the recent publications by one of us (Wickham 2007). This understanding puts to one side the most common ideal type of the social. This everyday ideal type relates to the straightforward, widely used, relatively innocent sense of social as human interaction per se. In this sense, the social is a synonym of sociality/sociability and of society, and even of culture and community.
But our understanding certainly does not put to one side a second ideal type of the social, the one most dominant in sociology—the reason-morality type. Indeed, our understanding seeks to overthrow the reason-morality ideal type in favour of a rival, a third ideal type (which we will come to shortly). The reason-morality ideal type has its roots in Plato’s and Aristotle’s understanding of sociality, particularly through the Platonic premise of homo-duplex (whereby humans are seen to have two natures; a lower nature by which they experience the world and a higher nature by which they can rise above their base experience and realise their full capacity to reason, a premise hinted above in our discussion of Kantian morality). This ideal type picked up a few (different) Christian edges in its journey from the ancient to the modern world, through the likes of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, but gained most of its current strength through Locke and Kant and their various heirs. For this ideal type, the social is an outcome of our natural-reason driven quest for moral perfection. For this ideal type, the social, alongside culture, is an ally of reason and morality as they struggle to reduce the influence of and/or to control each of politics, law, and the state. For this ideal type, culture is defined as the formation of fully-reasoning, morally-aware individuals and groups.

The third ideal type of the social—the rival we are championing, the rival to the second—is the politico-legal ideal type. This ideal type has its roots in the much harsher ‘man is a dangerous animal in need of great discipline’ Epicurean and Stoic accounts of sociality/sociability. Human beings, by such accounts, have some reason—just enough to allow them to see that they need strong rule, that they cannot trust themselves to rule by reason alone, and to deliver such rule—but their will far outweighs their reasoning capacity. This politico-legal ideal type, on its journey to the modern world, picked up a few Christian, as well as a few Judaic, neo-Epicurean and neo-Stoic edges, but gained most of its current meaning through Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Thomasius, as well as thinkers like Machiavelli, Selden, and Justus Lipsius. For this ideal type, all the relations between the forces are different than they are for the second ideal type. For this ideal type, the social is an achievement of politics, in concert with law and the state, along the lines of Hobbes’s remark about the social in leading up to the famous passage in Leviathan where he says that in the state of nature ‘the life of man’ would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. For Hobbes, the social (called here ‘society’) is something that we cannot take for granted, something that requires enormous political and legal effort, and, in this sense, something that can be lost, if we are not careful: ‘In such condition [the state of nature], there is no ... industry; ... no knowledge of the face of the earth; ... no arts; no letters; no society’ (Hobbes 1994: 76).

Conclusion: What this means for the culture-social relation

By this way of thinking about the culture-social relation, the social cannot survive in any location until politics, in league with law and the state, can contain the power of morality, culture, and religion. The modern Western world features this type of social: it is, precisely, the domain of relative freedom and security that is often casually called modern Western society. It was born as a consequence of measures designed to limit the culture of religious killing in seventeenth-century Europe. These measures included, among many others: Lipsius’s promotion of constancy and patience; Thomasius’s promotion of decorum; and Pufendorf’s promotion of a certain style of moral personae.

On Lipsius

‘The aim of constancy was to achieve a “right and immovable strength of the minde”’, while the aim of patience was ‘to resist the importunities of passion, and ... to avoid one’s reason being over taken by opinio, that is, by “vain imagining”’. Lipsius thus made a ‘contribution to the Dutch achievement of producing personnel for military, judicial and administrative offices, men equipped to set aside their religious beliefs in order to perform official functions for the State’ (Saunders 1997: 86-7).
On Thomasius

Thomasius accepted that the best balance of forces for good government favours public authority over private freedom, but wanted the authority used to protect and enhance private freedoms. He trusted that a combination of honestum (a moral duty to self and to others), decorum (mores or customary duties), and justum (one's legal duties)—which were seen to be neither strictly legal nor strictly moral—was the best way to deliver it. In other words, he thought the imposition of legal duties by force alone could never be enough for successful rule, it must be accompanied by honestum and decorum. For Thomasius, decorum is especially important to authority, for he held that were people totally reasonable, a society would be able to function on customs and good manners alone, but because they are not totally reasonable the state’s authority and the compulsion it brings are vital elements in producing and maintaining society: “virtue without power is impotent” yet “power without virtue is the source of all evil” (Barnard 1971: 237-9).

On Pufendorf:

The decisive characteristic of Pufendorf’s construction of civil authority is thus: that its bearers—the sovereign and the subject—are not regarded as manifestations of a universal moral nature or a higher moral law. They are viewed instead as moral personae instituted by man himself as a means of fashioning deportments suited to the attainment of civil peace under conditions of religious division (Hunter 2004: 680).

Perhaps the time is ripe for a more thorough exploration of this way of understanding the culture-social relation, including an investigation of the findings of the NYPD and similar publications. After all, the modern West, at present, while still a long way from the devastation of religious violence in early modern Europe, is much closer to that frightening scenario than it seemed just a few years ago.

Gary Wickham & Barbara Evers
Murdoch University

Fuente, E. de la 2007 'The place of culture in sociology: Romanticism and debates about the “cultural turn”' Journal of Sociology 43:2, pp. 115-130.
NYPD 2007 Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat, Prepared by M.D. Silber and A. Bhatt, Senior Intelligence Analysts, NYPD Intelligence Division. New York City Police Department.