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Chapter 2

Cultural Power and Social Movements

Ann Swidler

Culture has always been important for the kinds of processes students of social movements study. But as culture moves to the forefront of social movement research, it is important to address directly the theories, methods, and assumptions different approaches to the sociology of culture carry with them.

I begin by reviewing the basic theoretical approaches in the sociology of culture and go on to suggest that traditional Weberian approaches, which focus on powerful, internalized beliefs and values held by individual actors (what I call culture from the “inside out”) may ultimately provide less explanatory leverage than newer approaches that see culture as operating in the contexts that surround individuals, influencing action from the “outside in.”

The sociology of culture contains two basic traditions, one deriving from Max Weber and the other from Emile Durkheim. Weber focused on meaningful action, and for him the fundamental unit of analysis was always the individual actor. Ideas, developed and promoted by self-interested actors (rulers seeking to legitimate their rule, elites attempting to justify their privileges, religious entrepreneurs seeking followers), come to have an independent influence on social action. People find themselves constrained by ideas that describe the world and specify what one can seek from it. Thus culture shapes action by defining what people want and how they imagine they can get it. Cultural analysis focuses on the complex systems of ideas that shape individuals’ motives for action. In Weber’s famous “switchman” metaphor:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. ‘From what’ and ‘for what’ one wished to be redeemed and,

let us not forget, 'could be' redeemed, depended on one's image of the world.
(1946a: 280)

Weber (1968, 1958) analyzed culture by trying to understand typical worldviews, like the Protestant one, that had shaped the motives of historically important groups. Identifying how a worldview motivates action—how one committed to it would act under its sway—is explanation in Weberian terms.

The second crucial strand in the sociology of culture comes from Durkheim. For Durkheim (1933, 1965), culture is constituted by "collective representations." These are not "ideas" in the Weberian sense. Collective representations may range from the vivid totemic symbol to moral beliefs to modern society's commitment to reason and individual autonomy (Durkheim 1973). Collective representations are not ideas developed by individuals or groups pursuing their interests. Rather, they are the vehicles of a fundamental process in which publicly shared symbols constitute social groups while they constrain and give form to individual consciousness (Durkheim 1965; Bellah 1973). Durkheim writes not of "ideas" and "world images" but of representations, rituals, and symbols. Symbols concretize "collective consciousness," making the animating power of group life palpable for its members. Symbols do not reflect group life; they constitute it.¹

Talcott Parsons (1937) made a heroic attempt to synthesize Weber and Durkheim, taking from Weber the image of action as guided by culturally determined ends and from Durkheim the notion of culture as a shared, collective product. The end result was the Parsonian theory of "values," a term that played no important role for either Weber or Durkheim. For Parsons (1951, 1961), "values" are collectively shared ultimate ends of action. "Norms" are shared cultural rules that define appropriate means to attain valued ends. Parsons sees shared values as defining societies, making them what they are, just as Durkheim saw the totem as constituting the Aboriginal clan, making it a society. At the same time, Parsons sees values as governing action in very much the way Weber saw ideas as switchmen. But unlike Weber's concept of "ideas," Parsonian values are very general, abstract orientations of action, rather than the specific, historically grounded doctrines and worldviews that Weber thought shaped action (see Swidler 1986).

Despite its logical appeal and distinguished theoretical ancestry, the Parsonian theory of values was never very successful as a guide to research.² Renewed interest in culture emerged from the Parsonian legacy but moved in a different direction. Clifford Geertz (1973), a student of Parsons, followed Weber in much of his substantive work but broke with the Weberian founda-

tions of Parsons's theory of action.³ He did so by altering both the question and the methods of cultural studies. Influenced by semiotic approaches to language and symbols, Geertz argued that culture should be studied for its meanings and not for its effects on action. He also shifted methodological focus, arguing that the proper object of cultural study is not meanings in people's heads but publicly available symbols—rituals, aesthetic objects, and other “texts.”

Despite Geertz's debt to Weber, the effect of the Geertzian revolution in anthropology, history, and literary studies has been to break with the Weberian problematic. Rather than looking at the ideas that motivate individual actors (or even collections of individual actors), Geertz's followers examine public symbols and ritual experiences (see Keesing 1974). Culture cannot be used to explain individual action or even group differences in behavior. Attention does not focus primarily on ideas, belief systems, or dogmas, but on other properties of culture, especially the mood or tone that a “cultural system” gives to daily life through its symbolic vocabulary and through the ritual experiences it makes available (Geertz 1973, 1976). Culture constitutes “humanness” itself as well as the social world: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz 1973: 5). If culture influences action, then, it is not by providing the ends people seek, but by giving them the vocabulary of meanings, the expressive symbols, and the emotional repertoire with which they can seek anything at all.

The Revolution in Cultural Studies

Since the mid-1960s, when Geertz's influence began to be felt (with the original publication of “Religion as a Cultural System” in 1966), three dramatic developments have transformed cultural studies. They can best be summarized as publicness, practices, and power.

Culture as Public Symbols

Geertz's work fundamentally redefined the object of cultural analysis, revitalizing the practice of cultural studies.⁴ Geertz shifted attention from a question that cultural analysts could rarely answer satisfactorily—How does a person's culture actually influence his or her actions—to one that was guaranteed to produce satisfying and even dazzling results: What does this cultural text, ritual, or practice mean to the people who use, perform, or live it? From Geertz's (1973) unpacking of the multistranded meanings of a Balinese cockfight to a historian unraveling the meaning of a ritual or folk tale (Davis

1975; Darnton 1984) to a literary critic finding deeper cultural patterns that animated Shakespeare's plays (Greenblatt 1980), the technique is similar. Identify a cultural text and then situate it in the rich web of associated cultural practices, beliefs, social structural realities, folk experiences, and so forth that allow its hearers, practitioners, or devotees to find it meaningful. Meaning itself is defined as context, as the other practices in which a text or ritual is embedded. This redefinition of the object of cultural analysis subtly altered what culture was understood to be. The focus on public vehicles of meaning reduced the need to investigate what any given individual or group actually felt or thought. Indeed, public symbols displayed a system of meanings, what some would call a semiotic code, rather than ideas that were in any person's head. The semiotic code was in some sense external to, or at least independent of, the minds of particular individuals. No longer the study of an ineffable subjectivity, the study of culture could now be grounded in accessible public objects.

The focus on public symbols also avoided the question of whether culture is necessarily shared or consensual. Durkheim and Parsons had been forced by the logic of their arguments to claim that cultural meanings were universally shared. But this claim did not hold up empirically. Public symbols, on the other hand, are clearly shared by the people who use them or form around them, and the question of whether these symbols' wider context of meaning is really shared seems unimportant. The analyst's task is to understand a formerly opaque ritual or practice through its context, and that exercise itself seemingly confirms that the context that has made its meaning comprehensible to the analyst also accounts for the ritual's ability to animate its practitioners or devotees.

Focusing on public ideas or texts also reshapes how one describes culture's influence on history. Rather than looking, as Weber did, for the ideas that motivated particular historical actors, the analyst traces changes in the cultural context within which all actors operated. Weber looked for ideas that directed the operation of "material and ideal interests." Contemporary culture analysts trace shifts in "discourses," the larger contexts of meanings within which any particular ideas or interests can be formulated (see Wuthnow 1987, 1989).

Practices

Cultural analysts have externalized the locus of culture in another way, by moving it from the mind's interior (ideas and mental representations) to social practices. The focus on practice has been widespread, from the attempt

to revise the Marxian model of culture as “superstructure” (Williams 1973) to the efforts of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault to locate culture in embodied and institutionalized practices. Indeed, along with the terms *text* and *discourse*, the concept of “practice” is the hallmark of the new approaches in the sociology of culture.⁵

The concept of practice or practices differs from older conceptions of culture in two important ways. First, in reaction against the Durkheimian tradition, it emphasizes human agency. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) conceives of culture not as a set of rules, but as deeply internalized habits, styles, and skills (the “habitus”) that allow human beings to continually produce innovative actions that are nonetheless meaningful to others around them. For Bourdieu, active human beings continually recreate culture. They do not dutifully follow cultural rules, but energetically seek strategic advantage by using culturally encoded skills. Because access to those skills is differentially distributed, people’s strategic efforts reproduce the structure of inequality (even if the players of the game are slightly rearranged).

Second, locating culture in social practices ties the study of culture to the analysis of institutions. Here the most important innovator is Michel Foucault. Foucault analyzes how systems of categories and distinctions are enacted and made real in institutional practices. For example, the practices that, after the sixteenth century, came to differentiate the sane from the mad—exclusion and confinement in asylums, or the diagnostic criteria later used by psychologists and others in the human sciences—are sets of cultural rules made real by being used to categorize and control human beings (Foucault 1965, 1978).

Foucault’s arguments resemble Durkheim’s insistence that rituals demarcate cultural boundaries and make symbolic truths real. But Foucault does not emphasize exotic ritual and symbol, nor the shared mental representations that unify a society’s members. Rather, Foucault shifts attention to institutions, which use power to enact rules that construct human beings (“the subject”) and the social world (Foucault 1983).

Power

The third important element in rethinking culture is a focus on power and inequality (Lamont and Wuthnow 1990). Max Weber (1968) always noted how the struggle for power shaped ideas, arguing that the interests of powerful groups had lasting influence on the shape of a culture. But he was interested in how ideas originally created to serve the powerful came to have a life of

their own, constraining rulers as well as those they ruled, forcing elites to preserve their legitimacy by making good on their status claims and leading religious specialists to become preoccupied with distinctively religious problems.

Contemporary theorists instead see culture as itself a form of power. Foucault (1980), for example, analyzes how new kinds of knowledge and associated practices (such as measuring, categorizing, or describing objects of knowledge) in effect construct new sites where power can be deployed. New disciplines, such as psychoanalysis, construct new loci such as the unconscious, new subjectivities, where power can be exercised (and also where resistance can emerge). Foucault (1977, 1983) eliminates the question of who has power, leaving aside the role of interested agents, to emphasize instead that each cultural formation, each technique of power, has a history of its own, and that different actors adopt these techniques for different purposes. Since cultural practices, categories, and rules are enactments of power, Foucault does not think of culture as being used by the powerful to maintain their power. Rather, he thinks of power itself as practices that deploy knowledge to constitute human beings as the subjects of that knowledge.

Pierre Bourdieu focuses less on power than on inequality. He emphasizes that people differ not only in their cultural resources but also in the skill with which they deploy those resources. Bourdieu's (1984) special contribution is to show how deeply inequalities between the more and less privileged penetrate persons, constituting the fundamental capacities for judgment, aesthetic response, social ease, or political confidence with which they act in the world. Actors use culture in creative ways to forward their own interests in a system of unequal power, but the effect of that struggle is to reproduce the basic structure of the system.

Culture and Social Movements

Both opportunities and difficulties await researchers who look to the sociology of culture for fruitful new approaches to social movement questions. On the one hand, as others have noted (Cohen 1985; Tarrow 1992a), culture has always been central to the kinds of processes social movements researchers study, such as formulating grievances, defining a common identity, or developing solidarity and mobilizing action. Indeed, social movements are the sites where new cultural resources, such as identities and ideologies, are most frequently formulated (Friedman and McAdam 1992). Addressing such processes more directly, as several recent researchers have done (see Klan-

dermans, Kriesi, and Tarrow 1988; Morris and Mueller 1992), can only invigorate the field.

On the other hand, the traditional concern of social movement theory with activists and their motives fits naturally with the Weberian focus on how individuals develop understandings that guide their action. Researchers such as Doug McAdam (1988) who study activists, theorists such as David Snow (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988) who analyze the cultural preconditions for activism, and scholars such as William Gamson (1992) who study how ordinary people talk about politics all focus on individuals and their motives. They try to understand actors' experience and the larger forces that shape their motives, ideas, and identities. While such approaches have already proved fruitful, it is important that social movement researchers not become wedded to an implicitly Weberian image of culture just as cultural theory is moving in the other direction—toward more global, impersonal, institutional, and discursive assertions of cultural power.

Turning Culture Inside Out

There is now an abundance of work—that of Foucault and Bourdieu, but also many others (Wuthnow 1987; Sewell 1985, 1990, 1992)—arguing that culture constitutes social experience and social structure, that culture should be seen as socially organized practices rather than individual ideas or values, that culture can be located in public symbols and rituals rather than in ephemeral subjectivities, and that culture and power are fundamentally linked. Yet these more global approaches to the study of culture can also be difficult to grasp firmly, either theoretically or empirically. It would be ideal to marry Weber's concrete, grounded style of causal argument to Durkheim's understanding of the irreducibly collective, encompassing nature of culture.⁶

One new approach to understanding how culture shapes social movements involves rethinking how culture works. Most culture theory assumes that culture has more powerful effects where it is deeper—deeply internalized in individual psyches, deeply integrated into bodies and habits of action, or deeply embedded in taken-for-granted “mentalities.” But at least some of the time, culture may have more powerful effects when it is on the “outside,” not deeply internalized or even deeply meaningful. Variations in the ways social contexts bring culture to bear on action may do more to determine culture's power than variations in how deeply culture is held. And study of these social contexts may prove a fruitful direction for integrating culture into social movement research.

For Weber's actor-based sociology of ideas, culture has more influence

when it is clearer, more coherent, and more deeply held. Protestantism had more influence on economic action than any other faith because its rationalized doctrine cut off "magical paths" to salvation, because it held that salvation was demonstrated in worldly action, and because it demanded that the intensely believing faithful rigorously regulate every aspect of daily life. Although Durkheim's model of culture was different from Weber's, he also held that culture had its greatest effects when it was most deeply part of the collective consciousness. Only universally shared, actively practiced, vivid symbols could constrain individual passions and impose a social reality on individual consciousness.

To analyze culture's power to affect action, independent of whether it is deeply held (either in the sense of deeply internalized, taken-for-granted practices like the *habitus* or in the sense of deeply held beliefs like those of Weber's Protestant saints), we may focus on three sources of cultural power: codes, contexts, and institutions. In each case we will see how the culture's effects on action can operate from the outside in, as social processes organize and focus culture's effects on action.

Codes

The notion of culture as a semiotic code has been one of the hallmarks of the new cultural studies. But the notion of semiotic code, by analogy with the deep structures that organize language, usually refers to deeply held, inescapable relationships of meaning that define the possibilities of utterance in a cultural universe. Deep, unspoken, and pervasive equals powerful.

Some codes are not deep, however, and not in the least invisible. A perfect example is provided by Theodore Caplow's (1982, 1984) study of Christmas gift giving in Middletown. In an article with the compelling title "Rule Enforcement without Visible Means," Caplow (1984) makes the point precisely. Caplow finds that middle-class Americans do not "believe in" Christmas gift giving. They criticize the commercialization of Christmas; they consider buying Christmas gifts an unpleasant burden; they think most gifts are a waste of money; they often do not like the gifts they receive; and they are unhappy with much of what they buy for others. Thus, Caplow asks, why do they give Christmas gifts, spending a considerable share of their disposable income, if they do not believe in it? Why does the practice persist without normative support and even in the face of widespread criticism?

Caplow uses data on actual gift giving to argue that Christmas gift giving constitutes a semiotic code (that is, a set of relationally defined meanings) in which the relative value of the gifts a person gives others signals the relative

importance with which she or he holds those others. Not to give a gift would, independent of the intentions of the giver, be interpretable as a sign that one did not value the (non)recipient. What governs action in this case, then, is not individuals' internalized beliefs, but their knowledge of what meanings their actions have for others.⁷

Speaking of semiotic codes may seem to take us right back into the thickets of French structuralist theories or into a search for the deep underlying meanings that animate Geertzian "cultural systems." But semiotic codes can be much more discrete, more superficial, and sometimes more contested or political than semioticians usually imply. For example, when florists and confectioners try to increase their business by announcing National Secretaries' Week, few are presumably moved by deep belief in the principles that lie behind the announcement. But if every newspaper in the country is for weeks blanketed with advertisements implying that bosses who appreciate their secretaries will give them flowers and take them out to lunch, both secretaries and their employers may be, at the least, uncomfortable about what signals their actions will send. An employer may well think that for twenty-five dollars it is not worth the risk of hurting the secretary's feelings; and even a secretary who has disdain for the occasion may feel offended, or at least ambivalent, if it is ignored.

Much of our cultural politics is fought out on precisely such terrain. Let us imagine that a national secretaries' union launches a "Bread Not Roses" campaign, so that for employers to offer flowers without a raise is redefined as a sign of contempt. This would be a direct use of culture to influence action, not so much by shaping beliefs as by shaping the external codes through which action is interpreted. These are cultural power struggles, in which publicity can be a potent weapon even if no deeper persuasion occurs.

Even without conscious efforts at publicity, one of the most important effects social movements have is publicly enacting images that confound existing cultural codings. From the punk subculture's deliberate embrace of "ugly" styles (meant to muddle standard status codings [Hebdige 1979]) to the Black Panthers' display of militant, disciplined, armed black revolutionaries to the New Left spectacle of middle-class college students being beaten by police (Gitlin 1980), altering cultural codings is one of the most powerful ways social movements actually bring about change.

Recent American gender politics exhibit similar redefinitions of the cultural codes that signal masculinity and femininity. Increasingly in films (a perfect example is *Working Girl*) toughness and ambition are coded as part of earthy, sexy femininity, while classical feminine weakness, lace, and fluffy pillows are

identified with a manipulative, dishonest antifemininity. In the same spirit, the very word *macho* makes the traditional hallmarks of masculinity seem suspect—signs of insecurity or weakness. The recent Disney classic *Beauty and the Beast* offers a wonderfully muscled, powerful, handsome antihero, Gaston, who is made utterly ridiculous as he carefully examines his appearance in every mirror he passes. In contrast, the Beast wins Beauty's love through his gentle awkwardness, his eagerness to please her, his love of books, and his distaste for violence. These cultural reworkings may sometimes change people's values or give them new role models. But more important, such cultural recodings change understandings of how behavior will be interpreted by others. If traditional feminine helplessness starts to look manipulative and controlling, and if masculine dominance starts to look pathetically self-absorbed, then men and women do not have to convert to find themselves meeting a new standard. Men may continue to aspire to masculinity and women to femininity, but the content those ideals encode has changed.

The agendas of many social movements revolve around such cultural recodings. Indeed, since most movements lack political power (this is precisely why they use unconventional political tactics) they can reshape the world more effectively through redefining its terms rather than rearranging its sanctions. And of course opponents employ the giant machinery of publicity that defines antiwar activists as unpatriotic, feminists as man haters, and the wealthy as beleaguered taxpayers to subvert social movements and their goals, precisely by winning the battle for symbolic encoding.

Since many of the enduring accomplishments of social movements are transformations in culture—in the legitimacy of specific demands, but also in the general climate of public discourse (see McAdam 1982)—theoretical ideas that focus on global properties of cultural systems may be more valuable than approaches that focus primarily on specific actors or even specific gains.⁸ Such analyses would emphasize the flamboyance or visibility of a movement's tactics rather than either its success in mobilization or its gains in more conventional terms (see J. Gamson 1989). Researchers might then seek to understand why some cultural offensives succeed and others fail.

Contexts

One of the persistent difficulties in the sociology of culture is that culture influences action much more powerfully at some moments than at others. I have argued elsewhere (Swidler 1986), for example, that explicit cultural ideologies emerge during "unsettled" historical periods when such coherent, systematic worldviews can powerfully influence their adherents. But some-

times even fully articulated ideologies do not predict how people will act (as the many examples of co-optation, of movements that sell out their principles, or of leaders who betray revolutions attest). And at other times, even inchoate or contradictory worldviews powerfully affect action. To better understand such variations in culture's influence, we need to think more carefully about the specific contexts in which culture is brought to bear.

The contexts in which ideas operate can give them coherence and cultural power. "Context" in the first instance means the immediate, face-to-face situation—whether actors are meeting in public forums such as mass meetings or legislatures where issues are debated and decided. In such settings, the dynamics of the meeting itself can give ideas a coherent, systematic influence, even when the individual participants are confused and ambivalent. Second, context can mean the more general situation of conflict or accommodation, polarization and alliance formation, crisis or politics as usual.

The effect of context is evident in many ordinary political and work activities. In academia, for example, one may be confused or ambivalent about an issue—how good a job candidate's work is, whether a colleague merits tenure, whether a departmental decision is genuinely feminist. But in a meeting where sides polarize, where one group defines the issue one way and their antagonists define it in another, these ambiguities fall by the wayside. When politics polarize and alliances are at stake, the public culture crystallizes. Ideas that may have had only loose associations become part of a unified position; other ideas, which may originally have been intermingled with the first set, become clearly opposed. To back the side one supports comes to mean holding a particular ideological line, casting one's lot with a given framing of the situation. It is the conflict itself, the need to separate allies from foes and the need to turn general predispositions into specific decisions, that structures ideological debate.

Certain contexts, particularly those that are important in many social movements, give culture a coherent organization and consistent influence that it normally lacks in the minds of most individuals. This accounts for some of the difficulty in trying to pin down just where and why culture makes a difference in social action (see, for an example, the revealing debate between Sewell [1985] and Skocpol [1985] on the role of culture in the French revolution). If we think of culture either in the Weberian sense, as ideas deeply internalized in individual psyches, or in the more recent semiotic sense as broad, encompassing discourses that shape all social discussion in a given historical era, we will miss the more specific ways cultural power varies by context.

Social movements play out in contexts such as revolutionary committees, public meetings, and constituent assemblies, where stakes are high, risks are great, and political alliances are both essential and uncertain. When activists demand ideological purity to undermine their enemies and consolidate their alliances, they make ideas powerful from the outside in. When a political meeting decides that individual leadership violates its principles, or that fetal tissue research threatens the right to life, ideas can acquire a power to affect action that they normally lack. Of course there is a relation between such context-specific amplifications and clarifications of ideological effects and the wider beliefs, commitments, and values that individuals use to think about their lives in ordinary times. But ordinary culture is fluid, multistranded, and often inconsistent. Specific contexts turn inchoate individual beliefs and broad cultural idioms into particular demands for action. To use contemporary jargon, political actors know the "correct line" even if they remain uncertain about their personal beliefs. And specific political contexts lead actors to draw lines of ideological division sharply, to develop the action implications of their ideological stances, and to make adherence to one side or another of a debate an important sign of alliance or opposition. As the song says, "Which side are you on?"

Institutions

To explain how culture can have consistent effects on action even when people's beliefs are inconsistent, ambiguous, or lightly held, I have suggested that semiotic codes and political contexts can make ideas and symbols culturally constraining, irrespective of whether people believe them. Institutions can have similar effects, by another route.

Institutions are well-established, stable sets of purposes and rules backed by sanctions. One example is legally structured marriage. Others, less formal but no less powerful, are the employment relationship and the established norms about buying and selling that define consumer transactions.⁹

Institutions create obdurate structures that are both constraints and opportunities for individuals. For sociologists of culture, what is interesting about institutions is that individuals create culture around their rules. Individuals can then come to act in culturally uniform ways, not because their experiences are shared, but because they must negotiate the same institutional hurdles.¹⁰

For example, in a college where students must have a major in order to graduate, they need to be able to answer the question, What do you plan to major in? They may also ask themselves and each other, What am I interest-

ed in? because the institution contains the presumption that focused interests guide the choice of major. Moreover, students may develop cultural lore about how to select a major, identities based around the choice of major, and categorizations of others ("techies" versus "fuzzies") on the basis of their majors. In a similar way, the American institution of voting presumes that citizens have ideas or opinions about public issues. Those who do not have opinions or ideas may feel that they are missing some crucial ingredient of selfhood. The tasks an institution requires make sense only if people have or can develop corresponding orientations. Widely shared cultural accounts for those orientations ensue, creating collective consistencies and resonances that the actors might not possess otherwise.

Similarly, the cultures of social movements are shaped by the institutions the movements confront. Different regime types and different forms of repression generate different kinds of social movements with differing tactics and internal cultures. Dominant institutions also shape the movements' deeper values. The most obvious case is the institution of suffrage itself. From Chartism to women's suffrage to the civil rights movement, Western democracies have witnessed the drama of people denied suffrage organizing extra-legal protest to batter their way into the system, making claims for equal dignity and equal moral personhood. In such systems, to be a legitimate political actor is to be one who can vote.

Social movements develop their cultures to fit extant institutions in other ways as well. Where, for example, the state is responsible for public order, movements can induce state action by threatening the public peace. French workers, for example, protested against employers, not directly, but by barricading streets, marching to the town square, and demanding state involvement (Reddy 1984). In the weaker American state, with powerful market institutions but weak centralized police powers, workers defined their battles as struggles with employers over benefits and wages.

Institutions affect the formulation of social movement identities and objectives in yet more central ways. Where the state enshrines "rights" as the crucial legal claim that trumps all others, both individuals and social movements will conceive of the claims they make as "rights" (Glendon 1991). And where legal claims are tied to group identities, as they long have been for American Indians (Cornell 1988) and increasingly have become for women, the disabled, and members of many ethnic and racial groups, identity becomes a central focus for social movements. When institutions make questions of group identity salient, they generate identity-oriented movements and a quest for identity on the part of individuals.

If institutions shape cultural responses in these ways, then the “frame alignment” of which David Snow and his colleagues (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988) have written is not just a matter of individuals’ getting their frames in sync. Rather, individuals develop common scripts in response to the features of the institutions they confront. Commonalities in movement cultures are, at least in part, responses to the institutions the movements are trying to change.

The implication of all this for social movement researchers is in part to change the ordering in their implicit causal models. Gamson’s *Talking Politics* (1992), for example, looks carefully at discourse—at what ordinary people say about politics when they are stimulated to think about it in a group situation. Gamson is interested in delineating the elements from which an active, oppositional culture could be built. But on the evidence of the ways people in Gamson’s focus groups talk, one might well conclude that social movements in contemporary America are a near impossibility. While respondents demonstrate intelligence and occasional indignation over social wrongs, their information is fragmentary, their conversation meandering, and their worldviews concatenations of numerous overlapping frames, many of which are nearly self-canceling. But perhaps this search for a popular culture that could support activism starts in the wrong place. How people organize the cultural resources at their disposal depends very much on the kinds of institutional challenges they face.

Conclusion

I began this essay by stressing the two great wellsprings from which much of contemporary culture theory derives. In a sense Weber and Durkheim still define the range of alternatives available to sociologists who want to use culture to explain things. I have suggested that while the Weberian image of culture as belief carried by committed individual actors seems easier to work with, recent developments in cultural studies have moved in a more Durkheimian direction, seeing culture as constitutive, inherently collective, imbedded in symbols and practices, and necessarily infused with power (see Alexander 1988). But culture in this sense—public practices infused with power—can also be extremely hard to grasp concretely. Indeed, too-easy embrace of the notion that culture is ubiquitous and constitutive can undermine any explanatory claims for culture. Then emphasis on culture becomes a species of intellectual hand waving, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere, while other factors continue to carry the real explanatory weight.

I have tried to offer four concrete suggestions about how culture might be conceived as a global, collective property without becoming only a diffused mist within which social action occurs. I have argued first that, to think more powerfully about culture, we must entertain the possibility that culture's power is independent of whether or not people believe in it. I have then gone on to suggest that culture can have powerful influence if it shapes not individuals' own beliefs and aspirations, but their knowledge of how others will interpret their actions.

My third suggestion is that students of culture in general, and social movement scholars in particular, need to pay close attention to the public contexts in which cultural understandings are brought to bear. Reminding ourselves of the power that meetings and other group forums have to crystallize ideological splits and recode public speech and action, I suggest that culture can have consistent, coherent effects on action in particular contexts even if individuals and groups are divided and inconsistent in their beliefs.

Finally, I have suggested that institutions structure culture by systematically patterning channels for social action. In a sense this simply reinforces the insights of the "political process" model of social movements, which notes that movements respond to the wider structure of political constraints and opportunities (McAdam 1982). But I have tried to push the cultural dimension of such processes, arguing that even cultural patterns that appear to be independent inventions (or innate needs) of individuals or groups can be produced or reproduced by the challenges with which institutions confront actors. Thus many movements may invent simultaneously what seem to be common cultural frames (like the many rights movements of the 1960s or the identity movements of the 1980s). But these need not be matters either of independent discovery or of cultural contagion. Rather, they may be common responses to the same institutional constraints and opportunities.

Rethinking how culture might work from the outside in is a large task. I do not think the suggestions I have made here about codes, contexts, and institutions are the only ways the issue might be approached. But I am convinced that if interest in culture is restricted to studying the inner meaning systems of deeply committed activists, or if culture is relegated to a vague—if "constitutive"—penumbra, we will sacrifice more incisive ways of thinking about its power.

Notes

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1. See the analysis of Durkheim's view of symbols as constitutive in Bellah 1973.
2. The two major lines of empirical work on values are the anthropological, comparing values of different social groups (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961), and the social-psychological, comparing the values of individuals (Rokeach 1973).
3. Geertz's early classic, *The Religion of Java* (1960), is overtly Weberian in inspiration and execution, tracing the influence of differing religious ethics on economic action. Geertz (1966) also emphasizes the problem of theodicy (explaining suffering and injustice in the world God controls), which was central to Weber's analysis of the dynamics of religious change. And Geertz has returned repeatedly to the problem of rationalization in non-Western religious traditions (1968, 1973).
4. See Keesing 1974 for a detailed treatment of this issue.
5. See Sherry Ortner's (1984) insightful and entertaining analysis of shifts in culture theory, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties."
6. This is the theoretical strategy Randall Collins (1981, 1988) has called "microtranslation." The theorist attempts to provide concrete, individual-level causal imagery even for macro or global causal processes, without making the micro reductionist claim that the underlying causal dynamics operate at the micro level.
7. Careful readers of Weber will note that such an explanation of action is perfectly compatible with his theoretical orientation. "Social action" is, after all, action whose "subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber 1968: 4). Weber (1946b) also argued clearly that the Protestant sects continued to influence action long after intense belief had faded because members knew that sect membership gave visible social testimony to their worthiness. Nonetheless, Weber and most of his followers have been preoccupied with the inner workings of the religious psyche rather than with more external forms of cultural power.
8. William Sewell Jr. (1985, 1990) analyzes how dramatic social movements shift an entire pattern of public discourse and thus remake future forms of collective action.
9. See Jepperson 1991 and Scott 1992 for fuller treatments of institutions and problems of institutional analysis.
10. I develop this argument more fully for the case of marriage in *Talk of Love: How Americans Use Their Culture*, forthcoming from University of Chicago Press.