

# SECTION CULTURE



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## Letter from the Chair

Photo: Terence E. McDonnell, University of Notre



Dame

Next week I'm heading to New York to see my parents and my sister and her family for the first time since COVID. I hope you are all vaccinated (thanks, Science!) and able to see friends and loved ones this summer.

## Section Awards

I have the great honor of announcing the results of this year's section awards. Before I get to the good news, I just wanted to note that I saw the lists of nominees and was bowled over by all the great work submitted for our awards. The competition was stiff! Without further ado...

We had two co-winners for **The Mary Douglas Prize for Best Book in the Sociology of Culture**: Fernando Domínguez Rubio's *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* and Matthew Clair's *Privilege and Punishment. How Race and Class Matter in Criminal Court*. In addition, the committee handed out two honorable mentions: Erin Metz McDonnell's *Patchwork*

*Leviathan: Pockets of Bureaucratic Effectiveness in Developing States* and Anne Warfield Rawls and Waverly Duck's *Tacit Racism*. Kudos to the hard work of the committee: Larissa Buchholz (Chair), Orly Clerge, Julia Sonnevend, Roi Livne, Derron Wallace, and Christina Simko.

We also had two winners for **The Clifford Geertz Prize for Best Article**: Daniel DellaPosta's "Pluralistic Collapse: The 'Oil Spill' Model Of Mass Opinion Polarization" and Kevin Kiley and Stephen Vaisey's "Measuring Change And Stability In Personal Culture Using Panel Data." Both papers were published in the *American Sociological Review*. The committee also acknowledged Craig M. Rawlings and Clayton Childress's "Emergent Meanings: Reconciling Dispositional and Situational Accounts of Meaning-Making from Cultural Objects" (*American Journal of Sociology*) with an honorable mention. Many thanks to the Geertz Award committee: Omar Lizardo (Chair), Beth Gharrity Gardner, Tim Hallett, Yongren Shi, Andrea Voyer, and Xiaohong Xu.

Finally, we honor our two co-winners of **The Richard A. Peterson Prize for Best Graduate Student Paper**: Laura Acosta, "Victimhood dissociation and conflict resolution: evidence from the Colombian peace plebiscite" (*Theory and Society*) and Chloe Grace Hart, "Trajectory Guarding: Managing Unwanted, Ambiguously Sexual Interactions at Work" (*American Sociological Review*). Many thanks to our esteemed award committee: Carly Knight (Chair), Jaleh Jalili, Erin Johnston, Rachel Skaggs, Jeff Swindle, and Marshall Taylor.

**Congratulations** to these wonderful sociologists for their excellent work and contributions to the Sociology of Culture. There is so much brilliant cultural sociology being written right now—please read and cite their research! I'd also like to acknowledge the award committees for their work and emotional anguish as they made these difficult decisions. It means so much to the section to have such wonderful volunteers.

### **Culture and Contemporary Life Series**

Our first year of the Culture and Contemporary Life Series has come to a close. I'm so incredibly proud of the success of this initiative and many of you have written to me to say how much you've enjoyed the discussions. We've had three panels since the last newsletter. Click the titles to watch!

### **Vaccinations in the Age of COVID**

Panelists included Claire Laurier Decoteau, Laura Mamo, and Jennifer Reich with Margarita Rayzberg moderating.

### **Creative Industries in Crisis**

Panelists were Patricia A. Banks, Angèle Christin, and Steven Tepper with Rachel Skaggs moderating.

### **The Cultural Politics of Naming and Commemo-ration**

Panelists included Angela Gonzales, Fiona Greenland, and Christina Simko with Robin Wagner-Pacifici serving as moderator.

These panels have been a real gift this year. They have kept the section connected throughout our COVID isolation—I know I really looked forward to these events. They helped us make sense of current events as they happened and affirmed the value of taking a cultural lens to topics of the day. It has been great to hear about all the wonderful contributions to these conversations from our panelists' research.

The committee put together a truly inspired group of panelists. The committee made an online series seem easy, but that obscures the efforts that it took to make everything run so smoothly. Thanks to Hannah Wohl (Chair), Shai Dromi, Lisa McCormick, Meltem Odabas, Matt Rafalow, and Victoria Reyes (council liaison) for pulling off this huge accomplishment and keeping us inspired this year.

### **Updates from Council**

The Culture Section council and committees have been hard at work this year pushing forward on a number of fronts. Given that ASA is online this year, we're temporarily refocusing the John Mohr travel award into a grant to support the work of a racially or ethnically under-represented graduate student's research in the sociology of culture. The success of the mentorship program's first year has led the membership committee to renew it for the 2021-22 year. Thanks to Blake Silver (Chair), Meghan Daniel, Michael Siciliano, Patrice Wright, Alissa Boguslaw, and Mathieu Desan for their work. The Diversity and Inclusion committee (Nino Bariola and Anya Degenshein co-chairs, along with Jelani Ince and Yesenia Vargas) have developed a robust slate of proposed initiatives—I appreciate their important work. Look out for twitter profiles of BIPOC students on the job market from @ASACulture in the coming months. We're also amplifying the work of cultural scholars of color by creating a bibliography of self-nominated work. Finally, in lieu of our usual section reception, I'll be hosting a Culture Section Trivia Night on Zoom. Look for

details on these and other initiatives in my emails to section members.

### **In this Issue**

The June newsletter memorializes two of our recently departed cultural sociology colleagues: Barry Schwartz and John Ryan. Former Chair of the Sociology of Culture Section Barry Schwartz is memorialized by Mark Jacobs, Robin Wagner-Pacifi, Gary Alan Fine, Michael Schudson, Yael Zerubavel, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Lyn Spillman. John Ryan is remembered by Mike Hughes. We thank these colleagues for sharing their memories of these beloved sociologists.

Chandra Mukerji has a thought-provoking essay about how Trump uses speculative fiction to create “self-fulfilling

prophesies with political effect.” She draws on Foucault to make a powerful statement on the power of prophetic truths. Finally, Emma Brandt reports on two of the Culture and Contemporary Life Panels, and Alex van Venrooij reviews *Measuring Culture*.

This is the last issue with Yu Ching Cheng as lead editor of the newsletter. The section is indebted to her tireless efforts. We also welcome editors Bo Yun Park, Manning Zhang, and Emma Brown who join Bambang Trihadmojo (our webmaster and social media manager) on our newsletter and communications team.

I hope everyone enjoys their summer as we collectively remember how to be around people again! May your summer be restorative, and we’ll see you in August for ASA.

## Barry Schwartz Memorial

**Barry Schwartz: A Remembrance**  
**Mark D. Jacobs (George Mason University)**



Photo: Barry Schwartz

*Source: Dignity Memorial.*

Barry Schwartz, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Georgia, and Chair of the Culture Section at the turn of the century, passed away on January 6 of this year at age 82. An original thinker and a generous spirit, his writing and his mentorship helped create the contemporary sociology of culture. A number of his colleagues have contributed to this group remembrance: Robin Wagner-Pacifi, Gary Alan Fine, Michael Schudson, Yael Zerubavel, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Lyn Spillman. His intellectual legacy survives in the work of his colleagues and those he mentored, in addition to his voluminous and influential writings—books and essays—most of which can be downloaded from the website [barryschwartzonline.com](http://barryschwartzonline.com).

In particular, he revived and expanded the concept of collective memory, providing intellectual ballast for the discipline while recovering and expanding central lines of inquiry. (His convenient, concise, and accessible introduction to the conception of collective memory can be found in the *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, ed. by Anna Lisa

Tota and Trever Hagen.) Barry's interests were wide-ranging, imaginative, and deep. Perhaps best known for his work on Abraham Lincoln in American memory—through times of societal crisis, and up to the present—he wrote profoundly and engagingly on such topics as queuing and waiting as forms of social control; vertical classification as the symbolism of deference; popular reverence for George Washington, despite Washington's shortcomings; collective memory in Japan and in Korea; and the ontological status of miracles attributed to the historical Jesus. As his interests and methods in studying collective memory evolved, his intellectual style solidified: he identified and contrasted the core assumptions and approaches of competing theoretical traditions and devised inventive but rigorous tests for assessing them against each other.

I owe Barry a personal debt. I was a graduate student at Chicago, where Barry supervised a research seminar for entering fellowship students, when Richard Nixon took away my funding: Philip Kurland, the distinguished law professor at the university, was an outspoken critic of Nixon in the run-up to the Watergate scandal, in retaliation for which Nixon cut federal fellowship funds to the university. Barry found me a job as a research analyst in a juvenile court outside Washington—a job he had himself held, as he worked his way to an M.A. at the University of Maryland—and he kept in close contact after that. In later years, we always got together around ASA meetings. Back then, I was privileged to inherit Barry's files at the court, with neatly-kept folders of various research projects he had conducted there. He extracted from court files information about juveniles which he explored systematically by hand, looking for surprising correlations, which he would then analyze in finer and finer detail. His research was data-driven, guided by his developing findings. Although modest (within the parameters of the job), these studies were informative and insightful, and presaged his approach to subsequent research.

Barry was no child of privilege: he was, in today's parlance, a "first-genner" who made his own success. He had dropped out of high school towards the end of his senior year, exposing him to a tour of military service, upon completion of which he passed the test for a General Equivalency Diploma and entered Temple. He earned his MA at Maryland, and his Ph.D. at Penn, where he studied with Marvin Wolfgang, Erving Goffman, and Philip Rieff.

Barry gave generously of his time to students, whom he would advise to pursue distinctive paths of research; and he followed

his own advice. *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay* (1975) combined clever applications of symbolic interactionism, especially in the experiential form of "face-to-back interaction," with revealing measures of inequalities and other dimensions of social disorganization. *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, published in 1987, the year that the ASA Culture Section was born, had obvious significance for the section's emerging agenda. In it, Barry poses issues central not only to our intellectual but also our civic life; he examines not just the content, but the very constitution of our civic consciousness.

Why do all known cultures conceive of authority relations in terms of vertical metaphors? With *Vertical Classification: A Study in Structuralism and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1981) Barry introduced a strategy for framing inquiry that characterized his subsequent work: making explicit significant differences of assumption and method adopted by seminal thinkers, as a way of structuring his own analyses of contested conceptions and claims. In *Vertical Classification* for example, he contrasts Levi-Strauss's structuralism with Durkheim's functionalism. He finds that physical height is the universal symbol of authority because the socialization of children inevitably requires looking up at their parents.

*Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (2000) and *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era* (2008) together represent Barry's *magnum opus*. The first book compares the vagaries of the collective memories of Lincoln and Washington through the Progressive Era and World War I; the latter extends the comparison (with the emphasis on Lincoln) up to the turn of the century. Both of these books are notable for the inventive use of evidence. A vacillating reputation like Lincoln's can be read not just from public opinion polls and cartoons but also from public statues and other works of art, as well as from comment books left by visitors over decades at the many museums, shrines, statues, memorials, etc. Barry traveled far and wide in his search for many imaginative sources of evidence; it was a labor of love that produced an original and convincing portrait.

Barry's detailed analysis of Lincoln's standing in America's late twentieth-century collective memory led to his characterization of "the post-heroic" era—a characterization that has only grown in contemporary salience. Barry calls out historical inaccuracies in the collective memory, as a basis of critiquing contemporary society. When, a decade or so ago, I asked an undergraduate honors class to research the most



popular memes of Lincoln, they identified “the Hard-Drinkin’ Lincoln”—hardly a symbol of honor and respect. Many of the annual conversations I had with Barry at ASA meetings centered on the distinctions drawn by the philosopher Richard Rorty between “stable” and “unstable” irony, as a way to characterize contemporary cultural change. That was to be a joint project, but alas it stands unfinished.

Only recently did I learn of Barry’s most daring project, grounded in his characteristic exploration of the tension between constructionism and realism: a dialogue among Barry and about a dozen scholars of theology, centered around Barry’s work on collective memory, about the ontological status of the Biblical miracles performed by the historical Jesus. (*Memory and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity: A Conversation with Barry Schwartz*, ed. Tom

Thatcher, 2014). Barry entitles his opening essay about memory and history, “where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” I knew from my conversations with Barry that he had been studying the teachings of Jesus’s rabbis; despite my familiarity with the dimensions of his knowledge, I was still surprised by the full extent of his intellectual depth.

His family and his colleagues at Georgia have experienced a great loss; members of the Culture Section have lost a guiding spirit. Following are remembrances and tributes to Barry by some of those members: Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Gary Alan Fine, Michael Schudson, Yael Zerubavel, Vered Vinitsky-Seroussi, and Lyn Spillman. Taken together, these remembrances elaborate the profound significance of Barry’s thought as well as the integral selflessness of his character.

### **A Remembrance for Barry Schwartz** **by Robin Wagner-Pacifici (The New School for Social Research)**

Barry Schwartz was an extraordinary sociologist, intellectual, and human being. He was infinitely curious about history, about society, and about the ways humans had of making meaning. From criminology to social psychology, to structuralism and semiotics, to collective memory (a field he helped create), his mind took in the empirical world and sought to analyze and understand it. I was fortunate to become his mentee, then friend, and to learn from him over the course of my career, from graduate school until now. And my thinking and career were forever changed as a result of that sustained encounter.

It was my dissertation advisor at The University of Pennsylvania, Charles Bosk (another recent terrible loss for Sociology) who suggested I send an early graduate school piece of writing about structuralism (the French rather than the Parsonian variant) to both Barry and Joseph Gusfield. Both esteemed scholars were gracious and generous in reading and commenting on a graduate student’s effort and both would become ex officio advisors as I developed my own projects. Barry appreciated and critically engaged the austere rigors of structuralism and semiotics, even as he would also eschew abstraction to delve deeply into empirically rich cases of famous political figures and historical events, eventually focusing his research on their transformations over time in society’s collective memory.

In his ground-breaking early books, *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay*, and *Vertical Classification: A Study in Structuralism and the*

*Sociology of Knowledge*, time and space were analytically foregrounded as Barry brought cognition, psychology, and morality into productive dialogue with each other for Sociology. This interaction is best illustrated in a typically astute sentence from a related article, one in which Barry named what was at stake in apparently mundane activities, such as waiting in a queue or line: “[W]hat makes the queue itself morally significant and psychologically demanding is that it is a way of organizing obligations...” (“Queues, Priorities, and Social Process,” *Social Psychology*, 1978, Vol. 41, No.1, 3-12. P.3). Such a great phrase: “organizing obligations”.

This very tribute to Barry is also a way we have of “organizing obligations,” and it is an obligation I’m honored to take up even as I’m so saddened by his loss. My most intense, sustained, and transformative experience working with Barry took shape in the late 1980s when Barry visited Swarthmore College (where I then taught) as an External Examiner of our Honors students. During the Honors weekend, Barry and I found time to talk about Sociology and culture and politics and art. I mentioned to him that I was fascinated by Maya Lin’s very recently constructed Vietnam Veterans Memorial – so different from other war memorials and already generating strong reactions and controversy. At the time, I was mainly interested in the Memorial’s semiotic inversions, its unexpected lowness and darkness and abstract form. Barry immediately grasped the even richer possibilities for sociologically analyzing the memorial by bringing historical and ethnographic angles to

bear, expanding the contexts and materials involved in what would become a several-year collaborative project to wrap our minds around this most unusual cultural object. Barry's knowledge of history, of war memorials and monuments, of Durkheim's ideas about the importance of commemoration and collective consciousness, along with his adamant empiricism, pushed us to examine the VVM from multiple angles and through multiple lenses. The article came to include analysis of objects left at the Memorial site, of political discourse and official documents surrounding its creation, and of further emendations of the Memorial complex (including the statues of the Three Fighting Men and the Nurses and an American flag). It was thrilling to work with Barry, and to learn from him every step of the way. It was through this process that Barry ushered me into the emerging field of Collective Memory and helped shape my thinking and writing. And speaking of writing – while we shared the task of writing the article, there is no doubt that the almost poetic cadence of the piece, its narrative flow, had Barry's impress. He was, among other things, a really beautiful writer.

Barry would go on to write his great books about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in collective memory, among other projects. A bit of a paradox tracks these projects; Barry was an adamant empiricist, with realist tendencies, all the while elaborating a magisterial accounting of the work of social construction in transforming the resonance, prestige, and meaning of these historical figures over time. For example, in the case of Washington, Barry argued that hero worship is a complex phenomenon never entirely dependent on the innate

specific qualities of a given "hero," but rather: "[W]hat hero worship entails [is] not the recognition of greatness but the transformation, by social definition, of the ordinary into the heroic. If we are to understand this transformation, we must place it in proper context. Statements about Washington must be matched by statements about the central needs and concerns of his society." (Barry Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," *American Sociological Review*, Feb., 1983, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Feb., 1983), pp. 18-33, p.20). I've found myself thinking a lot recently about Barry's idea of the mapping of heroes onto central needs of societies at given times. I've been thinking specifically about Joe Biden and returning to Barry's work on Washington and Lincoln to make sense of this new President. In this way, I'm still learning from Barry and wish he were here to discuss Biden and the concerns of Biden's society with him.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Barry's unfailingly kind and gentlemanly demeanor. This did not, however, preclude a certain quirky playfulness (he once addressed me in an email as the "Divine Miss R") and the occasional intellectual, political, and aesthetic provocation. For example, it took me years to realize that we did not share the same aesthetic judgment or affectual relationship to that very object we had looked at and pondered together so intensely for so long, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. That this difference in personal opinion never hindered our work or our writing is a testament to both Barry's professional scrupulousness and his intellectual openness.

#### **A Memoir of Barry**

**Gary Alan Fine (Northwestern University)**

In 1990, I was invited to move from the University of Minnesota to the University of Georgia to serve as department head. For some of my sociology colleagues, it seemed an odd choice, as the two universities were not treated as comparable in stature. Indeed, the deans at Minnesota felt this, as they were unwilling to match the offer that I had received, imagining that no ambitious scholar would make that move. However, they had not counted on the presence of Barry Schwartz as an intellectual magnet. By the time that I had applied, I had become intensely interested in understanding the dynamics by which political reputations come to be. Even though I was a full professor, fifteen years into my career, I wished to be Barry's student, and so I became and so I am a different scholar.

As much as Barry Schwartz shaped me, we are not identical. One might well argue that Barry's lodestar was Emile Durkheim, whereas I was more attuned to the writings of Erving Goffman. Barry examined reputations in light of the needs of society or the nation - whereas I was fascinated by the power of groups and reputational entrepreneurs. Perhaps more to the point, Barry was fascinated by the Great Figures of History. When I arrived at Georgia, Barry had recently published his *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*. If Barry was going to examine the great founding father, I was going to study our greatest traitor, Benedict Arnold. The reputations of the two were linked as it turned out. I considered myself as Barry's dark twin. Later as he examined Abraham Lincoln, our greatest president, I studied Warren Harding, at

that point considered our worst. Barry's agenda was a powerful goad.

But what made Barry so special was that he was always an intellectual and political skeptic. He embraced this skepticism lightly and joyfully. And in his suspicion of the taken-for-granted and in his desire to turn sociological boilerplate inside out, his work has some of the feisty, yeasty qualities of the writings of those in the Second Chicago School of Erving Goffman and Howard Becker. Barry would not embrace the view that reputations developed from an objective assessment of events, but he also rejected the perspective that social constructions were all that matter, and that historical meaning was up-for-grabs: a mere game for mere intellectuals. There are frameworks of meaning, but also obdurate realities, a view that allowed Barry – along with Lewis Coser – to bring the cultural frameworks of Maurice Halbwachs to sociological attention.

The paper of Barry that I find most emblematic of this skeptical approach is his 2009 publication, "Collective Forgetting and The Symbolic Power of Oneness: The Strange Apotheosis of

Rosa Parks." Here Barry takes the iconic (perhaps overly iconic) figure of Rosa Parks, and argues, successfully, that there were "Rose Parkses" before there was Rosa Parks. As famous as she became – and as brave – she was not the first, but she had the supporters and the story that permitted her "strange apotheosis" to take root. Without denying her gifts, Barry argues that there was a need for one civil rights heroine, and Ms. Parks fit the bill; others had to be pushed aside, even if they violated Jim Crow laws previously. Others had been on those buses and had been arrested. It is a masterful, Barry-worthy account, and I was honored to have been the editor that published it in *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

Over the years, Barry and I would dine annually and convivially in North Georgia between Athens and my summer home in Western North Carolina. We missed our 2020 dinner, and I feel a hollow emptiness in knowing that our 2021 dinner is not to be.

#### **Remembering Barry: A Champion I Wish I Had Known Better Michael Schudson (Columbia University)**

I met Barry Schwartz in academic 1976-77. He was a junior faculty member who had just been denied tenure, serving his final year at the University of Chicago. So, fresh out of graduate school myself and in the first months of a tenure-track position, the time he spent with me was time getting to know a new junior faculty member he would never come to know as a colleague. Not exactly high priority. But we met for a lunch or a coffee, I don't recall just when or where, or how many times – twice, three times perhaps. Nor do I remember if our meeting included Teresa Sullivan, the other junior faculty member just starting out with me. The three of us were the entire junior faculty. I don't recall what we discussed. I only remember Barry's tone – calm and cordial throughout, not a hint of criticism of his senior colleagues who voted not to promote him, a genuine interest in hearing about my work. There was an unusual combination of seriousness—approaching gravity— with kindness, gentleness, and he was what today we would call "relatable" – no such word existed then. How was it that someone with such apparently esoteric academic interests – queueing behavior? – could be so easy to talk to?

Barry's interests and mine would converge later on collective or cultural memory. I followed his work at a distance, as he did one detailed study after another of this then unfashionable topic. We were in touch a few times on one or another cultural memory matter and we had a most enjoyable conversation at the University of Georgia the one time I gave a talk there. I was impressed by the fierce integrity with which he pursued his work, notably in the book on Lincoln and how and why the Lincoln remembered in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was distorted by the effort to reshape him to fit the civil rights movement. This Lincoln as President was not someone dedicated most of all to saving the United States as a single country but to becoming the Great Emancipator. A kind of early edition of political correctness set in. It's clear that, while documenting this, Barry wanted nothing to do with it. On behalf of Lincoln, Barry was indignant. On behalf of truth, Barry was indignant. On behalf of a brave social science driven by a commitment to a clear, fact-based vision, Barry was a champion.

Barry was a champion, more than I understood. I wish I had known him better.

#### **Barry Schwartz in Memoriam: A Personal Note**

It was with great sadness that I received the news that Barry Schwartz passed away, but his legacy will remain part of my own intellectual biography. Barry's work was one of the important influences early on as a young scholar and it helped me in making a major shift in my work. As a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania I decided to study the rise of Israeli national myths that draw on past events, and I embarked on this research in the late 1970s. In my early analysis of the various ways in which these myths were constructed, I discussed it in terms of "folk history" and nationalism. It was only later that I encountered the concept of collective memory and realized that it was indeed what I was studying, and memory studies became the conceptual framework of my work. Reading Barry's article, "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," published in *Social Forces* in 1982, was a critical turning point in this process.

I followed this reading by writing to Barry a letter in 1982 and sending him those parts of my dissertation that focused on the case an ancient event that reportedly took place at Masada, near the Dead Sea, which rose from relative obscurity in Jewish memory to a key event of national significance in Israeli culture. My research followed the shaping of the modern narrative about Masada during the prestate period and after the establishment of Israel, as well as the refashioning of geographical site into a major archeological site and the diverse contestations of the hegemonic interpretation that gave rise to counter-myth narratives. Barry, who had become interested in the case of Masada, wished to further explore the impact of Yitzhak Lamdan's poem entitled "Masada," which he wrote in the late 1920s, in raising public memory of that event.

Looking now at my file of correspondence with Barry Schwartz, I was amazed to rediscover our dialog on Masada during the following years, which led to our joint article on "The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory" that was published in *Sociological Quarterly* (vol. 27, pp. 147-64; co-authored also with Bernice M. Barnett, his graduate student) in 1986. This was one of my first three articles, which I published in 1986, a year that marked a turning point in my

career as a scholar. The experience of working with Barry on this piece helped me continue my research on three major Israeli myths, Masada, the Bar Kokhba revolt and Tel Hai, ultimately leading to the publication of *Recovered Roots: Israeli Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1995). Barry, who by then read had more of my work, was highly encouraging in this process.

I was surprised to find the following note in my letter to Barry on April 27, 1992: "Dear Barry, Just a quick post-conference note to let you know how glad I am that we finally met! I have never had this strange experience of knowing someone for so long through telephone conversations and correspondence without meeting them. So meeting you, finally, in person, was an important part of the conference for me, and I'm glad we had that opportunity!" By now I did not remember that our intellectual contact had developed for a full decade prior to our first meeting in person which occurred in a conference on collective memory.

In 1988, when I joined the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, I introduced a new graduate course on Collective Memory that drew doctoral students from a wide range of departments and was a major source of intellectual stimulation for me and them. Barry's growing work on collective memory led to his famous studies on George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and the Vietnam memorial in Washington DC (with Robin Wagner-Pacifici) was an important resource in my teaching and in the intergenerational transmission of his scholarly legacy. When I moved to Rutgers University, I continued to teach this seminar through the Department of History, and it remained my favorite course.

Barry Schwartz's work and scholarly contribution encompasses much more than his studies in collective memory, yet for me he will remain a major influence on my early intellectual growth during a critical phase in professional identity and I will remain indebted to him in my continuing engagement in the field of memory studies.

**How I Will Remember Barry**  
**Vered Vinitsky-Seroussi (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)**



How will I remember Barry? Always “Barry” when we spoke, always “Barry Schwartz” when I taught his articles and books in my seminars and only once “Prof. Schwarz” back when we first met in 1990.

So how will I remember Barry? Following his seminal work that concluded a long-time debate in memory studies – surrounding the causal relations between past and present and their respective effect over the shaping of the past – he stated that “while the object of commemoration is actually to be found in the past, the issue that motivates its selection and shaping is always to be found among the concerns of the present” (1982: 395). So what will be the present needs, circumstances, concerns, and moment that will keep Barry in my life?

I will remember Barry every time someone calls me “*meydele*” in a good way. Not from the beginning of our acquaintance but somewhere midway, Barry started calling me “*meydele*.” For those who are not familiar with Yiddish (myself included), *meydele* means a little girl. It is sometimes used affectionately, and in and of itself, when directed at youngsters, is not derisive. But in contemporary Israel, it has been used in a derogatory manner in some famous cases by Hebrew speakers who were adult males speaking to adult females, as a put-down, intended to suggest that the women against whom it was directed were subordinate. Barry, being an American Jew with no special ties to Israel until a very late point in his life, knew no Hebrew, had no knowledge whatsoever of the derogatory significance of the term, and most importantly, never belittled anybody. Respect was something he wrote about and had for people. I did not mind him calling me this way but made sure he understood the meaning in my culture. Barry, like Barry, was curious about the difference between the cultures, and never forgot my reaction. In a note for a special birthday I had last year, he acknowledged that I “allow no one but me to call you a *meydele*. But you must admit,” he added, “that I’ve not abused that liberty” (2020). Indeed, he never did.

I will remember Barry every time a mass shooting in the USA makes its way to international media. Following such events, I used to write a short note to Barry, expressing my shock and sadness. He, who was no less sad than I was and certainly was a caring person, dismissed my mail and in return, would write plainly and simply without giving in to popular views and expected reactions. “What surprised me,” he wrote me following one such event,

was the amount of publicity this event received. I realize that 15 people died and plenty were wounded

grievously for the rest of their lives. But this kind of thing never ends. Today 15 dead; yesterday, 6; the day before that 10. You get what I mean. Here a school; there, a bank; elsewhere a subway. The whole country’s a shooting gallery.

Many of my friends blame the craziness on our gun laws. But this is not the whole problem: the Swiss start shooting guns when they’re children and keep them in the house like so many brooms or paper towels, but they don’t shoot each other like Americans do. Israel, too, is a “gun culture,” but shootouts are probably rarer than in Switzerland (2012).

I will remember Barry every time I will attend an annual meeting of the ASA and wonder about the accuracy of memory. I first met Barry when I was a graduate student and my teacher from back home, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, who was himself Barry’s student in Chicago (back in the 1970’s), suggested that I meet Barry. I was working on high school reunions when the notion of collective memory was just at its start in this round in America. We met in one of those plastic-looking lobbies in one of those plastic-looking hotels – big enough for ASA to take place and bland enough for not being recallable later on. Following my inquiry about the notion of reunions, he had tears in his eyes; he emotionally talked about Odessa where his family came from, and how exciting it would be to go back in time and space. His memory of that encounter was different:

After a few words of greetings you took out a notebook and started asking me questions, which I answered and you recorded. You were actually taking notes! [sic] The people who walked by our seats and table seemed to envy you for your access to such a brilliant source of information – a suit which did not quite fit me (2020).

Did not quite fit Barry? Fit him alright but Barry never admitted to others and perhaps not to himself what a brilliant sociologist he was. As he received very few awards in his life and was rather removed from fame and glory, it was stunning to watch Barry taking those conferences very seriously when he was already well known and well published. He used to prepare real papers even at the stage where people mainly sought after him; he used to sit in a half-empty conference room listening to other people’s presentations and took notes(!). The corridors where

the real PR work operated did not interest him. He barely knew where they were.

But more than the above anecdotal moments (as important as they are), I will remember Barry and deeply feel a sense of intellectual loss on each and every writing day of my life. I've consulted with him on collective memory not too often, but it was always meaningful. "hi Barry," I would write him when I felt that I was stuck with an important riddle, "is there any chance you have a couple of minutes for me?" I knew the answer would always be positive and always delayed – sometimes by long weeks, but once it arrived on my email it was like opening this great Christmas present from someone who knew exactly what one needs. The joke among us used to be that if you don't want to work hard, don't send the stuff to Barry. But not only did we work hard following the conversation we had, but he did too. Months after we corresponded over some research project, I could get a mail like the following one:

Regarding your home museum work. I forgot to pose this question: What is the difference between a *home museum* and a *shrine*? The most general definition of a shrine, after all, is that it is "a place at which devotion is paid to a venerated person." Surely, the home museum (which is by the way a new term) is an embodiment of history, a concretization of the past. On the other hand, people would not visit this "museum" in the first place if they did not feel an unusual level of admiration, even adoration, for the person who occupied it. One fails to get this feeling when visiting a general museum, like the Smithsonian Museum of National History, whose major intent is to inform, not invoke its visitors' commitments. This why I pose the question about the difference between museums and shrines. A museum displays artifacts;

a home museum, in its capacity to perform the functions of a shrine, displays relics that, by definition, are only found in shrines. In this sense, home museums are anomalous. . . . In these connections, I think you might like to read Edward Shils's discussion of "The Presence of the Past in Artifacts," which is part of a longer chapter on "The Endurance of Past Objects."

And a month later:

"Vered, I just want to make a short comment on your comment. First, can you remember a single event in your life which is divorced from the **place** [emphasis -BS] in which that event occurred? In other words, the memories of our own lives are integrated with the places in which they occurred. Perhaps this is why I return to the neighborhoods of my youth whenever I return to Philadelphia. Remarkably, many of these places are still standing. Why do I take the trouble (and put myself in danger by going to these places, which are now violent slums)? I suppose it has something to do with what Shils calls "the grip of the past"--a kind of "nostalgic gravitational pull."

And after all of that, he would apologize for not having enough time to put his comments (sometimes six pages long) aside for a few days, to "give me a chance to delete stupid and/or useless comment . . . . So forgive me for sending you comments which are not as well conceived as they should be."

Do you get the picture?

I must have done something right in my life to deserve his time, his wisdom and his friendship.

#### **Tribute to Barry Schwartz Lyn Spillman (University of Notre Dame)**

I have before me a Culture Section button from Barry Schwartz's time as Chair. As was then the custom, a new button was produced for members to wear at each ASA meeting, creating a sort of cohesive energy and recognition that served the cause of cultural sociology well. Barry's design was larger

than usual— about two inches in diameter— and deviated from the genre by being neither hip nor cute. It shows a grandiose scene of antique heroines in flowing gowns carrying standards into battle, captioned "Hope, Love and Beauty Overcoming Time." Like much of Barry's work, it stuck in my mind for the

way it seemed to imply an ironic but otherwise unfashionable rejection of the ironic, fluency in constructionism making a claim to the realist ground of some fundamental values.

I first encountered Barry's kind and serious scholarship when he wanted to talk about my work on the long-term emergence of American and Australian national identities. In his kindness, he saw no status bar to initiating a conversation with an unknown junior scholar, and his encouragement and enthusiasm meant a lot to me. He was pleased I had written about persistence, as well as change, over centuries. But our conversations and debates in the following years had a common theme. Barry wanted to highlight as counter-constructionist some ontological truth in what persisted, and to downplay (while recognizing) the constructionist politics of memory. I often resisted, never quite feeling as he did the tension his wish for realist grounding imposed on constructionist analysis. But I think it is important for understanding his impressive body of work; most prominently, his original, deeply researched and strongly argued studies of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in collective memory. And I've come to recognize that tension as profound and generative for any collective memory scholarship.

While Barry will likely be most remembered for his work on American collective memory, his interests were wide-ranging, and he created a model life of scholarship by following those interests from social psychology right through to biblical studies. Among his many contributions I continue to recommend *Vertical Classification* as a brilliant synthesis of

semiotics with social psychology, by way of anthropology. He also broke ground with a sustained collaborative project resulting in *NorthEast Asia's Difficult Past: Essays in Collective Memory*. Co-edited with Mikyung Kim, this prize-winning collection investigated consequential collective memories well before many American sociologists were even aware of the contentious regional history now becoming more and more significant in global affairs.

For the Culture Section, his legacy is also more particular. It was demonstrated most recently in the last of the wonderful series of section webinars on "Culture and Contemporary Life," at which Robin Wagner-Pacifici spoke with Angela Gonzalez, Fiona Greenland, and Christina Simko on "The Cultural Politics of Naming and Commemoration." I think it fair to say that Barry initiated the thread of scholarship and conversation on collective memory in the section. For much of our section's history, our contributions to the interdisciplinary conversations on collective memory were something of an arcane specialty, attracting a steady stream of theses, books, and articles but not attracting wider attention. But the controversies more evident in the past year over lingering and reviving memories of the confederacy have evoked wider interest, even as collective memory scholars say, "of course." We can thank Barry for the fact that cultural sociologists can claim a body of scholarship and expertise on these newly public issues. And in doing so, we can also thank Barry for the model of scholarly devotion he left us—pursuing intellectual and moral tensions wherever they lead, and in this way at least, perhaps, "overcoming time."

## John Ryan Memorial

**In Remembrance of John Ryan  
Michael Hughes (Virginia Tech)**



Photo: John Ryan

Source: *College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech.*

John Ryan, professor of sociology at Virginia Tech, died unexpectedly of cardiac arrest at his home on February 23, 2021. After growing up in Rochester, New York, as a devoted rock and roller and baseball fan, John headed south to Morgantown, West Virginia, where he graduated from West Virginia University with a B.A. in sociology in 1971 and an M.A. in sociology in 1977. He earned his Ph.D. in sociology in 1982 from Vanderbilt University, where he studied under and worked with Professor Richard Peterson.

John's interest in music and culture began early. His first band, formed in 1963 when he was 14 years old, made only two public performances, but the experience was enough to set John off on an accomplished musical career. He won national songwriting contests, performed in folk duos and a successful rock band, and was a colleague of singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt, who lived in Morgantown near the end of John's undergraduate days.

While studying the sociology of culture at Vanderbilt, John continued his musical career, performing as a guitar-playing singer-songwriter in many music halls and bars of Nashville. Slowly, however, the music career gave way to the sociology of music career, and John's sociological creativity emerged in publications on the music industry and the arts.

John started as an assistant professor at Clemson University in 1982. Working in the production of culture perspective, his first article, on country music songwriting, showed that songwriters create the initial idea for a song, but what creates the final product is a decision chain involving publishers, artists, producers, sound engineers and mixers who collaborate based

on the product image they believe will be most successful in the market. His first book, *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry: The ASCAP BMI Controversy* in 1985 showed that the music market was not organized through free exchanges between producers and consumers. Rather, it was created by agencies that licensed musical products and distributed royalties to artists, deciding along the way what kinds of music they would license.

His then wife, Deborah A. Sim, a graphic designer, and museum curator, was his intellectual companion and collaborator during this time, co-authoring a paper with John in *Social Forces* on art as news and designing the Culture Section buttons that she and John distributed at the ASA meetings from 1992 through 1998 while John chaired the section's Membership Committee. John moved through the ranks at Clemson, and he was appointed as chair of the sociology department in 1996.

The sociology of culture was the core of his life's work. Culture was a foundation of the work he did in violence and violence prevention with a grant from the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention for a multi-site evaluation study of neighborhood anti-violence organizations. The project and evaluation continued for 10 years, and John's evaluation results informed the program and shaped the grassroots efforts in two disadvantaged neighborhoods.

After serving as chair of the department at Clemson for 6 years, John took his administrative skills to Virginia Tech to chair the Department of Sociology there for 18 years. In 2000, with Michael Hughes, he edited and contributed to an issue of *Poetics* devoted to the work of Richard Peterson on the production and consumption of culture. At Virginia Tech, his scholarship expanded to include studies on terrorism, online extremism, and community reactions to crime and tragedies.

John will always be remembered for his calm demeanor, quiet listening, dry wit, razor-sharp insights, and sound words of advice. He was a scholar and passionate sociologist, and he positively affected the lives of many. His influence will live on through the work of colleagues, friends, and students. John is survived by his wife Jill Harrison and their daughter Emma as well as his daughter Molly Ryan and her mother, Deborah Sim.



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## Book Review: “*Measuring Culture*”

**Mohr, John W., Bail, Christopher, Frye, Margaret, Lena, Jennifer, Lizardo, Omar, McDonnell, Terence, Mische, Ann, Tavory, Iddo, Wherry, Frederick. 2020. *Measuring Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.**

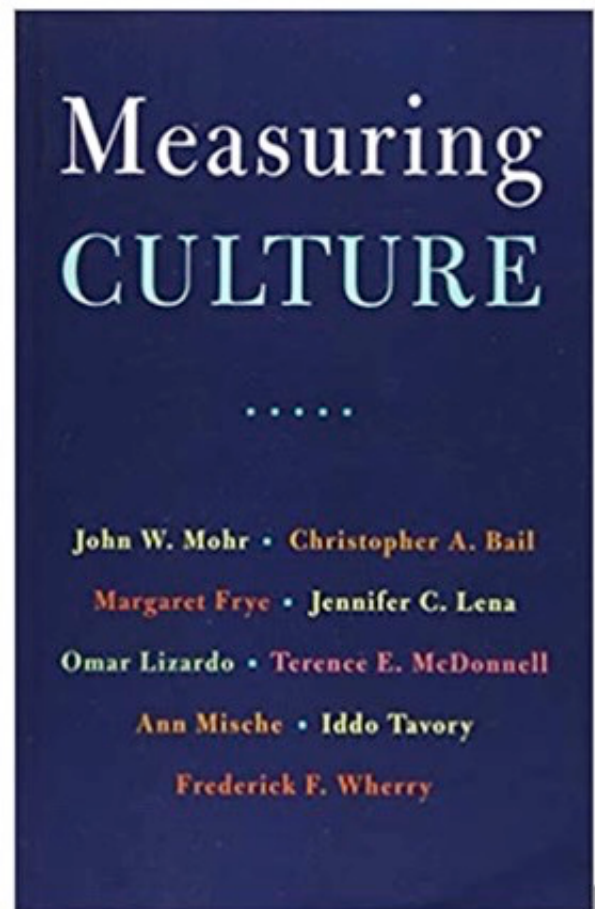
**Review by Alex van Venrooij (University of Amsterdam)**

In 2003, John Mohr wrote a short essay for this newsletter on what he thought other sociologists should know about cultural sociology. For Mohr, cultural sociology could potentially play a leading, paradigm-shifting role within our discipline if cultural sociologists could convincingly show mainstream sociologists how to incorporate the study of cultural meaning-making. But this would require vigilance against, in his eyes, false stereotypes about the study of cultural meaning as a purely interpretative endeavor. As his own work had shown, the hermeneutic study of meaning could also be done using advanced quantitative modeling techniques. There was no fundamental division between meaning and measurement, between positivism and interpretivism, between the two cultures of the sciences and the humanities. Yet at the same time rigorous and systematic study of culture should also not lead to crude simplifications and insensitivity to the subtleties, the ephemeral qualities, and ambiguities of the cultural dimension. To achieve this, we needed more dialogue across the methodological and epistemological divides. “Can’t we all just get along?”, he asked.

*Measuring Culture* is the result of John Mohr's efforts at bringing people together. Emerging out of several meetings (co-)organized by Mohr, it is written by a collective of some of the leading scholars in our field, with expertise on a diverse range of methods (ethnography, interviewing, network analysis, computational social science) as well as the most sophisticated theoretical developments. Their aim was to develop a consensus on an analytical approach to the study of culture that could indeed transcend the opposition between formal and interpretative analysis. The result is an extraordinary piece of work. The authors managed to incorporate a wealth of insights into a short and highly readable book, which students can use to navigate the current state of the art in cultural sociology, and which accomplished researchers will admire for the seamless

integration of various theoretical and methodological discussions.

Although the title perhaps suggests otherwise, the book is not a methodological handbook on how to measure culture. There are no detailed discussions on scale construction, similarity measures, or any other specific measurement techniques. The



Picture: *Measuring Culture* Book Cover  
Source: [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0231162210)

discussion is pitched at a more general, more theoretical level. The consensus that the group achieved seems first and foremost a theoretical consensus on culture as a levels of analysis phenomenon. Culture is considered to be public and private, existing inside and outside of individual minds, contextualized in micro-situations as well as in larger discursive and social structures. This allows the authors to organize their discussion in separate chapters on culture as located in persons, in objects and in social relations. At each of these levels, the authors discuss the history of measurement, the current state of the art and potential issues that remain to be solved.

Chapter 1 starts by discussing the measurement of culture in people. This involves analyzing how people think, talk and act. Even though the study of thinking had been considered as too subjective during the early days of the cultural turn and had been replaced in favor of studying "external" culture, the chapter shows how the study of thinking is currently one of the most exciting areas in cultural sociology. It highlights the work on (the relation between) declarative and nondeclarative thinking, the measurement of cognitive schemas, and other ways in which especially social and cognitive psychology has influenced cultural sociology in recent years. To circumvent the "Talk is Cheap" debate, the authors reserve the study of talk for analyzing how people imagine their futures or tell stories (irrespective of whether those lead to action or not). For the study of action, the authors look to ethnographic methods and digital trace data for more distanced but detailed analysis of action.

Chapter 2 discusses cultural meaning in objects. The problem, of course, is that meaning is not literally "in" objects, but objects can be carriers of potential meanings, whose material qualities more likely afford some rather than other interpretations. It therefore makes the case for measuring the observable qualities of objects, and interestingly points to the sociology of the senses as a potential source of inspiration. The chapter also reminds us that although measurement might stabilize or "fix" the qualities of objects, we need to be aware that material qualities, and meanings, can change over time (as when statues lose their original colors). Objects also have a life cycle of production, distribution, and reception, and we need to follow the object to understand their potential and actualized meanings.

Chapter 3 then brings us to measuring meaning in social relations, again at different levels: in face-to-face interactions, social networks, and larger fields. Although the local

production of meaning in interaction was often considered to be the domain of purely qualitative methods, the chapter shows how the emergence of patterned interaction opened the door to (basic) forms of measurement, as in "ethnographic counts", and more recently, more complex forms of analysis that analyze patterns in online social interactions. Similarly, the tools of network analysis emerged to a large extent out of the attempts of anthropologists to formalize the patterns of social interaction observed during field work. Network analysis can therefore be seen as the abstract version of ethnographic field work. Moreover, even though network analysis was oftentimes conceived as a purely social structural and anti-cultural perspective, the authors discuss the literature on how culture and networks interact, showing that we do not have to hold on to this culture-structure opposition. Finally, field analysis is described as a way to get at the more abstract relations and positions in which both networks and interactions can be embedded. Also, here, where others might hold on to the opposition between "substantialist" and "relational" thinking, and for example regression analysis and correspondence analysis, the authors again show that what was once thought of as a clear demarcation line is now a fuzzy boundary.

As is clear from the above descriptions, these chapters cover a lot of ground. The idea of Measuring Culture is no longer exclusively focused on the measurement of meaning as originally described by John Mohr, i.e., the use of formal, relational techniques to measure meaning structures (in textual material and at the meso-level of fields and institutions). This is now only one of many options that students of culture have at their disposal. But by expanding the range of methods and including qualitative methods such as ethnography or interviewing as a form of "measuring culture" (and not just as providing the raw material for quantification), it reiterates the general point that since culture is not one monolithic thing, we need different methods for different elements of culture. It would be counterproductive to privilege one style and level of analysis since this would limit our ability to understand meaning-making processes. Ethnography might be good at studying the local production of meaning, interviews are needed for the imagined futures, and topic modeling is useful for the larger discursive spaces that might limit the range of possible meanings that people can mobilize. And we need this methodological pluralism to do justice to our subject matter. The fourth chapter discusses three "classic" research projects that used multiple measurement strategies to "pivot" across different levels of analysis: DiMaggio's work on the culture wars, Mische's ethnographic and network analysis of political

youth movements in Brazil and Mohr, Wagner-Pacifici and Breiger's computational hermeneutics of national security documents. This chapter differs in style from the other chapters as it relies on interviews with the researchers and pays attention to the "context of discovery" of these projects: the false starts, the serendipitous discovery of new methods over lunch with a friend-of-friend from another department, the discussions that lead to new moves across the methodological landscape. The anecdotes are entertaining and strangely reassuring. To read that DiMaggio had, for example, also forgotten about kurtosis is a good antidote for anyone's lingering imposter syndrome. But we can also draw more serious lessons from this chapter, as it nicely shows the gains that can come from pivoting across measurement strategies: that DiMaggio, for example, found no strong evidence for polarization when measuring culture in persons through surveys, while a topic modeling of newspaper discourses could clearly show evidence of polarization in public culture.

Given the centrality of the idea of "pivoting" to the argument of the book I expected perhaps a more systematic discussion of how to proceed in this kind of analytical strategy. The exemplary studies of chapter 4 show how this has been done in the past. But what about the future? Or in the language of the

book, where do the potentialities lie and where are the current absences? An ideal typical overview of possible designs could possibly suggest ideas on how to proceed. Can we perhaps make a distinction between the more classic combination of different methods for different types of data (as in the work of Mische where ethnography and network analysis amplified each other) or the pivoting across methods for analyzing the same data (as when Mohr, Wagner-Pacifici and Breiger alternate between computational methods and traditional hermeneutic analysis to analyze the same documents). And along which kinds of dimensions can we pivot and turn? Even with only a few dimensions, the number of permutations would probably be innumerable, and quite daunting to analyze, but some concrete guidelines would have been welcome -- also because currently the advice to readers remains somewhat general: read widely and outside of your own discipline, work together with others, and keep up with the latest in machine learning algorithms.

That being said, if asked by a colleague in my department who wonders about what cultural sociology is all about, and whether there is a logic to the methodological madness that indeed also characterizes my own cultural sociology group, *Measuring Culture* would definitely be the book I would recommend.

## Essay

### **The Power of Speculative Fiction in Politics: Foucault's Prophetic Truth** **Chandra Mukerji (UC San Diego)**

Donald Trump's lies galvanize his base. His followers cheer the loudest for outrageous claims. The crowds are energized by his hubris, treating his fantasies as exciting rather than misinterpretations of facts. Asking epistemological questions about his statements may be important to politics and journalism, but it is bad sociology. It does not explain how clear fictions could be so politically effective and so horribly destructive.

Here I will argue that Trump uses political forms of speculative fiction to engage his followers through imagination rather than reason. His outrageous claims serve as what Foucault called prophetic truths, self-fulfilling prophecies with political effect. Foucault argued that prophetic truths work outside political debate or legal reasoning but are essential to state power. They

serve as scripts for collective action that motivate groups and draw them together to build (or destroy) political institutions.

The use of prophetic truths in politics and in relation to institutional power is something I have been studying in a different time and place: 17th-century France. Louis XIV gained power by being entwined in oracular visions of the Sun King, Apollo. The Sun King was a godlike figure from the past, capable of bringing France a new dawn. He carried the Gallic heritage from the classical past and offered visions of a glorious French destiny — if the king was given the powers to revive that past. As the Sun King, Louis XIV achieved levels of power unmatched by his predecessors. He became, arguably, the most powerful king in Europe. Critics ridiculed him for his hubris in enacting the role of the Sun King, but he still made France a modern state, using this device. Even nobles who subordinated

themselves to the king and court followed the Sun King because he offered dreams of a glorious future based on a great past that seemed plausible, if outrageous.

Trump is no Sun King, although he would like to be with his opulent residences filled with gold and mirrors; neither does he act like the monarch. Louis XIV believed in good manners and thought a great leader should build a civilization on a foundation of science and art, bringing out the best in all his people. Trump has never been so generous. But Trump has used speculative fiction just as effectively to reconfigure relations of institutional power, terrifying allies, and enemies alike with fictions that he seems intent on making come true.

Like all speculative fiction, Trump's claims are most entertaining when they are counterintuitive, freeing the imagination with what seem to be impossible twists of fate. They are speculative in the sense that they are thought experiments. "What if" he could get Mexico to pay to build a border wall? "What if" he could lock her up, or lock up all his enemies using the DOJ to do it? "What if" he could prove that China engineered Covid-19 maliciously to destroy our economy? "What if" his followers who refused to wear masks would not get sick. And "What if" he could convince people that the democrats stole the election? The speculations may seem to be paranoid delusions, but that is not why they work. They provide a narrative basis for Trump to exercise forms of agency that his followers lack. They are stories in which his powers are almost unlimited. They are expressions of a freedom Trump offers his people by association. In their narrative purpose, these fantasies are speculative fictions more than lies. They are not truth claims about the present, but rather outrageous dreams of possibility.

It is ironic to use the concept of speculative fiction to understand Donald Trump's political fantasies, since the term has frequently been used to describe feminist science fiction and hailed as a medium for overcoming the repressive effects of a sexist society. Trump's campaign slogans and feminist speculative fiction may not share political content, but they have the same political force: a capacity to draw people away from common sense reality and to an alternate political world. Feminist speculative fiction is meant to illuminate by contrast to fictional spaces the domination of the mind resulting from everyday misogyny. Trump's speculative fiction offers his followers a view of their irrelevance to most systems of power by offering futures in which they matter to government. In both

cases, disempowered audiences are purposefully stirred to anger and motivated to assert their power.

Trump is particularly dangerous because he seems to understand the links between institutional power and speculative fiction and uses them to undermine the state. He enjoins his followers to believe that freedom is not a matter of law—the Constitution, Declaration of Independence or Bill of Rights. It is an inheritance of white, Western men that has been squandered by corrupt governments infiltrated by minorities. Trump offers freedom by opposing the state rather than claiming rights through legal standing. Making America Great Again is a restoration of an inheritance that has been stymied by institutional power.

Foucault explains how this kind of speculative fiction works politically. Prophetic truths are not lies, he argues, because they are claims about a future that can be neither proved nor disproved. They predict the future like an oracle or prophet, fashioning expectations beyond common sense. Prophetic truths may not hold up against the results of scientific enquiry or the exercise of reason, but they can nonetheless galvanize people to seek the reality in the prophecy.

According to Foucault, prophetic truths are key to building (or tearing down) forms of institutional power. Both legal and political discourse is open to debate, he argues, and as such, is too fragile to serve as the foundations of states. We may think of states as systems of laws, but they depend on speculative purposes that are inscribed in laws but not encompassed by them. Only dreams of collective futures can hold together the diverse institutional domains of states (schools, post offices, legislative bodies, etc.). They are coordinated around forms of collective desire and are vulnerable to speculation about the underlying truths of political practice. Trump has exploited the oppositional power of oracular speculation in talk about the deep state and corruption, threatening democracy and the pursuit of equity not as principles but as guiding speculative fictions of America.

The violence in this mode of governance turned on itself is not far beneath the surface. When Trump says the Proud Boys should stand down but stand by, he is writing speculative fiction in which destruction is the point. The intended action is never articulated because it might be seriously debated; but the future is being described.

All the threats that Trump engenders in his followers are designed to give Trump greater power, increasing his



effectiveness in getting what he wants. His agency becomes their purpose and the way for them to claim power. Lock up immigrants. Get Mexico to build a border wall. Ruin the Chinese economic rise. Force the democrats out of office. These scenarios are speculative fictions about forces unleashed, “what if” stories that Trump uses to bind his followers to him with his agency. His accolades know his stories are fictions, but they embrace his counterintuitive desire to realize outrageous desires just to show it can be done. They capture freedoms vicariously through him that elude them alone. They know that what he says is outrageous, like proposing drinking bleach to stop Covid. They simply want to stop the numbing sense of helplessness experienced by self-identifying victims who see themselves in Trump.

Foucault argues that prophetic truths only work if they seem plausible, but plausibility only requires projecting events from the past into the future. MAGA as a slogan does that. “Again” is the key term in “Make America Great Again.” It means restoring the power of white, Western men — the ones who see themselves left behind in rural towns, in schools, in the job market or even just in paying taxes. They can believe that the future could be different, seeing in the history of Reconstruction the pattern they want to repeat. Immigrants, foreigners, minorities, and women could all be put in their place like freed slaves were in Reconstruction. Trump uses racism and immigration restrictions to animate his base around memories of white minorities dominating black communities by force and voting restrictions. In this way, he makes his speculative fictions about restoring the political inheritance of “real Americans” seem plausible.

The idea of the prophetic truth has roots in Heidegger’s “object” and contemporary use in Latour’s “matter of concern.” It embodies a sense of collect possibility that draws people together, giving them a basis for common action. Trump can deny Biden’s election as president not because it is true, but because it gives his base something to do.

The power of speculative fiction to politics may seem disheartening to those who believe in the authority of the state, the power of law, and the democratic principles of American, but these are the speculative fictions that have been drawing us together. They are the dreams that animate ideas of social justice and belief in the government’s ability to combat climate change. They drive speculations about the future that are no more guaranteed than building a wall. But Christian ideas about stewardship of the earth, belief in science as a guide to policy, and the American commitment to equity have long histories that still can draw us together.

We know that fictions are subject to fashion, and Trump’s bravado will go out of style. His followers get more violent as the cause falls apart. But the brand will fail as all do. In the meanwhile, Trump has invigorated many people who had given up on government, motivated by those that have spoken out for the democratic process. They have decided to dream again of America as a democratic country rather than just a neoliberal one. A long-standing prophetic truth seems to be finding new form, attached to concerns about racism and social justice that give ideas of equality new significance.

## Reports: “The Culture of Poverty Myth and Anti-Blackness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

by Emma Brown (New York University)

On February 17, 2021, the Sociology of Culture Section of the American Sociological Association held the second virtual event of the Culture and Contemporary Life Talk Series, which explores the pressing social issues of our time through a cultural lens. The topic of the event was “The Culture of Poverty Myth and Anti-Blackness in the 21st Century.” The panelists were

Jean Beaman (University of California, Santa Barbara), Monica Bell (Law & Sociology at Yale University), and Alford A. Young Jr. (University of Michigan) with moderator Jordanna Matlon (American University). The discussion focused on how the culture of poverty myth intersects with contemporary anti-

Blackness and new challenges/approaches to thinking through anti-Blackness and the culture of poverty myth.

Jordanna Matlon began by asking the panelists, Why are we here? Why do we keep having this conversation? Why do we keep coming back both in popular discourse and an academic discourse, to this idea of the culture of poverty, the culture of poverty thesis on blackness in America?

MB pointed to its roots, namely in the justification for and creation of institutions of enslavement, imperialism, and settler colonialism. Historically, there have been two major justifications of racialization: biology and culture. She identified Sociology's eugenic origins as complicit in the development of biological analyses and implicated the American ideas of individualism and inattention to structural dynamics as furthering cultural explanations for inequality.

JB concurred and added two points, the first being that Black struggle against oppression today is antithetical to a general understanding (in the US and globally) of forward racial progress compared to the conditions of previous generations. She also spoke to the lack of acknowledgement of heterogeneity of Black life as partly why tired tropes like the culture of poverty persist.

AAYJ said that there is still tremendous social distance between African Americans and everybody else. In addition to the macro dynamics, these problems endure because there is not as much toleration of difference as there should be, despite the appearance of connection that modern technology affords.

JM asked AAYJ to explain the historical and theoretical origins of the culture of poverty.

AAYJ noted that at the end of slavery, two cultural perspectives emerged to regulate Black bodies. The first was that Black people were lazy and had to be compelled to work. The second, 50 years later, came from the rise of large-scale riots responding to the frustrating pace of the Civil Rights Movement, which led to a narrative of Black Americans as energetic, hostile, and threatening. Thus, two seemingly contradictory narratives came together to further the culture of poverty logic.

Next, JM asked panelists to speak to the role institutions play in producing and perpetuating Black poverty.

MB responded that institutions serve the purpose of protecting status quo distributions of power and wealth and must do material as well as cultural/ideological work to construct how people view the world. She has shown this in her scholarship on neighborhoods and policing by looking at the symbolic violence enacted by institutions. She pointed out that ways of moving about the world are withheld not just through the material work that institutions do, but also through lenses that shape boundaries and belonging.

AAYJ highlighted that while institutions such as schools, workplaces, social service agencies, etc. are often seen as disparate across the discipline, it is important to think about how the same patterns of regulation, surveillance, and disqualification from access to these formal institutions speak to a larger issue of what's at stake.

JB returned to the question of agency and the importance of seeing the ways that Black people have responded to structural problems they face.

JM asked JB to speak to her research on France and a comparative framework for understanding the culture of poverty.

JB explained that in France, difference is framed as cultural and not racial, and the conversation about French identity, though not explicitly stated, has been undergirded by certain racial and ethnic underpinnings. Culture does a lot of work to flatten representations, literally and figuratively, of what France is and who French people can be. As a result, minorities in France are continually excluded and marginalized because they are not seen as white and not seen as French, even if they see themselves that way.

JM followed up by asking how we can use insights from France to nuance the conversation on American anti-Blackness and the culture of poverty thesis.

JB said that France can give us insight into the cultural language and code words being used to discuss racial difference and locate Black Americans as outside of mainstream America.

JM asked in what ways the US context can nuance the French conversation on race.

JB noted that it's a tricky question because of the French perception of US conversations about race. There is fear within

the French academy of American ideas like critical race theory encroaching on their institutions. What has been revealed, she said, is the ineffectiveness of colorblind frameworks.

MB added that it is important to think outside the US context, as we have often relied on an Americanist concept of what racial justice looks like. It is important to understand the macro-structural processes and how they cut across many different groups of Black people across the globe and create additional racial categories. Cultural sociologists work to understand the reproduction of those cultural and historical dynamics, how they are continually reinforced, and their impacts. Agency is important to consider as well, but anti-Blackness is structural.

AAYJ added that anti-Blackness is an important term because it rejects the reduction of race to only explicit acts of racism. They are important as well, but the point of anti-Blackness is to illuminate what happens in the presence and absence of Black people, which broadens our understanding of the meaning behind race.

JM asked AAYJ to speak about intersectionality, one of the important innovations of this scholarship.

AAYJ spoke to how intersectionality opens up important ways of broadening the conversation by enabling us to think more deeply and creatively about the diversity of not only African Americans as people, but also the discourses around anti-Blackness, other perspectives that have to do with the study of the experiences of Black folks, and the consequences of how they live their lives. He noted the importance of Black feminist thought in his own scholarship, and although Sociology is still relatively new to intersectional work, he called it an inherently important project to pursue.

On the topic of intersectionality, MB noted the important role of anti-Blackness in queer spaces. She discussed how the theory rejects an assumption of shared experience with structures and power. It is crucial not just as a theory, but also in the ways we conduct ourselves as scholars and interpret our findings.

JB agreed with the other panelists and added that another way to consider intersectionality is the ways our interlocutors identify with us and make similarities and differences between their own social locations and our own experiences.

Returning to the culture of poverty myth, MB noted that it is effective at justifying a lack of full racial progress, the

continued oppression, and the wealth disparities, and it keeps us from seeing the legacies of structural dynamics.

JM asked JB to discuss her thoughts on culture versus structure, and if there is a better way to think about these dynamics.

JB spoke to the importance of engaging with other subfields to have these conversations and thinking across traditional boundaries.

AAYJ added that we need to think carefully about how we are interweaving our empirical and analytical work. Structure endures in our imagination, practical reality. We need to think about this more deeply and more thoroughly given that we accept that the cultural terrain and social terrain are always in play in our empirical work.

MB added that culture is not an autonomous structure and that it is important to be context specific. To mobilize a culture of poverty myth to justify racial injustice and operate in an anti-Black way is to sync up with a particular political project that is hardly neutral or apolitical.

JM took two questions from the audience. The first is that the culture of poverty narrative seems to have scared emerging scholars from studying culture, so how do we overcome that? Second, how do the panelists personally approach studying culture given its racist history? Relatedly, how has sociology of culture helped or hurt thinking around the culture of poverty myth?

MB responded that she tries to situate any conversation about meaning making and culture within a structural narrative. Decontextualizing can lead to inaccurate understandings of claims, so as cultural sociologists, we need to attend to culture.

In her work, JB said she pays attention to cultural meanings that people are making but also the broader structural context, for example French Republicanism, which makes discussions of race and ethnicity illegitimate and illegible. There are ways in which people are talking about race and racism outside of explicitly using those terms.

AAYJ spoke to being explicit about embracing a cultural conversation that already indicts many Black folks, because the politics do not disappear by just simply going about the work. He pointed to respectability politics as a failed effort to intervene on culture.

MB added that respectability politics has been intrinsically bound up with our efforts to make institutional change. It is a special case of a culture of poverty logic that influences how we advocate in a structural context as well as structural outcomes.

JB raised the notion of the deserving and undeserving within the comparative context, particularly as respectability relates to narratives of national societal belonging.

## Reports: “Vaccination in the Age of COVID”

by Emma Brown (New York University)

On March 11, 2021, the *Culture and Contemporary Life Talk Series* hosted “Vaccinations in the Age of COVID,” a panel which discussed what cultural sociology uniquely reveals concerning the development and distribution of vaccines as well as the public reception of vaccines. Panelists Claire Laurier Decoteau (University of Illinois Chicago), Jennifer Reich (University of Colorado Denver), and Laura Mamo (San Francisco State University) were joined by moderator Margarita Rayzberg (Cornell University).

### **What does your work reveal about the role of culture in vaccine development and vaccine distribution?**

JR said that since the polio era, we have lived in a landscape where most infectious diseases were seen as solved. In her research, she has found that a lot of the concerns around vaccines and distrust come from the complicated relationship between for profit pharmaceutical companies and the state as an institution of both regulation and enforcement. During the COVID era, this relationship come into sharp relief in ways that are really unusual, like people having the names of manufacturers of vaccines, and it’s a really different way of thinking about how people are interpreting science and the relationship between state and capital and trying to make decisions for themselves.

LM pointed to the paradox of biomedical culture, and the recent shift of vaccines being targeted to consumers and reframed as drugs that consumers can choose to opt into. She discussed the individualization of medicine as culture and how it reveals and produces inequities. It is also important to look at the political moment this exists within, particularly with Trump and the era of knowledge contestation.

CLD discussed vaccine hesitancy and the way that the media presented hesitancy among certain cultural groups as homogenous, reproducing a particular cultural deficit model around vaccines. However, hesitancy is often more tied to one’s relationship to the state, experts, and science than culture. She noted that vaccine decisions, for example in the Somali American community, are very context-specific, and cautioned painting groups with broad cultural brushstrokes. There is also epistemic injury involved, where people’s understandings of their own experiences are systematically denied by experts, which creates more feelings of distrust.

### **What do you think about the debate about vaccine prioritization? What does your research tell us about the possible models and logics of distribution that are available, but that we’re not seeing in this moment?**

LM described the fragmentation of our healthcare system and the failures of the rollout being tied to the complex politics playing out between the private and public actors involved.

JR noted that the people at the center of these social determinations were medical doctors who had two goals, saving lives, and preserving social function. These goals identified two completely different subpopulations, and these decision makers also took a colorblind approach. Further, there was no common vocabulary about ‘risk’ and whether prevention was related to exposure or disease severity. These disjointed and tone-deaf processes are partly why so few states have adopted the CDC guidelines. Ultimately, the prioritizations were set in ways that were almost impossible to actualize. The defunding of the ‘public’ in public health and translating it into corporate and neoliberal partnerships set up the rollout to fail. It was designed to magnify the inequality we already had, and therefore, that’s what’s happened.



CLD discussed the reception of the rollout from her research on three different populations. Many residents have raised the unequal vaccine distribution as evidence of disinvestment in their communities. Many Black and Latinx residents, in particular, have said they will “wait and see” about getting vaccinated, since the vaccine was developed under the white supremacist Trump administration.

JR added that the vaccine distribution issue we are facing today (scarcity) will eventually give way to another problem: distrust among the communities who are not yet vaccinated once there are enough doses for everyone. The early inequities in the rollout could have great impacts on future vaccination efforts, because knowing someone who has received a vaccine is a good predictor of who wants one and how people understand who these technologies are for. In other words, the disparities in the initial rollout will likely become amplified over time.

**What tools does sociology have to interpret vaccine hesitancy in different communities?**

**How we interpret the distrust of the state in groups that have very different historical trajectories? Is it the same or is it different?**

CLD noted that vaccines are a biopolitical project, so whether you feel included in the body politic impacts whether you are willing to buy into the logics of herd immunity, etc. Anyone subjected to state violence has a harder time believing the state is concerned with their best interests. Also, people’s experiences with doctors and other local healthcare providers are important to understanding hesitancy and community levels of knowledge and trust. Many people are not opposed to the vaccine but are waiting for more information before making a decision.

JR does not necessarily believe that public health exists anymore because it focuses on personal behavior modification rather than community solutions. She raised the concern of what will happen when the private sector starts to take ownership of public health, like enacting vaccine requirements. She clarified that vaccines are not the problem but rather corporations which are driven by their interests instead of by the public good or worker advocacy.

LM underscored the consumer-driven message of public health and problematized how the vaccine is being sold as a personal

choice by private companies who are taking control of knowledge and education around healthcare.

**What are the sources of information that the groups that you all study are using? How do they determine the trustworthiness of different sources of information? What are the legitimate sources of expertise that they turn to when thinking about vaccination?**

LM discussed her research on HPV to highlight the biomedical culture models being enacted in conversations among healthcare professionals about COVID, including vaccines, testing, and screening tools as preventive care.

CLD added that the infrastructure of contact tracing, which was highly ineffective, is now being used to disseminate information about COVID vaccines. Yet people remain distrustful of the contact tracers and city efforts. Cuts to social networks like ICE raids have also impeded trust building in communities over the past year.

JR spoke to the fact that doctors are now seen as one source among many for healthcare information rather than the ultimate authority, as they were in the past. She explained that the medical education model of decision making is not effective because people’s decisions are guided by more than just what they know. Tension exists between efforts to combat misinformation and the perceived irrationality of not following medical advice.

**The first audience question was about how the COVID vaccines are described as a consumer good, and how the language of choice plays into a culture where we think about ourselves as consumers of health information.**

LM pointed out the shift in drugs and vaccines from public health measures to prevent life-threatening disease to being marketed for non-life-threatening conditions as consumer goods. It also has to do with deregulation of the industry, particularly in direct advertising to consumers.

JR spoke about how historically, there were only a few vaccines which were created when national solutions were needed. As time went on, parents started associating children’s illnesses like seizures and autism with vaccines. The result was that in the 1980s, people began speaking back to medicine and growing distrustful. She argued that vaccine resistance is not unique in medicine but rather a product of a movement to

question healthcare systems. Social activism changed how we think about risk and prevention in ways that have had both positive and negative consequences.

CLD echoed that vaccine decision making is emblematic of other healthcare and parenting strategies that involves doing personal research and making informed decisions on medicine and science more generally.

**The second audience question was about the global politics of vaccine distribution and diplomacy.**

CLD discussed how the global inequalities that have arisen in vaccine distribution are unsurprising, and that COVID may

have longer term effects on the global South because of vaccine distribution but also economic and structural inequalities.

JR noted that while we have proven that fully funding science gets results, we simultaneously lost the opportunity to allow people to feel like they had ownership of the products that came from these public investments. This has made clear from the perceptions of their rollout. Two problems have emerged: the US was initially not going to participate in the global vaccine access effort, and the narrative remains that vaccines are intended for certain people or certain countries. Around the world, the relationships between the state and the pharmaceutical industry create distrust among citizens, and this will be important for the shift from pandemic to endemic — a virus we live with.

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## Announcement

### Culture Section Mentorship Program

The Culture Section is launching its [annual Mentoring Program for 2021](#). Faculty, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and other sociology scholars and practitioners are invited to participate. This program is designed to support connections and community within the section, broaden our intellectual networks, and provide support for the professional development of graduate students and early-career sociologists.

Graduate students and early-career sociologists will be matched in Mentoring Pods with faculty and other more senior sociologists who share their scholarly interests and career goals. The mentoring meetings will be held virtually and are meant to create sustained mentoring relationships.

**Format:** Mentors and mentees will be matched into small group Mentorship Pods. Once pods have been identified, participants will be connected over email. From there, mentors and mentees will introduce themselves and schedule a time to meet virtually. The Mentor Pod meetings format and agenda will be flexible based on participants' interests and goals.

**Sign up now:** To participate as a mentor or mentee, please complete this [Google form](#) to share your interests and goals with our Membership Committee by **Friday July 2**. The committee will use this information to create the Mentor Pods.

**Questions?** Please feel free to reach out to Blake R. Silver, chair of the Membership Committee, with any questions about the program at [bsilver@gmu.edu](mailto:bsilver@gmu.edu).

### New Articles

Mijs, Jonathan, and Christopher, Hoy. 2021. How Information About Inequality Impacts Belief in Meritocracy. *Social Problems*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa059>.

Savelsberg, J.J. 2020. Writing biography in the face of cultural trauma: Nazi descent and the management of spoiled identities. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-020-00125-8>

## New Books

Siciliano, M. L. 2021. *Creative control: The ambivalence of work in the culture industries*. Columbia University Press.

Qi, Xiaoying. 2021. *Remaking Families in Contemporary China*. Oxford University Press.

## Op-ed

Case Against Cancel Culture by Victor Kogan at Counter Currents. <https://countercurrents.org/2020/09/case-against-cancel-culture/>

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