SECTIONCULTURE

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Letter from the Chair

Monika Krause

Dear colleagues in the culture section,

The ASA Meetings are fast approaching, so it is time to look ahead to the conference and to look back on the section activities of the past academic year.

Just because I am looking forward to it, I begin with an invitation to the section's reception at the conference, which will be a **joint reception** with the Theory Section and the Consumption Section, and will take place on Sunday August 11th, 7-9:30pm at the Humaniti Hotel: 340, de la Gauchetière Ouest Montréal, (Québec) H2Z 0C3.

Many thanks to Alexander Hoppe, who worked on this for our section alongside Daphne Ann Demetry and Carly Knight.

If you are able to join the conference this year, please come along to our **business meeting (Tuesday, August 13th 9-9.30,** Palais des Congrès 511B), where we will, among other things, celebrate our award winners.

Please join our paper sessions. I am grateful to Chair-elect Clayton Childress, who organized this together with Fabien Accominotti, Guillermina Altomonte, Rachel Skaggs on the programming committee and to the session organizers. Our newsletter editors have put together a schedule for you, that you could save or (if you are like me) print.

Among these events, can I especially highlight our annual professionalization panel for early career researchers?

Tania Aparicio has assembled a great panel on **grant writing (Tuesday, August 13th, 8 – 9 a.m.),** featuring a range of perspectives, including grant recipients and members of selection committees. If you know someone (and I bet you do), who could benefit from this opportunity to turn what can be a very lonely practice into a conversation, who may be at the conference but may not read this newsletter, please let them know about it!

Election Results

We have had a fantastic slate of candidates for section positions this year and I would like to thank the nominations committee (chaired by Ruth Braunstein, including also Thomas deGloma, Neha Gondal and Christina Simko) and everyone who agreed to stand.

Please welcome our newly elected officers: Hannah Wohl, our incoming Chair-Elect, Shai Dromi, Jyoti Puri and Ana Villareal as council members and Manning Zhang as student representative.

Clayton Childress has been serving as Chair-Elect this year, and will become Chair at the end of the business meeting in August. Ming-Cheng Lo will continue to serve as Chief Operating Officer. I am already very grateful to them both, as well as to our outgoing Council Members, Tania Aparicio, Jean Beaman, Amian Ghaziani, Vanina Leschziner, and Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra.

Award Winners

All through February, March and April our award committees were collecting, reading, conferring, debating, and ranking your submissions. I am grateful to everyone who contributed to this process. Many congratulation to our winners, which you will find listed in the newsletter further below.

I look forward to celebrating the work our colleagues have highlighted at our business meeting. I also look forward to a lecture by Ben Carrington, who will deliver the first lecture by a winner of the Stuart Hall Award in Cultural Sociology, which "recognizes a mid-career sociologist whose work holds great promise for advancing the cultural study of racial or ethnic inequality." This will be held online in the fall semester as part of our Culture and Contemporary Life Series.

Culture and Contemporary Life

Speaking of Culture and Contemporary Life, I add my thanks to the colleagues who have led the series this year. Adrianna Munson and Michael Johnston chaired the committee, Jessie Finch and Giovanni Zampieri also made important contributions. You can find reports and recordings of our thematic sessions in our last newsletter and on our website.

Giovanni Zampieri organised a session in May with editors of many of the major journals in our field, who very generously gave their time. This was very well-attended event and an engaging and open conversation, which we (intentionally) did not record. If I had to provide a two-word summary in the form of a "top tip" from these editors, it would be "Avoid Jargon" and, to add 23 more words, "this includes important concepts if you do not explain what exactly you mean by them and why they are important for your article".

Last but not at all least, many thanks to our communications committee (Hannah Wohl (Chair), Nick Dempsey), our newsletter editors, Clara Cirdan, Man Yao, Manning Zhang and our webmaster Derek Robey. It has been fantastic working with them all year.

I hope you enjoy this edition.

All best,
Monika

ASA CONFERENCE SESSION AND PANEL INFORMATION

Formal Models of Duality in Culture and Society

Sun, August 11, 8:00 to 9:30am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 511E

Marking fifty years since its publication, Ron Breiger's 1974 paper on "The Duality of Persons and Groups" continues to serve as the foundation of a lively research agenda across various fields in sociology. During the last five decades, scholars have exploited and generalized Breiger's duality idea "beyond persons and groups" to apply to all settings featuring a dual co-constitution of entities across different orders of organization. This session, jointly sponsored by the Mathematical Sociology and Sociology of Culture Sections, seeks papers pushing Breiger's duality idea forward both in terms of formal methodological innovation and substantive application to core issues in cultural analysis and the measurement of culture broadly conceived. These may include duality in cultural networks, fields of cultural production and consumption, cases and variables, persons and beliefs, and symbols and practices, among others. Papers seeking to move "beyond duality" both methodologically and substantively will also be considered.

(Session Organizer) Omar A. Lizardo, University of California-Los Angeles

Sociology of Culture: Expressions of (and against) Inequality

Sun, August 11, 12:00 to 1:30pm, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 514A

How do cultural expressions relate to structural inequality? The papers in this session explore symbols, ideologies, new media and art that reflect, challenge, or reinforce oppressive power dynamics.

(Session Organizer) Rob Eschmann, Columbia University

Culture in Interactions

Mon, August 12, 8:00 to 9:30am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 510D

Perhaps the main legacy of Howard Becker is exposing how culture is essential to social interactions. Sociologists have developed a vast conceptual arsenal to explain how interactions among individuals unfold, including processes of labeling, role performance, schematic representation, the development of "cultural styles," field positions, and imagined futures. Many times, however, these concepts have remained disconnected from one another. This session welcomes submissions that contribute to bridging these (and other) conceptual tools to advance current sociological debates on social interactions. Papers addressing interactions at micro-, meso- and macro-level contexts are welcome, as well as papers that make new theoretical or methodological connections between different sociological understandings of what social interactions are composed of. Papers addressing culture in interactions within global or transnational contexts are especially welcome.

(Session Organizer) Tomas Gold, University of Notre Dame

Culture in Organizations and Markets

Mon, August 12, 10:00 to 11:30am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 510D

How does culture shape organizations and markets, both formal and informal? Conversely, how do organizational and market contexts influence cultural practices and meaning making? For this panel, we invite empirically grounded and theoretically innovative papers that engage with these and other questions pertaining to cultural processes in markets and organizations. We welcome all studies, regardless of theoretical orientation, methodology, region, or historical period of study.

(Session Organizer) Anna Wozny, Princeton University & Tokyo College

Culture in Objects

Mon, August 12, 2:00 to 3:30pm, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 510D

Culture is everywhere but is especially embodied in objects, from material forms to ideas and media content. The study of cultural objects has been a central agenda within cultural sociology. This panel seeks submissions that adopt various approaches to examine cultural objects, their aesthetic and physical properties, and their cultural power. Papers could explore the creation, production, and reception of cultural objects, both within a local context and on a global scale. We also welcome papers that emphasize material agency, investigating how the materiality of cultural objects shapes processes of meaning-making. Papers with an interdisciplinary approach and/or a global perspective are especially welcomed.

(Session Organizer) Jun Fang, Colby College

Grad Student Professionalization Panel on "Crafting Grant Proposals"

Tue, August 13, 8:00 to 9:00am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 511B

Panelists will share how to successfully present research projects in grant proposals. The panel will feature a range of perspectives, including grant recipients and members of selection committees.

(Session Organizer) Tania R. Aparicio, Teachers College-Columbia University

Section on Sociology of Culture Business Meeting

Tue, August 13, 9:00 to 9:30am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 511B

(Session Organizer) Clayton Childress, University of British Columbia

Culture and Solidarity Across Difference (Co-sponsored by Section on Race, Gender, and Class)

Tue, August 13, 10:00 to 11:30am, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 511B

Audre Lorde wrote, "Our differences are polarities between which we can spark possibilities for a future we cannot even now imagine, when we acknowledge that we share a unifying vision." The study of social difference shows us that culture shapes the politics, experiences, and outcomes of difference. However, difference can also yield new forms of culture, of bridging and interconnection through cultures of solidarity. This session draws together varied theoretical and methodological approaches and empirical cases to examine the multifold ways culture and solidarity manifest, interconnect, and act across difference.

(Session Organizer) Hajar Yazdiha, University of Southern California

Section on Sociology of Culture Section on Sociology of Culture Roundtables

Tue, August 13, 12:00 to 1:30pm, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 7, 710A

(Session Organizer) Kevin Kiley, North Carolina State University; (Session Organizer) Parker Muzzerall; (Session Organizer) Claire Sieffert

Culture in People

Tue, August 13, 2:00 to 3:30pm, Palais des Congrès de Montréal, Floor: Level 5, 511B

Sociologists of culture have become increasingly interested in the role that the physical body—our primary interface with the social world—plays in structuring cultural experiences. At the same time, our bodies are themselves sociocultural products, continually shaped by our everyday

experiences. This session welcomes submissions that contribute to sociological thinking on the role that the physical body plays in processes related to enculturation, cognition, interaction, identity, meaning making broadly construed, and perception. Papers addressing the processes through which bodies become encultured and the effects of particular life experiences on, e.g., cognition, emotions, perception, as well as those offering methodological interventions for studying the body's role in cultural processes, are especially welcome.

(Session Organizer) Alessandra Lembo, University of Chicago

SOCIOLOGY OF CULLTURE

SECTION AWARDS

Mary Douglas Award for Best Book

Committee
Natasha Warikoo (Chair), Michaela DeSoucey, Joshua Doyle, Fiona Greenland, Jyoti Puri, Eric Schoon

Winners
Hajar Yazdiha, *The Struggle for the People's King: How Politics Transforms the Memory of the Civil Rights Movement* (Princeton UP)

Anna Schwenck, *Flexible Authoritarianism: Cultivating Ambition and Loyalty in Russia* (Oxford UP)

Stuart Hall Award in Cultural Sociology

Committee
Prudence Carter, Gillian Gualtieri, Monika Krause (Chair), Cresa Pugh, Nirmal Puwar

Winner
Ben Carrington

John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Award
Committee
Lyn Spillman (Chair), Miray Philips, Casandra Salgado, Blake Silver, Jeffrey Swindle

Winners
Zaoying (Cherry) Ji, "The Global Rise of Women in Higher Education: Divergent Pathways and Global Discursive Changes, 1960-2020."

Evangelina Warren, "Understanding the Effects of Proximity to Whiteness"

Clifford Geertz Award for Best Article

Committee
Laura Nelson (Chair), David Diehl, Jun (Philip) Fang, Carly Knight, Derron Wallace

Winner
Aliza Luft, "The Moral Career of the Genocide Perpetrator: Cognition, Emotions, and Dehumanization as a Consequence, Not a Cause, of Violence." *Sociological Theory*

Honourable Mentions
A.K.M. Skarpelis, "Horror Vacui: Racial Misalignment, Symbolic Repair, and Imperial Legitimation in German National Socialist Portrait Photography." *American Journal of Sociology*

Peter Francis Harvey, "'Everyone Thinks They're Special': How Schools Teach Children Their Social Station." *American Sociological Review*

Richard A. Peterson Award for Best Student Paper

Committee
Laura Adler (Chair), Sourabh Singh, Fabien Accominotti, Jaleh Jalili, Galen Watts
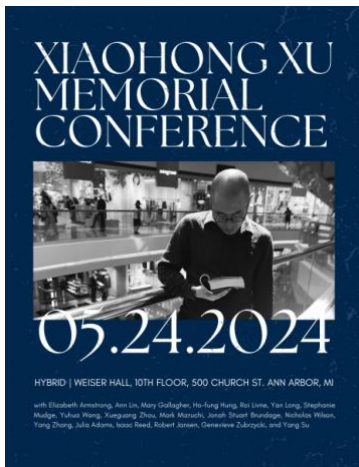
Winners
Ankit Bhardwaj, "Doubtful Calculation: How Experts Build Trust in Uncertain Energy Futures"

Taylor Laemmli, "Class Experience Mobility through Consumption, Work, and Relationships"

By Junchao Tang

On May 24, 2024, the Department of Sociology and the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan held an emotional conference in honor of sociologist Xiaohong Xu. Professor Xu, who passed away on December 12, 2024 at the age of 45, was a much beloved scholar and teacher, and a most original sociologist of Chinese politics, culture, political economy, and history. At the time of his death, Xu was an Assistant Professor of Sociology in the University of Michigan and the Lieberthal-Rogel Center's associate director. The event gathered scholars and students who discussed Xu's most recent contributions and was attended in-person and remotely by 150-some people. Its complete videorecording is available online.

Elizabeth Armstrong, chair of Michigan Sociology, opened the conference by saying Xu was "not just a brilliant mind," but a person who became "a dear friend and mentor to many of us." Director of U-M's International Institute Mary Gallagher reflected on her efforts to bring Xu to the University of Michigan and spoke about her intellectual exchanges with him, highlighting Xu's unique perspective on Chinese governance, which always sparked enriching debates. Ann Lin, director of the Lieberthal-Rogel Center, said that the conference was testament to Xu's influence. "The depth of love and respect for Xiaohong is evident in this gathering. His work has reshaped our understanding of social science in the context of China." Lin added that many students who applied to the Master's program in her center did so "because they wanted to work with Xiaohong Xu." She highlighted Xu's role in inspiring a new generation of scholars and the profound impact that he had on their academic journeys.

The conference was organized in four panels, with each featuring at least four scholars who engaged, critiqued, and reflected on one of Xu's recent contributions. The first of them is a still unpublished manuscript, entitled **The Great Separation: Labor Politics in China from Mao to Market,** which by Roi Livne's (Michigan) account Xu regarded as his "life-defining work." The Great Separation explains China's transition from Maoism to its specific version of market capitalism by tracing the evolution of a symbolic separation between "economy" and "politics." This separation effectively meant a depoliticization of economic growth policies in China. Yan Long (UC Berkeley) praised Xu's ambitious approach and likened this work to establishing a national park. Long noted Xu's emphasis on the continuity between the Cultural Revolution and post-Mao developments, challenging both Marxist and liberal perspectives. Ho-fung Hung (Johns Hopkins) emphasized Xu's contributions to the sociology of political parties and collective action and the balance his analysis struck between romantic and anti-romantic elements. Stephanie Mudge (UC Davis) focused on Xu's original concept of "ordoeconomism," comparing it to German ordoliberalism. Mudge explained how Xu's argument on the separation between politics and economics provides a unique framework for understanding Chinese socio-economic dynamics.

A second panel focused on **The Misruling Elites**, an ambitious work published posthumously in Theory & Society shortly before the journal's transformation. Introducing the article, Mary Gallagher commended Xu and colleague's innovative datasets and robust engagement with existing theories of social revolution. She emphasized how Xu's work challenges established narratives and provides a more nuanced understanding of elite political dynamics and governance in China. Yuhua Wang (Harvard) spoke about his personal interactions with Xu and highlighted Xu's novel interpretation of elite fracturing and its role in the CCP's rise to power. "In social science, the great shoulders are usually too old and too white," Wang reflected. "Fortunately, we today can stand on the shoulder of Xiaohong; but unfortunately, the shoulder is also too young." Xueguang Zhou (Stanford) spoke about Xu's integration of micro-level quantitative data with classical sociological theories. Zhou noted Xu's potential to deepen our understanding of local elites' interactions with the CCP through contextualized case studies. Mark Mizruchi (Michigan) observed that "Xiaohong's ability to connect historical events with broader sociological theories set him apart," emphasizing how Xu's work challenged conventional wisdom and offered new insights into the role of elites in shaping historical and political outcomes.

Xu's contribution to the recently published edited volume **After Positivism** was discussed in the third panel. Jonah Stuart-Brundage (Michigan) highlighted Xu's anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist approach to comparative-historical research, noting how Xu's work challenged traditional methodologies and advocated for a reflexive, practice-oriented comparative framework. He emphasized how Xu's methodological innovations provide valuable tools for sociologists seeking to navigate the complexities of comparative-historical research. Nicholas Wilson (Stony Brook) added that Xu "set a new standard in our field with his innovative comparative methods." Yang Zhang (American University) provided an overview of the new wave of historical sociology in China that were influenced by Xu's work. "Xiaohong's emphasis on contextual depth reshaped our approach to historical sociology," he remarked. Julia Adams (Yale), Xu's dissertation advisor, reflected on discussions she had with Xu on comparative methods. "Xiaohong's work on duality in comparative methods was truly inspirational," she said.

A fourth panel was dedicated to the article **Modernity and the Politics of Newness**, published in Sociological Theory, which Xu co-authored with Issac Reed (UVA). Reed, who came to present and reflect on the argument, credited Xu for providing "a fresh perspective on revolutionary temporalities." He discussed how Xu's work sheds light on the performative aspects of political movements and the ways in which revolutionary periods are constructed and understood. Yang Su (UC Irvine) noted that "Xiaohong's insights into the dynamics of revolutionary periods are profound" and debated Xu and Reed's approach to the contested nature of the revolutionary regime. Robert Jansen (Michigan) offered a programmatic reflection on Xu and Reed's work, proposing future research directions on revolutionary temporalities. He discussed how Xu's theoretical contributions provide a foundation for future studies on the temporal dimensions of political movements and the role of performance in shaping historical narratives.

These discussions were framed by a keynote address of Ho-fung Hung, who reviewed Xu's trajectory as a scholar, and concluding personal remarks by Xu's close friends Yan Long and Roi Livne. Xu's tragic and untimely death meant that he did not live to present and promote much of his work, let alone fulfill his enormous scholarly potential. This conference will hopefully be a first step toward doing this for him and ensuring that his ideas receive the attention they deserve.

*Junchao Tang is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the **University Michigan**. His primary research interest lies at the intersection of social stratification, political sociology, and economic sociology. He uses a wide range of quantitative and archival approaches to understand the dynamics of financialization and quantification as well as their implications on economic inequality and state development.*

Book Review – *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*
Reviewed by Isabelle Higgins
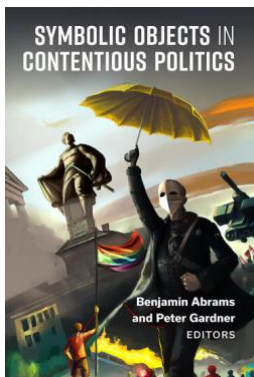
Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics is an ambitious and wide-ranging edited collection in which the editors, Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardener, highlight the importance of paying attention to a distinctly undertheorized field. While contentious politics have been extensively theorized, the role that objects play in these contexts has been markedly less so – the editors attest, for example, that there is currently very little literature on the role of placards in mass protests despite their ubiquity, visibility and relevance in such contexts. When theorizing this absence, Abrams and Gardner explain that their approach holds 'three central properties…that the "stuff" to be considered be symbolically important, physically manifest, and appear in the context of contention.' (32). This framing allows for the inclusion of a breadth and depth of contributions to the volume, in terms of disciplinary background, methodology, empirical context and object(s) of study.

One of the volume's greatest strengths is in working with multifaceted and rigorously theorized definitions for both 'symbolic objects' and 'contentious politics'. This conceptual framing, put forward by Abrams and Gardner both in the introduction and in the first substantive chapter, allows for fascinating parallels and connections to be drawn between a notably wide range of research contributions. Abrams and Gardner contend that symbolic objects come in all shapes and sizes – from a signature or badge to a statue or a street. They can be human or inanimate, specifically created for contention or not, banal or 'highly charged' (21). What defines a 'symbolic object' then, is that it has both material and symbolic properties, that it is 'neither a symbol nor an object alone' but 'both at once' (23). It is the intersection of these properties, Abrams and Gardner argue, that affords these objects 'the many distinctive roles that they play in processes of contention around the world and across history' (23).

This conceptualisation of a 'symbolic object' is made more productive by Abrams and Gardner's understanding of 'contentious politics', which 'includes but is not limited to social movements' and can be 'found across the totality of situations in which there is something at stake that cannot be resolved without transgressing or superseding existing power structures, whether those situations intensely involve governing authorities, or include them only as passive bystanders.' (14). This definition is broad in both its understanding of 'contention' as practice and 'the political' as context. When combined with the theorisation of a 'symbolic object' (as an item in which materiality and semiosis intersect), a valuable theoretical lens emerges. The productive potential of this multifaceted theoretical and conceptual formulation is demonstrated throughout the collection in its entirety.

One clear benefit of this conceptual understanding is the range of empirical contexts and objects that can be studied, theorised, and placed into conversation with one another. In their opening and closing chapters, for example, the editors refer to a range of contexts that may seem dizzying in their difference - a non-exhaustive list includes: milkshakes thrown at politicians, the toppling of statues, the wearing of various items (shoes, headdresses, lapel pins), everyday items (spoons, coathangers), as well as weapons (AK-47s, machetes), the creation and use of placards in street protests, the street itself as object of protest, parts of the bodies of humans and animals, the body itself as an object of protest during the act of self-immolation, and different types of flags in a range of global locations. Abrams and Gardener do not theorize these objects separate from their contexts– either spatially or temporally – and so they also pay attention to how objects are produced, as well as to how they might be changed or transformed in various ways, and to how they might themselves be part of processes of transformation. Objects are thus theorised in relation to how they might emerge, be (re)used and/or remembered in a range of contentious political contexts. This vastness in the variety of objects, contexts and processes referenced by Abrams and Gardener is managed skilfully and effectively, because of the valuable conceptual framing that they put forward.

This skilfulness in conceptual framing is also reflected in the organisation of the chapter contributions, which are thoughtfully separated into three sections concerned with the 'creation', 'potency' and 'legacy' of symbolic objects in turn. These sections are well balanced – there are four chapters within each. The depth of the research conducted by the contributing authors complements the breadth of empirical cases referenced by Abrams and Gardener – each contributing chapter examines a smaller range of objects through a more focused empirical, theoretical and/or methodological lens.

Objects and empirical contexts covered by contributors are global in their scope - from the feathered headdress in a US context of settler colonialism (Dobroski, Chpt.5), to representations of self-immolation in Tunisia (Zuev, Chpt.9), and Biafran symbolic objects (including flags and war technology) within present-day contention in Nigeria (Atata & Omobwale, Chpt. 12). Methodologies used by contributors vary too: from observation of protests and interviews with actors in Warsaw and Berlin (Ślosarski, Chpt. 1), to a case study analysis of the 'affective intensity' (152) of signatures across contexts (Dukes, Chpt. 7), and an approach that 'braid[s] fragmented social histories from below' (237) to study the role of the Mekap (a type of shoe) in Kurdish anticolonial movements (Dirik, Chpt. 11). Disciplinary backgrounds and approaches invoked by contributors non-exhaustively include: 'an anthropology of access' (55) to theorise martyrdom in Iran (Saramifar, Chpt. 3), the tracing of a 50-year history of 'the street' in Portuguese contentious politics (Accornero et al, Chpt. 6), and analysis of mask-wearing in relation to representational politics and Habermasian critique (Thomassen & Riisgaard, Chpt. 13). There is also variety in the specific and intersectional histories and relations of inequality engaged with by contributors, which include: examination of the 'Western origins

of the rainbow flag' (81) in the context of Lebanese queer activism (Nagle, Chpt.4), the state violence enacted by police in Toronto on protestors with particular 'bodywork practices' (Zawilski, Chpt, 8:175), and 'the ceaseless recuperation, reformulation, and reformation of El Che' (218) as a contentious political symbol across space and time. (Selbin, Chpt. 10). The four sets of thematic connections drawn here speak to the productive potential of engaging with each of the chapters in depth, as well as reading them in relation to one another and considering the connections and discontinuities that exist between them.

Reflecting on the purpose of their text, Abrams and Gardener highlight that the 'this book does not aim to "fill a gap" […] but rather to help develop a more unified field of study in relation to symbolic objects, and to encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplines' (294). The editors achieve these aims through their conceptual framework, the thoughtful inclusion and ordering of such a rich range of contributions, and their synthesis of key themes that emerge from the contributing chapters in their conclusion. Here, they pay attention in turn to questions of 'impact and potency', 'differences of interpretation', 'semiotic entanglements' and 'transformation' both *of* and *by* symbolic objects (295-303). These themes productively speak to the flexible, adaptive, sometimes unpredictable, often in-flux, and always subjectively experienced nature of symbolic objects in contentious political contexts. The breadth, depth and conceptual understandings put forward by both the editors and contributors of this collection make it a valuable text that holds productive potential for a range of readers with differing disciplinary backgrounds and empirical interests. I look forward to engaging with it further, and particularly to thinking through some of the arguments made in relation to my own empirical research context.

*Isabelle Higgins holds a PhD from the Department of Sociology, **University of Cambridge**. Her empirical work explores how children deemed eligible for adoption in the USA are represented and monetized online by a range of digital 'adoption advocates', including governments, private adoption agencies and adoptive parents. She draws on insights from the sociology of 'race' and racism, decolonial thought and reproductive sociology to explore how the design and everyday use of digital technologies reproduces intersectionally racialised forms of structural inequality. Isabelle has held fellowships at Cambridge Digital Humanities, the John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress, the New School Institute for Critical Social Inquiry and the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence. From September 2024 she will take up a Teaching Associate position in Media and Culture and Sociological Theory at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge.*

Interview with Omar Lizardo
By Clara Cirdan

Clara Cirdan (C): Do you want to just tell us a bit about yourself, and your research and if you'd like to share any future plans or perspectives?

Omar Lizardo (O): Hi, my name is Omar Lizardo, and I teach and do research at UCLA. A big chunk of my research has to do with cultural sociology - sociology of taste, mainly, and, more recently, with applying formal methods to measuring culture. I've got a good chunk of my other research dealing with theory in general, but also the subset that connects cultural theory with the socialization and internalization of culture. Another theory project that I've been working on with a co-author is about the notion of probability as it relates to the theory of action, and, then, another chunk of my research is on social network analysis.

C: How do you have time for all these different research strands, and how do you connect them?

O: Two things happened in my career: coming across a bunch of authors and topics. And it's then more like a geological layering. I started mostly as a person interested in cultural networks and tastes, Bourdieu, network analysis, etc. Then, I began to acquire more interest in Network Science, Complex Systems, etc. Obviously, I became interested in theory, and then all those things have accumulated over time. I've also accumulated co-authors - a lot of my work is now co- authored- which is very different than it was initially, when you are mostly thinking your thoughts. So, I would say that over time, what I'm working on, has definitely become much more of a function of, you know, this co-

author is 'bothering' me about something, or, I signed up to write handbook chapter, something very externally oriented. But, also, in the interest of what I'm teaching at the moment. When I was at the University of Notre Dame, six or seven years ago, I was teaching a lot of culture and cognition classes. My work was thinking more about those topics theoretically, maybe some also empirically. But since I've been at UCLA, I've been teaching a lot of networks classes, which I feel has made the networks research strand more prominent. At some point, I thought that my research agenda was illustrated by some kind of internal, coherent motivation within. I have recently realized, looking at my research trajectory, that it is essentially purely a function of what I'm teaching at the moment and the collaborations I have going.

C: Could you tell us a bit more about collaboration in your research.

O: Co-authors and co-authoring projects are the main way that I'm going to venture into familiarizing myself with new literature - it forces me to read things that I would not otherwise read, and, definitely, read outside of discipline proper. And then, of course, after we do so many things, there is at least some impetus to try to bring some coherence into it and say: 'Well, it's really all related'. If I write some Handbook Chapter or maybe some theory piece, occasionally it will be single-authored, but most of the empirical work that I do, and the social network analysis work is co-authored. And because I've been at this for a while, there is an accumulation of both senior co-authors, but also people who used to be my students who are now co-authors.

At Notre Dame, I was able to get some students that were interested at the same time, in the same kind of culture and cognition topics. And we began to co-author these theory papers. They are also used to co-author amongst themselves now, which, I think, is a really good way of thinking about theory. Theory tends to be thought of as a very lonely realm of a single scholar thinking big thoughts, but I think, sometimes, three or four people writing a theory paper is better than one written by a single person.

With collaboration, the main thing is that you have to put your ego aside. Because when you do your work, you are kind of the 'ultimate boss' and the creator of whatever happens. When we collaborate, we have to figure out what's going to be the balance, right? And there can be really brilliant scholars on their own, but, when it comes to collaboration, they can't have it because they just can't let go of all the micro-decisions. So, to me, that's super important. In the STEM fields, there's a super high-level division of labor, which means that if you collaborate, there is a really nice entry into collaboration. If you are a sociologist in the team of engineers and computer scientists or physicists, then you're understood to be kind of the authority of sociology, and you don't overstep the boundaries of the other things. I remember trying to transpose that in the way you collaborate for sociology papers, defining the roles very early on. My smoothest collaborations have been the ones where it was like: 'Okay, I'm the data person, somebody else does the theory', or   vice versa. That way, you don't over-step on each other's toes. In a fuzzy division of roles and labor, collaborations become really challenging.

C: Can you also talk a bit about the different methods that inspire you?

Sure. Initially, I was mostly trained in fairly conventional quantitative methods, with social network methods – which, maybe in the early 2000s, were still non-conventional, but now they are pretty conventional. My methodological toolkit was fairly quantitative for most of my career, although, once again, because of co-authoring, that has also been a platform for learning methods by observing other people do it and then doing mixed methods work.

My first major foray into that was a mixed methods paper that I co-authored with an ex-colleague from Notre Dame, named Robert Fishman, now at Carlos III. And it started with me kind of 'mucking around' with quantitative survey data and then realizing there was a comparative project there. Fishman is a historical sociologist, a comparativist, who focuses on Spain and Portugal. And then we wrote a paper that combined quantitative Eurobarometer data with historical and qualitative data that he had collected. That was my first hands-on exposure to historical, comparative, and even qualitative interview-based work, which was great: learning about how you construct qualitative, historical comparative argument, how to use interview data to support cases, and so on. I feel I learned a lot. The main sociology of taste project that I have right now is also mixed methods, using survey data and interviews.

C: Would you like to talk a bit about how cultural sociology influences your thinking?

O: It's always been a central part of my thinking, depending on how broadly you define it. My first attempts to do empirical work focused on cultural taste and consumption. I was thinking about culture in both this very concrete application to the study of taste stratification, distinction, etc, then, also thinking about it in this more general, theoretical sense. It was in the early 2000s, when I was a grad student when the culture and cognition research was beginning to happen, special issues in *Poetics,* and formal methods stuff. At the time, John Mohr was pioneering work on bringing measurement and meaning together; then, there was the then relatively small - but now gigantic - industry of empirical work in sociology of taste. All that influenced the way I was thinking and the way that I was thinking of myself as an empirical researcher. It did not depend on any internal compass but was much more related to what's happening around me intellectually. The last major project that John Mohr did, the various conferences that ended up becoming the *Measuring Culture* book, were like that. John's main thing was to bring together a bunch of people who were not homogeneous, either in approach or methods, and try to have a conversation about measuring culture. When John organized all those conferences, I thought of myself almost as a substantive/ theory person. But a lot of the messages my previous supervisor (John Breiger) implanted early on in my career were around how to think about certain problems that are both theoretical and methodological? So, when you use a method, it's not just to level up a new method, but also to solve a theoretical problem. I think it's a good emphasis on how some of my early training ended up showing up later.

C: What do you think defines 'cultural sociology' within sociology?

O: I think that the field has changed. Initially, it started as just another section of the ASA with some thematic focus (culture as media and the arts). Over time, the field has become broader and more ambitious in its scope. In many ways, even by the mid-80s and early 2010s, it was clear that whatever you're doing in cultural sociology, it was going to be in the middle of the other fields in sociology. The questions asked are broader, and the tools - both theoretical and methodological - are more multipurpose tools, which, I think, it's both the strength and the weakness of the field. The field is, arguably, one of the most general fields in sociology. It still has a strong DNA of a substantive field, given by studies such as those in arts and culture, but then there's this larger sense of culture as a general thing, that obviously applies to every other field: if you're a race, gender scholar, etcetera, you can use tools, theoretical and methodological, from the study of culture, right? The general phase of the culture is good because it keeps it in the middle of everything - dealing with general theoretical questions, but also being a field that absorbs some of the methodological input from outside. It has always been a highly adaptive field methodologically, and it has the advantage of making those methods into some kind of interesting theoretical problem, right? That's obviously good. I think the disadvantage is that the field gets diffused through sociology. The culture section itself is fine, but it's not necessarily the only place in which culture is done. And even the term culture doesn't necessarily imply anything or bring anything to mind for most people. I always advise my students to have an 'end' when they talk about culture: culture, *and* something, the thing they do, because culture is not going to bring anything to mind, it's not recognized as a field.

C: What do you think is then 'culture' in cultural sociology?

O: I think so in many ways it *is* everything, right? If you think about culture in the West as cultural institutions, culture as mental representations, culture as well-established cultural narratives... It's my sense that sometimes people don't like to say this because then, they think: 'Well, culture is everything, and then it means nothing'. Yeah, but it is literally everything. Everything that matters, right? Unless you're a physicist or a chemist or whatever, but if you're, if you're a sociologist...It's hard to not refer to 'culture'. That's fine to say culture is everything – doesn't mean it's an undifferentiated blob, but that you then make differentiations within this larger thing. And, in many ways, this is why it's completely unproductive to say you study culture. Think about race, class, gender, sexuality - the core fields in sociology. You grab a random scholar in a field, and you catch them in the middle of what they're doing, odds are they're studying 'culture'. They're studying categories, practices; they're studying discourses, people's narratives, memories. So, then you're saying: 'Well, everybody is studying culture'. It's fine to be in a field in which what you

are studying is what everybody else is studying. The issue then becomes that there's so much diversity in terms of what people are studying, and that the category that is supposed to be at the center of the field is also heterogenous.

Then there's two ways of approaching that: Culture – how do you break that up? You can say: 'Okay, I'm going on to a more convoluted vocabulary, adding all these other words that are equally complex, like: 'practice', 'institutions', 'schemas' etc. That's, one way of doing it. Another way, which is the way we ended up writing the *Measuring Culture* book - almost by accident- is actually to get very simple. Instead of trying to define 'culture', we were asking: '*Where* is culture?' And we ended up with that schema of 'culture' as – 'people,' 'interactions', and 'objects'. Because those words: 'people,' 'interactions,' and 'objects,' yes, they are still complex, but they're not as complex, because they are also answering a very concrete question. You catch a cultural sociologist, what are they doing all day? They're either talking to people, 'messing around' with some objects, or looking at some social context or interactions in, usually, some institutionalized context. I remember the first draft of Measuring Culture's "People" Chapter, Maggie Frye and I were the first ones to take a crack at it. We ended up, completely without planning, with a very simple schema also. People are either talking, thinking, or doing something - so, you study culture in talking, thinking, and doing. That schema was a really easy way to organize the field, in simple categories of action. And I feel that's one way of dealing with: 'What is this *culture* thing?' Culture *is* everything. But it's also heterogeneous assemblages of a bunch of other things. The best way is then to break it up. But don't break it up in a way that one particle ends up essentially remapping all the complexities of the whole thing into your other thing. Map it so that you're getting something that seems pretty simple, and say: 'This is the slice that I am studying'.

C: How do you see the future of cultural sociology?

O: It's hard to know because that definitely depends on the mode we're going to enter. The field has become more methodologically focused, which is where the political economy academia is pointing to. Especially in American universities, it seems they only want to hire somebody who does computational social science, which, of course, creates a strong incentive for anybody who's a young culture scholar: 'Well, you better learn how to code, right? And that's what I mean by methods focus - because it's not even any method; it's computational. But the strength of culture is that it is a multi-method field: historical sociologists, qualitative scholars, and ethnographers, do cultural work. And I think that that methodological diversity has to be kept. There's a ton of external incentive for computational sociology, but that still is never going to be a majority of the people, just given both the distribution of interests and the questions that people like to ask. The nature of the people who get recruited into sociology is never going to be mostly people who do computational work. There's always going to be diversity, and qualitative methods are now in a period of strong codification that didn't exist before. When I was in grad school, Michèle Lamont was still a highly controversial scholar because she was doing interviews. Now, it's like it makes you yawn: 'I'm gonna do an interview project'. Lamont was radical, and this was only 30 something years ago - and Michelle is still a relatively young scholar. But now qualitative methods are highly codified, the ultimate Kuhnian paradigm. They have textbooks telling you: 'This is how you do interviews: you sit down, you talk to people.' It's amazing that we live in this era of high-level codification of qualitative methods.

The field is never going to become purely quantitative, even though some people fear the quantitative "data" revolution. It's more like these bridging and 'trading zones' - the kind of vocabulary used by STS people - that is how these fields *actually* operate. I think that cultural sociology will continue to be strong because it always has this bridging capacity. The field is in a good position - you want maximum entropy in terms of methodological approaches. That's usually a sign of a healthy field: fields that are on either extreme - i.e., mostly quantitative or, mostly qualitative -, tend to develop much more homogeneous epistemic cultures, which sometimes can be advantageous in the short term but disadvantageous in the longer term.

C: Do you have any advice for early scholar sociologists?

O: That's hard, because things have changed. I feel like my advice to graduates has become totally obsolete. The kinds of jobs that appeared posted when I applied in 2005-2006 said something like: 'hiring sociologist'. Now there are all these elaborate descriptions of all kinds of contradictory things. I wouldn't have known how to apply for any of those jobs. So, the advice is mainly hypothetical; there's little practical advice I feel can give young scholars because I don't

think I have the experience. The timing of the field changing should be linked to people's biographical, or biological career, right? When I was on the market in 2005, the director of the grad studies at Arizona was Sarah Soule. She said - which I'll never forget: 'When I was at the start, I had no publications. I just got hired because I had good letters. You need publications.' And that was 2005. That is way too fast of a time scale to shift.

It's also hard to give that advice because I feel sometimes the only way to do that is to become so instrumental about what you do, to get rid of everything that is fun about the job. Yes, you have to be productive, but you have to make it so that you are enjoying the productivity.

C: How would that look like?

O: Choice of subject matter should never be driven by instrumental concerns. I see this sort of cynicism very early on in the grad school career: 'Well, since they are only hiring computational scientists, I'm going to learn Python and R, even though I don't like it'. If you're doing that in a completely mechanical way, it's not good - instrumentalization would be something I would advise against. There are all kinds of ways to be productive. There was an old book by Jon Elster on paradoxes of action. And he had a really cool example about certain actions that are inherently byproducts, like trying to fall asleep. You can't will them. Because if you will them, you fail. And I feel it's the same thing as being a successful scholar: it is inherently a byproduct, you can't will it. So that's why it's also very hard to give advice, because it can imply an instrumental means-to-an-end orientation. Rather, do this other thing: study something that you are passionate about. In terms of the micro-dynamics of motivation, it is the only way to do it: find something that is part of the ongoing labor of intellectual production you actually enjoy and that will hook you into doing it for hours in a non-instrumental way. I feel, a lot of times, people don't just find that. It's hard because the other thing is that a person's career keeps getting shortened. So, the time to do work is much faster, and there's much less of that exploration component. But you can't find what you are passionate about if you don't have time for it. A lot of early scholars commit too fast to do something. And you have to do that because of the way everything is organized, but sometimes, that sort of "satisficing" (in Herbert Simon's terms) can be bad, because if you could search for a little longer, you could have found something you're more passionate about.

C: Thank you for your time, it has been really insightful. All the best in your future projects!

Announcements

New Books
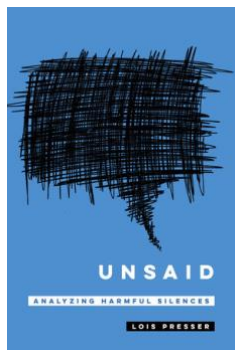
Presser, Lois. 2022. *Unsaid: Analyzing Harmful Silences*. University of California Press.

This book advances a methodological approach for determining what is not said within texts. Researchers and laypersons alike suspect that some text is "coded" – that it contains some "subtext." They are keen to identify that subtext, to make out what a text is taking for granted or communicating surreptitiously, for left implicit, the message is shielded from critique. Furthermore, researchers and laypersons point to voices that go unheard, perspectives that go unheeded. A strategy for determining unsaid things and excluded perspectives in a systematic fashion has been lacking. This book develops such a strategy and thus contributes to social research and activism toolkits.

New Articles

Chang, Andy Scott. 2024. "Masculinity on the Margins: Boundary Work among Immobile Fathers in Indonesia's Transnational Families." Social Forces 102(3): 1048-1067.

Clingan, Lauren. 2024. "Defining Women's Incomes: Household Disruptions and Gendered Resolutions." Social Forces (online first).

Jasso, Guillermina. 2024. "Poverty, Redistribution, and the Middle Class: Redistribution via Probability Distributions vs. Redistribution via the Linear Income Tax System." Frontiers in Sociology 8.

Krause, Monika. 2024. "Interpretation and Critical Classification. Geertzism and Beyond in the Sociology of Culture." Sociologica 18(1):87–93.

Krause, Monika. 2024. "Scientificity before Scientism: The Invention of Cultural Research in German Studies of Antiquity 1800–1850." Theory and Society.

Rucks-Ahidiana, Zawadi. 2024. "Ambitious Ideals, Realistic Expectations: How Prior Experiences with Structures Moderate the Goals of Section 8 Voucher Holders through Frames." American Journal of Cultural Sociology.

Rucks-Ahidiana, Zawadi. 2024. "Controlling Images of Neighborhoods in Gentrification Coverage." Social Problems (online first).

van Stee, Elena G., Arielle Kuperberg, and Joan Maya Mazelis. 2024. "Activating Family Safety Nets: Understanding Undergraduates' Pandemic Housing Transitions." Socius 10.