



Message from the Chair

Feature Article

Thick Description in Causal Claims

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Our Anniversary Symposium on “Cultural Sociology and its Others” is an opportunity to reflect on how we negotiate the “trading zones” between cultural sociology and other intellectual subcultures, within sociology and beyond. What particular differences in conceptualization, significance, and evidence have we encountered, and what “pidgin languages” help us with local, practical communication (Galison 1997)? In the fall I suggested that our conceptual suspicion of the explanatory power of “interests” is a core and enormously productive feature of cultural sociology which has sometimes blocked communication in trading zones. Here, I want to discuss another high-stakes “trading zone” issue, but this time a matter of research logic rather than conceptualization – the supposed opposition between “thick description” and causal claims, or between the ideographic and nomothetic in sociological inquiry.

Because of our primary focus on meaning and meaning-making, cultural sociologists are (quite rightly) ambivalent about sociology’s standard assumptions about causal logic. Sometimes, we reject them as inappropriate to our research goals, which demand a different logic of inquiry and different criteria of assessment. As Geertz admonished, “... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly– that is, thickly–described” (1973, 14). This position would be fine, except that, in sociology, and given the implicit power of methods-class presuppositions about the importance of causal explanation, it often leads to the irritating misapprehension that much of what we do is “preliminary” or “exploratory” in the process of knowledge production. Other times, and especially in trading zones with other sociologists, we make claims about the causal power of culture. This too could be fine, except that it sometimes inclines us to reduce meaning to causal variables which elide the depth and contextual complexity of strong interpretive analysis, the actual meaning-making process, and the “thick description” which should be our core competence and contribution. We seem condemned either to

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Re-Conceptualizing Media Within Cultural Sociology

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As a ubiquitous social phenomenon and societal resource the media are intimately involved in making life meaningful and are of utter importance to cultural sociology. Media sociologists now argue that it’s virtually impossible to escape for long, the ever-present “torrent” of media images (Gitlin 2002) that incessantly call for our attention in late-modern societies. Yet sociologists are hard pressed to find media-themed sessions at our annual meetings. At the last two American Sociological Association meetings in New York (2007) and Montreal (2006) media-themed sessions were virtually absent. Nevertheless, such absence does not necessarily speak to a lack of interest. Several people attending the ASA Culture Section’s mini-conference on modeling held at NYU last summer agreed that the current state of media scholarship in cultural sociology (and sociology in general) is lacking and in need of new insights. In this short essay, I hope to re-ignite media scholarship among cultural sociologists by offering a way to re-conceptualize media’s position within cultural sociology. In doing so, I briefly identify the broad, diffuse, and ubiquitous nature of media discourses in late modern societies, and highlight key media-centric questions from which cultural sociologists may ground future scholarship. My hopes are to help us better understand the nuanced roles of the media in the intricate and

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give up on causal claims or to lose track of meaning-making.

This ambivalence first puzzled me when, fresh off the boat from analytic philosophy, I realized that much of the sociology I loved – and not only qualitative work – didn't look too strong when it was assessed according to the criteria of methods-class causal logic. At least at that time, the dominant view of causal inference was basically a combination of the old “covering law” model – e.g. “causal explanation works by subsuming events under causal laws... [which] derive from general theories” (Kiser and Hechter 1991, 6) – with pragmatic attempts to patch up this model with more refined methodological tools. Truly interpretive work was valued for its difference – i.e. its humanistic quality and its “exploratory” insight – but always set apart from mainstream research logic.

Since then, many more sophisticated approaches to the logic of inference continued to develop, especially in comparative historical sociology (e.g. Mahoney 2004; cf. Spillman 2004). What few sociologists have recognized, though, is that philosophers of history long ago faced the inadequacy of positivist covering-law models of causal inference and came up with more direct and in some ways more radical epistemological solutions to my original puzzle. They provide a way to resolve cultural sociologists' ambivalence about causal logic and at the same time develop a “pidgin language” which can make sense in trading zones. They can help us relax about causality: we can continue to emphasize the central importance of thick description, and yet still be interested in causal claims.

Some of what I learnt from the historians' epistemological debates can be summarized as follows (for a more extended argument and more on the sources, see Spillman [2004]):

(1) Well-grounded causal claims can be made with different degrees of generalization. Contra covering-law models, singular causal claims are possible: philosophers of history provide a logic for better justification of such claims, and some sociological arguments for narrative methodologies also take this line. MacIntyre suggested that causal explanation is, primarily, particular rather than general: “we often in both the natural and social world identify and understand particular causal relationships without invoking law-like generalizations.” At the same time, very broad causal claims – close to “causal laws” – are also possible, but only if the conditions necessary for that causal relation to operate are near-universal. Because of the importance of antecedent conditions and mechanisms, “that hallowed formula ‘Whenever an event of type A occurs, then an event or state of affairs of type B occurs’ never by itself specifies any possible causal relationship.” (1976: 144, 149–152) The more complex and historically dependent a phenomenon is, the more importance is assumed by pre-existing states

of affairs in explaining a particular causal relationship. This is why we typically respond to generalized economic or psychological “laws” with questions about scope conditions or variable mechanisms.

(2) So any causal claim should give as much attention to scope conditions under which causes will operate and to mechanisms of the causal relation, as to the causal relation itself.

For instance, Mandelbaum (1974, 60) argues that views of causality derived from covering-law models tend to overlook the fact that “the establishment of the precise nature of ... initial and boundary conditions is a complicated task, and is itself the task of the historian.” Moreover, causal attribution is not made on the basis of “constant conjunction” and general law, but on the basis of productive efficacy: “... we seem to see a direct connection or transfer of power between events... what is seen is not two successive events, but a continuous process” (Mink, 1978, 216). Suggesting that causal attributions can and should be made in singular cases, he demands special attention to conditions and mechanisms of causal relations. This means that new explanation involves new analytic description and redescription. Many important sociological contributions, which would be very weak causal arguments according to standard models, are better understood as providing a new view of conditions or mechanisms. Philosophers of history provide more technically sophisticated ways of articulating methodological criteria for assessing arguments about causal conditions and mechanisms. And cultural sociologists are particularly well equipped to explore initial conditions and mechanisms of mid-range causal generalizations: our work often challenges or improves existing causal arguments by better specifying their conditions and mechanisms (Jacobs and Spillman 2005).

(3) Historians also argued that the proper grouping of events in an identifiable process is one of the major explanatory strategies in history: Walsh (1974) called this colligation. Colligatory concepts group different events in naming a particular process, and so they do not classify events as similar, nor provide explanations of classes of events, in the way required by the covering-law model of causal explanation. Rather, a part is explained in terms of its place in a suggested whole: the determining relationships are “internal” to the phenomenon studied, rather than “external,” as they would be in standard causal explanation. Sociologists, like historians, colligate, often explaining some phenomenon by placing it in terms of some larger conceptualization. Colligation is crucial in debates about the nature of causal conditions and mechanisms. Sociological innovation often involves new or refurbished colligations, rather than new causal claims. The powerful generalizability of

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many exemplary studies in cultural sociology comes in the new views they offer of causal conditions and mechanisms by sorting empirical events in new ways, or by identifying previously neglected structures and processes – not in the generality of the causal relations they identify.

What all this suggested to me is that ambivalence about causal logic in cultural sociology – as sometimes in sociology more generally – is based on an unnecessarily restrictive view of causality. In particular, we can and should retain our emphasis on thick description, but we don't need to give up interest in causal claims.

It may be evident that my summary of arguments from the philosophy of history also synthesizes many common elements of implicit methodological wisdom in sociology; points which have been made in debates across standard methodological divides and points which have been made in passing about standard causal logic, although often with little epistemological support. But I think these arguments offer a language and logic of inquiry which can bring a wide variety of methodological strictures and innovations into focus in a new way. For instance, many sociologists now accept that attention to causal mechanisms is important for a variety of reasons. Others have called for more attention to narrative logic in sociological explanation—again from a variety of points of view. But these and numerous other methodological innovations have yet to be integrated in a more broadly based reformulation of logics of inquiry in sociology which does not see “thick description” as merely an overture to explanation.

By contrast, this framework allows us to see thick description as a process of colligation. It helps us think of this process as providing new knowledge about conditions and mechanisms of conventional causal relations, and to remember that conditions as well as mechanisms are key parts of causal explanation (whether quite particular or very generalized). Moreover, it allows us to make epistemological sense of the importance of what Kaufman (2004) argues is a trend towards “endogenous” explanation in cultural analysis, the explanation of particular cultural elements in terms of the dynamics and structure of the larger cultural wholes of which they are part (such as in varieties of semiotic analysis). It also suggests a way of understanding field theories' explanations of elements in terms of their place in fields, without worrying about the way they conflict with “conventional understandings of causality” as does Martin (2003, 4). So one reason for taking seriously historians' suggestions on epistemological issues sociologists have also faced lies in the ways they can help synthesize a variety of rather scattered methodological proposals, and help justify innovations which lack conventional epistemological

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More information on all these events can be found at <http://www.ibiblio.org/culture/newsletter>.

Recovering Venerable Traditions in the Study of Culture (organizer: Andrew J. Perrin, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Marshall Battani, Grand Valley State University, Andreas Koller, New York University, Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, George Mason University; Sarah S. Amsler, Kingston University, Heinz-Dieter Meyer, SUNY Albany.

New Lines of Inquiry into Culture (organizer: Chris Nippert-Eng, Illinois Institute of Technology). Daniel Silver, University of Chicago; Jae-Mahn Shim, University of Chicago, Stefan Bargheer, University of Chicago, Eviatar Zerubavel, Rutgers University, Amin Ghaziani, Northwestern University; Gary Alan Fine, Northwestern University, Ira J. Cohen, Rutgers University. Discussant: Paul DiMaggio, Princeton University.

Issues of Evidence and Warrant in Analyzing Culture (organizer: Marion Fourcade, University of California-Berkeley). Justin H.G. Lee, University of California-Los Angeles, Wendy Griswold, Northwestern University; Nina Angelique Johnson, Northwestern University, Jean-Louis Fabiani, Ecole des Hautes études en Sciences, Alexander Vander Stichele & Rudi Laermans, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

Bringing into Dialogue Divergent Perspectives about Culture (organizer: Susan Silbey). Patty Masters, George Mason, Joelle Evans, MIT, Jeffrey Goldfarb, New School, Mariana Caciun, Michigan.

These sessions will complement an invited session co-sponsored by the Culture Section and the Theory Section:

Invited Session on "Global Differences in Conceptualizing Culture", co-sponsored with the Theory Section (co-organizers Mark D. Jacobs, George Mason University, Paul Lichterman, University of Southern California, and Ann Mische, Rutgers University). Presider: Paul Lichterman, University of Southern California. Presenters: Thomas Eberle, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, Daniel Cefai, University of Paris X-Nanterre, France, Evelina Dagnino, University of Campinas, Brazil, Eiko Ikegami, New School University. Discussant: Michele Lamont, Harvard University.

In addition to section sessions, there are three regular sessions devoted to the study of culture:

Regular Session, Cultural Sociology: Language, Memory, and National Transformation. Organizer and Presider: Anne Kane (University of

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dynamic processes of making life meaningful.

With few exceptions (Collins 2003), scholars have traditionally treated the media as a separate branch (albeit a large one) on the larger cultural tree. As they focused on institutional analyses and production studies, content and text studies, and reception/effect studies, researchers tended to conceptualize the media as separate from social existence. Since the late-1990s media sociologists have struggled to find new avenues of inquiry that differ from past research. Some recent work does just this (Benson 1998; Lembo 2000; Calavita 2005), yet, while insightful, reveals media research as scattered and absent a central organizing theme around which future research may develop and flourish. Likewise, scholars with a number of interests spanning from crime, to poverty, to sexualities have considered the role of media in their work, yet it's often a secondary notion in the form of an added chapter or paragraph, and not a fundamental component. The conceptualization of media that I offer in this essay differs by suggesting we consider media not as an add-on, but as constituting culture. The media are central to cultural and social scholarship, and similarly expansive, omnipresent, and fundamental to social life as ideology, power, and control. Conceptualizing the media as such makes media research directly and centrally useful for scholarship in a variety of areas, including women's studies, racism, labor, social movements, immigration, and crime and deviance, and any other area that involves public perception and the questions of meaning making that are at the core of cultural sociology (Spillman 2002).

Hints of scholarship that treat media diffusion as a central organizing structure do exist (Silverstone 1992), though heavily focused on reception studies, the academic climate was not ready for such a paradigm shift at the time. More recently, however, European scholars John Thompson, Nick Couldry, and Sonda Livingstone have all laid the groundwork for a paradigm shift in media scholarship that is ripe for cultural sociologists in the U.S. to explore and develop. Their insights respect the saturation of the media in modern societies, acknowledge people's ability to take hold of media content and use it in different ways and for different purposes, and illuminate a deeper role for the media in a range of social and cultural theory and research.

Across the pond, social theorist John Thompson (1995: 11) claimed that "[i]f 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,' as Geertz once remarked, then communication media are spinning wheels in the modern world and, in using these media, human beings are fabricating webs of significance for themselves." Thompson introduced an understanding of the mass media that respects consumer agency and that, much as cultural resource

theory suggests (Swidler 1986; Schudson 1989), people use in their everyday lives to make sense of the world. Nick Couldry (2004) followed by suggesting social and cultural scholars conceptualize the media as thoroughly entrenched in everyday life, and lived in both thought and action. By suggesting we start "theorising media as practice," Couldry asked that media scholars branch off from the mountain of studies that examine media production and content, and begin asking such intentionally broad questions as, what do people say and do in relation to media? Couldry sought to identify "where might lie the epicenter for new research questions" (116), with the aim to "redirect [media research] onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media" (117), which, he argued, "places media studies firmly within the broader sociology of action and knowledge...and sets it apart from versions of media studies formulated within the paradigm of literary criticism" (117). Couldry correctly recognizes that the media cannot be separated from people, rather it must be understood as part of and constituting our social environments and consciousness, again, highlighting the centrality of media scholarship for cultural sociology.

More recently, International Communication Association (ICA) president Sonda Livingstone (2007) suggested in her presidential address in San Francisco that we investigate how communication technologies "mediate" our everyday lives. Livingstone noted whether "we cannot conceptualise the working of the public sphere, or of cultural processes of individualization, or of globalization, or consumerism, or of information networks, without articulating a key role for the media." Like Couldry, and Thompson before him, Livingstone suggested we conceptualize the media, and communications more broadly, as central to social existence.

If we accept the fact that social life in the U.S. is one of media saturation, we can begin to tease out the deep-seeded and nuanced ways that media discourses inform human thoughts and actions, and integrate media scholarship thoroughly into our work. Considering the media in such a way highlights guiding questions for future research in cultural sociology, namely what's the media's role in the meanings people hold of their social environments, social phenomena, and "other" people? We may pose this question broadly by asking about the role of media in people's understanding of such things as crime and imprisonment, domestic politics and foreign policies, the poor, or the "War on Terror." Or, we may pose it more specifically by asking how people use media to understand the war in Iraq, crime in Hartford, Muslims in Detroit, immigration from Latin America, or imprisonment in California. Both ways locate media as fundamental to the

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meanings people hold of a variety of social phenomena and as key to cultural sociology.

These insights imply that because we all participate in a society where the media and its meaningful discourses are omnipresent, regardless of how directly or actively we may consume them, media content in some ways informs part of what we know about a great variety of things. Questions on the role of the media in people's understanding of a variety of issues respect both their ability to evaluate media discourses and create their own realities with the media they consume, while also considering that the media may in some ways inform what they know about social phenomena despite their interpretive agency.

It is precisely because of its extensive reach, ability to constitute social life, and people's use of media messages to create "webs of significance for themselves," (Geertz 1973; Thompson 1995) that media research offers important and necessary contributions to a great range of scholarship, and should be a central feature of cultural sociology. Questions on the relationship between a ubiquitous media environment and people's meaningful social realities are fundamental to cultural sociology and reveal exciting new avenues for scholarship.

References for this article may be found at
<http://www.ibiblio.org/culture/newsletter>.

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rationales.

Another reason for taking these historians' suggestions seriously lies in their value for communicating in trading zones with sociologists whose taken-for-granted loyalties to methodologies grounded in conventional causal inference run deep. Other alternatives demand changes in our logic of inquiry which may be too radical to be realistic, given the institutionalization of conventional nomothetic thinking. For instance, critical realism offers a robust alternative but calls for a fundamental revision of ontological as well as epistemological assumptions in the discipline (Archer et al. 1998; Porpora 2000; Steinmetz 1998). On the other hand some reflective analysts of conventional methodologies like Sobel (1996) and Berk (1988) have suggested giving up on causal inference entirely. Considering such alternatives, the suggestion that thick description is a form of colligation that helps understand conditions and mechanisms of limited causal claims sounds quite moderate. And yet from cultural sociology's point of view, it provides a language for explaining that interpretive analysis is or should be central and essential to any extended sociological argument.

Works cited and further readings are available at
<http://www.ibiblio.org/culture/newsletter>.

Houston-Downtown). Discussant: Jeffrey Olick (University of Virginia). Anna Lisa Tota (University of Virginia), Yifat Gutman (The New School for Social Research), Olga Shevchenko (Williams College), Christopher Wetzel (University of California-Los Angeles).

Regular Session, Cultural Sociology: Strangers No More: Place, Discourse, and Identity Formation. Organizer: Anne Kane (University of Houston-Downtown). Presider: Bethany Bryson (James Madison University). Discussant: Craig S. Watkins (University of Texas, Austin). Eric P. Magnuson (Loyola Marymount University), Jason Mast (Yale), Amy J. Binder (University of California, San Diego), Rebekah Peebles Massengill (Princeton University).

Regular Session. Sociology of Culture: Religious Foundations of Discursive Practice and Collective Action. Organizer: Anne Kane (University of Houston-Downtown). Presider: Mustafa Emirbayer (University of Wisconsin at Madison). Discussant: Anne Kane (University of Houston-Downtown). Isaac A. Reed (University of Colorado-Boulder), Andrew Junker (Yale University), Heidi Jean Swarts (Rutgers University-Newark), Jonathan Marc Mermis-Cava (University of California Davis).

The Culture Section will also sponsor refereed roundtables, organized by Diane Grams (Tulane University):

TABLE 01. CULTURE AND FAMILY. Margaret Tally, Jane Poulsen, Queensborough Community College, Colleen Greer, Bemidji State University; Debra Peterson, Bemidji State University, Edson Rodriguez, University of Southern California.

TABLE 02: SUBCULTURES AND COUNTER CULTURES. Jeffrey Purchla, The New School For Social Research, Tanya Saunders, University of Michigan, Jason Torkelson, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, Michael Jindra, Spring Arbor University.

TABLE 03: MEMORY, NARRATIVE AND OTHERNESS. Jacob Heller, SUNY-Old Westbury, Joachim Savelsberg, University of Minnesota; Amelia Corl, University of Minnesota, Cindy Cain, University of Arizona, Zhilin Tang, Purdue University, Elizabeth Long, Rice University.

TABLE 04: PRODUCTION OF CULTURE PERSPECTIVE. William Danaher, College of Charleston, Kathleen O'Neil, University of Mississippi, Gregory Kordsmeier, University of Wisconsin, Keri Monahan, Stacy Lom, Northwestern University.

TABLE 05: RELIGION AND CULTURE. Gary Adler, University of Arizona; Jeffrey Sallaz, University of Arizona, Sarah MacMillen, Duquesne University, Tulasi Srinivas, Emerson College, Andrea Cossu, Universita di Trento.

TABLE 06: ***Continued on page 12***

Clifford Geertz in the Human Sciences

Matthew Norton, Yale University

“I didn't realize, when I started out, after an isolated childhood, to see what might be going on elsewhere in the world, that there would be a final exam . . .”, Clifford Geertz said in his 1999 Charles Homer Haskins lecture to the American Council of Learned Societies.

“I suppose that what I have been doing all these years is piling up learning. But, at the time, it seemed to me that I was trying to figure out what to do next, and hold off a reckoning: reviewing the situation, scouting out the possibilities, evading the consequences, thinking through the thing again. You don't arrive at many conclusions that way, or not any that you hold to for very long . . . A lot of people don't quite know where they are going, I suppose; but I don't even know, for certain, where I have been.” (full essay available at <http://www.acls.org/op45geer.htm>)

Geertz regularly resisted summing up in a tidy way what it was that he had to say or what he thought it meant for the rest of us. A funny sort of comment on the work of one of the most lucid and writerly theorists of culture, but apt. Geertz did not advance a unified and programatically elaborated theoretical position, and in his own unique and inimitable way was, methodologically, really just another ethnographer. At the same time – especially since the 1970s with the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures* and its iconic essays on thick description and the Balinese cockfight – it is difficult to overstate the influence of Geertz' work amongst the diaspora of the cultural turn. The richness of the Geertzian theoretical vocabulary, the incisive power of his analyses, and the compulsive readability that his ability to turn a phrase lends to his texts have placed him at the center of his own webs of significance, stretching out from anthropology to influence the contours, questions, and research agendas of all cultural analysis in the human sciences. The purpose of the “Clifford Geertz in the Human Sciences” conference sponsored by Yale University's Center for Cultural Sociology and Whitney Humanities Center from 19 – 21 October 2007, was to begin assessing that web, what it means, where it has gone, and where it has still to go.

The conference was divided into three parts: “Geertz in the Human Sciences”, “Structuralism, Hermeneutics, Geertz”, and “Geertz, Style, Method”. The first session included an introduction by Jeffrey Alexander, and then papers by George Marcus, Stuart Clark, and Mats Trondman. Alexander introduced the conference suggesting that its goal was to contribute to the assessment of what Geertz meant, what he crystallized, and what he made possible. The conference aimed to both contribute to an assessment

of Geertz' legacy in the human sciences, and to understand in a future-oriented way where the main lines of Geertzian thought are heading. Two of these principle lines are hermeneutics and cultural theory. There are also, though, a number of ambiguities in tension in Geertz' work, notably patterns vs. processes, the aesthetic vs. the semiotic, and Geertz vs. theory. These were among the main themes linking conference papers together.

Marcus examined Geertz' legacy in an area of the human sciences with which he is usually not associated: science studies. Observing that Geertz sought and failed to replace himself at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) with a scholar working in science studies as his starting point, Marcus argued that in part the structure of the IAS meant that legacies were shaped by the ecology of ideas that permanent fellows could develop and create cohorts to explore. What he saw was the centrality of interpretivism in the ecology of ideas that Geertz developed at the IAS. One possible interpretation of Geertz' interest in science studies is that it represented the most polemical possibility for furthering the struggle between positivism and interpretivism. To interpret positive science, and to show how it was itself interpretive, was in a way to transcend it.

Clark began with the observation that Geertz is incessantly named by historians in their footnotes but that historians have largely misunderstood Geertz' work. According to Clark, even historians committed to ‘thick description’, often continued to practice ‘thin history.’ The reason for this was a failure to engage with the theoretical implications of Geertzian thick description, taking it instead as a call for ‘more description.’ Thick description is based Ryle's contention that accounts of human action always need to be described adverbially. This places the interpretation of meaning at the center of thick description. Similarly, Clark charged that many historians have failed to recognize the ontological consequences of Geertzianism for their work. Rather than adopting a preference for the most ‘accurate’ observers or sources, Geertzian history would need to be agnostic on truth and falsity and focus instead on the success or failure of the object in terms of what it purported to be.

Trondman sought to frame the terms of a reconciliation between Alexander and Smith's ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology and Geertz. The strong program's ‘reluctant turn’ from Geertz, Trondman argued, was not in fact necessary after all. The turn from Geertz was due to his slide from the reconstruction of meaning systems toward a focus on symbolic action, the socio-material determination of action, meaning as behavior and use, and an anti-theoretical emphasis on local knowledge and particularity. Trondman, through a re-reading of a number of Geertz' later essays found that these

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moves were more increasing tendencies than programmatic changes; the earlier Geertz who served as a springboard for the strong program continued to emerge in later essays, demanding that Geertz' place be closer to the center of a 'strong program', rather than as simply a point of origin from which the program must turn.

The second session, "Structuralism, Hermeneutics, Geertz" included papers by Peter Brooks, Philip Smith, and Peter Galison. Brooks raised the question of Geertz' relationship to Barthes given that both espouse a semiotic approach to the interpretation of culture. What Geertz means by semiotics is something more like history or anthropology while for Barthes it is linguistics. So while Barthes always seeks to work back from manifestations to the systems that make them possible, Geertz is content with a hermeneutic vision of society as text upon text, making the analysis of deeper codes unhelpful. Despite these differences, the two are similarly attuned to readings of social performances and nuanced signs. Geertz may seek to avoid looking for laws, but he cannot help but discover codes that make the signs of his analysis possible. Barthes may be nauseated by bourgeois myths yet he is among their most compelling interpreters. Each theorist – in what he seeks to do and not to do – circles around the same premise, that cultural interpretation is the principal business for the human sciences.

Smith focused on the iconic status on Geertz' essay on the Balinese cockfight, a canonical work of social scientific analysis. Smith argued that there are structural characteristics of the essay that help explain this, and analyzed these using the structuralism of the Russian formalists. He argued that the key structural features of the cockfight essay are that it has a narrative structure centered on problem-solving, it connects thematically to universal human dramas, works toward an emotional climax, recursively and leisurely builds its conclusions adding thoughtful ambiguity rather than revelatory punch, and involves genre innovation (published in *Daedalus* rather than a mainstream anthropology journal.) Smith concluded by arguing that we ought not follow Geertz in rejecting structuralism outright. The kind of structuralism advocated by the Russian formalists is flexible enough to encompass both the demand for local hermeneutics and systematic structural analysis. This sort of structuralism is an important potential ally for interpretive cultural analysis.

Galison's paper focused on the notion of 'scientific cultures.' He observed that Geertz was positioned between universalism and nominalism. This middle ground is characterized by two images. Cultures are either like essentially identical grains of sand, or are like crystalline structures, with clear borders and a unique internal order. Geertzian (and Kuhnian) visions tend toward the latter. But Galison argued

that we need not see cultural systems as so purely ordered or strictly bounded. This prevents understanding both change within these systems and hybridization. To counter this, Galison introduced the concept of 'trading zones' to capture dynamism and fluctuation at the borders of scientific cultures, such as that between math and physics. The concept of 'scientific cultures' remains important, but must be understood in terms both of local ordering and unexpected fluctuation and hybridization as one gets further afield.

The first part of the "Geertz, Style, Method" session included papers by Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Isaac Reed, Georgia Warnke, and David Apter. Wagner-Pacifici began with a close reading of the phrase 'malarial and diffident' that Geertz uses to describe himself and his wife at the beginning of the cockfight essay. This phrase, she argued, frames the dilemma that Geertz and Weber in his lecture on "Politics as a Vocation" share – the vocational challenge of simultaneously 'getting in and staying out.' Wagner-Pacifici calls this stance 'diffident engagement,' and though it problematically brackets difficult phenomena, handled skillfully it can be effective. Geertz holds violence at bay in his analysis of the cock fight through a comic opening and the use of footnotes, while Weber focuses on violence and holds the disappointments of actual politics at bay. The diffident engagement of both writers is a technique for reflecting dismay but not allowing one's analysis to be swallowed by it. It is a strategy that plays between proximity and distance, maintaining a vocational remove while involving the reader in the recursive reconstruction of ambiguity.

Reed placed Geertz' interpretivism in the broader environment of core problems in social theory. Geertzian thick description, according to Reed, can be understood as 'maximal interpretation' – accounts of social events that go beyond theories and facts to attain the status of explanations. But what counts as an explanation is lodged in the researcher's context of investigation and may be constrained in ways that take us rather far afield of the context of explanation – the things we want to explain – and its local structuring of knowledge as well as obscuring the interpretive nature of social scientific claims themselves. It is the negotiation of these contexts, in maximal interpretations that go beyond what can be immediately be derived from the data or theory but which take close account of each, at which Geertz was so skilled. For Reed, as well as Geertz, that is what sets 'deep' explanation apart – it attends to the local structuring of formations of meaning in both contexts of research.

Warnke explored Geertz' claim in the essay on the cockfight that cockfighting is for Balinese a kind of sentimental education, similar to Macbeth for

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Westerners. Why should they serve as sentimental education only for those who come from the culture that produced them? In fact, Geertz attempts to make sense of this kind of gap in his later writing about ethnography by introducing the pessimistic concept of anthropological irony, characterized by unbridgeable gaps and misunderstanding in the play of constructions between ethnographer and subject. In fact, Warnke suggested, this fails to do justice to the careful reconstructions of the horizons of meaning in Geertz' actual ethnography. The theories of reading of the German hermeneutician's provide a better, and more optimistic, account of what Geertz actually does. Rather than ironic failures of communication, Warnke saw partial, but ultimately meaningful communicative success in Geertz' ethnographies.

Apter explored, on the one hand, the embeddedness of Geertz' work in social scientific and philosophical systems and, on the other, the originality of Geertzian interpretivism. Explaining this gap Apter finds 'the field,' which drew Geertz to anthropology, a discipline ambiguous regarding the status of its own knowledge claims, and enabled the development of his unique style of thinking. Geertz was able to be Geertz because he was able to stand at the center of his own cultural system, holding off tendencies of the time that predetermined objects and techniques of analysis. He instead deployed his own historical and literary sensibility to the analysis of local contexts of meaning. Apter concluded by noting that reading Geertz as a cultural system meant understanding that when we read Geertz we are reading commentaries on both the discourses of others in other places as well as commentaries on the discourses of Geertz himself.

The second part of the "Geertz, Style, Method" session included papers by Bernhard Giesen, Paul Lichterman, and J. Joseph Errington. Giesen contrasted Geertz' account of the hierarchical cosmology of Negara with axial age distinctions. While axial age distinctions led to violent domination and a missionary civilization, the cosmology of Negara is formulated on a non-violent understanding of the superiority of the conquerers over the conquered. Giesen argued that we need to understand Geertz' concept of the ritual and charismatic foundations of political authority as also indispensable in Western modernity. This is perhaps overlooked because of fundamentally different 'cultural styles' that can be connected back to founding myths. In the case of Negara this cultural style centered on the adoption of ritual form and trappings of cultural refinement, whereas the cultural style of Western modernity required unveiling, natural self-presentation, and non-decorative aesthetics.

Lichterman argued that the thick descriptive ethnography that Geertz advocated was driven by insoluble tensions and ambiguities. Thick description,

Lichterman argued, is at one and the same time a theoretical project and an exercise of cosmopolitan citizenship. It involves a double writing: writing the subjects into an ethnographic account; and writing the ethnographer and the subjects into an imagined world that readers find believable. This second writing, enabling a point of credulous contact between reader, account, ethnographer and subjects is thus a kind of cosmopolitan citizenship (albeit with difficult politics). Rather than establishing a prior orientation to the symbolic world of subjects by focusing on a predetermined object of analysis, thick description seeks to write about episodes that challenge assumptions and disrupt theoretical categories, all the while bringing the reader into a newly configured relationship with the subject.

Errington engaged with recurring conflicts in Geertz' work over the concepts of 'system' and 'text.' There were certain conceptions of system that Geertz rejected, but at the same time he uses the concept of system regularly. Similarly, Geertz is ambivalent about the Ricoeurian analogy of social action to text. This is partly a result of the ethnographic limitations of the dialogic model that Ricoeur has in mind. These conflicts in Geertz' work can be understood as the movement between 'estrangement' and 'intimacy.' This brings Geertz' concept of culture into contact with a Goffmanian concept of interaction. The model of interaction, or conversation, is richer than the simplified notion of dialog, and similarly helps clarify the conceptual problem that made 'text' and 'system' ambiguous metaphors for Geertz. A strong Geertzian conception of culture, on the other hand, suggests itself as a remedy for a conspicuous absence of meanings in Goffman.

The papers presented by Reed, Smith, Trondman, and Alexander are forthcoming in Cultural Sociology as part of a colloquium on "Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program." A manuscript composed of revised versions of the conference papers will be submitted shortly to one of the major university presses, which has expressed strong interest.

Check out the new, improved
Culture website

<http://www.ibiblio.org/culture>

Where you can read and discuss all
the items in this newsletter!

An Invitation to Cultural Sociology at Harvard

Mark Pachucki, Christopher A. Bail, and
Lauren A. Rivera, Harvard University

As Harvard prepares to host the second “Culture Day” in celebration of the 20th anniversary of our section, we write to give colleagues an overview of cultural sociology in our department. Sociologists in William James Hall began laying the foundations of our subfield decades before the so-called “cultural turn.” The early contributions of Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, Seymour Martin Lipset, David Riesman, Harrison White, and Talcott Parsons, for example, attracted uncommon cohorts of undergraduate and graduate students that included Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Breiger, Paul DiMaggio, Gary Alan Fine, Wendy Griswold, George Madsen, Michael Schudson, Margaret Somers, Ann Swidler, and many others. Many of the ideas that germinated in the hallways of William James Hall in previous decades therefore came to have profound influence on the development of contemporary American cultural sociology.

Most recently, cultural sociology has enjoyed a renaissance in Cambridge as a new generation of leading scholars joined Orlando Patterson, winner of the National Book Award in 1991 for *Freedom and the Making of Western Culture* and Stanley Lieberman, whose *A Matter of Taste* won the Culture section’s Best Book Award ten years later. Michèle Lamont left a strong community of cultural sociologists at Princeton, attracted by the possibility of strengthening the influence of cultural sociology on the study of inequality, poverty, race, and immigration – long-time strengths of Harvard’s department. Last year, Kathy Edin joined the Kennedy School of Government, and her path-breaking work on low-income parents further bolstered the bridge between culture and policy-oriented audiences. Other faculty members, such as Larry Bobo, Frank Dobbin, Peter Marsden, Rob Sampson, Mary Waters, William Julius Wilson, Chris Winship, and Marty White are developing growing interests in identity, meaning-making and perceptions of inequality.

A strong group of junior faculty further solidified our community: Prudence Carter studied non-dominant forms of cultural capital and their impact on educational achievement across ethno-racial groups in her prize-winning book *Keepin’ It Real*. Neil Gross drafted *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, and Jason Kaufman continued to teach in the area and publish a number of noted articles (described below). Although these scholars have left or are leaving Harvard, others are joining our community of cultural sociologists. This is the case for Natasha Warikoo, whose book on cultural consumption and

ethnic status hierarchies in multiracial high schools in London and Queens is forthcoming at University of California Press; and for Jal Mehta, who studies changes in the cultural frames behind American education policy (both are recent graduates of our department who have recently been hired by the Graduate School of Education). Our community is also in dialogue with Harvard’s stellar science studies faculty, which includes Peter Galison, Sheila Jasanoff, Andy Lakoff, and Steven Shapin. There are also interactions and collaborations with scholars interested in cultural processes at neighboring institutions, including Ezra Zuckerman, Susan Silbey, and Damon Centola (MIT/Sloan); Nancy Ammerman and Julian Go (Boston University); and Peggy Levitt (Wellesley College). There is also great potential for even more inter-institutional collaborations in the Boston area – both with colleagues who are already here, and others who are joining us, such as Steven Vallas (new chair of the Department of Sociology at Northeastern University).

Our focus on culture has attracted a strong group of graduate students, post-docs, and visiting scholars who meet regularly at the Culture and Social Analysis workshop. Over the past five years, this diverse group has discussed exciting new research that shares a common focus on meaning-making. The workshop has benefited from overlap with other local workshops on economic sociology, immigration, race and identity, and social exclusion in Europe and visits from distinguished guest speakers. Below we describe some of the unique constellations of these diverse fields to sketch a portrait of cultural sociology at Harvard today. Our examples of ongoing research are illustrative rather than exhaustive; while we only have space for a brief overview here, a list of past speakers from the workshop can be found at the workshop’s website (<http://sites.harvard.edu/k25441>).

Ethnicity and Immigration

Cultural approaches to ethnicity and immigration are thriving at Harvard. Among the larger projects underway is a comparative study of anti-racism coordinated by Michèle Lamont and colleagues in Brazil, Canada, France, Israel, and the United States. This project analyzes everyday anti-racism by comparing the “de-stigmatization strategies” of marginalized groups facing different types of social and symbolic boundaries. A second major study organized by Mary Waters compares second-generation immigrant acculturation in the United States and Europe, using new tools from cultural sociology to reassess classical models of assimilation. A number of visiting faculty and graduate students are involved in both projects, and have also conducted original research on indigenous populations in Canada, second-generation Africans in France, and nationalism among African Americans. Christopher Bail’s article “The Configuration

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Symbolic Boundaries against Immigrants in Europe” was recently published by *American Sociological Review*. An overview of related themes pursued by members of the Culture Workshop can be found in a recent issue of *Poetics* (Vol. 35:6, 2007), which reports on proceedings of a national graduate conference on boundary-work, where Fredrik Barth delivered the keynote address.

Comparative Historical Sociology

Harvard has enjoyed a reputation as a leader in historical sociology for many years. Often overlooked, however, is the vibrant group of faculty and graduate students interested in cultural approaches to historical sociology. Orlando Patterson’s long-term interest in slavery has culminated in a series of new books on freedom that draw from qualitative interviews with a broad spectrum of Americans. Jason Kaufman has produced important work on associationalism, and will soon publish a monograph that explains the divergent political cultures of the United States and Canada by the uneven dissemination of British common law. Together, Patterson and Kaufman received the Best Article Award of the Culture Section for “Cross-National Cultural Diffusion: The Global Spread of Cricket” a few years ago. Graduate students interested in comparative historical sociology are currently working on collective memory of slavery in France; Apartheid in South Africa; and terrorism in the United States and United Kingdom. In addition, Lauren Rivera recently published an article on national impression management in Croatia in *American Sociological Review*

Culture, Inequality, and Poverty

Cultural approaches to the study of inequality are a pillar of our field. At a recent conference (<http://conference.aapss.org/>), William Julius Wilson urged experts in poverty to take on the impact of culture on poverty as he has done in his recent book on Chicago neighborhoods. Next year, he will begin teaching a course on this topic with visiting lecturer David Simon, producer of the television program “The Wire.” Working together with Mario Small (University of Chicago), Michèle Lamont authored a recent paper that describes how cultural sociology can provide a clear alternative to the culture of poverty argument that remains popular among many economists, policy experts, and policy makers. Kathy Edin and Tim Nelson continue their study of low-income fathers and mothers in a number of ongoing projects. In his recent book *Prejudice in Politics*, Larry Bobo and Mia Tuan (University of Oregon), have forged new connections between social psychology and cultural sociology through their focus on insiders and outsiders. In an *American Sociological Review* article (with Nicola Beisel), Tamara Kay invokes the work of Bill Sewell to consider the role of cultural schemata in the

construction of gender and class hierarchies around abortion. Chris Winship is pursuing his ethnographic study of violence prevention through the collaboration between police forces and black ministers – after supervising a younger generation of poverty or race experts who make cultural arguments, such as David Harding (University of Michigan), Karyn Lacy (University of Michigan), Mario Small, and others. Graduate students are now working on a number of exciting dissertations that will deepen our understanding of how meaning-making affects racial and social inequality. They focus on topics such as the effects of romantic and sexual attitudes on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage; the experiences of upward and downward mobility among members of the Black middle class; the impact of exposure to middle-class educational institutions on the trajectories of inner-city youth; and the effect of class-based cultural signals on elite hiring processes.

Knowledge and Education

A cluster of colleagues have been working on the diffusion of ideas and other topics in the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of education. Most recently, Neil Gross organized a conference on Professors and their Politics, which received considerable national press coverage. Lamont pursued her interest in the study of forms of excellence in higher education. Her forthcoming book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* considers cultures of excellence across the social sciences and the humanities. Jason Kaufman and departmental graduate Jay Gabler have examined the relationship between “high” cultural capital and admission to selective colleges. John Diamond (Graduate School of Education) studies racial identity and exclusion within a middle class progressive high school. Graduate students have been interested in studying evaluation in a range of settings, including homophily in hiring decisions among elite firms; the assessment of institutional quality across New England museums; and the production of value in Contemporary Chinese Art. Some related themes were discussed at a recent conference *Après Bourdieu: European and American Legacies*, which explored the ever-growing influence of the late French sociologist. Participants included Rick Fantasia (Smith College), Vincent Lepinay (MIT), David Swartz (Boston University), and Sylvie Tissot (University of Strasbourg).

Organizations & Networks

Harvard sociologists continue to foster dialogue between cultural and organizational sociology, particularly in the study of networks. The collaborative work of graduate students with faculty members Nicholas Christakis, Jason Kaufman, and

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Andreas Wimmer (UCLA) on "Facebook.com" networks was recently featured in a recent *New York Times* article. This cluster of research seeks to engage theories of homophily, cultural capital, and ethnic identification by investigating how cultural preference and the friendship networks of college students interact. Stan Lieberson and Freda Lynn (now at University of Iowa) conducted similar work that demonstrates how popularity can be considered a taste in its own right. In addition, Frank Dobbin and Beth Simmons (Harvard Government Department) have been studying the diffusion of neoliberal public policies around the world, comparing cultural to more conventional power, learning, and competition explanations (see *Annual Review of Sociology* 2007). The Harvard-MIT Economic Sociology Seminar regularly features colleagues working at intersection of cultural and economic sociology, most recently Heather Haveman (University of California, Berkeley) on compensatory grant-making among Chinese joint-stock companies; Kieran Healy (University of Arizona) on network performativity; as well as our own Filiz Garip and Paul DiMaggio (Princeton University) on common threads between the digital divide and migration dynamics. Promising graduate student research in this field includes a study of choral societies as organizational venues for civic engagement; Buddhist religious organizations in China; reputation costs on housing prices in neighborhoods; network influences of food choice and social status on health outcomes; gender dynamics in organizations in the leveraged buyout industry; and simulation techniques modeling cultural preference formation in networked populations.

Collaboration and Beyond

Cultural sociology at Harvard has flourished as a bridge between sub-fields. As we look toward the future, we believe the continued growth of cultural sociology will require conversations across disciplines that have already begun here at Harvard and elsewhere – with demographers, epidemiologists, economists, criminologists, and policy experts, among others. These new dialogues will no doubt cause growing pains as we continue to encourage public audiences and policy makers to take culture seriously. We look forward to discussing these and other challenges with you on July 31st. We reiterate our invitation to the welcoming reception and/or dinner, which the Culture and Social Analysis Workshop and the Department will host in William James Hall on July 30th. Please remember to reserve your spot by emailing Heather Latham (hlatham@wjh.harvard.edu).

Sociologist Seeks Stories

Dr. Elizabeth Long, Rice University
elong@rice.edu

At the Culture Mini-Conference at the ASA in New York last summer, I presented a paper on “Stories as Models” in which I argued that the anecdotes and small stories that sociologists use, often to introduce their work or exemplify a point, are actually “carriers of theory” and do important cognitive work to create or revise conceptual categories and innovate theoretical models or frames. I am currently expanding that paper, drawing out connections on the one hand to parables and the orality/literacy divide, and on the other hand to brain structures and the connection between reason and emotion. To help expand the paper, I need more stories in order to think about what kinds of stories work in this way and why.

What sort of micro-stories am I talking about? These are the stories scholars use in a casual or offhand way, often as a narrative “hook,” but which, on reflection, turn out to make a larger point. Often they serve as puzzles or cognitive “koans” that get people – even those who don’t have an academic background -- involved in thinking along with the author by encapsulating in a particular example a more general set of issues or processes. They can serve as analogies or parables, or reveal unexpected relationships and connections not otherwise visible in traditional sociological inquiry. Sometimes they are moments drawn from fieldwork, sometimes they are “found stories,” and sometimes they are personal experiences that seem to provoke thinking in the researcher and then figure in the representation of the scholarship.

Might you be able to help me gather some of these stories? If you have used anecdotes or small stories in this fashion in your own scholarly writing or presentations, have encountered them in the work of other scholars, or have found them useful in your own process of thinking through problems, I would appreciate hearing from you. You could email me about this at elong@rice.edu, and if you it would be easier to speak to me about this rather than write about it, I would be happy to call you for an informal brief discussion at a number and time that is convenient for you.

CULTURE, LOGIC AND RATIONALITY. Vida Bajc, University of Pennsylvania, Gabe Ignatow, University of North Texas, Eva Illouz, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Shoshannah Finkelman, Hebrew University, Grant Blank, Applied Social Research Associates.

TABLE 07: CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE. Rui Gao, Yale University, Shyamal Das, Minot State University, North Dakota; Lisa Eargle, Francis Marion University; Ashraf Esmail, Delgado Community College, Tatiana Omeltchenko, University of Virginia, Lester Kurtz, University of Texas.

TABLE 08: ICONS AND CULTURAL PRACTICE. Vanina Leschziner, University of Toronto, Black Hancock, DePaul University, Jaita Talukdar, Temple University, Christian Ferney, Duke University; Elizabeth Essary, Duke University; Suzanne Shanahan, Duke University.

TABLE 09: INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE. Kees Van Rees, Tilburg University, Rachael Barlow, Indiana University, Nicholas Pagnucco, University at Albany, Yuan Li, University of Southern California, Philip McCarty, University of California Santa Barbara.

TABLE 10: TOURISM: IDENTITY AND ECONOMICS. Deborah Rapuano, Gettysburg College; Jessica Fernandez, Gettysburg College, Nina Bandelj, University of California, Irvine; Frederick Wherry, University of Michigan, Elizabeth Bennett, University of California, Santa Cruz.

TABLE 11: ASSIMILATION, RESISTANCE, DIVERSITY. Jeniffer Herrera-Andujar, Herbert H. Lehman College of the City University of New York, Jon Smajda, University of Minnesota, Peter Brinson, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Karen Douglas, Sam Houston State University.

TABLE 12: CULTURE AND THE BODY. Josh Adams, Ohio State University, Kim Cunningham, CUNY Graduate Center, Bethany Bryson, James Madison University, Meccasia Zabriskie, Northwestern University.

TABLE 13: CULTURE AND NATIONS. Erin Murphy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Susan Kukucka, Griffith University, Yoichi Murase, Rikkyo University.

TABLE 14: TOPICS IN MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY. W. Gartman, University of South Alabama, Andrew Payton, University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill; Stephen Vaisey, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Jeremy Tanner, University College London.

TABLE 15: TOPICS IN CULTURAL CONSUMPTION. Giseline Kuipers, Uuniversity of Amsterdam, Krista Paulsen, University of North Florida, Michael Yaksich, University of Maryland - College Park, Ian Woodward, Alexander Vander Stichele, Catholic University of Leuven; Rudi Laermans, Catholic University of Leuven.

TABLE 16: FILM AND PRODUCTION OF CULTURE. Jenny Lantz, Stockholm School of Economics, Isabel Pinedo, Hunter College, CUNY, Joseph Lampel, Cass Business School; Shivasharan Nadavulakere, Cass Business School, Dorothee Verdaasdonk, Erasmus university Rotterdam, Seio Nakajima.

TABLE 17: AUTHENTICITY, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION. Diane Grams, Tulane University, Liana Thompson, University of California, Santa Cruz, Melissa Weiner, Quinnipiac University, Erika Busse, University of Minnesota, Bridget Nolan, University of Pennsylvania.

TABLE 18: CULTURE AND IDENTITY. Paul Lachelier, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Doreen Martinez, Northern Arizona University, Fuyuki Kurawasa, York University, Tulasi Srinivas, Emerson College.

TABLE 19: CONSUMER STUDIES RESEARCH NETWORK. Rachel Schwartz, Cornell University, Dilek Cindoglu, Bilkent University, Renée Ann Richardson, Harvard University, Janet Lorenzen, Rutgers University, Katherine Chen, William Paterson University.

TABLE 20: CULTURE AND RELIGION NETWORK. David Smilde, University of Georgia, Table Presider

TABLE 21: MATERIAL CULTURE NETWORK. Terence McDonnell, Northwestern University, Table Presider

TABLE 22: POLITICAL CULTURE NETWORK ROUND TABLE. Richard L. Wood, University of New Mexico, Paul Lichterman and Nina Eliasoph USC, Susan Munkres, Furman University, C. Brady Potts, Carol Xu.

TABLE 23: SPACE & PLACE NETWORK ROUNDTABLE. Jan Marontate, Simon Fraser University, Jonathan Wynn, Smith College, William G. Holt, University of Connecticut.

TABLE 24: SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE STUDENT NETWORK. Carey Sargent, University of Virginia, Table Presider

TABLE 25: VISUAL SOCIOLOGY NETWORK. Richard Williams, Rutgers University, Table Presider