

# ENDOGENOUS EXPLANATION IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

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Jason Kaufman

*John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences, Department of Sociology,  
Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138;  
email: jkaufman@wjh.harvard.edu.*

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■ **Abstract** This paper examines recent work in the sociology of culture devoted to providing endogenous explanations of cultural phenomena. The focus is on works that provide cultural explanations of cultural processes, as opposed to the social structural and “production of culture” explanations otherwise predominant in the literature. I examine three distinct approaches: a “post-hermeneutic” approach devoted not to the question of cultural interpretation but to the issue of subjects’ manipulation of culture in the quest for meaning; a semiotic approach focused on the mechanics of symbol systems; and an ecological approach that emphasizes the role of competition and niche density in explaining both cultural stasis and change. The three approaches have in common a general lack of interest in traditional conceptions of meaning (*verstehen*), choosing instead to focus on issues related to the internal structure and dynamics of cultural expression. This marks a new opportunity for synthesis and exploration in a field traditionally devoted to extra-cultural explanation of cultural phenomena. Both endogenous and exogenous explanations are offered for the rise of this new trend in the sociology of culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Arguably, the formal sociological study of culture in the United States was launched in response to two prior trends in the humanities: the interpretive tradition of cultural studies in which social artifacts such as books, paintings, and stories are dissected as examples of social structure and socio-cultural preference; and the historicist tradition in the humanities, by which I refer not to a desire to contextualize art works in their proper place and time but the attempt to describe the production of culture as a vast (and often unspoken) discourse among men (and sparse few women) of great genius.

Pioneering sociologists in the United States (e.g., Becker 1982; DiMaggio 1982, 1987, 2000; Gans 1974; Griswold 1981, 1987a; Hirsch 1972; Lamont 1987; Peterson 1976, 1979; Radway 1984; White & White 1965) reinvigorated the formal study of culture in direct response to these trends in the humanities. The new sociology of culture thus began with pointed queries about the role of authorial intent,

editorial transformation, differential consumption, and other structural features of the cultural domain. This new sociology of culture was thus a self-conscious negation of earlier approaches to culture—the *verstehen* tradition of Weber, the personality cult in art history, civilizationism in American cultural studies, and structural functionalism, for example. Postwar sociologists in the American tradition claimed their ground by refocusing cultural analysis on the causal efficacy of structural boundaries, institutional limits, and market organization in the cultural domain (DiMaggio 2000, Hirsch & Fiss 2000). The period described in this article refers to that *succeeding* this structuralist phase in cultural studies (hence my use of the oft-misused term *post-structuralism*).

I refer to the contemporary mode herein by referring to its preferred, and distinctive, mode of cultural explanation—endogenous explanation. By this I mean that the sociological approach to culture has of late backed away from a style of reasoning that presumes to explain culture through extra-cultural factors such as social structure (DiMaggio 1982), the economics of artistic production (Peterson 1976), the institutional makeup of criticism and dissemination of the arts (Griswold 1987b), and so forth. Endogenous explanations focus instead on causal processes that occur *within* the cultural stream: mechanisms such as iteration, modulation, and differentiation, as well as processes such as meaning making, network building, and semiotic manipulation. This new approach has merit in that it makes culture more than just a dependent variable. Language, thought, and expressive culture not only shape the meaning we attribute to material things and human relationships (Sewell 1992) but also influence one another in ways worth understanding. Cultural change can occur independently of social structural, technological, or material change. The transformation of Calvinist theology into the “spirit of capitalism” (Weber 2002) is only one such example of the power of endogenous cultural change. An abiding strength of the new focus on endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture is its ability to unveil the internal workings of such processes in detail.

But first, we must address the question of the factual accuracy of this observation. Has there in fact been a shift in American cultural sociology from exogenous to endogenous modes of explanation? Overall, endogenous explanation does seem to have found new currency among sociologists of culture. Says cultural sociologist Ann Swidler (2001, p. 206), for example, “The biggest unanswered question in the sociology of culture is whether and how some cultural elements control, anchor, or organize others.” Swidler and the other scholars whose work is reviewed here devote themselves in one way or another to these issues. Herein I describe three approaches to answering internalist questions in American cultural sociology. Each devotes itself in different ways to uncovering the internal mechanisms of stasis and change in the production of ideas, customs, and cultural objects (e.g., literature and “art”). Whether this is a trend or indeed just a passing fancy has yet to be seen. Whether there are schools or “approaches” of cultural analysis is itself unclear. At the very least, however, the fact that several of the field’s most prominent scholars have devoted themselves to the question of endogeneity is good evidence that this is in fact a new stage in sociological thinking about culture.

## BASIC CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three distinct types of endogenous explanation are explored here. I first discuss what I call the post-hermeneutic school of cultural sociology. Work in this area follows in the tradition of reception studies, which focus on how consumers make meaning out of the cultural products they consume. More importantly, post-hermeneutic cultural sociology rejects the traditional Weberian emphasis on culture as the source of values, and thus a key component of social action. The emphasis of work in the post-hermeneutic vein is to look not at the values implicit in various cultural tropes but at subjects' search for meaning therein. Thus, the central project here is to explore the psycho-semantics of perception, emotion, and meaning making on the part of socially situated individuals.

Next, I turn to recent sociological work that draws on the Durkheimian tradition in cultural sociology, as well as the more recent semiotic turn in literary analysis. The goal here appears to be rejection of aesthetic historicism, or the attempt to explain the origins of various cultural products, in lieu of a self-conscious focus on semiotic patterns embedded in those products. Sociologists in this tradition ask not *why* a specific genre of art appears at a particular time and place but *what* the signs and symbols embedded in that genre say about that time and place. Recent examples of this form of analysis in the sociology of culture follow.

A third school of endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture takes a somewhat more novel approach. It focuses on how ecological constraints shape and enable cultural production and change. Scholars have only just begun assembling the pieces of a full-blown research tradition on cultural ecology, but we would appear to have the beginnings of a new school of thought in the area nonetheless. I refer to this emerging perspective as "cultural ecology" not because it resembles a Spencerian argument about human cultural evolution but because it supports a general theory of cultural change through the analysis of naturally evolving subdivisions in cultural fields. Scholars working in this new tradition argue that there are thresholds at which cultural producers (e.g., scholars, artists, or even parents choosing names for newborn babies) will attempt to innovate or differentiate themselves from predominant styles of cultural production. The mechanisms by which this occurs vary from one model to another, but the basic theme is a search for endogenous properties of cultural fields that naturally, if not inevitably, lead to cultural differentiation and innovation over time.

Note again that all three perspectives share in common a rejection of the traditional sociological search for exogenous explanations of cultural outcomes and change. Scholars working in this new tradition eschew analysis of social structure and the production of culture in the search for internal mechanisms governing cultural processes more generally. This divergence itself seems symptomatic of a causal process described by endogenist thinkers: Seen endogenously, academic fields are susceptible to schism between rival scholars looking for ways to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Over time, however, debate stabilizes, thus creating new opportunities for schismatic differentiation. That the basic properties of the debate should stay the same illustrates a central insight of the ecological

perspective: Innovation does not occur in free form but within the parameters of constrained disagreement. Divergent innovations must retain enough remnants of the original form to remain discernible to viewers familiar with that tradition. In this sense, then, the endogenous turn in cultural sociology is both an avatar of the past and something destined for rebuttal in the future.

To the extent that it takes after older, internalist schools of thought in art history and literary analysis, mainstream structural sociology of culture may well reject endogenous explanation as *passé*. However, the strength and variety of scholarship in each of these new schools indicates that endogeneity will have a lasting impact on the discipline. Furthermore, it does seem fitting that cultural sociologists would turn to endogenous explanation in an era when (a) the muscular preeminence of deconstructionist literary criticism is on the wane (the baroque, dare I say, of endogenous cultural explanation), thus reopening the field to sociologists; and (b) endogenous forms of explanation are ubiquitous in the natural sciences, from ordered complexity and chaos theory to genomics and behavioral neuroscience. If it is indeed true that American sociology is defined by its respect for the natural sciences and ambivalence toward the humanities, then this constitutes one possible explanation for the rise of endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture. But my primary task here is not to explain but to describe. A short review of some of the more prominent pieces in the literature of the past decade (or two) follows.

In the succeeding discussion of these three new schools of endogenous explanation, I attempt to situate the “new” both in terms of its intellectual ancestors and antagonists. This should facilitate evaluation of the past, present, and future of these new approaches to causal explanation in the sociology of culture.

## **UNVERSTÄNDLICH: THE POST-HERMENEUTIC TURN IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY**

One new school of thought in cultural sociology grows directly out of the mainline “production of culture” tradition. Arguably, the sociology of culture first found its footing in America through the production of culture perspective (DiMaggio 2000). By showing, for example, how institutions and organizations in the cultural field influence the content produced therein, sociologists were able to establish a unique, counterintuitive stance on the analysis of culture more generally (see Peterson & Anand 2004). The production of culture perspective openly flouted Durkheimian assertions about the wholism of culture and its organic relationship to social structure (i.e., reflection theory). It also rejected the lineal tradition of teleological master narratives prevalent in early-twentieth-century art history (see, e.g., Gombrich 1960). In contrast, this new field laid bare the materialist (and often capitalist) trappings of the “cultural industries,” thus proving its worth in both cross-national studies of cultural content and critical studies of the high-brow/lowbrow divide (e.g., Becker 1982, Hirsch 1972, Peterson 1976).

As the production of culture perspective grew and matured, it evoked questions of its own, however. Recently, prominent scholars in this field have called for a more integrated focus on the interaction between producers and consumers, as opposed to the traditional focus on producers alone (e.g., Battani & Hall 2000, Cerulo 2000, Griswold 2001, Hughes 2000, Peterson 2000, Swidler 2001). Particularly telling in this regard is a recent special issue of *Poetics* (December 2000) celebrating the contributions of Richard Peterson, one of the pioneers and most ardent practitioners of the production of culture perspective in cultural sociology. Each article, in its own way, tells roughly the same story about the trajectory of the subfield over the course of Peterson's career: The production of culture perspective evolved out of a need to account for the supply-side dimensions of culture. It has flourished and grown. Now, alas, it is time to turn attention to the demand-side of the equation—more specifically, to the complicated means by which consumers make sense of, and thus make meaning out of, the cultural constructs offered them by the culture industries. Says Peterson (2000, p. 230), with respect to the lessons gleaned from his own experiences and accomplishments in the field, "Rather than seek out global empirical patterns, it may prove useful to focus on the process by which people go about creating patterns of culture in concrete situations. . . ." Not to relinquish the mantle as supply-side sociologist of culture, Peterson refers to this process as "auto-production" and adds (2000, p. 230) that "the idea of auto-production in this context highlights the fact that mass production is not linked to *mass* consumption, but to a reception process in which people actively select and reinterpret symbols to produce a culture for themselves."

Taken out of context, this might appear like a return to the cultural consumption or "reception studies" tradition (e.g., Jauss 1982, Radway 1984). It is not. The canon on cultural consumption assumes that audiences have more or less static worldviews around which they reconcile their respective interpretation of cultural goods. Thus, in Radway's (1984) classic study of romance novel readers, women who read such books have certain needs that they fulfill, or at least defer, through reading. In contrast, Peterson's (2000) comments reflect a new sensitivity in American sociology of culture regarding the instability and mutability of the needs and interests that consumers bring to the table when choosing cultural materials and making meaning out of them. For example, Battani & Hall's (2000, p. 153) contribution to the Peterson *festsschrift* concludes, "His [Peterson's] work on audiences and culture showed that deep resonances of social actors with cultural objects are not simply the consequences of their structured social locations within a social order. . . . People fabricate meanings—that is to say, produce them." Otherwise put, supply-side sociologists have brought the production of culture perspective to the demand-, or reception-side, of the equation.

It is exactly this question—how do social actors use culture to fabricate meaning in and of their own lives—that is the central preoccupation of what I refer to as the "post-hermeneutic" school of cultural analysis. The main thrust of this emerging paradigm is its emphasis on the constitutive nature of cultural interpretation. Actors do not simply consume culture in ways that fit their predominant

worldview; they use cultural products to try and find that worldview, to construct it out of the items in their grasp. Returning to Weber's classic analysis of the cultural origins of capitalism, we thus might ask how exactly it was that Calvinist Christians constructed a new repertoire of economic action out of their struggles with "salvation anxiety" (Weber 2002). Calvin crafted the doctrine, but his followers "made" capitalism. Post-hermeneutic sociologists want to understand the actual process by which such transformations take place.

Because the search for meaning is inevitably tied to the personal experiences and cultural repertoires of social actors, the post-hermeneutic perspective necessarily embraces the notion that the psycho-history, or emotional schema, of those actors is an important component of study. The new interpretative cultural sociology has reconciled itself to the fact that, if there is no single, unified set of meanings attached to cultural symbols (Sewell 1992), then cultural consumers' interpretations of those symbols might be equally varied, thus requiring careful consideration in their own right. From this observation a new focus on the existential dilemma of consumption has emerged: if social actors do not bring preformed conceptions and worldviews to the field of cultural consumption, and if such consumption does not translate into the simple absorption of prepacked conceptions and worldviews, then where does meaning come from? What sustains and transforms it across the cultural field?

Denizens of cultural studies have a ready answer to this question, as do post-modernists. The former persist in equating all knowledge with power, whereas the latter are resigned to studying a world without apparent meaning. The new "post-hermeneutic" cultural sociologists reject both approaches. Their focus is on meaning in the traditional Weberian sense, but they reject the assumption that culture generates values that drive social action. Instead, they ask where meaning itself comes from and how actors find it, use it, and create it. Thus, the meaningfulness of culture is something to be explained, not something used to explain.

Ann Swidler's *Talk of Love* (2001) focuses on exactly this issue: the fragile link between action and meaning. According to Swidler, individuals normally rely on cultural values as guides to action only to the extent that values provide rationales for predetermined ends. Individuals readily speak of culture in reference to their lives, but there is scant evidence that these references are anything more than a repertoire they use to make sense of their thoughts and actions. Among the settled, middle-class individuals she spoke with about love and marriage, Swidler notes (2001, p. 103), "Cultural experience is everywhere in the accounts they give of their lives, but that culture is diffuse, inconsistent, and unclear in its effects." People know and experience much more culture than they actually use. Much of it is merely ignored, from the advertisements people see but do not really see, to conversations where they defend ideals they do not actually believe in. "It is much less important for people to have a coherent worldview than to have enough different beliefs to adapt to most contingencies without losing the conviction that somehow the world makes sense" (2001, p. 75). "In this way," Swidler continues (2001, p. 106), "we can recognize the significance of values for action, not as determiners of ends but as tools for fine-tuning action within established life strategies."

The key to understanding the origins of these established life strategies is a question Swidler leaves to others, presumably psychologists, to ponder (see below). Her chief observation, and a novel one at that, is that individuals do not rely on culture to give meaning to their lives; they rely on it to help them find the right words, actions, and rationales to express meaning. Culture provides people “strategies of action” or repertoires of meanings that, in turn, help shape the way they lead their lives, though not necessarily the personal goals that underlie them (see also Eliasoph 1998, Joas 1996, Swidler 1986).

In sum, Swidler proposes (2001, p. 87) “an ‘identity’ model of how culture works. The fundamental notion is that people develop lines of action based on who they already think they are. This is true in two senses. First, . . . actors’ capacities shape the lines of action that they find possible and promising. The second sense in which mine is an identity-based model is that a great deal of culture operates by attaching meanings to the self.”

This perspective dovetails nicely with that of Nancy Chodorow, whose recent book, *The Power of Feelings* (1999), takes up where Swidler leaves off—the intersection of personal psychological development and the culture surrounding those persons. Says Chodorow (1999, p. 239), “I have called this book *The Power of Feelings* but I do not mean feelings in the sense of emanations of raw affect. The feelings that concern psychoanalysis are always feelings enmeshed within stories. A particular feeling condenses and expresses an unconscious fantasy about self, body, other, other’s body, or self and other. Unconscious fantasy projectively endows the world with personal meaning, filtering the world through an emotionally laden story, and it affects and shapes the introjective construction of an inner object world.”

Similarly, Norman Denzin (1999, p. 117) advocates a “performative, interpretive, interactionist” form of cultural studies that focuses on “the stories people tell one another as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies, or existential turning point moments in their lives.” Karen Cerulo (2000) focuses on how individuals fill in gaps in newspaper stories, thus contributing to the “meaning construction” of the news in their own ways. In his provocatively titled book, *Thinking Through Television*, Ron Lembo (2000) takes a comparable approach to the study of meaning making among regular TV watchers. The emphasis here is on modifying the conventional “reception of culture” perspective by acknowledging that the creation of meaning is an implicit part of the consumption process. Cultural consumers do not only seek cultural products that resonate with them; they construct meaning for themselves as part of the consumption process.

Rambo (1999) perhaps takes this perspective to its furthest extremes in positing a rational choice scenario in which cultural structures, or unified meaning systems, are the result of individuals’ accumulated efforts to control symbolic objects or dictate the meaning associated with given persons, places, things, texts, ideas, and so on. Because such efforts are “constrained by the actor’s own symbolic capacities and interests, and even more narrowly by the need to orient to the control of others, anticipating their capacity to get and give meanings” (Rambo 1999, p. 323), the net result of all such efforts is a social system of meaning, or “culture structure.”

Rambo thus stresses the constitutive process of meaning making, as opposed to the conventional notion of meaning as something embedded in texts and then discovered by consumers. Psycho-biography comes to the fore in the determination of those intentions. Individuals are driven to find and make meaning in order to define and assert themselves in the world. In sum, argues Rambo (1999, pp. 328–29), “In the cultural reconstruction of rational choice theory, meaningful interests are not something actors *have* so much as something that they *see and show*.” Meaning making is thus portrayed as an exercise in resource control. One seeks to impute meaning to the world in such a way as to maximize one’s own material, social, and/or psychological benefit while minimizing the resistance others are likely to pose to it.

In contrast, an older piece by Wendy Griswold (1987a) offers what might be the closest approximation of an approach to culture that bridges the post-hermeneutic and semiotic schools of thought (see below). Griswold shares with the post-hermeneutic school an interest in the way cultural consumers “fabricate” meaning from the things they consume. From the semiotic school, she accepts the notion that signs vary in the types of material they offer for would-be meaning making. Griswold’s work departs from the post-hermeneutic mode in that it focuses not on individual constructions of meaning but on critical constructions made at the meso-social level by cultural entrepreneurs such as literary critics, journalists, and so forth. She thus tends to assume that such meanings are shared among wide segments of the population, such as national societies, as opposed to focusing on how particular individuals draw on both social and personal resources in crafting meaning for themselves (see, for example, Denzin 1990; Griswold 1987b, 1990). In this sense, then, her approach is perhaps closer to that of the semiotic school than the post-hermeneutic school. So too is that of Gottdiener (1985), who advocates a semiotic approach to the struggle between cultural producers and consumers over the assumed meaning of cultural objects. We thus turn to the semiotic approach now.

## CULTURAL GENOMICS: THE SOCIOLOGIST AS SEMIOTICIAN

Two texts might properly be seen as the harbingers of semiotically oriented explanation in the sociology of culture. The authors of the first, Alexander & Smith (1993), actually take the author of the second, Wuthnow (1987), to task for “turning away from the ‘problem of meaning’” (Alexander & Smith 1993, p. 153). I try to reconcile both views, or at least explain their differences, here. I also highlight several other recent works by sociologists of culture that reject exogenous explanation in lieu of the exploration of the internal dynamics of sign systems and the endogenous production of meaning.

Alexander & Smith (1993) begin their piece “The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies” with the following complaint about exogenous explanation of cultural processes: “Too often, cultural forms are



presented as empty boxes to be filled in by structural needs, with the result that the internal content of representations exercises little explanatory power.” They criticize Bourdieu, for example, for relying too heavily on social structure as the explanatory force behind action, via the cultural mechanism of “habitus.” Instead, Alexander & Smith (1993, p. 155) propose “a more hermeneutically sensitive and internally complex model of culture,” one that stresses the foundational role of deep cultural dichotomies in social process (see also Alexander 2002, Rambo & Chan 1990). Drawing deeply on the work of Durkheim, Mauss, Saussure, and especially Claude Levi-Strauss, Alexander & Smith view culture as a system of binary sets of symbols, each of which serves to delineate sacred from profane symbols. “They set off the good from the bad,” they write (1993, p. 157), “the desirable from the detested, the sainted from the demonic.” Such symbolic sets constitute social discourses that guide action and interpretation therein. “Because meaning is produced by the internal play of signifiers,” they add (1993, p. 157), “the formal autonomy of culture from social structural determination is assured.”

Having laid out their support for endogenous explanation in cultural analysis, Alexander & Smith (1993) then demonstrate their framework by applying it to contemporary American discourse about civil society, or “the moral regulation of social life” (1993, p. 161). Their analysis stresses (1993, p. 161), “the fact that the institutions of civil society, and their decisions, are informed by a unique set of cultural codes.”

Wuthnow (1987) advocates a very similar approach to cultural analysis in his volume of essays, *Meaning and Moral Order*. Like Alexander & Smith, Wuthnow (1987, p. 66) favors structural analysis of moral codes, or sets of “cultural elements that define the nature of commitment to a particular course of behavior. These elements,” he continues, “. . . have an identifiable symbolic structure.” Thus, Wuthnow presents an agenda much like Alexander & Smith’s (1993): the systematic study of the relationships between cultural symbols. Where he differs from Alexander & Smith is on the degree to which such analyses actually reveal true knowledge about the intended meaning of such symbols. Wuthnow, for example, goes to great lengths to demonstrate the inadequacy of cultural analyses that claim direct insight into the minds of cultural actors. He cites Robert Darnton’s (1984) work on “the great cat massacre” as an example of good cultural analysis gone bad—Darnton does a beautiful job, according to Wuthnow, of dissecting the various symbols at play in a late-eighteenth-century post hoc account of the French Revolution, but he errs in assuming that those symbols really tell us anything about the mindset, or *mentalité*, of the actors in question. Any number of epistemological obstacles obscure the issue of meaning, says Wuthnow. “As with Darnton’s cat massacre,” he writes (1987, p. 63), “we will probably conclude that more can be learned about the conditions under which a statement or act is meaningful than we can about its actual meaning.”

Both Wuthnow and Alexander & Smith advocate a linguistic style of analysis that focuses on the relationships between symbols, both positive and negative. So says Wuthnow, for example (1987, p. 64), “. . . We can examine the relations

among elements of discourse, just as a structural linguist examines relations in language. What we can discover are the kinds of elements that can be associated with one another, those that are not, and perhaps some of the rules governing these associations.” This is remarkably similar to Alexander & Smith’s (1993) call for a post-Durkheimian focus on binary sets of cultural symbols. Again, the chief difference would appear to be Alexander & Smith’s assertion that these sets actually drive social action in predictable ways. Wuthnow seems dubious about the relationship between symbols and action, at least to the extent that it is epistemologically possible to connect the two with any certainty. Thus, Wuthnow’s approach appears to share the psycho-biographical school’s interest in culture as part of a search for meaning, as opposed to a vector of meaning itself. Alexander & Smith (1993), as well as Rambo & Chan (1990), take culture at face value; they believe that meaning can be reliably found in utterances, actions, and texts.

No matter how much disagreement there might be about the epistemology of meaning, however, the sheer number of semiotically oriented studies in cultural sociology is strong evidence that this is a significant form of endogenous explanation in the field today. Archer (1988), for one, adopts the notion of binary oppositions as the cornerstone of her morphogenic approach to cultural analysis. All cultures revolve around embedded either-or distinctions, which she refers to as the “cultural system” of a given society. It is the cultural system that defines the basic parameters of intelligible action. Thus, cultural codes, framed as either-or distinctions, drive social action endogenously. Like Wuthnow, furthermore, Archer generally avoids the issue of the inherent meaningfulness of these codes. It is their function as the building blocks of social action that is of primary concern here.

A number of more contemporary studies take up the semiotic mantle in part or whole. Bergesen (2000, 2004) offers a new framework for analysis of art oriented toward the identification and codification of iterative rules governing the construction and typification of distinct artistic styles. Bergesen aims to do for cultural products what Noam Chomsky did for linguistics—identify a base set of rules governing all productive iterations within a specific communicative system. John Levi Martin (2000), in contrast, aims to document a network typology of personal beliefs, thus categorizing beliefs in relation to one another, as opposed to deriving the iterative rules governing their creation. Martin posits a conceptual schema whereby personal beliefs can be viewed with respect to collective belief space, or a social matrix of associated and unassociated beliefs within which individuals might be mapped.

Margaret Somers is a leading proponent of a narrative-based approach to semiotic cultural analysis. Much of her published work (e.g., 1992; 1994; 1995a,b; 1999) attempts to deconstruct the semiotic code of public narratives about the public sphere. This she calls a “historical sociology of concept formation.” Somers argues that stories and symbols have independent effects on social action through their constituent influence on the basic parameters of political debate. She defines culture as (Somers 1999, p. 124), “intersubjective public symbolic systems and networks of meaning-driven schemas organized by their own internal rules and

structures that are (more or less, depending on the situation) loosely tied together in patterns of relationships." She suggests (1999, p. 125) that we "... separate the realm of culture from other social forces by abstracting it out for heuristic purposes only as a distinct analytic dimension of meanings; this makes it possible to explore the internal dynamics of a cultural schema on its own terms." A significant contribution of Somers' work in this area is the observation that any such cultural schema "must be buttressed by an epistemological infrastructure that verifies its truth claims" (1999, p. 125). Thus she uses the term "knowledge cultures" to refer to those cultural schemas that have achieved a state of epistemological certainty, or taken-for-grantedness, in society at large. This helps explain the efficacy of culture as an independent source of social action.

John Meyer and his colleagues have long advocated a similar sort of approach to the study of national, social, and political development around the world. In a recent overview of this work, Meyer (1999, p. 123) defines his approach to culture as "less a set of values and norms, and more a set of cognitive models defining the nature, purpose, resources, technologies, controls, and sovereignty of the proper nation state." Here and elsewhere, Meyer and his colleagues have argued that such cognitive models are responsible for widespread changes in the organizational structure of governments, nongovernmental organizations, and institutions of science and higher learning around the world (see, e.g., Boli & Thomas 1999; Frank & Meyer 2002; Frank et al. 1995, 2000; Meyer et al. 1992; Ramirez & Ventresca 1992; Schofer 1999; Soysal 1994). Cerulo (1995) is particularly adept in this regard, as she formally uses semiotic methods to analyze the structure and content of national anthems, flags, and symbols. This constitutes semiotic analysis of cultural diversity at the comparative, macrosociological scale.

On a more microsociological plane, Michèle Lamont has taken up the post-Durkheimian mantle with her notion of symbolic boundaries. Lamont argues that dichotomous cultural distinctions, primarily based on observations relating "us versus them," have causal efficacy in generating and perpetuating social structural inequality. A volume edited by Lamont & Fournier (1992) relates symbolic boundaries to "the making of inequality," for example, and Lamont's subsequent two books (1992, 2000) explore the role of race- and class-based distinctions in France and the United States. A recent edited collection (Lamont 1999) also looks directly at "the cultural territories of race." In addition, a volume (2000) edited with French sociologist Laurent Thévenot attempts to reframe comparative cultural sociology around the notion of symbolic boundaries, or repertoires of moral evaluation. Social structural differences come into play here as well, particularly with regard to the occupational and educational systems of the two countries, but it is reasonable to portray Lamont's work as at least partially "internalist" in orientation.

Several other sociologists of culture are much more explicit about their commitment to semiotically oriented endogenous explanations of cultural diversity and change. Lee (1999) and Biernacki (1999) advocate a poststructuralist, literary approach to deconstructing the meaning and generative power of cultural codes. Olick (1999; see also Olick & Robbins 1998, Olick & Levy 1997) and

Wagner-Pacifci (1986) take a dramaturgical approach to cultural expression, arguing that the way social events are featured, described, rationalized, critiqued, and remembered has a lasting impact on political debate and social order. Thus, for example, Wagner-Pacifci (1986, p. ix) deconstructs “the highly structured way in which news of terrorist acts, hostage reactions, government positions and rationales for positions, and public response reaches us.” One might call this “an interpretation of interpretations,” as does Wagner-Pacifci (1986, p. 2). Similarly, Olick (1999) shows how attempts to commemorate specific, often highly traumatic events from the past are “path-dependent products of earlier commemorations,” thus drawing our attention to the hermeneutic loop by which cultural tropes create themselves.

A final, programmatic statement about cultural autonomy and the semiotic approach is given by Sewell, who plainly states that “[c]ulture is neither a particular kind of practice nor a practice that takes place in a particular social location. It is, rather, the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general” (Sewell 1999, p. 48). More specifically, he regards this semiotic dimension in a Saussurian sense, which is to say that symbol systems need not be coherent or internally consistent. It is merely necessary that “users of culture will form a semiotic community—in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action” (1999, p. 49). Thus, the mission of cultural semiotics seems clear: to continually uncover and decode the symbolic oppositions that drive cognition, expression, and memory.

## CULTURAL ECOLOGY: ENDOGENOUS EXPLANATIONS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND CHANGE

This last body of work embraces what I believe is the most novel approach to endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture. It represents a vast new subject of inquiry in the field, one motivated, moreover, not by overweening interest in culture at the expense of all else but in forms of causal analysis applicable to all fields of sociology. Although the precedents are murky, it appears to share much in common with earlier work in demography and organizational ecology. I refer to this new approach as “cultural ecology” primarily because it draws on the notion that social processes occur within relatively contained “ecosystems,” each incorporating unique sets of endogenous constraints on growth, stability, and change (see, for example, Hawley 1986).

The major principle of cultural ecology is that there is an internal impetus for emulation and innovation within all cultural systems, driven primarily by the desire for social distinction and differentiation. The hidden key to work in this vein is the existence of social thresholds at which emulation turns to differentiation. Thus, accepted styles of reasoning, artistry, or even baby naming aggregate to a point whereby innovations in form are sought, and similarly imitated, by those seeking to differentiate themselves from their predecessors. The profound observation therein is that such innovations will reproduce essential characteristics of the

then-predominant form, thus producing a kind of iterative cultural dichotomy not unlike that described by culturalists in the semiotic tradition (see above).

The first and most self-consciously “endogenous” work in the ecological tradition is written, not surprisingly, by a scholar known for his meticulous and often counter-intuitive observations of the vagaries of causal analysis in the social sciences—Stanley Lieberon (see, e.g., Lieberon 1985, Lieberon & Lynn 2002). In the introductory chapter to *A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change* (2000), Lieberon makes clear his aim: to explore the role of internal mechanisms in cultural change. Unlike standard historical accounts of cultural change, Lieberon’s is less interested in the content than the form of fashion. To wit, his account of changing American fashions in baby names begins with a clear effort to situate the phenomenon in time and space—such changes only began in the late nineteenth century, when changing demographic, cultural, and social factors weakened the power of tradition over baby-naming practices. He also adeptly points out (2000, p. 66) that naming trends have, over the past 100 years, tended to change more quickly for newborn girls than for boys, presumably because boys’ names “play more of a role of marking continuity with the past and less of a decorative function.”

Nonetheless, Lieberon’s account also refutes many commonly held opinions about the impact of external events on changing fashions in baby names (2000, p. 70). “Although this popular assumption that changes in taste reflect changes in social conditions . . . or commercial influences is true, it is less useful than most observers realize. Some of the most important social developments have at best a minimal impact on tastes. Likewise, the influence of advertisers can be exaggerated . . . . Social events are often no help in understanding tastes in terms of either their form or the direction of the change.” He concludes this survey of exogenous explanations with the following comment (2000, p. 91): “The internal taste mechanisms are the building blocks underlying virtually all changes in taste, and we shall devote the next two chapters to understanding them.”

Lieberon’s primary observations about changing taste focus on what ecologists might call the “carrying capacity” of socio-cultural environments. Thus, in explaining an endogenous causal process that he refers to as “the incremental replacement mechanism,” Lieberon (2000, p. 115) posits the following thought experiment:

Suppose a blue blazer is popular among men. At some point, the market for blue blazers will be saturated and at least some men will be attracted to something different—but not too different. Manufacturers and retailers will play with variations rather than revolutions. Perhaps consumers will respond to a different color or fabric, or changes in the buttons or a switch from a single-breasted style to a double-breasted style. . . . [N]ew tastes build on existing tastes, and the elements are gradually replaced.

Key to understanding (or believing) this notion is the assertion that some consumers desire novelty, though nothing so novel as to be unrecognizable vis à vis

current trends. Implicit is the assumption that (a) such incrementalism is indeed the norm, and (b) there is a discrete and empirically verifiable frame of reference within which such norms of taste can be observed and manipulated.

This represents, albeit in embryonic form, a mode of social explanation not unlike that developed in the life sciences to explain, or at least account for, the evolution of species. (See Lieberman & Lynn 2002 on the general usefulness of evolutionary theory for sociological theory.) In the biological case, interspecies competition for finite resources, coupled with random mutations within species, produces systemic change over time. In the sociological case, taste preferences elicit diminishing marginal returns at some obvious threshold, thus inducing innovation. In this way, tastes resemble finite resources in ecosystems, such as nutrition and available habitat. A given taste's value thus lies in its relationship to the systemwide distribution of tastes. Consumers change their taste preferences in accordance with the relative distribution of opportunities for distinction. Or, in Lieberman's own words (2000, p. 157),

[T]he appeal of specific names will shift even if the disposition of parents along the continuum from favoring rare to very popular names is constant. . . . Suppose, for example, a specific name has an appeal to parents favoring unusual names. Their adoption of that name, however, may now make the name too popular for later parents with the same inclination toward rarity. In contrast, the name could generate a following among new parents who find a mildly popular level just right. And this can progress upward, with a new set of parents, with different dispositions, replacing earlier parents. [Nonetheless], at some point even the appeal of a popular name will decline for parents who are attracted to such names. There is a limit to the level of popularity that even they will accept.

Lieberman concludes his study of naming practices by reaffirming the utility, and emerging popularity, of endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture (2000, p. 257): "The perspective I have developed for analyzing names—emphasizing how internal mechanisms can generate change in the absence of external social change—is related to other recent efforts in cultural studies that point in multiple ways to the internal dynamics of culture." A number of those efforts mirror, or at least resonate with, Lieberman's ecological approach to cultural analysis.

An equally elegant and often ethereal account of endogenous processes in the sociology of culture is offered by Abbott (2001) in *Chaos of Disciplines*. As Abbott admits, *Chaos* is really two books in one cover, the first a theoretical account of the institutionalization of ideas (particularly in academic settings), the second a more general account of a particular type of cultural configuration. The former section concerns us here because it touches directly on the issue of culture and its social organization. Abbott's topic is intellectual fields and their tendency to subdivide over time into camps that replicate divisions at higher levels. Thus, sociologists find themselves divided into two camps, one structuralist and the other culturalist,

each of which subsequently divides into structuralist and culturalist camps, and so on. In his own words (2001, p. 3), “. . . a subset of a larger unit can contain scaled-down versions of structures and processes in that larger unit . . .” The verity of the observation should be clear to all. The explanation, however, is uniquely cultural, and, to the surprise of some, it is similar to Lieberson’s in several important respects.

First, Abbott, like Lieberson, goes to great lengths to distinguish his approach to the sociology of culture from the more traditional variants thereof. Whereas Lieberson’s primary target is “reflection theory,” or the argument that a society’s culture directly and necessarily reflects the social conditions therein, Abbott’s foil is Foucauldian theories of knowledge and power. Says Abbott on this account (2001, p. 4), “The mechanism I propose [to explain duplication in intellectual subdivisions] is in the first instance purely cultural; my account is, in that sense, internalist. By contrast, most current views of intellectual succession are externalist; knowledge is somehow wed to power and power propels change.”

Second, both scholars’ theories build on, but ultimately aim to supplant, the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1988, 1993, 1996), whose concept of cultural fields is, perhaps, the true origin of ecological thinking about cultural stasis and change in sociology. Abbott and Lieberson make the following distinction (excuse the pun): contra Bourdieu, the new cultural ecology aims to make explicit those mechanisms of cultural competition that are *independent* of the interests and groups engaged in such competition. Bourdieu’s primary concern was in describing cultural fields as arenas of struggle between groups with disparate access to the material necessities of life. Both Lieberson and Abbott are committed to exploring endogenous mechanisms leading to cultural differentiation rather than to the social structural sources of such competition. Their theories attempt to formally model cultural change, whereas Bourdieu appears more intent on asynchronous analyses of cultural systems and their relation to social power and class reproduction.

Recall Lieberson’s argument that cultural fashions change over time as some portion of the population seeks new, or at least modified, versions of predominant tastes. Abbott makes a similar argument about intellectual succession in academic disciplines. When intellectuals describe themselves to lay people, they use very general, often meaningless terms. When they describe themselves to other intellectuals, however, they evoke standard dichotomies that split the field into two parts: those like them and everyone else. Thus, telling someone he or she is a quantitative sociologist says little beyond the fact that you are one of the many people who are not qualitative sociologists. Among a crowd of fellow quantitative sociologists, however, one will evoke a finer, but roughly equivalent distinction—I am a strict causal analyst, for example, as opposed to someone interested in more descriptive methods. Within each of these camps, furthermore, the relevant population will tend to divide itself into more and less qualitative camps. This, argues Abbott, is because one *must* draw such either-or distinctions to describe oneself, and to describe others.

A global us-versus-them dichotomy thus serves as a reference point in each sub-community, where it serves as a further reference point within sub-subcommunities, and so on. "At any given time, then, a fractal distinction profoundly shapes our understanding of our own and others' social science," concludes Abbott (2001, p. 13), "fractal distinction" being one phrase he uses to describe the structure of this particular phenomenon. "On the one hand, it measures our similarities and differences no matter how great or small those may be. On the other it generates endless misunderstanding and provides a disturbingly powerful tool for nonsubstantive argument. All these characteristics arise from the relational character of fractal distinctions, which makes them generate a clear local structure that replicates a hazy larger one."

Where Abbott's theory really gains traction is in explaining how academic disciplines develop and divide over time.

... The triumph of a position in intellectual life usually guarantees that position's downfall by placing it in a new context of fractal comparison . . . This perpetual recontextualization forces each newly triumphant position to recognize that it has omitted central matters of concern or that, like sociological conflict theory, it is itself now representing what it thought it had defeated . . . Another consequence of rediscovery in real time is that there is an extraordinarily complex history of terminologies. For the old ideas return under new names (Abbott 2001, p. 18).

It is not clear (to this author at least) whether Abbott's theory of differentiation might best be considered a subset of Lieberman's, or vice versa. Lieberman concedes the tendency for old tastes to reemerge as new ones (such as the resurgent popularity of New Testament names like Faith, Hope, and Felicity), although he does not insist on it to the same extent as Abbott. However, both agree that the indexicality of naming practices is an important motor of cultural change, as is the more instrumental goal of personal distinction. The outcomes in question are different—clearly less is at stake, and more at hand, in choosing baby names than in forging high-status art forms or professional preoccupations—but the mechanisms are comparable. The endogenous process of qualitative distinction creates self-perpetuating cycles of cultural change over time.

Another proponent of this perspective, though in a slightly different tenor, is Randall Collins, whose *Sociology of Philosophies* (1998) tours nearly three millennia of intellectual development with an "internalist" eye. Although Collins may not see himself as a cultural ecologist, his "global theory of intellectual change" is quite specific in this regard. Collins portrays intellectual communities as intergenerational vacancy chains along which individuals are arrayed according to their transgenerational influence (i.e., the degree to which their reputation lives on in the work of subsequent generations of intellectuals). "The structure of the intellectual world allows only a limited number of positions to receive much attention at any one time. There are only a small number of slots to be filled, and once they are filled up, there are overwhelming pressures against anyone else pressing through to the top ranks"



(Collins 1998, p. 75). One way to maximize one's opportunities, Collins argues, is to pit one's work against that of the prevailing paradigm. "... Intellectuals seem to be drawn to their opponents," Collins posits (1998, p. 73). "They seek them out, like magnets tugging at each other's opposite poles. The intellectual world at its most intense has the structure of contending groups, meshing together into a conflictual supercommunity."

This approach seems roughly comparable to Abbott's. Both stress the role of limited opportunities in promoting innovation. Outcomes are more patterned, and thus more easily explained, in Abbott's analysis of disciplinary growth, but the two share at least a similar view of the ecological dynamics of endogenous cultural change.

Similar themes appear in a variety of other works in the field. Mark (1998) presents a wholly theoretical account of social differentiation based on the observation that interpersonal communication creates informational disjunctures within social structures that, over time, cumulate into disparate social networks. Because information-sharing appears to be the key mechanism here, one might similarly label it an endogenous theory of cultural change wedded to an exogenous theory of social structural transformation.

In a completely different vein, several sociologists of media have observed a tendency for emulation and repetition in television programming (Bielby & Bielby 1994, Gitlin 1983). Faced with massive opportunity costs and a perpetual fear of failure, network executives look to promote new shows that incorporate proven stars, themes, and most importantly production teams with a known record of success. This observation mirrors, in part, Collins' (1998) observation about the role of network ties in intellectuals' careers. Most prominent intellectuals have a disproportionately large number of social ties to other prominent intellectuals, Collins observes. Such ties help rising intellectuals by creating career opportunities, fomenting intellectual challenges, and bolstering their confidence and emotional energy.

Thus, we find in the new literature on cultural ecology a sort of unwitting convergence around several key themes: (a) Opportunities for favorable placement within cultural systems are limited by the time and attention span of audiences; (b) limited opportunities promote bi-modal social clustering, whereby contrasting camps of allies foster cultural tropes in opposition to one another; (c) social location (i.e., status or prestige) in these camps is influenced by network ties to other prominent figures in the network; (d) the process of camp differentiation tends to be iterative, generating long-term trends in which similar dichotomies emerge within camps, and further generating "self-similar social structures," or fractal differentiation over time. Again, Pierre Bourdieu is probably the first sociologist to articulate these ideas in any comprehensive way, although his explicit interest in the social structural dynamics underlying cultural fields has predisposed the new generation of cultural ecologists to sidestep his work. The new ecological models are focused more directly on identifying endogenous mechanisms of cultural change, as opposed to the social structural interests to which they give voice.

Future studies will need to examine such ecological dynamics across a wide variety of cultural milieu in order to define the scope conditions for such processes. Hilgartner & Bosk (1988) propose an ecological framework for understanding the rise and fall of public concern with social problems. One of the chief obstacles to such a model, they profess, is the difficulty of defining, let alone operationalizing, the "carrying capacity" of public arenas of discourse about such matters. Indeed, defining the carrying capacity of various cultural domains is one question that will obviously prove difficult, though necessary, if the ecological perspective is to thrive. Furthermore, cultural ecologists will eventually have to face up to the post-hermeneutic question of how exactly cultural producers come to recognize the volume, density, and competitiveness of rival cultural products and niches. This is an especially pressing question in the face of the increasing impact of cultural diffusion and aesthetic *mélange* on modern global society. Has it become harder to distinguish trends, let alone differentiate oneself from the crowd, in such a world? Finally, cultural ecologists will need to pay further attention to explaining, or at least accounting for, variance in cultural fields with respect to their institutionalized tolerance for (and tendency to promote or discourage) cultural innovation and change. In contrast to academia or baby naming, for example, the contemporary *haute couture* and architecture industries endorse radical experimentation to such an extent that familiarity is taboo and pastiche *de rigueur*. How and why this affects the mechanics of endogenous cultural change should prove fruitful and interesting. All three issues might well turn the attention of cultural ecologists back to the social structural sources of human ecology, thus completing another cycle in the swing from exogenous to endogenous explanation in sociology.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulty of assessing and summarizing what may or may not be a new trend in the sociology of culture, the works discussed here do appear to share a number of important characteristics. For one, they all dispense with conventional efforts to provide social structural explanations of cultural outcomes. From an ecological standpoint, this is not at all surprising. After several decades of rapid progress in the production of culture mode, sociologists of culture have begun looking for new intellectual alternatives. Not surprisingly (if you are a believer in ecological explanations of cultural change), the new alternative is theoretically similar to the conventional art history that prompted the formation of the production of culture perspective in the first place. It might be that cultural humanism and the sociology of culture have, and will continue to have, alternate interpretative fashions. Nevertheless, even if there never really is anything new under the sun, as Abbott (2001) would have it, we can at least hope to make gradual improvements in what we already think we know. This is clearly the case with our understanding of endogenous processes of cultural change. Whereas humanists like Gombrich (1960) and Meyer (1956) promoted a mode of explanation akin to great men having great

conversations about art, contemporary sociologists like Abbott (2001), Bourdieu (1984, 1996), Collins (1998), and Lieberson (2000) have offered detailed, generalizable models of both the causes and effects of niche competition in cultural fields.

A second, perhaps more unique, feature of these three emerging schools of endogenous explanation in the sociology of culture is their stance on the Weberian question of meaning, or *verstehen*. Many, though not all, of the scholars whose work is discussed here show tacit disregard for the content of culture, which is to say that the works reviewed here tend to show more interest in the structure of culture than the content thereof. Swidler's *Talk of Love*, for example, regards cultural content as something after the fact—familiar tropes that individuals use to justify their behavior. This trend is also apparent in the semiotic school, where discovery of the symbolic structure of cultural dichotomies generally takes precedence over the content of those dichotomies as such. Similarly, cultural ecologists emphasize the continuity of cultural forms at the expense of the actual content thereof. This is not meant as a criticism but only an observation of fact. The new sociologists of culture are intent on structural analyses of culture. They aim not to unearth the meaning implicit in cultural objects but the symbolic systems that undergird them. This may be a product of the new prestige culture has found within the discipline, thus prompting sociologists of culture to attempt to develop endogenous models comparable to those prominent in structural sociology. Or it may be an unwitting imitation of the postmodern turn of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Regardless, it seems inevitable that the limitations of this perspective will be felt sooner or later, and a voice from the wilderness will beckon us back to the study of meaning and the social structural sources thereof. Even so, our enhanced understanding of the endogenous processes whereby meaning is made, communicated, and transformed will no doubt prove useful.

Finally, sociologists of culture have a newfound sensitivity to the role of competition as an endogenous catalyst for cultural change. This, again, might simply stem from an effort to emulate more completely the dominant modes of structuralist sociology, but I suspect it is more rightly an effort to move the sociology of culture in new directions, past reflection theory, structural functionalism, and the production of culture perspectives. In some respects, this emphasis on distinction and competition harks back to Weber's discussion of status groups and Durkheim's analyses of social systems of classification. In each of the three perspectives discussed above, there is a deep sense of tension among competing ideas, rationales, and expressive modes. Cultural objects, artistic and intellectual styles, even the everyday search for meaning, have all thus been freed of their traditional status as dependent variables, things to be explained by a-cultural causes. Nor is culture-as-independent-variable seen any longer as a unified whole, imputing to social action prescribed meanings, goals, and values. Culture itself is now being treated as a unique social object worthy of in-depth analysis. In a sense, then, we are witnessing the addition of a new tool in our repertoire of sociological concepts and causes. This alone makes these three new schools of cultural analysis well worth further examination.

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