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The cultural turn in American sociology

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American sociology is in the midst of a cultural turn. Where sociologists once spurned culture, associated as it was with the normative premises of Parsonian theory or with other kinds of idealisms, today they embrace it. Problems of meaning, discourse, aesthetics, value, textuality, and narrativity, topics traditionally within the humanists' purview, are now coming to the fore as sociologists increasingly emphasize the role of meanings, symbols, cultural frames, and cognitive schema in their theorizations of social process and institution. This is happening across the intellectual landscape.

Political sociologists are analyzing the ritual construction of power (Alexander, 1988, 1993; Berezin, 1997; Falasca Zamponi, 1997; Falasca Zamponi, this volume.) Not only have they shown the cultural contingency of such things as nationalism, they have also turned the supposed objectivities of class and sexual position into cultural accomplishments, for example, insisting on the ways in which historically and societally variable meanings of work shape the nature of working-class demands or the ways in which conceptions of the market influence modalities of state intervention (Biernacki, 1995; Brubaker, 1998; Dobbin, 1994). Social movement theory once centered its attention on power balances and resource opportunities enabling challengers to aggregate, to find voice and reach for power (McCarthy and Zald, 1987; Tilly, 1978). It now increasingly analyzes the ways in which interpretations of grievances, understandings of situations, and repertoires of action shape the emergence, strategies, and course of social movements (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Friedland and Hecht, 2000; McAdam, 1982; Melucci, 1996; Snow and Benford, 1992).

Organizational theorists, long comfortable with conceptualizations of structure and strategy that depended on objective notions of resource relations, understood through competition and conflict, differentiation, and symbiosis, have increasingly recognized the conventional, and indeed fictional, quality of many organizational forms and strategies. Institutionalists who once looked to culture as a rushing in where rationality failed, where means–ends relations were uncertain or technologies untried, now increasingly recognize that culture plays a constitutive role in shaping organizational structures, strategies and technologies (Biggart and Guillen, 1999; DiMaggio, 1991; Dobbin, 1994; Fligstein, 1996, 1990; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Mohr and Guerra-Pearson, forthcoming; Scott, 2001; Scott et al., 2000).

Sociologists are increasingly taking bodies, space, and time – the elemental materials of social life – and analyzing the ways in which they figure in social signification. Feminists, and race and queer theorists are showing not only the ways in which the properties of the body are read, but how those readings are generative of the subjectivities inhabiting them (Seidman, 1991; Twine, 1998). Urbanists and sociologists of the built environment are analyzing the ways in which categories are materialized in physical form (Biernacki, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Gottdiener, 1995; Molotch, 1998; Zellman and Friedland, 2001; Zukin, 1995), and time, which has either been a staging ground or a fungible resource, is now increasingly understood as a culturally constructed and consequential foundation of social life, manifest in the social productivity of narrative forms, memorialization, and temporal classification (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Somers, 1994; Zerubavel, 1985).

As sociologists maneuver across this new terrain, they confront the methods, theories, and insights of humanist scholars for whom questions of meaning and interpretation have long been at the core of their intellectual project. As sociologists enter this transdisciplinary zone, they are discovering that scholars in the humanities, particularly those in what is often called cultural studies, began making a sociological turn long ago (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, 1992). Moving from canonical high culture to more popular forms, analyzing the ways in which cultural products are part of larger transformations in the ways of knowing in domains far from literature and art such as statecraft, cartography, and accounting, discerning the interests embedded in text, tune, image, and cultural forms of all sorts, the humanities drew heavily on post-structuralism, interpretive anthropology, and practice theory (Bermingham, 1986). Humanists increasingly came to assert that culture was not only a social product, but also integral to the production of the social. Scholars in the humanities moved away from a single-minded rereading of independent texts, increasingly analyzing the ways in which society itself could be read as a text. In making this move, they had at their disposal a wide array of analytical tools that had been developed for understanding and theorizing the production of meaning in texts, theories of genre, strategies of reading, types of rhetorical forms, the narrative process, and the nature of performance and sign systems. Inspired by linguistically grounded theorists who asserted that the subject is a position made speakable by language much more than a unitary consciousness speaking a language, humanists have pointed to the fictional quality of the social, to the logical and psychic contradictions immanent in the performativity of authority.

Where sociologists often hope to show that culture can be explained, and thus interpreted, through an analysis of its relation to social structure, sociologists have much less frequently addressed the cultural meanings themselves. In contrast, humanists bring an interpretative stance to whatever they encounter. While sociologists tend to socialize the text, analyzing the conditions of its production and reception, as well as the social interests it represents, humanists textualize society, assuming that the social order is an order of representation. Institutions, organizations, practices, and structures are all made into significations, texts to be read, grist for their exegetical mill. While they assume that the social is constituted in and through orders of language, code, symbol, and sign, humanists rarely, if ever, specify the contingent social conditions of its production or social productivity. For humanists, interpretation is explanation, whereas for sociologists it tends to be the reverse, in that sociologists make the assumption that their ability to isolate factors that co-vary with some cultural phenomenon constitutes its most useful interpretation.

The cultural turn in sociology and the sociological turn by humanists necessarily calls into question the division between them. This has provoked the calling of names and boundary defense from both sides of the aisle (Alexander, Smith, and Sherwood, 1993; Schudson, 1997; Bielby and Bielby, this volume; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Schneider, this volume). "Sociology," Schudson writes, "can learn from cultural studies, but cultural studies is more in need of sociology than the other way around" (1997: 381). The territorial heat of partition indicates the existence of another space to be explored. The Cultural Turn conferences that we have organized at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from which this volume is composed, have been working forums where scholars from the social sciences and the humanities can explore together this shared and contested zone (http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/ct). It is our conviction that both communities have much to offer and much to learn, and it is this spirit that we seek to promote in this volume.

The place of culture in American sociology

Why the turn to culture in American sociology? Certainly it may reflect a new political–economic order in which image and identity increasingly matter. The collapse of the cold-war system and the steady erosion of the organizing power of left–right partisan politics, the politicization of sex, gender, and race, the return of religious cosmology to the public sphere, and the material productivity of software not only make the materiality of the sign abundantly clear, they point to ontology, to the very nature of the social, as a theoretical problem. They also point to the importance of identity and value-formation in social organization. Who we are and what we desire have become pressing theoretical and political problems. The theoretical status of the human is once again a question. All of this has brought culture to the fore. By this account it is the world that is becoming more cultural and we who must retool or reconceptualize if we are to stay abreast of the changes in that world.

This explanation is insufficient. If the cultural character of the social world is becoming increasingly apparent, that is not to say that culture was any less important for sociological explanation before these events. One need only rethink the classical theoretical texts. Durkheim's insight that the divine was a representation of the collectivity has been well-trodden sociological ground; its corollary, that the symbol was constitutive of the collectivity, has been relatively unexplored (Friedland, 2002). Weber, of course, pointed to forms of rationality that were structures not simply of organization, but of belief. And Marx's labor theory of value was not simply a materialist way of unlocking the laws of capitalist motion, it was a cultural account of valuation and category formation, values and categories integral to the operation of the economy. The entire project of sociological disenchantment presumed enchantment as the basis of the social order. Fictions have always been integral to the construction of social reality.

The cultural turn is neither an adaptation to changing social conditions nor is it a retreat from the core of social theory, from society as a theoretical object. It is rather a reconstitution of the sociological project, a transformation of its ontology and hence in the kinds of research problems that are likely to be most intellectually exciting and the theoretical specifications able to claim validity. It augurs, in short, a paradigm shift. What we are experiencing in American sociology can be better understood – in Thomas Kuhn's (1970) terms – as a recognition of the empirical, theoretical, methodological, and ontological limits of existing intellectual frameworks.

An increasing number of sociologists declare the inadequacy of their theoretical tools to address the problems confronting them. For example, Harrison White first developed a topological algebra for the study of kinship ties (1963) and then helped pioneer the field of social network analysis. These approaches insisted on the objectivity of the social, seeking to explain both social action and actors' accounts of that action in terms of the structure of social ties and one's position within them. White has rethought the utility of his objectivist approach. He now argues:

> My theme proper is that mathematical and interpretative approaches should become indispensable to one another, partly because of this increasing scope and flexibility of mathematics . . . It is equally evident that, in avoiding and sidestepping the

interpretative – and thus any direct access to the construction of social reality – *mathematical models have come to an era of decreasing returns to effort. Another way to say the same thing is that interpretative approaches are central to achieving a next level of adequacy in social data.* (White, 1997: 57–58)

Respecifying one's model is no longer enough. White now seeks to study the co-implication of semantic and social spaces of institutional life, value sets, styles of use of those values, and social topologies. Changes in values, uses, and social networks typically occur together. Without understanding the semantic space and actions within it, one cannot understand the social space and its behaviors, and vice versa (White, 2003).[1]

The duality of the social and the cultural

Whatever new paradigm emerges, and it is too early to tell what that paradigm will look like, it will have to rethink the category of culture itself and the ways it is deployed in sociological practice. There is an enduring tendency in American sociology to hive meaning off, to treat it as something apart, inaccessible, and thus either beyond the sociologist's ken (Wuthnow, 1987), or an autonomous domain with its own symbolic logic or economy. This is evident in a wide range of dualities within the field. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the split between the social and the cultural. The assumption that there is a gap between the old class-based social movements and the new identity-based movements, for example, is premised on a division between the social as an instrumental distributional system of things and the cultural as an expressive system of signs.

Albert Melucci, the social theorist of the "new" social movements, argues that their form and identity are a response to a new informatic mode of domination, a political economy where the commanding heights controls the production of symbols, not things.

In societies with high information density, production does not involve economic resources alone; it also concerns social relationships, symbols, identities, and individual needs. Control of social production does not coincide with its ownership by a recognizable social group. It instead shifts to the great apparatuses of technical and political decision-making. The development and management of complex systems is not secured by simply controlling the workforce and by transforming natural resources; more than that, it requires increasing intervention in the relational processes and symbolic systems on the social/cultural domain . . . The operation and efficiency of economic mechanisms and technological apparatuses depend on the management and control of relational systems where cultural dimensions predominate over "technical" variables. Nor does the market function simply to circulate material goods; it becomes increasingly a system in which symbols are exchanged. (1996: 199–200)

"New" social movements, Melucci argues, oppose the "dominant codes upon which social relationships are founded," not control over the material means of production (1989).

It is widely presumed that there are material, objective "social" things that are separate, and fundamentally different, from more subjective, interpretive, cultural artifacts. This split, of course, derives from the long history of western philosophy, the Cartesian dualisms of mind and body, subject and object, ideal and material forces.

For example, in their anguished introductory essay to their collection, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt express their concern that the cultural turn has eviscerated not only Marxism, but historical narration more generally. By its insistence on the discursive constitution of "social categories," they argue that the cultural turn threatens the social itself and, with it, the prospect for explanation and agency.[2] Having led and launched some of the best cultural historical analysis, it is a return of the social, displaced by the cultural, for which they now pine. They write of their contributors:

> Although the authors in this collection have all been profoundly influenced by the cultural turn, they have refused to accept the obliteration of the social that is implied by the most radical forms of culturalism or post-structuralism. The status or meaning of the social may be in question, affecting both social history and historical sociology, but life without it has proved impossible. (1999: 11)

And with what do Bonnell and Hunt identify the social? With the material (see also Schudson, 1997). They point approvingly to the growing study of "material culture" – of furniture, plastic madonnas, food – as an arena in which "culture and social life most obviously and significantly intersect, where culture takes concrete form." The implication is that the social is a domain of materiality, of hardness, thingness, objects with objectivity. It is not their aim, they say, to return to the days when it was legitimate to reduce the cultural to "the material world of economics and social relations" (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999: 26). But it is just this identification of the social with the material and the cultural with language, this maintenance of the duality of the social and the cultural, that blocks the way.

This duality is present in the most sophisticated of our theories. William Sewell's now-classic essay (Sewell, 1992) revises Giddens' concept of the duality of structure through the categories of "rules" and "resources." In Sewell's theory, rules refer to "cultural schemas": "society's fundamental tools of thought, but also the various recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habitus of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools." Resources, in contrast, are objects and attributes of human beings that can be used to "enhance or maintain power." Schemas are virtual; resources are actual. Social structures conjoin the two.

While we like Sewell's definition of structure as the coupling of schema and resources, his resolution ends up privileging the social over the cultural. As Sewell's own discussion of the importance of schema in constituting the social power of resources suggests, it is not possible to delineate a concept of power with reference to the material world alone. Power, like structure, is known by the coupling of schema and resources. So not only does Sewell smuggle a particular end – power – into the definition of means, he de-culturalizes power, locating it in the control of resources which can be specified independently of the institutional sites in which they are produced/known/allocated. Resources, Sewell argues, are known as resources by their capacity to "enhance or maintain power" which is known by control of resources. The theory eats its tail.

One can see the problem when he distinguishes between two dimensions of structure: depth, a dimension of schema, and power, a dimension of resources. Deep structures are pervasive and unconscious. Powerful structures shift resources, typically creating inequities ("modest power concentrations," "shifting resources toward some speakers and away from others"). With this duality in place, Sewell can argue that linguistic structures are deep, but relatively powerless, a "neutral medium of exchange," which are therefore inappropriate to thinking about social structures where resources are really involved.

Not only is Sewell's analysis based on the official language as opposed to the way it is deployed, but, as Bourdieu and others have pointed out, linguistic competence is a powerful distributive force in modern societies (Bourdieu, 1991). The problems with this formulation, however, run deeper still. The use of resources, indeed the constitution of resources and the subjects who use them, are organized through institutions. Institutional reality is constructed through linguistic representation. As the philosopher John Searle has pointed out, all institutional facts – property, marriage, government – involve the conversion of collective intentionality into deontic powers – iterated, interlocked "status functions" – through linguistically mediated performative speech acts and constitutive rules. One cannot derive any institution, and hence its powers, even the organization of force, from "brute reality" itself (Searle, 1995). The state of nature, Searle points out, "is precisely one in which people do in fact accept systems of constitutive rules (1995: 91).

With regard to social life, language is not a neutral medium, but contains classifications/valuations which are productive of the things they denote. Languages author particular kinds of subjects in so far as they come into existence by speaking an authorized language. Linguistic practices, including the most ordinary, are part of the infrastructure of power. It is the unremarkable implication of the particular word in the particular social relation and vice versa that is power.

Conversely, Sewell can argue that most "state or political structures," while having enormous resource consequences, are generally not taken for granted. Sewell is here talking about state centralization and coercion. "One might argue that state structures are relatively mutable precisely because the massiveness (power) and obviousness (lack of depth) of their resource effects make them natural targets for open struggles." In the examples, his criteria are regime changes – new party systems in the United States for example, revolutions in the Third World. We would argue that it is precisely the taken-for-granted centrality of the state in allocating resources and in the schemas of social life, and of the democratic state in particular, that makes certain forms of political contest so durable. Thus Sewell, in the very next paragraph, can talk about "some political structures with immense power implications that are nevertheless relatively deep, that become 'second nature' and are accepted by all (or nearly all) political actors as essentially power-neutral, taken-for-granted means to political ends." These include the American constitution, the French public bureaucracy and the English community legal structure. Sewell concludes: "Durability, then, would appear to be determined more by a structure's depth than by its power." Sewell thus reintroduces the very duality he rejected, contradicting the whole point of the previous discussion of structure as the conjoining of schema and resources. It is precisely because these schema are materialized, that they are powerful. Depth is the result of past materiality, a forgotten history of materiality which has been naturalized. The distinction between depth and power alerts us to the attributes of institutionality and its decomposition, but it does not help us to explain them. They describe the problem, the joining and de-coupling of schema and resources; they do not point to a way toward explaining it.

More recently Sewell has taken on the duality of culture and practice, seeking to conceptualize their articulation (1999: 47). Sewell defines culture as the semiotic dimension of human social life, and practice as purposeful practical activity (1999: 44, 47–48). Sewell thus maintains his earlier dualism. He argues that "semiotic structure" is analytically independent of the economic, political, or geographical structure. Sewell politicizes a culture that he theorizes as having a "thin" coherence, a thinness due to the uncertainty and extension of reference, the resultant autonomy of culture, and the political contests that ensue. Linguistically constructed institutional facts – such as money or property – are anything but thin. Which objects, activities, and persons can be organized through different institutional categories is subject to political contest. The linguistically constructed institutional fact itself however is both enduring and epistemologically objective (Searle, 1995). While nowhere addressed, it is implicit in Sewell's approach that the purposes of practice are themselves not cultural, but what he takes to be objective considerations such as power and resources. In Sewell's approach it is, in fact, the struggle for power that organizes culture's coherence, its structured difference between the high and the low, the majority and the minority, the permitted and forbidden. "Authoritative cultural action, launched from the centers of power, has the effect of turning what otherwise might be a babble of cultural voices into a semiotically and politically ordered field of differences." If the purposes of practice were themselves cultural, the difference would not be hierarchical, but undecidable. Power, in that it is constituted by reference to values and legitimate uses of resources, which themselves are typically constituted by language, is anything but objective.

Although Sewell invokes institutional "nodes" wielding the most resources – like the state, business corporations and religions – as "sites of concentrated cultural practice" (1999: 56), it is in fact the logic of group contest that animates his theoretical machine. "The official cultural map may, of course, be criticized and resisted by those relegated to its margins. But subordinate groups must to some degree orient their local systems of meaning to those recognized as dominant; the act of contesting dominant meanings itself implies a recognition of their centrality" (1999: 56–57). Power struggles (like ours here) generate differences which are the basis of semiotic structure. The power of institutions and groups is located in part in their ability to structure semiotic difference. While these differences are supposed to refer to practices, practice is, in fact, absent – at both a theoretical and an empirical level – within his analysis. Without practices tied to institutional fields, Sewell can conflate the struggle between dominant groups over their position in a hierarchy of practices with the contradictions between incommensurable institutional logics. Even in his own terms, Sewell inadequately specifies the relation between culture and practice, for while he has pointed to the ways in which group conflict organizes meanings, he fails to specify the ways in which meanings organize group conflict.

Neither interests, powers, nor resources can be specified independently of the meanings which organize specific institutional fields. Materiality is a way of producing meaning; meaning is a way of producing materiality. Materiality and meaning are not exterior to each other, as the conceptual divide between social and cultural systems, or resource and structure, or the term "embedded," all variously imply.

Sociologists tend to make ideas and values into external variables which may add explanatory power once interests, which are attributes of individuals, organizations, and groups in social situations, have been taken into account. That culture might shape the formation of both the agents and their interests has not been a typical starting point. It is presumed that the social is knowable, observable, can be read from positionality in ostensibly objective relations between people and things. The social is presumed to be an instrument formed in consequence of the struggle for existence.

Jeffrey Alexander's post-Durkheimian school has grounded the autonomy of the cultural in the linguistic order of signs and symbols, in semiotic structure. Alexander and his students have looked on culture as a code or language with its own internal logic, insisting on its autonomy from the materiality of the social world (Alexander, 1998; Alexander and Smith, 1993; Kane, 1991). Alexander distinguishes between three "environments of action": social, cultural, and personality. The analytic autonomy of the cultural realm enables generalizable significations – both typifications and inventions – independent of the social conditions of their use. Autonomous, structured cultural codes provide the tools through and by which actors can recode themselves and the world and thereby create new worlds.

If Alexander grounds the autonomy of culture in semiotic order, he identifies the social system with an order of distribution. Reviewing Alain Touraine's theorization of post-industrial social movements, Alexander describes Parsons' distinction between values and norms, the latter involving "historically specific forms of organization that focus, not on general values, but on the distribution of rewards and sanctions" (1996). Alexander approves of how Touraine, unlike Parsons, does not conflate "existing forms of social organization with the cultural ideals that informed them." It is the gap between value and norm, between the cultural and the social, between cultural ideals and social norms, in which Alexander locates the possibility for reflexive agency and hence for social movements.

Pierre Bourdieu, whom Alexander has attacked for his materialist reductions, is not really that different (1985). Bourdieu refuses the idealist stance, arguing for the homology between categorical and social structures as they are mediated through incorporated non-discursive knowledges deposited in the habitus. Bourdieu does transform culture into an integral part of a general material economy, a form of capital like all others. However, like Alexander, for Bourdieu it is the gap between the symbolic and the social order, between habitus and the structure of domination, that makes both creative agency and critical social movement possible: things like the "fuzzy logic" of the habitus, its economic transposability, the mismatch between the conditions in which a habitus was acquired and the conditions in which it is expected to operate (Friedland, 2001).

In cultural sociology, relations to means – space, time, bodies, objects, and words – specify interests. Relations to ends tend to specify meanings. Social scientific theory has primarily sought a science of means, analyzing the ways in which the means are distributed or deployed, instrumentalizing means as sources of power. The ends are either exogenous and unanalyzed,