

The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture

Edited by

Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION
TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

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For David and Lauren

For Leijia

citizens of culture, artists of democracy

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Introduction

MARK D. JACOBS AND NANCY WEISS HANRAHAN

The “cultural turn” of the past few decades has reconceptualized “culture,” even while making it the central focus of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. It rejected, among older theories of culture, the Parsonian conception that culture comprised a relatively consensual system of values and norms that provided evaluative grounding for the other subsystems of action. The varied proponents of the cultural turn objected to this and other conceptions for a number of reasons. Its emphasis on internalization of objective structures restricted possibilities for human agency. It ignored the full range of human subjectivities, even while essentializing categories of status distinction. The theory seemed to describe a cultural system too closed to accommodate the burgeoning definition of identity differences or the urgent need for dramatic social change.

Taking the diffusion of cultural authority in contemporary societies as its premise, the cultural turn embraced a more pluralistic conception of culture, one that recognizes variations in social and individual experience and expresses commitment to values of equality and tolerance. As more people of different types are recognized as cultural actors, the position of culture within society and the terms of its analysis have been transformed. Culture comes to be seen not primarily as a distinct or overarching system of belief, but as something more pervasive and integral to everyday life – indeed, as the very medium of lived experience. The cultural turn, however, reopens the two overriding problematics that older conceptions of culture had once seemed to resolve: how to maintain social solidarity amidst the celebration of difference, and how to ground normative evaluation of action amidst the decline of cultural authority.

The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture demonstrates both the promise of the cultural turn and the outlines of a path for moving beyond it. Taken together, the 28 original essays collected in this volume constitute a cutting edge of the sociology of culture. The volume is framed by consideration of theoretical issues central to the cultural turn: agency and structure, constructivism and essentialism, system and difference. Successive sections in the volume explore the operation of

culture as cultural systems and as processes of meaning-construction in everyday life; as axes of group identity and of collective memory; as the animating energy of institutions and of local, national, and global citizenship. This body of inquiry across such a broad spectrum of substantive topics reveals, unsurprisingly, significant variation in ideas and methods. Emergent from these essays, however, is a new approach to the problematics created by the cultural turn – a gathering reconceptualization of culture that starts to define a basis of solidarity in the very recognition of difference, as well as a new basis for evaluative judgment in the absence of prescriptive cultural authority. This newly emerging conception of culture is an aesthetic one, which offers possibilities for intensifying and re-imagining the experience of civic life.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The opening section of the volume explores theoretical issues emphasized in the cultural turn, issues that resonate throughout the sections to follow.

What causes the transformation or reproduction of cultural systems? How is the causal nature of culture usefully conceived, once the idea of culture as either a “prime mover” or an epiphenomenon is rejected? **Margaret S. Archer** argues that from structural functionalism to structuration theory to cultural Marxism, most theories of culture conflate cultural systems of ideas with socio-cultural interaction. By postulating that these terms are analytically distinct, Archer is able to predict how the variations within each of them interact to condition different cultural outcomes over time, as part of a systematic theory of structure, culture, and agency. From this perspective Archer can explain, for example, why the Reformation and Counter-Reformation generated lasting sectarian conflict rather than restoring consensus in Renaissance Europe, when both were equally concerned with preventing the actualization of secular rationalism.

What is the relationship between culture and cognition? Is culture something out there that individuals internalize, like Bourdieu’s *habitus* or Durkheim’s collective representations, or is cognition prior to culture? **Albert J. Bergesen** argues for a radical essentialism: it is the mind or brain that is generative of culture, but we are hard-wired for plasticity, flexibility, and indeterminacy. In his view, culture is a set of schemas that can be combined in an infinite number of ways, much like a generative grammar that provides schematic rules but allows for infinite variation in language. Applying this analysis to art, he argues that stylistic variation is not a result of the socialization of artists into various aesthetic conventions, but the product of “an art faculty that enables us to produce an infinite number of unique artistic structures from a finite set of primitives, rules, and principles.” The properly sociological moment in the study of art is of the social power that generates selection of the dominant style of any historical period.

Cultural difference has been used as a critique of universalist categories such as the human subject or the autonomous individual, and to demonstrate the gendered, classed, racialized, or sexualized nature of the presumptively culture-neutral public sphere. Because cultural differences are implicated in social stratification, they also provide frequent bases on which to make claims for redress. But a paradox emerges:

the ongoing articulation of difference does not dismantle, but actually reproduces cultural systems. To move beyond the “difference dilemma,” **Nancy Weiss Hanrahan** elaborates a model of gender as a cultural system in which difference functions on three levels and in time. The temporal dimension of this model allows for the contingency of differences as they play out over time, without forfeiting the systematicity that is an important feature of culture and its analysis. The articulation of difference as a political strategy, and its chances of success, are considered in light of this model.

The next set of chapters articulates new understandings of cultural systems. What have been the consequences for cultural systems of the diffusion of cultural authority? How are they restructured and to what extent do they still orient action?

How does the transformation from industrial society to knowledge society alter the relationship between culture and knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge? **Karin Knorr Cetina** argues that cultural forms of inquiry are necessary to investigate knowledge processes. “Epistemic culture” and “knowledge culture” are to knowledge society as national culture was to industrial society, describing the structures and policies of the general knowledge-environment that sustain or discourage certain knowledge outcomes, as well as the arrangements, processes, and principles that constitute knowledge settings.

Ronald N. Jacobs argues that the focus on general interest and nonpartisan news media in sociological research obscures alternative forms of media discourse that have important implications for civil society. He maps media content between the poles of news and entertainment, of general interest and particular interest and of nonpartisan and advocacy reporting, and describes the ways in which these different types of media inform one another to produce a rich language of civic discourse. His research on the African-American press shows how an expressive medium with a particularistic audience and advocacy orientation can be a force of civic engagement rather than civic isolation.

Thirty-five years after Geertz’s seminal essay about religion, **Rhys H. Williams** examines how best to describe religion as a cultural system. Does it lend itself to a structural approach or an agency-oriented approach? Is it a form of implicit or explicit culture? Is it hegemonic or counter-hegemonic? Arguing that religion can no longer be seen as either functional or epiphenomenal, Williams prefers a conception of religion as cultural repertoire. In an increasingly complex and pluralistic society, particular groups make their own interpretations of religion explicit in order to promote them, often for political protest.

Vera L. Zolberg outlines the development of the aesthetic canon through the modern period, and its apparent dissolution in the postmodern one. But there is a puzzle in this seemingly straightforward narrative. If the categories and distinctions that once supported the canon have dissolved, if more types of work are considered art, if there is now a plurality of gatekeepers and indeed, of criteria of aesthetic value, how is it that there is still something we call Art? How do we explain the persistence of Art in contemporary conditions, in which the cultural authority to name it has been dismantled?

Antoine Hennion explores the quirky, seemingly eccentric, habits and dispositions of the amateur, such as the music lover who knows the location of every CD on his shelf but whose filing system defies rational categories. Challenging Bourdieu’s notion of taste as a classification system that can be mapped onto other social

indicators, he analyzes the interactions, devices, bodies, and objects through which taste comes to have these very particular forms. Taste, he argues, is a reflexive activity: through these modalities, both the specific competencies of the amateur and the repertoire of objects that she values are produced.

The next set of chapters considers the construction of meaning and the development of subjectivity in everyday life. How do we see or make ourselves – in the flow of interaction, through our manipulation of cultural objects, or through processes of meaning-making?

Tia DeNora considers how we use music to explore our moods, get ready for work, remind us of people we love, or set the stage for parties, sex, or shopping. In her view, music is not a structure – that is, not something that acts on individuals – but a resource for action, for the production of self, emotional states, styles, and interaction situations. Her model of aesthetic agency provides an alternative to the idea that music “reflects, anticipates, or is structurally analogous to social developments or cognitive styles” and points to the role of material culture in configuring subjectivity.

Material culture is also an important element of **Daniel Thomas Cook**’s research on the commodification of childhood. The baby shower anticipates and configures the child as a consuming subject – even before it is born. The implications of this seemingly innocent social custom are far-reaching. Cook argues that the commodification of childhood grounds consumption in the life course, lending continuity to a consumer culture that would otherwise be only loosely organized instances of buying and selling. He asks, what are the consequences if agency and creativity “continue to move in the direction of being predominantly responses to ready-made commercial meanings?”

Andrea L. Press and **Bruce A. Williams** consider “reality” television and what they call “lottery celebrity.” It is luck rather than talent, the ordinariness of individuals rather than their distinction or accomplishment that makes people celebrities on reality television. What happens when our accomplishments are restricted to the here and now rather than being made available for future generations? Ironically, when everyday life is all there is, it becomes devalued.

Maria Kefalas’s research illuminates the ways in which economically disadvantaged single mothers make meaning out of their experience. Rather than a narrative of lost opportunity, poverty, and despair, the women in her study see motherhood as a way to gain control over the chaos of poor urban lives, and as an impetus for positive advancement, including education and jobs. She argues that since class privilege structures the ideology of mothering in unrecognized ways, poor single mothers are really being stigmatized not for their mothering, but for their class.

The question of identity and difference has become a central concern not only of cultural sociology but also of political sociology and the sociology of social movements. Does the articulation of difference, often associated with positive group identity, necessarily mean the breaking down of larger forms of solidarity? How are we to understand categories of identity that appear fluid in many aspects of individual and social life, yet are often reified in the structures of social stratification? **David Halle** and **L. Frank Weyher** argue for the continued importance of a class analysis that is nuanced and takes culture into account. Their research demonstrates that people inhabit mixed and often contradictory class locations based on a wide variety of economic factors such as stock ownership, women’s labor force

participation, and the impact of globalization. The failure to recognize this complexity can account for the difficulty of discerning statistical evidence of class culture.

Michele Dillon's research challenges the narrow view that the affirmation of identity differences attenuates a commitment to a broader communal history, that difference is somehow antithetical to commonality. She explores how gay and lesbian Catholics work to reconcile their particularistic sexual identities with church doctrine, rather than choosing between being Catholic and being gay. In doing so, they contest and rework the universalizing identity narratives of Catholicism. Her research demonstrates that traditions have multiple strands that can anchor and bridge particularistic differences, making it possible to affirm difference from within, rather than in opposition to, a cultural tradition.

Orville Lee takes a more radical approach to the question of identity difference, suggesting that race is a "structured, cultural object" rather than a permanent feature of social systems and individual identity. Given that race does not inhere in particular individuals or groups but is a socio-cultural logic that imposes racial categories and meanings on individuals, does it make sense to continue to use racial categories for the purpose of making political claims? Do we need racial categories to redress the social injustices of race, or in doing so are we reproducing the very logic that is the target of critique? Lee argues that "the abolition of racial thinking would be a basic normative condition for social emancipation from racial antagonism."

How are we to understand "collective memory," when unified conceptions of culture and history have been challenged by the multiple readings and interpretations of differently positioned social actors? Who has the authority to make collective memory, and how do individuals orient themselves with respect to the past?

Barry Schwartz, Kazuya Fukuoka and Sachiko Takita-Ishii ask why Japanese teenagers feel accountable for their history while American teenagers do not, even though Americans rather than Japanese think that apologizing for the consequences of past events is appropriate. Presenting an alternative to theories that demystify history and commemoration as ideological forms, the authors argue for the importance of culture as an ethos or worldview that enters into the way individuals think about their relation to the past and future.

Jan Marontate analyzes the changing nature of museum practices as these institutions shift from sites of cultural authority to sites for negotiation between museum experts, funders, subjects of museum exhibitions, and the publics that museums serve. No longer the arbiters or final interpreters of culture, museums must respond to the claims of different groups to authority over their own material artifacts and cultural information. These changing ideas about cultural rights, authenticity, and cultural authority affect not only the curatorial decisions of museums, but virtually every museum practice (from the handling and restoration of objects in collections to the manner in which exhibition catalogs are written) and engage the public as an active party to the creation of shared practices and values.

"How can we remember terror, and how can we forget it?" **Anna Lisa Tota** poses this question in her analysis of the commemorations of the 1980 Bologna massacre and the 1969 bombing in Milan. She argues that the commemoration of terror requires constructing adequate sites and objects of memory, such as memorial

plaques at the train station in Bologna and the bus used to transport the dead from the scene. But it was the vitality of local councils, associations of the victims' families, and their collective ability to press the state for resources that ultimately made the difference between the remembering in Bologna and the forgetting in Milan.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici argues that in liminal moments of rapid change, multiple perspectives, and instant information, the witness who can render, record, and remember becomes especially important in making the world intelligible. But the location of the witness in both time and space generates a number of dilemmas. All witnesses, whether third party observers or actual survivors, operate both inside and outside of an event; they are at once implicated in it and freed from its mandates. What does this mean for the autonomy of the witness, and how does it frame his action?

How do social institutions live in the experience of ordinary people? How are the discourses and practices that we associate with institutions constructed or maintained? How are institutional actors accountable to the publics they serve?

Magali Sarfatti Larson sees the profession as a disciplinary culture in that it is ordered, and creates order, on the basis of its mastery of a field of knowledge and its commitment to service. Today, as part of a more general crisis of governability, professions are undergoing a market-driven reorganization that forces on them a macrodiscourse based on risk, cost, and liability. Their consequent retreat from the public sphere vitiates both their claims to competence and their promise of ethical commitment to a social function. Larson calls for a democratic reinterpretation of the professions and the art of governing through serving the public sphere.

Every time we park a car or deliver the dry-cleaning and are reminded of the limits of liability, we encounter the law. Through narrative accounts of how people define and respond to the problems they confront in everyday life, **Susan S. Silbey** analyzes how legality is experienced and understood as people engage, avoid, or resist the law. She argues that the complexity of competing accounts and contradictory experiences actually strengthens the law as a structure of social action – a finding with broad implications for the analysis of social institutions and of culture.

The cultural turn in the analysis of welfare was strongly influenced by feminists who questioned taken-for-granted categories of analysis, revealing their gendered character and meaning. But is it necessary to sacrifice objective measurability to pursue interpretive analysis? Just as telescopes enhance our ability to see, **John W. Mohr** demonstrates that scientific tools such as formal models of analysis enhance our understanding of the social construction of welfare categories and its accompanying discourses. For example, Mohr maps a Gallois matrix to reveal the tight homology between acting and knowing as mutually constitutive dimensional orders.

What does the chronic nature of scandal say about our public life? Why, because of that very chronicity, did the organized theft of a half-trillion dollars through government-encouraged bank fraud over the course of two decades attract relatively little public attention? **Mark D. Jacobs** defines public scandals as “ambiguous and suspenseful public dramas of the struggle between good and bad faith,” and claims that they “germinate in cultures of corruption, secrecy, and suspicion along the fault-lines of and between politics and business.” His case study of the savings and loan

scandal as a narrative of bad faith illustrates the way the “no-fault society” erodes the very concept of accountability.

The final set of chapters shows the utility of a cultural approach to problems of citizenship and democracy. What does culture have to do with the constitution of public discourse and public space? How does it enable and constrain civic action?

It is almost a commonplace that the more individuals participate in voluntary associations, the stronger democracy will be. But “do actually existing civic groups live up to their theorized potentials?” **Paul Lichterman** analyzes the “civic customs” of two local groups – a gay coalition and an alliance of mostly Protestant churches – and finds that their styles of membership (bonding) and self-understanding with respect to the larger world (boundary-drawing) offer very different possibilities for citizenly conversation and empowerment. His cultural approach to problems of citizenship adds nuance to the simple call for more civic engagement, and establishes a critical framework for evaluating the democratic potential of civic groups.

How should we be talking about cloning or genetic engineering? What are the appropriate terms of the public bioethics debates? **John H. Evans** claims that “thick” discourse concerning the ends we should pursue is being eliminated from the public sphere, replaced by a much thinner discourse focused on means. Linking this historical development, in part, to the exclusion of religious discourse from the public sphere, he argues that we need to find a way to use religious discourse – as one possible conversation about ultimate ends – to enrich the debates about bioethics in a manner consistent with our democratic ideals.

What are the implications of economic globalization for the emergence of a system of global democracy? **Diana Crane** compares the “hegemonic” interpretation, that globalization processes are dominated by transnational corporations in the service of an economic elite, with a “civil society” interpretation. In the alternative forms of the latter interpretation, the major actors are either a global system directed by international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, or transnational social movements that form advocacy networks and public spheres. Among the cultural flows Crane considers is the emergence of a rationalistic and scientized culture of experts whose purpose is to develop rules and standards for policies that may be globally applicable.

What does the closing of a theatrical production in Warsaw in 1968 have to do with the fall of communism 30 years later? **Jeffrey C. Goldfarb** argues for the central role of autonomous culture in axial political change. The alternative values and conversations of the arts and sciences are not in themselves blueprints for political action. But they can open up possibilities for an expanded arena of public freedom and suggest new modes of interaction – a “politics of small things” – that can have far-reaching consequences for the constitution of democracy.

Nancy Fraser argues that problems of social injustice should be addressed through a perspectival dualism that allows us to see the imbrication of cultural and economic forms of subordination. But what are the appropriate cultural terms? Rather than understanding cultural forms of injustice through categories of identity and difference, she suggests we consider it a problem of status, of “subordination in the sense of being prevented from participating *as a peer* in social life.” This effectively links cultural injustice to the normative issue of parity in interaction

and suggests that remedies be sought within social institutions, rather than in positive images of identity groups.

THREADED THEORETICAL ISSUES

True to the premise of the cultural turn, these chapters attest to the weakening of many traditional forms of cultural authority. Marontate discusses how cultural relativism undermines the cultural authority of the museum, transforming it into a site of mediation among the cultural rights of numerous claimants. As Zolberg recounts, under the influence of postmodernism, not only does the canon that enshrines artistic “masterpieces” lose its authority, but so does the very boundary that defines what counts as art. Hennion’s amateur is free to resist expert opinion in fashioning her own taste in the practice of reflexive self-expression. As the authority of the state and the authenticity of collective memory come increasingly under suspicion, officially promoted memories of terror evoke counter-memories emanating from civil society, as Tota documents. The significance that Knorr Cetina attributes to “epistemic culture” provides perhaps the most dramatic evidence of the weakening of traditional cultural authority, which casts into doubt the very production of truth and knowledge. In detailing one case of the “no-fault society” that systematically corrodes any conception of meaningful public accountability, Mark Jacobs demonstrates why chronic scandal is characteristic of contemporary society. Beset by the external forces of market and managerialism, as well as the internal forces of stratification and competition, the authority of professionals narrows to its technical component, in Larson’s analysis. No longer, as Evans documents, do theologians feel entitled to voice their views about ethical issues in the public sphere.

The weakening of traditional forms of cultural authority displaces rather than negates the varied ways large and small that “culture matters.” Because, as Archer argues, cultural powers are variable, in certain conditions culture has the power to cause societal transformation. Globalization can be conceived, as Crane does, as a set of cultural flows – and the type of flows will determine whether the process is “top down” or “bottom up.” As Schwartz, Fukuoka, and Takita-Ishii find, culture produces entirely different patterns of collective memory and accountability from one nation to another. Culture naturalizes the political and economic injustices whose workings, revealed by Fraser, are disguised by status distinctions. The culture of civic groups has the power, as Lichterman demonstrates, to narrow as well as to expand citizens’ horizons. Culture so strongly influences the way ordinary people understand their class position, as Halle and Weyher show, that it becomes a central variable in understanding any action (like voting) from the point of view of class. In more mundane ways, as Press and Williams note, culture helps young people formulate and navigate the soap opera-like melodramas of their social lives. And – among many other examples contained in these pages – culture, in DeNora’s analysis, helps align cycles of physical and emotional energy with the rhythms of everyday domestic routine.

Theoretical issues central to the cultural turn naturally receive attention in these chapters. Culture mediates structure and agency. By distinguishing system integra-

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