CULTURE IN ACTION: SYMBOLS AND STRATEGIES*

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Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct "strategies of action." Two models of cultural influence are developed, for settled and unsettled cultural periods. In settled periods, culture independently influences action, but only by providing resources from which people can construct diverse lines of action. In unsettled cultural periods, explicit ideologies directly govern action, but structural opportunities for action determine which among competing ideologies survive in the long run. This alternative view of culture offers new opportunities for systematic, differentiated arguments about culture's causal role in shaping action.

The reigning model used to understand culture's effects on action is fundamentally misleading. It assumes that culture shapes action by supplying ultimate ends or values toward which action is directed, thus making values the central causal element of culture. This paper analyzes the conceptual difficulties into which this traditional view of culture leads and offers an alternative model.

Among sociologists and anthropologists, debate has raged for several academic generations over defining the term "culture." Since the seminal work of Clifford Geertz (1973a), the older definition of culture as the entire way of life of a people, including their technology and material artifacts, or that (associated with the name of Ward Goodenough) as everything one would need to know to become a functioning member of a society, have been displaced in favor of defining culture as the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning (see Keesing, 1974). For purposes of this paper, culture consists of such symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life. These symbolic forms are the means through which "social processes of sharing modes of behavior and outlook within [a] community" (Hannerz, 1969:184) take place.

The recent resurgence of cultural studies has skirted the causal issues of greatest interest to sociologists. Interpretive approaches drawn from anthropology (Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Claude Levi-Strauss) and literary criticism (Kenneth Burke, Roland Barthes) allow us better to describe the features of cultural products and experiences. Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have offered new ways of thinking about culture's relationship to social stratification and power. For those interested in cultural *explanation* (as opposed to "thick description" [Geertz, 1973a] or interpretive social science [Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979]), however, values remain the major link between culture and action. This is not because sociologists really believe in the values paradigm. Indeed, it has been thoroughly criticized.[1] But without an alternative formulation of culture's causal significance, scholars either avoid causal questions or admit the values paradigm through the back door.

The alternative analysis of culture proposed here consists of three steps. First, it offers an image of culture as a "tool kit" of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Second, to analyze culture's causal effects, it focuses on "strategies of action," persistent ways of ordering action through time. Third, it sees culture's causal significance not in defining ends of action, but in providing cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action.

[1] See Blake and Davis (1964) and the empirical and theoretical critique in Cancian (1975).

The paper proceeds, first, by outlining the failures of cultural explanation based on values. It then argues for the superior intuitive plausibility and explanatory adequacy of the alternative model. Finally, it suggests research approaches based on seeing culture in this new way.

CULTURE AS VALUES

Our underlying view of culture derives from Max Weber. For Weber, human beings are motivated by ideal and material interests. Ideal interests, such as the desire to be saved from the torments of hell, are also ends-oriented, except that these ends are derived from symbolic realities.[2] In Weber's (1946a [1922–3]:280) famous "switchmen" metaphor:

> Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.

Interests are the engine of action, pushing it along, but ideas define the destinations human beings seek to reach (inner-worldly versus other-worldly possibilities of salvation, for example) and the means for getting there (mystical versus ascetic techniques of salvation).

Talcott Parsons adopted Weber's model, but blunted its explanatory thrust. To justify a distinctive role for sociology in face of the economist's model of rational, interest-maximizing actors, Parsons argued that within a means–ends schema only sociology could account for the ends actors pursued.[3] For Weber's interest in the historical role of ideas,

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[2] In *The Sociology of Religion* (1963[1922]:1), Weber insists that "[t]he most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented toward *this* world." Religious behavior remains ends-oriented, except that both the means and the ends increasingly become purely symbolic (pp. 6–7):

> Since it is assumed that behind real things and events there is something else, distinctive and spiritual, of which real events are only the symptoms or indeed the symbols, an effort must be made to influence, not the concrete things, but the spiritual powers that express themselves through concrete things. This is done through actions that address themselves to a spirit or soul, hence done by instrumentalities that "mean" something, i.e., symbols.

[3] See the summary chapter of *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937:697–726), where Parsons explicitly poses the theory of action as a correction to utilitarian views of action.

Parsons substituted global, ahistorical values. Unlike ideas, which in Weber's sociology are complex historical constructions shaped by institutional interests, political vicissitudes, and pragmatic motives, Parsonian values are abstract, general, and immanent in social systems. Social systems exist to realize their core values, and values explain why different actors make different choices even in similar situations. Indeed, Parsons does not treat values as concrete symbolic elements (like doctrines, rituals, or myths) which have histories and can actually be studied. Rather, values are essences around which societies are constituted. They are the unmoved mover in the theory of action.

Parsons' "voluntaristic theory of action" describes an actor who makes choices in a situation, choices limited by objective conditions and governed by normative regulation of the means and ends of action (Warner, 1978:121). A "cultural tradition," according to Parsons (1951:11–12), provides "value orientations," a "value" defined as "an element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation." Culture thus affects human action through values that direct it to some ends rather than others.

The theory of values survives in part, no doubt, because of the intuitive plausibility in our own culture of the assumption that all action is ultimately governed by some means–ends schema. Culture shapes action by defining what people want.

What people want, however, is of little help in explaining their action. To understand both the pervasiveness and the inadequacy of cultural values as explanations, let us examine one recent debate in which "culture" has been invoked as a major causal variable: the debate over the existence and influence of a "culture of poverty."[4]

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[4] I make no attempt to evaluate the empiricial merits of the culture-of-poverty argument. Insofar as the argument is waged on both sides as one about who is to blame for poverty, it is sociologically wrong-headed, since both sides seem to agree that structural circumstances are ultimately at fault. Furthermore, neither side seems to have a very clear notion about how such a culture would work, if only in the sense that neither makes a claim about how long it would take to change cultural patterns in the face of new structural opportunities, or, for those who make the structural argument, how fast action might adjust to opportunity. I use the culture-of-poverty argument not because I am sympathetic to its substantive claims, but because it is so familiar and its basic arguments are so characteristic of other cultural explanations.

The Culture of Poverty

Why doesn't a member of the "culture of poverty" described by Lewis (1966) or Liebow (1967) (or an Italian street-corner youth of the sort Whyte [1943] described) take advantage of opportunities to assimilate to the dominant culture in conduct and dress, acquire the appropriate educational credentials, and settle down to a steady job? Much of the argument has revolved around whether the very poor "really" value the same things that more secure middle- and working-class people do. Valentine (1968:69) quotes Oscar Lewis's description of the culture of poverty which, typically, stresses the centrality of cultural values:

> By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime. (Lewis, 1966:xlv)

Valentine (1968) counters Lewis by claiming that distinctive lower-class behavior can be better explained by structural circumstances, and that many of the values Lewis cites as typical of the poverty subculture (male dominance, for example) characterize the larger society as well (pp. 117–19). Liebow (1967), in turn, claims that street-corner men value the same things that men in the dominant society do, but that their behavior is a defensive cultural adaptation to structural barriers.

The irony of this debate is that it cannot be resolved by evidence that the very poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class, as indeed they seem to do. In repeated surveys, lower-class youth say that they value education and intend to go to college, and their parents say they want them to go (Jencks et al., 1972:34–5). Similarly, lower-class people seem to want secure friendships, stable marriages, steady jobs, and high incomes. But class similarities in aspirations in no way resolve the question of whether there are class differences in *culture*. People may share common aspirations, while remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organizes their overall pattern of behavior (see Hannerz, 1969).

Culture in this sense is more like a style or a set of skills and habits than a set of preferences or wants.[5] If one asked a slum youth why he did not take steps to pursue a middle-class path to success (or indeed asked oneself why one did not pursue a different life direction) the answer might well be not "I don't want that life," but instead, "Who, me?" One can hardly pursue success in a world where the accepted skills, style, and informal know-how are unfamiliar. One does better to look for a line of action for which one already has the cultural equipment.

Indeed, the skills required for adopting a line of conduct—and for adopting the interests or values that one could maximize in that line of conduct—involve much more than such matters as how to dress, talk in the appropriate style, or take a multiple-choice examination. To adopt a line of conduct, one needs an image of the kind of world in which one is trying to act, a sense that one can read reasonably accurately (through one's own feelings and through the responses of others) how one is doing, and a capacity to choose among alternative lines of action. The lack of this ease is what we experience as "culture shock" when we move from one cultural community to another. Action is not determined by one's values. Rather action *and* values are organized to take advantage of cultural competences.

The culture-of-poverty example suggests a misdirection of our explanatory efforts. Students of culture keep looking for cultural values that will explain what is distinctive about the behavior of groups or societies, and neglect other distinctively *cultural* phenomena which offer greater promise of explaining patterns of action. These factors are better described as culturally-shaped skills, habits, and styles than as values or preferences.

The Protestant Ethic

These causal issues appear again when we turn to the paradigmatic sociological argument for the importance of culture in human action—Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958a [1904–51]).[6] Weber sought to explain rational, capitalist economic behavior by arguing that culture, in the shape

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[5] What I mean here is similar to what Bourdieu (1977) calls "practices." He says, for example,

> What is called the *sense of honor* is nothing other than the cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought, which enables each agent to engender all the practices

consistent with the logic of challenge and riposte, and only such practices, by means of countless inventions, which the stereotyped unfolding of ritual would in no way demand (p. 15).

[6] There has been no apparent slackening of interest in the Protestant ethic. Recent theoretical reassessments by Marshall (1982) and Poggi (1983) testify to the still powerful appeal of Weber's theoretical questions, and the rich, new historical studies of Marshall (1980), Fulbrook (1983), Camic (1983), and Zaret (1985), among others, show the continuing fascination exerted by demanding, ideological Protestants.

of Calvinist doctrine, created a distinctive frame of mind which encouraged rationalized, ascetic behavior. The doctrine of predestination channeled the desire to be saved into a quest for proof of salvation in worldly conduct, thus stimulating anxious self-examination and relentless self-discipline. Ends created by ideas (that is, the desire for salvation) powerfully influenced conduct.

If we take seriously the causal model Weber offers (both in *The Protestant Ethic* and in his theoretical writings on religion), however, we cannot understand his larger claim: that the ethos of Protestantism endured even after the spur of the Calvinist quest for proof of salvation had been lost.[7] If ideas shape ethos, why did the ethos of ascetic Protestantism outlast its ideas?

Weber argues for continuity between the desire of early Calvinists to know whether they were saved or damned and the secular ethic of Benjamin Franklin. We recognize other continuities as well: in the Methodist demand for sobriety, humility, and self-control among the working class; and even in the anxious self-scrutiny of contemporary Americans seeking psychological health, material success, or personal authenticity.

How, then, should we understand continuity in the style or ethos of action, even when ideas (and the ends of action they advocate) change? This continuity suggests that what endures is *the way action is organized*, not its ends. In the Protestant West (and especially in Puritan America), for example, action is assumed to depend on the choices of individual persons, so that before an individual acts he or she must ask: What kind of self do I have? Saved or damned? Righteous or dissolute? Go-getter or plodder? Authentic or false?

Collective action is also understood to rest on the choices of individual actors. Groups are thus seen as collections of like-minded individuals who come together to pursue their common interests (Varenne, 1977). Even large-scale social purposes are presumed best accomplished through movements of moral reform or education that transform individuals (McLoughlin, 1978; Boyer, 1978; Gusfield, 1981). To call this cultural approach to action the "value" of individualism, as is often done,

misses the point, since this individualistic way of organizing action can be directed to many values, among them the establishment of "community" (Varenne, 1977; Bellah, et al., 1985). This reliance on moral "work" on the self to organize action has, then, been a more enduring feature of Protestant culture than the particular ends toward which this work has been directed. Such examples underline the need for new ways of thinking about cultural explanation.

These two cases illustrate the chronic difficulties with traditional efforts to use culture as an explanatory variable and suggest why many have written off the effort altogether.

CULTURAL EXPLANATION

If values have little explanatory power, why expect culture to play any causal role in human action? Why not explain action as the result of interests and structural constraints, with only a rational, interest-maximizing actor to link the two?

The view that action is governed by "interests" is inadequate in the same way as the view that action is governed by non-rational values. Both models have a common explanatory logic, differing only in assuming different ends of action: either individualistic, arbitrary "tastes" or consensual, cultural "values."[18]

Both views are flawed by an excessive emphasis on the "unit act," the notion that people choose their actions one at a time according to their interests or values. But people do not, indeed cannot, build up a sequence of actions piece by piece, striving with each act to maximize a given outcome. Action is necessarily integrated into larger assemblages, called here "strategies of action."[9] Cul-

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[7] Weber himself attempts to deal with this issue from the beginning, first in the *Protestant Ethic*, by trying to assimilate non-Calvinist varieties of Protestantism to the Calvinist model, and second in his essay on the Protestant sects (Weber, 1946b[1922–23]) where he argues that market incentives sustained habits of conduct from which the spirit had gone. But that argument is not sufficient if it is in fact the spirit which *has* lasted.

[8] See Warner (1978) for an elegant explication and critique of this line of argument in the work of both Talcott Parsons and his critics.

[9] Bourdieu (1977) also emphasizes the idea of strategies, and the term is central to a whole tradition in anthropology, which, nonetheless, sees strategies as oriented to the attainment of "values" (see Barth, 1981). Very valuable are Bourdieu's critique of the idea of culture as "rules" and his insistence that we can understand the meaning of cultural traditions only if we see the ways they unfold and can be altered over time. For him, cultural patterns provide the structure against which individuals can develop particular strategies (see the brilliant analysis of marriage in Bourdieu, 1977:58–71). For me, strategies are the larger ways of trying to organize a life (trying, for example, to secure position by allying with prestigious families through marriage) within which particular choices make sense, and for which particular, culturally shaped skills and habits (what Bourdieu calls "habitus") are useful.

ture has an independent causal role because it shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed.

The term "strategy" is not used here in the conventional sense of a plan consciously devised to attain a goal. It is, rather, a general way of organizing action (depending upon a network of kin and friends, for example, or relying on selling one's skills in a market) that might allow one to reach several different life goals. Strategies of action incorporate, and thus depend on, habits, moods, sensibilities, and views of the world (Geertz, 1973a). People do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put.

Our alternative model also rests on the fact that all real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action.[10] The reader of the Bible can find a passage to justify almost any act, and traditional wisdom usually comes in paired adages counseling opposite behaviors. A culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a "tool kit" or repertoire (Hannerz, 1969:186–88) from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action. Both individuals and groups know how to do different kinds of things in different circumstances (see, for example, Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). People may have in readiness cultural capacities they rarely employ; and all people know more culture than they use (if only in the sense that they ignore much that they hear).[11] A realistic cul-

tural theory should lead us to expect not passive "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel, 1967; Wrong, 1961), but rather the active, sometimes skilled users of culture whom we actually observe.

If culture influences action through end values, people in changing circumstances should hold on to their preferred ends while altering their strategies for attaining them. But if culture provides the tools with which persons construct lines of action, then styles or strategies of action will be more persistent than the ends people seek to attain. Indeed, people will come to value ends for which their cultural equipment is well suited (cf. Mancini, 1980). To return to the culture of poverty example, a ghetto youth who can expertly "read" signs of friendship and loyalty (Hannerz, 1969), or who can recognize with practised acuity threats to turf or dignity (Horowitz, 1983), may pursue ends that place group loyalty above individual achievement, not because he disdains what individual achievement could bring, but because the cultural meanings and social skills necessary for playing *that* game well would require drastic and costly cultural retooling.

This revised imagery—culture as a "tool kit" for constructing "strategies of action," rather than as a switchman directing an engine propelled by interests—turns our attention toward different causal issues than do traditional perspectives in the sociology of culture.

When do we invoke cultural explanation? And just what is it that we take culture to explain? Usually, we invoke culture to explain continuities in action in the face of structural changes. Immigrants, for example, are said to act in culturally determined ways when they preserve traditional habits in new circumstances (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918). More generally, we use culture to explain why different groups behave differently in the same structural situation (compare, for example, the argument of Glazer and Moynihan [1970] to Lieberson [1981] or Bonacich [1976]). Finally, we make the intuitively appealing but theoretically vacuous assumption that culture accounts

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[10] The problem of cultural "dissensus" or diversity has recently received some explicit theoretical attention (Fernandez, 1965; Stromberg, 1981; Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983; Rosaldo, 1985). However, these advances are partially offset by the vogue for theories of "hegemony" among Marxists and by semiotic approaches which see cultures as codes within which any meaning must be communicated (see Stromberg, 1985).

[11] Writing of the simultaneous participation of ghetto dwellers in mainstream and ghetto subcultures, Ulf Hannerz (1969:186) notes:

> [M]an is not a mindless cultural automaton. . . . First of all, when people develop a cultural repertoire by being at the receiving end of cultural transmission, this certainly does not mean that they will put every part of it to use. Rather, the repertoire to some measure constitutes adaptive potential. While some of the cultural goods received may be situationally irrelevant, such as most of that picked up at the movies, much of that

derived from school, and even some of that encountered within the ghetto community, other components of an individual's repertoire may come in more useful.

Bourdieu (1977:82–3) also emphasizes how a "habitus" provides resources for constructing diverse lines of action. A habitus is "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems . . ." (emphasis in original).

for any observed continuities in the way life of particular groups.

Does culture account for continuities in action independent of structural circumstance? It does, but in ways different from those the conventional approach would predict.

Let us return to the explanatory problems raised by Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, this time examining Weber's larger comparative–historical project. In his comparative studies of China and India (1951 [1916]; 1958b [1916–17]) and his general sociology of religion (1963 [1922]), Weber argued that religious ideas made an independent causal contribution to the economic trajectories of different societies. Other-worldly and mystical religiosity led people away from rational economic action.

If culture plays the independent causal role Weber attributed to it,[12] it must not change more easily than the structural and economic patterns it supposedly shapes. Precisely here, however, the Weberian model fails empirically. Weberian students of culture have been embarrassed by their success in finding functional equivalents to the Protestant ethic in societies that Weber would have considered other-worldly, mystical, or otherwise averse to rational economic activity. If there was initial triumph in discovering independent religious sources of a transcendental, ascetic, and potentially rationalizing ethic in one remarkable, non-western modernizer, Japan (Bellah, 1957), the frequent replication of such parallels has undermined the very argument for the causal influence of Protestantism (see Eisenstadt, 1970a).

According to Weber's model, culture should have enduring effects on economic action. Cultures change, though; and the ends societies pursue have changed dramatically in the modern era, from Chinese communism (Schurmann, 1970), to Islamic scripturalism (Geertz, 1968), to the various resurgent nationalisms (Geertz, 1963; Gourevitch, 1979; Hannan, 1979). Faced with the challenge of the modern West, late-developing nations have *constructed* ascetic, this-worldly, modernizing ideologies (Wuthnow, 1980). Far from maintaining continuity despite changed circumstances, a surge of ideological and religious activity has propelled the transformations modernizing societies seek. Culture thus plays a central role in contemporary social change, but it is *not* the role our conventional models would predict.

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[12] The analytic independence of culture's causal role is at issue here, not its magnitude.

Two Models of Cultural Influence

We need two different models to understand two situations in which culture works very differently. In one case, culture accounts for continuities in "settled lives." In settled lives, culture is intimately integrated with action; it is here that we are most tempted to see values as organizing and anchoring patterns of action; and here it is most difficult to disentangle what is uniquely "cultural," since culture and structural circumstance seem to reinforce each other. This is the situation about which a theorist like Clifford Geertz (1973b) writes so persuasively: culture is a model of and a model for experience; and cultural symbols reinforce an ethos, making plausible a world-view which in turn justifies the ethos.

The second case is that of "unsettled lives." The distinction is less between settled and unsettled lives, however, than between culture's role in sustaining existing strategies of action and its role in constructing new ones. This contrast is not, of course, absolute. Even when they lead settled lives, people do active cultural work to maintain or refine their cultural capacities. Conversely, even the most fanatical ideological movement, which seeks to remake completely the cultural capacities of its members, will inevitably draw on many tacit assumptions from the existing culture. There are, nonetheless, more and less settled lives, and more and less settled cultural periods. Individuals in certain phases of their lives, and groups or entire societies in certain historical periods, are involved in constructing new strategies of action. It is for the latter situation that our usual models of culture's effects are most inadequate.

Unsettled Lives

Periods of social transformation seem to provide simultaneously the best and the worst evidence for culture's influence on social action. Established cultural ends are jettisoned with apparent ease, and yet explicitly articulated cultural models, such as ideologies, play a powerful role in organizing social life (see, for examples, Geertz, 1968; Schurmann, 1970; Eisenstadt, 1970b; Walzer, 1974; Madsen, 1984; Hunt, 1984).

In such periods, ideologies—explicit, articulated, highly organized meaning systems (both political and religious)—*establish* new styles or strategies of action. When people are learning new ways of organizing individual and collective action, practicing unfamiliar habits until they become familiar, then doctrine, symbol, and ritual directly shape action.

Assumed here is a continuum from *ideology* to *tradition* to *common sense* (see Stromberg, 1985).[13] An "ideology" is a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action. Ideology may be thought of as a phase in the development of a system of cultural meaning. "Traditions," on the other hand, are articulated cultural beliefs and practices, but ones taken for granted so that they seem inevitable parts of life. Diverse, rather than unified, partial rather than all-embracing, they do not always inspire enthusiastic assent. (A wedding, in our own culture, may seem odd, forced, or unnatural when we actually attend one, for example. But it will still seem the natural way to get married, so that going to a justice of the peace requires special explanation.) Traditions, whether the routine ones of daily life or the extraordinary ones of communal ceremony, nonetheless seem ordained in the order of things, so that people may rest in the certainty that they exist, without necessarily participating in them. The same belief system— a religion, for example—may be held by some people as an ideology and by others as tradition; and what has been tradition may under certain historical circumstances become ideology. (This is the distinction Geertz [1968:61] makes when he writes about a loss of traditional religious certainty in modern "ideologized" Islam—coming to "hold" rather than be "held by" one's beliefs.) "Common sense," finally, is the set of assumptions so unselfconscious as to seem a natural, transparent, undeniable part of the structure of the world (Geertz, 1975).

Bursts of ideological activism occur in periods when competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for dominance.[14] People formulate, flesh out, and put into practice new habits of action. In such situations, culture may indeed be said to directly shape action. Members of a religious cult wear orange, or share their property, or dissolve their marriages because their beliefs tell them to. Protestants simplify worship, read the Bible, and work in a calling because of their faith. Doctrine and casuistry tell people how to act and provide blueprints for community life.

During such periods, differences in ritual practice or doctrine may become highly charged, so that statuary in churches (Baxandall, 1980), the clothing and preaching styles of ministers (Davis, 1975; Zaret, 1985), or the style and decoration of religious objects are fraught with significance.

Ritual acquires such significance in unsettled lives because ritual changes reorganize taken-for-granted habits and modes of experience. People developing new strategies of action depend on cultural models to learn styles of self, relationship, cooperation, authority, and so forth. Commitment to such an ideology, originating perhaps in conversion, is more conscious than is the embeddedness of individuals in settled cultures, representing a break with some alternative way of life.

These explicit cultures might well be called "systems." While not perfectly consistent, they aspire to offer not multiple answers, but one unified answer to the question of how human beings should live. In conflict with other cultural models, these cultures are coherent because they must battle to dominate the world-views, assumptions, and habits of their members.

Such cultural models are thus causally powerful, but in a restricted sense. Rather than providing the underlying assumptions of an entire way of life, they make explicit demands in a contested cultural arena. Their independent causal influence is limited first because, at least at their origins, such ideological movements are not complete cultures, in the sense that much of their taken-for-granted understanding of the world and many of their daily practices still depend on traditional patterns.[15]

Second, in a period of cultural transformation, ideology forms around ethos, rather than vice versa. To illustrate this we may turn once

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[13] Other scholars have recently made distinctions similar to the ones drawn here. Skocpol (1985) distinguishes "ideology" from "cultural idioms," and Stromberg (1985) contrasts ideology, tradition, and semiotic code. Geertz, in his writings on religion (1973b), ideology (1973d), art (1976), and common sense (1975) has made an important contribution by noting that different orders of experience live continuously side by side while people make transitions from one to another. For my purposes here, the most important dimension of comparison is that between culture which seems real, independent of the efforts individuals make to maintain it (common sense), versus that which requires active human effort or participation to be sustained (religious traditions) or to become true (ideology).

[14] Todd Gitlin (personal communication) observes that ideology is contested culture.

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[15] Over time, as an ideology establishes itself, it may deepen its critique of the existing order and extend its claims increasingly into taken-for-granted areas of daily life (e.g., the escalating Puritan critique of vestments, ritual, and preaching [Zaret, 1985]). Nonetheless, whatever the new ideology does not explicitly regulate still falls under the sway of the old order. Old orders are thus resilient, hiding their premises in the minutiae of daily life.

again to arguments about the Protestant ethic. Remember that for Max Weber the consequences of Calvinism flowed from its doctrine, operating on believers' overwhelming psychological interest in salvation. But even in *The Protestant Ethic* (1958a [1904–5]), Weber is hard pressed to explain why the doctrines of predestination and proof produced the rationalized, ascetic conduct of the saint (as opposed to fatalistic resignation, or even hedonism).[16]

In *The Revolution of the Saints* (1974), Michael Walzer makes a very different argument about the relation between ethos and doctrinal logic in Calvinism. Walzer shows that the ethos of methodical self-control was not an accidental byproduct of Calvinism's doctrine. Rather, Calvin repeatedly adjusted the logic of this theology to stimulate the discipline he saw as necessary for fallen man. He "opportunistically" revised and reworked his doctrine *in order* to achieve a particular psychological effect. Calvin needed potent theological imagery to inscribe within his congregants the rigorous control of thought and action he sought. Indeed, tightly argued doctrine, austere ritual, and potent imagery were the weapons Calvin crafted to teach a new ethos. But doctrine "caused" ethos only in an immediate sense. In a larger explanatory perspective, commitment to a specific ethos, a style of regulating action, shaped the selection and development of doctrine.

Walzer also suggests a new way of thinking about the relationship between ideology and interests. As the ruler of a small theocracy, Calvin certainly had immediate interests in controlling the citizens of Geneva, and he bent his doctrine to those ends. Walzer also argues, however, that the wider appeal of Calvinism was to those displaced clergy and insecure gentry who were looking for new ways to exercise authority and a new ethos to regulate their own conduct as elites. Interests are thus important in shaping ideas, but an ideology serves interests through its potential to construct and regulate patterns of conduct. And indeed, those new capacities for action and for regulating the action of others shape the interests its adherents come to have.

To understand culture's causal role in such high-ideology periods, we need, third, to consider ideologies in a larger explanatory context. Coherent ideologies emerge when new ways of organizing action are being developed. Such ideologies, often carried by social movements, model new ways to organize action and to structure human communities. These ideological movements, however, are in active competition with other cultural frameworks—at the least in competition with common sense and usually with alternative traditions and ideologies as well. Explaining cultural outcomes therefore requires not only understanding the direct influence of an ideology on action. It also requires explaining why one ideology rather than another triumphs (or at least endures). And such explanation depends on analyzing the structural constraints and historical circumstances within which ideological movements struggle for dominance.[17]

Culture has independent causal influence in unsettled cultural periods because it makes possible new strategies of action—constructing entities that can act (selves, families, corporations), shaping the styles and skills with which they act, and modeling forms of authority and cooperation. It is, however, the concrete situations in which these cultural models are enacted that determine which take root and thrive, and which wither and die.

Settled Lives

The causal connections between culture and action are very different in settled cultural periods. Culture provides the materials from which individuals and groups construct strategies of action. Such cultural resources are diverse, however, and normally groups and individuals call upon these resources selectively, bringing to bear different styles and habits of action in different situations. Settled cultures thus support varied patterns of action, obscuring culture's independent influence.

Specifying culture's causal role is made more difficult in settled cultural periods by the "loose coupling" between culture and action.[18] People profess ideals they do not follow, utter platitudes without examining their validity, or fall into cynicism or indifference with the assurance that the world will go on just the same. Such gaps between the explicit norms, worldviews, and rules of conduct individuals espouse and the ways they habitually act create little difficulty within settled strategies of action. People naturally "know" how to act.

[16] Weber, of course, acknowledges the tension between the "logical and psychological" consequences of Calvinism in a famous footnote (Weber, 1958a [1904–05]: 232, n. 66). He and later commentators have also stressed the pastoral context in which Calvinism was interpreted as crucial to understanding the doctrine's effects (see Zaret, 1985).

[17] This section draws on arguments found in Skocpol, 1985.
[18] There is by now a large literature on the weak relationship between attitudes and behavior (Schuman and Johnson, 1976; Hill, 1981). See Cancian (1975) for one interpretation of this gap.

Cultural experience may reinforce or re-fine the skills, habits, and attitudes important for common strategies of action, but estab-lished ways of acting do not depend upon such immediate cultural support.

In settled cultural periods, then, culture and social structure are simultaneously too fused and too disconnected for easy analysis. On the one hand, people in settled periods can live with great discontinuity between talk and ac-tion. On the other hand, in settled lives it is particularly difficult to disentangle cultural and structural influences on action. That is because ideology has both diversified, by being adapted to varied life circumstances, and gone under-ground, so pervading ordinary experience as to blend imperceptibly into common-sense as-sumptions about what is true. Settled cultures are thus more encompassing then are ideologies, in that they are not in open com-petition with alternative models for organiz-ing experience. Instead, they have the undis-puted authority of habit, normality, and com-mon sense. Such culture does not impose a single, unified pattern on action, in the sense of imposing norms, styles, values, or ends on in-dividual actors. Rather, settled cultures con-strain action by providing a limited set of re-sources out of which individuals and groups construct strategies of action.[19]

There is nonetheless a distinctive kind of cultural explanation appropriate to settled cultures. First, while such cultures provide a "tool kit" of resources from which people can construct diverse strategies of action, to con-struct such a strategy means selecting certain cultural elements (both such tacit culture as attitudes and styles and, sometimes, such ex-plicit cultural materials as rituals and beliefs) and investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstances. An example might by young adults who become more church-going when they marry and have children, and who then, in turn, find themselves with re-awakened religious feelings. In such cases culture cannot be said to have "caused" the choices people make, in the sense that both the cultural elements and the life strategy are, in effect, chosen simultaneously. Indeed, the meanings of particular cultural elements de-pend, in part, on the strategy of action in which they are embedded (so, for example, religious ritual may have special meaning as part of a family's weekly routine). Nonetheless, culture

has an effect in that the ability to put together such a strategy depends on the available set of cultural resources. Furthermore, as certain cultural resources become more central in a given life, and become more fully invested with meaning, they anchor the strategies of action people have developed.

Such cultural influence can be observed in "cultural lag." People do not readily take ad-vantage of new structural opportunities which would require them to abandon established ways of life. This is not because they cling to cultural values, but because they are reluctant to abandon familiar strategies of action for which they have the cultural equipment. Be-cause cultural expertise underlies the ability of both individuals and groups to construct effec-tive strategies of action, such matters as the style or ethos of action and related ways of organizing authority and cooperation are en-during aspects of individual, and especially of collective, life.

Second, the influence of culture in settled lives is especially strong in structuring those uninstitutionalized, but recurrent situations in which people act in concert. When Americans try to get something done, they are likely to create voluntarist social movements—from re-ligious revivals (McLoughlin, 1978), to reform campaigns (Boyer, 1978), to the voluntary local initiatives that created much of American pub-lic schooling (Meyers, et al., 1979). Such strate-gies of action rest on the cultural assumption that social groups—indeed, society itself—are constituted by the voluntary choices of indi-viduals. Yet such voluntarism does *not*, in fact, dominate most of our institutional life. A bu-reaucratic state, large corporations, and an im-personal market run many spheres of Ameri-can life without voluntary individual coopera-tion. American voluntarism persists, nonethe-less, as the predominant collective way of dealing with situations that are not taken care of by institutions.[20]

Culture affects action, but in different ways in settled versus unsettled periods. Disen-tangling these two modes of culture's influence and specifying more clearly how culture works in the two situations, creates new possibilities

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[19] Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside* (1969:177–95) has an excellent discussion of this issue, stressing both the ways in which the ghetto dwellers he studied drew on a flexible repertoire of cultural expertise, and how much of the specific ghetto subculture was adapted to the exigencies of ghetto life.

[20] Renato Rosaldo (1985) has written provoca-tively of anthropology's overreliance on images of culture as sets of plans or rules. He argues that culture is better thought of as providing resources for dealing with the unexpected, for improvising. While my argument stays close to the culture as plan im-agery, it nonetheless stresses that what is cultur-ally regulated is that part of social life which has to be continually created and recreated, not that part which is so institutionalized that it requires little active support by those it regulates.

for cultural explanation. The following schematic diagram summarizes the two models of cultural explanation proposed here. Neither model looks like the Parsonian theory of values, the Weberian model of how ideas influence action, or the Marxian model of the relationship of ideas and interests. However, between them the two models account for much of what has been persuasive about these earlier images of cultural influence while avoiding those expectations that cannot be supported by evidence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

First, these two models of cultural causation identify the limited sense in which values *are* important in shaping action. James March (1978:596) can argue that values neither can nor do guide decision making in the ways that rational choice theorists suppose:

> Choices are often made without respect to tastes. Human decision makers routinely ignore their own, fully conscious, preferences in making decisions. They follow rules, traditions, hunches, and the advice or actions of others. Tastes change over time in such a way that predicting future tastes is often difficult. Tastes are inconsistent. Individuals and organizations are aware of the extent to which some of their preferences conflict with other of their preferences; yet they do nothing to resolve those inconsistencies. . . . While tastes are used to choose among actions, it is often also true that actions and experiences with their consequences affect tastes.

On the other hand, Milton Rokeach (1973) has spent a fruitful career investigating the significance of "values." He finds that individuals can produce reliable forced-choice rankings of eighteen "terminal" values (e.g.,

"equality," "an exciting life," "family security"). Such values differ in plausible ways by class, race, and occupation, and are, at least in some circumstances, modestly related to actual behavior.

We may reconcile these two images of the role of values in human action by thinking of them as parts of settled versus unsettled lives. In unsettled lives, values are unlikely to be good predictors of action, or indeed of future values. Kathleen Gerson (1985), for example, in an insightful study of women's career and family choices, notes what a small role is played by the values and plans young women have, and how much their choices are shaped by their immediate situations—a first job which works out, or a boyfriend who does not. Young women's choices are not driven by their values, but by what they find they have become good at, or at least accustomed to.

Within an established way of life, however, values—both "terminal" and "instrumental"—may play a significant role. A woman preoccupied with juggling the demands of husband and children against those of her work may well have developed a settled policy about whether "happiness," "an exciting life," "self-respect," or "social recognition" are more important to her. She may even refer to those values in making particular choices. Indeed, values are important pieces of cultural equipment for established strategies of action, since part of what it means to have a strategy of action is to have a way of making the choices that ordinarily confront one within it. We can thus recognize the significance of values, if we acknowledge that values do not shape action by defining its ends, but rather fine-tune the regulation of action within established ways of life.

This perspective could reorient research on culture in a second way, by directing attention to a set of historical questions about the in-

Figure 1. Two Models of Culture

	Characteristics	Short-Term Effects	Long-Term Effects
Settled Culture (traditions and common sense)	Low coherence, consistency	Weak direct control over action	Provides resources for constructing strategies of action
	Encapsulates	Refines and reinforces skills, habits, modes of experience	Creates continuities in style or ethos, and especially in organization of strategies of action
Unsettled Culture (ideology)	High coherence, consistency	Strong control over action	Creates new strategies of action, but long-term influence depends on structural opportunities for survival of competing ideologies
	Competes with other cultural views	Teaches new modes of action	

teraction of culture and social structure. Distinguishing culture's role in settled and unsettled periods, we can focus on those historical junctures where new cultural complexes make possible new or reorganized strategies of action. We can then ask how concrete structural circumstances affect the relative success of competing cultural systems. We could also ask how the capacity of particular ideas, rituals, and symbols to organize given kinds of action affects the historical opportunities actors are able to seize. Such questions might finally begin to give us a systematic view of the dynamic interactions between culture and social structure.

A third reorientation of cultural research would focus not on cultures as unified wholes, but on chunks of culture, each with its own history. Culture provides resources for constructing organized strategies of action. Particular cultural resources can be integrated, however, into quite different strategies of action. A crucial task for research is to understand how cultural capacities created in one historical context are reappropriated and altered in new circumstances. An example of such research is William Sewell's (1974; 1980) examination of how, faced with the threats of early industrialism, nineteenth-century French artisans drew on traditions of corporate organization to construct a new ideology of radical socialism.

At least since E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), of course, sociologists have examined how established cultural resources are reappropriated in new contexts. The argument proposed here goes beyond this, however. The significance of specific cultural symbols can be understood only in relation to the strategies of action they sustain. Culture does not influence how groups organize action via enduring psychological proclivities implanted in individuals by their socialization. Instead, publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others. It is thus not the rearrangement of some free-floating heritage of ideas, myths, or symbols that is significant for sociological analysis. Rather, it is the reappropriation of larger, culturally organized capacities for action that gives culture its enduring effects.

Attention to strategies of action also suggests a number of specific research questions, answers to which would give us more precise understanding of how culture works:

—In new circumstances (after immigration, for example), who remains traditional longer? If culture influences action by constraining strat-

egies of action, we should expect the greatest "traditionalism" among the old (see Portes, 1984:391) and those from culturally encapsulated backgrounds, people for whom the costs of learning new cultural skills would be greatest. If culture shapes action through values, on the other hand, we should expect the most socially advantaged to show greatest resistance to change, since they would have the greatest resources with which to protect and pursue those values.

—How do belief systems break down? When do they lose their plausibility? Beliefs about the social world, for example that hard work determines individual success (Huber and Form, 1973), do not seem to depend directly on their descriptive accuracy. Instead, they are linked to social–structural realities through the strategies of action they support. The English upper classes abandoned medieval conceptions of the inevitable dependence of the poor when the system of poor laws they had developed became unworkable (Polanyi, 1944; Bendix, 1956). Similarly, the question raised by Thomas Kuhn's (1962) analysis of science—when and how anomalies accumulated by an aging paradigm precipitate a "scientific revolution"—might be solved by attention to strategies of action. Paradigms break down, according to this argument, when they fail to regulate adequately normal scientific work—when, for example, scientists have difficulty knowing which explanations fit the rules of the game and which do not, how to award power and prestige within the field, or how to make effective guesses about which new research directions are likely to prove fruitful.

—What capacities do particular cultural patterns give those who hold them?[21] For example, one might observe that in the early-modern period, those groups armed with ascetic Protestant ideologies very often won their social battles. One could point to practical links between ideology and social organization, such as the popular egalitarianism of Cromwell's Puritan army. Protestantism also facilitated distinctive strategies of action, however, such as the creation of activist voluntary associations (Thompson, 1963:350–400) and the legitimation of more systematic forms of political authority (Walzer, 1974). Some argue that

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[21] I am indebted to Douglas Roeder for the argument of this paragraph, and particularly for noting that Mary Fulbrook's (1983) work could be interpreted as showing not only that pietist Protestantism had very different political implications in different historical contexts, but that whatever their political orientations or alliances, in the cases Fulbrook studied, the pietist Protestants won out politically.

Protestantism succeeded because it was adopted by "rising" groups challenging traditional authority (Wallerstein, 1974). The systematic comparative work of Fulbrook (1983), however, indicates that even when pietist Protestants allied with established authorities, they won. In a similar way, third-world nation-builders seem often to have felt that Marxist ideology provides valuable political capacities (see Huntington, 1968).

—How do ideologies become tradition or common sense? If ideologies are not distinctive kinds of belief systems (see Geertz, 1973d), but rather distinctive phases in the development of cultural systems, some former ideologies may become so uncontested that they are no longer organized as self-conscious belief systems. One might investigate when and under what circumstances such ideological relaxation occurs, and when it fails to occur. Is hegemony alone enough to soften the self-conscious boundaries of an ideology? One might suggest that an ideology will resist being absorbed into common sense when it is the organizational ideology for a special cadre within a society (Weber, 1963 [1922], on priests; Mann, 1973, on European Communist parties; and Schurmann, 1970, on the Chinese Communist Party). It would also be important, however, to study popular Marxism, for example, in nations where the Marxist idiom has been dominant for more than a generation. Does it become Marxist common sense?

CONCLUSION

The approach developed here may seem at first to relegate culture to a subordinate, purely instrumental role in social life. The attentive reader will see, though, that what this paper has suggested is precisely the opposite. Strategies of action are cultural products; the symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action. When we notice cultural differences we recognize that people do not all go about their business in the same ways; how they approach life is shaped by their culture.

The problem, however, is to develop more sophisticated theoretical ways of thinking about how culture shapes or constrains action, and more generally, how culture interacts with social structure. This paper has argued that these relationships vary across time and historical situation. Within established modes of life, culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed. Thus culture appears to shape action only in that the cultural repertoire limits the available range of strategies of action. Such "settled cultures" are nonetheless constraining. Although internally diverse and often contradictory, they provide the ritual traditions that regulate ordinary patterns of authority and cooperation, and they so define common sense that alternative ways of organizing action seem unimaginable, or at least implausible. Settled cultures constrain action over time because of the high costs of cultural retooling to adopt new patterns of action.

In unsettled periods, in contrast, cultural meanings are more highly articulated and explicit, because they model patterns of action that do not "come naturally." Belief and ritual practice directly shape action for the community that adheres to a given ideology. Such ideologies are, however, in competition with other sets of cultural assumptions. Ultimately, structural and historical opportunities determine which strategies, and thus which cultural systems, succeed.

In neither case is it cultural end-values that shape action in the long run. Indeed, a culture has enduring effects on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing the characteristic repertoire from which they build lines of action.

A focus on cultural values was attractive for sociology because it suggested that culture, not material circumstances, was determinative "in the last instance." In Parsons' (1966) ingenious "cybernetic model," social structure may have constrained opportunities for action, but cultural ends directed it. The challenge for the contemporary sociology of culture is not, however, to try to estimate how *much* culture shapes action. Instead, sociologists should search for new analytic perspectives that will allow more effective concrete analyses of how culture is used by actors, how cultural elements constrain or facilitate patterns of action, what aspects of a cultural heritage have enduring effects on action, and what specific historical changes undermine the vitality of some cultural patterns and give rise to others. The suggestion that both the influence and the fate of cultural meanings depend on the strategies of action they support is made in an attempt to fill this gap. Such attempts at more systematic, differentiated causal models may help to restore the study of culture to a central place in contemporary social science.

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