

Culture

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A Message from the Chair

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On Boundaries--Conceptual and Actual

I was thinking about what to write as a message from the Chair when news came over the radio of the attack on one tower of the World Trade Center. Turning to the television set I saw the attack on the second tower, the collapse of both buildings and later, the destruction of a large segment of the Pentagon. What has unfolded in the subsequent two weeks has given me—like all of us—much to ponder as a sociologist and citizen.

The events of September 11 would be hard to explain to anyone who believes that culture is not a powerful factor affecting the structure of society. The attacks were directed against the landmarks that symbolize American society. There seems little doubt that the attacks were the work of terrorists who see their ideological differences with the United States, its ethos, its government, and its economics as polar extremes. Dichotomous distinctions between western thinking and religious fundamentalism pushed them to plan the horror. The twin towers of the World Trade Center were more than office buildings; they were a symbol of western values and practices, housing major financial institutions, corporate law firms and government agencies.

Destroying the buildings and taking thousands of people's lives was meant to cast a wide pall on American society. The American response also tended toward polarity. "More than acts of terrorism they are acts of war," President Bush said and set to the task of defining the enemy.

The borders people draw, creating geographical or conceptual boundaries—that categorize and define—are a source both of conflict and of order as Durkheim noted just at the turn of the last century. For us sociologists, the horrendous event constitutes (if I may be so disengaged for a moment) a field experiment to find ways in which boundaries—socially created

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Editor's Note

Please let me know your ideas for submissions!

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Styles of Political Engagement

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In this essay I will advance an argument about political culture that undergirded but had to remain largely implicit in my recent book, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). This argument stayed in the background to allow a focus on the substantive, non-disciplinary, "public intellectual" purpose of the book. To provide some context, I'll describe the book before stating the argument itself.

Cultural Dilemmas explores the current state of American political culture through participant observation of local social change groups. In the research, I observed not only discourse but also practices such as storytelling, ceremonies, meetings, and actions. In addition to some short case studies, the book contains multi-chapter treatments of congregation-based community organizing and of human rights work as found in Amnesty International. The former is a major contemporary
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The Simpsons and the Sopranos

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The Simpsons and the Sopranos. A mob and a cartoon family on TV. They don't seem very similar, yet upon closer examination they share a lot in common that tells us something about what we think about these days (to the extent that any piece of popular culture informs of broader outlooks). Both Homer Simpson and Tony Soprano are middle-age heavy set (Homer: paunchy) guys with dysfunctional families who live in the suburbs and are stuck in jobs they aren't crazy about. Both shows open with the principals driving their totems of suburban ascendance – Homer's station wagon and Tony's SUV – up to their homes. They both have long-suffering wives, Marge and Carmela, who, by and large, stay at home
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boundaries—create conflict or unity—a major interest of the Culture Section (and of mine).

An example of boundaries leading to conflict is clearly seen in the graveyard of Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center. But the reactions since the attack show the ways in which dichotomous thinking has created coalition, connection, and in many cases, a breakdown of categories among New Yorkers and other Americans. As one survivor put it describing his harrowing escape down 87 floors “there was no gender, no race, no religion. It was everyone, unequivocally helping each other.” (*New York Times*, September 16, 2001). Further, a normally partisan Congress stressed such words such as “bilateral,” and “bicameral.” The boundaries that had created conflict now strengthened the ties within groups, expressed in hundreds of ways, as a sense of unity. Everywhere one sees the American flag—on the site of the explosion, on the streets of New York, draped on the hoods of cars, at fire stations and public buildings and small businesses on the roadways out of the city and in the small towns. Throughout the world, sentiments of connection poured out exclaiming as did the French (normally guardians of their unique status) in the newspaper *Le Monde*, “We are all Americans.”

For those theorists who propose that there is no reality beyond that which is interpreted individually by people there is the heart-breaking reality of broken and destroyed bodies and bent steel. But, of course, there is also the *real* of the symbolic, the ideas that led to the destruction. “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,” wrote W.I. Thomas in 1928. We assume that the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center defined their target as a symbol of a civilization so evil that it merited destruction. And we, in response, cast them as mindless fanatics. This kind of destruction, stemming as it does from defining a population, as “other” is not unique. The Nazis systematically sent thousands of Jews and Gypsies to their deaths in extermination camps every day during World War II for no other reason than the definition that separated them from the rest of the population. And the arbitrary lines drawn in the former Yugoslavia drove individuals of mixed heritage to define themselves narrowly as Serbs or Croats as they faced annihilation.

What can we sociologists contribute to an analysis of such destruction and the symbolic thinking that leads to it?

In the past few years, culture—long relegated to the anthropologists or pushed off to the side of the sociological agenda—has emerged as an important aspect of the sociological task. Boundaries are now a focus of a number of sociologists of culture who have organized its study to include broad issues of classification and its dynamics. They are also examining programmatic topics such as the use of discourse and rhetoric and particular symbols—among them anthems, flags, and historical memorial sites—to define groups and create identities.

Moving from a tradition normally associated with the symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists and philosophers, calling to mind Wittgenstein, Schutz, Garfinkel and a number of scholars not associated with those traditions such as Bourdieu, DiMaggio, Lamont and Wuthnow, sociologists have explored the interplay between acts of symbol-making and their establishment in what we have tended to think of as structure.

Their work does not just regard social construction loosely, but explores systematic and consciously set and collectively created meanings and conventions. It explores the impact of categorization not only on everyday life (a rich topic) but its role in the institutionalization of structures (such as in institutionalized racism and sexism); the work of social actors in maintaining systems of meaning; and the ordering of such meaning through categories. One aspect of this is the emphasis on boundary setting and boundary maintenance.

The field has moved beyond classifying divisions of society by groups’ access to material goods, to classifications based on access to knowledge, taste, networks, social skills, language and the means of cultural production such as radio, and film.

—We have also become more interested in identifying those people or groups who create the classifications. In the case of the World Trade Center, those who classified Americans as an evil society mobilized followers who went to their deaths to draw the boundary starkly. It is not always so easy to locate the designators of categorical distinctions. Powerful leaders define but so do ordinary people with interests in distinctions.

As sociologists have provided concepts to everyday parlance such as “role model,” “socialization,” “significant other,” and “unanticipated consequences” and insight into their processes, now “binary distinctions” as a form of boundary analysis ought to share the screen alerting individuals outside the academy to the mechanisms by which people divide into separate and hostile camps. We already have much to contribute as we professionally look at the construction of moral orders that are as powerful if not more powerful as the strength of the muscular, of battalions of armies, the rule of kings and priests.

From Durkheim to Bourdieu we sociologists have articulated the role of distinction in defining social life. More recently Michel Lamont and Michel Fournier’s fine collection on *Cultivating Differences* laid out work by a number of scholars on an array of boundary issues that are the consequence of binary categorical thinking with consequences for individuals’ attitudes and behavior with regard to art, music, taste, politics and gender. And Steven Vallas has analyzed the boundaries that divide workers as working with their heads or their hands with consequences that undermine the recognition of skill at every level of employment. These few examples are only a tiny proportion of sociologists’ work of this type to which policy makers and others could turn with profit in these difficult days.

Many sociologists, then, have helped us to understand the fallacy and indeed the evil of dichotomous thinking in everyday life. The horrible events of September 11 demonstrate not only how important it is to rid ourselves of these habits of thought, but also how entrenched they are. Those events make it incumbent on us to scrutinize our own professional practice for vestiges of dichotomous categorization. Ironically, we find that some of the very scholars (both inside and outside of our discipline) who attack the marginalization of “others” wind up nonetheless reproducing dichotomous thinking.

In the last several decades sociologists critically examined underlying paradigms that orientated scholars’ analyses in such fields as the family and gender, race, professions,

organizations and the workplace in general, class, poverty, theories of structure and agency and science. This led to much creative thinking. But it also led to dismissal and derogation of work done in the past and drew boundaries around the legitimacy of inquiry of categories of scholars. For example, researchers' backgrounds (ethnicity, gender, and race) were regarded as reason enough to call into question their powers of analyses. Such perspectives suggested that insights into group processes could only be identified by group members—insiders. Western scholars were regarded as empathetically challenged or conceptually impaired when studying eastern societies and men were regarded as unable to contribute to the understanding of women in society. Attempts at objectivity and scientific analysis met with harsh criticism. Although scholars were rightly critical of implicit and explicit biases within the social sciences, too often, the scholar's category (e.g. white men, middle class women) rather than the work, was branded. Identity politics in academia undermined the opportunity to build on contributions of the past.

Some use science (selectively) or damn science. Scholars who regard boundaries that lump a whole population of women together as "women," feel free to make a binary distinction between "white" women and women of color. Some of these also essentialize women and men or if they do not essentialize women, white men are always fair game. Indeed, any contribution of the reviled "other" is regarded as impaired conceptually or charted to preserve a set of polarized interests. There is no need to chronicle more examples. Scholars, like politi-

cians and terrorists (of course, with different intents)_engage in boundary control, and like them use rhetorical strategies, create symbolic icons, establish separatist organizations or subgroups within larger ones and create communities of thought based on the nostalgia of past histories.

Thus, as we think about how to apply our knowledge about the consequences of binary polarities we need to clean our own conceptual houses. The ideologies of identity politics in the academy as well as outside the academy often slow the engine of revelation.

—In my book, *Deceptive Distinctions* (1988) I sought to document the investments of groups (both subordinates and superordinates) in maintaining binary categories. Distinctions based on sex and gender was the case in point. Then, as now, I believe that dichotomous thinking in thought and in practice creates blinders to diversity in society and the inevitable invidious comparisons that lead to exploitation and disaster.

Through my office window, I have a view of the Empire State Building—a symbol of American culture, and conceivably a potential target of attack. I continue to hear sirens screaming down Fifth Avenue. It is a constant reminder of the power of categorization that has brought us to this tragedy, and of the nature of sociologists' inquiry into the consequences of boundaries, binaries, and categorical thinking. For sociology to be on the cutting edge and to be useful in contributing to social justice, we have to be on guard against dichotomous thinking both in theory and in practice.

Styles of Political Engagement, continued

economic justice and democracy movement, with 133 local projects in cities around the country working on similar issues (mostly local but some statewide) through a basically common political methodology. To give some scale of the movement, approximately 3,500 congregations are actively involved, paying dues and devoting significant energy to the work, and these congregations contain nearly 3 million members. Human rights work is a good comparison case. It expresses the other core progressive agenda—the quest for individual liberty and dignity—and is secular as an organization, although its members sometimes have religious motivations for their human rights concerns. Using data from the case studies and the theoretical perspectives from cultural sociology, the book takes on issues about individualism and the role of religion and culture in politics more generally debated in the work of social critics such as Robert Bellah, Richard Rorty, Todd Gitlin, and Robert Putnam. Whereas most work on culture and politics deals with the right (manifesting the still-influential Enlightenment assumption that progressive politics is more natural and less in need of cultural analysis) or with politics around issues of obvious cultural concern such as sexuality, my focus is on progressive politics and especially work on economic issues.

Styles of engagement as a dimension of political culture

Culture

My basic argument is that to understand political culture properly we need to pay attention to styles of political discourse and action, not just their substantive content. Of the many dimensions on which such styles can vary, let me mention three. Sometimes public discourse is full of moral passion; other times it is cool and instrumental. In some movements issues are linked in a unified social vision; other movements are resolutely single-issue. Sometimes movements link politics to values and allegiances arising from the cultural traditions to which people are connected in their extra-political life; at other times they decouple politics from civil-societal cultural traditions.¹

Here are two cases from my fieldwork that show differences in styles of engagement.

The Cincinnati Area Coalition against U.S. Intervention. During the Gulf War of 1990-91, a peace movement around the country worked to oppose U.S. policy. In Cincinnati, a loosely structured group formed during that period and fielded a few antiwar actions. At coalition meetings, discussion was entirely on nuts-and-bolts subjects, and it soon became clear that this was not an accident but an explicit choice. At a meeting in February 1991, when the ground phase of the war was already underway and it was clear that the war would end within a few days, a draft political statement was brought up but immediately put aside without discussion. In making this choice, the group decided not only not to take a

public position beyond demanding that the war end but also not to have an internal discussion of the issues raised in the draft statement. A little later in the meeting, a member tried to raise broader questions: What are we as an organization fundamentally about? How do we want to change the United States so that the country will make fewer wars? He argued that the goal of stopping the war didn't make sense any more because it was going to be over soon anyway and evidently we weren't going to stop it. So maybe, he said, we should think more about our broader purposes. He was, in a friendly way, ruled out of order. No such discussion as he proposed took place at that or any other meeting.

What explains what happened at this meeting? The obvious, practical explanations are implausible. Lack of time was certainly not the issue. The remainder of the evening was spent discussing, in mind-numbing detail, two elaborate proposals for the organizational structure of a group which was never to meet again. Nor can we adequately explain the constraints the group imposed upon itself by desire to avoid alienating potential supporters of ending the war through an over broad public statement, since the group restricted even its *internal* discourse. A third possible explanation, that the group was in danger of destructive internal conflict if discussion became broad or passionate, is also implausible. In fact the group was relatively homogeneous politically. Some of the members were students, but the rest were long-term peace activists who had been demonstrating together for years against American policy in Central America and, for the older ones, Indochina. There were certainly differences, but I doubt if there was a single participant who opposed the Gulf War alone without feeling that there were underlying reasons why the United States tended to get involved in problematic wars.

Something deeper, some set of customs or rules—learned in the group or brought in from other political experiences—appears to have been in play. There seemed to be an implicit rule that people's reasons for belonging and their ethical sentiments were an entirely private matter. Any discussion of topics beyond nuts and bolts was effectively embargoed. Connections between the immediate political issues at hand and general social or political visions were not made. Nor were links forged between people's politics and the more general cultural traditions, such as religious and ethical values, to which they were attached. Furthermore, these activists expressed little passion and transcendence, even though in fact most of them were highly committed to their cause.

This pattern, manifesting a highly *constrained* mode of public discourse, can be found over and over among political groups of all stripes. Such styles are enduring patterns. Unlike the ones adopted by politicians under the influence of their consultants, they are usually not manipulated instrumentally. The operative rules expressed in these patterns are not just practical adaptations. Rather, they are ethically charged. They may be implicit or customary rather than explicit, but activists have a deep commitment to them. In some of the groups I studied, such as Amnesty International, one even hears explicit discussions about what style of political engagement is best, forming a layer of "secondary discourse" laid on top of the "primary discourse" about substantive political issues.²

Milwaukee Innerscity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA). MICAHA is an instance of congregation-based community organizing. This movement melds a variety of religious social action traditions and the philosophy of community organizing developed by Saul Alinsky—who was a secular Jew—into a distinctive religio-political language that is far more expansive than the discourse found in the antiwar group.

At MICAHA meetings, people are present not as individuals but as representatives of their congregations. In front of me at the table around which the MICAHA housing task force met was a manila folder bent into a simple name plate reading, "Steve Hart, St. Andrew's." Faith in such an environment is not a private source of motivation, as it was for the people from the churches that I found in the Cincinnati antiwar organization and have seen in many other progressive groups, but a communal identity. (However, this identity varies within MICAHA, since each congregation has its own.)

All meetings begin and end with prayer, and some include a reflection period organized by one of the participants, often based on a passage from scripture. At times people make references to religious or ethical values underlying the practical work. But the connection between faith and politics goes deeper than this. MICAHA participants continually tell stories about how their lives have been transformed by their involvement in community organizing. Over and over again I heard how they had learned to connect their faith to public life and become effective, engaged actors in the public arena. Far from competing with their spiritual life, this involvement often deepened it. They also reported that their congregations had been affected, becoming at once more connected with the surrounding society and more effective organizations internally.

In addition to business meetings and other task-oriented activities, MICAHA devotes an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources to training. Most people who become more than superficially involved attend training, often a lot of it. It plays a major role in how participants are transformed and is a key site for learning and articulating the movement's religio-political language. Training in MICAHA is not primarily a matter of learning particular skills (how to run a meeting, for instance) but of developing a systematic perspective on religion and politics. In training, one is challenged to rethink one's connection to public life, the way one's congregation operates, and even the goals for one's personal life. The perspective involves a distinctive set of terms or categories—self-interest, power, relationships, and so on—providing what is explicitly called a "language." Training is a key part of how a richer, more robust discourse has been created within faith-based community organizing.

To draw on the life-affirming values found in religious communities is understood by everyone involved in contemporary organizing as the heart of the process. These values are not uniform—one finds Unitarians and fundamentalists working side by side—but theological differences rarely cause problems. (Issues where positions are strongly associated with these differences, such as abortion, are bracketed. This is an example of how MICAHA did have its own rules, imposing certain constraints on engagement.) Overall the style of political discourse exhibited by MICAHA is quite expansive; it persistently links faith and values—frameworks and com-

mitments found in civil society—to political issues and public policy.

Religion and styles of engagement

Since the Cincinnati anti-war group was secular while MICAH is religious, a person might think that for all practical purposes expansiveness and religiosity are the same. But this would be an error. It is quite possible to engage in expansive talk on a secular basis.

One hallmark of expansive discourse is the presence of transcendent talk. By transcendent, I mean using standards of value that are grounded in things outside of normal life in the currently existing world, and giving these standards a morally binding quality such that they trump not just one's personal interests but also the rules and values found in one's social and cultural environment. Thus the biblical injunction that "we must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29) manifests transcendence, as does the stance of a sociologist who follows strongly held ethical standards and defies the law, going to jail rather than betraying the confidentiality promised to respondents.

Cases of transcendence without religion abound. The Green activists described by Paul Lichterman clearly believe in transcendent standards and use them in their discussions, and human rights activists do so some of the time. Another example is a loose group of ex-communists that I have observed for many years. These people are in their seventies and still politically active in various left-of-center groups. They are secular, but they feel that the social world is morally skewed at a basic level. Especially since they stopped appealing to any "actually existing socialism" as a model, they use external, non-empirical bases—hopes and visions for a better society—to assert their stance. They take it that these represent superior principles worthy of being followed. That is, the values have a transcendent, morally binding quality. These ex-communists manifest their commitment personally by organizing their lives around a vision of justice and involvement in struggles to achieve it. This commitment has exacted serious risks and costs. One, for instance, was a school teacher who was fired in a procedure ruled illegal only over a decade later, and even then with vastly too little compensation to make up for his economic losses. Nevertheless, these activists have been able to maintain their world view over the entire span of their adult lives, and their point of view has sustained them. Having a transcendent world view does not make these people "religious"—if anything, they tend to be antireligious, although they have mellowed in this regard over the years—but it does give them capacities for expansive discourse.

In fact, transcendent values can lead to an antireligious stance. This was traditionally the case for Marxists. In addition, some human rights activists, while asserting transcendent values about the liberty and dignity of the human individual, see religious faith as one of the great sources of human rights violations.

Conversely, religious groups—especially new or unconventional ones—sometimes deal with public issues in a "cool" way, defining themselves, at least in their external discourse, as just one more cultural grouping. In essence, they want to be treated as interest groups and put forward utilitarian arguments—we are taxpayers, we are law-abiding, we vote, we are customers—for accepting them and giving them the same

rights as any other group. They take an implicitly relativistic stance in their discourse on public issues, even though on religious ones they may be far from relativistic.

To be sure, religious faith offers many possibilities for engaging in expansive discourse. The assertion of transcendent standards against the existing world was something humans first learned how to do within religious frameworks, long before secular world views developed this capacity. In the West, as Bellah among others has argued, it was the radical monotheism of ancient Judaism that first decisively relativized worldly standards and authority. Elsewhere, other religious traditions did similar things: witness the Buddhist monks who immolated themselves during the war in Indochina. But this capacity, like other hallmarks of expansive discourse, can now exist independently of religion, or even in opposition to it, as the examples given above show. People who are secular have every right to insist that making a passionate and transcendent commitment to social ideals does not make them less secular or more religious.

Of course, one could define religion as any framework that asserts transcendent values, and then argue that all expansive discourse is "religious."³ But if we are talking about religion in the ordinary sense, the connection between religion and discursive styles is contingent. Given that transcendent values can generate hostility to religion, the common-sense understanding of "religion" has advantages. That is, transcendence is best conceptualized as an analytical dimension of cultural traditions, while "religion" points to a set of concrete traditions.

Styles of engagement matter, politically and analytically

Analytically, styles of engagement are independent of the left-right dimension, as the two examples show. On the right, as on the left, one can find groups with highly expansive or highly constrained modes of engagement. Nonetheless, you may well be thinking that highly expansive discourse is more characteristic of the right than of the left nowadays. If so, you would be right. Progressives, especially over the past generation, have tended to engage in discourse that I would call anemic. By that I mean that it is constrained more than it needs to be and in ways that have damaged the chances of progressive politics. The passion and appropriate moralism, the insistence that one is struggling for basic justice and human rights, that was found in 1930s labor struggles or the civil rights movement, is less often articulated today. The commitments are probably very much the same in the hearts of activists. Furthermore, analyses of trends in opinion poll results show clearly that on the vast majority of issues ordinary Americans have *not* moved to the right over the past 25 years. Yet to a significant extent the left has ceded the moral high ground in public debate.

One example is the health insurance debate of 1993, where Clinton put forward over-complex proposals in a technocratic tone, trying to disguise the fact that the plan had redistributive implications and would expand the role of government. He did not argue that more equality in access to health care was a moral imperative and that alleviating human suffering was a higher goal than protecting the interests of insurance companies and HMOs. By leaving a moral void, Clinton made it easier for the insurance industry to present

itself as the champion of individual liberty and dignity, and this helped defeat his proposals.

One of the sources of the empirical correlation between constrained discourse and left-of-center politics is what might be called the liberal dilemma: that some of the values progressives hold—individual autonomy and privacy, tolerance for diversity, skepticism toward authorities and orthodoxies—imply discursive constraints. But in studying MICAH and similar groups, it was clear that they were able to link religion to politics without intolerance and while maintaining the capacity to translate between religious and secular languages. In posters and leaflets during one of its campaigns, MICAH said that “housing is a civil right; housing is a human right; for us, people of faith, housing is a divine right.” The first claim connects the immediate demands MICAH was making to the language of the civil rights movement and the moral requisites of American democracy and constitutionalism. The second speaks to the more radical version of human rights thought, the one asserting economic rights as well as civil liberties. The final claim is the only religious one, and it is put forward modestly. The qualifying clause indicates that the claim is not taken to be binding upon all Americans (as the first is) or all humans of good conscience (like the second) but as something expressing only the “local” legitimization of particular cultural traditions, binding only on a limited community.

Thus, the baleful consequences that social critics such as Rorty see as necessary consequences of bringing religious values into public debate turn out to be avoidable. Similarly, maintaining individual autonomy does not really require that one regard as a purely private matter the motivations and values underlying members’ commitment. In some activist groups, people can and do speak of these without requiring that they be uniform, especially when they have the solidarity provided by a shared history of working together. Thus one can work loose of the liberal dilemma.

Attention to styles of engagement can also shed light on sociological issues about political culture. Any set of rules about how to talk and do politics constitutes an ethos: a model of the right way to be a citizen active in public life. These models vary. Jeffrey Alexander argues that a coherent “democratic code” governs all public discourse in America; Nina Eliasoph shows how talk with an explicit public dimension virtually disappears most of the time; *Habits of the Heart* tells us that a hegemonic individualistic language makes public concern hard to articulate. We can see the unity and disagreements among these arguments about political culture by thinking of

each as an account of the nature, sources, and consequences of one of the competing rule sets used in the U.S. to guide or legitimate styles of engagement.

Again, think of the discussion engendered by the work of neo-deTocquevillians such as Putnam. The issues often get debated in terms of the health or pathology of American civil society. But if our concern (like Putnam’s) is with the political implications of civil society, a central issue has to be the nature and density of *links* between civil-societal cultural traditions and politics. These can be many or few. That is, the values generated in extra-political life can be connected to public debate or separated from them. Rules about styles of political discourse influence these outcomes, mediating the relationship between American culture and politics.

These examples, I hope, will suggest the usefulness—in social-critical and sociological analysis alike—of paying systematic attention to styles of political engagement.

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NOTES

1. Civil-societal cultural traditions generate and sustain values in many ways. Occupational and recreational involvements; science, religion, and the arts; family life and solidary groups: all can induct participants into value-laden concepts. Think, for instance, of the good swing sought in amateur baseball, representing an aspiration to excellence for its own sake. Another case can be found in choruses and choirs, where pursuing “blend” subordinates individual self-expression to a collective goal.

2. This distinction is parallel to legal theorist H.L.A. Hart’s concept of primary and secondary rules. Secondary discourse has connections with meta-political and procedural talk about the rules of the game, the value of tolerance, and so forth. However, it is not the same. People can pursue tolerance and freedom passionately or coolly, for instance, and can link or decouple that pursuit from overarching political visions.

3. This is the position Durkheim takes, for instance in his treatment of individualism.

The Simpsons and The Sopranos, continued

with the kids. Parallel sets of kids too. Tony Soprano Jr. and Bart Simpson regularly get into trouble and everyone knows they will end up like their dads. On the other hand, Lisa Simpson is bright, plays the saxophone, and will go to college, while Meadow Soprano is also a quick read, straight A student, solos in the choir, and wants to go to Berkeley. The relatives share similarities too. Tony’s mom, Livia, like Marge’s sisters, lives alone and is very resentful of Tony as

is his uncle Junior who is unhappy with Tony as boss, yet unclear what to do about it.

Let’s start with Tony Soprano, a successful mob boss. He has an attractive wife, family, and upper middle class home. At some level he has it made. But there are problems. He feels agitated by both his families – mafia and wife/kids/mother/uncle. He gets anxiety attacks. Stress and depression. He even passes out on occasion, and so goes

to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, where he starts to talk about what agitates him. The core suspicion soon comes out.

Tony: *It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that I know. But lately I am getting the feeling that I came in at the end. That the best is over.*

Dr. Melfi: *Many Americans feel that way...*

Tony: *I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in a lot of ways he had it better. He had his people, they had their standards, their pride. Whata we got?*

Tony Soprano is a middle-aged guy, at mid-career, in the middle of raising kids, in an upper middle class environment. He isn't at the beginning or the end. The show isn't about ideals and making it, nor settling up before death. It's not quite about suffocating with success, it's more subtle, as if a whole way of life has had its time and glory and yet is still going and he's prospering because of it. But deep down he knows something has changed: "I am getting the feeling that I came in at the end...the best is over." Almost a generation X or Y kind of statement. Maybe a metaphor for American hegemony heading into the 21st century, but maybe that's too much of a reach. Regardless, at the heart of this critically successful and immensely popular melodrama lies the most ambivalent and complex of feelings. The mob is the setting, but the feelings are universal, and for some reason Americans relate to them at this time in their history. Such grousing wouldn't seem right in 1950s family dramas. Father knew best, and as such he didn't need Prozac or psychiatry, and didn't engage in anxiety attacks from having to manage family and business affairs. Tony is a white heterosexual male, like Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*, who verbally discharged his stress and anger in racial and ethnic epithets. Tony gets anxiety attacks.

Family is no longer a haven in a heartless world nor an ethnic source of strength (*The Godfather*) but is now a claustrophobic source of anxiety. It's an American ethos of being stuck; not conquering or reaching for the heights. The older American ideal was to start anew, not just in job and residence, but with the rise of divorce rates, of marital partners as well. Tony may keep his girlfriend, but he doesn't contemplate leaving Carmela, or his kids, or his job. *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone had dreams: he wanted to go legit. He had will: he killed all his tormentors in one swoop. He had vision: he moved his family business to the Nevada of gambling and casinos. Tony Soprano? He decides nothing. He is going nowhere. He is stuck in New Jersey. He has no vision for his future. His dad wanted to move to Reno, but Livia wouldn't let him, and Tony resents her for wearing his dad down to a nub, as he put it. But even knowing his dad's dreams he doesn't contemplate moving to Vegas, or Reno, or anywhere.

And that's the key to this whole series. It's about a loss of goals and ideals, not as a tragic crisis from something happening in your life—not from a death, or a firing from your job—but just the normal state of existence. It is America in late middle age. Not the end yet, and certainly not the beginning with all those hopes and dreams. In that sense I think the Sopranos taps a deeper contemporary American sensibility about loss and potency. This isn't America on the rise with its TV shows dramatizing idealized family forms and patriar-

chal authority relations (like *Father Knows Best*, 1954-1963), nor is it the America of racial conflict and defeat in Vietnam dramatized in an angry white male lashing out (like *All in the Family*, 1971-1992). Rather this is the America of late hegemony, or early decline, or something like a deep deep middle age. And with that social condition comes a certain loss of older values, goals, and ideals, to be replaced by a certain acceptance and resignation to what is. Ours is the era of *The Simpsons* and *The Sopranos*. The metaphors are of overweight middle-aged men having trouble coping, and well off but trapped and unhappy wives. But with all the discomfort, angst, and unsatisfying relationships, none of them has the will to change their life situation, or for that matter, even the anger to lash out like Archie Bunker. Instead when there is dissatisfaction it turns inward: Tony has stress and Prozac; and Homer, he has donuts, TV, and beer. What is offered up on the dramatic platter today is neither the denial and whitewashing of the 50s, nor the anger and change of the 60s-70s, but Tony's sense that "...I came in at the end...the best is over." Denial (50s), anger (60s-70s), resignation (90s-): its like a cultural version of Kubler-Ross's stages of death and dying.

Similar themes are played out in *The Simpsons*. At first the program seemed to be about Bart Simpson and all the troubles he got into. But he turned out to be a one trick pony; a Dennis the Menace with attitude. No, the real interesting character was Homer, the dad, the bumbling donut-eating sleeping-on-the-job indifferent-to-his-wife's-needs safety engineer at the local nuclear power plant. And while most of that was funny it was more. Homer's corner-cutting, cheating, fudging, lying to family and friends wasn't just the dramatization of a bumbling fool, vicious humor, or cynicism – although some of that of course – but someone essentially trying to do the right thing but without the means, will, or morality. Like Tony Soprano Homer is stuck: at work, at home, with Marge and the kids. So he cheats a little, cuts a corner here and there, hints Bart needs to rise above principle now and again. There is something sad and tragic about the constant trying, yet getting nowhere.

Below the surface humor of the dysfunctional family there are no dreams of a better life. The Simpsons are stuck in the middle of the pipe of life (Lisa sometimes aspires in a real sense). And the society that writes these melodramas. Do they give their families a way out? Are they given the will to escape to a new town in the classic American tradition of new beginning? Or, the wives, are they given the feminist gumption to leave these domestic traps for at a minimum affairs, if not to find other people altogether? No. No one goes anywhere. They all come back to the same social situation as if there is no choice. It's the overwhelming reality of these programs. They are caught and they compromise, adjust, deal, cope, and with that feel the stress. Yet none of these characters is written with the motivational structure to forge a way out of the malaise. Marge can't be satisfied with Homer; nor Carmela with Tony's philandering ways; nor Tony with being a mob boss; nor Homer with being a safety engineer. Think of their relations with their sons, Bart Simpson and Tony Soprano Jr. Do their dads hold out hope for them? Do they pose as a moral ideal? No. They sort of nod and wink at their high jinks and lack of ambition, goals, or talents. Father doesn't

know best and these kids – Lisa and Meadow too – know it. Homer and Marge are not Ozzie and Harriet but not because they are more real or cartoon characters, but because they are frustrated and stuck. It shows in their attitudes, child-rearing practices, reactions to spouses, and in-laws.

The key to understanding Homer is his corner-cutting, his fudging, his lying. It's not that he is evil, or dishonest at the core, but that he knows that espousing higher values won't matter; that no matter what he might want to tell Bart it won't make a difference. Homer knows it and so does Bart. Their cynicism is rooted in their depressingly fixed life condition. The absence of hope produces such an outlook. And why not put hope in these characters? Why not have Marge leave Homer for a better life, or Homer the nuclear power plant for a better job, or the whole family for a better city? Or why not have *Homer Knows Best*, the TV show. He is the father, why shouldn't he know best. You know he doesn't, and you know he knows he doesn't, and that corrodes him from the inside. It eats away at him. No future at the power plant; no future in the marriage; no future in Springfield. What's left: bury his life in junk food, TV, and hang out with fellow bar flies. Look at Homer Simpson's physical condition: look at what his life has done to his body and his spirit. They are both sapped of strength and moral will. It's why Homer cheats when he can; it's why rising above principle is his key moral stance; it's why he regularly lies to the kids, to the wife, to the boss, to friends and neighbors. If he is not going to do a dramatic change in life, then he will just fudge and try and get by.

Homer, like Tony, is stuck. And why it's a reflection of a larger state of consciousness is that the writers don't give either of them a way out. Rising above is not the present national mood. Resisting; taking the bull by the horns; holding out ideals for the kids; pulling up stakes and heading west, or anywhere, is not written as an option for Homer, Tony, Marge or Carmela, because having the nauseating experience of a compromised existence is what people relate to. It isn't an accident that *The Simpsons* is the longest-running TV show in history. People like it. It doesn't change. Bart doesn't grow up, nor Lisa, nor do Homer and Marge age. It's that angst of being caught in the declining middle years; of having enough not to be driven on, or of not having the will to push one forward. Cope. Relate. Adjust. Accept. And when the anxiety rises, there is junk food, TV, beer, fantasies, and if you can afford it there is Prozac and a psychiatrist. Don't yell like Archie Bunker, the white male under attack by social change; don't deny like Robert Young when father knew best; just accept, and accept, and accept. The will to transform given social conditions just isn't there. There is no future. There isn't even the anger to be a bigot and backlash against forces, real or not, that you claim put you in that spot. No one leaves their condition here. Neither Homer nor Tony, neither Marge nor Carmela. They all come home every night. It's like the movie *Groundhog Day*. It just repeats. It doesn't get better. It doesn't get worse. Such a view wasn't the case earlier, and no doubt further social change will make this representation

Conference Report

"New Cultural Frontiers" at UCLA, May 18-19, 2001

Lisa McCormick, Yale, and David Halle, UCLA

On May 18 and 19, the LeRoy Neiman Centre at UCLA hosted a conference entitled "New Cultural Frontiers." The conference opened with a session on the role of the Centre's namesake in American culture and closed with a session surveying Jeffrey Alexander's work in cultural sociology. In between, the papers presented addressed an impressive diversity of topics, demonstrating how all the major social and sociological issues are worked out in the realm of "culture."

Jan Avgikos (Columbia University) in a paper titled "Neimanland" discussed the place of LeRoy Neiman in post World War II American culture and stressed his position vis-à-vis the debate over high and popular culture. As one of America's most recognizable and broadly popular living artists Neiman's work tests the theories of Gans and others who suggest that an artist cannot be accepted by the cultural elite into the pantheon of "cultural greats" until his popularity wanes.

The issue addressed by Jeffrey Alexander (UCLA) was morality. In his paper entitled "The Truth of Fiction: Narrating the Holocaust and Other Cultural Traumas," he argued that everyday judgments about good and evil are not only cognitive work accomplished through the application of broad moral principles, but cultural work accomplished through the construction of narratives. In his paper, he traced the progres-

sion of the Holocaust from its initial status as one of many Nazi war atrocities to the symbol of ultimate evil so powerful that it undermined confidence in modernity. He argued that from a sociological perspective, evil is not an ontological fact inherent in a traumatic event; rather, an event must "become" evil through a process of coding and representation.

Roger Friedland (UCSB) addressed the issues of sex and the body in his paper entitled "Sexuality and Religious Nationalism." Friedland contrasted the ontology of the social of religious nationalism with the more familiar ontology of liberal nationalism. In place of the autonomous, abstract individual, religious nationalism offers elemental agents who are gendered and embodied men and women. In the place of the aggregate will of the demos, it derives its authority from a divine will. In place of the market or democracy, it gives primacy to the family. Religious nationalism defends patriarchal authority and maintains gender segregation in order to re-masculinize the state and re-sacralize the family, which is the centre of both physical and cultural reproduction. The key to understanding the logic of religious nationalism, then, is sexuality. He suggested that we, too, would do well to recognise the politics of eros and, to turn Foucault on his head, begin to read power through sex.

Min Zhou (UCLA) and Ken Thompson (Open University, UK) both addressed the issues of ethnicity and nationality. Each presented findings from their respective projects researching the uses of popular media and communications technology by immigrant communities. In his paper entitled "Border Crossing and Diasporic Identities: Media Use and Leisure Practices of an Ethnic Minority," Prof. Thompson used primarily ethnographic data to discuss how Indian women living in England interpret Indian films and soap operas to construct their "hybrid identities" and use Internet technology to build a trans-national community with Indian immigrants in other countries. Contrary to the classic sociological image of assimilation, his evidence suggested that it is middle- and upper-class immigrants who actively maintain ties to the old country; due to greater financial resources, they are in a position to preserve their culture and construct a fragmented identity. Min Zhou's presentation, entitled "Chinese Language Media in the United States: Ethnicization, Transnationalization, and Acculturation in American Life," was on a similar theme but drew quite a different conclusion. Her interest was the use and impact of ethnic media among Chinese immigrants to the United States. Prof. Zhou's research involved content analysis of all the major Chinese-language newspapers, television networks, radio broadcasts, and websites, as well as face-to-face interviews with staff from these media outfits as well as consumers of their products. The conclusion she drew from her data was that acculturation is not impeded by these media, but accomplished through it.

Surveillance and desire were the issues addressed by Vincent Pecora (UCLA) in his paper entitled "Social Surveillance in Modern Culture." He argued that reality TV is more than an instance of hyper-reality in which fact and fiction become blurred; it is evidence of a significant shift in society's attitude toward surveillance. Practices that once conjured Orwellian images are now embraced; surveillance is no longer an evil to be feared but an object of sublime desire. There is more to this desire than the appeal of voyeurism, because the nature of surveillance has changed. No longer mere subjects of surveillance, we have become willing participants, arming ourselves with sophisticated digital technologies. We have become the ethnographers, producers, and promoters of our own life stories, enthusiastically posting our intimate details for public display on our personal webpages. According to Pecora, these trends suggest that contemporary society is less about the blurring of fact and fiction as the postmoderns had warned, and more about the quest for "real life" that requires surveillance for its verification.

The main issue addressed by Ron Eyerman (Uppsala University, Sweden) was politics. In his paper entitled "Music in Movement: Cultural Politics and Old and New Social Movements," Eyerman argued that previous scholarship on social movements has grossly neglected the role of culture. The general tendency has been to reduce social movements to the standard quantifiable measures of resource mobilization and power struggle. When culture is addressed, it is reduced to an instrumental function as little more than another kind of resource to be mobilized. The result is a false characterisation of movements as "wavelike." Eyerman counters that the meanings and beliefs of social movements do not evaporate after a movement loses steam, but are instead held crystal-

lised in artistic forms, such as music, which "encase" these ideas until a later generation uncovers and re-mobilises them. Borrowing Raymond Williams's subcultures model, Eyerman described how a movement's ideas remain in currency in the "residual" strata of the culture, holding the potential to become "emergent" again in the form of a social movement. Eyerman played examples of music currently circulating in the "residual" layer, contrasting samples from the far left and the far right of the punk genre. Both examples were appropriately post-modern – pasting together overt references to many other social movements from other countries and previous generations – and global – making creative use of Internet technology to distribute their music.

Complementing Prof. Eyerman's talk was Bill Roy's (UCLA) paper entitled "Aesthetic Identity, Race and American Folk Music." Roy provided a detailed account of the changing racial identification of this particularly plastic genre through history. When folk music was introduced at the end of the 19th century, it was part of a nationalist agenda and the majority of musicians associated with it were white. In the 1930's and 40's, it was deliberately transformed by the "Old Left" into a biracial genre, only to become to overwhelmingly white again when taken over by the "New Left" in the 1960s. Roy explains that this change in racial association had less to do with the music and more to do with commercialization and the changing strategy of the Left. The racial history of folk music, he concluded, provides a unique opportunity to understand the relation between social boundaries and musical boundaries.

William Gibson (CSU, Long Beach) addressed the issues of gender and violence in his paper entitled "Masculinity and War Culture in Contemporary America." He argued that American war culture has changed dramatically since Vietnam, both within the military itself and in the wider American public. There are numerous indicators of this change. It was ambivalence, rather than patriotic fervour, that resulted from military efforts through the 1990s. The public is no longer willing to make blood sacrifices like those immortalised in national holidays like Veteran's and Memorial Day; so strong is the public's reluctance public to incur casualties in war that the notion of the "empty battlefield" has begun driving military technology development and government military policy. Recently, the military has been struggling to cope with extreme turnover rates and trailing recruitment. Gibson argued that the marked decline in war culture spells the end of the hegemonic position enjoyed by the military in the definition of masculinity; war is no longer believed to be the rite of passage that turns boys into men. More controversial, however, was his claim that waning war culture is an indication of a superpower in decline.

Laura Miller (UCLA) also addressed gender politics in the military in her paper entitled "Sexual Harassment in the US Army," focussing in particular on the role of cultural difference in women's experience of sexual harassment. Through ethnographic and interview methods, Miller determined how the racial and cultural background of military women influenced their interpretation of interaction between men and women, as well as their belief in the military justice system. Miller called for more culturally-sensitive research to influence policies presently based on "white-white" models of harassment.

Laura Robinson and David Halle addressed the impact of new technology on the arts. On the one hand many of the skeptics who believe technology's impact has been exaggerated seem vindicated. Napster is in many ways a traditional fight over copyright issues. Downloading movies over the Internet is just another mode of distribution. E-Bay is just another way of selling art. On the other hand it can be argued that the cumulative effect of recent technological changes has produced a qualitative change. Thus new electronic media give the viewer/listener/audience the kind of ability to interact with, change and control the products that is really unprecedented.

It is possible to divide the papers presented at the conference into two camps according to the authors' implicit definitions of "culture." Some, like Zhou, Roy, and Thompson, were more influenced by the sociology of culture perspective,

interpreting "culture" to mean cultural artifacts and engagement with them. Others were more influenced by cultural sociology, like Pecora, Friedland, Gibson, and Alexander, who defined culture more broadly as the codes and narratives embedded in society and framing social action. For those more influenced by the sociology of culture perspective, studying culture raised primary methodological concerns; this was the topic of Howard Becker's talk entitled "Studying the New Media." From the cultural sociology perspective, however, studying culture is primarily a theoretical problem.

Most of the papers presented at this conference will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Qualitative Sociology* (Robert Zussman editor). Jeffrey Alexander's paper will appear in the November issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory*. The papers about Prof. Alexander's work will appear in the

2001 Culture Section Awards

Best Book Awards: Stanley Lieberson and Robin Wagner-Pacifici

Stanley Lieberson's *A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change* (Yale University Press, 2000) and Robin Wagner-Pacifici's *Theorizing the Standoff Contingency in Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) are the co-winners of the 2001 Culture Section Book Prize. The committee felt both books were deeply original in very different ways, and that it speaks well for the culture section to give a joint prize to books that come from what are in theory very different sides of sociology, but in fact address problems of culture in original ways.

A Matter of Taste is concerned with shifting patterns of first names and what that can tell us about more general processes of cultural change. Lieberson assembles an original data set of names that he uses to ask and answer a number of complex theoretical questions about everything from changing patterns of sound to shifting cultural meanings and basic social change. As one committee member said, "I really think the underlying thing Lieberson is analyzing is just fascinating—the way cultural patterns shift in predictable ways due to the underlying nature of 'meaning making.' That is, if people want to convey relatively consistent kinds of things (names that sound pretty for girls but not too much like their elderly aunts), then they will

converge on certain sound patterns and certain 'new' names. I think his argument that names are uniquely valuable for studying uncontaminated patterns of change because there isn't commercial transaction or advertising directly involved was also fascinating."

Theorizing the Standoff argues the provocative suggestion that the notion of the "standoff" represents a kind of frozen social moment that reveals both structure and dynamics. As one committee member said, "She is integrating structuralism and pragmatism, not an easy task, and seriously revising her previous theoretical position (much more structuralist). The book is learned and insightful, concrete and theoretical. In its concluding moves on the endings of standoffs, she even addresses the normative dimension, which I think is great. Wagner-Pacifici connects her case study investigations with enduring philosophical and normative reflections. Hers is a sociologist's contribution to enduring human questions concerning difference and tragedy. It deals with really important issues, both practical and theoretical. She shows how the apparent amorality of the pragmatic position is situated and gains moral standing."

Committee Members: Al Bergesen (chair), Jeffrey Goldfarb, Christine Nippert-Eng, Ann Swidler

Best Article or Chapter Awards: Anne Kane and Paul Lichterman

The committee for the Culture Section Best Article/Chapter Award received 18 nominations (by 6 March 2001 – an additional two nominations were received more than two weeks after the deadline, these the committee did not consider). The co-winners of the 2001 Best Article/Book Chapter are Anne Kane for "Narratives of Nationalism" and Paul Lichterman for "Talking Identity in the Public Sphere."

Anne Kane's "Narratives of Nationalism: Constructing Irish National Identity during the Land War, 1879-1882" (2000, *National Identities* 2:245-64) provides a compelling demonstration of the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of national identity development. Kane uses over one thousand accounts from the Irish Land War of the late 19th century to analyze the construction of

a unified narrative of Irish national identity. Her careful discussion of the material, political, and cultural differences among the Irish prior to the Land War problematizes the apparently inevitable emergence of Irish nationalism, substituting an insightful analysis of how competing discourses of conciliation and retribution were fused through an emphasis on shared experiences of British injustice and the sacralization of The Land. Kane's detailed accounting of symbolic meanings and consequent narratives – and the movement of those meanings and narratives over time – demonstrates the importance of discourse and narrative analysis. The committee found "Narratives of Nationalism" to exemplify the explanatory

power of cultural sociology. Paul Lichterman's "Talking identity in the public sphere: Broad visions and small spaces in sexual identity politics" (1999, *Theory and Society* 28:101-41) empirically demonstrates the highly structured nature of culture. Lichterman analyzes identity talk in two groups governed by differing interactional routines of solidarity and social identity. Lichterman carefully considers patterned differences in the assumptions underlying the two groups' willingness to speak self-critically or not about their identity and interests. This allows him to empirically illuminate the largely theoretical debate on the relationship between multiculturalism and democracy. Thus the committee found "Talking identity in the public sphere" an outstanding example of cultural sociology and the distinctive contribution sociology makes to culture studies more

Committee Members: Sarah Corse (chair), Libby Schweber, Richard Williams

Best Student Paper Awards: Syhon Baumann and Jamie Mullaney

The 2001 Best Student Paper Award goes to Syhon Baumann, a graduate student in the sociology department at Harvard University, for "Intellectualizing Discourse and Art World Development: The Case of Film in the United States"; and to Jamie Mullaney, a graduate student in the sociology department at Rutgers University, for "Like a Virgin: Temptation, Resistance, and the Construction of Identities based on Not Doings."

Baumann's paper begins with an intriguing question. How did film come to be regarded as an art form? While it is true enough today that films (or at least some films) are regularly regarded as an artistic cultural form, this has not always been the case. In the early days of film production movies were seen to be a crass form of popular entertainment crafted to meet the base values and low aesthetic expectations of a largely working class audience. Baumann notes that somewhere between then and now, films changed their status, and the question he asks in the paper is how did this come about? Baumann identifies three types of factors that affect the level of artistic legitimacy of cultural fields: (1) successful efforts at collective social mobilization, (2) the grounding of artistic work in a system of critical discourse, and (3) the opening up of opportunity spaces within the broader cultural arena.

He then proceeds to evaluate the contribution of each of these factors in the case of film through a rigorous and fascinating set of historical investigations. At the core of the argument is an ingenious content analysis of 468 film reviews published in the *New York Times*, *the New Yorker* and *Time Magazine* between 1925 and 1985. What Baumann sets out to discover in these reviews is when and how does film come to be seen as a genuine form of artistic expression? The methods he devises for this task will no doubt come to be seen as an exemplar for other cultural sociologists. Baumann creates a range of measures for evaluating the emergence of critical discourse. He looks, for example, at the language used to evaluate paintings and music during the same time

period and checks to see when similar terms begin to be applied to the analysis of films. He looks for the presence of both positive and negative commentary in the same review as a measure for the perceived complexity of film interpretation. He measures the rise of referential film commentary by looking at when and how films are compared to one another within reviews. He watches for the emergence of reviewers' disdain for films that are deemed to lose value because they are too accessible or too facile. He tracks these changes across time and correlates them with the rise of other forms of legitimation (such as the emergence of film festivals and film study programs).

In the end, however, the paper's greatest contribution may well be less about what he has shown about the changing character of the cultural field of film production, though what he has to say about this is quite substantial. But what he has shown us about how sociological methods can be applied to the study of a cultural form. For in this paper Baumann does something that is really quite important. He treats cultural meanings as empirically measurable social phenomena and he does so with all the sophistication and creativity that formal sociology is able to muster. But more than this, he uses those measurements of meanings as the basis for making broader explanatory arguments about changes in social organization and thus puts cultural sociology at the center of mainstream sociological explanation. Don't take our word for it, go read it yourself, it has recently been published in the *American Sociological Review*.

The second paper is "Like a Virgin: Temptation, Resistance, and the Construction of Identities based on Not Doings" by Jamie Mullaney.

The concept of identity has become increasingly central to the work done by sociologists, not only for those of us who study culture, but across a broad range of specialties: gender

studies, sociology of sexualities, queer theory, sociology of the life course, social movements and the like. While this reflects a great deal of innovation in thinking about how identities affect other social processes, the actual study of how identities operate and how we take them on has not progressed much beyond the seminal work of early symbolic interactionists such as Erving Goffman and Howie Becker.

The paper by Mullaney breaks this open, suggesting a wide variety of new ways to think about what an identity is and how identities operate as social institutions. The paper begins with an interesting insight. Mullaney notes that we mostly think of identities as being organized around sets of things that we take on in our lives, new roles we play, new activities that we engage in. She asks whether there is anything different about identities constructed around the notion of not doing something. To explore this, she considers the social status of virginity, perhaps the ideal-typical case of an identity constructed around the concept of “not doing”, in this case, of not having sex. What she discovers, in a wonderfully thoughtful analysis that offers up new surprises on every page, is that identities based on not doing **do** differ in a whole range of fundamental ways from identities based on doing.

To study this, Mullaney does something else that is quite innovative, she turns to novels written by nineteenth century British authors who were more or less obsessed with “fallen” women and the trials, tribulations and temptations that they undergo. Included in her sample were: Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Emily Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, and so on. Ten novels in all. And through a wonderfully rich and sociologically informed close reading of these novels, Mullaney provides us with a fascinating portrait of the social conventions, expectations and transformation of the social status of virginity.

Committee Members: John Mohr (chair), Wayne Brekhus, Ralph LaRossa

Books of Note

Richard A. Peterson, Vanderbilt University

Crane, Diana, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. Crane deftly shows how fashions in clothing have changed from the eighteenth century when clothes emphasized social class distinctions to a late twentieth century use of clothes as a badge of lifestyle, sexuality, age and ethnicity. Along the way, she identifies two styles of women’s clothing in the 19th century, one conformist and one expressing a non-verbal resistance to women’s roles of the periods. She tests theories about 19th century working-class clothes and reports women’s conflicted responses to the (appalling) view of women expressed in Vogue fashion photographs.

Lachmann, Richard, *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves: Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press. We’ve long known that capitalism emerged as much out of a taste for conspicuous display as from a passion for austerity. But by comparing developments from the 12th to the 18th centuries in regions across Europe, Lachmann shows why elites reacted differently

to the challenges of modern warfare, global exploration, and the religious wars of the time. He finds that in every case those elites who embraced capitalist market ways and the emerging nation-state did so not out of a positive desire but as attempts to maintain their own special privilege.

She shows for example that temporality plays a complicated role. Most negative identities are time dependent. Being a virgin, being single, being childless are linked in important ways to life stage, so what appears normative at one moment will appear abnormal at another. Part of the complication of these identities then comes from the crossing of temporal boundaries. Another issue has to do with the permeability of the social boundaries themselves. She has a fascinating discussion of the numeric distance between “0” and “1” and how it differs from the numeric distance between other numbers, say “45” and “46.” And she explores how role distancing operates as a way of managing these types of boundary issues. She also raises the question of directionality. The status of virginity is qualitatively different from the status of being a “non-smoker” or a “non-meat-eater” because one can go back and forth between being a smoker and a non-smoker, but it is impossible to go back to being a virgin after having become a non-virgin. She links this to a number of other interesting contemporary issues such as the discourse of Alcoholic Anonymous (in which an alcoholic can never exit this state) or, the mandates of Meghan’s Law (under which a child molester can never recover their non-offender identity). And she points out how in popular discourse, we eagerly appropriate the verbal category of virginity to refer to all kinds of social activities that people have never engaged in.

It is a paper with many strengths. It is smart, insightful, innovative methodologically and it makes a substantive theoretical advance in our general understanding of the concept of identity.

The paper has also recently been published as the lead article in the Spring issue of *Qualitative Sociology*.

Hart, Stephen, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Hart shows that conservatives have fared much better in the US than progressives in recent decades even though public opinion has showed no comparable move to the right. He says this is because progressives have hung on to outmoded modes of discourse and have ceded the moral high ground to conservatives. Through extensive case studies he explores the most successful cultural constructions of progressive agendas focusing on citizenship and democracy.

Bergesen, Albert J. and Andrew M. Greeley, *God in the Movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publications. Films not