OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW
by Richard A. Peterson

John Hall, Chair of the section Nominations Committee, announces that the section membership has selected Gary Alan Fine as Chair Elect (and thus Gary will chair the Program Committee for the section sessions at the 1989 ASA meetings in San Francisco). Also, Liah Greenfeld and Ann Swidler have been elected to the section Council for three-year terms. Warmest congratulations and welcome to all three. Vera Zolberg becomes section Chair as of the ASA meetings in August. Our section's fate could hardly be in better hands.

It is almost two full years since I was elected Chair of the Section-in-Formation at the ASA meetings in New York. We have come a long way together since then - but not nearly as far as the gentleman on the right. We quickly got the 200 members and became established. Membership has continued to grow so that we are now one of the "middle-sized" sections. We have enjoyed excellent sessions at the Chicago and Atlanta meetings. (For details of the latter, see page 2 below.) We have made progress toward a curriculum package for culture-related courses, and we have established a newsletter that many members report actually reading.

Vera Zolberg takes over with the mandate to continue the growth in section membership and in services to members. Growth in numbers may be particularly difficult this coming year because the ASA Council has elected to increase the dues it keeps from $5 to $8. The section membership has also voted to increase dues by $2 for section projects. Thus section dues for regular members go from $5 to $10. (The good news is that students and (if the ASA approves) those earning less than $15,000 will continue to pay just $5.) Whether a five or tenner, by all means, renew your section membership so we can sustain culture as a growing concern in the discipline.

SERVICE TO MEMBERS: first, CULTURE is now more clearly visible to our colleagues. Second, the newsletter has become a lively channel of communication and can become even more so. (To this end, please submit citations of current journal articles of interest to culturalists; information on movies useful in class; requests for information, contacts, etc. useful in your research; and information about general or special-topic reading lists. As an example of the latter, I would be glad to send you a sociology of culture reading list created at Vanderbilt for our graduate special area exam in culture.) Then there is the curriculum project chaired by Rosanne Martorella. In addition, we would like to circulate a section membership address list that includes people's research and teaching interests. This latter is not a difficult task but needs someone to take the lead in getting it done.

12:30 PM 195. Sociology of Leisure and Popular Culture 196. The Sociology of Love and Friendship


Saturday, August 27
8:30 AM 117. Section on Social and Ethnic Minorities. Roundtable 3: Gender and Social Inequality: Ethnicity and Gender in Two American Communities

10:30 AM 119. Didactic Seminar. New Methods for Cultural Studies de Wendie Graverolle

12:30 PM 131. Cognitive Sociology

141. Section on Medical Sociology. Roundtable 3: The Examination of Social Aspects of Health

2:30 PM 143. Sociology and the Other Social Sciences: Cultural Studies

10:10 PM SESSION PARTY Vera Molberg's room - confirm details

Saturday, August 27

9:30 AM BUSINESS SESSION: Section on Sociology of Culture

CULTURE 2
THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE IS A CAPACIOUS FIELD

Vera Zolberg, New School for Social Research

Statements on culture by Liah Greenfeld (Newsletter vol. 2, no. 1) and Jeffrey Goldfarb (vol. 2 no. 3) face us with extreme positions. Greenfeld sees the sociology of culture as "perspective not specialty". Encompassed in its subject, "symbolic reality", are values and norms. But these, she argues, following Weber, are central to every substantive domain of social action, all of which are grist for the cultural sociologist's mill.

Against this view, Jeffrey Goldfarb calls upon us to recognize sociology of culture as a subfield whose objects of investigation should be limited to "the arts and sciences broadly understood." Resolutely distancing himself from those who reduce the arts and sciences either to reflection of society or ideology, he contends instead that culture "is an autonomous sphere in the modern world" best understood as "interrelated with other spheres of life, but developing significantly apart from them." In his terms, autonomous culture is emergent from the conversations of cultural agents through their knowledge and contacts with works and producers, in the processes of production, distribution and consumption, bound up in a general framework of interpretation.

Interestingly, we find Weber called upon by both Greenfield and Goldfarb, the former to show that ideal-type understanding of social action requires that we bear in mind all aspects of the symbolic in order to arrive at a concrete understanding; the latter to emphasize the increasing specialization of domains in the rationalizing processes of society. If Greenfield's presentation makes for an overly diffuse conception of culture (at least, as Goldfarb sees it), Goldfarb's seems to sacrifice breadth for the sake of his own value position. Even while we may agree with his project of extricating an understanding of art and science from the functions socially imposed upon them, I contend that his proposal too narrowly confines them to a domain of "experts," ignoring the extra-aesthetic aspects of their traditions and lay interpretations, and their embeddedness in domains as broad as those Greenfield points to.

My own view is not to attempt to destroy the two positions and interject a third in the French manner described by Claude Levi-Strauss in Tristes Tropiques. Rather, I welcome the discussion which they provoke, as well as syntheses of approaches such as that recently presented by Robert Wuthnow in Footnotes. For a Section which did not even exist two years ago, and which today has attained a membership of over 500, we are far from ready to limit our concerns. Such large numbers are not proof, but they suggest that sociologists are searching for an intellectual home in which they will be able to explore specialized substantive fields from standpoints which have until relatively recently been on the margins of the discipline. Although many are far from adopting the particular Weberianism of either Greenfield or Goldfarb, they seem ready, as our Section program in Chicago and the one in Atlanta suggest, to reexamine their substantive concerns in the light of the problematics of culture and the power of symbols.

Thus, in my view, the sociology of culture is a capacious field whose folds can encompass a range of approaches and subjects once excluded through a premature semi-codification of knowledge. Without arguing that sociology of culture should adopt a post-modernist "anything goes" stance, I believe that we are not yet ready to reject any substantive content—art, religion, science, political ideology—approached from symbolic or discourse analysis, with full attention to the social structural and historical processes in which meanings are created. In fact, our goal at this stage should be the construction of our own field, with the awareness that however it comes out, we begin with no pre-ordained final position.

We welcome brief statements from Section members concerning "culture" and the thrust of the Section. Also, statements citing relevant literature that detail recent developments in particular areas are welcome. Ed.