21 The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life

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Reality is not made up of insular chunks unambiguously separated from one another by sharp divides, but, rather, of vague, blurred-edge essences that often "spill over" into one another. It normally presents itself not in black and white, but, rather, in subtle shades of gray, with mental twilight zones as well as intermediate essences connecting entities. Segmenting it into discrete islands of meaning usually rests on some social convention, and most boundaries are, therefore, mere social artifacts. As such, they often vary from one society to another as well as across historical periods within each society. Moreover, the precise location – not to mention the very existence – of such mental partitions is often disputed even within any given society.

Culture and Classification

There is more than one way to carve discrete chunks out of a given continuum, and different cultures indeed mold out of the same reality quite different archipelagos of meaning. While all cultures, for example, distinguish the edible from the inedible or the young from the old, they usually differ from one another in where they draw the lines between them. The distinction between the sexually accessible and inaccessible is likewise universal (all cultures, for example, have an incest taboo), yet the specific delineation of those who are considered off limits often varies from one culture to another. Surrounding oneself with a bubble of "personal space," too, is a universal practice, yet, in marked contrast to other species, humans exhibit substantial sub-specific cultural variations in where they draw its boundaries. (Along similar lines, the precise delineation of one's "personal" circle of intimates also varies from one culture to another.) By the same token, not everyone who is considered "black" in America would necessarily be classified as such in the West Indies or Brazil....

Languages likewise differ from one another in the way they generate distinct lexical particles, and it is not unusual that a single word in one language would cover the semantic range of several separate words in another. Thus, for example, while there is a single word for both rats and mice in Latin, insects and airplanes in Hopi, and brothers-in-law and grandnephews in the Algonquian language of the Fox, there are separate words for blankets that are folded and spread out, for water in buckets and in lakes, and for dogs that stand and sit in Navajo. Such differences have considerable cognitive implications. After all, it is much easier to isolate a distinct mental entity from its surroundings when one has a word to denote it. That explains why the Navajo, who use different verbs to denote the handling of objects with different shapes, indeed tend to classify objects according to shape much more

than English speakers. By the same token, lacking the necessary lexical tools for differentiating, it took me, a native speaker of Hebrew, a long time before I could actually notice the mental gaps – so obvious to English-speakers – that separate jelly from jam or preserves....

Any notion of logic is valid only within a particular cultural milieu, and our own classifications are no more logical than those of "savages." We must therefore resist the ethnocentric tendency to regard our own way of classifying reality as the only reasonable way to do it. That entails giving up the idea that some ways of classifying are more correct and "logical" than others and, therefore, also reconsidering the standard tests through which we usually measure intelligence. Thus, for example, "a person, asked in what way wood and alcohol are alike [should not be] given a zero score if he answers: 'Both knock you out' [just] because the examiner prefers logical categories of scientific classification."[1] By the same token, nor should we penalize someone who maintains (as did my daughter, when she was five) that the difference between a bus and an airplane lies in the fact that we need not pay the pilot on boarding a plane.

Ways of classifying reality vary not only across cultures but also across historical periods within the same culture. The last couple of centuries, for example, saw substantial shifts in the location of the lines we draw between the sexes, the "races," public and private, family and community. Along similar lines, our calendar year did not always begin on January 1, opiates were still legal in America only eighty years ago, and lungs and gills did not become "similar" until comparative anatomists began classifying organisms according to functional rather than morphological features. Even the location of the line separating art from life changes over time – the Romans, for example, would often execute real-life convicts on stage as part of theatrical shows. A few decades ago, Americans were taught to regard the color of one's skin (and Germans the color of one's hair) as most salient for social exclusion. Today they learn to ignore it as socially irrelevant....

The lines we draw vary not only across cultures and historical periods but also within cultures at a given point in history, as one can tell from the joke about the Orthodox Jew from New York who asks a Southerner who is obviously intrigued by his traditional garb and heavy accent, "What's the matter, you've never seen a Yankee before?" At the same time that one needed seven-eighths "white blood" to avoid being considered a "person of color" in Florida, a mere three-quarters would suffice in Nebraska, and in universities that rarely tenure their young faculty, the line normally separating faculty from students may not be as pronounced as the one separating tenured faculty from both students and nontenured faculty. The lines believed by residents of fancy neighborhoods to separate them from those who live in less prestigious neighborhoods nearby are likewise often blurred by the latter. (When I asked the man from whom I bought my house about the nearest train station, he mentioned a station located six minutes away in a fancier neighborhood, yet "forgot" to mention a station located only two minutes away in a much less prestigious one.) Likewise, within the same culture, meat eaters draw the line between what is edible and inedible quite differently than do vegetarians. (Whereas Bertrand Russell would claim that this line ought to be drawn "at the level of the species," vegetarians may not find ordinary meat eaters that different from cannibals.) Similarly, though "*inter*marriage" normally denotes unions between blacks and whites or Jews and Christians, Ashkenazic Jews also use it to refer to marrying Sephardic Jews.

Of course, from the proverbial Martian's standpoint, since we only marry other humans, we are all "boringly endogamous"[2] and any cross-racial or interfaith "intermarriage" is embarrassingly trivial, yet even within the same culture, lines that seem obvious to some groups may be totally ignored by others. Thus, for example, despite their obvious ubiquity to their own members, the boundaries of communes are usually ignored by the state. And the wide mental gaps that nine-year-olds believe separate them from eight-year-olds, or that rat breeders perceive as separating their own "refined" show animals from ordinary rats, are not appreciated by anyone but them. Along similar lines, whereas no radical bookstore would place a book on the women's movement alongside books on beauty or homemaking, bookstores less sensitive to the distinction between feminist and traditional notions of womanhood might well do so. The distinction some current college students make between "stylish radical-chic" and "granola" lesbians is likewise lost on many alumni, "to whom the shadings of lesbian politics are as irrelevant as the difference between Sodom and Gomorrah."[3]

Such diversity also generates discord. As we carve mental entities out of reality, the location as well as the very existence of the lines separating them from one another is quite often disputed.

The prototypical border dispute is a battle over the location of some critical line in actual space, as manifested in disputes ranging from local turf feuds between neighbors or street gangs to full-scale international wars. It is the original on which numerous battles over the location of various partitions in mental space are modeled. Controversies regarding the location of group divisions (the eighteenth-century debate over whether blacks are "closer" to whites or to apes, family fights over who should be invited to a wedding) or moral boundaries (the line separating legal from illegal drugs, the ethical limits of euthanasia) are perfect examples of such border disputes. So are the battles over the fine line between politicians' private and public lives, the definition of work (the distinction between mere "chores" and actual "labor," the status of housework), and whether phrenology or chiropractic are part of science. Just as disputable is the delineation of frames, as evident from heated arguments between comedians and their audience over whether personal insults are within the limits of the comedy show frame....

Even when we do not dispute its location, we often still disagree with one another on how impenetrable we expect a given boundary to be. Such disagreement is at the bottom of disputes over the walls of prisons (whether prisoners may take weekend leaves, how often they may be visited, the conditions for paroling them) and nation-states (immigrant quotas, the status of guest workers, the right to travel abroad), battles over the extent to which groups ought to allow their languages to be "contaminated" by foreign words, and family fights over whether children may close the doors to their rooms. Moreover, we often wage battles over the very existence of a given boundary. States, for example, usually ignore boundaries drawn by separatists, while conservatives and liberals fight over the necessity of drawing a line between "X" and "R" rated films and evolutionists and creationists debate the distinction between science and ideology. Along similar lines, animal rights activists defy the "experiment" frame that allows the killing of animals,

whereas feminists question the distinction between erotic art and pornography and object to sexism even in fiction or jokes. Governments and dissidents likewise often debate the legitimacy of the frames that distinguish "religious" sermons, "satirical" plays, and "academic" discourse from explicit political protest.

Such battles are basically about whether what may look like several separate entities are indeed just different variants of a single entity. The entire debate over the reunification of East and West Germany or North and South Korea, for example, was basically over whether there should be one or two of each. Such disagreements also led some people to reproach those who found John Poindexter's and Oliver North's reasoning at the Iran-Contra hearings, for example, evocative of the Nuremberg trials, as well as those who compared the secession of Lithuania from the Soviet Union in 1990 to that of South Carolina from the Union in 1860, with "How can you even compare?" The current battle between Israeli liberals and ultranationalists over whether or not to prosecute Jewish vigilantes in the West Bank is, likewise, basically about whether they and others who break the law constitute one moral entity or two separate ones ("lawbreakers" and "overzealous patriots").

Language certainly plays a major role in such disputes. That is why Israel has traditionally refused to recognize Palestinians as a distinct entity and why a seceding East Pakistan immediately renamed itself Bangladesh. When sociology conference organizers debate whether to include a single "Race and Ethnicity" session or two separate ("Race" and "Ethnicity") ones, they are actually fighting over whether or not being black or Oriental is different from being Irish or Italian, and when Czechs and Slovaks debate whether to name their union "Czechoslovakia" or "Czecho-Slovakia," the separatist overtones of the latter name are quite obvious. The label "*para*psychological" clearly excludes phenomena from the realm of science, whereas the label "nonhuman animals" clearly defies the conventional distinction between human and animal. Moving away from the discrete labels "homosexual" and "heterosexual" to a continuous homosexuality–heterosexuality scale likewise helps rid the gay of their "specialness" stigma, whereas using "Ms." as the counterpart of "Mr." clearly helps feminists downplay the distinction between married ("Mrs.") and unmarried ("Miss") women (which, since it does not apply to men, implies that marriage transforms women more than it does men).

Such labeling politics reveal how attitudes toward (protecting or defying) boundaries and distinctions betray deep sentiments (conservative or progressive) toward the social order in general. Like the heated battles over drugs, censorship, and abortion, they show that not only does the way we cut up the world underlie the way we think, it clearly also touches the deepest emotional as well as moral nerves of the human condition.

The Color Gray

That the location as well as the very existence of boundaries is often disputed is even more understandable given the pervasive presence of ambiguity in our life. To the rigid mind, the world is a set of discrete entities separated from one another by gaps. Crossing these gaps entails sharp, dramatic breaks. Movement between islands of meaning therefore has a jerky, staccato nature characterized by abrupt transitions.

That is why we gain or lose a full hour as we cross time-zone boundaries or experience some shock upon waking up from a daydream. Such experience of reality obviously allows no room for ambiguity. Yet "things," noted Anaxagoras, are rarely "cut off with an axe."[4] In reality, there are no discrete entities literally detached from their surroundings by actual gaps. Nature "refuses to conform to our craving for clear lines of demarcation; she loves twilight zones."[5] Our neat and orderly classifications notwithstanding, the world presents itself not in pure black and white but, rather, in ambiguous shades of gray, with mental twilight zones and intermediate essences. Despite the stubborn efforts of the rigid mind to deny it, at least some element of ambiguity in our life is inevitable....

In short, instead of well-defined islands unequivocally separated from each other by substantial gaps, the world normally presents itself in the form of blurred-edge essences distinguished from one another only by "insensible gradations."[6] Analytic thinking, therefore, is clearly not the only mode by which we process reality. In fact, even most of the concepts we use to organize our experience are not clear-cut and sharply delineated but, rather, vague[7] and often modified by such "hedges" as "largely," "sort of," "quite," "almost," or "more or less."[8] (Until recently, such an ability to process fuzzy categories and negotiate subtle nuances actually distinguished our thinking from that of machines.)...

The Social Construction of Discontinuity

Breaking up reality into discrete islands of meaning is, thus, an inevitably arbitrary act. The very existence of dividing lines (not to mention their location) is a matter of convention. It is by pure convention, for example, that we regard Danish and Norwegian as two separate languages yet Galician as a mere dialect of Portuguese. It is likewise by sheer convention that we draw a line between heroin and other lethal substances such as alcohol and tobacco (not to mention its own chemical cousins, which we use as pain-killers or as controlled substitutes for heroin itself). It is mere convention that similarly leads us to regard cooking or laundering as "service" occupations and fishermen or raftsmen as less skilled than assembly-line workers or parking-lot attendants. Just as arbitrary is the way in which we carve supposedly discrete species out of the continuum of living forms, separate the masculine from the feminine, cut up continuous stretches of land into separate continents (Europe and Asia, North and Central America), or divide the world into time zones. Nor are there any natural divides separating childhood from adulthood, winter from spring, or one day from the next (both my children, indeed, used to refer to the morning before their last afternoon nap as "yesterday"), and if we attribute distinctive qualities to decades ("the Roaring Twenties") or centuries ("nineteenth-century architecture"), it is only because we happen to count by tens. Had we used nine, instead, as the basis of our counting system, we would have undoubtedly discovered the historical significance of 9-, 81-, and 729-year cycles and generated fin-de-siècle and millenary frenzy around the years 1944 and 2187. We probably would also have experienced our midlife crisis at the age of thirty-six!

It is we ourselves who create categories and force reality into supposedly insular compartments. Mental divides as well as the "things" they delineate are pure

artifacts that have no basis whatsoever in reality. A category, after all, is "a group of things [yet] things do not present themselves... grouped in such a way.... [Nor is their resemblance] enough to explain how we are led to group... them together in a sort of ideal sphere, enclosed by definite limits."[9] Classification is an artificial process of concept formation rather than of discovering clusters that already exist. Entities such as "vitamins," "politicians," "art," and "crime" certainly do not exist "out there." The way we construct them resembles the way painters and photographers create pictures by mentally isolating supposedly discrete slices of reality from their immediate surroundings. In the real world, there are no divides separating one insular "thing" from another. The "introduction of closure into the real" is a purely mental act.

And yet, while boundaries and mental fields may not exist "out there," neither are they generated solely by our own mind. The discontinuities we experience are neither natural nor universal, yet they are not entirely personal either. We may not all classify reality in a precisely identical manner, yet we certainly do cut it up into rather similar mental chunks with pretty similar outlines. It is indeed a mind that organizes reality in accordance with a specific logic, yet it is usually a group mind using an unmistakably social logic (and therefore also producing an unmistakably social order). When we cut up the world, we usually do it not as humans or as individuals, but rather as members of societies.

The logic of classification is something we must learn. Socialization involves learning not only society's norms but also its distinctive classificatory schemas. Being socialized or acculturated entails knowing not only how to behave, but also how to perceive reality in a socially appropriate way. An anthropologist who studies another culture, for example, must learn "to see the world as it is constituted for the people themselves, to assimilate their distinctive categories.... [H]e may have to abandon the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, relocate the line between life and death, accept a common nature in mankind and animals."[10] Along similar lines, by the time she is three, a child has already internalized the conventional outlines of the category "birthday present" enough to know that, if someone suggests that she bring lima beans as a present, he must be kidding.

Whenever we classify things, we always attend some of their distinctive features in order to note similarities and contrasts among them while ignoring all the rest as irrelevant. The length of a film, for example, or whether it is in color or in black and white is quite irrelevant to the way it is rated, whereas the color of a dress is totally irrelevant to where it is displayed in a department store. What to stress among what is typically a "plethora of viable alternatives" is largely a social decision,[11] and being socialized entails knowing which features are salient for differentiating items from one another and which ones ought to be ignored as irrelevant. It involves learning, for example, that, whereas adding cheese makes a hamburger a "cheeseburger," adding lettuce does not make it a "lettuceburger," and that it is the kind of meat and not the condiment that goes with it that gives a sandwich its distinctive identity. It likewise involves learning that the sex of the person for whom they are designed is probably the most distinctive feature of clothes (in department stores men's shirts are more likely to be displayed alongside men's pajamas than alongside women's blouses), and that the way it is spelled may help us locate an eggplant in a dictionary but not in a supermarket. Similarly, we learn that in order to find a book in a

bookstore we must attend its substantive focus and the first letters of its author's last name (and ignore, for example, the color of its cover), yet that in order to find it in a book exhibit we must first know who published it. (We also learn that bookstores regard readers' ages as a critical feature of books, thus displaying children's books on dogs alongside children's books on boats rather than alongside general books on dogs.) We likewise learn that, in supermarkets, low-sodium soup is located near the low-sugar pineapple slices ("diet food"), marzipan near the anchovy paste ("gourmet food"), and canned corn near the canned pears (rather than by the fresh or frozen corn). And so we learn that, for the purpose of applying the incest taboo, brotherhood "counts" as a measure of proximity to oneself, whereas having the same blood type is irrelevant.

Separating the relevant (figure) from the irrelevant (ground) is not a spontaneous act. Classifying is a normative process, and it is society that leads us to perceive things as similar to or different from one another through unmistakably social "*rules* of irrelevance"[12] that specify which differences are salient for differentiating entities from one another and which ones are only negligible differences among variants of a single entity. Ignoring differences which "make no difference" involves some social pressure to disregard them. Though we often notice them, we learn to ignore them as irrelevant, just as we inhibit our perception of its ground in order to perceive the figure. Along the same lines, ignoring the stutter or deformity of another is not a spontaneous act but rather a social display of tact. It is rules of irrelevance that likewise lead judges, professors, and doctors to display "affective neutrality" and acquit innocent defendants, reward good students, and do their best to save patients' lives even when they personally despise them. They also lead bureaucrats who screen applications to exclude applicants' sex or race from their official considerations even if they are personally attentive to it.

The social construction of discontinuity is accomplished largely through language:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories... we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face.... [T]he world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up... as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that... is codified in the patterns of our language.... [W]e cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.[13]

Not only does language allow us to detach mental entities from their surroundings and assign them fixed, decontextualized meanings, it also enables us to transform experiential continuums into discontinuous categories ("long" and "short," "hot" and "cold"). As we assign them separate labels, we come to perceive mental essences such as "professionals," "criminals," or "the poor" as if they were indeed discrete. It is language that allows us to carve out of a continuous voice range the discrete categories "alto" and "soprano," distinguish "herbs" (basil, dill) from leaves we would never allow on our table, define vague discomfort in seemingly sharp categories such as "headache" or "nausea," and perceive after-shave lotion as actually different from eau de toilette or cologne. At the same time, it is our ability to assign them a common label that also allows us to lump things together in our mind. Only

the concept "classical," for example, makes Ravel's music similar to Vivaldi's, and only the concept "alcoholic" makes wine seem "closer" to vodka than to grape juice.

Since it is the very basis of social reality, we often forget that language rests on mere convention and regard such mental entities, which are our own creation, as if they were real. "The trouble," the Eleatic Stranger reminds Young Socrates,

> began at the moment when you [said] that there are two classes of living creature, one of them being mankind, and the other the rest of the animals lumped together.... [B]ecause you were able to give the common name "animals" to what was left, namely to all creatures other than man, you thought that these creatures do in actual fact make up one class.... [Yet cranes too might] classify the race of cranes as being distinct from all other creatures: the rest they might well lump together, men included, giving them the common appellation of "the beasts." So let us try to be on the watch against mistakes of that kind.[14]

By the same token, as we divide a single continuous process into several conceptual parts ("cause" and "effect," "life" and "death"), we often commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and regard such purely mental constructs as if they were actually separate. We likewise reify the mental divide separating "white-collar" from "manual" labor as well as the purely mental outlines of such entities as races, classes, families, and nations. Like the dwellers of Plato's proverbial cave, we are prisoners of our own minds, mistaking mere social conceptions for actual experiential perceptions.

It is society that helps us carve discrete islands of meaning out of our experience. Only English speakers, for example, can "hear" the gaps between the separate words in "perhapstheyshouldhavetrieditearlier," which everyone else hears as a single chain of sound. Along similar lines, while people who hear jazz for the first time can never understand why a seemingly continuous stretch of music is occasionally interrupted by bursts of applause, jazz connoisseurs can actually "hear" the purely mental divides separating piano, bass, or drum "solos" from mere "accompaniment." Being a member of society entails "seeing" the world through special mental lenses. It is these lenses, which we acquire only through socialization, that allow us to perceive "things." The proverbial Martian cannot see the mental partitions separating Catholics from Protestants, classical from popular music, or the funny from the crude. Like the contours of constellations, we "see" such fine lines only when we learn that we should expect them there. As real as they may feel to us, boundaries are mere figments of our minds. Only the socialized can "see" them. To all cultural outsiders they are totally invisible.

Only through such "glasses" can entities be "seen." As soon as we remove them, boundaries practically disappear and the "things" they delineate fade away. What we then experience is as continuous as is Europe or the Middle East when seen from space or in ancient maps, or our own neighborhood when fog or heavy snow covers curbs and property lines, practically transforming familiar milieus into a visually undifferentiated flux. This is the way reality must appear to the unsocialized – a boundless, unbroken world with no lines. That is the world we would have inhabited were it not for society.

Notes

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 200.
2. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 71–2.
3. "Have Gays Taken over Yale?" *Newsweek*, October 12, 1987, p. 96.
4. Sven-Tage Teodorsson, *Anaxagoras' Theory of Matter* (Goteborg, Sweden: Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1982), p. 99.
5. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964 [1936]), p. 56.
6. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1911 [1908]), p. 278.
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958 [1953]), part I. 68–71.
8. George Lakoff, "Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2 (1973): 458–508; George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 122–5.
9. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 7–8.
10. Rodney Needham, "Introduction" to Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, p. viii.
11. Stephen J. Gould, "Taxonomy as Politics: The Harm of False Classification," *Dissent*, Winter 1990, p. 73.
12. Erving Goffman, *Encounters* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), pp. 19–26.
13. Benjamin L., Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," in *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956 [1942]), pp. 213–14.
14. Plato, *Statesman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 263c–263d.

Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Zerubavel on Cognitive Categories

One of the fundamental tools for analyzing culture is the concept of cognitive categories. As Zerubavel demonstrates here by synthesizing many examples, cognitive categories create meaning from a potentially undifferentiated flux of experience. Further, they vary according to time, place, and social context, and frequently generate dissent and debate. Zerubavel's book suggests that while categorical distinction is essential, people may classify in either rigid, fuzzy, or flexible ways, creating or blurring gaps between mental entities to different degrees.

For other examples of variation in categorization see, for instance, excerpts from Benedict on adolescence, Lamont on status, and Nippert-Eng on home and work, this volume; and Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For more general overviews and theorizing about categorization, see Barry Schwartz, *Vertical Classification: A Study in Structuralism and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); Paul DiMaggio, "Classification in Art," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 440–55; Mary Douglas and David Hull, eds., *How Classification Works: Nelson Goodman Among the Social Scientists* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992); John Mohr, "Soldiers, Mothers, Tramps and Others: Discourse Roles in the 1907 New York City Charity Directory," *Poetics* 22 (1994): 327–57; Kathleen Carley, "Extracting Culture Through Textual Analysis," *Poetics*

22 (1994); 291–312; Christena Nippert-Eng, "Beyond Home and Work: Boundary Theory," pp. 277–92 in *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kristen Purcell, "In a League of Their Own: Mental Leveling and the Creation of Social Comparability in Sport," *Sociological Forum* 11 (1996): 435–56; Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Paul DiMaggio, "Culture and Cognition," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 263–87; Wayne Brekhus, "A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus," *Sociological Theory* 16 (1998): 34–51, and Karen Cerulo, ed., *Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming). For a guide to related literatures on cognition in social psychology, see Norbert Schwarz, "Warmer and More Social: Recent Developments in Cognitive Social Psychology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 239–64.

22 The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith

Value Analysis and its Critics

From the 1940s to the 1960s, "culture" played a fundamental part in social science theory and research. Primarily by employing the concept of "values," sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and even psychologists continued a modified version of the hermeneutic tradition that Max Weber had introduced into social science.

In the period that followed those early postwar decades, it is fair to say that value analysis, and what was taken to be the "cultural approach" more generally, was forcefully rejected. It was convicted, sometimes more and sometimes less justifiably, of idealism. There were two main dimensions to the accusation. On the one hand it was argued that, in both theoretical and empirical work, values had been accorded an illegitimate primacy over other types of social structures. On the other, it was asserted that value analysis was idealistic in that it failed to heed the complexity and contingency of human action.

These critiques, however, merely led to one-sided approaches in turn. Idealism was defeated at the cost of reductionism, and this time it was culture itself that played the subordinate role. Those sensitive to the failure of value analysis to record the significance of social structure recast culture as an adaptive, if creative and expressive response, to ecological and organizational demands. Meanwhile, those concerned with the problem of action reduced culture to the product of action and interaction or aggregate individual behavior. Social structural and actor-centered understandings of culture remain today the dominant trends in mainstream social science.

We take this movement from culture to social structure and action to be premature: It has solved the problems of value analysis at the expense of a consideration of meaning itself. While the careful correlation of culture with social structure represents a real advance over the more idealistic versions of value analysis, the "new institutionalist" focus on practical action and objectification at the expense of representation and internalization and, more importantly, at the expense of internal symbolic logic and cultural process. While we sometimes find in this work the formal language of codes, myths, narratives, and symbols, we do not find the referents of these terms in a substantive sense. 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....

Bringing contingency and institutional effects back into our understanding of how culture works is a vital task. In achieving this micro–macro link, however, one must not overlook the reality of emergent properties, which demands that the integrity of different levels of analysis be maintained. Neither the importance of attitudes and actions, nor the significance of organization and environment, negates the existence at still another level of a cultural system. The recent approaches to culture have not provided a satisfactory alternative to the value analysis that was discredited decades ago. They have provided for more subjectivity, more organizational responsiveness, more contingency, and sometimes more empirical pay-off in a traditional causal or predictive sense. They have not, however, provided a model that achieves these advances while allowing for a continuing, formative reference to the cultural order. . . .

An Alternative Model

We would like to propose that culture be thought of as a structure composed of symbolic sets. Symbols are signs that have a generalized status and provide categories for understanding the elements of social, individual and organic life. Although symbols take as referents elements of these other systems, they define and interrelate them in an "arbitrary" manner, that is, in a manner that cannot be deduced from exigencies at these other levels. This is to say that, when they are interrelated, symbols provide a nonmaterial structure. They represent a level of organization that patterns action as surely as structures of a more visible, material kind. They do so by creating patterned order, lines of consistency in human actions. The action of an individual does not create this pattern; at the same time, as we will see, cultural structures do not create the action itself.

We may think of a cultural system as composed of these structures and may think of these structures themselves as being of several different kinds. One important kind of "cultural structure" is the narrative. . . . As Lévi-Strauss and Barthes have suggested, however, beneath narrative there lie structures of a more basic kind which organize concepts and objects into symbolic patterns and convert them into signs.[1] Complex cultural logics of analogy and metaphor, feeding on differences, enable extended codes to be built up from simple binary structures. Because meaning is produced by the internal play of signifiers, the formal autonomy of culture from social structural determination is assured. To paraphrase Saussure in a sociological way, the arbitrary status of a sign means that its meaning is derived not from its social referent – the signified – but from its relation to other symbols, or signifiers within a discursive code. It is only difference that defines meaning, not an ontological or verifiable linkage to extra-symbolic reality. Symbols, then, are located in sets of binary relations. When meaningful action is considered as a text, the cultural life of society can be visualized as a web of intertwining sets of binary relations.

Taking our leave from Foucault, on the one hand, and from Parsons and Durkheim on the other, we assert that signs sets are organized into discourses.[2] These discourses not only communicate information, structuring reality in a cognitive way, but also perform a forceful evaluative task. Binary sets do so when they are charged by the "religious" symbology of the sacred and profane. In this situation, analogies

are not simply relations of sterile signs; they set off the good from the bad, the desirable from the detested, the sainted from the demonic. Sacred symbols provide images of purity and they charge those who are committed to them with protecting their referents from harm. Profane symbols embody this harm; they provide images of pollution, identifying actions, groups, and processes that must be defended against. . . .

The Discourse of American Civil Society

Civil society, at the social structural level, consists of actors, relationships between actors, and institutions. At the very heart of the culture of American civil society is a set of binary codes which discuss and interrelate these three dimensions of social-structural reality in a patterned and coherent way. In the United States, there is a "democratic code" that creates the discourse of liberty. It specifies the characteristics of actors, social relationships and institutions that are appropriate in a democratically functioning society. Its antithesis is a "counter-democratic code" that specifies the same features for an authoritarian society. The presence of two such contrasting codes is no accident: the elements that create the discourse of liberty can signify democracy only by virtue of the presence of antonymic "partners" in an accompanying discourse of repression.

Democratic and counter-democratic codes provide radically divergent models of actors and their motivations. Democratically minded persons are symbolically constructed as rational, reasonable, calm and realistic in their decision making, and are thought to be motivated by conscience and a sense of honor. In contrast, the repressive code posits that anti-democratically minded persons are motivated by pathological greed and self-interest. They are deemed incapable of rational decision making, and conceived of as exhibiting a tendency towards hysterical behavior by virtue of an excitable personality from which unrealistic plans are often born. Whereas the democratic person is characterized by action and autonomy, the counter-democratic person is perceived of as having little free-will, and, if not a leader, as a passive figure who follows the dictates of others.

The discursive structure of actors

Democratic code	Counter-democratic code
Active	Passive
Autonomous	Dependent
Rational	Irrational
Reasonable	Hysterical
Calm	Excitable
Controlled	Passionate
Realistic	Unrealistic
Sane	Mad

Accompanying this discourse on actors and their motivations is another directed to the social relationships that are presumed to follow from such personal needs. The

qualities of the democratic personality are constructed as those which permit open, trusting, and straightforward relationships. They encourage critical and reflective, rather than deferential, relations among people. In contrast, counter-democratic persons are associated with secretive, conspirational dealings in which deceit and Machiavellian calculation play a key role. The irrational and essentially dependent character of such persons, however, means that they still tend to be deferential toward authority.

The discursive structure of social relationships

Democratic code	Counter-democratic code
Open	Secret
Trusting	Suspicious
Critical	Deferential
Truthful	Deceitful
Straightforward	Calculating
Citizen	Enemy

Given the discursive structure of motives and civil relationships, it should not be surprising that the implied homologies and antinomies extend to social, political and economic institutions. Where members of the community are irrational in motivation and distrusting in their social relationships, they will "naturally" create institutions that are arbitrary rather than rule governed, that use brute power rather than law, and that exercise hierarchy over equality. Such institutions will tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive and to promote personal loyalty over impersonal and contractual obligations. They will tend to favor the interests of small factions rather than the needs of the community as a whole.

The discursive structure of social institutions

Democratic code	Counter-democratic code
Rule regulated	Arbitrary
Law	Power
Equality	Hierarchy
Inclusive	Exclusive
Impersonal	Personal
Contractual	Ascriptive
Groups	Factions
Office	Personality

The elements in the civil discourses on motives, relationships, and institutions are tied closely together. "Common sense" seems to dictate that certain kinds of motivations are associated with certain kinds of institutions and relationships. After all, it is hard to conceive of a dictator who trusts his minions, is open and honest, and who rigorously follows the law in an attempt to extend equality to all his subjects. The semiologics of the codes, then, associate and bind individual elements on each side of a particular code to the other elements on the same

side of the discourse as a whole. "Rule regulated," for example, is considered homologous with "truthful" and "open," terms that define social relationships, and with "reasonable" and "autonomous," elements from the symbolic set that stipulate democratic motives. In the same manner, any element from any set on one side is taken to be antithetical to any element from any set on the other side. Thus, hierarchy is thought to be inimical to "critical" and "open" and also to "active" and "self-controlled."

The formal logic of homology and opposition through which meaning is created, and which we have outlined above, is the guarantor of the autonomy of the cultural codes – despite the fact that they are associated with a particular social-structural domain. However, despite the formal grammars at work in the codes, which turn the arbitrary relationships between the elements into a set of relationships characterized by what Lévi-Strauss has termed an "a posteriori necessity,"[3] it would be a mistake to conceive of the discourse of civil society as merely an abstract cognitive system of quasi-mathematical relationships. To the contrary, the codes have an evaluative dimension that enables them to play a key role in the determination of political outcomes. In American civil society, the democratic code has a sacred status, whereas the counter-democratic code is considered profane. The elements of the counter-democratic code are dangerous and polluting, held to threaten the sacred center of civil society, which is identified with the democratic code. To protect the center, and the sacred discourse that embodies its symbolic aspirations, the persons, institutions, and objects identified with the profane have to be isolated and marginalized at the boundaries of civil society, and sometimes even destroyed.

It is because of this evaluative dimension that the codes of civil society become critical in determining the outcomes of political processes. Actors are obsessed with sorting out empirical reality and, typifying from code to event, with attributing moral qualities to concrete "facts." Persons, groups, institutions, and communities who consider themselves worthy members of the national community identify themselves with the symbolic elements associated with the sacred side of the divide. Their membership in civil society is morally assured by the homology that they are able to draw between their motives and actions and the sacred elements of the semiotic structure. Indeed, if called upon, members who identify themselves as in good standing in civil society must make all their actions "accountable" in terms of the discourse of liberty. They must also be competent to account for those who are thought to be unworthy of civic membership – who are or should be excluded from it – in terms of the alternative discourse of repression. It is through the concept of accountability that the strategic aspects of action come back into the picture, for differing accounts of actors, relationships and institutions can, if successfully disseminated, have powerful consequences in terms of the allocation of resources and power. Strategically, this dual capacity will typically result in efforts by competing actors to tar each other with the brush of the counter-democratic code, while attempting to shield themselves behind the discourse of democracy. This process is clearest in the courts, where lawyers attempt to sway the opinion of the jury by providing differing accounts of the plaintiffs and defendants in terms of the discourses of civil society. . . .

A Modern President Under Attack: Richard Nixon and Watergate

The discourse involved in the push for the impeachment of President Nixon in 1974 is remarkably similar to that of the impeachment of President Johnson some hundred years before. Although the particular issues in hand (in the Watergate break-in and cover-up, the misuse of surveillance powers of the F.B.I., C.I.A., and the I.R.S., the President's failure to obey various subpoenas to hand over documents and tapes, and the secret bombing of Cambodia) contrast with those of Johnson's impeachment (the Tenure of Office Act, the Stanton Removal and various statements opposing Congress), the generalized understandings made by the impeachers were shaped by the logic of the same symbolic structure. As was the case with Johnson, Nixon's motivations were perceived by many in terms of the counter-democratic discourse. As deliberations by the Congressional committee on the impeachment of Nixon made clear, central to this perception was an image of the President as a selfish and fractious person who was interested in gaining wealth and power at the expense of the civil community.

> The evidence is overwhelming that Richard Nixon has used the Office of President to gain political advantage, to retaliate against those who disagreed with him, and to acquire personal wealth.[4]

> He created a moral vacuum in the Office of the Presidency and turned that great office away from the service of the people toward the service of his own narrow, selfish interests.[5]

True to the codes, this self-centered attitude was understood to have arisen from an irrational, unrealistic, slightly paranoid motivational structure. Because of these personality needs, it was argued, Nixon evaluated others, without reasonable cause, in terms of the counter-democratic rhetoric of social relationships.

> Once in the White House, Mr. Nixon turned on his critics with a vengeance, apparently not appreciating that others could strenuously disagree with him without being either subversive or revolutionary.[6]

Irrational, selfish, and narrow motives are connected to sectarian rather than cooperative and communal relations. They cannot form the basis for an inclusive, conflict-containing, civil society. Time and again, Nixon was described as deceitful, calculating, suspicious, and secretive – unacceptable characteristics in a democracy. These perversities, it was believed, led him to resort to counter-democratic and illegal political practices. Nixon had covered up his dark deeds by making false excuses for himself. He had acted in a calculating rather than honorable manner to maximize his own advantage regardless of morality and legality.

> To defend both the bombing [of Cambodia] and the wire-tapping, he invoked the concept of national security.... The imperial presidency of Richard Nixon came to rely on this claim as a cloak for clandestine activity, and as an excuse for consciously and repeatedly deceiving the Congress and the people.[7]

> We have seen that the President authorized a series of illegal wire-taps for his own political advantage, and not only did he thereby violate the fundamental constitutional rights of the people of this country but he tried to cover up those illegal acts in the very same way that he tried to cover up Watergate. He lied to the prosecutors. He tried to stop investigations. He tried to buy silence, and he failed to report criminal conduct.[8]

These procedures and relationships were viewed by Nixon's accusers as a dangerous source of pollution, a disease that had to be stopped before it could infect the rest of the civil society, destroying the very tissues of social solidarity.

> Mr. Nixon's actions and attitudes and those of his subordinates have brought us to verge of collapse as a Nation of people who believe in its institutions and themselves. Our people have become cynical instead of skeptical. They are beginning to believe in greater numbers that one must look out only for himself and not worry about others.[9]

The President's motivations and relationships were seen as subversive of democracy. His administration had developed into an arbitrary, personalistic organization bent on concentrating power. The institutional aim was, as the *New York Times* argued, dictatorship, and an authoritarian coup d'etat.

> One coherent picture emerges from the evidence.... It is the picture of a White House entirely on its own, operating on the assumption that it was accountable to no higher authority than the wishes of and the steady accretion of power by the President. It is the picture of a Presidency growing steadily more sure that it was above and beyond the reaches of the law.[10]

Yet, despite the mounting tide of evidence against Nixon in the early summer of 1974, he still had significant support. Those who continued to support him did not counter the discourse of repression with the picture of a flawless, pristine paragon of democratic morality; they tended to argue, rather, that in the messy world of political reality, Nixon's personal behavior and political achievements were not inconsistent with that discourse broadly conceived.

> The President's major contribution to international peace must be recognized to compensate for other matters, to a substantial degree.[11]

> As has been written to many representatives on the Judiciary Committee, President Nixon's lengthy list of accomplishments rules out impeachment. Let us be grateful we have such a fine leader, doing his utmost to establish world peace.[12]

> As in the case of the evidence relating to the Plumbers' operation they show a specific Presidential response to a specific and serious problem: namely, the public disclosure by leaks of highly sensitive information bearing upon the conduct of American foreign policy during that very turbulent period both domestically and internationally.[13]

These statements suggested that in a world characterized by realpolitik, it would be unwise to punish Nixon's peccadillos when, on balance, he had supported and advanced the cause of the good. Especially important in this equation were Nixon's

foreign policy initiatives with the Soviets and Chinese, as well as his ending the Vietnam War, all of which were presented as having advanced the cause of "peace," a state of affairs analogous with inclusive social relationships. Related to this argument was another that focussed not on the impact of the President, but on the consequences of impeachment itself. These consequences, it is suggested, militate against a prolonged period of distracting, generalized discourse.

> Certain members of Congress and the Senate urge the President's removal from office despite the impact such a disastrous decision would have on America's political image and the economy.[14]

> We would do better to retain the President we in our judgement elected to office, for the balance of his term, and in the meantime place our energies and spend our time on such pressing matters as a real campaign reform, a sound financial policy to control inflation, energy and the environment, war and peace, honesty throughout Government, and the personal and economic rights and liberties of the individual citizen against private agglomerations of power in the monolithic state.[15]

The message is that, because of political realities, both mundane political and wider moral goals can be effectively attained only by avoiding impeachment.

The use of these arguments, however, did not preclude Nixon's supporters in Congress from also understanding events in a more generalized manner. They held the impeachment inquiry and its committee members strictly accountable in terms of the two antithetical moral discourses. They linked the lack of hard, irrefutable evidence of the commission to their concern that the inquiry measure up to the highest ethical standards. In principle, therefore, they were compelled to refuse to consider Nixon guilty of an impeachable offense until his accusers could produce a "smoking gun" proof of his direct, personal, and wilful involvement in an indictable crime.

> To impeach there must be direct Presidential involvement, and the evidence thus far has failed to produce it.[16]

> Now many wrongs have been committed, no question about it, but were those wrongs directed by the President? Is there direct evidence that said he had anything to do with it? Of course there is not.[17]

Nixon's supporters pointedly contrasted their hard line on the issue of proof with that of his detractors. They described these opponents in terms of the discourse of repression: Nixon's critics were willing to support impeachment on the basis of evidence that a rational and independent thinker would not accept. Indeed, the critics' motive was greed, their social relationships manipulative. They were the very paradigm of a counter-democratic group: a bloodthirsty and suggestible mob unable to sustain the dispassionate attitude upon which civility depends.

> I join in no political lynching where hard proof fails as to this President or any other President.[18]

> I know that the critics of the President want their pound of flesh. Certainly they have achieved that in all the convictions that have taken place. However, they now want the whole body, and it is self-evident that it is Mr. Nixon who must supply the carcass.[19]

> Yes, the cries of impeachment, impeachment, impeachment are getting louder.... For the past year allegation after allegation has been hurled at the President. Some of them have been stated so often many people have come to accept them as facts, without need of proof.[20]

This evaluation of the impeachers' motives and social relationships was accompanied by a negative evaluation of the institution involved in the impeachment process. They were described as performing in an arbitrary manner, treating Nixon as an enemy rather than as a fellow citizen, and as trying to maximize their own power rather than the power of right. This disregard for the law endangered the democratic foundations of society; it could, indeed, create an antidemocratic revolution.

> [We are] each convinced of the serious threat to our country, caused by the bias and hate pumped out daily by the media.[21]

> The Supreme Court decision that President Nixon must turn over Watergate-related tapes... can make any President virtually a figurehead whose actions can be overturned by any arbitrary high court order.... The Court has, in effect, ignored the Constitution, written its own law, and demanded it be considered the law of the land.[22]

> Five members of the committee have made public statements that Mr. Nixon should be impeached and they have not been disqualified from voting. Leaks detrimental to the President appear almost daily in the media.... When public hearings begin, I fully expect women to appear with their knitting, each a modern Madame Defarge, clicking their needles as they wait for Richard Nixon's head to roll.[23]

Conclusion

...We argue that culture should be conceived as a system of symbolic codes which specify the good and the evil. Conceptualizing culture in this way allows it causal autonomy – by virtue of its internal semiologics – and also affords the possibility for generalizing from and between specific localities and historical contexts. Yet, at the same time, our formulation allows for individual action and social-structural factors to be included in the analytical frame. The codes, we have argued, inform action in two ways. Firstly, they are internalized, and hence provide the foundations for a strong moral imperative. Secondly, they constitute publicly available resources against which the actions of particular individual actors are typified and held morally accountable. By acknowledging the importance of phenomenological processes in channeling symbolic inputs, our model shows that it is precisely these contingent processes that allow codes to make sense in specific situations for specific actors and their interests.

In addition to this claim about action, our model takes account of social structure. We have argued, in theoretical terms, that autonomous cultural codes may be specified to sub-systems and institutions. Their content, we have suggested, reflects and refracts upon the empirical dimensions in which institutions are embedded. Our studies, indeed, provide crucial empirical insights into the relationship between culture and

social structure, and more specifically, into the relationship between civil society and the state in American society. They demonstrate that conflicts at the social-structural level need not necessarily be accompanied by divergent values, or "ideologies," at the ideational level. To the contrary, in the American context at least, conflicting parties within the civil society have drawn upon the same symbolic code to formulate their particular understandings and to advance their competing claims.

The very structured quality of this civil culture, and its impressive scope and breadth, help to underscore a paradoxical fact: differences of opinion between contending groups cannot be explained simply as the automatic product of divergent sub-cultures and value sets. In many cases, especially those which respond to new historical conditions, divergent cultural understandings are in part an emergent property of individual and group-level typifications from code to event. This is not to posit a radically individualist theory, but rather to suggest a more interactive conception of the link between cultural and social structures, on the one hand, and the actors, groups, and movements who have to improvise understandings always for "another first time," on the other. Because worthiness can be achieved only by association to the discourse of liberty or by active opposition to the discourse of repression, political legitimacy and political action in the "real world" are critically dependent upon the processes by which contingent events and persons are arrayed in relation to the "imagined" one. In light of these relations among culture, structure, and typification, we can credit the role of political tactics and strategies without falling into the instrumentalist reductions of "institutionalism," on the one hand, or elusive concepts like "structuration" or "habitus" on the other. . . .

Notes

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" in Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (London: Fontana, 1977).
2 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, *Towards a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1912]).
3 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*.
4 Messrs. Brooks et al., "Report on the Impeachment of Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States," in *Congressional Record*, Vol. 120 [22]: 29–293.
5 Mr. Rangel, ibid., 29302.
6 Mr. Conyers, ibid., 29295.
7 Ibid., 29295.
8 Ms. Holtzman, in *Debate on Articles of Impeachment* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974): 124.
9 Mr. Eilberg, ibid., 44.
10 *New York Times*, Editorial, 7/31/74.
11 *New York Times*, Letter, 8/1/74.
12 Letter, ibid., 7/31/74.
13 Mr. Hutchinson, in *Debate on Articles of Impeachment*: 340.
14 *New York Times*, Letter, 8/1/74.

15 Mr. Dennis, *Debate on Articles of Impeachment*: 43–4.
16 Mr. Latta, *Debate on Articles of Impeachment*: 116.
17 Mr. Sandman, ibid., 19.
18 Mr. Dennis, ibid., 43.
19 *New York Times*, Letter, 7/17/74.
20 Mr. Latta, *Debate on Articles of Impeachment*: 115.
21 *New York Times*, Letter, 7/31/74.
22 *New York Times*, Letter, 7/29/74.
23 *New York Times*, Letter, 7/2/74.

Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Alexander and Smith on Binary Codes in Public Discourse

Alexander and Smith uncover an underlying structure in American public discourse, a formula which consists of a binary code contrasting democratic and counterdemocratic actions, relationships, and institutions. The full study examines the use of this same discursive structure in very different controversies and scandals over two hundred years.

For an earlier cross-national study along related lines see Albert Bergesen, "Political Witch Hunts: The Sacred and the Subversive in Cross-National Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 42 (1977): 220–33. Other studies which investigate the deep structure of American public discourse in different ways include work by Ron Jacobs and Rhys Williams, excerpted this volume; Jeffrey Alexander, "Culture and Political Crisis: 'Watergate' and Durkheimian Sociology," pp. 187–224 in Alexander, ed., *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Robert Wuthnow, ed., *Vocabularies of Public Life: Empirical Essays in Symbolic Structure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Philip Smith, "The Semiotic Foundations of Media Narratives: Saddam and Nasser in American Mass Media," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 4 (1994): 89–118; Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); the articles by Alexander, Smith, and Jacobs in Jeffrey Alexander, ed., *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), and Barry Schwartz, "Frame Images: Towards a Semiotics of Collective Memory," *Semiotica* 121 (1998): 1–40. Influential classics on American public discourse include Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1955), Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979 [1973]) and Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," pp. 3–23 in W. G. McLoughlin and R. Bellah, eds., *Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

Alexander and Smith build on their case studies to make the theoretical point that understanding culture means understanding the internal, emergent patterns of cultural categories which are used in meaning-making. This argument implies that cultural explanation should do more than examine the way categories are used in action (cf. Part II, this volume), or processes of cultural production (cf. Part III, this volume). Indeed, Alexander and Smith criticize work across the spectrum from Shils to Bourdieu for insufficient attention to internal symbolic logic. Excerpts from work by Eliasoph, and Lichterman, with accompanying notes this volume, illustrate a different approach to public culture which emphasizes norms of action rather than discursive structure. For more discussion of the autonomy of "culture-structures" see for instance Jeffrey Alexander, "Analytic Debates: Understanding the Relative

Autonomy of Culture," pp. 1–27 in Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alexander, *Structure and Meaning: Relinking Classical Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); "The Promise of a Cultural Sociology: Technological Discourse and the Sacred and Profane Information Machine," in Richard Münch and Neil Smelser, eds., *Theory of Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Anne Kane, "Cultural Analysis in Historical Sociology: The Analytic and Concrete Forms of the Autonomy of Culture," *Sociological Theory* 9 (1991): 53–69; and Lyn Spillman, "Culture, Social Structure, and Discursive Fields," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 15 (1995): 129–54. Alexander and Smith's argument is challenged in Marshall Battani, David Hall, and Rosemary Powers, "Cultures' Structures: Making Meaning in the Public Sphere," *Theory and Society* 26 (1997): 781–812; see also the reply in Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, "Cultural Structures, Social Action, and the Discourses of American Civil Society: A Reply to Battani, Hall, and Powers," *Theory and Society* 28 (1999): 455–61. In *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) Laura Desfor Edles shows the deep cultural structure which conditioned an important political change in the direction of democratization.

23 Cultural Form and Political Meaning: State-subsidized Theater, Ideology, and the Language of Style in Fascist Italy

Mabel Berezin

Social scientists of various theoretical orientations view meaning as located in the content of particular art objects. Their first analytic question is narrative: What story does this picture, film, play, novel tell? The social science paradigm that links meaning to content suggests that a political organization, such as a totalitarian state, that sought to disseminate ideology through art would seek to affect the content of art objects. To invoke George Orwell, an analysis of Newspeak would enable one to understand the political ideology of *1984*.

The theater under Italian fascism presents a puzzle that challenges the social science assumption that meaning resides principally in narrative content. Political ideology is a special case of public meaning – collectively shared understandings of social order. The history of cultural production in the 20th century offers numerous instances of art in the service of politics. Descriptive terms such as "socialist realism" or "Nazi architecture" suggest a straightforward relation between artistic content and political ideology. The relative infrequency of plays [with fascist content] in fascist Italy suggests that the process by which art incorporates political ideology is less direct and raises my central question: How does art express political ideology?...

In this article, I reconceptualize the relation between political meaning and ideological content. The Italian fascist regime, like all regimes that institutionalize political ideologies, did not paint pictures, design buildings, or create theater; it did give money in support of various cultural projects. I analyze the theatrical projects that received regime subsidies from 1927 to 1940. The defining characteristics of these projects suggest how a theater without fascist content could plausibly convey fascist ideology.

I argue... that the Italian fascist regime affected the form and not the content of theater... The pattern of state theatrical funding, analyzed in conjunction with the rhetorical strategy of appropriation and reappropriation that emerged between regime cultural bureaucrats and theatrical cultural entrepreneurs, suggests that it was theatrical form, the performative dimensions of theater staging and acting style, that contained fascist meaning....

Vehicles of Meaning: Theater as Cultural Object

Griswold defines a "cultural object" as "shared significance embodied in form, i.e.,... an expression of meanings that is tangible or can be put into words. Thus, a religious doctrine, a belief about the racial characteristics of blacks, a sonnet, a hairstyle, and a quilt could all be analyzed as cultural objects" (1987*b*, pp. 4–5)....

Theater as an artistic genre is vulnerable to misinterpretation if one neglects its formal dimension. The narrative content, or script, of a play is only part of theater. *How* theater is performed is as central to its meaning as *what* is performed. With rare exceptions (e.g., Goldfarb 1980; Levine 1984), the tendency to treat theater as literary text in social analysis (e.g., Griswold 1986; Williams 1979) is quite old (Carlson 1984). A tradition of social analysis dating back to Artistotle's *Poetics* suggests that the meaning of theater lies in its content. Aristotle views plot, character, diction, and thought – the ideational aspects of theater – as primary aspects of theater; he sees spectacle and song – the performative aspects of theater – as secondary (Aristotle 1992, pp. 63–4). Yet, it is precisely theater's experiential dimension, its theatricality, the "grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions" (Burns 1972, p. 33), which includes staging and acting style, that makes it adaptable to political ends. Anthropological theories of theater (Turner 1982, 1990) recognize that, to borrow from Aristotle, "spectacle" and "song" are the characteristics of theater upon which its ritual value, and political potential, depends.

Performance is to theater as the play of light and shadow is to painting. The particular blend of light and shadow in a painting, once created, remains whereas a performance is continually recreated (Becker 1982, p. 302). The formal dimension of theater is experiential and based on collective social action both among the actors and between the actors and audience. Theories that focus upon the meaning of social behavior, rather than theories of aesthetics, are germane to an analysis of theater. Georg Simmel's (1971) classical social theory underscores the salience of form in social life and his essay "Sociability" suggests a way to incorporate the disjuncture between form and content into cultural analysis....

Between 1934 and 1940, 354 new plays appeared on the Italian stage. I have developed four broad categories based on a reading of the plot summaries of these plays: (1) fascist; (2) possibly political; (3) private life; and (4) detective/mystery. The majority of the new plays (72%) focused on the dilemmas and absurdities of private life. Love stories and drawing-room farces that imitated French boulevard theater represented continuity in the Italian theatrical repertory (Grassi and Strehler 1964). My sample reading of the leading Italian theater magazines *Comedia* and *Scenario* for this period confirmed the prevalence of this "white telephone" genre, as the 1930s variant came to be known. Of the remaining plays, 15% had themes that could be characterized as possibly political in intent. Only 5% had themes that could be characterized as explicitly fascist. Detective/mystery plays of the Sherlock Holmes type exceeded the proportion of fascist plays (8% vs. 5%)....

The state system of market incentives and regulation may have created company heads who were loyal fascists but it did not create a fascist theater. The "rules" focused upon stimulating production and not upon what was produced. Institutional arrangements within the Italian theater created market rigidities that continued to militate against aesthetic and political innovation. The regime and theatrical reformers recognized that forces external to the market, such as state subsidies, and outside of the company system would have to support innovation, either fascist or aesthetic, on the Italian stage.

A system, which I have elsewhere labeled "state paternalism" (Berezin 1991), developed that gave financial support to a number of theatrical projects, artistic structures with coherent visions, that the market could not sustain. Given corporativism's public rhetoric, which demanded private initiative in the arts, we can assume that, with private financial initiative lacking, the state stepped in because it somehow perceived that these theater projects would promote its interests.

I argue that we may reconstruct how theater became a vehicle of fascist meanings – meanings that were not dependent on content – by shifting our unit of analysis from plays to theatrical projects and by analyzing the pattern of state theatrical subsidy. Projects are more useful for attempting to understand meaning because it is easy to read ideology into isolated performances. The point is not that there were no plays with explicitly identifiable fascist themes, but that they were few and far between....

The Pattern of Subsidy: Performing Fascism

The theatrical projects that continued to receive regime support, in contrast to the ones that lost support, are suggestive of the regime's ideological intentions.

Acting Italian, acting fascist: Personal discipline and national incorporation. – Acting schools and the amateur theater groups attached to them were 19th-century Italian theatrical institutions that the regime turned to its ideological advantage. These schools were only nominally about training for the theater, as Italian actors were frequently "children of art" (*figli d'arte*) who followed their parents into the craft. Diverse dialects divided the Italian populace, and acting schools combined popular amusement and training in standard spoken Italian. The schools flourished after the unification, when the nationalist need for linguistic consolidation became critical (Anderson 1983, pp. 41–9). In 19th-century Italian theater schools, learning to act meant learning to speak, and become, Italian. In fascist Italy, learning to act meant learning to become fascist, as the qualities of a good actor – discipline and subordination within an organization – were the qualities of a good fascist. In the amateur theater, one acted citizenship and national incorporation, whether that be fascist or Italian.

The Dopolavoro's [Fascist Party leisure organization] amateur theater wed the 19th-century emphasis upon language training to the fascist interest in personal discipline and organizational behavior (OND 1929, p. 150). In an English-language propaganda pamphlet intended for international diffusion, an anonymous regime publicist noted: "The dramatic theaters of today have no improvised actors, anxious only to show off, but intelligent, cultivated performers who study with zest.... Apart from the artistic merit attained by the amateur theater through its discipline and training, mention should be made of the importance accruing to the wider diffusion of good Italian" (OND 1938, pp. 29–31).

"Discipline" and "training" were antithetical to the acting style of the "improvised actor" or *mattatore* and the system of standardized roles. A Dopolavoro guidebook

(OND 1929) on how to organize and conduct an amateur theater linked theatrical reform to fascist socialization: "The abolition of roles responds to a precise fascist concept to subordinate every personal desire to the success of the whole" (p. 28). According to the guidebook, the theatrical individualism that the *mattatore* represented was aesthetically and politically out of step: "Men are united in groups, in masses. Heroes, solitary giants, the protagonists who gesture and shout for themselves and of themselves, absorbing the attention of others, egotistical and egocentric, that shout: I am! I do! I say! I think! I feel! such a figure is dead" (pp. 100–1)....

Silvio D'Amico's Royal Academy equated personal discipline and professionalism. D'Amico aimed to create professional actors and directors – disciplined craftspersons who subordinated parts to the whole. That professionalism in the theater coincided with fascist values of discipline and hierarchy was a felicitous coincidence for both the regime and the theatrical world. D'Amico's new Italian actor would create "a life always new, and fresh and lively" and his director would "create spectacle" (D'Amico 1941, pp. 14, 15). D'Amico's academy did not eschew the goals of national incorporation inherited from the earlier theater schools. The academy was located in Rome and used scholarships to recruit a national student body (D'Amico 1941). Language training was foremost on its agenda. Dialect and improperly spoken Italian militated against the formation of a national theater as the *mattatore*'s individualism militated against professionalism. According to D'Amico, "recitation" was the "fundamental instruction" required for a young actor in order to "correct with patient reeducation the bad habits originating in dialect" (D'Amico 1941, pp. 23–4).

Emotion and spectacle: Feeling fascist incorporation. – The amateur theater and *filodrammatiche* [theater schools] used acting style, a performative aspect of theater, to suggest a fascist ideological discourse of discipline and hierarchy. The open air theaters created spectacles in public spaces that revived the ritualistic dimensions of theater. Staging that focused upon the appropriation of public space sought to generate emotions that would make all participants feel incorporated into a fascist collectivity. The audience would transfer the feeling of collectivity that the aesthetic community created to a feeling of political community residing in the fascist state. In this regard, the open air theater was similar to the numerous rallies and public events that the fascists staged for purely political reasons.

Of the open air theaters, the National Institute of Ancient Drama and the Thespian Cars received continuous regime support... Given the regime's desire to equate the fascist empire with the Roman empire, an organization that tried to revive classical dramas in their original locale was in its interests (Visser 1992). The statute of the National Institute of Ancient Drama explicitly linked fascist Italy to past imperial glories. The institute viewed itself as in the "avant-garde" of a movement to use the "glorious classical tradition" and to "recover the imperial heights of Greece and Rome" that had "its roots, not in vacant intellectualism, but in the history and in the future of Italy" (Unsigned 1929, p. 215). The emotion or feeling of national incorporation that the institute would promote contrasted sharply with the "vacant intellectualism" of "bourgeois" theater and liberal Italy. The economic requirements of the tourist trade supplemented the institute's ideological and aesthetic dimension. The institute's president noted that "in addition to its artistic and educational ends classical dramas contribute to tourist facilities in our country" (Pace 1937, p. 378).

The Thespian Cars aimed to educate the aesthetic sensibility of the masses. Starace (1938) claimed that the project would "make it possible for persons to become acquainted with the best theatrical productions who in other times would have been constrained to ignore them for lack of means" (p. 48). The content of what was performed did not affect the aesthetic thrust of the performance. Over the nine years for which there is evidence, the Thespian Cars performed 44 different plays representing 37 Italian authors (Corsi 1939, pp. 263–88). The repertory consisted exclusively of Italian dramas and favored historical and canonical works that were "comic and sentimental in a very plain form and easily accessible to the simple creatures of the masses" (Corsi 1939, p. 279). Despite the reliance upon Italian classical authors such as Carlo Goldoni and Vittorio Alfieri – authors whose works demanded period costumes – the contemporary repertory of the Thespian Cars did not differ from what was staged in the company-based city theaters.[1]

Fascist aesthetic education aimed to arouse the emotions, not stimulate the intellect. Rather than drawing intellectual distinctions based upon content, it used the theater's power of spectacle to engender feelings of community. Going to the theater became more important than what one saw at the theater. One fascist publicist drew a connection between the Thespian Cars and religious experience: "Like the faithful have in churches, seats adapted to collect themselves and raise their souls and thoughts to God; likewise a knowing, mature people have in theater seats adapted to raise their spirit to the beauty of art, and in it to find a surging force of life" (OND, n.d., p. 15). A critic writing in the theatrical review *Comedia* argued that in order to have a "theater worthy of Fascism and Rome," it would be necessary to "reach the brain [of the masses] by passing through its heart" (Cantini 1933, p. 12).

Spectacle was the vehicle of feeling, religious or fascist, which educated the heart. The Thespian Cars' productions packed the central town piazzas with throngs of people and employed costumes and lighting to command the attention of the audience. According to fascist sources, popular response was enthusiastic. The Thespian Cars "seemed like a gift of the regime; and a greatly effective gift it was. The public, coarse but intelligent, compressed and strained their astonished eyes in front of the spectacle" (Corsi 1939, p. 268). An American observer reported on the impressive scenic effects and noted that an audience watching a performance "shed tears of joy" (Di Robilant 1931, p. 599)....

Comparing theatrical projects. – Projects that continued to receive funding displayed three characteristics: (1) they did not originate with the regime; (2) ideology was not a salient dimension of theatrical repertory; (3) they emphasized performance and not text – theatrical form and not content – and this emphasis crossed class boundaries.

First, the regime did not design theatrical projects. The Thespian Cars revived the prerailroad method of traveling theater as well as adopting pre-World War I socialist concepts of popular theater. The theater schools were straightforward appropriations of preexisting theatrical institutions. In the prefascist period, experimental theater projects had failed to raise, or to adequately sustain themselves with, private money.

Second, the content of the subsidized theater's repertory was not ideologically distinctive. Publicity brochures for subsidized theater projects and descriptions of them in official regime publications and theatrical reviews conspicuously failed to report or glossed over repertory. For example, fascist propaganda pamphlets on the Thespian Cars focused on production details and emphasized the technological complexity of the stage and the efficiency with which the group moved from town to town. An English edition of a Dopolavoro propaganda book noted that "in the eight years that it has been operating, it has never been necessary to postpone or even delay a performance, nor has it ever been necessary to make emergency arrangements on account of the failure of the trucks to arrive" (OND 1938, p. 41). Copious photographs of theatrical machinery and crowd-filled piazzas documented these points (OND 1931).

Third, fascist cultural policy was not uniform across social class boundaries. Fascism's ability to endow the lower middle classes with the cultural capital that they lacked was a large part of its appeal among these classes (Berezin 1990; De Grazia 1981, pp. 127–50). The subsidized theater projects were aimed at different types of audiences with different degrees of cultural sophistication and knowledge. What is striking about these projects is that the capacity to make theatrical distinctions within class categories was the same across class boundaries. For example, whether one was an upper-middle-class person attending a performance of classical drama or a lower-middle-class person enthralled by the pageantry of the Thespian Cars, one still had to understand given the general context that the regime had appropriated public space to create a new kind of aesthetic and political community. Similarly, an upper-middle-class audience accustomed to bourgeois theater would take the same message from experimental theater as a lower-middle-class or working-class person would take from a Dopolavoro *filodrammatiche*. Theater was now about order, discipline, and hierarchy.

The absence of the reporting of repertories, not the absence of a repertory, suggests that *how* a play was performed, not *what* was performed, constituted the focus of the regime's theatrical concerns. The secondary position ascribed to the repertory and the primary position ascribed to performance is central to understanding the meaning of the subsidized theater. Spectacle, emotion, and discipline, qualities of theater in general and not fascism in particular, dominated regime and theatrical discourse on the subsidized theater. Successful projects emphasized the collective and ritualistic aspects of theater that were reflected in the location and staging of performances and the professionalism – the hierarchy and coordination – reflected in the acting style. The performative, or formal properties of theater, dramatized political meanings without resorting to overt political content.[2] The prerequisites of theater as artistic genre merged with the requirements of fascism as political genre to create a fascist theater.

The projects that did not continue to receive funding were playwright centered; that is, they emphasized the primacy of the author and his text. Playwright-centered theater was characteristic of 19th-century theater. The tradition of the *mattatore* theater hindered its diffusion in Italy, and Italian playwrights and *mattatore* frequently vied with each other for theatrical dominance. The regime came to identify the 19th century with liberalism and words – the polar opposites of fascism and action. Theatrical projects that supported the playwright, the emblem of 19th-century theatrical style, were less likely to receive continuing support. At the same time, the regime could not ignore playwrights such as Pirandello and D'Annunzio, who were internationally known theatrical figures. The regime found it expedient to provide them with funding and to permit their projects to fail in the marketplace.

The regime did not expect subsidized projects to be profitable, but projects did have to generate popular interest if they were to be of any political use. Eliminating emphasis on the author and the text did not guarantee success if the project completely lacked popular support. Content made a difference to the audience, and the regime bowed to popular taste. The *18BL*, the only subsidized project that its producers designed as explicitly fascist, was a popular failure and not repeated. In 1934, several prominent Italian movie directors, theatrical personnel, and elite members of the PNF explicitly decided to create a "fascist" spectacle. The creators of the *18BL* modeled it on Soviet mass propaganda spectacles (Salvini 1934, pp. 251–2). The hero was a huge truck – the *18BL*. The play represented three events in Italian fascist history – World War I, the fascist revolution, and subsequent state reconstruction (Bontempelli [1934] 1974, p. 264). Staged in Florence, the audience sat on one bank of the Arno River (about 200 yards from the stage) and watched shapes and shadows on the other bank of the river. The technological complexity of the staging took precedence over dialogue. Collectivism governed the production. Eight "directors" planned the staging, and although it had one star who played the truck, the rest of the cast consisted of a chorus (D'Amico [1934] 1964, pp. 283–9).

The failure of the *18BL* elicited widespread discussion in regime publications. A theatrical critic in the fascist theater review, *Scenario*, commented, "The Latin temperament that fortunately guides our spirit and our taste, prevents us from conceptualizing a spectacle of this character" (Salvini 1934, p. 253). Another reviewer in *Gerarchia*, a regime review of politics, argued that the *18BL* failed because its creators (all committed fascist intellectuals) had misconceived the true nature of fascist theater: "The theater problem is a problem of the nation, which ought to have a theater of extremely Italian spirit and forms as it has a very Italian political constitution. To do this, it is not enough to construct an edifice but it is necessary to let gush from the subsoil those vital forces that want to ascend toward the sun" (Giani 1934, p. 1052). Critics spoke about the failure of the *18BL* as a failure of style or form, and not content or substance...

The experience of theater from the point of view of both its creators and its audience is an inherently social process – one never stages or sees the same play twice. But theater is not perfectly akin to social life; it is play or, as Turner (1982, pp. 20–59) has noted, the space between structures – the formally mediated aspects of social life. The playfulness of theater bring us back to Simmel's (1971) conception of sociability and points us in the direction of unraveling the meaning of the fascist theater. Sociability is based on an implicit knowledge of formal rules of behavior that participants in particular cultural and social contexts share. Simmel juxtaposes sociability, or form, against values, or content: "Where a connection, begun on the sociable level... finally comes to center about personal values, it loses the essential quality of sociability and becomes an association determined by a content – not unlike a business or religious relation, for which contact, exchange, and speech are but instruments for ulterior ends, while for sociability they are the whole meaning and content of the social processes" (p. 131).

Sociability is an end in itself – it is "the *play-form of association*" (Simmel 1971, p. 130; emphasis in original). The transgression of sociability lies in the violation of the form, or genre, of social behavior, and all participants in a "sociable" connection recognize the transgression. The performance dimension of theater suggests a translation of Simmel – theater is the *play-form of art*. Drawing upon the link between theater and ritual, Turner (1982) argues that "'ludic' recombination" is the "essence of liminality" or theatricality and that in "liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them" (pp. 27–8). Form in social life and in art is so familiar as to be taken for granted; content is variable. For example, a theater audience expects different plays to be about different subjects; guests at a party expect diverse conversation. A contemporary Broadway theater audience would recognize a shift in form if they found a *mattatore* on the New York stage; party participants would be disconcerted if a fellow guest began to discuss personal problems. As Susanne Langer has stated, "*Familiarity* is nothing but the quality of fitting very neatly into the form of previous experience" (1951, p. 83; emphasis in original). Form, theatrical or social, has the capacity to communicate what is "familiar," and what is not, what is acceptable, and what is not.

The "subsidized" Italian theater, the fascist theater, used formal properties, spatial arrangement, and behavior or, translated into theatrical language, the "performance modes" of theater to convey political meaning by transgressing the boundaries of familiarity. The regime's pattern of subsidy "played" with theatrical form. This playing with form was likely to have resonated more with Italian theater audiences than could overt fascist content, which they could easily ignore. The evidence in this article suggests that theater audiences were resistant to fascist content. In addition, there is much anecdotal evidence, and some empirical evidence, that Italians viewed fascist content as a joke (see, e.g., Passerini 1984, pp. 84–153).

The form of a social, or theatrical, action is arguably a more cogent communicative practice than the specific content of an action. The fascist theater transgressed the boundaries of theatrical expectations. Each type of subsidized theater did this in a different way depending upon the demands of its own format, but the end results were the same.

Expectations of theatrical communication were to go to an urban indoor theater and watch a *mattatore* perform a familiar play. By shifting theater from private to public space, open air theater broadened the conception of theater and emphasized its ritual, or collective, value. Italian theater began in public space and had only moved into private space with the development of modern society (Toschi [1955] 1976). The Thespian Cars sought to instill the spirit of community in adults who were too old for the schools that the fascists were redesigning and too poor to partake of other cultural products (Koon 1985). Assembling the masses in the piazza to watch the spectacle created a temporary aesthetic community that, it was hoped, would evoke the feeling of the political community of the fascist state. This public setting for the Thespian Cars contained cultural and political meaning that would not escape the ordinary Italian citizen, for the piazza was a secular and civil space – a market, a public meeting place, and a scene of sociability (Carandini 1986, p. 47), and this held true across class boundaries. In the early years of the fascist movement, the piazza became a politically charged locale. Fascists and socialists fought for control of the piazza to assert political dominance (Lyttelton 1987, pp. 2, 23). The

fascist Thespian Cars in the piazza were an enduring reminder that the fascists had conquered the piazza and Italy. The location of the performance was so charged with meaning it rendered a repertory superfluous.

Although amateur theater and acting schools appear to be unrelated to experimental theaters from the perspective of fascist ideology, the . . . formal properties of these theatrical projects – professional acting and corporativist organization of theatrical production embodied in the prominence of the director – conveyed more strongly than any play a central message of the fascist regime. Just as a populace familiar with the nontheatrical uses of public spaces would have noticed when the regime appropriated those spaces, audiences familiar with the middle-class theater and its tradition of the *mattatore* would have attached some meaning to the move to a professional theater that was director based.

The evidence that I have discussed suggests a more general conclusion. I argue that the regime's support of the performance aspects of theater, rather than theater's content, was not simply utilitarian; there was a deeper connection between fascism and form. The translation of corporativism for the masses was Believe, Fight, and Obey – a call to action without an object, to a style of behavior without a goal – as opposed to Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – a call to values and content. In liberal democratic societies, understanding the ideas and principles of a nation are central to political participation. In Italian fascist society, the content was secondary because the fascists wished to create a feeling of participation, not actual participation, in the community. Assembling a mass of people in a public square to watch a theatrical performance, or to listen to a speech of Mussolini, represented emotional participation in the community. Corporativism, whose only concrete injunction was to belong to a fascist corporation or union, created a large bureaucratic space in which any content was possible and formality itself became the dominant value. Style and feeling articulated in the language of community and discipline characterized not only fascism but the fascist theater. Individuals subordinated themselves to the "organism" of the state, felt the spirit of community, and assumed their proper productive tasks whatever they might have been.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this case for the problems with which we began – the transmission of ideology and the regime's construction of political meaning? When we shift our unit of analysis from the text of an individual play to a theatrical project, the regime's apparent lack of interest in content does not appear as puzzling as it did at the outset of this article. Theatrical projects included staging and style of acting as well as repertory or text. They contained whole visions of how to do theater and as such are a better index of what the fascists wished their theater to convey than the content of individual plays. Regime subsidies determined that spectacle – the quality that Aristotle in the *Poetics* characterized as the least important dimension of theater – eclipsed the content of theater.

While all case studies are by their nature limited, their value comes from their ability to generate hypotheses for future research. The Italian case suggests that studies of political meaning that restrict their analyses to the content of ideological

doctrines and cultural products are potentially misleading. It finds that the formal properties of a cultural product – the performance dimension of theater – convey meaning, in this instance fascist ideology, even when the content of a cultural product – text of a play – does not...

Notes

1 The Thespian Cars staged 10 of the plays that appeared in the *Annuario*'s listing of new plays. Of these plays, two fell into the fascist category and three fell into the possibly political category. The Thespian Cars' repertory appears in Corsi (1939, pp. 277–82).
2 Goldfarb (1980, pp. 111–12) reports a similar finding in his study of Polish student theater.

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Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Berezin on Theatrical Form

Although many students of art and politics would expect state-supported theater during Italian Fascism to promote Fascist themes and messages, Berezin finds that plays were mostly apolitical, and shows how theatrical form, not dramatic content, conveyed Fascist ideology. The case reminds cultural analysts to attend to the effects of formal properties of cultural objects, not just their explicit content. In the extended study Berezin also shows a cultural production process in which cultural entrepreneurs obtained state subsidies by linking theatrical innovations to Fascist rhetoric (thus combining analysis of genre and analysis of cultural production, as do Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, this volume).

For more on theater in social context, see for instance Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theater 1576–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Raymond Williams, "Forms," in *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1981]); and Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Persistence of Freedom: The Sociological Implications of Polish Student Theater* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980).

For other work on Fascist political culture in Italy see Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Berezin, "The Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State, and Theater in Fascist Italy," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 639–51; Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Falasca Zamponi, "Of Storytellers and Master Narratives: Modernity, Memory, and History in Fascist Italy," *Social Science History* 22 (1998): 415–44; and Anne Bowler, "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism," *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 763–94. Related studies in political culture include Laura Desfors Edles, *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Philip Smith, "Barbarism and Civility in the Discourses of Fascism, Communism, and Democracy: Variations on a Set of Themes," pp. 115–37 in Jeffrey Alexander, *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998); David Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and the overviews provided in Mabel Berezin, "Politics and Culture: A Less Fissured Terrain," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 361–83, and George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

24 Deciphering Violence: The Cognitive Structure of Right and Wrong

Karen Cerulo

On March 13, 1996, newspapers and TV stations around the world reported one of the most riveting stories of the decade: the massacre of 16 children and their teacher in a Dunblane, Scotland, classroom. Blazing headlines spread news of the tragedy. The *New York Times* declared: "16 CHILDREN ARE SLAIN IN SCOTLAND AS GUNMAN STORMS INTO A SCHOOL."[1] The *Guardian* announced: "MASSACRE OF THE INFANTS."[2] The *Chicago Tribune* reported the story, saying:

> The pipers who are a fixture at every important Highland funeral will play the laments as 16 1st graders and their teacher are laid to rest.... They were shot to death Wednesday by Thomas Hamilton, a strange and troubled man who took his motive with him when he killed himself after emptying four pistols into a gym full of 5 and 6 year olds.[3]

USA Today recounted the event in a similar way:

> Residents of Dunblane, Scotland held a candlelight vigil on March 13, 1996, mourning 16 kindergartners and a teacher slain by lone gunman Thomas Hamilton, a disgraced boys' club leader.[4]

For days, jarring sights and sounds invaded TV screens across the world: tiny corpses, wounded and traumatized survivors, the painful cries of victims' family members. Such images were played and replayed for months to come.[5]

The headlines and reports surrounding the Dunblane tragedy share a striking resemblance. Readers will soon note that these narratives ordered the facts of the event in a remarkably similar way. In this chapter, I dissect the sequence used to present the Dunblane shootings. In so doing, I explore several more general questions: First, are the sequences that characterize stories on the Scotland massacre indicative of a broader storytelling formula? Do all stories of heinous or *deviant violence* unfold in a similar way? Is the sequencing of deviant violence substantially different from that of justifiable or *normal violence*? And what formats characterize narratives describing *ambiguous violence* – acts too difficult to classify?

In answer to these questions, the pages to follow present a specified set of informational sequences – formats that differentiate stories of deviant, normal, and ambiguous violence. Initially, I rely on journalistic and media accounts to demonstrate these patterns. But as the chapter unfolds, I complement news reports with editorials, short stories, novels, photographs, films, and paintings. In this way,

the chapter identifies generalizable formulae for signifying various forms of violence – formulae that denote right, wrong, and ambivalent in both factual and fictional, both verbal and visual accounts of violent activity.

Sequencing Right and Wrong

I have noted that the headlines and reports surrounding the Dunblane tragedy share a striking resemblance. In these accounts, information and images unfold in a remarkably parallel fashion. Specifically, the components of these narratives follow a format I call a *victim sequence*.

Victim sequences prioritize the characteristics of those whom violence strikes. Via such sequences, storytellers can establish an early link between victims of violence and the heinous nature of the acts that befall them. In the victim design, facts and observations concerning perpetrators appear much later in the information chain. Contextual qualifications are reserved for the format's conclusion. As such, readers and viewers become acquainted with a violent event through the "eyes" of the injured. The victim serves as the audience's point of reference.

In analyzing hundreds of journalistic and media reports, I find that victim sequences represent the prototype for deviant violence narratives. For example, storytellers liberally adopted the format in recounting the ultimate deviance of the Scotland massacre. Indeed, we can revisit the headlines and stories earlier introduced, using them to highlight this narrative pattern. Note the *New York Times* headline:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
16 CHILDREN	*Victim*
ARE SLAIN IN SCOTLAND	*Act*
AS GUNMAN	*Performer*
STORMS INTO A SCHOOL	*Context*

The same order characterizes the *Chicago Tribune* story:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
They (16 1st graders and their teacher)	*Victim*
were shot to death Wednesday	*Act*
by Thomas Hamilton, a strange and troubled man	*Performer*
who took his motive with him when he killed himself after emptying four pistols into a gym full of 5 and 6 year olds.	*Context*

A victim sequence organizes the *USA Today* report as well:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Residents of Dunblane, Scotland held a candlelight vigil on March 13, 1996, mourning	*(Intro)*
16 kindergartners and a teacher	*Victim*
slain	*Act*
by lone gunman Thomas Hamilton, a disgraced boys' club leader.	*Performer*

Victim sequences are not restricted to momentous atrocities. This sequence proves equally prevalent in reports of "everyday" deviant violence. Consider, for example, the following newspaper account of a routine homicide in Queens, NY.[6] In describing the deviant murder, the journalist favored a victim sequence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
A Queens store owner	*Victim*
was shot to death	*Act/Consequence*
by two robbers	*Performer*
Friday night as he drew a 9 millimeter pistol in an attempt to foil the robbery, the police said.[7]	*Context*

Similarly, a victim sequence frames this account of a child's brutal, deviant murder:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
A 4-year old girl who was hospitalized	*Victim*
after being found stuffed under a waterbed mattress as punishment died on Saturday night, the Broward County Sheriff's office said, adding that	*Act/Consequence*
her mother's boyfriend would be charged with murder. The man, Carlos Schenk,	*Performer*
had been charged with aggravated child abuse and jailed under $50,000 bond.[8]	*Context*

In each of these stories, victims and their fate become the signature of the event. The victim provides the porthole through which readers enter the story. In this way, victim formats can create a special milieu. The directing voice of each report prioritizes the dark side of violence. Violent actors along with their motives and circumstances are met from the vantage point of the offended. Via a victim sequence,

readers are encouraged to inhabit the victim; they are urged to process the violence through the lens of the "target."

Normal violence narratives stand in contrast to their deviant counterparts; such stories exhibit their own unique structure. Storytellers generally unfold reports of normal violence using a format I call a *performer sequence*.

Performer sequences prioritize information about the violent actor. Facts regarding her/his intentions, feelings, and behaviors appear early in the information chain; information on victims and context is delayed. In this way, performer sequences direct audience members to step "into the shoes" of the violent actor: Readers and viewers observe violence through the movements of the perpetrator.

In reviewing accounts of normal violence – here, violent acts acceptable under the law – the prevalence of performer sequences becomes clear. Consider, for example, this description of force exacted by the Washington D.C. police against two suspects in the attack:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
D.C. police officers	*Performer*
shot and wounded	*Act/Consequence*
two suspects	*Victim*
Thursday night, both after they allegedly tried to run over officers who were trying to stop them in unrelated incidents.[9]	*Context*

This text references all violent action from the perpetrators' vantage point. The structure of the narrative imposes the violent actor's perspective on the telling of the event. The same can be said of the following account describing a self-defense shooting. (Note that contextual information contained in the story makes clear that the gunman faced life-threatening conditions.) In this account, the performer sequence forces readers to enter the action at the side of the "good guy":

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
A truck driver	*Performer*
shot and killed	*Act*
a 15-year-old boy	*Victim*
who was attempting to rob him late Tuesday at a Buckner Terrace gas station, police said. The driver was shot in the chest during the 11 p.m. robbery attempt outside a closed Texaco station.[10]	*Context*

Journalists and reporters also use performer sequences in narrating violence that is normalized by context. For example, a performer sequence unfolds this incident of football-related violence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
The Steelers	*Performer*
beat up	*Act*
Los Angeles	*Victim*
21–3 yesterday.	*Context*

The story continues:

"We (the Steelers)	*Performer*
are hitting people hard.	*Act*
Go in and look at that Raider locker room, you'll see people beat up."[11]	*Victim*

Similarly, storytellers typically choose performer sequences when reporting the normal violence involved in natural disasters:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
A powerful earthquake	*Performer*
devastated	*Act*
200 villages in the remote mountains of northeastern Iran yesterday, killing at least 1000 people and injuring at least 5000.[12]	*Victim/Context*

And performer sequences are typically used to frame accounts of "figurative" violence. Note the lead on a story addressing the "victims" of medical laboratory "violence":

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
David Lynch	*Performer*
likes to kill	*Act*
cells	*Victim*
just to watch them die.[13]	*Context*

These examples illustrate a clear pattern. When violence occurs in culturally acceptable ways, storytellers stress actors and their motives over the consequences of an act. Narrators use performer sequences to facilitate the bonding of audience and perpetrator.

One can observe a dramatic counterpoint – a stark contrast of victim and performer designs – by focusing on stories that simultaneously address both deviant and normal violence. The following Associated Press report offers one such opportunity. This story appeared upon the death of Pat Garret, the law enforcement officer responsible for the justifiable homicide of the infamous killer, Billy the Kid. In describing Garret's normal violence, note that the journalist constructs a performer sequence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Garret	*Performer*
hunted down	*Act*
William II. Bonney Jr. a.k.a. Billy the Kid.	*Victim*
He	*Performer*
shot	*Act*
him to death	*Victim/Consequence*
at Old Fort Sumner in Lincoln County on Jul. 14, 1881.	*Context*

In contrast, the journalist reports the deviant murder of Garret via a victim sequence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Garret	*Victim*
was slain in 1908.	*Act*
His killer	*Performer*
was never brought to justice.[14]	*Context*

Similarly, consider the following story addressing the war in the former Yugoslavia. When the American journalist reports on Croatian violence – violence inflicted by a nation with whom the U.S. sympathizes – a performer sequence directs the narrative:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Croation Government Forces	*Performer*
routed	*Act*
rebel Serbs today from Knin.[15]	*Victim*

However, when the story turns to violence perpetrated by Serbian enemies, the reporter adopts a victim sequence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Many Croatians who lived in the area	*Victim*
were forced to flee	*Act*
by the Serbs.[16]	*Performer*

The anecdotal data presented heretofore illustrate a broader, more general pattern of reporting. Indeed, in analyzing a sample of 130 newspaper leads,[17] I found that victim sequences were favored overwhelmingly in stories of deviant violence. In contrast, journalists typically structured normal violence accounts using perpetrator formats.... According to the data, 71% of the leads devoted to deviant violence

display victim sequences. In contrast, none of the leads reporting normal violence prioritize the victim. Rather, the large majority of these stories – 96% of the leads – favor the performer sequence....

Sequencing Ambiguous Violence

Violence is not always easily identified as deviant or normal. In some cases, violent acts can be ambiguous in nature. *Ambiguous violence* contains both deplorable and moralistic elements; such acts may be distasteful and unpleasant, but nevertheless defined as justifiable. As such, ambiguous violence can elicit great ambivalence from those exposed to it. Individuals can experience mixed feelings in reacting to such events.

The ways in which storytellers recount ambiguous violence speaks to the complex nature of such events. Journalists typically rely on two special sequences when unfolding ambiguous acts of violence: *contextual sequences* and *doublecasting sequences*.

Contextual sequences prioritize data on an act's setting or circumstance. Such information encases the central players in a story. In so doing, contextual sequences offer reasons and explanations for otherwise unacceptable violence. Indeed, such formats provide potential justifications for violent acts, justifications that appear before readers and viewers actually learn of the act itself.

Suicide stories offer one good venue in which to explore the telling of ambiguous violence. While many view suicide as unacceptable violence against the self, others view the act as an acceptable exercise of choice. Recent debates on physician-assisted suicide have further intensified the ambiguity of the act.[18] For those reporting on suicide cases, contextual sequences prove the format of choice. The stories that follow illustrate the style; both reports concern a suicide assisted by Dr. Jack Kevorkian. A contextual sequence directs the *Detroit News* account of the event:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Janet Atkins, a 54-year-old Portland Oregon woman	*Performer*
suffering from Alzheimer's disease,	*Context*
took her own life June 4, 1990 by using a suicide device.	*Act*
Retired Royal Oak MI pathologist, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the machine's inventor assisted the woman.[19]	*Context*

The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported the story in a similar way:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
An Oregon woman	*Performer*
suffering from Alzheimer's disease has	*Context*
become the first person to commit suicide	*Act*
using a device created by Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a Michigan Pathologist.[20]	*Context*

By qualifying this suicide with data on the perpetrator's medical condition, storytellers direct readers to consider Atkins' act "in context." The sequence prioritizes the details surrounding the event, presenting the audience with the full complexity of the issue.

Contextual sequences frequently frame other forms of ambiguous violence. Accidental violence provides a case in point. Note this description of an unexpected Japanese attack on a U.S. plane:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
A mechanical problem may have caused	*Context*
a Japanese destroyer	*Performer*
aiming at a target being towed by a U.S. attack bomber	*Context*
to shoot	*Act*
the plane out of the sky.[21]	*Victim*

In this report, qualifications and justifications become the primary point of reference; via contextual sequencing, the violence itself is relegated to the horizon.

Doublecasting sequences represent another popular method by which storytellers unfold accounts of ambiguous violence. In such sequences, contextual information simultaneously casts the central "subject" of the story as both victim and perpetrator. In this way, doublecasting complicates the flow of information; the sequence imposes a point/counterpoint format on an account. In choosing doublecasting sequences to frame a story, narrators encourage their audience to consider multiple dimensions of the violence in question.

The narratives that follow, detailing the murder of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, illustrate the links between ambiguous violence and doublecasting formats. Dahmer's death represents a highly ambiguous case. On the one hand, his murder was an act of gruesome, heinous violence. Yet, the murder targeted a brutal serial killer, leading many to view the violence as an acceptable act of justice. The ambiguity of this issue is reflected in the sequencing of the following newspaper excerpts. Note, for example, the *New York Times* headline that announced the story to readers:

JEFFREY DAHMER	MULTIPLE KILLER	IS BLUDGEONED TO DEATH IN PRISON
(Victim)	*(Perpetrator)*	*(Act/Context)*

Doublecasting characterizes both the eye-catching banner and the story lead that accompanies it:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Jeffrey L. Dahmer,	*Victim*
whose gruesome exploits of murder, necrophilia, and dismemberment shocked the world in 1991,	*Context/Perpetrator*
was attacked and killed today	*Act/Consequence*
in a Wisconsin prison where he was serving 15 consecutive life terms.	*Context*[22]

The *Guardian*'s description of Dahmer's murder adopts the same strategy. Doublecasting drives the story's headline:

JEFFREY DAHMER	CANNIBAL AND SERIAL KILLER	MURDERED IN JAIL
(Victim)	*(Perpetrator)*	*(Act/Context)*

Doublecasting unfolds the text as well:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Jeffrey Dahmer,	*Victim*
the serial killer and cannibal,	*Context/Perpetrator*
was found dead	*Act/Consequence*
on November 28, 1994 in the Columbia Correctional Facility in Portage, WI.[23]	*Context*

The doublecasting formats displayed in these examples bar the connection of victim and act. Before allowing readers to fully sympathize with Dahmer's fate, the sequence presents readers with his sins. In this way, doublecasting disrupts the typical subject-predicate structure of the text. The sequence frames a dual status for Dahmer, the focus of the report. Dahmer is the victim acted upon as well as the violent performer. This strategy can problematize the violence at hand....

[T]he data confirm the connection between contextual sequences, doublecasting formats, and the presentation of ambiguous violence.... 85% of ambiguous violence narratives display contextual or doublecasting sequences; only 14% of such stories reflect an alternate design. When one reviews ambiguous violence stories with reference to theme... the same pattern emerges.

Beyond the News

The signature sequences of deviant, normal, and ambiguous violence reach beyond news reports; they are evident across a wide variety of storytelling genres. Distinct structures of right, wrong, and undecided pattern both factual and fictional works, both verbal and visual images.

Commentary

The formats heretofore reviewed are regularly found in messages of commentary and persuasion. Note, for example, the structural counterpoint that delineates "right" from "wrong" in this letter to the editor of *USA Today.* A citizen writes to contrast the April 19, 1995, bombing of the A. P. Murrah building with the 1993 ATF action against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Note the victim sequence that embodies the author's discussion of the Oklahoma affair, an event the writer specifically identifies as deviant violence:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
On April 19	*(Time Frame)*
a building of innocent people	*Victim*
was targeted by	*Act*
a lunatic.	*Performer*

In contrast, the citizen adopts a performer sequence in describing what he views to be the normal violence of Waco:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
In Waco,	*(Place Frame)*
the federal government	*Performer*
was pursuing a legitimate, legal process.[24]	*Act*

In this letter, structure as well as content convey the author's assessments. One derives meaning not only from what the author writes, but also from how he frames the message.

In a similar vein, consider two historical examples of persuasive communication on violence: President Roosevelt's address to the U.S. Congress following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, and President Truman's address to the nation following the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima. These texts make apparent the sequence formats that differentiate deviance from normalcy. Note that a victim sequence frames Roosevelt's description of Japan's deviant attack:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date that will live in infamy	*(Temporal Frame)*
the United States of America	*Victim*
was suddenly and deliberately attacked	*Act*
by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.[25]	*Performer*

Contrast this approach with President Truman's method in reporting the "necessary" bombing of Hiroshima. A performer sequence structures his opening words:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
Sixteen hours ago	*(Temporal Frame)*
an American airplane	*Performer*
dropped one bomb	*Act*
on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base.	*Victim*

Indeed, he uses the performer sequence throughout the speech:

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
We	*Performer*
are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely	*Act*
every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city.	*Victim*
We	*Performer*
shall destroy	*Act*
their docks, their factories and their communications.	*Victim*
We	*Performer*
shall completely destroy	*Act*
Japan's power to make war.[26]	*Victim*

These examples suggest that subjective commentary on violence mirrors the structural formats so common to factual accounts. From "straight" reporting to well-crafted rhetoric, the sequencing of right and wrong remains constant.

Turning to ambiguous violence, one finds that such commentary follows contextual or doublecasting sequences. These patterns parallel the ordering of factual accounts on the subject. Note, for example, this commentary addressing the violent aspects of "outing":

TEXT	IDENTITY QUALIFIER
In an effort to battle stigma against homosexuals,	*Context*
a faction among American gay people	*Performer*
has adopted a tactic that many find an alarming invasion of privacy: unmasking	*Act/Consequence*
prominent people who it says are secretly gay.[27]	*Victim*

The act of outing is fraught with ambiguity. The practice involves an "attack" on individual privacy. Yet, those who perpetrate the attack justify the action as a sacrifice necessary for the "greater good." The sequencing of the outing editorial reflects this dilemma. By couching the perpetrators within the context of their intentions, the writer problematizes the violent nature of the act. Contextual information directs audience members to the multifaceted nature of the event.

In another arena, recall Singapore's controversial caning of U.S. citizen Michael Fay. Editorials in the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Times-Picayune, USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* were riddled with ambivalence on the caning. Many writers supported some punishment of Fay, yet they also questioned the severity of the Singapore government's response. Commentators regularly invoked doublecasting sequences to express these mixed feelings. Each ambivalent communicator used the same succinct phrase to frame descriptions of Michael Fay: an American teenager who will be caned (victim role) for vandalism (perpetrator role). Fay's *leitmotif* simultaneously referenced him as both victim and performer. This concurrent presentation of Fay's "sins" and sentence was designed to locate readers inside the writers' ambivalence.[28] . . .

Notes

1 March 14, 1996: A:1.
2 March 14, 1996: A:1.
3 March 14, 1996: A:1.
4 March 14, 1996: A:1.
5 *Newsweek* magazine published perhaps the most enduring image of the event: seventeen individual portraits and names identifying each of Hamilton's victims. See Pederson (1996: 24).
6 In presenting this anecdotal evidence, I chose accounts describing criminal acts; this strategy allowed me to focus on indisputably deviant violence.
7 "Queens Store Owner Is Shot To Death." *New York Times* (February 26, 1995) A:33. Note that in all newspaper examples, I present the story *leads*. Leads represent the opening sentences of a factual account, those designed to provide a concise, definitive statement of the action. Story leads occupy my primary analytic attention as such segments are typically identified as the guiding frames of factual narratives. Indeed most journalists argue that the lead "steers the rest of the narrative" (Harrington and Harrington 1929: 68).

8 "Girl Stuffed Into Bed Dies." An Associated Press report appearing in the *New York Times* (November 28, 1994) A:15.
9 "D.C. Police Shoot, Wound Two." *Washington Post* (May 17, 1997) C:5.
10 "Truck Driver Kills Teen Trying to Rob Him, Police Say." *Dallas Morning News* (July 17, 1996) A:21.
11 "Steelers Pound Raiders." *New York Times* (November 11, 1994) C:1.
12 "Iran Earthquake Kills At Least 1000." An Associated Press report appearing in the *Star Ledger* (May 12, 1997) A:1.
13 Lim, Paul J. 1995. "Scientists Seek to Kill Killer Cells." The *Seattle Times* (February 26, 1995) A:1.
14 An Associated Press report appearing in The *Star Ledger* (August 13, 1995) A:9.
15 Bonner, Raymond. 1995. "Croat Army Takes Rebel Stronghold in Rapid Advance." *New York Times* (August 6) A:1.
16 Bonner, Raymond. 1995. "Croat Army Takes Rebel Stronghold in Rapid Advance." *New York Times* (August 6) A:8.
17 The sample was drawn from twelve U.S. newspapers, newspapers selected with an eye toward both regional variation and variation in readerships: the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Denver Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Reuter's News Service (online news reports), the *St. Louis Dispatch*, the *Star Ledger*, and *USA Today*. During the period of December 1, 1995, to November 30, 1996, I randomly selected 4 issues of each newspaper for a total of 48 issues. Within each of the 48 issues, I coded all stories pertaining to violent action. This strategy resulted in a sample of 136 stories. These stories were coded for theme, the sequence used to construct the headline, and the sequence used to present the lead.
18 Results from the *General Social Survey* (1996) indicate a good deal of public ambivalence toward suicide and euthanasia. For example, when asked, "Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person has an incurable disease?" 61% of those sampled answered yes, 34% answered no, and 5% were either unsure or unable to answer. A 1994 Gallup poll directly addressing the Kevorkian situation indicates similar levels of public ambivalence. In response to the question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the actions taken by Dr. Kevorkian?" 43% approved, 47% disapproved, and 10% had no opinion.
19 "Doctor Assists Woman's Suicide." *Detroit News* (June 5, 1990) A:1.
20 "Suicide Machine Used for First Time." *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 6, 1990) A:1.
21 "Japan Accidentally Shoots Down U.S. Plane," an Associated Press report appearing in the *Boston Globe* (June 5, 1996) A:4.
22 Terry, D. T. "Jeffrey Dahmer, Multiple Killer, Is Bludgeoned to Death." *New York Times* (November 29, 1994) A:1.
23 *Guardian* (November 29, 1994) 1:13.
24 Nieman, O. 1995. "Innocent Targeted." *USA Today* (May 1) A:10.
25 As quoted in Commager (1968: 451–452).
26 As quoted in Truman (1961: 197–199).
27 Johnson, D. 1990. "Privacy Versus the Pursuit of Gay Rights." *New York Times* (March 27) A:23.
28 Doublecasting also framed editorials addressing the controversial castration of Texas prisoner Larry Don McQuay. The *Houston Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *USA Today* all characterized McQuay as the convicted "child molester" (perpetrator role) awaiting castration (victim role). These double modifiers maintained McQuay's

dual status as perpetrator and victim. Doing so placed the violence of the castration in gray, uncertain territory.

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Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Cerulo on Narrative Sequences

Analyzing a random sample of reports from twelve US newspapers during 1995–6, Cerulo demonstrates that the meaning of violent events varies according to the sequencing conventions with which they are presented, demonstrating how the structure of messages influences their meaning. Thus, Cerulo challenges cultural analysts to go beyond a superficial focus on cultural content to examine the way symbolic structure produces meaning. In her book, she also discusses at length how sequencing conventions are learned and institutionalized (that is, the cultural production of these conventions) and the ways interpretations by audience focus groups differed when the same stories were differently configured (cf. Hunt, this volume).

For other analyses of discourse about violence see for instance Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *Discourse and Destruction: the City of Philadelphia versus MOVE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Philip Smith, "Executing Executions: Aesthetics, Identity, and the Problematic Narratives of Capital Punishment Ritual," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 235–61, and Smith, "Codes and Conflict: Toward a Theory of War as Ritual," *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 103–38. For further research on news media see excerpts from studies by Hunt and Jacobs, and accompanying editor's notes.

Examples of other studies analyzing the impact of symbolic structure on meaning include Karen Cerulo, *Identity Designs: The Sights and Sounds of a Nation*, ASA Rose Book Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); John Mohr, "Soldiers, Mothers, Tramps, and Others: Discourse Roles in the 1907 New York Charity Directory," *Poetics* 22 (1994): 327–57; and Robert Wuthnow, ed., *Vocabularies of Public Life: Empirical Essays in Symbolic Structure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), especially chapters by Cerulo, Dowd, Bergesen, and Bergesen and Jones. See also the excerpt on narrative by Jacobs, this volume.

The basic insight about the importance of underlying symbolic structure for producing meaning, common to all excerpts in Part IV, is commonly traced to semiotics. The classic text is Ferdinand de Saussure, "Nature of the Linguistic Sign," pp. 65–70 in *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library: 1959 [1915]). See also Marcel Darnesi, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999); Mark Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass

Culture: A Semiotic Approach," *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (1985): 979–1001; Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," pp. 109–59, in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). For a critique and alternative formulation of semiotics see Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude*, Part 2 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

25 Civil Society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse, and the Rodney King Beating

Ronald N. Jacobs

On March 3, 1991, an African-American motorist, Rodney King, was pursued for speeding. After a brief chase, King was met by 21 police officers, including members of the California Highway Patrol and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). In full view of all present, King was severely beaten by three white LAPD officers as a sergeant and the remaining 17 officers looked on. Unknown to the police officers, the event was videotaped by an amateur cameraman, George Holliday, and sold to a local television station. The videotape, which was broadcast thousands of times, provoked a public crisis over police brutality and racism in Los Angeles. Interest in the crisis died down about a month after the release of the Christopher Commission report on July 9, 1991, but exploded again in April 1992 with the return of not-guilty verdicts for the four police officers who had been indicted for the beating. By the end of the crisis Police Chief Daryl Gates had resigned, Mayor Tom Bradley had decided not to run for reelection (for the first time in 23 years), and the city had experienced the most costly civil disturbance in the nation's history. Given that the city of Los Angeles had paid more than $20 million between 1986 and 1990 as a result of judgments, settlements, and jury verdicts against LAPD officers in over 300 lawsuits dealing with the excessive use of force, how is it that the Rodney King crisis came to be seen as defining racial tensions in Los Angeles? How did the events surrounding the crisis affect political elites and other public actors in civil society? How did they affect social understandings about race relations? Answering these questions, I argue, requires an examination of the cultural dynamics of civil society.

Narratives, Events, and Civil Society

In recent years social scientists have adopted the concept of civil society and modified it by trying to make it more frankly sociological. They have argued that civil society is composed of not one but many public spheres and communities (Calhoun 1994, 1991; Taylor 1995), that the study of civil society should supplement its focus on institutions with a consideration of overarching symbolic codes and narratives (Alexander 1992; Alexander and Smith 1993; Jacobs and Smith 1995), that theories of civil society should dispense with the idea of a "presocial self" in favor of a community-situated self (Etzioni 1995; Walzer 1995), and that events in civil society should be seen as having a cultural significance of their own (Kane 1994; Sewell 1992*b*). Yet important questions remain for these theoretical revisions if they are to have an empirical payoff. How are the different public spheres related to one another and to the putative "national" sphere of civil society?

How do different communities use the overarching codes and narratives of civil society to construct social identities? How do events influence these narrative constructions?

I argue that a more sociological explanation of the dynamics of civil society can be organized around the central concept of narrative. As Abbott (1992) and Sewell (1992*a*) have noted, narrative analysis has become an increasingly important tool for social scientists interested in explaining social process and social change. There are two main reasons for this. The first has to do with the role narrative plays in constructing identities and enabling social action. Narratives help individuals, groups, and communities to "understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and antiheroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms" (Alexander and Smith 1993, p. 156). As studies of class formation (Somers 1992; Steinmetz 1992), collective mobilization (Hart 1992; Kane 1994), and mass communication (Darnton 1975; Jacobs 1996; Schudson 1982) have demonstrated, social actions and identities are guided by narrative understandings. Furthermore, by connecting their self-narratives to collective narratives, individuals can identify with such "imagined communities" as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nation.[1] As Steinmetz (1992, p. 505) has noted, these collective narratives can be extremely important for how individuals evaluate their lives, even if they did not participate in the key historical events of the collective narrative.

A second useful feature of narrative for studying the dynamics of civil society is that it enables the analyst to consider the significance of events. As Somers (1995, p. 127) has noted, theories of civil society too often fail to consider how events have cultural significance "on their own terms." Depending on how they are defined, how they are linked together in a story or plot, and what determines their selection or exclusion into a particular narrative, events can have important consequences for social identities and social actions (Steinmetz 1992, pp. 497–8). Some events "demand" narration and therefore have the power to disrupt prevailing systems of belief and to change understandings about other events in the past, present, and future (Kane 1994, pp. 504–6; Sewell 1992*b*, pp. 438–9). Other events get called up from the past, pointing to a foundational point of origin for a newly mobilizing community (A. Smith 1991, pp. 125–45; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The point is that events do not have a unitary causal meaning: they contain multiple plot structures, multiple narrative antecedents, and multiple narrative consequences (Abbott 1992, pp. 438–9). The same event can be narrated in a number of different ways and within a number of different public spheres and communities. These competing narratives influence not only how individuals will understand an event, but also how they will evaluate different communities, including the idealized "societal community" described by Parsons (1971).

Of those types of events that "demand narration," crisis is one of the most important. Crisis develops when a particular event gets narratively linked to a central cleavage in society and demands the attention of citizens as well as political elites (Turner 1974, p. 39). In the modern media age, a crisis becomes a "media event," announced through an interruption of normal broadcast schedules, repeated analysis by "experts," and opinion polling about the central characters involved in the crisis (Scannell 1995; Dayan and Katz 1992). The outcome of a crisis is far from

determined, but depends instead on the interaction between narrative construction and event sequence. Events such as the Dreyfus affair, Watergate, and the Rodney King beating become important plot elements for the different narratives of civil society and nation, and for this reason they can be extremely consequential for social outcomes....

I argue for a more contextual approach to the study of civil society, one that takes into account its multiple public spheres and communities, the consequences of particular events and the different forms of their narration, and the consequences of these narrative understandings for other events. This requires, as Sewell (1992*a*, p. 487) has noted, an extended, in-depth, and empirical study of texts. In the analysis that follows I focus on two newspapers with different (but overlapping) readerships. By examining the different narratives they constructed about the Rodney King beating – in terms of characters, character attributes, plots, event linkages, and genres – I show how the two newspapers constructed different but overlapping narrative understandings about the crisis. I also show how certain events became crucial turning points for the different narratives of both newspapers, while other events had significance only for the African-American press....

Narrative Tension and the Elaboration of the Crisis

With the event having been constructed as a crisis, it began to be represented through a tension between two competing narrative forms. On one side was a romantic "drama of redemption" pitting the heroic actors of the local government (the mayor and the City Council) against the antiheroic ones (Gates and the LAPD). In this narrative, which was employed by both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the heroic actors were not constructed through any sort of positive discourse, but rather through a semiotic opposition to Gates and the LAPD. Because Gates refused to hold his police officers accountable for their actions, and because he was coded by the counterdemocratic discourse of institutions, the remaining local governmental officials became the defenders of institutional legitimacy more or less by default. This occurred on several different levels. Semiotically, it operated through opposition, where every term implies and entails its opposite. In this case, symbolic opposition to Gates benefited the Mayor and the City Council. Politically, it worked because of the need for an identifiably legitimate authority.[2] This political dynamic was expressed quite well in a *Los Angeles Sentinel* editorial, which argued that "this community has had enough police brutality and if the chief of police won't stop it, then the commission must, and if not, the mayor and the City Council must take definitive action" (7 March 1991, p. A8).

In the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, however, the actual composition of the romantic narrative differed in important respects from that of the *Times*. An important reason for this was the construction of a second romantic narrative in which the African-American community itself was posited as the heroic actor. In this "romance of the community," the heroic actor was represented not through a mere semiotic opposition, but through actual and positive discourse. Employing a style common to the African-American press (cf. Wolseley 1971), the newspaper invoked the ideals of American society while criticizing that society as it actually existed. In opposition to

mainstream society, the *Sentinel* represented the African-American community as the true voice of unity and morality, and hence as the only agent able to truly resolve the crisis. We can see the construction of this second romantic narrative in the following excerpts:

> Rarely, if ever, has an issue so united the Black community in the way the March 3 Rodney King incident has done. The savage beating of King has inspired Los Angeles' Black community to speak with one voice. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 March 1991, p. A1)

> We must not allow ourselves to be set apart in this battle. Justice must be served and we must, at least in part, be the instruments of that justice. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 28 March 1991, p. A7)

> The African-American community itself has a distinct role in the accountability equation. In fact, the community represents the proverbial bottom line: it is the ultimate determinant of values and enforcers of acceptable standards. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 11 April 1991, p. A6)

In this romantic narrative, the beating of Rodney King became a transformative event, unleashing the potential power of the African-American community. While Daryl Gates and the LAPD were still the villains of this narrative, there were new heroes.

In tension with the romantic narratives, both newspapers also used a tragic frame to interpret some of the events surrounding the crisis. In a tragic narrative, as Frye (1957, pp. 36–7, 282–7) notes, the drama must make a *tragic point*; that is, while the protagonist must be of a properly heroic stature, the development of the plot is one of ultimate failure. Thus, in the *Los Angeles Times* the public – what Sherwood (1994) has called the heroic actor of the "drama of democracy" – became represented as a series of factions, and it became more difficult to imagine a plot development where a new actor could successfully step in and do battle with Gates and the police department. Within the tragic genre, reaction to the beating was interpreted through a narrative of class, racial, and ethnic segregation rather than public unity. As an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* lamented, "It is profoundly revealing that while middle-class viewers recoiled in horror at the brutal footage, the victim, like many others familiar with police behavior in poor and minority neighborhoods, considered himself lucky that the police did not kill him" (*Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 1991, p. B5).

These types of accounts in the *Los Angeles Times* represented a "tragedy of fate," in the aporetic sense of resigned acceptance, a tragedy pointing to an evil "already there and already evil" (Ricoeur 1967, p. 313). However, the tragic frame of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* diverged in important respects from such a tragedy of fate. The *Sentinel* combined elements of tragedy and irony, calling up other recent instances of brutality against African-Americans. News reports in the *Sentinel* juxtaposed the outrage and collective attention about the Rodney King beating with the relative lack of attention concerning another beating case whose trial had begun on the same day. The trial stemmed from the "Don Jackson case," a 1989 event where two Long Beach police officers were captured on videotape pushing an off-duty, African-

American police officer through a plateglass window, "followed by the sight of Jackson being slammed onto the hood of their patrol car, after a 'routine' traffic stop" (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 7 March 1991, p. A1). While the *Los Angeles Times* had given the Don Jackson story significant coverage in 1989 (12 articles), it failed to make the textual attachment to the Rodney King beating in 1991. For the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, however, the Don Jackson story served as an important interpretive filter through which to view the Rodney King beating. Other historical events also found their way into the *Los Angeles Sentinel*'s coverage. In a feature interview, Brotherhood Crusade leader Danny Bakewell noted, "When I saw what happened to that brother on television, I thought I was watching a scene out of the distant past: a Ku Klux Klan lynch mob at work" (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 March 1991, p. A5). By recalling other instances of brutality against African-Americans, writers for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* placed the event of the beating in the middle of a long and continuous narrative, rather than at the beginning of a new one.

It was unclear at this point which narrative form would prevail as the dominant understanding of the crisis in either newspaper. For both, the final act of the social drama would depend on the responses of political actors and on the interpretation of these actors' attempts to resolve the crisis. Even at this early point in the crisis, however, important differences were developing in the reports of the two newspapers. Specifically, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* constructed two competing romantic narratives and a more ironic-tragic narrative, both of which would have important consequences for subsequent news coverage...

With the crisis developing rapidly, members of the political elite launched investigations to try to maintain the romantic narrative (where they were the heroic figures) and to deflate the tragic one. Yet, just like the construction of the crisis, the success of these attempts was neither automatic nor guaranteed....

[N]one of the initial attempts to resolve the crisis were successful. The grand jury investigation was largely ignored by the press, the FBI probe was eventually de-emphasized after being criticized, and the conflict between the City Council and the Police Commission did little except hurt the mayor's approval ratings. News reports in the *Los Angeles Times* responded to these failed actions of the political elites by updating the two narrative constructions and shifting the relative importance accorded to each genre. On the one hand, reports from "civic leaders" strengthened the tragic narrative of factionalism, claiming that "the intense fight over Gates' tenure has further polarized the city, politicized the issue and obscured the fundamental questions of brutality, racism, and police training raised by the King beating" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 1991, p. A13). At the same time as the tragic genre was reinforced, other reports weakened the romance of local government, noting with irony the lack of heroism among city leaders. As an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "The Rodney King beating has brought to the surface ugly problems in Los Angeles: not only the allegations of police brutality, but the now exposed factionalism among races and ethnic groups and the tensions between longtime city powers who fear too much change and new line city powers who fear too little" (*Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 1991, p. B6). In this new plot, the event of the

beating was not only linked to the problems of police brutality, but also to the weakness of local leaders....

The Christopher Commission and the Move Toward Resolution

Resolution of the crisis would, for the discursive community of the *Los Angeles Times*, require the creation of a new hero; for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, it would require that this new hero, if not the African-American community itself, at least be attached to that community. The "hero" who was eventually to satisfy the conditions of both communities was the Christopher Commission and its "Report of the Independent Commission of the Los Angeles Police Department," released to the public on July 9, 1991. The Christopher Commission was composed of representatives from all institutional branches of "elite" civil society. It was cochaired by John Arguelles, a retired California State Supreme Court judge, and by Warren Christopher, a former deputy attorney general and deputy secretary of state. Also included in the commission were two university professors, a college president, three accomplished lawyers, the president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, and a corporate executive.

Despite these symbolic resources, the Christopher Commission was not automatically cast in its ultimate role as romantic hero. It had originally been formed as two separate investigations: the Arguelles Commission, formed by Daryl Gates, and the Christopher Commission, instituted by Tom Bradley. Like the investigations preceding them, both commissions were initially represented in a negative light by the *Los Angeles Times* as being politically motivated and dependent. The Arguelles Commission was represented as being tied too closely to Gates, while the Christopher Commission was considered too close to Bradley. The decisive move toward symbolic resolution of the crisis came with the merging of the two commissions into an expanded Christopher Commission. As an event, the merging of the two commissions presented an opportunity for new narrations of the crisis to be made. Both Arguelles and Christopher made numerous public statements representing the merged commission as an independent, cooperative, and objective body whose orientation was directed toward the good of the public. They represented their merged commission as a movement away from the tragedy of factionalism and back toward the romance of local government. As the following excerpts demonstrate, their efforts were reflected in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> The heads of the panels... said they were seeking to distance themselves from the clash as the Police Commission forced Gates to take a leave. (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 April 1991, p. A23)
>
> "I think it would be good for everybody if we could come up with some kind of coordinated effort," said retired State Supreme Court Justice John Arguelles, the head of Gates' five-member civilian panel. "There are [now] two committees that might be perceived as having independent agendas that they might want to advance." (*Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1991, p. A1)
>
> "In order to maximize the commission's contribution to the community," Christopher and Arguelles said in a joint statement, "we must concentrate on making an objective

and thorough study of the long-term issues without being drawn into the controversy over the tenure of Chief Gates." (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 April 1991, p. A23)

In an environment dominated by satirical and tragic interpretations, even this merged commission was understood skeptically, and its report was forecast by some to be an "impressive study... that ends up just sitting on somebody's shelf" (*Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 1991, p. A10). Nevertheless, when the Christopher Commission's report was released on July 9 – completed "within a restricted time frame because delay would not be in the public interest"[3] – the density of media coverage about the crisis surged. In the *Los Angeles Times*, while there were three articles about the Rodney King crisis during the week before the release of the report, there were 48 articles in the subsequent week; in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the density of articles increased from three articles to nine over the same period of time. But the report did not only provoke a quantitative change in media discourse; it also engendered a qualitative shift. The event became a turning point for all of the narrative understandings of the Rodney King crisis. In the *Los Angeles Times*, it was interpreted through a religious metaphor of revelation strengthening the romantic narrative:

> Just as the Rodney G. King videotape gave the American public an unfiltered glimpse of police brutality, so did the Christopher Commission open a window Tuesday on the working lives of Los Angeles police, exposing strains of racism, violence, and callousness toward the public they are sworn to protect... Throughout the inquiry, both men said, they were acutely aware of the high expectations for their efforts. Arguelles talked of producing a report that would be seen as "visionary." (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1991, pp. A10, A17)

The *Los Angeles Times* began to interpret the release of the Christopher Commission report as a symbolic completion of the crisis begun by the videotape. If the videotape provided the beginning of the narrative, the report enabled its closure. With this interpretive shift the satirical and tragic frames disappeared from the reports of the *Los Angeles Times*. At this point, the discursive environment of the *Los Angeles Times* began to resemble a cultural situation that Turner (1969) has called "reaggregation." While authority figures had previously been represented as divided and politically motivated, they were now represented as being open and cooperative, unified in their support of the Christopher Commission report, and motivated by the duty of office and concern for the public. Attention also shifted back to Police Chief Gates, who was represented as increasingly ego driven and out of touch with the public. As the following news reports demonstrate, the sharp opposition drawn between Gates and the remaining political leaders helped to increase the legitimacy of those leaders:

> "It appears as though a pattern is beginning to develop at Parker Center to punish or harass those who cooperated with the Christopher Commission and to intimidate others from cooperating in the future," [City Councilman] Yaroslovsky said. "This is an untenable situation, which the Police Commission should immediately move to restore." (*Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 1991, p. A7)

> The councilmen's good faith should not be trifled with by Gates. He can either cooperate with the council members and business leaders who would try to work with him on a transition or he can try to fight the many lined up against him. (*Los Angeles Times*, 17 July 1991, p. B10)

> Over a turbulent 10-day period, some of the most prominent political, business, and labor leaders wrestled with a difficult mission: how to persuade Police Chief Daryl Gates to commit to a retirement date. (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 July 1991, p. A1)

Former political adversaries, such as the Police Commission and the City Council, were now calling on one another to help in a common cause. Business and labor leaders, who had previously not been significant players in the social drama, were reported to be joining the unified effort. Articles in the *Los Angeles Times* reported that other area police departments, such as those in Pasadena, Long Beach, Santa Monica, Maywood, and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office, were also conforming with the Christopher Commission reforms. Finally, when two of Gates's strongest supporters – councilmen John Ferraro and Joel Wachs – called for his resignation, the symbolization of political unity was virtually complete, at least for the *Los Angeles Times*....

For the *Los Angeles Times*, as I have suggested, this period witnessed a strong narrative consolidation into an exclusively romantic frame. Acting as a bridge to unify the previously divided members of the local government and the political elite the Christopher Commission was represented as an objective and "visionary" body enabling the unification and cooperation of local government leaders. At the same time, the unification of local government coincided with a strengthening opposition to Police Chief Gates. When Gates finally announced his resignation, the LAPD became purged of the figure around whom much of the symbolic pollution had concentrated. Public focus began to turn to the upcoming trial of the four indicted officers, the conviction of whom would signal complete redemption for the political leaders of Los Angeles, legitimacy for its institutions, and moral rejuvenation for its citizens. Rather than treating the trial as a separate event, the *Los Angeles Times* and its public understood it as the final chapter of the narrative, clearly expecting the result to be the conviction of the officers.[4] As for the other narrative forms that had previously been used by the *Los Angeles Times* – the tragedy of isolation and the satire of politicization – they appeared to disappear in a case of collective memory loss.

In the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, however, collective memory continued to play a significant role in the coverage of the crisis. We can see this from the earliest events leading up to the release of the Christopher Commission report. In its evaluations of the separate Christopher and Arguelles commissions, the *Sentinel* identified the latter with Gates and the former with Bradley and used the appropriate sides of the bifurcating discourse of civil society to interpret their actions. The *Sentinel* reported about the merging of the two commissions in a manner far different than the *Los Angeles Times*:

> Earlier Gates said that his Arguelles Commission would cooperate with Bradley's Christopher Commission. Subsequent reports indicate that the Arguelles Commission has had difficulty in attracting panel members and that the two commissions would merge – a prospect not too much to the liking of the Brotherhood Crusades' Danny

Bakewell or acting Police Commission President Melanie Lomax. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 4 April 1991, p. A3)

The *Los Angeles Sentinel* interpreted the possibility of a merger between the two commissions as being necessitated by the weakness of the Arguelles Commission. In a direct metaphor of pollution, the Arguelles Commission was interpreted as something to be avoided, as a potential danger to the purity of the Christopher Commission.

Nevertheless, when the merged commission's report was released, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* described it as a "window of opportunity" and as an investigation of "extensiveness... forthrightness... and validity" (11 July 1991, p. A6). In this respect it mirrored the *Los Angeles Times*. At the same time, however, the *Sentinel* did not construct the commission report as a bridge toward the legitimation of local government leaders, but rather as a justification for the longstanding criticisms made by the African-American community. In this respect, the event of the Christopher Commission report was linked to the romance of the African-American community. John Mack, executive director of the Los Angeles Urban League, argued that the report "confirmed what we already know: that racism is rampant in the LAPD" (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 11 July 1991, p. A15). By attaching the event to the romantic narrative of the African-American community, the *Sentinel* reinforced the heroic role of the black community at the same time that it extended such a role to the commission and its report. If local leaders wanted to be narrated into a heroic role by the *Sentinel*, they would have to include the African-American community in the resolution of the crisis and would have to recognize that community's collective memory.

Notably, the focus in the *Sentinel* was on the reform recommendations, the findings of bias, and the issue of racism, rather than on the unity of the political leadership in its quest to remove Gates. Rather than relying on sources of support from the political and business leadership, the *Sentinel*'s representation of support for the commission included City Councilman Michael Woo, Brotherhood Crusade leader Danny Bakewell, and the African-American Peace Officer Association, as well as "community leaders and various community coalitions long critical of Chief Gates and the practices and politics of the LAPD" (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 July 1991, p. A1). The voices heard through the *Sentinel* did not readily forgive the political leaders, the police department, or "white society." They continued to represent the police department as exclusive and racist and to identify other area police departments (such as the Lynwood Sheriff's Office) as racist. The durable text of police oppression, always available for the *Sentinel*, was again brought forth as new incidents of brutality were revealed. As the following excerpts demonstrate, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* continued to represent the political system and mainstream society by using the antiheroic side of the discursive code:

> After the Rodney King beating, the barrage of nationwide media publicity and public disgust lulled citizens into a false sense of pride and complacency, encouraging them to believe that impending recommendations on LAPD practices and politics would serve to turn the department's mentality around. Then along came the Vernell Ramsey case – another Black Foothill victim alleging excessive force by the LAPD. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 September 1991, p. A1)

> Recent City Council debates – 13 so far – over Christopher Commission recommendations have led to a barrage of complaints from community leaders and various coalitions. One of the main arguments has been the issue of power. Critics charge that the City Council has too much and has become lackadaisical about responsibly exercising its duties. (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 22 August 1991, p. A1)

Thus, there was no real narrative consolidation in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* after the release of the Christopher Commission report. The romance of the African-American community continued to be the dominant romantic genre for reporting about the crisis. It was supplemented by a "romance of the Christopher Commission," where the commission was constructed in relations of similarity to the African-American community instead of being attached to local government. Local government leaders, and the City Council in particular, were viewed largely as a threat to the resolution of the crisis. Similarly, the tragic-ironic narrative persisted. White citizens were interpreted as being not sufficiently concerned or vigilant enough to ensure that the reforms would be enacted. In other words, while the *Los Angeles Times* had narrated the event of the commission report as a link to political leadership and public unity, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* had narrated it as a link to African-American leadership and public complacency. In doing so, both newspapers were following the "narrative logic" that had developed during the course of events....

In this study of the Rodney King crisis and its interpretation by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, I offer some suggestions about how to study the interplay between the analytic and concrete forms of culture, and I demonstrate how such an approach can help us to understand events, social actions, and the dynamics of cultural representation in civil society. First, I show how the cultural construction of social problems in civil society occurs in multiple media that are connected to different communities of discourse. It is not simply the case that a "social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in society" (Blumer 1971, p. 300). This notion hypostatizes "society," "construction," and "problem" as though all were more unitary than they really are. The Rodney King crisis was socially constructed as several different problems in several different public spheres. In the *Los Angeles Times* it was constructed as a problem of police brutality, of factionalism, and of political divisiveness. In the *Los Angeles Sentinel* it was constructed as a problem of police brutality, of white insincerity, and of the need for African-American empowerment. The construction of these problems depended on the event, its narration by different social actors, and the ability of these actors to draw on codes and narratives that particular discursive communities found both plausible and dramatic. This finding supports a "public arenas" model of social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), at the same time that it reorients the model toward a recognition of multiple public spheres.

Second, by conceptualizing narratives and events in a relational manner, I show how interactional effects can have important consequences for social outcomes. Clearly, the event of the Rodney King beating had important consequences for subsequent narrative understandings about race relations and civil society. But the event had neither a unitary nor a necessary meaning. While it was constructed in the

Los Angeles Times as the beginning of a narrative of crisis, in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* it was inserted into the middle of an ongoing narrative about civil rights and police brutality. Furthermore, the meaning of the beating changed as new events were added to the various narrative constructions. Some events, such as the grand jury investigation, were "meaningless," in the sense that they were not significant for the narrative constructions of the crisis. This is noticeable in that the sequence of events following the grand jury investigation ultimately became very meaningful following the not-guilty verdicts for the four officers indicted in the original investigation. Other events, such as the FBI probe, were initially meaningful but were soon removed from the ongoing narrative constructions and thus made inconsequential. Still other events, such as the conflict between the Police Commission and City Council, changed the earlier meaning of the crisis. The point is that both meanings and outcomes depend on the *interaction* between events and their narrative understandings, a finding supported by related studies of collective action (see, e.g., Ellingson 1995; Kane 1994) and violence (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici 1986, 1994).

Finally, this study indicates that genre plays an important part in how events get narrated, linked to other events, and infused with social expectation. This is an important addition to narrative analysis and its focus on events, plots, and characters. Genre influences the expected outcome of a particular narrative construction by constructing a set of expectations for the hero and for the conclusion of the story. The "field" of genres surrounding a particular event influences social outcomes because of the way that it informs competing expectations. This is also true of other cultural structures, such as codes, idioms, and schemas. But the analysis of narrative and genre allows us to address more fully the relationship between the analytic properties of culture and their concrete articulation in real events. For this reason, a "narrative sociology" can help social scientists to better understand the dynamics of social process and social change.

Notes

1 The idea of imagined communities is borrowed from Anderson (1983).
2 Greenfeld (1992, p. 416) has illustrated how this dynamic worked in the 18th-century construction of an American nationalism and a revolutionary consciousness.
3 As stated on the cover sheet of the "Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department."
4 Indeed, when the not-guilty verdicts were read in April 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "Outrage and indignation swept the city Wednesday as citizens rich and poor, black and white, struggled to reconcile the acquittals of four Los Angeles Police Department officers with the alarming, violent images captured on a late-night videotape" (30 April, p. A1).

Appendix Table A1 Chronology of the Rodney King Crisis

	Date	Event
1991:		
	March 3	Rodney King is beaten by members of the Los Angeles Police Department, an event recorded on videotape by amateur cameraman George Holliday.
	March 6	Police Chief Daryl Gates calls the beating an "aberration."
	March 11	A grand jury investigation is formed to look into the beating of Rodney King.
	March 12	An FBI probe is formed to investigate the beating of Rodney King.
	March 14	Four Los Angeles police officers are indicted for the beating of Rodney King.
	March 30	Daryl Gates forms the Arguelles Commission to investigate the beating of Rodney King.
	March 30	Tom Bradley forms the Christopher Commission to investigate the beating of Rodney King.
	April 4	The Police Commission, on the urging of Mayor Tom Bradley, removes Daryl Gates from his position as police chief.
	April 5	The Arguelles Commission and the Christopher Commission are merged into an expanded Christopher Commission.
	April 6	The City Council, after criticizing the Police Commission's action, reinstates Daryl Gates to his position as police chief.
	July 9	The Christopher Commission releases the results of its investigation, the "Report of the Independent Commission of the Los Angeles Police Department."
	July 12	Daryl Gates announces that he will retire as police chief.
	July 14	Daryl Gates announces that he might not retire until 1993.
	July 17	City Councilmen John Ferraro and Joel Wachs make a public call for the resignation of Daryl Gates.
	July 22	Daryl Gates announces that he will resign as police chief in April 1992.
1992:		
	April 29	A Simi Valley jury acquits the officers charged with beating Rodney King. In the civil disturbances that ensue there are more than 11,000 arrests, 2,000 people are injured, and 58 people are killed.
	June 6	Daryl Gates retires as chief of the Los Angeles Police Department and is replaced by Willie L. Williams.

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Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Jacobs on Narratives and Public Events

Jacobs draws attention to the way different narrative constructions influence the understanding and evaluation of public events in his analysis of reporting about the political aftermath of the Rodney King beating in mainstream and African-American newspapers in Los Angeles. Narratives may differ in emplotment, character construction, and genre. In the full article, Jacobs analyzes such differences in the early construction of the event, and in failed attempts at resolution, as well as in the elaboration of the crisis and the move toward resolution discussed here.

For other studies of racial issues and the news see also excerpt from Hunt, this volume, and associated editor's note. Other work on news narratives includes Michael Schudson, "The Politics of Narrative Form: The Emergence of News Conventions in Print and Television," *Daedalus* 111 (1982): 97–112; Ronald Jacobs, "Producing the News, Producing the Crisis: Narrativity, Television, and News Work," *Media, Culture and Society* 18 (1996): 373–97;

Robert Karl Manoff, "Writing the News (By Telling the 'Story')," pp. 197–229 in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); and Barbie Zelizer, "Achieving Journalistic Authority Through Narrative," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 366–76. For more on news conventions and their history see Richard Kaplan, "The American Press and Political Community: Reporting in Detroit 1865–1920," *Media, Culture and Society* 19 (1997): 331–55; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); and Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For a classic semiotic analysis of conventions for news photos, see Stuart Hall, "The Determinations of News Photographs," pp. 176–90 in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds., *The Manufacture of News: A Reader* (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1973).

Jacobs demonstrates the use of narrative analysis as another tool to unpack the ways meaning emerges from the internal structure of discourses; he incorporates binary code analysis (cf. Alexander and Smith, this volume) but focuses on sequencing conventions in narrative (cf. Cerulo, this volume.) On narrative analysis in sociology see, for instance, Roberto Franzosi, "Narrative Analysis – Or Why (And How) Sociologists Should Be Interested In Narrative," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 517–54; Ronald Jacobs and Philip Smith, "Romance, Irony, and Solidarity," *Sociological Theory* 15 (1997): 60–80; Margaret Somers, "Narrating and Naturalizing Civil Society and Citizenship Theory: The Place of Political Culture and the Public Sphere," *Sociological Theory* 13 (1995): 229–74; Steven Sherwood, "Narrating the Social," *Journal of Narratives and Life Histories* 4 (1994): 69–88; and William Sewell, "Introduction: Narratives and Social Identities," *Social Science History* 16 (1992): 479–89.

Part V

Social Change and Cultural Innovation