

## American Sociological Association Section on the Sociology of Culture

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### Letter from Section Chair, Francesca Polletta (UC Irvine)

#### What's Wrong with a Good Story?

I don't know when telling a good story came to be seen as the essence of persuasive politics. Certainly, in the last few years, a steady stream of political strategists has championed storytelling as the way to win the hearts and minds of the American public. After John Kerry was defeated in 2004, pollster Stanley Greenberg concluded in an election postmortem that, "a narrative is the key to everything." James Carville, famous for engineering Bill Clinton's presidential victory, agreed: "we could elect somebody from the Hollywood Hills if they had a narrative to tell people about what the country is and where they see it." Several years later, Robert Reich wrote a book about the four stories Democrats should tell. Linguists George Lakoff and Geoffrey Nunberg disagreed about everything the other was counseling Democrats, except that they should definitely tell more stories. In a *New York Times Magazine* cover story a few months ago, psychologist Drew Westen summed up President Obama's failure as his inability to tell a "simple narrative."

Why has politics come down to telling a simple story? I do understand the desire for a compelling account of the past that makes the present into a challenge and the future a triumph; one that turns otherwise disconnected policy positions into expressions of a unified and unifying moral vision. But I don't think that strategists should spend their time and energy trying to come up with such a story.

First, though, a word on why they might want to. Experimental research in the last ten years has

shown just how we hear stories differently than other kinds of messages. For a long time, communication scholars thought that people processed messages in only two ways: "centrally," where they really scrutinize a message and evaluate its claims critically, or "peripherally," where they absorb a message casually, judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or by the mood they're in. Peripheral processing may lead to attitudinal change in the moment but it doesn't last. To get people to really change their opinions requires that they process information centrally. The hitch is that they're only likely to do that when they already have a personal stake in an issue.

Research suggests that people process stories by a third route. They immerse themselves in the story, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions that the protagonists do.

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Green and Brock (2000) found that subjects who were highly absorbed in a story (indicated by statements like “activity going on in the room around me was not on my mind” while reading the story) were likely to report beliefs consistent with those implied in the story. To probe the dynamic involved, subjects were asked to circle every “false note” in the story. The more absorbed they were, the less likely they were to see such false notes. This suggests that when they hear stories, audiences suspend their proclivity to counterargue, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information they are hearing. They truly suspend disbelief, and they do so in a way that has lasting effects. The attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time (Appel and Richter 2007).

However, narrative research has also identified an important condition for stories’ persuasive power. Stories have no effect if their message is too explicit (Slater and Rouner 2002). This is not surprising. Readers resist being beaten over the head with the moral of the story. But this suggests that “simple stories” may not be so easy to craft. Indeed, seemingly simple stories may not be simple. GOP representatives misread the seemingly simple Tea Party narrative of America ruined by an interventionist government when they held firm against tax increases in the debt ceiling negotiations. It turns out that Tea Party supporters actually wanted their representatives to work out a compromise. Did the Occupy movement succeed in rallying a stunningly diverse array of participants and supporters because it told a clear, simple, and straightforward narrative of ordinary people on a financial precipice while Wall Street bankers got bonuses? Or was it that the “99 percent” slogan was vague enough to make quite different stories (with, variously, capitalism, Wall Street bankers, and the federal government as the villains) seem to cohere? Despite his call for Democrats to fashion a “coherent story,” Geoffrey Nunberg (2006) points out that the conservative right came to power not on one story (that somehow squared a commitment to less government with a belief that the government should control what happened in people’s bedrooms), but rather on a collection of stories, often mismatched ones (about a government that was too weak and one that was too strong, about crybaby victims and the ordinary god-fearing Americans who were victimized by liberal elites) that just *seemed* to hang together.

The sixty-four hundred dollar question, then, is: what makes some stories seem to hang together? More broadly, what accounts for the coherence of persuasive messages? In a recent *ASR* piece, Amin Ghaziani and Delia Baldessari (2011) attribute the LGBT movement’s ability to stage remarkably unified national marches over the course of two decades not to the strong coherence of the movement’s collective identity but rather to its “thin coherence.” Certain movement commitments—“cultural anchors” they call them—notably to community building and equality were combined with more transient and less broadly espoused commitments, for example, to diversity, education, and action on HIV/AIDS. Thin coherence sustained the movement’s

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### **A note from the New Co-Editors:**

We want to take a moment and introduce you to the new culture section newsletter. First, we want to give thanks to Andrew Perrin, who has kept this ship afloat well after his term as editor expired.

Second, we hope that you’ll be enthused by our new newsletter: we have launched several new features to foster new connections and broaden our scope, including brief interviews, spotlights on young scholars, profiles of departments with established culture programs, links to publications on the leading edge of cultural work, and a commissioned ‘Culture Meets...’ essay that will link our section with other subfields. We were excited to fold these new facets into the things you already love about the newsletter: groundbreaking essays, Letter from the Section Chair, and the Books of Note.

And finally, we want you to stay tuned for changes on the website. It’s a longer-term project for us to develop the site into a streamlined resource and storehouse of ideas to better serve the section’s needs and goals. For now, you can click on articles (to download them), names (for email addresses), and books (to order them) if you are reading this as a pdf.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Jon, Andrew, Claudio, Mary, Allan & Tricia

**(Letter from the Chair, continued from Page 2)**

unity over time and across the diverse groups that made it up. The authors may be right that thin coherence requires a set of core idea elements. Alternatively, though, coherence may be a function of a particular discursive form rather than its content. When John Lee and I studied an online forum held to solicit public input into what should be built on the site of the former World Trade Center in 2002, we found that participants often told stories to explain their opinions, for example, about whether the Towers should be rebuilt or whether a transportation hub should be developed on the site (Polletta and Lee 2006). When they did that, other participants sometimes responded, “my thoughts exactly!” or “I agree” and then told their own stories. But the second and third stories often made quite different points or even contrary points than the first one. Stories allowed people to disagree without seeming to disagree, we came to believe. Still another possibility is that coherence may come simply from being the opposite of what the other side is arguing.

So one problem is that simplicity and logical coherence may be overrated when it comes to persuasive storytelling. But the other problem is that Americans distrust stories. Or better, we’re ambivalent about them. We love stories and we worry about them. We see them as at once authentic and deceptive, universal and idiosyncratic, normatively powerful and politically unserious. To “tell one’s story” means to express one’s most authentic self; to “tell a story” means to lie; and to say that something is “just a story” means that it has little claim to authority. When John and I looked at how people talked *about* storytelling in the World Trade Center forum, we found that people appreciated storytelling for its capacity to capture what was unique about each person and to compel right action. But they also faulted storytelling for *not* being able to do those things: since “everyone has a story,” no one’s story was unique; and, far from compelling moral action, stories might stand in the way of it (for example, people might be less likely to condemn the terrorists if the memorial to the victims of the attack told terrorists’ stories too). Stories, they said, were powerful but also subjective, biased, manipulable, and in the end, trivial. One participant worried about how much money rebuilding the towers would cost, “Yes, we could float bonds, but is the legacy we want to leave to our children an inspiring story, a fine view and a pile of debt?” “Inspiring stories” in other words, were no match for financial imperatives in compelling action.

More recently, Alice Motes and I searched a sample of right and left-leaning newspaper, blog, and newsmagazine articles over the last three years for references to “narrative” in politics. We found a slew of them. But when we read a sample of sixty of those articles, we found something interesting. Sometimes the writer used the term narrative to refer to a galvanizing moral vision of the past and future that made diverse policy initiatives seem coherent and compelling. For example, a *Nation* piece on the 2010 elections asserted that “Issues are Important; Narratives Are More Important” and called on progressives “to stand for something more than managing the status quo.” (For the sake of ease of reading, I’m not going to provide references, but write me if you’d like them). A conservative blog quoted Laura Ingraham that “the narrative of decline has been cemented in the minds of people across this country. We’re turning it around with dramatic action.” Narratives in this usage were often referred to as “larger” or “broader,” both temporally and thematically. They were unifying and resonant, “powerful,” “coherent.” They “restore[d] faith” and inspired pride.

But more often--much more often (by a margin of 5 to 1)--writers used the term narrative in one of two ways. Sometimes narrative referred to the current media “take” on an issue—the one-line sound bite dominating the press about the likely outcome of an election or about the main obstacle to a policy (e.g. a “narrative of democratic disarray” on the debt ceiling negotiations or one of the GOP “being on the cusp of victory”). Alternatively, narrative referred to a strategically crafted message offered by candidates, parties, or officials to make the case for their platform or position (the “Bernanke narrative,” McCain’s “new narrative,” the “Obama narrative,” “Republicans’ narrative,” “the left’s narrative”). The two uses were often connected, with left and right politicians “pushing” their narratives to try to “control” or “regain control” or “take back control” of the media narrative.

In contrast to the serious and earnest tone of the articles that used narrative in the first sense, in these pieces, the tone was knowing, skeptical, inside-baseball. That a narrative had become the dominant one was represented as a temporary political victory in a ceaseless war of position. Had John Boehner quashed Republican opposition to ending tax cuts for the very wealthy, a *Daily Kos* writer speculated, “the GOP would be above the fray and the narrative would [be] one of even more Democratic disarray.” Instead, Boehner was forced to take a hard line position, “throwing the narrative back toward GOP support of the wealthy at the expense of everyone else.”

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# 2011 Clifford Geertz Award for Best Article

(Award Committee: Kelly Moore, Loyola University, on leave at NSF; Vera Zolberg, New School for Social Research; Larry Isaac, Vanderbilt University)

As chair, I was truly fortunate to have Kelly and Vera on the committee. They executed their responsibilities in outstanding fashion. Please join me in thanking them for their fine service.

We received 16 excellent nominations this year, making our task quite difficult. We decided that two articles in particular really rose to the top. Both of these articles achieved top rank from the committee because they deal creatively with fundamental questions in the study of culture. They are innovative in their approach, and are very well written. In fact, this was true of a number of the articles submitted and after going back and forth several times, the committee members decided that we would be doing a disservice to these candidates if we selected only one of them.

**The 2011 Clifford Geertz Award is given to Geneviève Zubrzycki (University of Michigan) for her: “[History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish mythology](#),” published in *Qualitative Sociology* (March, 2011).** Understanding how national and other kinds of collective myths bind people together has long been an important question for sociologists of culture, and increasingly, so has the question of how and when mythic ideas of nation fade as they are challenged. In this richly documented and theoretically sophisticated paper, Zubrzycki develops the concept of the “national sensorium,” to account for the variable power of national myths. Joining together phenomenological and historical approaches, the “national sensorium” captures the way that sensorial entities—sounds, scents, objects, and tastes—that are associated with myths of nation are deployed and experienced in particular historical moments, and importantly, by specific groups in the (contested) cultural space of the nation. Zubrzycki develops this idea through vivid interpretations of Polish national myth making and unmaking, drawing artfully on archival and ethnographic data, concentrating attention on the building and contestations of sensory experiences of the myth of Poland as a martyred Christian nation in the period following the second world war, and the post-Soviet era. Inviting us to think about how and why the sensorial practices of wearing a crown of thorns brooch, carrying a cross at a demonstration, singing songs, hearing Chopin’s funeral march for a fallen hero, brandishing a flag, and moving through a landscape dotted by places of martyrdom represent “transtemporal nodes” of meaning that can buttress, and undermine, myths. Finally, Zubrzycki’s article gives us an important sociological tool with which to understand why and how myths work: she shows that different social groups - the young and the old, the Catholic and non-Catholic, among other social categories, experience sensoria differently. This important set of conceptual and theoretical tools is presented in a lively and clearly written article that sociologists of culture, of politics and social movements, comparative and historical sociology, and embodiment and emotion should find valuable, and important in understanding how myths work, and when they collapse.

**Honorable Mention is for Terrence McDonnell, “[Cultural Objects as Objects: Materiality, Urban Space, and the Interpretation of AIDS Campaigns in Accra, Ghana](#),” published in *American Sociological Review* (May, 2010).** Terry McDonnell makes a theoretically important contribution based on his innovative empirical work in Ghana. McDonnell is an engaging writer, and brings to a blind spot within sociology of culture a fresh view. McDonnell addresses a fundamental, but largely neglected question in the sociological understanding of meaning: As he puts it: “How does materiality constrain or enable the fabrication of meaning?” In the study of cultural objects, so central to the theorization of meaning-making, emphasis on symbolic qualities have dwarfed attention to the causal properties of the material. This article does a major service to cultural sociology by bringing the “object” back into the study of “cultural objects.”





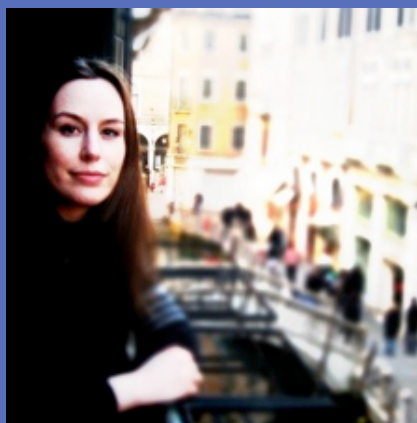
## Four Questions For...*Harvey Molotch*

1) **How did you become interested in the study of culture?** I never became interested in the study of culture. It just came my way as I made my life -- outside of sociology as well as within it. When I try to explain things to myself or to others, cultural issues barge right in.

2) **What kind of work does culture do in your thinking?** It brings me closer to human beings as they live their actual lives, including the doubts, passions, and more mundane mechanisms of routine being.

3) **What are some of the benefits and limitations to using culture in this way?** For me, a key benefit was antidote to somewhat more rigid structural formulations that played a stronger role in my earlier work. Marx himself, of course, was of two minds, the young and the old, the soft and the hard. The excesses of cultural analysis play out most strongly in the sub-discipline of cultural studies where vocabularies of obfuscation and terrible prose replace clarity of assertion and rich insights otherwise found in the humanities. In sociology, "culture" can invite similar dangers and be invoked as explanation when it is a mere residual of the random, the inexplicable, or the unknown. The challenge is not to over-simplify culture into an "independent variable" that explains things, just so.

4) **How does your approach to culture shape the types of research topics and settings?** I don't know how to leave it out. My understanding of culture is that it is everything, material and symbolic, so as a matter of principle, why would it not be there, 24-7, in every thought in our brains? It is a reach for the complete.



**Clifford Geertz Award  
Winner:**  
Geneviève Zubrzycki  
University of Michigan



**Mary Douglas Award  
Co-Winner:**  
David Garland  
New York University



**Mary Douglas Award  
Co-Winner:**  
Teresa Gowan  
University of Minnesota

## Junior Scholar Spotlight: Avi Astor

Avi Astor was this year's recipient of the Culture Section's Richard A. Peterson Best Graduate Student Paper Award for his article, "Memory, Community, and Opposition to Mosques: The Case of Badalona" (forthcoming, *Theory and Society*). The article is based on research that he conducted as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. His dissertation, *Mobilizing against Mosques: The Origins of Opposition to Islamic Centers of Worship in Spain*, examines the sources of contention over mosques in contemporary Spain. Drawing upon interviews, ethnographic observation, census data, and social surveys, his project explains why conflicts over mosques are more frequent and intense in Catalonia than in other Spanish regions.

After defending his dissertation this past summer, Avi commenced a post-doctoral fellowship at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. As a fellow, he is teaching a course on religious pluralism this fall and will continue to pursue his interest in the intersection of religion, identity, and politics in the modern world. He is part of a research group whose projects include an analysis of the emergence of far right populist politics in Spain and an investigation of recent legislation banning Islamic face veils in several Spanish municipalities.

Avi is also conducting a comparative study of conversions to Islam and Judaism in Spain. Spanish converts are an interesting subgroup, as the ancestral and cultural ties to Islam and Judaism that many possess, or believe themselves to possess, at once influence their propensity to question their inherited identities and constitute resources they may draw upon to maintain a sense of authenticity when converting. His project seeks to disentangle the historical, institutional, and social factors accounting for similarities and differences in the personal and collective narratives and trajectories among converts to each religion.

## Mary Douglas Book Award Winners

(Award Committee: Sharon Hays, University of Southern California; Orville Lee, New School for Social Research; John Van Maanen, MIT; David Swartz, Boston University)

We are very pleased to announce the winners of the Mary Douglas Award. We read 38 books for this award, many of them terrific, so this was a tremendously difficult choice. Marking the difficulty of this decision and the high quality of the submissions, we ultimately chose two books for the award winners, and named two more for honorable mention.

### **The first 2011 Mary Douglas Book Award Winner is David Garland for *Peculiar Institution*.**

*Peculiar Institution* is an insightful and awesomely exhaustive study of America's tenacious attachment to the death penalty. This innovative, careful, and culturally rich analysis offers the reader a full history of states' practices, legal proceedings, legislative patterns, media representations, and public perceptions and reception of capital punishment in the United States. Garland forcefully demonstrates that the U.S. has persisted in using the death penalty - long after other Western nations have abolished it, well past the time that Foucault would predict, and despite that fact that it is completely useless as a form of deterrence -- precisely because the U.S. is "peculiar" among advanced nations in the cultural conflicts that have marked its character: a histories of violence and racism attached to radical federalism and the demand for "local" democracy. Garland's bold and sweeping cultural analysis is the central reason that *Peculiar Institution* is likely to be the go to book for studies of capital punishment for decades to come.

### **The second 2011 Mary Douglas Book Award Winner is Teresa Gowan for *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*.**

*Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders* is a tremendously powerful study of homelessness, making brilliant use of cultural theory and cultural methods to understand the lives of the degraded and disenfranchised homeless population, and the cultural claims and institutional practices that shape those lives and reverberate throughout society. Gowan masterfully identifies and documents the cultural narratives used by the institutions that serve the homeless -- the "sin

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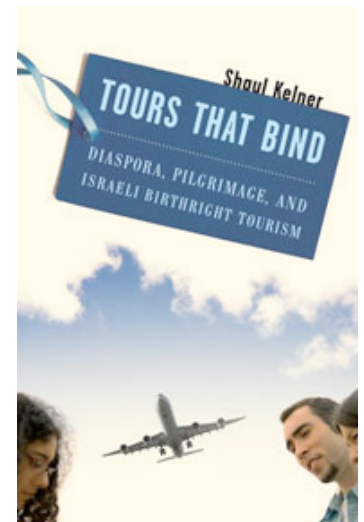
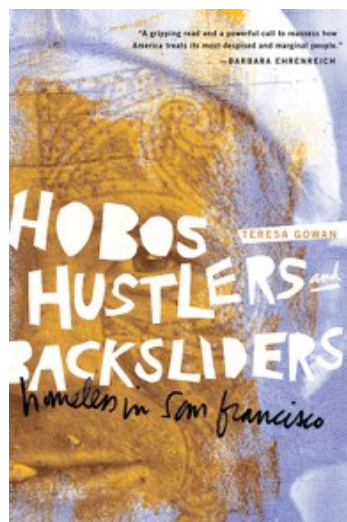
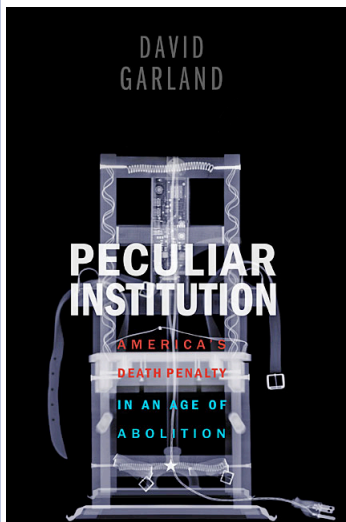
**(Douglas Book Award, continued from page 6)**

talk" that blames the poor for their immorality, the "sick talk" that points to the individual psychological pathologies of the poor, and the "system talk" that sees poverty and homelessness as the result of bad government and growing economic inequalities. In the age of neoliberalism, the voices of "system talkers" have been increasingly drowned out, and the logics of "sin" and "sickness" have come to dominate institutional and public discourse. But this is just the beginning of the story Gowan tells. The heart of her book is a highly thoughtful, human, and brave ethnography of homeless men that powerfully demonstrates how these men come to take on the labels of "sick" and "sinful" as their own, at the same time they seek to carve out spatially specific identities, connections, and modes of life. *Hobos* is simultaneously a model of excellent cultural theorizing, sensitive and systematic cultural methodology, and the kind of compelling storytelling and policy-relevant analysis that makes for great public sociology.

**The first Honorable Mention is Laura Adams for *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*.** *The Spectacular State* is a smart and innovative study of the centrality of public rituals, public performances, and public displays in defining the nation in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Drawing from over a year of participant observation and interviews with cultural elites in theater and the performing arts, Adams offers a compelling portrait of how contemporary postcolonial elites draw from global fields of cultural production as well as age-old local folk cultures in developing public displays meant to represent the cultural identity of newly independent Uzbekistan. Adams tells the story of how the "new" -- and simultaneously Soviet inspired -- public rituals of Uzbekistani cultural identity increasingly come into tension with state policies that seek to tighten control over the public sphere and restrict outside influences on the nation. *The Spectacular State* is a bold and far-reaching book that teaches us much about culture and the complexity of nation building in the post Soviet world.

**The second Honorable Mention is Shaul Kelner for *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*.** *Tours that Bind* makes masterful use of the conceptual tools of cultural sociology in an investigation of the meaning-making practices involved in mass tourism, diasporic identities, and the construction of symbolic homelands. His richly textured study first situates the multi-million-dollar state-sponsored Israeli Birthright Tourism program in the context of the growing worldwide phenomenon of homeland tourism, and then takes the reader on an ethnographic journey of Birthright Israel, studying the complexity of tourism as a medium of symbolic communication. Kelner highlights the often curious and paradoxical interplay of organizers' intentions, the context and content of the tours themselves, and the significance of friendship networks that develop among the homeland tourists. In all this, *Tours that Bind* is a fascinating and powerful story, with broad implications for the study of culture, politics, nation, and ethnic identity.

**(Click on the books to order!)**





# Amuses

Recent articles collected and reviewed by the Newsletter Graduate Student Editors

**Penfold-Mounce, Ruth, David Beer, and Roger Burrows. 2011. "[The Wire as Social Science-fiction?](#)" *Sociology* 45: 152-167.**

According to William Julius Wilson, the gritty HBO crime series *The Wire*, has "done more to enhance our understandings of the challenges of urban life and urban inequality than any other media event for scholarly publication, including studies by social scientists." From this statement (made at Wilson's Harvard seminar about the show) to positive reviews in the US and international media to being President Obama's favorite show, the show has been nearly universally lauded. Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows explore the merits of *The Wire* as the intersection of popular culture and the sociological imagination, labeling it a work of "*social science-fiction*." The authors argue this is accomplished by a palpable emotional tension between structure and agency, but also by the show's deliberate and sophisticated construction of authenticity. The authenticity that hooks so many viewers is achieved in part by casting non-actors from Baltimore, involved somehow with the stories they enact on set, weaving actual news stories into the script, and ultimately by generating a dynamism with the very 'realities' it presents. The authors use the reflections of real-life drug dealer and convicted murderer Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, cast after she was spotted in a Baltimore club, to show how *The Wire* truly transcends entertainment to be a cultural production: "TV cats talking about 'we want real people on this show. We want to show your reality.' But by showing who I really am, they're changing who I am." By blurring the boundaries of authenticity and reality *The Wire* indicates how our discipline sociology should take large-scale media productions and fictional dramas as sources for serious sociological insight.

**Lloyd, Richard. 2011. "[East Nashville Skyline](#)" *Ethnography* 12: 114-143.**

Richard Lloyd has once again produced an incisive ethnographic account of an American city in transition. Unlike Chicago, Nashville's recent gentrification caught many off-guard, since mid-sized southern cities lack the housing stock of Northern and Midwestern postindustrial urban cores. Additionally, the South is still perceived as fundamentally non-cosmopolitan and culturally conservative. Similar to Chicago's Wicker Park, however, the intersection of key urban themes—preexisting segregation by race and class, the rising popularity of New Urbanism, and a large cohort of 'creative class' in-movers—has resulted in displacement and general shifting of lifestyle amenities in what is now known as Nashville's 'historic' East End. Today, the streets of the adjoining redevelopment district Five Points are less distinct from gentrified Wicker Park, described by Lloyd as "increasingly filled with strollers, dog-walkers and art patrons, obscuring the divisions that characterize contemporary urban restructuring [like] real and symbolic violence, as prior claimants...are rebuffed" (122).

The article's richest contribution is its depiction of the city's annual Tomato Art Festival and the symbolic cultural violence wrought by the tradition of hurling rotten tomatoes at a designated target, one being an iconic inner-city mini-mart condemned for loitering and criminal activity on its property. Situated between the city's largest, mostly black public housing development and Five Points, the mini-mart was a deterrent to prospective visitors and the property had become desirable to condominium developers. The ironic injustice of its being pelted with rotten tomatoes by young, educated, artsy, "progressive" festival-goers for whom the city is being restructured is inescapable. In a strong critique of New Urbanism's contradictions, Lloyd shows how public loitering outside the mini-mart was condemned in order to make room for "densely populated public spaces (activated sidewalks) that engender lively encounters" (121). Regardless of whether the Nashville example symbolizes cultural revanchism within the gentrification project, Lloyd continues to scrape away at the surface of an urban cultural phenomenon that may shape how we understand inequality in the future.

**Bach, Jonathan. 2011. "[Modernity and the Urban Imagination in Economic Zones](#)." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 28: 98-122.**

We have all probably seen pictures of the extravagance of Dubai's palm tree island and heard about the deplorable conditions of the maquiladoras in Mexico. Both are spaces in which exceptions to the rules of the nation state are made regarding the regulation of economy and are generally known as "export zones", "free

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**(“Amuses,” continued from Page 8)**

ports”, or a variety of other terms. In a 2011 *Theory, Culture, and Society* article, Jonathan Bach explores these “Zones” from early capitalist development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to their 21<sup>st</sup> century, neoliberal ascendancy. He divides Zones into two ideal types based on investment, networks, and norms. Modular zones, such as the maquiladoras, tend to be dominated by low-skill, low-wage and tend to have negative impacts on local businesses and infrastructure. The Ex-Cities, exemplified in Dubai, are research and financial hubs with high-skill, high-wage labor and extensive investment in local infrastructure. He refers to this type of Zone as an “Ex-City” because they are both export-processing cities and cities of excess. The Ex-City both divides itself from the nation-state but integrates itself into the international network of similar Zones through global capital flows.

The Ex-City is thus a space and place where modernity is translated into a new form: an ahistorical city based on extreme rationality and the smooth mobility of goods and capital. Residents of some of these Ex-Cities boast that this type of city allows for self-reinvention. In the era of neoliberal globalization, Zones represent both the triumphs and atrocities of the neoliberal agenda.

**Press, Melea and Eric J. Arnould. 2011.**

**“Legitimizing community supported agriculture through American pastoralist ideology.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 11: 168-194.**

Every week, I make my way from a suburban “mall town” in Connecticut and travel 20 miles east to the bucolic charm of small, one-and-a-half-acre farm. Like thousands and thousands of Americans across the country, I pick up my weekly share—a box filled with an array of seasonal produce picked fresh from that very farm. The concept of community supported agriculture (CSA) is simple: in advance of the season, people buy “shares” in a farm and in return, receive a regular, often weekly, portion of the harvest. Consumers thus share in the risks and rewards of local farm production.

Over the past five years, the number of CSAs has risen dramatically, shifting from its beginnings as a countercultural phenomenon to one that has gained legitimacy in the mainstream. The authors link this growth to CSA’s connection with American pastoralist ideology. Using a narrative approach, they analyzed randomly selected CSA websites from each state, finding several themes that resonated with American pastoralism as previously expressed with 1950s suburbia and 1970s communalism. One key similarity is that each of these spaces constitutes a “middle landscape,” the point of intersection between nature and civilization, relieving historically-specific tensions between industrialization and nostalgia for mythic conceptions of community, among others. By participating in CSA, people can resist

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**“Culture Meets... Urban”**

**Michael Ian Borer, University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

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In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert E. Park – former beat journalist and latent student of the urbane urban explorer Georg Simmel – pushed his students and colleagues to explore Chicago’s “mosaic of social worlds.” He urged them to get their hands, and pants, dirty in “real” research. He highlighted the importance of firsthand observations and experiences and, in effect, defined “being there” as a methodological necessity for understanding urban ways of life. Motivated by this intellectual “call to arms,” Park and company set out to uncover the intricacies and fine details of the unique and distinct parts of their city in order to make grand general claims about the social life of, and social lives in, modern industrial cities.

It would seem, then, that from its infancy in the Windy City, American sociology would be defined by a strong connection between studies of culture and studies of cities. The discipline, however, did not play out that way. Simmel’s emphasis on creative social agents was overshadowed by the Chicago School’s dependence on biological metaphors (i.e., the city as an organism) and the goal to establish the *natural* laws of population distribution and the *natural* processes that determined successful adaptation to the urban environment. Louis Wirth’s summarizing article, “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938), attempted to show how three determining variables (size, density, and heterogeneity) produced an all-encompassing urban culture. Wirth’s interpretation of urbanism, however, was influenced by a nostalgic pessimism and failed to show how urbanism “as way of life” is actively and collectively accomplished by human beings rather than by variables. The Chicago School’s approach to urban culture is problematic for two main reasons. First, culture was understood as merely adaptive or reactive. Second, culture was understood as consensual. From this perspective, then, the city is made up of a dominant culture

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based on shared meanings and values and the minority populations on the periphery – those distinct “subcultures” that make up the city’s mosaic – must adapt to it or risk being pushed out, taken over, or torn apart by the precepts of evolution.

The Marxist-influenced urban studies that began to dominate urban sociology in the late 1960s and early 1970 got rid of the biological metaphors. Instead, they claimed that a city’s form and growth are not the result of *natural* processes, but come from decisions made by people and organizations that control wealth and other key resources. Though the Urban Political Economy approach offered important theoretical correctives, culture was still seen as a reactionary response to formative forces like politics and economics and continues to be a somewhat tangential interest. Yes, some scholars who have taken this approach to address urban culture (see, in particular, Sharon Zukin’s and Mark Gottdiener’s respective work), but they tend to do so under the guise of concepts like “symbolic economy,” looking at how ideas, meanings, and symbols are bought and sold rather than lived and experienced.

For various reasons that are beyond the scope of this brief essay, most cultural sociologists have given up on the idea that culture is consensual, unitary, and consistent across individuals who purportedly subscribe to a particular type of culture. Instead, culture is understood as fragmented, polysemic, and varied. Moreover, it is not a thing that exists unto itself but is rather actively performed, narrated, or used like a “tool kit.” Many of these ideas have come from the legacy and current scholarship of symbolic interactionists, and they have influenced contemporary studies of culture and cities. Though Erving Goffman can clearly stand on his own, his work gained value in urban studies *via* the work of Lyn Lofland. Her first book, *A World of Strangers* (1973), brings Goffman into conversation with Simmel in order to uncover the ways that urbanites make sense of the myriad of unknown others that surround them. She discusses “urban learning,” which can be used for both “avoidance” and “adventuring,” as a cultural achievement of modern urbanities. Twenty-five years later, in *The Public Realm* (1988), Lofland – with explicit indebtedness to Goffman, Gregory Stone, Jane Jacobs, and William H. White – reinforces the notion that the meanings of strangers and the urban environment are actively produced through interactions that are often quite orderly despite the lack of cultural consensus.

In the time between Lofland’s two books, Gerald Suttles argued that local urban cultures were not merely “residual” or “restorative” but were actively promoted by expert “culture makers.” In order to detect the “cumulative texture of local culture,” Suttles (1984) directs our attention toward the things that people put in museums (i.e., high culture) and what they put on their car bumpers and T-shirts (i.e., popular culture) “because these objective artifacts give local culture much of its stability and continuing appeal.” Suttles’s call to address the symbols and meanings that are given and passed down by “expert” culture makers and workers (e.g., novelists, journalists, architects, museum curators, and tourist boards) has influenced urban cultural studies like David Grazian’s exploration of Chicago blues clubs (2001) and Miriam Greenberg’s depiction of New York’s urban branding campaigns after 9/11 (2008). On the other hand, knowing that symbols and meanings are acted upon and reworked by both residents and visitors has led to investigations of everyday cultures constructed by those whom Jack Katz calls “urban alchemists” (2009). Jonathan Wynn has run with this idea in his study of walking tour guides in New York (2011), which nicely compliments Loren Demerath and David Levinger’s analysis of culture-making by way of pedestrian activity (2003). Culture makers are not confined to walking in the city, as Jeffrey Kidder’s ethnography of bike messengers attests (2011).

Scholars working within the “interstitial spaces” between cultural sociology and urban sociology have very disparate resources to draw upon, yet there are some important points of convergence. Urban sociologists have pushed cultural sociologists into and through a so-called “spatial turn,” whereby space and place are recognized a more important than simply settings for human behavior. Instead, space and place play significant roles in the ways that people make sense of their actions and interactions with others. The idea that space and place matter has been reinforced by programmatic statements, such as

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### **(“Culture Meets... Urban,” continued from Page 10)**

Gieryn (2000) and Borer (2006), and by institutionalized forums. For example, William Holt has been organizing the Culture Section’s “Space & Place” roundtable for the last handful of years where scholars share their research and help each other navigate the sometimes confusing, but always exciting, terrain of urban cultural studies.

As we’ve recently watched protesters take to streets and parks of cities around the world to voice their discontent, the roles of the places themselves cannot be ignored. The meanings that people have given to them and what they’ve come to symbolize are important, especially in a world where so much of our communication is electronically-mediated. Without sounding too much like a neo-Luddite, face-to-face interaction will always trump virtual communication when it comes to collective action. And face-to-face interactions have to take place somewhere. Place matters. Cities – and the smaller places that constitute them – remain the stages for some of our most meaningful cultural dramas.

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### **(“Article Reviews,” continued from Page 9)**

industrial food systems, quell fears about GMOs and pesticides, and recreate ideals of “grandmother’s garden.” Press and Arnould’s findings highlight the role of ideology and cultural imaginaries in consumption and in the process of building legitimacy for countercultural market forms.

#### **Bennett, Oliver. 2011. “[Cultures of Optimism](#).” *Cultural Sociology* 5: 301-320.**

The news media reports currently tend to focus on the negative aspects of life: from economic crises to crime to natural disasters. Sociology and other social sciences tend to have a pessimistic view of society and the future. Why, then, do surveys reveal that many have positive expectations of the future? In a 2011 *Cultural Sociology* article, Oliver Bennett explores outcomes of “the optimism of everyday life”, as well as the institutions and organizations that promote this type of optimism. Bennett conceptualizes optimism as a relative and contextual mode of thinking of the future.

He divides the optimism of everyday life into two major categories: 1) “big optimism” or the belief that humanity will progress and find its way; and 2) “little optimism” or micro view that good things will happen in the future for oneself or for others that are close to you. Optimism is associated with better health, marriages, and sexual relationships, as well as higher achievement. Optimism can also have negative impacts: from financial crises to policy failures to voter disillusionment. He then discusses the institutions and organizations that promote a cultural policy of optimism: religion, government, corporations, the arts, media, etc. This paper raises some interesting questions for sociologists and other social scientists to ponder: When does a culture of optimism become a culture of risk? What institutions in what situations are invested in promoting a culture of optimism or even risk?

#### **Rumpala, Yannick. 2011. “[‘Sustainable Consumption’ as a new phase in a governmentalization of consumption](#).” *Theory and Society* 40: 669-699.**

With increasing global concern over the environment and depleting resources, “sustainability” has been an enduring buzzword in development, production, and consumption. Examining initiatives by European public institutions encouraging “sustainable consumption,” Rumpala theorizes the governmentalization of consumption, which creates the hybrid of the citizen-consumer. In other words, state intervention has largely targeted everyday consuming behavior, constructing a populace that can be mobilized to make “better choices.” Once consumers become informed of their share of responsibility in environmental degradation, they are then expected to adapt their consumption habits in order to minimize their impact. Implied is a subsequent pressure on producers to change their bad habits. Through this, we can see how institutional objectives are deployed in a consumer society on individualist terms. Likewise, the emphasis on personal consumption blurs the boundaries between public and private spheres, marking the private as a tenable space for social change. This strategy, however, obscures questions of larger structural change as well as the distribution of responsibility. If states transfer the onus of responsibility onto individual citizens’ behavior, what are the actual prospects for social change and environmental justice?

## Feature Articles

For the 2011 ASA Conference, Francesca Polletta and Lyn Spillman organized a panel on 'Cultural Constraints.' These are three the essays from that group.

### **Cultural Structures and Social Performances**

[Jeffrey C. Alexander](#) (Yale University)

Let's begin with a question of immediate political relevance. Why are Republican activists, and their crop of current presidential candidates, so tightly lashed to the ideas of anti-state and anti-taxes? To answer this question, we need to look beyond immediate social and practical realities. American taxes are among the lowest in the developed world; extreme anti-deficit policies will undermine the still anemic economic recovery; and polls show that most Americans themselves want to restore tax fairness, at least on the wealthy. Republicans' anti-practical ideology can be explained only by the background culture structures of American conservatism, which themselves are nested inside an anti-statism bordering on paranoia that has been a central to Anglo-American political ideology since the English and American revolutions. Understanding such cultural constraints is central to both theory and research in cultural sociology.

The analytical debate about culture -- in the history of sociology, in social theory, and empirical sociology — centers on two questions. The first is whether or not culture should be understood as a structure. If the answer to this question is yes, then the second question comes into play. How should we understand action (individual or group) vis-à-vis such cultural structures?

As an advocate of the strong program in cultural sociology, my answer to the first question is a resounding yes. I've spent a lot of time ferreting out cultural structures in different social arenas and historical situations, and trying to figure out what they affect and how they change. Most of the 30 contributors to the *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* -- which I've edited with Philip Smith and Ron Jacobs and will be published in January 2012 -- occupy themselves with reconstructing culture structures across a wide range of institutional spheres and social processes, from the economic, political, racial, and governmental to sexual social movements.

Culture structures permeate social process and institutions, but they enable every bit as much as they constrain. To be conceptualized as simply constraining, cultural structures would have to be understood as acting "upon" a-social individuals. But only in the fantasies of rational action theorists are individuals like that. Real life individuals are social, and culture structures are inside them. Culture structures compose our selves. What we imagine, hope, and fear as individuals are filtered through cultural structures we did not ourselves create.

Some of the most important foundational studies in contemporary cultural sociology have conceptualized collective order in terms of culture structures of just this kind.

- In *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Viviana Zelizer shows that the sacralization of childhood has already emerged in the nineteenth century, long before the extraordinary social and economic shifts it triggered in the early decades of the decades after -- from the creation of school playgrounds, crosswalks, and parks to an entire industry devoted to insuring the new economic value placed on children's lives. Sacred childhood constrained; it also enabled extraordinary social reform and economic innovation.
- In *Work and Revolution in France*, William Sewell, Jr., demonstrates that the emphasis on the long-standing emphasis on solidarism in French culture created a distinctive "language of labor" that



powerfully affected not only the French revolution but skilled workers guilds and early reactions to industrial capitalism. It was this culture structure, he argues, that made socialism the dominant organizational framework for worker defense in France. A culture of solidarity constrained the options of the French working classes; they could not embrace individualism. Yet, the same culture structure also enabled, motivating workers to struggle against exploitation and build an alternative system of social justice.

- In *Why War?*, Philip Smith shows how pre-existing narrative structures of romance, melodrama, tragedy, and comedy continuously combine with binary structures of civil discourse to create the language of war. Whether it is political figures arguing for war's necessity or the anti-war intellectuals who confront them, these cultural constraints have enabled social actors to intervene pragmatically, and often violently, to restructure power in the contemporary social world.
- In my recent book *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*, I show the extraordinary suppleness and contingency of political action to be sharply restricted. The options of Obama and McCain, and the interpretive responses of their citizen-audiences, revolved around relatively fixed culture structures that hardly varied from one election period to the other. One of these cultural axes defines models of military and civic heroism, warranting that the social construction of crisis and salvation are endemic themes in struggles for power. Another cultural axis structures the discourse of civil society into a binary language that sacralizes comity, truthfulness, and rationality; pollutes aggression, deception, and impulsivity; and mandates that "working the binaries" is central to every political campaign. Another axis of cultural structuring allocates distinctive language games to different social spheres, ensuring that efforts to "walk the boundaries" between civil and noncivil spheres is critical to political success.

Culture structures, whether constraining and enabling, are as much about action as order. *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* is filled with discussions of events, eruptions, and innovations. Indeed, in our introduction to the volume, we editors suggest that the contrast between structures and events marks one of the enduring tensions of contemporary cultural sociology.

Eruptions, events, and innovations, while central to social life, do not challenge the idea of culture as a structure. The reason is that the structuring power of culture is linguistic. A culture structure is a pre-established set of understandings, symbolic associations, and meanings which communicating actors draw upon largely without knowing it. They do so in order to make sense of the persons, objects, and situations they encounter in social life; to communicate their intentions and meanings to others; and to be practical and effective in complex situations.

What is action, if culture is understood as a language? Action is practically oriented communication or, to turn it around, communicatively oriented practical action. Whether interpretive, strategic, and inventive, individual and group actions unfold inside encompassing language games. Cultures are language games that provide pre-constituted, extra-situational, and general meanings. Action can be "free" – in the sense of liberating, creative, radical, critical, rational, and practical -- but it cannot escape from the structuring of culture. To the contrary, it is the existence of pre-existing culture structures that enables actions to be liberating.

If we understand culture structure as language, we can then employ the conceptual armaments of semiotics. Culture structures consist of meaningfully related signifiers. They are not temporally and spatially situated in the material world; they do not have precise and particular references. Think of such signifiers as liberty, freedom, equality, hero, valor, and reasonableness.

Action, by contrast, does happen in time and space. It is defined by chronological and physical passage. Only as a human being moves through time does she encounter situated objects. The challenge for actors is to negotiate their position in time and space in a way that makes sense. To make sense is to make the situation meaningful in terms of the semiotic language games within which actors live and breathe.

Actors make signifieds of the things that the social world throws up to them, of the situations that their "interested," situated positions makes them face. Once signifier is fitted to signified, everything inside the situation -- things and people -- are understood as signs. Because actors confront the world as signs, they

understand even the most seemingly practical interests in a cultural way. Actors move through the world of signs amid the exigencies of time and space, all the time being as strategic, creative, and as meaningfully coherent as they can possibly be. As they do so, they engage in what Charles Peirce called semiosis, creating new and unexpected chains of relations -- meaningful associations -- among the signifiers that compose their culture structures. In the interest of what Schutz called typification -- the phenomenological process that makes everything newly encountered seem familiar to already existing ideal types -- there is continuous, if usually incremental and invisible, cultural shift and change. As actors reproduce cultural structures, their engagement in semiosis changes them.

To speak of culture structures and social action in this way is to conceptualize what I have called “cultural pragmatics,” the idea that culturally coded social action can be viewed as social performance. Theater is the prototypical example of tension between pre-coded, textual script and temporal/spatial contingency. Dramatic actors work from a script, but they do not follow it in the sense of reading. They must make it walk and talk, so that it can move an audience in an expressive and moral way.

For two centuries now, the practice and theory of theatrical action has been in a slow motion crisis. With the decline of ritualized public performances and theatrical patronage, and the emergence of theatrical markets, the ability to measure and predict dramatic success on the basis of a good text sharply diminished. What followed from this diminution was the broad de-fusion of the elements of theatrical performance: of the craft of script writing from the traditional narratives and genre; of the craft of acting from script writing; of theatrical directing from acting; of actor, director, and script-writer from props, stage effects, sound-production, lighting, editing and audience; of audience research and public relations from theatrical performances; and of critical interpreters from all of the other elements of theatre in turn. Avant-guard drama produced and theorized these separating defusions, even as they dedicated themselves to finding ways to re-fuse the elements of performance back together again. They wanted to overcome the lack of authenticity that shadowed modern dramatic production, not only on stage and film but in the increasingly carefully constructed performances of everyday life, from politics and business to religion.

In fact, social dramatic performances -- as compared to theatrical ones -- have encountered a similar challenge. With the rise of publics and counter-publics, with the growing power of critical intellectuals and intellectual critics, with the pluralization of the means of symbolic production, with the vast territorial and temporal expansion of societies and their depersonalization -- the elements of *social* performance have also become defused. The challenge of communicating meanings in a coherent manner has vastly increased. Despite the existence of powerful cultural structures, social performances require tremendous agility to be able to communicate in a practically meaningful way.

Theoretical resources for creating a social performance theory go back not only to Goffman, Geertz, and Turner, and before them to Kenneth Burke, but to the avant-guard dramatist Richard Schechner who, after encountering Victor Turner in the late 1960s, created a new field called “performance studies.” Social performance theory provides a flexible, supple way of working out the relation between cultural structures and practical-communicative action. Another way to say this is that social performance theory is a way to interconnect semiotics and pragmatism.

Why has the macro-sociological tradition made so little use of performance theory, and virtually nothing of the semiotic tradition? Because sociological theory identifies modernity with rationality and autonomy, it has associated culturally scripted-action with such supposedly anti-modern phenomena as religion, patriarchal authority, prejudice, and magic. Despite, or because of, his extraordinary contribution to modern sociological theory, Max Weber is the type case. In terms of his four basic types of social action, Weber associated goal- (*zweck*) and value- (*wert*) rationality with modernity, relegating traditional and affectual types of action to earlier, pre-premodern social forms. Revealingly, Weber took his theory of action from the legal sphere, where he had been professionally trained. Along with the market and science, law is the quintessentially “modern” institutional order. Normatively, it rests upon the ideal of a responsible, conscious, and rational actor, dispensing sanctions to deviations from that model.

The later Durkheim made a critical break from this modernist straightjacket. Returning to the elementary forms of primitive religion, he retrieved a model of how cultural structures might work in modern social life. His theory of solidarity, sacred and profane symbolic classifications, and expressive-cum-moral

rituals entered thoroughly into the anthropology of premodern societies, but sociologists remained moored to Durkheim's earlier ideas about the division of social labor, egoism, and anomie. To sociologists attuned to the seeming rationality of modernity, Durkheim's later ritual just didn't seem right.

Saussure invented structural linguistics – the French version of semiotics – in some part out of Durkheim's thinking as he making his late turn. Wittgenstein began formulating his linguistic philosophy at about the same time, but it was Saussurian concepts that allowed culture to be conceived as a language, meanings (*langue*) as relations among signifiers, speech (*parole*) as actions transforming objects into signifieds. Semiotics spread into some parts of social science and social theory via Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Foucault, and it was against this background that the symbolic anthropology of Geertz, Turner, Douglas erupted. By the early 1970s, not only Goffman but Geertz and Turner were mutating structural approaches to the symbolic into social performance theories of action. In doing so, they were influenced not only by Durkheim but John Austin, whose *How To Do Things with Words* made performance into a new philosophy of action-as-communication. Austin deeply influenced Derrida, and Turner and Derrida both influenced Judith Butler, who made gender into a culture structure and gendering action into performance.

Turner then met Schechner, and I'd like to say "and the rest is history," but for sociology it wasn't. After the linguistic and cultural turns, much of the best social and critical theory become semiotic, first structurally then post-structurally, and more recently became imbedded in performance theory. Sociology needs these resources if we are to develop a cultural pragmatics of strong cultural structures and contingent social performances.

## **You Can't Do That: Practices of Constraint**

[Karen A. Cerulo](#), Rutgers University

My essay examines how culture – in the form of communication strategies, cultural practices, and institutional structures – can constrain cognitive processes, and thus, influence thought and action. This work was presented as part of the ASA 2011 Culture Section invited session entitled "How Culture Constrains."

The organizers of our session asked presenters to conceptualize constraint, discuss cultural processes that can constrain action (including cognitive, normative, interactional, discursive and institutional mechanisms) and demonstrate constraint empirically, while avoiding simplistic implications of "false consciousness" My approach to these issues will revolve around my work in culture, communication and cognition. Over the years, I have examined many cognitive processes and explored the culture-cognition association. In addition, I have approached thought as a multi-dimensional process that resides not just in the brain, but in the culture and the structure of the contexts in which it occurs. This has been a persistent theme in my work, and it makes my research helpful in addressing the idea behind this panel.

For the purposes of this discussion, I define constraint as 1) limits on what we "see" or recognize, 2) the regulation of what we think about or how we think, or 3) the restriction of what becomes part of one's conscious consideration. I define cognition as processes that occur in the brain – e.g. attention, integration, classification, schematization, or recall. Further, I argue that communication norms, cultural practices, and social structures operate in conjunction with the brain to complete what we call "thought." Thus brain, culture and structure work together to enable and constrain thought and, potentially, enable and constrain action.

In the sections to follow, I refer to three specific cognitive processes and use them as vehicles by which to unfold my argument.

### **Habituation**

Habituation refers to a decrease in synaptic transmission. That is, neurons in the brain send out less

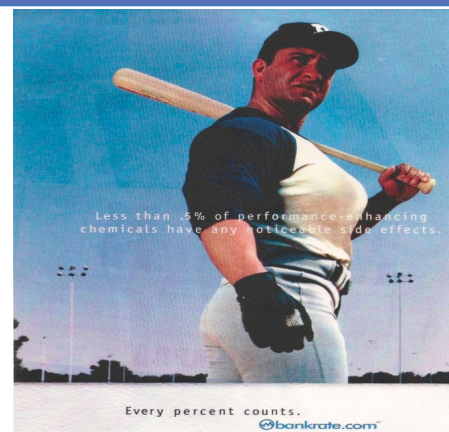
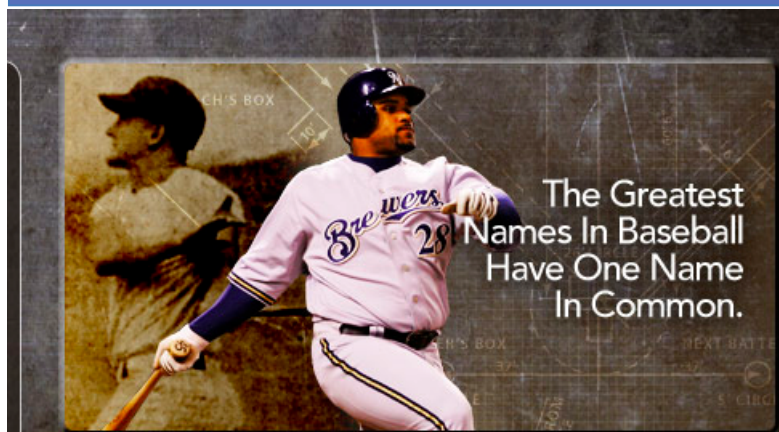
information – fewer signals to brain synapses. As a result, the chemical activity in the brain decreases and attention to stimuli wanes. Habituation happens when we are repeatedly exposed to the same thing. In such situations, we begin to “tune out” to the external world.

The physiology of habituation is important to understand, but it is only part of the story. As sociologists, we must recognize that the process can be altered. In my own work on communication, for example, I have found that messages constructed in certain ways can encourage habituation, while messages constructed in other ways can constrain it. More specifically, messages that deviate from or distort communication norms or cultural expectations in particular ways can constrain habituation and increase attention. To understand this process, we must take a moment to review some basic elements of message structure.

I argue that any message contains two major components. The “figure” refers to the forefront or focal elements of a message; the “background” to the setting or context in which the figure resides. Figures and grounds carry semantic meaning. Their combination carries syntactic meaning. Further, the figure and the ground can be presented in various ways, with each variation resulting in a different message structure.

In *normative message structure*, the meaning of a message’s figure and ground are designed to be clear and decipherable by most members of a target audience; the semantic meaning is intended to be explicit. In addition, the combination of the figure and ground – the message syntax – is designed to meet the cultural expectations of the target audience. In other words, the combination of materials should “make sense” to most receivers. Figure 1A shows an example of a normative message. The figure (Prince Fielder and his Louisville slugger bat) as well as the message backdrop (a classic silhouette of Ty Cobb in a baseball field) are clear indicators of baseball. Further, the figures-ground combination is compatible and makes sense to the baseball players and fans for which the ad is designed.

Figure One:  
Normative vs. Semantic Distortion



*Semantically distorted structure* occurs when the meaning of the figure *or* ground is distorted or manipulated in ways that contradict the cultural expectations of the target audience. Here, only semantic meaning is manipulated. Message syntax continues to conform to the cultural expectations of the target audience. Figure 1B provides us with an example of semantic distortion. For while this baseball player (the figure) is set in a context that “its” or “makes sense,” the meaning of the figure is wildly distorted by giving the player breasts.

*Syntactically distorted structure* occurs when the meaning of the figure and ground remains decipherable and clear to the target audience, but the combination of the elements contradicts the audience’s cultural expectations. While semantic meaning remains intact in such messages, syntactic meaning is altered. Compare the illustrations in Figure 2a and 2b. In Figure 2a, a normative ad for McDonald’s milkshakes, the product is clearly defined and set in the appropriate background (a McDonald’s store countertop). But in Figure 2b, a syntactically distorted ad for McDonald’s milk shakes, the “milk” is not where receivers might expect to see it. The combination of cow and trampoline creates a disconnect that beckons attention.



Figure Two:  
Normative vs. Syntactic Distortion



When syntactic contradiction occurs in the temporal unfolding of a message, we call it *sequentially distorted structure*. Comedy provides a good example. In comedy, the endpoint of a message is often not what a target audience expects with reference to the message starting point.

*Starting point:* A drunk appears in court and the judge says, “You’ve been brought here for drinking ...

*Endpoint:* The drunk says, OK – let’s get started!

or:

*Starting point:* I made a killing in the stock market ...

*End point:* I shot my broker.

Finally, *noisy structure* occurs when semantic *and* syntactic meaning are simultaneously disrupted or manipulated. In this way, neither figure nor ground meets with the cultural expectations of the target audience. Figure 3 illustrates such a message. In this historic *Goldust* detergent ad, the meaning of figure and ground are not completely apparent. Is this ad about voting ... cleaning ... racism? The combination of images is confusing (and somewhat offensive). It strains the sensemaking abilities and expectations of the target audience; In so doing, the ad encourages disattention. (It is worth noting that *Goldust* did not retain this ad for very long.)

Figure Three:  
Noisy Structure



Much research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience shows that, more often than not, we habituate to normative messages. (See Cerulo 1988; 1995a; 2009 for reviews of this literature.)

We’ve seen these messages before. We’re accustomed to them. We know where they are going. As a result, we can tune out or disattend to such messages at a conscious level.

We can use what we know about brains, communication norms and culture to explore ways to constrain habituation. In my own work, I have shown that moderate distortion of a target audience’s communication norms and cultural expectations – specifically semantic, syntactic or sequential distortion– can constrain habituation and increase attention and recall. In contrast,

extreme distortion such as noise proves too confusing for receivers, encouraging them to ignore the message (Cerulo 1988; 1995a). So, when we explore habituation, we see that we can learn much about cognition by merging our knowledge of the brain with our knowledge of communication and culture. In essence, studying culture helps us to discover the current communication norms in a given context. We gain some idea about how to disrupt those norms. In so doing, we also disrupt the neural chain of reactions. In this way, culture constrains habituation – and alters thought and often behavior.

### **Hot and Cold Cognition**

Cognitive neuroscientists also attend to a set of processes called hot and cold cognition. Hot cognition is associated with cognitive arousal and an elevated response to environmental factors. When engaged in it, people's responses to stimuli are often tied to emotion. Thus, hot cognition makes it difficult for a person to "calm down" and carefully analyze the information before them. In contrast, cold cognition refers to unemotional, painstaking thought that involves rational analysis. It is excessively critical and sometimes associated with over-analyzing a situation.

In my own work (Cerulo 1995b), I have examined the sociocultural factors that can constrain hot cognition. One example of this comes from my work on national symbols. My work on national symbols focused on their design, for I found that symbol meaning was conveyed through design as much as content. I analyzed over 180 anthems and 180 flags and identified the range of symbol designs, the sociocultural factors associated with the adoption of certain designs, and the variable audience response to certain symbol designs. The response element of my work will be my link to hot and cold cognition. For when it comes to national symbols, hot cognition is the desired response, as national leaders look for citizens to develop emotional bonds with their anthems, flags, etc.

First let us focus on the range of symbol design. My work shows that some anthems and flags display very basic, limited designs – These symbols represent a symbolic shorthand that connotes the symbol's intended message. The Libyan flag, a plain green field (still intact at this writing), provides an example of basic flag design. Others symbols are based on embellished designs. These designs are detailed and elaborate, laden with information that is meant to explicitly denote or "spell out" a certain message. The U.S. flag, with its 50 stars, thirteen stripes and three colors, illustrates an embellished symbol design.

In my research, I found that certain sociocultural conditions were associated with the creation and adoption of symbols with basic designs – factors such as a nation's centralization in the world system, the high intranational focus of its population, and authoritarian political arrangements. In contrast, factors such as a peripheral location in the world system, low intranational focus of the population, and democratic political arrangements were associated with the creation and adoption of elaborate symbolic codes.

The patterns I am describing here represent normative expectations with regard to national symbol design. People or "targets" in certain settings come to expect a certain symbol structure as the appropriate vehicle by which to symbolically communicate their nation's identity. These expectations bring us to the issue of hot cognition. My research shows that when those adopting national symbols chose anthems or flags that failed to conform to these design expectations, the symbols constrained citizens' ability to experience hot cognition. When adoption errors were made, when "deviant" designs were used to convey a nation's symbolic identity, citizens lacked emotional responses to the symbol; they failed to make passionate connections with the symbols; and their reverence toward the symbols was not voluntary, but rather, had to be mandated by law (Cerulo 1995b). So here too, we see the ways in which culture constrains cognition. The violation of expectations regarding modes of cultural expression can have tangible consequences – for both the cognitive processing of the symbolic message, and subsequent reactions to the symbol.

### **Graded Membership and Conceptual Prototypes**

I will address one final element of cognition, and discuss ways in which cultural practices and, in this case, structural arrangements constrain it: graded membership and conceptual prototypes.

In my last book, *Never Saw It Coming* (Cerulo 2006), I studied the cultural challenges faced by many groups and collectives in conceptualizing the worst of people, places, objects and events. I discussed the presence of blind optimism in American and other societies, and tried to explain its dominance. I argued

that this phenomenon resulted from the interplay of certain cognitive operations, cultural practices, and structural arrangements. Let me begin with the cognitive elements of the story.

Many cognitive scientists believe that concepts are built on a prototype or a “best example” premise. This means that, at their core, concepts amplify or exaggerate the critical features of a category; they focus our brains exclusively on a category’s “ideal”. When we encounter something we use our mental concepts and perform a neural operation called “graded membership.” That is, we “rank” or “place” entities with reference to others in their class. So when you go shopping for ... say ... a tomato, your brain compares every tomato you see to an ideal prototype... and it works from there. The more attributes that concrete tomato shares with the prototype that exists in your brain, the more likely you are to include what you see in the category tomato *and* the closer you will rank that observation to the category’s core ideal. Some tomatoes are just more tomatoey than others.

Graded membership has obvious results for the way in which we evaluate the world around us. The process quite forcefully establishes asymmetry as one of the brain’s prominent *modus operandi*. Best case examples of a concept are overemphasized and highly detailed; anything less than the ideal becomes increasingly nondescript, released or distanced by the brain from active consideration.

Perhaps you are saying to yourself right now: the brain has prototypes for bad things or worst cases too – i.e. the perfect storm, the prototypical murder. So how can I say that asymmetry routinely hides the worst? That is where elements of culture and structure come in. We can begin by considering culture.

In *Never Saw It Coming*, I discussed the ways in which specific cultural practices constrain the formation of negative prototypes. These practices build on the brain’s propensity toward asymmetrical thinking. As such, these practices keep us “in tune” with the *mechanic* ... the *way* or *manner* in which the brain operates, but they encode that process into a one-sided sociocultural experience. Cultural practices transform asymmetry – the tendency to emphasize only *the best-case example* of any concept – to positive asymmetry – the tendency to emphasize only *examples of the best-quality cases*. And they do so in a way that feels “natural” to our brains. Via these cultural practices, attention to the best cases (as defined by a particular group or community) becomes the norm ... the expectation. Attention to the worst defies normative expectations.

*Never Saw It Coming* carefully unpacked three sets of practices that function in this regard. *Eclipsing practices* allow members of groups and communities to distance and hide these things they define as “the worst” from active perception. The practice rests on the premise that groups and communities know the worst when they see it, but once acknowledging it, they will disattend it; once recognizing it, they will release it from focus.

Communities practice eclipsing in a variety of ways. The *banishment* of villains and sinners or symbols, books, language or the memory of events; the *physical seclusion* of the insane, the downtrodden, the criminal and the diseased; the *shunning* of those who offend the community’s values and rules. Each of these eclipsing practices render the worst functionally invisible.

*Clouding practices* provide another means of constraining attention to worst cases. Clouding practices simply minimize and distort what a community defines as “the worst.” Via clouding, the worst is detectable, but blurred in its details. Thus when stock traders predict potential highs of the Dow *to the point*, but can only describe potential market lows with impressionistic broad strokes and fuzzy numerical spans, they are clouding the worst. When military officials attempt to blur the details of casualties by shadowing them in reports of victory, they are clouding the worst, distorting it, and keeping it out of focus.

Finally, recasting redefines the meaning of the worst. Recasting allows a group or community to reconstruct calamity or catastrophe, and render such entities positive, valuable, and critical to collective wellbeing. Make lemons out of lemonade ... look for a cloud’s silver lining. Inverted and refashioned, stripped of its ugliness, the worst now embodies the vital and noble dimensions of existence. As such, it can remain centered in a group or community’s perceptual porthole.

*Never Saw It Coming* also addressed the role of structure in constraining our attention to the worst. I found that certain structural arrangements were more likely to support practices that encouraged blind optimism. Other structures challenged these practices, seemingly freeing people from the norms of positive asymmetry, and allowing them to conceptualize the worst quite accurately. These “emancipating structures” as I call them are characterized by a number of factors including significant autonomy of the structure’s

elements, porous boundaries between the structure's elements, multidirectional communication patterns within the structure, and the dominance of formal knowledge (Cerulo 2006).

## Conclusion

Habituation, hot cognition, graded membership and conceptual prototypes: all of these are cognitive processes central to thought. All are enabled by the neural, and yet completed by the cultural and the social. In the empirical examples I offered today, I attempt to illustrate how much richer our understanding of thought can be when we consider the interplay of brain and mind, of the cognitive, cultural, and structural. Whether we speak of constraining or enabling, this trio is vital to our understanding of social action.

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## A Phenomenology of Culture and Constraint

[John R. Hall](#), UC Davis

What might we learn about cultural constraint from the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Hall, Grindstaff, and Lo 2010)? The *Handbook* includes a series of 65 short essays on formal models of culture, the sublime, migration, carnival, authenticity, drag kings, science, cosmopolitanism, and diverse other topics? The editors asserted two precepts of a "Broad Program" for cultural sociology: (1) the significance of *globalization*; and (2) the centrality of the *lifeworld* as the site where culture comes is tethered to the social — in meaning construction, action, production, performance, narration, and so on. In the present essay, in part by considering selected chapters in the *Handbook*, I propose that theorizing alternative lifeworlds as distinct "frames" of social construction offers a new way of understanding culture in relation to constraint.

In my view, sociologists have become locked into a binary alternative between, on the one hand, the quest for a *general and comprehensive* account of "the" relationship between agency, cultural structures, and constraint, and, on the other hand, myriad accounts of such relationships in *specific* situations. What we lack is an effective theorization that would give guidance about how culture promotes agency or constrains people in personal relationships, at work, or in civil society. What we need is an institutional theory that identifies alternative *scope conditions* that mediate relationships between culture, constraint, and agency. These, I identify in relation to different zones, domains, regions, fields, and frames of action (hereafter indexed by the term "frame").

## The theoretical issue of culture and constraint

For some time, sociologists have recognized the problems with high-modern answers about the



relationship between culture and constraint, which tended to view culture as a totality. The outlier, and harbinger of hopeful developments, is Robert Merton (1938), who, in ‘Social structure and anomie,’ recognized that *alternative* circumstances concerning cultural availability of means to reach culturally prescribed ends might yield quite *different* individual responses.

Approaches in the last quarter-century of so, just as they moved away from culture as totality, equally deemphasized constraint. Recent studies describe diverse processes whereby agency *deploys* culture rather than bridling under its constraint. However, they do not do what Merton began to do, namely, give theoretical guidance about *where* and *when* we should expect culture to constrain, and *how*.

Ann Swidler is the early and important exception to that tendency: in her famous ASR article, “Culture in action” (1986), Swidler not only put forward her “toolkit” model of culture, she also argued that culture produces different degrees of constraint according to the times. In “unsettled” times, social actors work through the flux of emergent ideologies, in the bargain establishing new practices of action. However, in drawing from toolkits during “settled” times of social and cultural continuity, Swidler asserted, people “do not build lines of action from scratch” (1986: 277).

Swidler’s distinction between settled versus unsettled times points to social temporality as a scope condition. This distinction seemingly assumes some sort of objective characterization of “the times.” However, from a phenomenological vantage point, an objective distinction about time would be problematic. No doubt there are rare moments in objective time (perhaps right now!) when the world *in general* is unsettled. More typically, however, the “settledness” of times is socially relative to a given group, a particular social field, and the modalities of action of individuals as we pursue our everyday lives. To paraphrase Alfred Schutz (1945), there are “multiple times.” Following Swidler, developing a post-Schutzian phenomenology that theorizes multiple frames of social temporality may offer further purchase on the scope conditions of culture and constraint.

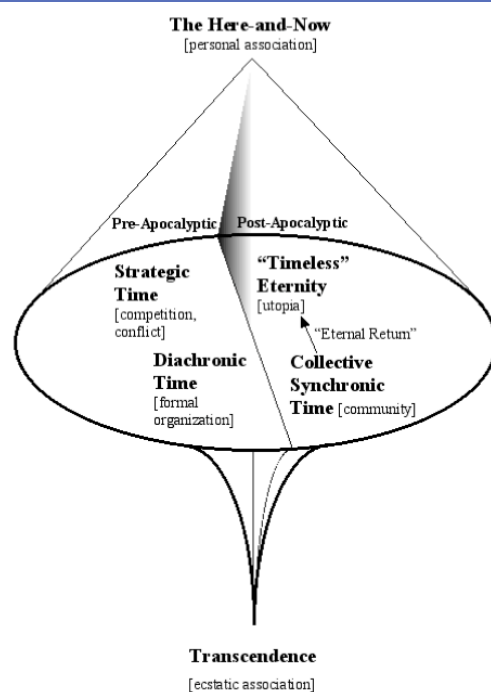
### The phenomenology of social time frames

In recent years, invocations of phenomenology have increased. However, mostly the invocations are “phenomenology-lite” – without the calories, without ambitions motivated by deep engagement with social phenomenology as an intellectual program. Yet social phenomenology focuses on the temporally structured lifeworld, where cultural constraints must operate in the play of meanings and social actions if they indeed constrain. Thus, spelling out a phenomenology of alternative sociotemporal frames potentially offers a basis for identifying scope conditions of culture as constraint.

In transcendental phenomenology, Husserl (1964) became centrally concerned with time consciousness. Subsequently, phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz located the temporal flow of consciousness within the lifeworld, in relation both to different motive structures of social action, memory, and projections of anticipated futures – that is, to action unfolding in, and simultaneously constructing, social time.

How can a social phenomenology of time identify scope conditions of cultural constraint? My approach is to theorize alternative ideal-typical temporal constructions of the social that correlate with long-standing but heretofore unsynthesized sociological theories (Hall 2009). Social temporalities correlate theoretically with alternative frames of the social, each of which exhibits a basic

Figure One: A general model of meaningful social temporalities that structure the vivid present, with associated typical forms of social interaction in brackets (From Hall 2009, p. 12).



undergirding logic of meaningful action (see figure 1). There are four relatively institutionalized frames of the social as well as two frames relatively resistant to thoroughgoing institutionalization. The four institutionalized frames are:

1. *Formal organization*, ordered by a logic of action centered in the *diachronic time* of the clock, in which units of time can be organized, saved, spent, bought, and so forth.
2. *Community*, which radiates outward from a logic of action centered in *collective synchronic time*, the time of shared ritual simultaneity of collective attention in the here-and-now.
3. *Competition and conflict*, ordered by a logic of action in *strategic time*, in which competitors or opponents seek to prevail in unfolding sequences and interactions of events.
4. *Utopia*, or alternatively, ideological tradition, centered in “timeless” *eternity*, where everyday ritual enacts an overarching pattern of life as a meaningful totality.

These four relatively institutionalized frames of action are undergirded by two more ontologically fundamental frames:

1. *Personal association* in the *here-and-now*, in which the enactment of social life reflects a baseline of multiple realities subject to whatever habitus, socialization, conventions, or emergent negotiated order involved participants successfully invoke.
2. *Ecstatic association*, accessing cognitive realms seemingly beyond social construction, in which people individually or collectively pursue *transcendence*, or the divine (for example, through zen meditation).

This broad theorization calls to mind many caveats. Here, I mention only two. First, these conceptualizations are ideal-typical, and no ideal type will exactly describe a given actual social formation. Thus, actual social formations will often exhibit *hybridic* cultural-structural features that can be described in relation to multiple ideal-typical framings. Second, any social setting is complex, and actors within a given setting typically orient to, and shift among, multiple frames. Nevertheless, one or another ordering frame of the social may obtain a ‘legitimate’ or predominate “accent of reality” (as Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 22-25 called it).

This general sociotemporal phenomenology can locate and specify the domains and interrelationships of a wide range of social theories. In brief, the here-and-now of personal association is the focus of micro-sociological theories of everyday life, iconically, in the work of Erving Goffman. Transcendence is the subject of studies on ecstatic association, theorized by Ernest Troeltsch, William James, and Rudolf Otto, among others. Durkheim’s theory religion – and more broadly, theories centered on solidarities of ethnic, religious, lifestyle, and other cultural communities – are located in the frame of the collective synchronic community. In the domain of “timeless” eternity, we find theories both of tradition -- for example, at the hands of Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, Edward Shils, and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger -- and of utopia, in the work of Karl Mannheim. In relation to organized modernity, game theorists center their analyses on the domain marked by strategic time – of competition and conflict, a domain also considered by Marx, Simmel and others. And the diachronic realm of formal organization is the subject of Weber’s theorization of legal-rational bureaucracy, and the focus of organizational sociologists in the years since.

### **Constraint in the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology***

On its face, a temporal phenomenology of the social already suggests that the pathways by which culture can constrain social action emerge out of specific frames and relationships among those frames. To explore this assertion here, let us use selected essays in the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* to map the phenomenology of culture and constraint in relation to substantive social processes. Note, however, that trying to capture the relevance of the *Handbook* for the problem of culture and constraint brings to mind the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s valiant effort to offer “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)” in 97 minutes. Suffice it to say, all nuances are going to be lost.

To begin, consider the autonomy of individual action in the *here-and-now* of *personal association* in relation to culture.<sup>1</sup> Hanrahan and Amsler (6) argue that people’s situated cultural critiques can open up moments of actor autonomy in which people understand and consciously engage with the culture that they

encounter, thereby asserting agency – even in the face of hegemonic forces (figure 2). David Grazian (18) amplifies this critical program by considering the legitimation and staging of “authenticity,” a practice that envelops and thereby constrains action in norms (figure 3). Yet, Grazian observes, both hybridity of culture (world music, fusion, and so on) and irony offer alternative ways of positioning action that free it from any regimen of authenticity. Culture constrains, but only for those who embrace a particular normative structure.

Figure Two: Critique within the frame of personal association as the basis for the assertion of personal autonomy

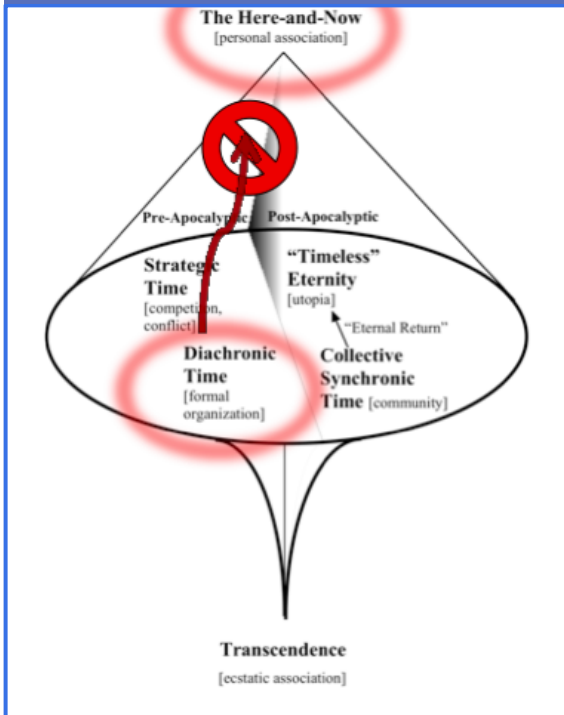
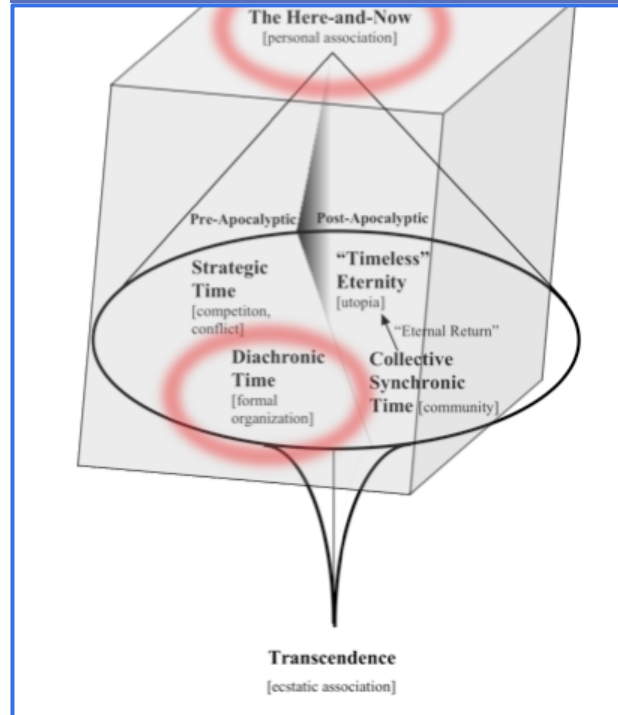


Figure Three: Authenticity as a legitimation of hegemony



*Handbook* threads of analysis focused on cultural differentiation similarly undermine any strong thesis concerning cultural constraint from outside onto the frame of the *here-and-now*. Mary Jo Neitz, Kevin McElmurray, and Daniel Winchester (17) point to how the collapse of a single, grand moral narrative has yielded a “multiplicity” of narratives that flourish in local cultures, an observation Gary Alan Fine (20) reinforces in his essay on idiocultures (figure 4). Zygmunt Bauman (31) elaborates this argument historically: whereas cultures of tradition were relatively binding in their constraints, modern cultures initially upended such constraints, and high-modern systemic regulation ushered in the era when Bourdieu could persuasively assert tight linkages between a class order and status-distinction hierarchies. But what Bauman (31: 333-34) calls “liquid modernity” superseded all this: culture no longer binds with norms; instead, cultural distributors make “offers” meant to seduce (figure 5).

Figure Four: Differentiation and collective synchronic communities' constraints on personal life

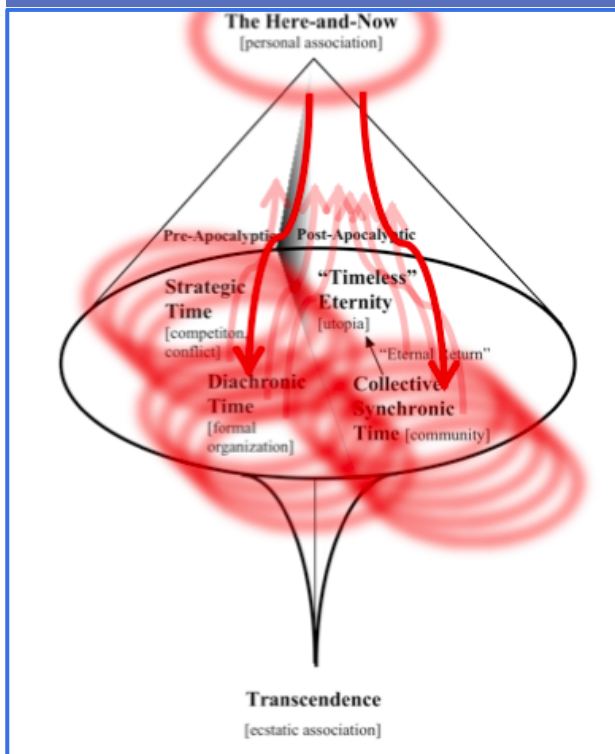
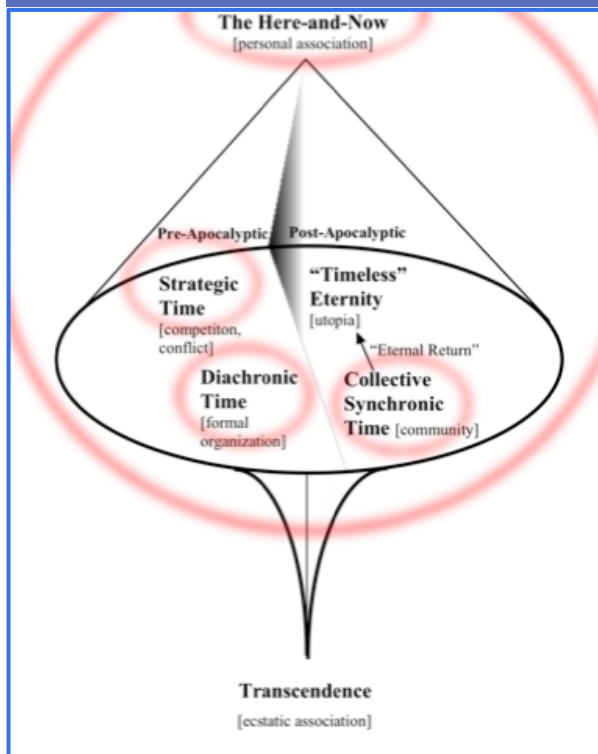


Figure Five: Culture and ritual “on offer” under conditions of differentiation



Mapping constraint in relation to temporally specified frames of the social reveals a different set of issues in *Handbook* essays on work and the professions, by Robin Leidner (40), Eileen Otis (41) Pei-Chi Lan (42), Alex Preda (43), Mary-Jo Good and Seth Hannah (44), and Susan Silbey (45). Beyond their discussions of work, service occupations, law, medicine, science, and carework, a general point emerges. Bourdieu sought to characterize “fields” as relatively institutionalized realms where the stakes of action – however contested – are largely known. By contrast, these essays suggest that realms of work are regions where a variety of relatively institutionalized sociologies deriving from different frames collide or become accommodated with one another (figure 6). Multiple kinds of workers, professionals, management, clients, consumers, and competitors create their agencies via distinctive frames. No matter how much the principals of an organization or institution may strive for coherence, they confront cultural stews that result from concatenation of frames.

Finally, let us map globalization and constraint phenomenologically. Although a naive account might characterize globalization as an extension of cultural hegemony from Western and other industrialized societies, the consequences of globalization are diverse (figure 7). Thus, Gary Hamilton and Don Fels (53) argue that the globalization of retailing has spawned choices in the constructions of identity, choices neither Western nor traditionally Egyptian, Chinese, or so forth. On a different globalizing front, as Kevin Gotham (58: 614) points out, the emergence of global tourism has created new affirmations of local identity, new nostalgias, new claims to authenticity. No doubt the many local lifeworlds of the planet have become increasingly integrated into globalizing production and retailing networks, and these networks constrain in a variety of ways. Yet ironically (or dialectically, depending on your metatheoretical preference), seemingly hegemonic globalizing processes do not homogenize lifeworlds. Instead, they open already diverse lifeworlds to social actors’ elaborations of meanings in new and unpredictable ways.



Figure Six: Work and the professions as ‘zones’ where the sociologies of different frames come into play

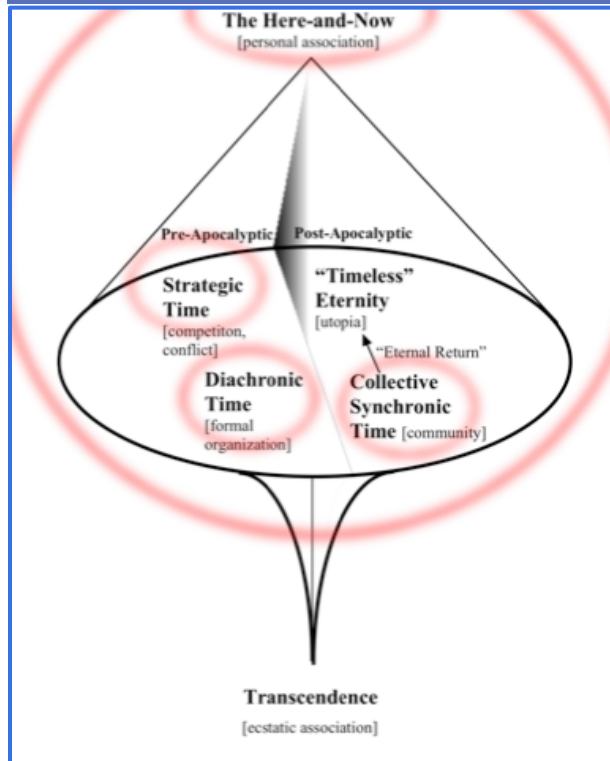
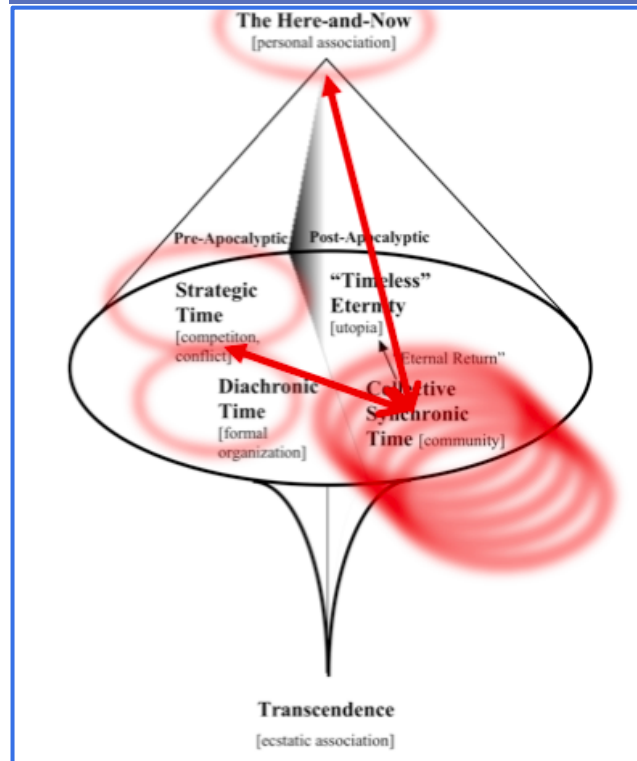


Figure Seven: Globalization and geographically based entities



## Conclusion

The *Handbook* essays I have mentioned, and others I did not have the opportunity to discuss, suggest that we have gone well beyond any reductionist characterization of “the” relationship between “culture” (now understood in its multiplicities) and “constraint” (recognized to occur through a variety of different mechanisms). Yet this observation begs for a specifically theoretical account. As I have sought to illustrate, a sociotemporal phenomenology offers a way to map, clarify, and synthesize substantive analyses and sociological theories concerning constraint.

As the present brief survey shows, mechanisms of cultural constraint vary according phenomenologically specified scope conditions – the frame *on* which they operate and the frame *from* which they emanate. We live in and move across complexly interrelated frames of the social, where patterns of constraint operate in complex relationship to possibilities of agency. Such mechanisms can be located phenomenologically. Doing so offers a way of enriching our understanding of social complexity, while avoiding either pure historicism on the one hand, or totalizing theory on the other.

Here, we might consider biology, rather than physics or chemistry, as a discipline worth emulating (or, to put the matter differently, biology increasingly has confronted the conditions of social science). Once, biologists thought that in evolution and genetics, they had unlocked the basic and overarching processes structuring plant and animal life. Now, with analyses of protein biochemistry in dna and myriad kinds of rna, they recognize that things are not so simple: cell biology is an interface between genetics and evolution in which chemical pathways become something akin to language – complex instructions and facilitating mechanisms. Biology is, in effect, beset by “cultural” analysis that elucidates myriad and highly contingent processes and outcomes. Whereas modern sociologists once sought parsimony, today, we should be embracing the complexity bequeathed the social by culture, without forswearing the identification of diverse meaningful mechanisms that yield relationships between cultural constraint and agency.

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### **(Letter from the Chair, continued from Page 3)**

Over and over again, narratives were described as "simple" in the sense of simplistic. They were also "contrived," "fraudulent," "false," "phony," and "patently false." They were "deeply misleading," "manipulated," driven by "facile conclusion and faulty logic," and untrue. Narratives were used by politicians to "explain away" embarrassing policy debacles and "run away" from their own positions, or to "gloss... over a big mistake."

Small wonder that Americans distrust political stories! Far from unifying moral visions, narratives, in this rendering, are sound-bites du jour. Particular narratives dominate not because they resonate with deep public beliefs and values but because politicians manage to stay on message in an echo chamber of media reports.

That Americans have mixed views about storytelling is perhaps not surprising. Sociologists of culture have pointed out that people have mixed views about many cultural objects. Romantic love is at once spontaneous and demands hard work; technology is progressive and dangerous; statistics are objective and manipulable. Ann Swidler famously argued that contradictory views of romantic love give people the flexibility to deal with the complex institution of marriage. But I've always wondered whether, far from functional for everyone, mixed views of cultural objects serve some people more than others. Are negative views of love, statistics, and technology likely to be triggered by some people or on some occasions more than others?

In the case of storytelling, I wonder if, ever since they came to be seen as intellectual elites, Democrats have had a hard time telling stories—or rather, have encountered more resistance to their storytelling. It is difficult to think of eggheads as folksy raconteurs. So Democratic stories are more likely to be heard as strategic, manipulative, or plain awkward (think: Al Gore, although in campaigning this time around, Mitt Romney may be the test case) than are Republican stories. (In his presidential campaign, Barack Obama used an array of rhetorical tools, often to dazzling effect. I don't think that storytelling was paramount among them).

If I'm right, there's an irony. Democratic pundits have been calling for a coherent "story" rather than a philosophy or vision or platform, I believe, because they have imagined that by speaking *in* ordinary American, they would come up with a way of speaking *to* ordinary Americans. But ever since the right won the battle over who was an elite (making it more about style than income, education, or background), Democrats' efforts to tell stories have risked being heard as faux-populist spin.

So what is the answer? Here are two. Great writers don't tell simple stories. They tell stories that defy our expectations. They take familiar plotlines, characters, and situations, and jigger them. They use tropes like irony, ellipsis, and shifting point of view to play to our expectations and defy them. They make us think we're hearing one kind of story and then tell us another. Democrats should do that. They should also sometimes *not* tell stories. They should say, "I could tell you a simple story but I'm not going to. Here's why."

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## Culture Program Focus: Cultural Sociology at the University of California, San Diego Amy Binder, UCSD<sup>1</sup>

If the members of the Department of Sociology at UC San Diego subscribed to a single rallying cry it might sound something like this: “All sociology must concern itself with meaning.” Granted, this is not the kind of thing that gets people mobilized into the streets, nor is it an intellectual commitment at the *individual* level that would surprise readers of this newsletter. But as a sensitizing epistemological concern shared by virtually all faculty and graduate students in a single department, it is a phenomenon worth noting. Perhaps only Northwestern, Princeton, and Berkeley could (almost) be described similarly. And although the 25 faculty and 75 graduate students currently in the department have multiple core areas of interest—political sociology, gender/race/class inequalities, comparative-historical analysis, science studies, among them—there is a common sensibility, shared by virtually all of us here, that sociological inquiry without attention to culture is incomplete sociology at best. Such a shared orientation makes this a great place to study and learn, both for those who have been around the department a long time, and for those new to this “very air we breathe.”

We come by our shared concerns with culture honestly. As in most formal communities where there is a strong “organizational saga” (as Burton Clark might have labeled it), our department has a particular origin story. Called upon in 1968 to put together a sociology department on the new campus of UCSD, the founder and first chairperson of our department, Joseph Gusfield, decided to focus on only a few areas, and the sociology of culture was one of them. In an interview he gave in 2006, Gusfield said that what he was reading at the time influenced how he decided to build the department.<sup>2</sup> His reading list had included Claude Levi-Strauss, Harold Garfinkel, and Jack Douglas. This assorted group reflected a varied approach to culture that shaped how the department ultimately developed. As testament to its eclecticism, through time the department served as home to many who took their approach to cultural analysis very seriously indeed, including Aaron Cicourel, Randall Collins, Michael Schudson, Chandra Mukerji, Bennett Berger, Jack Douglas, Tim McDaniel, and Bud Mehan. Our storied past includes, if not fist fights, then at least spectacularly heated disagreements between symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists!

The initial eclectic approach to culture continues strongly today. Those among us who participate actively in the ASA Culture Section—as one example of culture’s centrality to our work—include Rick Biernacki, Mary Blair-Loy, John Evans, Tom Medvetz, Kwai Ng, John Skrentny, Amy Binder, and Dick Madsen. We study language, law, media, religion, science, education, organizations, occupations, gender, social movements and politics. None of us, therefore, would be called “only” a cultural sociologist—but rather would refer to ourselves as “culture and...,” where the ellipsis signifies other subfield concerns. Our perspectives range from the more micro to the more macro, from qualitative to quantitative, and from the more hermeneutic to the more structuralist.

Others in the department whose work may not be quite as visible to members of the Culture Section but who nevertheless have a culture profile include Jeff Haydu, Isaac Martin, April Linton, Akos Rona Tas, Rebecca

Klatch, Martha Lampland, Christena Turner, and Charlie Thorpe. Former colleagues, including Steve Epstein, Maria Charles, and Andy Lakoff, among others—also contributed enormously to the culture environment at UCSD during their years with us.

Our current graduate students and recently minted PhDs are also central to the culture life force at UCSD. Michael Haedicke, now an assistant professor at Drake University, uses a cultural-institutional field analysis to understand the work of people in organic foods who find themselves needing to construct alternative identities at the intersection of movements and market logics; Erin Cech, this year a post-doc at Stanford, studies many aspects of women's professional identities and career trajectories in the sciences; Jeff Kidder, an assistant professor at Northern Illinois University, has recently published his book (Cornell University Press) on urban bike messengers; Angela Garcia investigates the cultural experience of "assimilation," or lack thereof, in different neighborhoods; Stephen Meyers researches the disability rights movement in Nicaragua as a phenomenon melding both global discourses and Sandinista logics of citizenship rights; Kate Wood is conducting a comparative case study of undergraduates' constructions of what makes for a "typical college experience." I will stop the list there, but will refer readers to our graduate student website for proof that most all of us at UCSD make culture a central part of our research.

To continually invigorate our conversations about culture and sociology, the department organizes a number of activities that are centrally "culture." For many years we have had a Culture + Society workshop that sponsors about 10 talks per year, with presenters evenly divided between UCSD insiders (faculty and graduate students) and outside speakers. Using a workshop format, presenters distribute their papers in advance and then speak formally for just 10 minutes in order to situate the project. For the remaining 90 minutes or so, the entire group engages in discussion of the paper. This format is ideally suited for graduate student participation (it is easier for many graduate students to actively engage with outside speakers when they have already read the work), as well as for presenters, who get sustained comments on their work. We have had several presenters leave campus stating that they now knew (or remembered) what it was like to be in "a culture department." Recent visitors to the workshop have included Wendy Griswold, Nina Bandelj, Neil Gross, Ann Mische, Steve Vaisey, among many others. The Culture + Society Workshop frequently co-sponsors events with other workshops in the department, including the Inequalities workshop and the Workshop for the Study of Conservative Movements and Conservatism.

An additional venue for discussing culture in our department has been the four one-day culture conferences that we have hosted—primarily for a Southern California audience (including participants and speakers from UCLA, USC, UC Santa Barbara), but with some representation from further geographic reaches. These conferences have showcased keynote talks about current work given by some of the most prominent cultural scholars in the field today—including Michele Lamont, Ann Swidler, Michael Schudson, Randall Collins, Chandra Mukerji, Craig Calhoun, Paul Lichterman, and Katherine Newman—but have also featured an innovative "middle section" of the day during which four sociologists (per conference), who are not necessarily *cultural* sociologists, have discussed the ways in which culture concepts have permeated and/or are currently changing their empirical subfields. Some of the presentations in this section of the conference were delivered by Cal Morrill on culture and organizations, Francesca Polletta on culture and movements, Mitchell Stevens on culture and education, John Skrentny on culture and the study of race/ethnicity, Steve Epstein on culture and science studies, and Abby Saguy on culture and law. Realizing the treasure trove of ideas we had uncovered in this part of the conferences, the organizers commissioned written pieces from all of the presenters and co-edited a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* with the title "Cultural Sociology and Its Diversity" (September 2007, Volume 619).

In sum, cultural sociology is alive and well at UCSD, kept vibrant through all manner of practice, ideology, schemas, scripts, institutional routines, repertoires, discourses, and organizational logics. If I forgot anything, it's probably kept alive by that cultural mechanism too!

1. Some of the ideas and language in this article were first published in an introductory essay to a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* titled "Cultural Sociology and Its Diversity." The introduction essay was written by Amy Binder, Mary Blair-Loy, John Evans, Kwai Ng, and Michael Schudson; the special issue was edited by the same group.
2. Sections of this interview were published in *Society for the Study of Addiction*. 2006. Conversation with Joseph Gusfield. *Addiction* 101 (4): 481-90.



# Books of Note

[Tim Dowd](#), Emory University

As evidenced by recent announcements circulated among the culture section, there is no shortage of new books. Here are but a few for your consideration in this new year.

## Three on the Economic Realm

Nina Bandelj and Frederick F. Wherry, Editors. [The Cultural Wealth of Nations](#). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

With a title that both harkens back to Adam Smith while also alluding to the cultural turn in economic sociology (e.g., the work of Zelizer), this edited volume casts much light on symbolic resources and the very real implications that they have for nations and their economies. Its impressive collection of contributors do so by dealing with topics that cover such things as development, tourism, wine and world heritage—all while dealing with theory that ranges from Smith to Bourdieu.

Jeffrey Hass. 2011. [Power, Culture and Change in Russia: To the Undiscovered Country of Post-Socialism, 1988-2008](#). London: Routledge.

This book has, at least, two thrusts. On the one hand, Hass takes on approaches to economic change that treat institutions as given and relatively unproblematic. Instead, he offers a theoretical model very much influenced by the likes of Bourdieu, DiMaggio, Meyer, and Weber—one in which macro-level institutions are linked to micro-level processes, and one where the economic realm is shaped by cultural logics and practices, by power relations, as well as by historical legacies. On the other hand, Hass uses this model to explain the dramatic change that has occurred in Russia of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Here, he makes convincing use of interviews, ethnography, and newspaper discourse to reveal the “hows” and “whys” of this change.

Zuleman Valdez. 2011. [The New Entrepreneurs: How Race, Class, and Gender Shape American Enterprise](#). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Valdez offers an “embedded market” approach that brings together scholarship on ethnic entrepreneurship (e.g., the works of Light, Portes and Rumbaut, and Zhou) with scholarship on the intersectionality of race, class and gender—an embedded approach that brings both structure and agency to the fore in interdependent fashion. Having laid out her approach in clear fashion—and making the case for how it extends and improves previous scholarship—Valdez shows its applicability in the remainder of the book. There, she addresses empirically the economic success and social integration of Latino/a entrepreneurs in Houston and its restaurant industry. Drawing on extensive data gleaned from interviews and observation, Valdez lays out the empirical nuances that her approach allows—such as the success that these entrepreneurs can and do attain, but also the constraints that they face given their respective positions in the economic order.

(Continued on Page 28)

### Three on Media

Ashley Mears. 2011. [\*Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model\*](#). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Media sociologists (and others) have often focused on how beauty and gender are framed and represented in a variety of media content—such as in films and advertisements. In this book, Mears provides an impressive look into the decisions and practices that lead to certain types of representations (e.g., “looks”) dominating—as those in the fashion industry target the mass-market of everyday consumers (think “Victoria’s Secret”) or target the world of high-fashion. Mears marshals considerable evidence (including participant observation and intensive interviews) to reveal how gatekeepers selecting fashion models grapple with uncertainty and with assumptions about what others find physically attractive, aesthetically appealing, and / or economically viable—including assumptions about race and gender.

Sarah Sobieraj. 2011. [\*Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism\*](#). New York: New York University Press.

Given the Republican primary season and the approaching presidential election, this is a timely book. Sobieraj deals with, among other things, how and why the whole world is often *not* watching the efforts of activists groups. Rather than focus on a particular group, she offers an expansive view of 50 groups that represent a wide range of interests and concerns—groups that sought media attention during the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions of both 2000 and 2004. She expertly combines extensive observation, numerous interviews, and analysis of news coverage so as to present a sobering view—one that shows the difficulties of gaining media attention in a way that promotes the change and discussion that various activist groups desire.

Siva Vaidhyanathan. 2011. [\*The Googlization of Everything \(and Why We Should Care\)\*](#). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Here’s another timely book—especially in the wake of recent discussions regarding online piracy and government regulation. Vaidhyanathan is not simply offering an account of Google the company; instead, he is addressing how we use Google and the implications that follow from such use. In this provocative book, the author encourages us to think about how Google shapes (if not regulates) the Web, how it compiles considerable information on its users, how it deals with the world (e.g., China), and how it treats knowledge and intellectual property (e.g., the Google Books program).

### Three on Music

Claudio E. Benzecry. 2011. [\*The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession\*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

There is a notable gap in the recent boom of music sociology: opera has received far less attention than other types of music. Indeed, when opera is mentioned in music sociology, it is often in survey research—where it is one of many genres that respondents can select as “liking” or “loving.”

Along with such sociologists as Atkinson, Martorella, Santoro, and Stamatov, Benzecry has played an important role in filling that gap—as he does again in this new book. Based upon fieldwork in Buenos Aires, he focuses on those who are passionate about opera. This qualitatively rich and detailed

analysis is bolstered by an attention to the broader field in which opera is located and a fascinating move away from treating opera as merely a badge of distinction. Indeed, by delving into how and why people love opera, Benzecry provides a work that should appeal not only to music sociologists, but also to cultural sociologists of all types.

Laura Clawson. 2011. [\*I Belong to This Band, Hallelujah! Community, Spirituality, and Tradition among Sacred Harp Singers\*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Here's a type of music that receives even less attention from sociologists than does opera: Sacred Harp singing (named for an 1844 religious tunebook that offered an alternative way of presenting songs, one that would could be read by individuals not familiar with typical musical notation). For those who have not heard this music, Clawson provides a wonderfully engaging introduction to this religious music with a long tradition in parts of the South. Furthermore, as Heider and Warner have done elsewhere, Clawson also makes a compelling case as to why we should heed this music. For example, as folk enthusiasts and others beyond the South have gravitated to this music, its performance has sometimes brought together liberal "seekers" from the North with conservative believers in the South. Utilizing extensive fieldwork, Clawson shows how participation in this music allows people with divergent worldviews to come together, as well as showing how issues of authenticity are negotiated amidst this mixing of old and new adherents. If you are interested in issues of authenticity, community, identity, and performance—then this is the book for you.

Tia DeNora. 2011. [\*Music-in-Action: Selected Essays in Sonic Ecology\*](#). Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

DeNora is one of the leading voices in music sociology—thanks, in part, to such works as *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* (1995) and *Music in Everyday Life* (2000). This collection brings together a range of chapters and articles—some of which are well known and some that are less known. Taken together, the selections show the arc and development of DeNora's intellectual career, including her recent focus on music's import for health and therapy.

### Three on Theory

J. David Knottnerus. 2011. [\*Ritual as a Missing Link: Sociology, Structural Ritualization Theory and Research\*](#). Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

"Ritual" is a familiar concept in sociology—particularly given its usage in the works of Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins (among others). In this book, Knottnerus argues that this concept is nonetheless underutilized in sociology. As a corrective, he puts forward in this book a precise and systematic theory that makes ritual a central element. In the process, he also offers a comprehensive overview of the decade of scholarship that, in various ways, advances this structural ritualization theory. While not only showing how structural ritualization theory differs from previous theories, Knottnerus also makes the case for its empirical applicability—whereby it allows us to understand the complexities of daily life.

John Levi Martin. 2011. [\*The Explanation of Social Action\*](#). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

While my short blurbs do not do justice for all the books listed here, this is particularly true for this ambitious book. Martin opens by writing on page ix, "...the social sciences (in part, but in large part) explain what people do, and they explain what it means to carry out such explanation. They often do reasonably well at the first task and usually abysmally at the second...The systematic wrongness of our approach is not quite due to theory, but when we find ourselves puzzling about the knots in which we have somehow tied ourselves, we generally believe that we are talking about 'theory.'"

Rather than attempting to summarize what comes next, I encourage you to read from that page forward. Whether you or not you agree with the author, you'll learn a great deal.

Eviatar Zerubavel. 2012. [\*Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity and Community\*](#). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zerubavel excels at taking the most basic and taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life and interrogating them in a way that leads to sociological epiphanies—such as he does in the *The Seven-Day Circle* (1985), *The Fine Line* (1991), and *The Elephant in the Room* (2006). He does so again in this illuminating book on what he calls the “genealogical imagination”—how we individually and collectively think about such things as relatives and ancestry and, in the process, construct such concepts as family and race. While dealing with more than theory *per se*, I mention this book here because it encourages us to look at the world in a new way.

### **Three Briefly Noted**

Nina Eliasoph. 2011. [\*Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare's End\*](#). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Focusing her attention on civic and community organizations, Eliasoph offers a detailed and sophisticated examination of what occurs within them—including talk of empowerment—and the limits that these organizations face. She also excels at showing the concerns of people (e.g., youth volunteers) who participate in these organizations.

Ralph LaRossa. 2011. [\*Of War and Men: World War II in the Lives of Fathers and Their Families\*](#). Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Moving beyond stilted stereotypes of fathers found on old TV shows, LaRossa digs into what fatherhood entailed during an era of great change—an era that included the horrors of WWII, the fears associated with the Cold War, and the challenges and transformations that accompanied the Civil Rights movement.

Laura Stark. 2011. [\*Behind Closed Doors: IRBs and the Making of Ethical Research\*](#). Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

This is a welcome contribution that helps make sense of institutional review boards. Stark provides a long term view—such as the initial rules for the treatment of human subjects by individuals at the National Institutes of Health's campus—so as to clarify how and why current rules take the form that they do. Linking both history and current practice, this is an informative book.

### **Three Others to Note:**

Mark Chaves. 2011. [\*American Religion: Contemporary Trends\*](#). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Anne Kane. 2011. [\*Constructing Irish National Identity: Discourse and Ritual during the Land War, 1879-1882\*](#). New York: Palgrave.

Cecilia L. Ridgeway. 2011. [\*Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World\*](#). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.