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The Diversity of Culture

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By 2008, the much publicized “cultural turn” in sociology is old news.¹ How far are we from the point where we made our initial turn toward culture? Some say we are in the midst of it (Friedland and Mohr 2004), while others believe we are in fact moving “beyond” it (Bonnell and Hunt 1999). Rather than debate this question, our goal in this special volume of *The Annals* is to add substance to the claim that all sociology must concern itself with meaning. The volume will provide evidence of cultural work being done throughout the discipline by offering updated reports from several different sociological sub-fields. The collection intentionally differs from other attempts to define cultural sociology from a particular theoretical position. Rather than aiming for definitive conclusions, we demonstrate how culture is already put into use in many areas of sociological inquiry, some of which, at first glance, seem to have little to do with culture.

The goal is to provide a justification, not so much in the form of a theoretical defense, but more as a practical argument for the growing significance of culture to our discipline. To paraphrase a comment made by critical theorists, our theory is already inherent in reality—or in other words, in the concrete research of many sociologists today. As Jacobs and Spillman (2005) point out, cultural sociology contributes to other sub-fields by empirically addressing central theoretical issues such as agency/structure, macro/micro,

NOTE: The authors are grateful to the University of California, San Diego’s, Social Science Division, the Department of Sociology, and the Department of Communication for generously funding the annual culture conferences in 2005, 2006, and 2007. Richard Madsen, our department chair, has been generous and supportive throughout. For his input into the idea of an edited collection of articles, we thank Calvin Morrill, who also contributed an excellent piece on organization theory to the volume. We also thank Julie Odland, managing editor of *The Annals*, for her assistance. The editors contributed equally to this project. Our names are listed alphabetically for convenience.

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constructivism/essentialism and others in the discipline. We bring together a group of culture-minded sociologists to document this trend and to comment on the pay-offs and challenges involving the use of culture in different sociological subfields, especially in the translation from the intellectual background of one subfield to another. We think a distinction can be made between knowing the concept of culture and knowing what to do about it.

Taken together, the articles in this volume encompass the agenda of cultural sociology in the broadest sense of the term, covering areas that range from large social institutions, such as the economy and the legal system, to small-group interactions. We are unabashedly catholic, both in terms of the topics included and the perspectives adopted.

The articles show how various approaches to culture are embodied in a wide variety of areas, such as arts, pop culture, organization, education, race and ethnicity, sexuality, science and technology, social inequalities, sociology of law, economic sociology, and microsociology. Rather than policing boundaries, we set forth our sense of a broad cultural approach through concrete discussions of new and emerging sociological research. Cultural theory, during the earlier years of its development at least, fought as much against itself as against other more positivistic and structuralist approaches in the discipline. Part of the goal in bringing

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Mary Blair-Loy is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego. She studies how morally and emotionally salient cultural schemas such as work devotion and family devotion help structure the institutions of the capitalist firm and the nuclear family. Her award-winning book, Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives (Harvard University Press, 2003), shows how these processes work among executive women. Other research addresses these issues among male executives, scientists, and low-paid call center workers.

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together articles with broadly different topics and perspectives is to open doors across different schools.

The editors share with our contributors an abiding concern with the practical application of cultural ideas in empirical research. We believe that theoretical advancement of cultural sociology thrives best when it is engaged with empirical research and concrete social problems on the ground. We abstain from coming up with an analytical definition that fixes the conceptual boundaries of what is taken to be culture. In fact, we happily embrace the chameleon-like nature of culture as a concept and the many shapes and forms culture takes. For us, culture is at once norms, values, beliefs, expressive symbols, as well as practice (Griswold 2004).

Focusing on the diversity of cultural sociology seems natural for us. The sociology department at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), was founded forty years ago by Joseph Gusfield, shortly after the founding of the university itself. As the new department's first chairperson, Gusfield decided to focus on only a few areas; the sociology of culture was one of them. In a recent interview (Society for the Study of Addiction 2006), Gusfield said that in building the department he was influenced by reading Claude Levi-Strauss, Harold Garfinkel, and Jack Douglas, an eclectic group that reflected a varied approach to culture. This eclectic approach to culture continues to be strong in the department, producing conferences and this special volume on the diversity of cultural sociology. The editors' own perspectives range from micro to macro, from qualitative to quantitative, and from the more hermeneutic to the more structuralist. We study language, law, media, religion, science, education, organizations, occupations, gender, social movements, and politics. Not one of us would "only" be a cultural sociologist; indeed, such a distinction does not make sense anymore, as the insights of cultural sociology have been well diffused throughout sociology.

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If a shared conviction runs throughout all the articles, it is the belief that culture and society are always in a dynamic relationship with one another. We draw from multiple sources and inspirations in our endeavors to understanding this dynamic relationship. As Gusfield (1989) wrote,

Both in European and American manifestations, "schools" such as symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, ethnomethodology, phenomenological sociology, semiotics,

critical sociology, and structuralism share this focus on what phenomena mean to participants and observers and how such phenomena attain their meanings. They represent approaches that seek to understand how patterns of consciousness enable us to organize experience. Rather than taking experience as something given, *the cultural sociologist seeks to understand how experience itself attains shape and content.* (P. 5, italics added)

Culture is the term sociologists adopt to face up to the inevitable open quality of society and hence sociology, which is, as we understand it, about the study of society. Our editorial philosophy cannot be summarized in the form of a number of robust theses, for we are not confined by a well-defined conceptual framework; nor do we have an argument that we intend to elevate to the status of a yardstick. We are, instead, informed by a set of basic attitudes.

First, our understanding of culture goes beyond the classical view of culture as a specific interest in art and literature or, more broadly, the aesthetic realm. Although contemporary American cultural sociology developed through the doorway of the sociological study of aesthetic objects and practices (Friedland and Mohr 2004; Spillman 2002), to define high culture as the only self-evident object for a cultural inquiry undercuts the catholic approach we embrace. Of course, literature and art *are* culture (but even the sociology of “art as such” is moving away from an “art ‘is’ culture” position; see Acord and DeNora’s article in this volume). But we want to focus on the simple fact that man/woman is a cultural being. A cultural approach entails a set of questions, a kind of intellectual sensitivity toward meaning, and a way of putting emphasis on human experience. So understood, all the different realms of human activities that sociologists study are cultural. The articles that we have included in this volume—addressing many different subfields of sociology—demonstrate how such a deceptively simple formulation could have profound effects.

Second, we see culture as implicated in the exercise of power. As the topics chosen show, we are convinced that poverty, discrimination, labor and work, the sex market, gay and lesbian politics, and global institutions must be no less matters of culture than some other topics where the cultural approach is perceived to be more dominant. Power is seldom exercised as brute coercive force; instead, it is endowed with legitimacy that ultimately rests on a set of cultural beliefs and values. Our contributors show, in concrete ways, how culture is caught up in various forms of power. Previous discussions of culture in the more politicized areas such as politics, race and ethnicity, stratification, and social movements have been regarded as marginal to the mainstream discussion in the related subfields. We hope the articles in this volume can help to move the cultural approach closer to the center in these subfields.

Third, a prevalent theme in the following articles is the increasing recognition of the *constitutive* effort of culture, a theme foreshadowed in Joseph Gusfield’s (1989) words, cited earlier. We all, as members of society, understand in a general way that culture matters. Many of the articles in this collection, however, elaborate this observation in more rigorous and systematic ways. For example, one emerging trend is the move for sociologists to go beyond a style of argument that relegates culture to a dependent variable and, instead, points to the constitutive

role of culture. The authors explore the diverse meanings and beliefs that individuals and groups adopt to interpret their life experiences and, equally important, how such life experiences are in turn consequential in their social lives. Hence, culture is found to be instrumental in small-group interactions as well as in the reproduction of persistent institutions such as schools, state bureaucracies, the legal system, and the market economy. In the areas of social movements, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and science/technology, the constitutive thesis means that culture is not simply “added on” to the topic at stake. Instead, culture sets the parameters for movement organizers to define their interests and goals. Culture as a set of ideological markers also informs how racial/ethnic, and sexual, boundaries are drawn. Finally, the critical interrogation of reason leads us again to culture to examine the social bases upon which scientific knowledge is produced and sustained.

Fourth, we take the cultural approach as an intellectual orientation rooted in the academic discipline of sociology. Broadly defined, the roots of cultural sociology can be traced to the works of authors as varied as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Erving Goffman, Raymond Williams, Anthony Giddens, Peter Berger, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and many more. Our focus, however, is on how more recent empirical sociological research appropriates culture both as an orientation and a subject matter in the context of American sociology. We believe that the cultural approach has been a highly productive perspective informing empirical research, and that cultural sociologists can themselves very readily study different quarters of the concrete world. Despite the differences, all of our contributors see the cultural approach as a way of arriving at a larger account of social life as a whole.

The articles in this volume, most presented at annual culture conferences at UCSD between 2005 and 2007, demonstrate the scope, depth, and innovation with which sociologists have brought culture to use in different areas. The first three articles explore how culture is understood in some of the major subfields in sociology. Calvin Morrill examines the use of conceptualizations of culture in organization theory, beginning with the early twentieth century, when culture played a marginal and unacknowledged role in research as compared to the dominant rationalist framework. Morrill shows how new streams of work drawing on two perspectives that emerged in the 1980s—organizational culture and neoinstitutional research—have propelled the cultural turn in organization theory. These streams, which address questions of how organizations change, how symbolic and social boundaries are constructed, and how (sometimes catastrophic) organizational deviance occurs, are shown to lead to better understanding of agency and power, not only within organizations but within the larger society.

What is the role of culture in the reproduction of social inequalities? Maria Charles addresses this question through three concrete questions that figure prominently in American scholarship on inequality: (1) How do persons come to occupy unequal social positions? (2) How are social group distinctions generated

and maintained? (3) How is inequality legitimated? Charles notes the recent increase in attention given to the “cultural” aspects of inequalities, such as processes of discrimination, cultural stereotyping, and devaluation. Both Charles and Morrill cite new research that combines micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis and that investigates how culture becomes “structural.”

Nowhere do the political implications of a cultural approach come more prominently to the fore than in the subfield of race and ethnicity. John Skrentny argues that much of this subfield is suffering from the ghost of Oscar Lewis, who first developed the “Culture of Poverty” argument that was subsequently, and wholeheartedly, adopted by political conservatives. Understandably, academics, generally liberal, have shied away from the implications of Lewis’s argument, which they view as blaming the victim. However, other subfields that lacked this political patina—such as studies of racial domination and the social construction of race—did develop either implicit or explicit cultural sociology arguments. Skrentny calls for an importation of the cultural analysis of these subfields into new approaches to ethnic cultures, urging scholars to be *bolder* about using cultural sociology in the study of racial and ethnic assimilation. He also believes that scholars should make analyses *deeper* by focusing on more existential orientations of ethnic and racial groups that may vary and *broader* by comparing different societies, as well as any possible links between the cultures of sending and receiving countries of ethnic groups.

The next set of articles shifts focus from the fluid and dynamic world of social movements to the major institutions of modern society, including education, the market, and law. Francesca Polletta argues that movement researchers long have treated culture as a residual category, drawing from the well of culture only to explain those features of collective behavior for which their structuralist models of movement emergence and mobilization could not otherwise account. When scholars began treating culture more seriously in their study of movements—most fundamentally in the analysis of framing in the mid-1980s—they understood the concept fairly narrowly as the meanings that movement leaders strategically marshal to rouse their potential adherents to action. Polletta moves beyond an understanding of culture as simply strategy to ask how culture constitutes interests and identities in the first place. Using the concept of institutional schemas to think through these processes, she suggests how scholars of social movements might study the ways in which culture constrains practical action, as well as the conditions under which culture serves to challenge the status quo, rather than reproduce it.

In accounting for how the sociology of education has developed, Mitchell Stevens argues that his subfield’s animating concerns—inequality and stratification—have been shaped by a “commingling” of Karl Marx’s theory of class reproduction and Max Weber’s theory of social legitimation—both of which point to deeply cultural (albeit differently conceived) processes. Yet, Stevens argues that these traditions have given rise to the status-attainment tradition which, while technically elegant and empirically revealing, has “tended to obscure the essentially cultural character of educational processes.” Stevens draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s

concepts of the habitus and cultural capital to show how schooling builds on the advantages of already culturally, economically, and socially privileged members of society in unnoticed ways, legitimating social stratification. Finally, Stevens describes three research streams in the sociology of education that deserve further cultural analysis: peer cultures, social networks, and organizational analysis.

Peter Levin's article on current research in the sociology of markets points out a dichotomy that limits how culture is assessed. Studies tend to conceptualize culture either as constitutive of markets (markets *are* culture) or as another independent variable affecting settled markets (markets *have* culture). Levin argues that to move the field forward, we need to understand the relationships between the two approaches. He urges us to conceptualize culture operating in both ways simultaneously and to be alert to the mutual constitution and operation of markets in an ongoing, iterative fashion.

Abigail Saguy and Forrest Stuart discuss the cultural turn in the sociology of law, a field with a long-standing attention to culture (dating back to Durkheim) when culture was viewed as moral values. Saguy and Stuart examine how recent research in the field reconceives legality as a primary cultural framework through which individuals interpret their lives, guiding both thought and action. Law is, according to the authors, taken *as* culture. The new approach abandons the linear causality inherent in a model of independent and dependent variables. Instead, it offers a nuanced and dynamic treatment of law as a site of cultural meaning highly sensitive to contingent factors. The key term here is *legal consciousness*, a concept coined to focus on people's own perceptions of and experiences with the law. The shift in theoretical strategy is simultaneously accompanied by a shift of research attention away from the opinions and decisions of legislators and judges onto "everyday life" in "commonplace" locations like workplaces, communities, and reality TV shows.

The next articles assess the cultural meanings in and of everyday life, science and technology, and sexuality. Gary Alan Fine and Corey Fields argue for the importance of "microsituations," that is, interpersonal and small-group events as arenas of action in their own right. They explain how sociologists must investigate interpersonal situations to study the process of how culture is both produced and experienced on the ground. Their emphasis on the contingent and intersubjective nature of culture is firmly rooted in a recognition of the reflexive self, evident in five major areas of microsociology: groups, cognition, identity/self, performance, and emotion.

Steven Epstein's article on science and technology cites a potential affinity between cultural sociology and post-Mertonian sociology of science yet notes that the two have not interacted much. Epstein divides the history of the field into two time periods and categorizes analysts as being concerned with culture writ large or with subcultures. He summarizes a number of insights from the sociology of science that should be particularly useful for cultural analysis in other subfields, such as the attention to cultural authority, the focus on material objects, and the difference between nature and culture.

Dawne Moon points out that the analysis of the discursive elements in the construction of sexual categories overlaps substantially with cultural sociologists' examination of the social construction of meaning and the concrete effects of this construction. She shows how sociologists who study sex and sexuality engage the sociology of culture in three ways. First, they bring a cultural critique to economic metaphors and ideological assumptions about sex. Second, they explore how people transmit sexual schemas, how sexual culture is reproduced at the interactional level within institutions, and how it is reproduced as "cultural objects." Third, they explore how people internalize sexual schemas such that the meanings of sex and sexuality come to seem natural and intrinsic to individuals rather than culturally produced. Moon also suggests that sociologists' key contributions to the cultural study of sexuality may be in emphasizing the crucial role of institutions in endorsing and promoting certain cultural "scripts" about sex and sexual personhood.

The final two articles address popular culture and the arts. Laura Grindstaff examines the intellectual traditions that have shaped the sociology of popular culture, traces the points of connection and difference between sociologists and other scholars studying popular culture, and argues for the continued relevance of cultural sociology for addressing key issues and concerns within the realm of "the popular," broadly conceived. Grindstaff acknowledges that in the complex cultural environment in which the production, distribution, and consumption of so much of our popular culture occurs, no one discipline has a monopoly on addressing the issues at stake, political or otherwise. She argues that cultural sociology is well equipped to make sense of the popular practices and institutions emerging in the context of the current technological and social "revolutions" in the centrality of and ubiquity of mass-produced and distributed popular culture both at home and abroad.

We end this volume by returning to the sociological study of aesthetic objects and practices. Sophia Acord and Tia DeNora examine new developments in the sociology of art. For them, artworks are not texts that either dictate certain responses in audiences or conversely welcome any response at all. Art works through "affordances," that is, by evoking certain responses and not others. The authors claim that audiences come to art objects with certain hopes and expectations and shape their own experiences in ways to enhance the "effect" art may have on them. They also show how art enters into a variety of practical and political uses that are not necessarily distinct from its aesthetic value. Rather, they argue that there is an aesthetic choreography to the human experience of action in many realms, from the operation of kingship to military ceremony to social movement organization and much more.

Note

1. It was not until the 1990s that the wholesale reinvention of the sociology of culture took place (Crane 1994). As recently as the late 1980s, the culturally oriented approaches to various sociological topics, such as politics, organizations, and stratification, among others, were considered marginal to the concerns of sociology in the United States (Wuthnow 1987; Crane 1994).

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