

STUDIES IN
SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION

A Research Annual

Editor: NORMAN K. DENZIN
*Department of Sociology
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

VOLUME 10 • 1989 (Part B)



JAI PRESS INC.

Greenwich, Connecticut

London, England

Copyright © 1989 JAI Press Inc.
55 Old Post Road, No. 2
Greenwich, Connecticut 06830

JAI Press Ltd.
3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU
England

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored on a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, filming, recording or otherwise without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN: 0-89232-947-2

Manufactured in the United States of America

CONTENTS

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	ix
FOREWORD	
<i>Norman K. Denzin</i>	xiii

PART B

VI. Reading the Emotions and Social Structure

SHARING THE HOLOCAUST: BITBURG AS EMOTIONAL REMINDER	
<i>Raymond L. Schmitt</i>	239

VII. Reading the Cultural Order

THE LANGUAGE OF CULTURAL STUDIES: AN ANALYSIS OF BRITISH SUBCULTURE THEORY	
<i>Van M. Cagle</i>	301
POWER AND CONTROL IN RIOTS AT THE AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX MOTORCYCLE RACES	
<i>Rob Lynch</i>	315
THE STIGMATIZED SELF AS MEDIA CONSUMER	
<i>Virginia H. Fry, Allison Alexander, and Donald L. Fry</i>	339
RUMORS OF WAR: RHETORIC AND ORIENTATION IN THE REAGAN'S "WAR OF DRUGS" SPEECH	
<i>Gary J. Krug</i>	351

IMAGINING CYBORGS: POSTMODERNISM AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Anne Balsamo

This paper is a prodding of that "sociological imagination" which Mills so strongly advocated. Written in 1959, Mills' book "The Sociological Imagination" had the quality of a full-scale sociological manifesto, offering sober warnings about the dangers of grand theory and abstracted empiricism in the development of sociological perspectives. With the advent of postmodernism, in any of its discursive varieties, the call for that "quality of mind" which Mills vehemently argued for, is even more necessary to apprehend the meanings of contemporary experience. The frenzy of postmodernism should not put us off from delving into its moments, to see what it is that we might see, armed with the devices of a peculiar "sociological imagination."¹ This paper is written in the spirit of Mills' imagination, but it is not a simple celebration. I want to use his radical energy to challenge a sociological perspective, specifically with respect to its notions of the "subject" and subjectivity. But I am also concerned that Mills be updated, to bring him, so to speak, into the 1980s.

Our culture is marked by its embeddedness in a technological, late-capitalist, post-theoretical world. The contours of this world have been hyper-theorized

Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 10, pages 369-379.

Copyright © 1989 by JAI Press Inc.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISBN: 0-89232-947-2

within the discourses of postmodernism. In turn, postmodernism as a rhetorical collage draws on the discourses of technology, science, art criticism, cultural marxism, post-structuralism, and feminism. Postmodernism is interdisciplinary—it is not simply a world view one can adopt or not adopt as a matter of fashion—and one must work to *situate* sociology within it as it is an unstable and shifting map encompassing all the human sciences. For some, the term “postmodernism” means the contemporary historical age, one whose beginning is traced back to the early 1950s, for others, it is a term that describes the prominent cultural aesthetic of our time, one that is marked by a self-conscious break with high modernism; yet again, for others, it names a domain of theoretical discourse, in the same way one could talk about “post-structuralism.”¹² For my purposes, it is not necessary to re-present the various perspectives one could take on the constitution of “postmodernism”; rather, it is more important to understand that it has not yet sedimented as a monolithic discourse. This is perhaps the source of both its maddening imprecision and its seductive lure.

The two most important issues for an imaginative sociologist in the age of post-modernism would be to identify the dimensions of properly “sociological” phenomena, and by extension, of properly “sociological” *subjects*. Mills puts these questions to the imaginative sociologist as: “What are the structures of this particular society as a whole?” “Where does this society stand in human history?” But the pivotal questions for Mills address a third focus of social analysis:

- What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period?
- And what varieties are coming to prevail?
- In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted?
- What kinds of “human nature” are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period?
- And what is the meaning for “human nature” of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Many of the terms of these questions have been called into question by the constitutive discourses of postmodernism. The term “human nature” has been deconstructed in favor of a less humanistic term, “subjectivity.” After poststructuralism, the “subject” can no longer be treated as an innocent concept roughly equivalent to the notion of a natural human being. While it is still used to “name” the person, it requires a theoretical and analytical commitment to understanding that “subjects are dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these” (Henriques 1984). The “subject” is not simply another word for “individual.”

The discourses of postmodernism have vigorously debated many of the terms and questions which Mills identifies as characteristic of the “sociological imagination.”

ENTER THE CYBORG

In a spirit of playfulness, one informed by feminist sensibilities as well as a “technological imagination,” I present *The Cyborg*. American popular culture has recently been flooded with images of this science fictional postmodern character. Not to be confused with mere robots, or toy transformers, cyborgs are “cybernetic organisms.” Often envisioned as some combination of a human and machine, popular media images include *Robocop*, whose titanium shell is animated by the remnants of a human man and *Max Headroom*, who stuttered his way onto American television early in 1987, only to fall victim to the folly of the Nielsen ratings during the new Fall season later that year.

American cinema, in particular, is populated with cyborg characters. *The Terminator* presents one of the most familiar and frightening visions of cyborg characterization. Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays a cyborg killing machine—a man-machine hybrid from one possible post-nuclear future in which machines set out to annihilate the human remains of humanity. Rachel, a cyborg creature from the film *Bladerunner*, is a top-of-the-line replicant whose “difference” from a human woman is barely perceptible to the trained *Bladerunner* eye. Although a further consideration of the cultural coding of these cinema cyborgs reveals a rather conservative perspective on the relationship between sex/gender identity and technology (Balsamo forthcoming), their pervasiveness attests to the presence of a reinvigorated image in American culture.

CYBORGS AS SUBJECTS

As media/mediated images, cyborgs are a way in which our “cultural imagination” envisions, and “person”ifies the intersections between the human and the machine, the body and technology, the “self” and the “other.” They are images that represent boundary tensions. Their constructed hybrid nature invokes a question: Where does one draw the boundary between human-ness and machine-ness, the natural body and the technological device? We wait in great anticipation to see what human qualities *Robocop* retains and what mechanical failures the otherwise perfect Rachel will expose. We wait in anticipation to see how the cyborg, as “constructed,” will differ from us as “natural.” We want to be reassured that the line(s) that mark our difference (and thus our superiority) are firmly secured. Because of the ways they both reaffirm and challenge these boundaries, cyborgs are clearly important objects/subjects of study for popular-culture analysts—but I want to argue their

importance and broader significance for social/cultural theory. To explore how the cyborg image might suggest new considerations for the cultural investigation of human identity, I now turn our attention from mythical hybrids, such as the Terminator, toward the ways in which all of us are already cyborgs.

What if we read the cyborg literally? Not as a metaphor for human identity, but rather as a synonym? To read the cyborg "literally" is to subject the cyborg image to a peculiar interpretive strategy. It is the difference between saying "people are *like* cyborgs" and "people *are* cyborgs." The first approach keeps our imagination chained to the images of cyborgs already realized in our popular cultural imagination. We look at those science fictional characters and extrapolate from there. The second approach, which requires a bit more interpretive indulgence perhaps, raises very different questions. What boundaries and distinctions are critical for our notions of who we are, what we are? How do we, on a daily basis, reassure ourselves of our fundamental "humanness"? Do notions of human identity rely on certain unquestionable distinctions? How do subjects negotiate contradictory identities? In short, what is the meaning of "human" in this age of "technology?" To reiterate Mills' questions: "What variety of men and women now prevail in this society? . . . And, in what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted?"

If we consider the cyborg as a coupling between a human being and a technological apparatus, locating "cyborg-ness" at the body, then pacemaker wearers, wheel-chair athletes, word processors, computer programmers, and medical patients "visioned" by CAT scans could all be considered cyborg subjects. But for Donna Haraway (1985), "cyborg" names the identity of organisms embedded in a cybernetic information system. In a Bates-ian move, she describes how people within a cybernetic system function as nodes within an information transmission network. Her essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," warrants explication at this point. She has gone the furthest in "reading the cyborg literally," and thus specifies, in extensive detail the dimensions of cyborg identity in the late twentieth century.

Working within a socialist feminist framework, Haraway explicitly maps the identity of woman onto the image of the cyborg. "Woman" is no longer singular, but rather a commodified, technological object whose unique human status is challenged by rapid technological transformations. For her, the cyborg image foregrounds the ambiguous constitution of a woman's self and body. On another level, Haraway weaves cyborg mythology through her articulation of a feminist politics: her "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (p. 71).

Haraway's cyborg essay describes the difficulty—and political necessity—of striving to account for both "personal" identity and "political" identity in

a postmodern age. Just as it has become a political imperative within feminism to recognize the partiality of one's own "feminist" perspective, it is imperative to question the common-sensical belief in a transcendental "feminine nature." One of Haraway's most forceful arguments asserts the necessity of rethinking the terms of "woman's/women's identity." Her account of cyborg identity is a rich source of material for the sociological imagination.

Haraway describes how the international women's movements have, in fact, as much constructed "women's experience," as they have uncovered or discovered experience as a creative collective object. Diverse feminisms grapple with the multiple dimensions of female identity as simultaneously a matter of fiction (a social-symbolic construction) and of materiality (a lived body). This reminds us to take account of the identities of "sociological" subjects as they have been created as part of political discourses. Thus the identities of "alcoholics," "transsexuals," "lesbians," "sorority girls," "black female tobacco workers," and "battered women,"³ are informed by the larger discursive and political movements in which they have been implicated as cultural actors/objects/spectacles.

Therefore, the cyborg is a social construction—"a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." This illuminates another crucial dimension, not only of women identity, but of postmodern identity. True to a symbolic interactionist framework, both human beings and cyborgs are simultaneously symbolically and biologically produced and reproduced through social interactions. The "self" is one interactional product; the body is another. Notions of individual identity must take into account experiences of "the self" and of "the body." Mary Douglas (1970), from an anthropological perspective, reminds us that "most symbolic behavior must work through the human body." Body imagery is fundamental to cultural notions of identity.

We begin to understand that identity is "always already" a constructed moment, often constructed at the vortex of contradictory determinations. But we also understand that there is a radical materiality to identity, one which cannot dispense with "the body" as an important influence on experience. If the cyborg appears on an embodied image of political/discursive formations and material and interactional reality, then "Woman's" identity, as such a social construction as it is a physical/biological given, reveals *her* particular cyborg likeness. "Woman," who has traditionally been characterized by a fragmented identity, more than casually resembles the cyborg, who for Haraway, "is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self" (1985, p. 82). Not only must the body and self be studied in their relation to each other, but also in relation to cultural and political notions of the body and self. What, then, are the implications of cyborg socio-politics for the sociological imagination?

CYBORG SUBJECTIVITY AND PHYSICALITY

Cyborg selves are not transcendental. They are constructed within cybernetic social networks. As the relations within the network change, so does the cyborg self. The cyborg fragmented self reminds us that there is *no* essential unity to return to uncover the universal characteristics of "Woman," a feminine self, a lesbian self, a black self, let alone, a cyborg self. A return to the the origins, the pastoral, or "the garden" is no longer possible. Identity cannot be studied as a fixed point of reference. As Susan Suleiman (1985) further describes, "the dream, now, is [not only] to get beyond the number one—the number that determines unity—but also beyond the number two, which determines difference, antagonisms, and exchange conceived as of merely the coming together of opposites" (p. 24). The identity of the self can only be studied as it is symbolically created through social interactions which are constantly shifting and skipping and are, at the same time, contradictorily determined.

This unstable, fragmented notion of identity is often viewed with some remorse by many *post*-modernist theorists. Kroger (1986) reads it as evidence for his vision of the "death of the social" (p. 26). Baudrillard celebrates it as the "collapse of the real." And Jameson (1984) describes "schizophrenia" as the cultural dominant of late capitalism. They ask rhetorically, and maybe sarcastically, how do we decode the "I" if it is no longer unitarily referential? For the postmodernists, the fragmentation of identity heralds the revocation of a notion of "the social." The challenge, then, for symbolic interactionists is to describe ways in which an unstable notion of identity does not eradicate a notion of the social. At the same time, the burden of theorizing "the social" looms large.

In a similar move, cyborg bodies challenge the traditional domain of social theory. Cyborg bodies are crafted bodies. Body building, colored contact lenses, liposuction, and other forms of "cosmetic" surgery have radically altered the "given-ness" of not only physical identity, but of the very dimensions and composition of what "counts" as a physical body. Technology provides us with the possibility of replacement body parts: new ligaments made out of "Goretex," plastic hip joints, a synthetic heart, an electronic retina. The high tech image of the cyborg works well to remind us to question the taken-for-granted naturalness of the body.

The body has been the reliable referent for determining gender identity. Western perspectives have traditionally relied on a simple binary model of male and female to account for sexual difference. In an age of cyborgs, some of whom might have none of the traditional "markers" of sexual identity, and some for whom political and psychic reasons render their gender markings purposefully ambiguous, where do we locate gender identity? Is it a property of the physical body? Is it a consequence of social practices? Or is it a constructed cultural emblem? From a feminist perspective, one of the most

important qualities of cyborgs is that they problematize the body as a reliable marker of sexual (and racial, cultural, physical) difference. On closer inspection of cyborg gender, we find that one of the most taken-for-granted notions of biological-human bodies—a sex/gender identity—is often very ambiguous and contradictorily coded.

CYBORG INTERNATIONALISM/ CYBORG ETHNOGRAPHY

Symbolic interactionism might be well-positioned to take on the challenge of the cyborg cosmology. Precisely at the points at which its concepts are undertheorized, through its engagement with the cyborg, symbolic interactionism is most prepared for a descent into the postmodern. In addition to stimulating new visions of "the social," "subjectivity," "identity," and "the body," cyborgs challenge symbolic interactionism's research practices of ethnography.

Cyborgs suggest at least two specific concerns in this regard. How are women/woman constructed as the object of sociological investigation, and more broadly, how can we rethink the practices of ethnographic investigation in such a way to take account of the fluid, cybernetic, interactional nature of cyborg experience and identity. Reifying "female identity" and the "female body" might make women easier to study but usually ends up gaining little insight into the dynamic nature of their daily production and reproduction. How does ethnography take account of the cultural construction of boundaries and distinctions which mark "the one" from "the other." Cyborgs require ethnographic accounts of the very construction of "self" and "other" which distinguish the ethnographer from the "native."

In a general move to rethink ethnography in the age of postmodernism, Stephen Tyler (1986) raises cyborgian questions in his essay on "Postmodern Ethnography." The pivotal terms of his analysis focus on ethnography as an interpretive practice. Clifford and Marcus' (1986) work on the "poetics and politics of ethnography," in which they wrestle with the understanding of ethnography as an inscription practice and as a strategy of textual interpretation, is very important for rethinking cyborg ethnography. For them, "culture [is] composed of seriously contested codes and representations; ethnographic text-making serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts." Postmodern ethnography recognizes the necessary construction of partial readings and partial truths. And as Larry Grossberg argues, culture is no longer simply a text, written on the surface of the body of "others," but rather a mutually constructed inscription produced by the very act of looking and of being looked at—an inscription whose meaning is not guaranteed in any instance.

As I have argued elsewhere (1987), cyborg ethnography raises fundamental questions about methods of cultural interpretation. Terms such as "gender," "self," "human," "writing," and "communication" are fractured in the cyborg cosmology; the mythical origins or essences of humanness and of culture have been dispersed. Any interpretive practice or framework predicted on a return to unity, centrality, or coherence will have a difficult time coming to terms with culture as it is reworked by technological change. Cyborgs also open up productive ways of thinking about the cultural construction of subjectivity and the social. Those fundamental terms and binarisms which the cyborg challenges by rendering hopelessly ambiguous are also part of a system of knowledge and power by which all of us have been oppressed. That they are now eroded or in crisis should not necessarily be cause for remorse. For if the epistemology of the centralized, rational, human-male-self runs into difficulty "reading" the cyborg, all the better for shaking up the rigid boundaries of an outmoded rationality, and stimulating the "sociological imagination."

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CYBORG DISCOURSE

Cyborgs pose a challenge to traditional disciplinary boundaries: Do they belong to a discourse of high-technology and engineering? Are they social subjects capable of symbolic creativity who might be studied via the traditional methods of symbolic interactionism and ethnography? Or are they purely fictional characters whose "reality" is best understood as "textuality," and left to those literary critics interested in science fiction and utopian narratives? Just as Denzin (1986) argues that "postmodern social theory is characterized by a call for [new] images of the social, society, language and the human subject." I argue that cyborgs call for a new interpretive framework. Cyborgs require from us a new interdisciplinary mode of cultural analysis, one which is suited to the thick contextualization of multiply coded identity.

Like Mills' description of a properly sociological imagination, cyborgs also require an imagination with the "capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological," from the organic to the technological, from the natural to the cultural, and from the "one" to the "many." The imagination required to understand the cyborg must be well-tuned to the role of technology in American culture and in individuals' lives. This is not to advocate the wholesale adoption of an ideology of technological progress, but rather an attitude that refuses "the artificial separation of technology from the imagination and which [understands how] the pervasive technologization of everyday life [in America] since the beginning of this century at least has shared and transformed all cultural processes from the ways in which we communicate with each other to the ways in which we perceive ourselves and the world" (deLauretis 1980, p. vii). The focus of this

interdisciplinary perspective is on cultural phenomenon, the ways in which American culture has been re-formed, re-shaped, as well as resistant within postmodernism. Its methods are rooted in cultural anthropology and symbolic interactionism; the practices of ethnography are revitalized. Its politics are informed by a feminist perspective; its political agenda must be radicalized.

Symbolic interactionism's particular contribution to this interdisciplinary approach lies with its commitment to study cultural interactions. A list of SI's traditional research program reveals not only phenomena associated with a dominant culture (police work, white-collar workers, sorority women), but more importantly, those constructed within the residual cultures of America (marijuana smokers, entrepreneurial madams, Italian-American slum residents). In this sense, the variety of research carried on in the tradition of symbolic interactionism begins to illuminate the plurality of American culture.

In fact, we are beginning to see the stirrings of an imagination awakening. It even could be argued that Mills' imagination has already been revived, not in mainstream sociology as he might have anticipated, but rather in the discipline's marginal movements. Elsewhere, this approach would be known as "Cultural Studies." The most extensive work carried on in the name of "cultural studies" has been done in Britain, and is associated with the work of Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists associated with Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Many of those cultural researchers make reference to the work done in symbolic interactionism by Howard Becker, Paul Rock, Mead, and other early symbolic interactionists. Angela McRobbie, in her essay, "The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk, Text and Action," identifies an important contribution to her work:

My emphasis in this article is with a particular type of research, namely "naturalistic" sociology, that branch of sociology which was, in many ways, appropriated by Left academics in the early 1960s, and refashioned so as to become a kind of frontline. Here accounts of how (mostly) working class people made sense of their lives; jostled alongside the (often tortured) attempts of the sociologist as he too made sense. In fact this kind of sociology had a strongly "multi-cultural heritage." It borrowed the term "ethnography" from social anthropology; its methods, particularly "participant observation," were strongly influenced by American sociologist Howard Becker, and its political force owed much to the work of E.P. Thompson and "history from below" . . . In fact feminist ethnographic sociology owes a great deal to this by now established sociological tradition (1982, p. 46).

Here in the United States, James Carey, who describes an American cultural studies tradition in mass communication research (Carey 1989), also identifies its roots in the tradition of symbolic interactionism associated with the Chicago School of Sociology and the work of those early pragmatists, William James and John Dewey.

The intersections among cultural studies and feminist scholarship stimulate many provocative research ideas. Perhaps it is an understatement to conclude

by claiming that there is much important work being done at the margins of many of the established disciplines of the academy. Much of this work either directly engages feminist scholarship or has been deeply informed by it. Building on the inroads feminism has made into the full spectrum of academic disciplines, the next wave of feminism will work on transforming those disciplines from within. Sometimes these interactions are confrontive and politically explosive. At the very least, they should be intellectually stimulating and suggestive of new concepts and insights. It is part of an on-going feminist project to theorize and expose the politics of scholarship with which we are all implicated.

I have tried to expose those interesting dimensions of the cyborg image which might serve as a springboard for the elaboration of a postmodern social theory. By striving to preserve the magic moments of symbolic interactionism and ethnography in the name of an interdisciplinary approach to cultural studies, I seek to identify a domain which is, in itself, a cyborgian-hybrid of an intellectual discipline, one uniquely suited to understand Cyborg sensibilities in a postmodern age.

NOTES

1. The development of this imagination is intimately tied to the connection between technology and American culture, just as the history of the American dream is marked by the cultural changes invoked by technological innovation.
2. The view of postmodernism from a feminist perspective is even more complicated due to the politics of scholarship which have infused postmodernist work. I argue that postmodernism has systematically repressed and avoided feminist scholarship which could be understood as addressing each of the most important issues on the postmodern agenda. See Balsamo (1987) for a more sustained attempt at describing the troubled relationship among feminist and postmodernist scholarship.
3. The types of subjects are taken from the selection of symbolic interactionist essays in Deegan and Hill (1987).

REFERENCES

- Balsamo, A. 1987. "Unwrapping the Postmodern: A Feminist Glance." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 11 (1): 64-72.
- _____. 1988. "Reading Cyborgs, Writing Feminism." *Communication* 10:331-334.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Carey, J. 1989. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Clifford, J. and G. Marcus. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Deegan, M.J. and M. Hill, eds. 1987. *Women and Symbolic Interaction*. Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Denzin, N.K. 1986. "Postmodern Social Theory." *Sociological Theory* 4: 194-204.
- de Lauretis, T., A. Huyssen, and K. Woodward, eds. 1980. *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions*. Madison, WI: Coda Press.
- Douglas, M. 1970. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Haraway, D. 1985. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's." *Socialist Review* 80 (March-April): 65-108.
- Henriques, J., W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn, and V. Walkerdine. 1984. *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London: Methuen.
- Jameson, F. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146: 55-92.
- McRobbie, A. 1982. "The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk, Text and Action." *Feminist Review* 12: 46-57.
- Mills, C.W. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Suleiman, S.R., ed. 1986. *The Female Body in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tyler, S. 1986. "Postmodern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document." In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by J. Clifford and G. Marcus. Berkeley: The University of California Press.