SECTIONCULTURE

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Letter from the Chair

Clayton Childress

If I come to your house, I might ask to look inside your kitchen cabinets. I'd never do it without asking, and usually won't even ask if I'm at all worried you'd be made uncomfortable by the question, but still, I'd *want to*. Hanging out while cooking is lovely, sure, but getting a peek inside someone's kitchen cabinets? That's the real gift.

What, I'd like to know, are your go-tos, both current and past? Which brand are you loyal to, and for what do you cut corners, costs, or improvise? What are your emergency backups, your pantry panic-buys, your bottomless essentials? What did you need that one time but are now stuck with the rest of it, unsure of what to do? And tell me: Which jars, cans, or bags were bought absentmindedly, or even better, aspirationally? And when did you silently admit to yourself that you will never use that thing, but still aren't ready to part with it yet? Or maybe you're still hoping to reconcile the past-you who bought it with an imaginary future-you? Is there something someone gave you that you're neither using nor passing along? And is there something tucked away so deep, even you forgot about it until right now? I want those stories, too.

The story behind the story is a regular fascination of sociologists, and perhaps sociologists in our subfield in particular. Did you know two former Culture Section chairs are currently studying junk drawers together? How perfect is that! I used to think my first love was listening to the director's commentary on DVDs, until I realized that with enough $10 words, I could become a sociologist and turn production-of-culture fun facts into a career of sorts. (When done recreationally, it might raise eyebrows; when done professionally, it's ethnography. What a job!)

In my first chair's letter, I looked to the past of our section as a way to make sense of the present. This letter focuses entirely on the present, and the final one will look ahead to the future. The present I want to share with you right now, however, is a peek inside the kitchen cabinets of our section. The device I'll use to do so is more twee than clever, but hey, it gets the job done.

Organizational Structure: The section's formal structure includes a Chair, supported by a Chair-Elect and a Past Chair, and a COO. An eleven-member council—two of whom are graduate students—also helps steer the section. Every council member is expected to serve on at least one committee. There are five awards committees: the Book, Paper, and Graduate Student Paper Awards are longstanding, while the Dissertation Improvement Grant and Mid-Career Award are newer. In addition, there are eight other standing committees: Nominations; Program; Diversity and Inequality; Reception; Mentorship; Survey; Newsletter and its Advisory Board; and the Committee for the Culture and Contemporary Life Series. The section also has a designated webmaster. With 13 committees active each year, and every role except for council and the COO turning over annually, the section functions sort of like an octopus: a creature with nine brains running in parallel, sometimes without routing communication through a central node. The result is that what's simultaneously counted as "good work" that's worthy of celebration by the section ends up bordering on the incoherent. We have, by accident, created an "open system" organizational structure in which multiple evaluative heuristics flourish at the same time, often without even being aware of each other. Given the size and heterogeneity of the section, if you can handle the unpredictability of never quite knowing what will be on the menu, it's worth celebrating and is wonderful.

Occupational Careers. This year, 58 individuals are formally dedicating time to keeping the section organized and running. Because academia operates somewhat like a pre-capitalist guild system, their contributions to the guild are balanced out against their multitude of other commitments and activities within the guild. Put another way, 58 cultural sociologists are depending on each other to keep the train running, without a single person who isn't simultaneously keeping planes and automobiles running

too, and without a single specialist in the bunch. To make things even more interesting, among these people there's about 85% turnover every year, meaning almost every lesson learned is quickly lost. What's the consequence of this? Much like Becker's understanding of art worlds, due to considerable time constraints and the centrality of collaboration, the system is essentially designed to punish attempts at innovation. Because most volunteers have also done volunteer work for other sections, there is also another layer of isomorphic pressure to just do things the (oftentimes admittedly somewhat mythical) way that they "have been done." In many ways it feels like the system has been set up to limit the damage anyone can accomplish through neglect or mismanagement, which again, may be reasonable. Yet because of all this, at the section level, institutional memory can seem like it's basically goldfish-like. The COO and Past Chair are usually the ones who carry any wisdom to the 36-month mark. While the downsides are obvious, the upside is that if you can manage to start something and keep it going for three cycles, it might miraculously seem to have "always been that way." And unless someone actively tries to shut it down (which rarely happens), it'll probably just keep going. Want examples? That will cost you a drink or ten, and only of the cheap stuff. But I'm fairly certain that a lot of what we do now started that way—things that stuck around for 36 months and now feel hard to change.

Market. Our market is overwhelmingly sociologists, but more specifically, it's ASA members in particular, as organizational membership is required to join the section. There are four facts about this market that help explain what we do. First, according to the most recent data, out of 53 sections we are the largest section in ASA. (That can fluctuate, so it's always safe to say we are *one of* the largest sections.) Second, despite occasional rumors, the section really does mirror the broader demographics of ASA—across race, gender, and their intersections. Third, we share over a third of our membership with the Theory section (another large section), and smaller sections, like Consumers & Consumption, share about half of their members with us. (We also significantly overlap with sections like Political Sociology, Comparative-Historical, OOW, Economic Sociology, and Global & Transnational). Fourth, like some other U.S. professional societies, ASA has been declining in members for about 20 years. Since its peak in 2007, membership has dropped by 37%, while the culture section has had a comparatively smaller 22%. So what do all these market factors explain about what we do? Quite a lot, in fact. Because of a rise in costs and a drop in section membership (which is how our budget is determined), like many other sections, we've shifted to co-hosting receptions with other sections. These are also now usually held offsite, which further saves on costs. Since there tends not to be coordination across sections about scheduling receptions, we've also been partnering with sections that share significant membership overlap (e.g., Theory; Consumers & Consumption, and this year, Sex and Gender). The idea is to reduce the chances that our members are double-booked, and if they are, we're hoping they'll choose *our* reception as it might be a twofer for them.

Law and Regulation. We have our section bylaws, and there's general ASA bylaws, as well as ASA guidelines and restrictions on what sections can and cannot do. I have also learned this year that ASA expects the Chairs of sections to maintain a "professional tone" on the Listservs, which seems reasonable enough. Yet the law and regulation stories I tend to prefer are the ones about strategies in a world of tactics, and pro-social unintended consequences. For example, the formula for how many panels each section is awarded at ASA each year is formalized and rationalized, but also not quite true. Our section for example, "splits" our business meeting allotment into two sessions: a 60-minute graduate student professionalization panel (which very much is a panel, despite not counting against our panel allotment), and a 30 minute business meeting (which is always rushed, because two thirds of the time of it has been apportioned to something else). We also "share" panels with other sections, taking turns "hosting" joint panels with the Race, Gender, and Class section and Mathematical Sociology section in the reverse cycle, thereby squeezing another Culture panel onto the schedule every year. There's also the last-day bonus panel, which means that if it's your turn to have your "section day" on the last day of the conference, ASA grants you an extra panel as compensation, which is why we had even yet another extra panel last year. To be clear, all of this is above board and approved by the organization. But the fact that the official, rationalized panel allotment seems to systematically undercount what's actually happening on the program is, dare I say, what separates us from the squares and/or economists. As for an unintended consequence, how about

a call to action? The John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant goes to two underrepresented graduate students at public institutions each year, and it is entirely donor funded. But due to ASA rules around making donations directly to sections, it technically operates as a fundraiser each year. Because of that technicality, however, *you can and should contribute to it*, which is a nice and worthwhile thing to do!

Industry Structure. ASA isn't really a monopolist in any meaningful sense, but for its ability to bring sociologists at U.S. institutions together it really is unparalleled. As for other conferences, there's the regional ones (PSA, ESS, SSS, MSS, NCSA, SSSA), specialist conferences and those attended by sociologists that overlap with other disciplines (SWS, INSNA, SSSP, PAA, LSA, AOM, ABS, ASC, SSHA, SASE, SSC, etc.), and then there's the ISA (an international generalist sociology conference, which unsurprisingly—says the expat—it doesn't seem like most U.S. sociologists attend.) And while ASA certainly isn't Tin Pan Alley, other conferences and smaller conferences can offer things that simply aren't feasible on the mothership, just as they can't offer what ASA can offer either. For example, unless you're deeply on the inside, setting up a pre-formed panel on a more niche thematic topic, or an author-meets-critics session, or even just finding space to meet with working groups or communities that aren't formally approved and recognized can be very challenging at ASA, but less so at some other conferences. And as it relates to culture scholars, our section isn't entirely dissimilar from Gertrude Stein's description of her hometown of Oakland, California: vibrant and lively across many different ever changing pockets, but without an identifiable core or functional center. The other conferences we attend are similarly incongruous, diverse, and dispersed, meaning ASA is the one conference where culture scholars who usually don't end up in rooms together can find themselves in rooms together. Yet due to changes at ASA, sections (including our own), will have larger conference footprints starting in 2026 in New York, meaning some of our rooms might become more askew too. While there have been rumblings about creating a smaller conference for culture scholars to supplement our ASA gatherings, if that were to ever happen, it would take learning the lessons from all the other smaller conferences that already exist, and what they've learned in being able to offer something more bespoke that our big, important, disciplinary-wide gathering.

Technology. Technology! The easiest facet! You do of course have other things to do, so let's end here! The last time we ran a section survey, only about 60% of respondents reported plans to attend ASA that year. The challenge has always been twofold: how to serve members for the 360 days ASA is *not* happening, and how to serve the perhaps 50% of members who have different things happening while ASA *is* happening. It's easy to forget that as recently as five years ago we didn't have *any* programming during the year, and that generally most academics just really weren't participating in online lectures and panels in real time at all. (For example, more of my warm feelings and intellectual fuzzies than are likely reasonable come from being able to virtually attend a biweekly workshop in another country and several time zones away.) Back when the word "Skype" still existed, the *Culture and Contemporary Life* series not only didn't exist, but it probably couldn't have existed, and it took a global exogenous shock, enterprising leadership in the section, and technological change to create the conditions under which the series could be created. And *CCL* panels are *different* from the section's ASA panels too, and in many ways complement them. Because *CCL* panels are invited and online, we've been able to use them to bring more international scholars into the fold, as well as to bring scholars from outside of the section and subfield into conversation with scholars in both. And because of the very long-lead time required in defining and constructing ASA panels, we're also able to be nimbler with our *CCL* panels, orienting more toward niche topics at some times, and more toward current events at others. This has also allowed us to keep our ASA panels to be open-submission, and to better serve a healthy mix of early-career scholars—who have the most at stake—and more senior scholars, who generously give their time to help them along. This is far from a story of technological determinism, but technology is a central facet in what makes it all balance out and work.

So, how was that for a peek inside the section's kitchen cabinets? Undoubtedly you'd stock them differently, and cook differently with the same ingredients too. Or maybe you're unsatiated by the metaphor, and want the real unvarnished goods. That would also be fair. What's good for the goose, and so on. All you have to do is ask.

Event Report – Jeffrey C. Alexander's Retirement Conference

Report by Willa Sachs

Willa Sachs is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Yale University and a Junior Fellow at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology.

Last October, friends, students, and colleagues of Jeffrey C. Alexander gathered in Yale University's Humanities Quadrangle to celebrate his retirement after an academic career spanning over five decades. The conference, entitled "Working Towards Meaning Together: Jeffrey Alexander's Legacy for Sociology," drew scholars from all over the world, including Sweden, Colombia, China, Italy, Czechia, Canada, and Scotland. The conference commemorated not only 'Alexander' the prolific social theorist, as one conference speaker put it, but 'Jeff' the friend and mentor.

1. Participants at the conference

Presenters overviewed Alexander's pioneering contributions to social theory, including cultural iconicity, civil sphere theory, cultural trauma theory, cultural pragmatics, structural hermeneutics, and the development of the Strong Program. The core tenets of Alexander's oeuvre, asserted the speakers, include structural voluntarism, social solidarity, multidimensionality, the binary discourses of civil society, the relative autonomy of culture, a postpositivist conception of social science, and a commitment to democracy and civil inclusion as utopian ideals.

The speakers detailed the impressive empirical depth of Alexander's work and his application of these theories to hundreds of social processes, social movements, and political issues, from the Watergate Scandal to Iran Contra to the advent of Trumpism. The speakers also traced Alexander's collaborative efforts with scholars writing from a variety of national perspectives to "deprovincialize" civil sphere theory and apply its core insights in other cultural contexts, which culminated in the publication of such volumes as The Civil Sphere in South Asia and The Civil Sphere in Latin America.

A key theme of the conference was Alexander's mid-career transition away from the functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons toward the development of a "strong" theory of culture. The speakers traced Alexander's rejection of materialism and realism and the influence of such thinkers as Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Claude Levi-Strauss on this line of thinking. The conference speakers recalled the development of the "culture club," an informal study group formed in 1984 at the University of California, Los Angeles. Over the next decade, the Culture Club would build the foundations of the Strong Program and provide the intellectual scaffolding for the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS), formed approximately twenty years later.

2. Jeffrey Alexander with former students from UCLA

Another particularly striking theme that emerged in the formal talks and informal discussions that followed was that, for all his years spent writing about Emile Durkheim and collective representations, Jeff himself had become something of a totem – or, at the very least, an "iconic intellectual," whose work merited canonization. While Alexander laughingly waved away such pronouncements as too saccharine, it was a clear point of consensus among conference attendees.

Indeed, Alexander represents a kind of totemic figure, not only because his theories have provided the "background representations" underpinning decades of cultural sociology workshops, conferences, and academic articles, but because, as one speaker put it, "he has an enormous capacity to generate bonds of inclusion and solidarity." If solidarity is born of group life, as Durkheim would have it, then the CCS community is certainly a testament to this: there is an undeniable effervescence in the room as everyone gathers weekly to engage with friends and colleagues who speak the same intellectual language. Alexander will stroll into the weekly workshop with a quiet kind of authority and, at times, an "impish grin," as one presenter recalled, sharply dressed in colorful glasses — or perhaps one of his signature leather coats or ushanka hats — and chatter comes to a lull. Alexander draws the attention of everyone in the room, unwittingly or not.

The conference presenters reflected how, as an 'iconic intellectual,' Alexander can appear intimidating: he often eschews small talk, and prefers to jump right into theoretically hard-hitting questions with a piercing gaze or sometimes a wry smile—even with people he's only just met. While this intensity helps craft the formidable persona of 'Alexander' the theorist, it equally reflects a core quality of 'Jeff' the friend and mentor: an acute interest in intellectual connection.

Answering "Who is Jeffrey Alexander?" as the title of one panel asked, then, required participants to not only examine the archives of Alexander's academic work—by poring over the hundreds of footnotes in The Civil Sphere, for instance, or analyzing his impressive citation count—but to dig into our personal archives of Jeff the friend and mentor. Conference participants revisited hundreds of email threads, full of advice and creative collaboration, and shared personal memories, including rides with Jeff in his convertible and warm summer conferences in Trento.

Some conference participants even caught a glimpse of Jeff's private archive during a post-conference Sunday brunch at his home: neatly labeled boxes containing several of his original notebooks and research notes for The Civil Sphere and other major works. The boxes, one guest reflected, were somehow surprisingly mundane and unassuming in light of the quasi-sacred status Alexander's work has assumed among cultural sociologists. But, after all, the conference was dedicated to investigating "the relationship between frontstage and backstage in the origin of paradigms" — and it was such "backstage" moments with Jeff that proved vital to understanding Alexander the theorist.

3. Jeffrey Alexander with some of his current students Willa Sachs, Sena Şahin, and Shivani Choudhary

A common refrain throughout the conference discussions was that Jeff is an extremely engaged and thoughtful mentor and colleague. He "helps students believe they have something important to say," reflected Ron Jacobs; he invests in his students' personal and academic well-being, added Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky. Jeff, reflected Anne Kane, has not only "theoretical brilliance, but … unending encouragement and enthusiasm for his students and their work." Nadine Amalfi, CCS program coordinator, shared how throughout her twenty-year professional relationship with Jeff, she had come to view him like a brother.

Jeff really "sees" people – he asks about their loved ones; he checks in on their mental wellbeing; he remembers papers they wrote weeks or months or years ago. If you send him a piece of writing, he will likely respond in a day or two with paragraphs of in-depth comments. He is energized by friendly intellectual sparring – he likes to challenge people, not because of some unwavering commitment to his own ideas, but because he likes to see if the conversation heads anywhere new or interesting. He's principled, but not dogmatic. Indeed, a key attribute highlighted by conference participants is Jeff's generosity and creativity as a collaborator. He pulls people into his orbit, learns from them.

Celebrating Alexander's collaborative spirit is perhaps one of the most important takeaways from the conference. Both Jeff the mentor and Alexander the icon understand even his most seminal works as the start, not the end, of the conversation.

A significant portion of the conference discussion centered on new ways to think about, expand, or reimagine some of Jeff's key theoretical ideas – including civil sphere theory – and to answer "the unanswered questions the theory invites" (Giuseppe Sciortino & Peter Kivisto). This mission is evident in the aforementioned efforts to deprovincialize civil sphere theory, which invites such questions as "how the cultural codes of the civil sphere relate to long-standing traditional values and moral codes such as patrimonialism and neo-Confucianism" in East Asia (Agnes Ku), or how transcultural dynamics and international relations impact the civil sphere (Jean-François Côté).

Participants critically examined Alexanders' theoretical insights alongside studies of nationalism (Eric Taylor Woods), colonialism (Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky), migration (Giuseppe Sciortino & Peter Kivisto), the ethnographic method (Anna Lund), other approaches to analyzing culture (Lynette Spillman), psychoanalysis (Emirbayer), and metatheory (Frédéric Vandenberghe).

It is these kinds of investigations that will invigorate the next generation of cultural sociologists as they think through Alexander's insights in generative new ways. One thing is certain: Alexander has made an indelible mark on sociology, and his legacy will inspire cultural sociologists across the globe to "work toward meaning together" for decades to come.

Interview with Musa al-Gharbi

By Manning Zhang

We had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Musa al-Gharbi, the author of the widely acclaimed We Have Never Been Woke, a book that has sparked conversations both in the U.S. and around the world. Dr. al-Gharbi, a sociologist by training, and an Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at Stony Brook University, connected with Manning Zhang, our student editor from Brandeis University, for an insightful discussion on his book, and his unique academic journey.

Manning: Before we delve into your book, could you tell us a bit about yourself, and the research you are doing? How did you come to write this book?

al-Gharbi: There are two stories I could tell. One about my broader intellectual trajectory, one a little more proximal to the time of writing. I'll quickly tick through both:

As I talk about a little bit on my website, my initial plan in life was to be a Catholic priest. And then I had this crisis of faith, and I became an atheist for a while, during this time I started studying philosophy as a way of exploring questions like "What's the nature of reality? Or, "What is the meaning of life?" But without the God stuff. At the time I thought politics was kind of dumb—that it was people getting distracted by the little things, while I was focused on the "big" things. But then my twin brother perished in Afghanistan while serving in the army. In the aftermath of that tragedy, and as I worked through it myself, and helped my family work through it, I realized that politics and these other social questions were more important than I thought, and were important in different ways than I appreciated at first. When I was transferring from the community college, I only applied to philosophy programs, so I enrolled in the nearest one at the University of Arizona, and I shifted my focus from metaphysics to applied social epistemology – "What do we know?" "In virtue of what?" – with a particular focus on the Middle East and foreign policy, to try to help other families avoid the same kind of tragedy as my family experienced.

In the aftermath of that tragedy, and as I worked through it myself, and helped my family work through it, I realized that politics and these other social questions were more important than I thought, and were important in different ways than I appreciated at first.

Gradually my interest in knowledge, and how we produce knowledge together, kept expanding. For instance, when the Black Lives Matter movement broke out in the United States, I became really interested in whether—and to what extent—the framework and data I had collected on social movements and state responses in the Middle East might also apply to the U.S. So I started to study race, policing and social movements. Later, I noticed this epistemic bubble around Trump's prospects in the 2016 election: the experts seemed to be striking an extreme posture with a high level of confidence and near-total unanimity. I found this interesting as a person who studies knowledge. After the election, I was distressed because very little seemed to have been learned from one of the largest collective prediction failures in contemporary history – instead, the primary focus was on pathologizing voters for delivering this unexpected result. And this got me interested more in U.S. political elections.

Eventually, these questions evolve into who produces knowledge and what the social life of knowledge outputs. One way to understand the project of *We Have Never Been Woke* is as an exploration of the political economy of the knowledge professions from the interwar period through the present.

But there's another type of story I could tell about how I came into this line of research that is more narrow, and I tell that story in the introduction of the book: I moved from being a shoe salesman in a small town in Arizona to being an Ivy

League intellectual in the Upper West side of Manhattan, and it was a cultural whiplash. The transition really challenged a lot of my previous assumptions about how social problems come about and persist, who benefits from them, and how. I had gone to New York, largely accepting what you might call a "banal liberal" view of social problems. If you had asked me who's to blame for whatever problem, I would have said, "those damn Republicans" and, "the millionaires and the billionaires," and I would have assumed those groups to be largely coextensive. But as I started looking at the social milieu in which I was enmeshed, I started seeing all of these problems that couldn't plausibly be attributed to the preferred stories that I had in my mind. And so that pushed me to think about what I was observing more deeply, and implanted these questions that started to haunt me – questions I spell out in the introduction to the book.

Manning: It's great to hear you talk about these stories in person…well, synchronously since we are at Zoom. It feels vivid. Now, as planned, I will dive into a couple of book-specific questions, in a Q&A format. The first question is pretty general: How do you feel about having such a highly publicized book? It's not very usual for a sociologist in the United States.

al-Gharbi: Yeah, yeah [laugh]. As I discuss a bit in Chapter 4, most academic books, even relatively good-selling ones, tend to move only a few hundred units. So this is a very different kind of book for an academic press. It's been great but a little overwhelming. I did a lot of stage-setting in the lead-up to the book to help ensure it had a solid impact – and I was well-positioned to do this because of all my media experience and connections. And I also had a whole team of people help me through the launch period. My literary agent negotiated with the press to get two dedicated publicists for the book: one focused on the US and one focused on international markets. And I have a booking agent who helps secure talks, negotiate the fees, and sort out the logistics. Still, despite all of the prep work and support, it's kind of hard to know how a book's going to be received. Going into the release, both myself and Princeton University Press had a lot of uncertainty about what the reception would be like. I tried to put that out of my mind and just produce the best work I could. But it's been really gratifying over the last six months to see the book received largely in the spirit that it was intended. The reviews are overwhelmingly positive – in prestige media outlets, book forums, left-aligned venues, you name it. Mother Jones even *listed it* as one of the best books of 2024.

I think, in part, people are more ready for the message now than they might have been a few years ago. If this book had come out in 2020 or 2021, maybe the reception would have been different because we would have still been in the throes of the latest "Great Awokening" which seems to have peaked in late 2021. Then, especially after the 2024 election and Donald Trump's reelection, I think many people became more hungry to understand how we got here—what went wrong and where things might be going next. Leading up to the election, both the press and I were concerned that, no matter how it turned out, people might have bigger issues to deal with after the election than discussing the themes of this book, even though there are a lot of important implications of the book for understanding U.S. politics.. But it's turned out that a lot of people have used the book to try to make sense of the electoral result. So that's also been a boon for the book and its reception.

Manning: You mentioned that you have two publicists—one working in the United States and another helping you explore markets outside the U.S. Do you have any plans to translate this book for international audiences? Is that part of the plan?

al-Gharbi: Yep. The book already has sold the rights to be translated into simplified Chinese. And I'm doing an international book tour this summer, thanks to support from the Open Society Foundation. I'll be spending about a month in the UK starting in May, and then another 6 weeks or so in Australia and New Zealand. I'll have some talks in Canada and other places and there might be more international stops as the tour continues to build out. In the meantime, I've done lots of interviews about the book for newspapers in non-English speaking markets.

Manning: Fascinating. When I read your book, I noticed that you intentionally avoided providing a definition of the term "Woke" at the beginning. Instead, you offered an intriguing explanation. Given that you mentioned the book will be translated into Simplified Chinese and potentially other languages, are you concerned that readers from non-U.S. cultures might feel confused if a clear definition isn't provided?

al-Gharbi: Yeah, as I explain in the book and reiterated on my Substack, I think people overfocus on definitions in a way that often makes things less clear, not more clear. In lieu of a definition, the book provides a lot of historical context around the word "woke." It explores the trajectory of other words that have served a similar discursive function in the past, and so on. I think that context will also work well in translation, and maybe even better in translation than if I'd tried to produce an idiosyncratic definition. But anytime you're doing a translation across languages, there is always the risk of some bits not coming through quite right or getting misunderstood. A lot of the early work by Foucault and Bourdieu, for instance, had early translations that led people to develop erroneous understandings of what those thinkers were arguing, and later revisions were made as a result of subsequent translations. This may be unavoidable to some level. But what I tried to do is provide this thick texture about how different stakeholders understand "woke," and I hope that at least will be able to translate across linguistic boundaries.

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Manning: I noticed that from time to time you use the word *we* to address symbolic capitalists. Also, in the introduction, you mention that *We Have Never Been Woke* is a work by a symbolic capitalist, about symbolic capitalists, and primarily for symbolic capitalists. Can I understand this as your intentional reflexivity in your writing? And how do you view yourself and your position in writing this book?

al-Gharbi: Yeah, I mean, it's definitely an intentional move towards reflexivity, which I think is very important. Some of the people I draw on most heavily for this book, like Bruno Latour—of course, the title comes from his book *We Have Never Been Modern*—and as I detail in the introduction, Latour tells the story about how the modern narratives we "moderns" tell ourselves about how we distinct from others… these stories actually obscure the nature of the modern world and make it difficult for us to understand and address its problems of modernity. In a similar way, I argue that the stories symbolic capitalists often tell stories about being allies to the marginalized and disadvantaged, being on the right side of history, and so on, and these narratives obscure how many social problems come about, persist, who benefits from them, and how.

Pierre Bourdieu also strongly advocated for reflexivity, like Latour. They're very different scholars in many ways, with importantly different projects. But one area where they agree is the importance of reflexivity. So, as much as possible, I tried not just to encourage this, but to embody it myself. One thing I've mentioned in interviews, and might be worth emphasizing here, is that in an important sense, this book is a physical embodiment of some of the things it explains and criticizes.

For instance, one of the things it critiques is the growing use of credentials—especially elite credentials—to determine which voices are worth taking seriously. Who we engage with, and who we don't. But I also went out of my way to target Princeton University Press – a prestige university press – because I knew that publishing it here would lead to a different credibility for the work, and would enhance my job prospects. And part of the reason Princeton was interested in this proposal was because I was coming from Columbia University. If I had submitted the same manuscript as a PhD student at the University of North Dakota, it probably wouldn't have received the same attention, if any at all.

Likewise, the book criticizes how people leverage collective identities for their own individual benefit. But here, again, part of what was appealing to Princeton about this book project is that it was composed by a Black Muslim author who is a columnist for The Guardian, etc. It's not that all Black authors get an automatic greenlight from Princeton. They didn't *just* publish me because I'm Black. But I suspect that if I had written the exact same book as a cisgender, heterosexual white male—especially if I had any hint of conservatism or Christianity about me – it would have been a lot less appealing to Princeton. The book would have been perceived as too risky, and they probably would have subjected me to numerous sensitive readers, among other things. And the public reception of the book probably would have been a lot different too.

I was given a lot more freedom, and the book was more appealing due to my racial and ethnic identity, despite the book's criticisms of these very tendencies within the knowledge professions – to systematically accord people different privileges and credibility on the basis of factors like gender, race, and sexuality. Instead of downplaying or avoiding this tension, I think it's important to lean into it and be honest and upfront about how I, myself, and this work, are both products of many of the dynamics explored in the text. I spent some time on this in the book itself, in a section called *He Who Lives by the Sword* in Chapter 5. But it's a fine line between reflexivity and narcissism, so I also tried to be really judicious about turning the lens to myself, and mostly just made a point to include myself in collective statements about symbolic capitalists.

I was given a lot more freedom, and the book was more appealing due to my racial and ethnic identity, despite the book's criticisms of these very tendencies within the knowledge professions – to systematically accord people different privileges and credibility on the basis of factors like gender, race, and sexuality.

Manning: In academia, as you say, we encounter and, in many ways, embody symbolic capitalism in our everyday lives. So, how can we refrain from engaging in that? Is it even possible in the future?

al-Gharbi: Yeah, I mean, structurally, academics simply are symbolic capitalists. The way we make a living is by what we know, who we know, and how we're known. In other words, we make a living by cultivating and leveraging symbolic capital, both on behalf of ourselves and others. I think that's unavoidable for us as academics: so long as we continue to do the job as it has historically and conventionally been understood, we will continue to be symbolic capitalists.

But I think the core of your question is: Is there a way to do this work that better represents the social justice commitments we espouse? I tried to avoid giving advice in the book, in part because it felt like a non sequitur. Princeton actually wanted me to end the book with something like "12 steps to effective social justice advocacy" or "5 policies to implement." But I thought it was a non-sequitur – to spend 300 pages exploring the history and political economy of the symbolic professions, and then wrap it up with a self-help guide. More importantly, I was apprehensive about suggesting that there are easy solutions to the problems the book addresses—especially solutions that wouldn't require us to make radical changes in the way we live and work.

Another reason I avoided giving advice is that there's this tendency, particularly for those who have the right demographic background, to push public intellectuals into the role of being a "secular priest for anxious liberals." I really didn't want to occupy that role. In fact, in some public events I've done, I've seen an appetite for that, where people respond in a somewhat hostile way when I frustrate their expectation that I should provide them with easy answers on how to live a good life or what they should do next.

I do think these are important questions. If the book raises these questions for readers, I think that's healthy. However, I believe the people best equipped to wrestle with and answer these questions are the readers themselves. They're the ones

who need to figure out what the implications of the book are for their own communities, institutions, circumstances, lives, and lifestyles. I wanted readers to wrestle with those questions themselves.

> *I believe the people best equipped to wrestle with and answer these questions are the readers themselves.*

Manning: Are you ever afraid of being misread?

al-Gharbi: I mean, before the book was released, this was definitely a concern – both for me and for the press. There were all these culture war screeds about wokeness and similar issues, and for people who hadn't read the book, it would be easy for them to make strong assumptions about what the book's argument was and where it fits into the broader cultural landscape. Now that the book is out and people can consult the text, I think some of those initial confusions have largely disappeared among those who've read it, and as a result of the warm reception the work has received from critics. So, that's been a relief, as it's allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the book's arguments, and more fruitful engagement.

Manning: How have other sociologists, and perhaps not just sociologists but social scientists in general, responded to your book? Of course, there are positive reviews, but what are some of the major critiques as well?

al-Gharbi: The reception of the book in the field of sociology has been interesting so far. My job market experience, for example, wasn't great. I came from Columbia University with a non-traditional academic background. I'm Black. I'm Muslim. I had nine peer-reviewed publications at the time (more today). And I had a book under contract with a prestige university press. One might assume that I would have breezed through the market—but that wasn't the case. I went on the market three times before ultimately landing a well-remunerated tenure-line job at an R1 research university. However, notice, that my position is *not* in the field of sociology—I'm an assistant professor of communication and journalism at Stony Brook University.

Doing job talks about this book was quite wild. Before the book came out, it was clear that a lot of hiring committees and other stakeholders in the field were apprehensive about how the project would be received. They couldn't read the book yet, so there was a lot of wild speculation about its contents. There was a real skittishness about whether the book would be a black mark on Princeton University Press and, by extension, any department that hired me. In fact, academics as a group tend to be quite conformist and risk-averse, and sociologists are no exception. We may even be worse in some ways, due to the ideological and political insularity of the field.

> *Doing job talks about this book was quite wild. Before the book came out, it was clear that a lot of hiring committees and other stakeholders in the field were apprehensive about how the project would be received.*

Now that the book is out, however, the reception has been much warmer, both critically and commercially. If I were to go on the market now, I think I'd have a different experience. The reception in the discipline has been pretty positive. I did an interview with *Contexts*, the ASA's public-facing magazine, and apparently, when you add up all the traffic sources, it ended up being the most consumed interview they've ever done so far. I'll be doing a talk at ASA this year for the History and Sociology of Social Thought section. And this interview in the Culture section. I get kind messages all the time from sociology faculty and grad students who read the book, via email and social media. Sociologists have helped organize some of my talks, and attend them in high numbers with very positive remarks after.

So, the reception within the discipline, *after* the release, has been very warm. People now see that it's not a culture war tract. It provides language and conceptual tools that help contextualize the activism since 2010, as well as the current period of backlash. I symmetrically analyze both anti-woke and conservative symbolic capitalists, showing how they have similar motives, dispositions, and ways of participating in politics. This has led to the book being embraced much more now that it's out. Unfortunately, I had to go on the market before the book was available for everyone to read, so I had a rather interesting experience looking for a job in sociology while touting this, now widely-celebrated, book.

Manning: Such a unique journey for a prolific grad student writer on the job market…
al-Gharbi: Well, this project was unusual in that it wasn't originally going to be my dissertation. I was working on a different dissertation, a quantitative project studying public attitudes toward race-targeted assistance programs like affirmative action. That project also had some really cool theoretical and empirical contributions. Initially, I planned to do both my original dissertation and the book, but my advisors suggested I shouldn't try to juggle both. They advised me to make the book my dissertation instead, and I'm glad I followed that advice. The department accepted it retroactively as my dissertation.

This worked out really well because it meant I got two rounds of peer review. First, I had a peer review from the press. Sometimes when a publisher is committed to a title, they softball the reviews. For me, because this is my first book, a lot was riding on it. And I really didn't want to have some obvious thing that I missed that everyone drags me for on the internet post-release. I wanted to make sure it got a thorough vetting pre-publication, so I urged them to send it to some reviewers who would give me the business, and to their credit, that's what they did. And it improved the manuscript a lot.

And then, I also had my dissertation committee review the work after. In addition to my local committee members—Peter Bearman, Andreas Wimmer, and Shamus Khan—we also brought in social movement scholars Fabio Rojas alongside Michelle Lamont from Harvard. Michelle published a great book called *Seeing Others*, which deals with how symbolic gestures actually can matter (under the right circumstances). We reached out to her because we knew our arguments intersected interestingly with my own, and to her credit, she not only joined the committee but also provided incredibly generous and thorough feedback. She meticulously went through the manuscript, suggesting better phrasing, pointing out potential weaknesses, and offering thought-provoking questions. It really made the book a lot stronger.

This process of having two waves of peer review—first from the press and then from my dissertation committee—made the work much more robust. It was invaluable to have such detailed, constructive feedback, and I think the book really benefited from being retroactively accepted as my dissertation in this way.

Manning: I just want to make sure I understand it correctly. You mentioned that your main dissertation project was a quantitative one on public attitudes. Did you continue with that project, or did you fully switch gears to focus on the book project?

al-Gharbi: I had to fully shift gears. When I first pitched the book to Princeton, I told them I could give them the manuscript in six months. But then it ended up taking almost three years [laugh]. I had never written a book before, so I didn't fully realize how different it is from writing a series of articles. In order to develop the argument over hundreds of pages, have the reader follow you across these different sections, while remaining accessible and compelling throughout so they keep reading – it's just a totally different beast. So, I had to put all my other projects on hold, which wasn't my plan. But now that the book is out, I might return to those other projects before I go full blast on writing the next book.

Manning: What do you think about the discourse around the professional-managerial class, especially the rising assumption that the professional-managerial class is hypocritical and harmful to politics?

al-Gharbi: One of the things I had planned to explore more in the book was how people have tried to conceptualize the group I call "symbolic capitalists." They've also been referred to as the creative class, professional managerial class, and so on. I produced a section on this for the book, but Princeton decided I couldn't include a literature review, so it was cut. I later published a version of that content on my Substack.

Regarding hypocrisy, I do touch on this point in the book, but I'll reiterate here: I don't find hypocrisy interesting analytically, not at all. As I mentioned in the introduction, if you believe in something, you're essentially a hypocrite and for several reasons. Moral principles tend to be austere, categorical, and unchanging while the world we navigate is full of ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity, contingency, and dynamism. All of us are born into circumstances that are not of our own making and not fully within our control. As agents, we are fallible in our judgments and limited in our powers. To accomplish big things, we typically have to collaborate with others, which often requires compromises. As a result of these and other factors, our lives and societies are often out of synch with our aspirations and professions. That isn't something unusual, it's not a unique characteristic of any particular belief system. It's the nature of belief given the kinds of agents we are. So I don't find hypocrisy per se to be particularly interesting. What I emphasize in the book is that this gap between what symbolic capitalists profess and what we do is practically consequential. Because we're elites, the ways we behave matter a lot for others – especially for working-class people, less affluent people, non-white people, religious and sexual minorities, and so on. There are practical consequences when we don't live up to our values, and I think those consequences are worth understanding and trying to address. But the hypocrisy itself? Not interested.

Now, regarding the professional-managerial class and its negative influence on politics, one point I made after the election—and in multiple essays before the election, but especially after—was that there's substantial evidence showing how symbolic capitalists have heavily consolidated into the Democratic Party. This has transformed the party's messaging, platform, and priorities, alienating other groups, particularly the people we consider ourselves as champions of —working-class people, less affluent people, non-white people, religious minorities, et al. These groups have been defecting from the Democratic Party, even as symbolic capitalists have become more entrenched within it. What's clear is that this defection is due to alienation from the Democrats, not because of any unique features of Trump. The attrition began before Trump and will likely continue after him unless changes are made. What's interesting is that this alienating nature of the ways we think and talk about politics—has been a consistent feature of the symbolic professions for about a century.

Another essay I published on my Substack is a review of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, written almost a century ago in the UK. It explores how many symbolic capitalists view themselves as allies to workers, but in reality, we are far removed from ordinary working people in terms of values, preferences, and priorities. When we actually encounter the people we consider our champions, we often recoil in horror and try to micromanage or censor them. In turn, they respond negatively by aligning with political parties opposite to ours. This has been a longstanding feature of the symbolic professions for roughly a century, and it gets exacerbated during periods of "Awokening."

Manning: You've been sharing links to your Substack blogs along with our conversation [laugh]. How do you manage to maintain your academic publications while also publishing so much on the side? How do you view writing op-eds? How important is that in your academic life, and how do you balance writing for different platforms? Why do you choose to do that? Sorry, it's a long question!

al-Gharbi: Yeah, so one thing you'll notice in a lot of academic departments is the assumption that public writing is a distraction from scholarly work. But when I went on the job market, I already had nine peer-reviewed publications, and now I have even more, including a recent co-authored article in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, plus a book under contract with Princeton. So my public-facing writing hasn't meaningfully interfered with my scholarly publishing. Part of the reason for that is that I try to make all my work pull in the same direction.

For instance, I often use public writing to test ideas. Here, there are two great features of public writing: First, you get instant feedback. Writing an academic article takes months—six months to write, another six months to get your first revise-and-resubmit, and then even after acceptance, it's months before publication, and longer still before you start to see what if any, response you get from colleagues in other peer-reviewed publications. But with public writing, you put something out, and you get reactions immediately. That allows you to explore ideas and refine them much faster. Second, writing for a more general audience forces clarity. You can't hide behind vague academic language; you have to be direct precise and concise. That process helps expose gaps in my own thinking, revealing areas I haven't thought through enough.

I also use public writing as a stepping stone to journal articles. I'll explore a theme across multiple essays and then realize there's a larger argument that an op-ed or even a series of op-eds can't fully develop—so I turn it into a scholarly article. It works the other way, too. After publishing an academic paper, I often use public-facing writing to explore its implications and applications in ways the original piece couldn't. Public writing also helps drive attention and citations for my research. For example, my recent *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* paper on censorship and self-censorship in science was accompanied by several op-eds in different outlets. Those articles explored themes that didn't fit within the paper's scope and also helped generate more visibility and engagement for the research itself.

My third book is actually going to be about public sociology. It'll be part *how-to* guide and part synthesis of research on why public engagement is so important. Many academic departments still see public-facing work as a distraction, but when you look at the data, the research that gets translated for the public and policymakers often has a much bigger impact on the trajectory of a field than the most-cited articles at any given moment. If you compare what's most discussed in public discourse to what's most cited in academic literature, the public-facing work tends to have more influence—because policymakers, funders, and even students considering entering a field engage with those ideas first. They're not combing through *American Sociological Review* archives; they see sociologists in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* and get a sense of what the discipline is about. That shapes who enters the field, what they work on, and how sociology interacts with adjacent disciplines.

There's a lot of research showing that colloquial science—scientific work translated for a broader audience—plays a crucial role in shaping academic fields. In some cases, it has a bigger impact than narrowly focusing on publishing in top-tier journals and accumulating citations. But academia is still catching up to this reality. So my third book will help bridge that gap by synthesizing the evidence and offering practical guidance on how to engage in public scholarship effectively.

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Manning: Since op-eds and blog posts reach a broader, often non-academic audience, do you actively engage in conversations with those readers? Or still mainly with symbolic capitalists, in your words?

al-Gharbi: Unfortunately, this wasn't always the case, but today, as I discuss in a section, *A Tempest in a Teapot,* in Chapter 4 of my book, the primary readers of news articles tend to be demographically similar to the people who produce the news. This makes it difficult to use platforms like *The New York Times* to reach non-symbolic capitalists, as symbolic capitalists remain the primary audience. While public writing allows you to engage with people outside your specific field—such as policymakers and academics in other disciplines—most mainstream media outlets still cater to symbolic capitalists.

Some non-symbolic capitalists do read *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, so there are occasional opportunities to reach them. However, engaging with non-symbolic capitalists effectively requires different methods. For instance, I have given talks at RV parks for senior citizens and spoken at churches. Local news outlets are another important channel—when non-symbolic capitalists do read newspapers, they are more likely to engage with local news than elite publications like *The Atlantic*. I try to use these other channels when possible, but when it comes to writing for mainstream media, I am mostly engaging with other symbolic capitalists—just those outside of sociology or my specific subfield. That kind of engagement is still valuable but in a different way.

Manning: Could you brief us about your second and third books? Are they still related to symbolic capitalism?

al-Gharbi: My second book will still be on this topic. When I initially pitched *We Have Never Been Woke* to Princeton, the plan was to dedicate half the book to analyzing symbolic capitalists—our communities, institutions, and the ways we leverage social justice discourse in struggles over resources, status, power, and opportunities. In the latter half, I intended to shift the analytic lens and examine the elites and the "normie" constituents who are increasingly defining themselves against us and growing mistrustful. This includes people whose work is tied to physical goods and services, those living in small towns and rural areas, individuals with lower levels of education or income, religious communities, and ethnic minorities. I planned to explore the causes and consequences of the growing sociological distance between these groups and symbolic capitalists, as well as how this distance prevents "us" from understanding their concerns.

The second half of the book was going to argue that issues often treated as separate—such as rising inequality, tensions around identity politics, and the rise of so-called populist leaders like Trump—are, in fact, interconnected. They are all part of the same overarching story: the widening divide between symbolic capitalists and much of the rest of society. I originally wrote the book as intended and submitted it to Princeton, but at 200,000 words [laugh], it was too long. As a result, the manuscript was split in half, with the first part reworked to function as a standalone book—this became *We Have Never Been Woke*. The second half, which offers a symmetrical analysis of these other stakeholders, is currently being revised into its own independent book. It will likely be titled *Those People*. An official announcement should be forthcoming, as we plan to begin shopping it to publishers in the next few weeks.

Manning: And the third book is a very different project.

al-Gharbi: Yeah. It's in part because a lot of people ask me for advice on how to do public writing, and I train people on this a lot—both now as a professor of communication and journalism, but even before that. I served for a while, for instance, as the managing editor for an academic consortium that brought together students who were combat veterans with students from war-affected regions to study conflict together. In that role, I also helped people edit and place their work. Later, for *Heterodox Academy*, a nonprofit where I was a communications director for a time, I also helped people edit and place their work and led writing groups to help scholars learn how to do this. There's a lot of interest in this—people are always asking me for advice. I provide some on my website. But I figured, why not produce a more robust resource for this? A book on public sociology would be relevant for both sociology and journalism – again, tying my interests together.

More substantively, one of the big contributions of the third book is that public-facing work is not just important for increasing the impact of our research and helping others understand its value. It's also intellectually important for shaping the trajectory of fields in ways people don't yet fully recognize. Another major impact I hope the third book will have is pushing more departments to take public-facing work more seriously and to consider integrating it more fully into hiring and tenure decisions. Right now, this kind of work is often seen as a sideshow—something "nice," but ultimately a distraction. I want to shake that up and show that the public impact of a work probably matters more than, say, citations, for understanding the long-term contribution of a scholar to a field.

Manning: Because you mentioned in the book that you draw on the sociology of culture theory and also compare and contrast it with Bruno Latour's theory—what drew you to this specific approach in the sociology of culture? Especially since this interview is for the ASA Culture section, how has sociological culture influenced your thinking about the specific empirical case you're studying? I'll start there, and then I can follow up with other questions.

al-Gharbi: Yeah, I mean, in some ways, I came to Bourdieu through Weber as a kind of starting point. Drawing from scholars like Latour, Michael Polanyi, and others, I was generally interested in discussing people's behaviors in a way that doesn't reduce everything to crass materialism. I think Weber is particularly helpful here for a couple of reasons.

Drawing from scholars like Latour, Michael Polanyi, and others, I was generally interested in discussing people's behaviors in a way that doesn't reduce everything to crass materialism. I think Weber is particularly helpful here for a couple of reasons.

First, he is reflexive—he encourages scholars to apply their own frameworks to themselves. In *Politics as a Vocation*, he has a great line that I included in the book, which runs, "In truth—let's be honest with ourselves here—this belief in the cause, as subjectively sincere as it may be, is almost always a 'moral legitimation' for the desire for power, revenge, booty, and benefits: the materialist interpretation of history too is no hansom cab to be hailed at will, and it doesn't stop for the agents of revolution! But then, after the emotional revolution, comes the return to traditional everyday life; the hero of the believers, and even the belief itself, disappears or becomes even more effective as a conventional slogan in the political philistine's or functionary's arsenal." Too often, scholars operate under what Andrew Abbott calls "knowledge alienation." We can readily recognize that *others* are influenced by all sorts of biases, prejudices, limitations, and interests, but we tend to analyze our own beliefs and behaviors in a completely different way than we do others'. Weber's work in general provides one of the earliest and most generative disciplinary critiques of these tendencies.

Beyond that, Weber is useful because of a key innovation he made over Marx—he widened the lens of how we understand and talk about interests. Instead of defining interests purely in materialist and individualistic terms, he emphasized that *ideal* interests also play a crucial role in motivating our behaviors. People are often willing to sacrifice material priorities in pursuit of ideal interests.

Weber's ideas were particularly helpful in getting me to think about status, class, power, and a broader understanding of interests beyond material concerns. Bourdieu builds on Weber in interesting and generative ways. In fact, Rogers Brubaker has a lovely essay on the relationship between their work, showing how Bourdieu makes important innovations in Weberian thought, drawing heavily from him in ways that aren't always fully appreciated.

What I found especially useful about Bourdieu was his notion of symbolic capital, which provides a more specific and processual account of how distinctions arise and how change happens. I was reading *Homo Academicus* just as the current period of what I call the *Great Awokening* was unfolding post-2010. In *Homo Academicus*, which examines the second Great Awokening in France, Bourdieu describes how academics aligned themselves with social justice movements while simultaneously using these commitments in struggles over power and status. Reading this in the context of our current moment led me to consider whether this period might also be a case of something larger—an idea my later empirical research validated.

At one point, I even considered using a different term—*symbolic revolutions*—instead of *Great Awokenings* to describe these periods of rapid shifts in how people talk and think about social justice. In his book on Manet, Bourdieu introduces the idea of symbolic revolutions and explores why they happen. His explanation isn't far from mine—it rhymes, though

my story takes a somewhat different approach. He also argues, for instance, that elite crises, including elite overproduction, are key predictors and drivers of these symbolic revolutions.

One significant innovation my work offers beyond Bourdieu is that, while he tended to focus on specific fields—*Homo Academicus*, for example, examines academia, *Manet* examines art—I am able to look across multiple fields simultaneously. With the data and tools available to me that weren't available to Bourdieu, I can show that these symbolic shifts aren't just occurring in academia but also in the arts, journalism, entertainment, and corporate HR departments—all at the same time. Moreover, I can demonstrate that the simultaneous nature of these shifts is itself a case of something. When Bourdieu was writing, there had only been one prior Great Awokening; when I was writing, we were in the fourth. Having twice as many cases allows me to ask and answer a different set of questions than Bourdieu could, using different methods and tools. This broader scope lets me contribute something new to the conversation beyond what Bourdieu laid out in his work.

Manning: That's very interesting. As a methodological question, would you say that a key strength of your research is your ability to use ongoing empirical material as evidence to support the theories you propose?

al-Gharbi: I definitely engage with historical research as well. For example, the second chapter of my book takes a cross-historical approach, tracing over a century of these patterns to establish that they constitute a distinct case of something. I go all the way back to the late 19th century, when symbolic professions first emerged, and follow developments through to the present. To build this argument, I use a mix of methods. Some of it involves quantitative analysis of large datasets, but I also rely heavily on historical sources and narratives. For instance, when examining the student protest movements of the 1920s, I incorporate direct quotes from students and contemporary accounts of how these movements were perceived, drawing from various historical materials.

Manning: How does your approach to culture shape your choice of research topics, settings, and methods?

al-Gharbi: I really like that question because I'm really interested in how people come to their research topics. Michael Polanyi has this book called *Personal Knowledge*, where one of the things he stresses is that academics aren't randomly assigned their objects of research. We don't enter a lottery or something—we *choose* them. And we often gravitate towards the particular questions and methods we do as a result of all these really interesting factors. Often, there are interesting stories behind what led me to particular questions. I've shared some of those in different places. For instance, in my paper on Islamic social science, which examines the relationship between regimes of knowledge about society and regimes of power within societies, I did an article and interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* where I discussed how that project came about. Similarly, for my work on how scholars often misperceive and misrepresent Trump voters and their motives, I've done interviews explaining the origins of that research.

> *In terms of methods and theories, I'm really eclectic.*

In terms of methods and theories, I'm really eclectic. I have a BA in Middle Eastern Studies, and a master's in philosophy. I've taught political science, earned a PhD in sociology, and now I'm in a school of communication and journalism. Outside of my home department, I was mentored by a social psychologist and I've co-authored with other psychologists. I work on a broad range of topics—including foreign policy, historical social science, and political analysis. The common thread uniting my work is a focus on questions like: What do we know? How is knowledge produced? How do we form a shared understanding of reality? What is the social life of knowledge outputs? When I come across a specific puzzle or research question, I think carefully about which tools will give me the best leverage to address it. Because of my interdisciplinary

background, I have a wide range of theoretical and methodological tools at my disposal, and I alternate between them systematically to make forward progress on issues of concern.

You can see this in *We Have Never Been Woke*. The book pulls together a lot of the quantitative empirical work I've done by myself and colleagues. It also has a chapter dedicated to historical analysis. It incorporates insights from cognitive and behavioral sciences. It engages deeply with economics and political science. The approach I take depends on the nature of the question I'm investigating.

One method I haven't explored much yet—but I'm very interested in—is ethnography. I have a few projects in mind for the future, once I finish my next two books. I think ethnography can offer a powerful lens into social phenomena, especially when combined with other methods. My advisor, Shamus Khan, co-edited a book on ethnography, and his own work demonstrates how ethnographic insights can be integrated with other approaches to powerfully illuminate society. Mario Small is another scholar who does this really well—he puts ethnographic findings into conversation with other types of data to reveal aspects of social life that might otherwise be overlooked. It's definitely something I'd like to explore further down the line.

Manning: Such openness to methods—you don't seem to hold any hierarchical views about them.

al-Gharbi: Yeah, I don't—I guess I don't… yeah, I don't. I'm interested in learning from whoever I can, from whoever seems to have something to teach me. I'm less concerned with which box it fits into or which discipline it belongs to. Now, of course, this has probably created some challenges for me on the job market, since a lot of departments prefer candidates they can neatly categorize—someone who studies one specific thing and clearly fits a particular departmental need. For someone who works across multiple areas, this presents certain risks and challenges in terms of how my work is perceived by colleagues. But at the end of the day, I'm committed to pursuing the questions that interest me, using whatever methods provide the best leverage. I want to do the kind of work that excites me, and I let the other stuff sort itself out downstream.

Manning: How do you envision the future of cultural sociology—or the sociology of culture? And what excites you most about where the field is headed?

al-Gharbi: I think there are two developments that excite me. One is that there seems to be more interest in things like morality and religion. Morality was a central focus of early sociology—many early sociologists focused on the important role that morality plays in defining a culture, who belongs to it, who doesn't, and on what basis. The study of morality became somewhat passé for a while when Talcott Parsons became unfashionable for political and theoretical reasons. But now, there's kind of a revival of interest in morality, and religion too. Sociology was founded on the study of religion—Weber argued that you can't even understand modernity without understanding key religious shifts. Durkheim saw religion as a crucial source of social cohesion. But as Samuel Perry and others have shown, the study of religion has become more marginal in sociology today. Many sociologists seem to hold the view that the only reason you would study religion—this transhistorical, global phenomenon that influences everything from family formation to political behavior—is if you are religious yourself, engaged in "me-search" or apologetics by another means, or if you hold religiously conservative views – and in a field where conservatism is taboo, scholars' assumed association of the study of religion with conservativism has further marginalized the field. However, there are signs of a revived interest in both morality and religion, and is something I find exciting.

The second thing that excites me is the emerging new tools that allow us to ask different questions. Even throughout my own career—which isn't that long, as this is only my second year as an assistant professor—I've seen major changes. Five years ago, my colleagues and I were excited that we could publish papers analyzing tens of thousands of articles spanning multiple decades from various media outlets. At the time, this was cutting-edge work. Now, just five years later, I've done

projects with collaborators where we've analyzed tens of *millions* of news articles across a 50-year period. The ability to work with such massive datasets allows us to draw conclusions with a statistical power that would've been impossible before, and to uncover historical trends and contemporary associations in ways that weren't possible before. This shift has been supported in part by the open science movement, which encourages researchers to make datasets and repositories more widely available, to share their code, etc. And it's enabled in part by new computational tools. I often collaborate with a computer scientist, David Rozado, to get leverage on some of these really ambitious data projects. Now, large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT might make some of this work even more accessible even for people who aren't buddies with computer scientists… although you should make friends with them anyway. They're nice people!

Manning: You seem to be really positive about these data tools.

al-Gharbi: Yeah. Of course, LLMs have their own issues—they hallucinate sources, they often summarize things strangely, their use raises complex ethical concerns about authorship and intellectual property, and they experience model collapse when trying to produce "original" content based on other LLM-generated content. We shouldn't be too Pollyanna-ish about these tools. But for research like some of the work I've published, focused on detecting patterns in large corpora, LLMs are really well-suited for the job. That's what they were designed to do. You still need a strong foundation in coding, statistics, and relevant scholarly literature to properly interpret, verify, and describe outputs, but the barriers to entry are much lower. And they can enable a wider range of scholars to ask different kinds of questions about cultural outputs – bigger questions—than we've been able to before. And I think that's really exciting.

Manning: I'd like to wrap up: I read your interview with Duncan Moench from 2021, where he suggested you should pursue a nonprofit job over elite academia, but you insisted on staying. Four years later, do you have a different answer to that question?

al-Gharbi: Yeah, I think pursuing a professorship was definitely the better choice. As jobs go, it's hard to beat the life of an academic. We complain about higher ed all the time, but people compete so intensely for these jobs for a reason. To be a tenure-line professor at an R1 research university is truly a charmed existence. Even the things people hate about academia tend to have significant virtues. For instance, while there's plenty to criticize about peer review when it works, it really does enhance the quality of people's work. The fact that I sometimes color outside the lines likely subjects my work to more scrutiny than others. However, rather than whining about bias, I think it's ultimately beneficial in sharpening my thinking and research to be subjected to this pushback. If anything, I think the bigger issue is that some people, when confirming views others want to hear, might not face as much scrutiny as they should.

As I explained in a recent podcast, you can see the value of being in academia by looking at the work of people who leave academia—often, the quality of their work starts to suffer because they're no longer held to the same accountability standards. And they tend to be subject to various forms of audience capture over time. So, no, I don't regret my choice. Despite the many deep faults in institutions of higher learning, staying in academia has been incredibly valuable for my thinking in addition to being a plum job. When these structures work, they truly strengthen the work we do.

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Reports on the Culture and Contemporary Life Seminar Series

By Rachel Rinaldo and Michael O. Johnston

Gender, Religion, and Nationalism in Global Perspective
February 11, 2025
By Rachel Rinaldo

The February episode of the Culture and Contemporary Life Talk Series, hosted by the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association, kicked off the 2025 series by bringing together renowned scholars to discuss the intersections of gender, religion, and nationalism.

Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, along with political scientist Nandini Deo (Lehigh University) and Saskia Schaefer (Humboldt University) discussed how these issues have become increasingly pressing in an era of resurgent nationalism and backlash against feminism. Fauzia Husein of Queen's University (Canada) moderated this very stimulating discussion.

The speakers discussed the role of gender in religious nationalisms and global right wing movements, especially with reference to how the Hindu nationalist movement in India, and Christian nationalists in the US and Europe, and Muslim nationalists in Turkey and Indonesia have mobilized women and how issues such as sexuality, family, and reproduction have been central to such movements and their national imaginaries. The panelists also explored the historical context of colonialism and decolonial perspectives, observing how colonizers sought to discipline gender and sexual practices, as well as how populist governments have often coopted decolonial language to promote conservative cultural agendas.

Overall, the panel highlighted how gender and sexuality are key focuses of religious nationalisms around the world, and yet there is much empirical and theoretical work to be done to explore the complicated and sometimes unexpected contours of their intersections. In particular, the panelists urged sociologists to engage with the insights on gender, religion, and nationalism that have emerged from studies of South/Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa.

In an era of globally connected authoritarian social movements and governments, it is imperative for sociologists to explore how gender/sexuality are often central to their visions, and much can be learned from historical and regional comparisons.

Reframing Behavior, Space, and Identity
March 21, 2025
By Michael O. Johnston

The latest episode of the Culture and Contemporary Life Talk Series, hosted by the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association, brought together scholars and students to examine the shifting relationships between behavior, space, and identity in everyday life. We were honored to be joined by Jack Thornton and Ole B. Jensen who provided deep insights that were anchored by a rich and timely discussion. Together, they explored how the spaces we inhabit—from college campuses to city streets—are not merely passive backdrops but active participants in shaping social life, cultural belonging, and power relations.

This wide-ranging discussion unpacked the social choreography of space in contemporary life—from the stratified spatial trajectories of college students in the U.S. to the urban politics of campus expansion and gentrification. Thornton offered a grounded analysis of how elite university students learn to navigate spatial and social hierarchies and examined how decisions about college location activate a heightened spatial awareness among students.

Drawing from his research on higher education and urban development, he discussed how institutional prestige, geography, and student agency intersect to shape identities and trajectories, and he invited attendees to think critically about the often-invisible spatial dimensions of inequality. Thornton also offered a nuanced reflection on digital surveillance and the blurring of public and private space. He noted how both realms are increasingly subjected to monitoring—from public transit to home-based smart devices—and how everyday technologies like phones and virtual platforms become tools of governance and control.

His attention to the uneven awareness and responses to surveillance highlighted not only class differences, but also divergent cultural orientations toward privacy and authority. Jensen deepened the conversation by introducing the concept of affordances—how the design of built environments enables or restricts particular human actions and identities. Drawing on his work in mobility studies and hostile architecture, Jensen examined how space "acts back" on users, shaping behavior and belonging in both subtle and overt ways. He also discussed Denmark's COVID-19 lockdown measures, emphasizing how social distancing made visible the elastic, relational nature of bodies in public space and offered a moment for rethinking the ethics of spatial design.

Both scholars talked about the difficult question of who controls public space—and how exclusion is often subtly enforced through design and regulation. Whether discussing business improvement districts in New York or the digital surveillance of remote work and home life, they highlighted how power circulates through spatial and technological infrastructures.

A central theme that emerged was the co-agency between human actors and spatial forms, and how everyday spaces—from benches and bike paths to classrooms and bars—mediate experiences of inclusion, exclusion, surveillance, and expression.

As we closed the session, it was clear that our understanding of space is inseparable from our understanding of identity. As scholars of culture, we are tasked not only with interpreting these processes but with participating in their reshaping.

The Culture and Contemporary Life Talk Series continues to offer a generative space for cultural sociologists to reflect on pressing social changes through interdisciplinary lenses. We extend our thanks to Professors Ole B. Jensen and Jack Thornton for their thoughtful engagement and look forward to the next chapter of these conversations.

Announcements

Interested or available in serving as an Editor or Co-Editor of the Culture Section Newsletter for the 2025/2026 academic year? Please send an initial inquiry email to the Newsletter team at asaculturenews@gmail.com

Culture Section Award Winners

John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant

Winner:
Şeyma Özdemir
UCSB

Honorable Mention:
Kristen Miller
CUNY
Honorable Mention:
Yucheng Liu
UCSB

Stuart Hall Award for Advancing the Study of Racial or Ethnic Inequality

Patricia A. Banks
Mount Holyoke College

Mary Douglas Prize for Best Book

Winner:
Reeves, Aaron, and Sam Friedman. *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024.

Honorable Mention:
Pernell, Kim. *Visions of Financial Order: National Institutions and the Development of Banking Regulation*. Princeton Studies in Global and Comparative Sociology. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024.

Clifford Geertz Prize for Best Article

Winner:
Fang, Jun.
"The culture of censorship: State intervention and complicit creativity in global film production."
American Sociological Review

Honorable Mention:
Krippner, Greta R.
"Gendered market devices: The persistence of gender discrimination in insurance markets."
American Journal of Sociology

Honorable Mention:
Yavaş, Mustafa.
"White-collar opt-out: How "good jobs" fail elite workers."
American Sociological Review

Richard A. Peterson Award for Best Student Paper

Co-Winner:
Kristen Miller, CUNY Graduate Center,
"'We Outside!' Bike Life and the Collective Experience of Blackness Beyond Capture"

Co-Winner:
Jack LaViolette, Columbia University,
"Seeing Aliens: How ecological affordances produce UFO sightings"

Call for Book Proposals

The ASA Rose Series in Sociology, a joint publication of the Russell Sage Foundation and the American Sociological Association, invites seasoned scholars to submit proposals for books that offer fresh perspectives on enduring controversies, challenge prevailing paradigms, and provide synthetic analyses of contemporary public issues. The series focuses on critical areas of research, including the Future of Work, Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration, and Social, Political, and Economic Inequality. We also welcome interdisciplinary work that intersects with these themes. Rose Series books are designed to be accessible to both academic and general audiences, ensuring broad impact and relevance across multiple fields. Benefits of Publishing with the Rose Series:

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Rose Book Speaker Series: Hosted by the University at Albany Rose Editors, this lecture series offers authors a platform to present their work to diverse audiences and emphasize the policy relevance of their research.

Interested authors are encouraged to submit their proposals. Proposals are reviewed on a rolling basis. For more information, please contact us at roseseries@albany.edu or reach out to a member of our editorial team: Joanna Dreby (jdreby@albany.edu), Aaron Major (amajor@albany.edu), Katherine Trent (ktrent@albany.edu), and Steve Messner (smessner@albany.edu).

Publications

Leal, Diego F. (2025). Locating Cultural Holes Brokers in Diffusion Dynamics Across Bright Symbolic Boundaries. S*ociological Methods & Research*. Online first, https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241251322517

> Although the literature on cultural holes has expanded considerably in recent years, there is no concrete measure in that literature to locate cultural holes brokers. This article develops a conceptual framework grounded in social network theory and cultural sociology to propose a specific solution to fill this measurement gap. Agent-based computational experiments are leveraged to develop a theoretical test of the analytic purchase and distinctiveness of

the proposed measure, termed potential for intercultural brokerage (PIB). Results demonstrate the effectiveness of PIB in locating early adopters that can achieve widespread levels of diffusion in societies segregated along bright symbolic boundaries. Findings also show the superiority of PIB when compared to classic alternative measures in the network literature that focus on locating early adopters based on structural holes (e.g., network constraint, effective size), geodesics (e.g., betweenness centrality), and degree (e.g., degree centrality), among other classic network measures. Broader implications of these findings for brokerage theory are discussed herein.

Letourneau, N. R., Robey, D. J., & Lamont, M. (2025). Lights, Camera, Activism: Recognition Strategies in Hollywood and Comedy. *Work and Occupations*. Online first, https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884251336699

Against the background of the #MeToo movement and the national reckoning with American racism, we assess how professionals in two fields of cultural entertainment engage in strategies to promote recognition. We draw on seventy in-depth interviews with creatives working in television production in Hollywood and professional comedy to advance a three-part argument: First, we describe seven distinct recognition work strategies they highlight, which differ in their goals, methods, and intended targets. These are categorized into two types: 1) Narrative Strategies ("sparking thoughts and dialogue," "reflecting reality," "Trojan Horse," and "emotional modulation"); and (2) Power Strategies ("see it to be it," "redistributing power," and "creative composition"). Second, we show how interviewees perceive that various constraints limit their capacity to pursue social goals through creative work. Third, we show that their recognition strategies operate in relation to these perceived constraints and how creatives conceptualize their micro-level actions as progressively creating broader changes. Many creatives believe their industry has the ability to transform society in small but cumulative ways; this study shows the ways in which they believe this process works, contributing to the growing literature on occupational activism.

Ly, Louise H. 2025. "Asian Americans as Objects of Desire: Gendered Racialized Attraction among White Spouses Married to East Asians." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. Online First.

Previous scholarship demonstrates that White people are privileged gatekeepers of interracial relationships in the United States; their racialization of minoritized groups has consequences for these groups in mainstream society. This article, based on 34 in-depth interviews with White spouses, examines how heterosexually intermarried White men and women frame their sexual and romantic desire for their East Asian spouses by analyzing their "vocabularies of desire"—socially constructed systems of meaning through which individuals understand and express their romantic and sexual preferences. Assimilation theory suggests that high rates of Asian-White intermarriage indicate the blurring of racial boundaries between these groups. However, this study finds that White spouses' vocabularies reify socially dominant perceptions of racialized differences between White and East Asian spouses, and White and Asian people generally. Consistent with sexual politics and racialized attraction scholarship, White men often use exotifying language to describe their attraction to East Asian women. Previous studies document White women's exclusion of Asian men from their dating and marriage pools; conversely, this study shows that White women who marry East Asian men are not entirely exceptions to this broader pattern of racialized exclusion. Rather than including East Asian men in their sexual and romantic considerations, White women exceptionalize their husbands, setting them apart from other Asian men. Both hypervisible and invisible aspects of the racialization process are apparent in respondents' vocabularies, intersectionally constructing East Asian Americans in sexual and romantic fields as racialized "Others." These vocabularies reflect and reinforce race and gender hierarchies within the intimate realm of marriage.

Marois, Sophie (2025). "Remember, reclaim, heal": commemorating anti-Muslim violence in Canada. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. Online first, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-024-00233-9

This paper traces annual commemorations of two anti-Muslim massacres in recent Canadian history: the 2017 shooting at a mosque in Québec City and the 2021 vehicle-ramming attack against a Muslim family in London, Ontario. Both attacks have prompted numerous commemorative efforts and emerged at the forefront of public debates around Islamophobia, far-right terrorism and hate crimes, as well as inclusion and national belonging. I examine these public contests and memory projects by combining sociological research on memory and commemoration with critical scholarship on the politics of grief. Empirically, I build a corpus of annual commemorative efforts and their associated media coverage (2017–2022), analyzing how practices and discourses of commemoration articulate grief and political grievances. Drawing on this corpus of public texts, I conceptualize commemoration as recognition and commemoration as repair as two overarching political grammars of commemoration in the aftermath of racially and religiously targeted massacres. By attending to these grammars and the barriers they encounter, this paper offers insights into public responses to white nationalist and anti-Muslim violence, and contributes to the growing focus,

within memory studies, on the transformative potential of commemoration. Implications for theories of recognition and repair in cultural and political sociology are discussed.

Qi, Xiaoying. 2025. "Reconceptualizing Crisis: An Empirically Based Investigation." *Sociological Inquiry*. First online.

> Crisis is predominantly characterized in terms of its detrimental consequences. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews in Melbourne and Taipei, the article provides a critical and distinctive understanding of crisis. Crisis is conceptualized here as a disruptive prefiguring of new possibilities, both agentic and structural. In crisis, a situation of adversity is combined with a positive prospect of possibility previously unnoticed or unavailable that is exposed or generated by the disruption. Against the traditional or established tendency to define crisis as a moment or a turning point, the article argues that crisis is best understood as an unfolding dynamic process of change or courses of generative development. In explicating crisis, a counter-transformation approach is developed. Drawing on empirical data, the article expands the sociological understanding of crisis.

Rucks-Ahidiana, Zawadi, Jiwon Choi, and Tsveta Dobreva. 2025. "The Growth Machine as an Agent of Racial Capitalism: Gentrification Coverage and the New Media." City & Community. Online first.

> The growth machine theory uses a political economy approach to explain why city politics center development interests. We argue that the growth machine operates not only to profit from capitalism, but from White supremacy. To capture this dimension of power and oppression, we theorize the growth machine as an agent of racial capitalism and illustrate it through a study of news media's assessments of gentrification in two cities. Our findings demonstrate that the news media assesses gentrification as good for Asian and Black neighborhoods, but as bad for White and increasingly White, Latinx neighborhoods. These racialized patterns of assessment reinforce the connections between race and value: White spaces are valued as in need of protection, while non-White spaces are devalued as in need of change. The findings suggest the need for racial capitalism in studies of how the growth machine operates and the decisions it makes.

Woźny, Anna. (2023). Domesticating the Salaryman: Marriage Promotion, Hybrid Masculinity, and the Resignification of Reproduction in Japan. *Men and Masculinities*. Online first, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X251328018

> This article analyzes the politics of masculinity underlying contemporary marriage promotion efforts in Japan that have been implemented to redress economic and demographic decline. Drawing on theories of masculinities, I demonstrate how official discourse advances a hybrid conception of manhood encapsulated by the figure of a "domesticated salaryman," defined not only by gainful employment but also by sensitivity, engagement in housework, and joint recreation with his wife. Data from a prominent marriage promotion campaign and interviews with Japanese men and women reveal how, despite its progressive veneer, the "domesticated salaryman" as an ideal and practice fails to challenge entrenched inequalities. Instead, it reflects a classed readjustment of Japanese masculinity as it adapts to the new political economy. By situating this transformation in relation to ongoing structural change, I suggest that men's imputed place in the economy must inform how we conceptualize the shifting notions of manhood occurring today. When seen against this background, hybrid masculinity is best understood as straddling the realms of production and reproduction, and their respective gendering as masculine and feminine.

Yaylacı, Ş., Robey, D., & Roth, W. D. (2025). Determinants of genetic essentialist beliefs about race: a comparison of Canada and the United States. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2025.2477748

> With the rise of genomics, beliefs about the relationship between race and genetics are increasingly important. Genetic essentialist beliefs – the idea that races have core essences determined by their genes – are associated with prejudice and justification of racial inequalities. Yet research to understand these beliefs is hampered by a lack of measures across nations. This exploratory study uses the newly-developed Genetic Essentialism Scale for Race to compare genetic essentialist beliefs and their determinants in samples of native-born White Canadians and Americans. We find higher average genetic essentialism among Canadian respondents than their American counterparts. However, examining subdimensions of genetic essentialism shows some of the views that contribute to it are held more strongly in the U.S., and others in Canada. We compare the determinants of genetic essentialism and its subdimensions across these national contexts and suggest further research into the role of multiculturalist policies, educational curricula, and religiosity.