**Soc. 530w: Sociology of Culture: An Introduction**

**Instructor:** Paul DiMaggio (8-1971; dimaggio@princeton.edu)

**Term:** Fall, 2002 pt. 2 (9:00 am – 12:00 noon, Wednesdays)

**Location:** 190 Wallace Hall

**Purpose:** This mini-seminar surveys the field, exposing you to major research traditions, themes, and areas of study. In so doing, it provides an overview for the curious and a platform for those who wish to do further work (research, comprehensive exam, teaching) in the sociology of culture, broadly defined.

**Eligibility:** This six-week "mini-seminar" is open to any graduate student in Sociology or other social-science department or the Woodrow Wilson school, and to undergraduate sociology majors. Others may apply to instructor for admission. It can also serve as the first part of a 12-week sequence, to be completed by Professor Lamont’s mini-seminar (first half of spring semester).

**Scope:** Sociologists use the word "culture" to mean many things, some cognitive (ideas or schemata), some behavioral (e.g., rituals, speech), and some physical (art works, sermons, the periodic table). We shall attend to all kinds, as long as they have something to do with meaning (whether divined from the structural relations among cultural elements or inferred from utterances and writings of people dead or living).

**Discussion:** Sociology of culture is among the broadest, fastest-moving, and most fuzzily-bounded of sociology's "subfields," encompassing sociology of the arts (including sociologies of art, literature, and music); sociologies of mass media and of popular culture, of religion, science, law, and language; cognitive sociology, sociology of knowledge and of ideas; and doubtless others I have forgotten. Moreover, cultural analysis is an important aspect of all other sociological subfields, having attained a prominent position in such areas (to name just a few) as historical sociology, economic sociology, and the study of social inequality. Although the seminar's topic makes institutional sense, it is intellectually odd, because "culture" is less a distinct area of social life than an aspect of almost any phenomenon one might study. This raises four temptations in syllabus-building, two of them OK, and two of which I have resisted.

1. A bias towards institutional studies: If one identifies the sociology of culture with the study of distinct institutional areas (art, religion, science, law), one has the great advantage of a bounded subject area, the study of which can attend even-handedly to the full range of practices and structures that constitute the institution in question. Arguably, sociologists of culture have made particular headway in these areas, and these areas are represented on the syllabus (but not disproportionately so).

2. A bias towards studies with cultural "dependent variables." Studies may be recognized as cultural in so far as they try to explain cultural phenomena – ideologies, attitudes, values, schemata, or discourse, for example. There is lots of good work of this kind, and it will be represented on the syllabus – but, again, not to the exclusion of other material.

The third and fourth temptations reflect not conventions of classifying subject matter, but an irony associated with the fact that every phenomenon has a cultural aspect. If an article attempting to explain something that is not itself "culture" -- for example, a behavioral or structural regular-
ity or historical event -- appears to be about "culture," the author is likely to have overestimated the influence of culture and slighted other factors. In so far as culture is integrated properly into the analysis, the work may appear not to be "about culture" at all. This invites the syllabus-maker to indulge:

3. A bias towards metatheory: If in empirical work a preoccupation with culture may lead to an analytic imbalance, in theoretical work it is perfectly legitimate to ask how cultural aspects of phenomena can best be conceived and studied. This is important work -- sociology's theoretical and methodological treatment of culture is far less advanced than its treatment of structural phenomena -- but only as a guide to, not a substitute for, research. Rather than start with meta-theory, we spend the first 5 weeks on empirical work, which prepares us to consider programmatic claims in week 6.

4. A bias towards studies that overemphasize the importance of the cultural aspect of their subject. The sociology of culture suffers in so far as its practitioners are tempted to cheer for cultural variables for their own sake. (The situation has gotten worse now that culture is fashionable: when most authors ignored culture, a paper that merely acknowledged culture's importance seemed to be "about" culture. Now that everyone believes culture matters, the threshold is higher.) We will be vigilant in our efforts to detect cases in which authors place a thumb on the scales when weighing the importance of culture relative to other explanatory factors.

Aside from this, there is so much interesting work spread out over such a vast substantive terrain that selecting just enough for six weeks (the perpetual problem of mini-courses) is even harder than usual. A syllabus that organized weeks around interesting substantive or theoretical questions about which there is a tradition of good work would run on for many semesters. (I've limited myself to 5 or 6 assigned readings per week. For more, see recommended readings and the supplementary reading list, awarded as a door prize to all students attending the first meeting.)

Instead, the approach of this seminar is to begin with relatively "micro" perspectives on culture -- cognitive, constructionist, and so on -- and to move towards more "macro" perspectives over the course of the seminar, ending with a theoretical stock-taking in week 6. This approach has the advantage of producing a fairly broad survey, for as one moves from micro to macro the sorts of constructs people use to represent culture tend to change, as do the kinds of things they study and the means they use to study them.

The syllabus also reflects a bias towards empirical articles. I focus on articles because they are shorter than books, and therefore we can read more of them. (Some books I'd like to assign are listed under "recommended readings.") I focus on the empirical because the point of the sociology of culture is to explain things -- about either culture or other phenomena that cannot be understood without reference to culture. (Note that this view does NOT entail a rejection of interpretation, as sociological explanations of culture usually require interpretation as a necessary step.) I define "explanation" broadly, but exclude opining without evidence. Other biases: against duplicating other graduate courses and (though I've tried to fight it), towards literatures (e.g., on the arts rather than science, micro or meso rather than macro issues) with which I am more familiar.
Requirements
A. Students are expected to do the reading thoroughly before the class meeting for which it is assigned, and to participate actively in class meetings. Emphasis is on mastering, responding critically and creatively to, and integrating the seminar's material. Be able to answer the following questions about each assigned reading:
   1. What research question is the author trying to answer?
   2. What is the author's definition of "culture" (or the aspect of culture on which she or he focuses)? How does the author operationalize the cultural element and how tight is the fit between operationalization and definition?
   3. What is the nature of the author's evidence and how does she or he bring that to bear on the research questions?
   4. How satisfactorily does the author link the evidence to the conclusions?
   5. What does the paper accomplish? What have you learned from it?

B. You are required to submit (by e-mail attachment) a memorandum of approximately 800-1200 words on the week's readings before three of the six class meetings. (No credit will be given for memoranda handed in late, as part of the point is to prepare you to participate actively in seminar discussion. Students who do not turn in three memos before class meetings do not get credit for the course.) Memos also provide a means by which I can give you ongoing individualized feedback. I do my best (almost always successfully) to get them back to you with comments within 7 days. A few guidelines:
   ***Please view memoranda as writing/thinking exercises, not as finished products. Use them to engage the week's materials, respond with questions, criticisms and new ideas they suggest, and put into words impressions that seem worth developing.***
   ***Use at least one of your memoranda to discuss how, if at all, the week's readings inform your own research agenda -- e.g., by suggesting ways of posing questions, or new approaches to operationalization or research design.***
   ***Please do not include notes on the readings in your memos. Don’t summarize the authors’ arguments -- you can assume that I am familiar with them. You may include brief quotations or paraphrases as illustrations of specific points that you make about the articles. But no notes or broad summaries.***

No term paper or research project is required, nor is there a final examination.

Readings: Two copies will appear in the seminar box in Sociology Department mailroom at least one week before seminar. Please contact me if you would like readings even more in advance to borrow and photocopy. The following book has been ordered from Micawber Books on Nassau Street:

Where possible, I have attached URLs so that you can gain access to readings on-line. In most cases these reside at subscription sites, which must be accessed through the system of a subscribing institution.
### OUTLINE AND READINGS

**Wednesday, Nov. 6/Week 1: The Micro-Sociology of Culture**

Berger and Luckman's constructionism is so fundamental to the sociology of culture that we begin with a selection from their classic book. My paper reviews a lot of empirical results from cognitive and social psychology and argues that they bear significantly on sociological concerns about culture, developing a synthetic framework for thinking about how culture works. The remaining four papers are empirical studies coming out of different theoretical traditions – Gumperz from sociolinguistics; Erickson from anthropologically informed ethnomethodology; Hochschild from gender theory and symbolic interactionism; and Chwe from rational-choice economics. The general morals for this week are that culture is enacted and can often be observed in social interaction, and that methods emphasizing the analysis of language and nonverbal tools are powerful (and under-employed) research tools.


**Recommended:**


Wednesday, Nov. 13\Week 2: Culture in Organizations, Communities and Networks

We move to the meso level with research on culture in formal and informal organization. We begin with Basil Bernstein's classic study class differences in language use, which localizes significant aspects of culture in the social organization of family and community. Erickson reports fascinating findings about social differentiation and culture use in an occupational community. Dobbin summarizes and illustrates the neoinstitutional approach to organizations as cultural constructions. The selections from Kunda’s study of a Rte. 128 computer company (Digital Equipment) both illustrate the value of an ethnographic approach to understanding organizational culture. Finally, Eliasoph and Lichterman introduce the important concept of “group style” and document how social settings constitute distinct normative environments for political talk.


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Recommended:


Wednesday, Nov. 20\ Week 3: The Institutional Production of Culture

Start with Bourdieu, who sets out the critical metaphor of field, some version of which is necessary to unify analysis of different cultural spheres, and some useful ways to think about it. Then move to philosophy, where a new paper by Gross challenges and elaborates upon Bourdieu’s and similar models. Peterson and Berger’s classic paper demonstrates how data (plus fieldwork) can reflect upon the institutional logic of a production system. Fleck’s classic study of the scientific “discovery” of syphilis focuses as much on the continuity ideas as on the social frameworks in which they are produced. Finally, Finke et al. use an analogy between religious systems and competitive markets to explain church attendance and growth in 19th-century New York state. (A new paper by Voas et al. takes them to task; skim to understand the critique.)


Recommended:
Bielby, William T. and Denise D. Bielby. 1994. "'All Hits Are Flukes': Institutionalized Decision Making and the
Wednesday, Nov. 27\Week 4: Cultural Consumption and Reception

Again, the readings strive for diversity in method and institutional realm. Again, we start with Bourdieu, this time *Distinction*, a richer, more interpretive, less economistic work that those that preceded it: we read his chapters on cultural choice in the upper middle and working classes. Whereas Bourdieu focuses on the affinity between elite taste and returns to cultural capital, Mark uses survey data on patterns of musical taste to test a complementary ecological approach to understanding such patterns. Halle uses ethnographic methods to interpret the meaning of sacred art in U.S. homes. Shively's paper also deals with intergroup differences in response to the popular arts (John Wayne films), using focus groups and interviews to explore their reception. Hout et al.'s work exemplifies the value of demographic analysis for the sociology of culture. Fantasia investigates a surprising case of cultural change and cultural contact.


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Hout, Michael, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. “The Demographic Imperative in


**Recommended:**

**Wednesday, Dec. 4 \ Week 5: The Macro-Sociology of Culture**

So many types of research fall under this rubric that much wonderful work ended up on the cutting room floor: These survivors provide a sampling. Nisbett and Cohen employ multiple methods to address a classic sociological question --- whether the prevalence of violence in the U.S. Southeast reflects cultural difference. (Don’t worry: N&C is just 102 pp. w/ lots of graphs and footnotes.) Swidler’s wonderful study of how Americans think and talk about love and marriage demonstrates the ways that culture exists outside of people, and the uses to which people put it. The paper by Meyer et al. summarizes the results of an ambitious research program that operates at the most macro level possible, that of what Meyer refers to as “world society” and “world culture.” Martin and Mohr use little clues (data from charity directories, and pictures in Richard Scarry’s children books) to reach big conclusions about cultural change (shifts in the classification of social problems and social representations of class in the U.S.).


**Recommended:**


### Wednesday, Dec. 11

**Week 6: Taking Stock -- Programs and Prescriptions**

After examining a wide range of research on culture variously defined, we are prepared to consider critically programmatic statements about what ideas and methods bear fruit (for which purposes) and which do not. This week's reading range widely in focus and perspective. Swidler's classic paper argues that it is more fruitful to think of culture as a set of recipes for action than as coherent sets of values or norms, and her paper with Jepperson draw implications for empirical research. Griswold’s paper sets out a useful paradigm for the sociology of culture – based on her work in literature, but one can imagine its extension to cultural forms beyond the arts. Brubaker and Cooper interrogate the increasingly influential notion of “identity.” Friedland and Alford develop the idea of institutional logics, proposing to place culture at the center of the study of political sociology and social change. Emirbayer and Goodwin’s paper sets out an ambitious if not entirely worked-out agenda for combining cultural and structural analysis through agency.


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**Recommended:**


