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Cultural Analysis in Historical Sociology: The Analytic and Concrete Forms of the Autonomy of Culture*

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In an effort to clear away confusions regarding the role of cultural analysis in historical explanation, this paper proposes a new approach to the issue of cultural autonomy. The premise is that there are two forms of cultural autonomy, analytic and concrete. Analytic autonomy posits the independent structure of culture—its elements, processes, and reproduction. It is achieved through the theoretical and artificial separation of culture from other social structures, conditions, and action. Concrete autonomy establishes the interconnection of culture with the rest of social life, and is achieved by fleshing out the historically specific formulation of particular cultural structures. In addition to theoretically specifying the two forms of cultural autonomy, I demonstrate analytic and concrete autonomy in practice by examining two works that incorporate culture into the analysis of the same historical event. The rewards of recognizing both analytic and concrete cultural autonomy are twofold. First, cultural reductionism can be countered by establishing that culture is structural. Second and more important, once the independent nature of a cultural form is established, its causal contribution to concrete historical situations can be assessed accurately and integrated into historical explanation.

As the field of sociology renews its interest in culture, the role of cultural analysis in historical explanation has become a growing issue of contention. Traditionally, historical sociologists have fallen into two main theoretical camps when dealing with culture. Cultural reductionists have been instructed by Marx's famous utterance that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (in Tucker 1972, p. 4). Cultural determinists may have interpreted Weber's observation that "ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (1958, p. 280) to mean that the ideal realm of social being is determinative in the last instance.

Recent progress in the fields of both cultural analysis (e.g., Alexander 1987, 1988a; Archer 1988; Geertz 1973; Sahlins 1976; Wuthnow 1987) and historical sociology (e.g., Hunt 1984; Sewell 1980; Skocpol 1979; Thompson 1963; Walzer 1965; Wuthnow 1989) has redefined the classic debate of material vs. ideal determination as an issue of cultural autonomy. Although this could be a positive theoretical step towards greater understanding of the role of culture in historical explanation, theoretical and methodological confusions about the autonomous nature of culture abound. In clearing the way for a historical sociology that incorporates cultural

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factors into explanation, many questions must be addressed. If autonomy is an attribute of structures, how is culture structural? Because culture has to do with subjective meaning, how can we recognize historical structures of culture? What is the relationship of material and ideational structures to each other and to the historical events in which they are situated?

In this paper I will propose a new approach to the issue of cultural autonomy. In doing so I will expose the problems of conducting cultural analysis in historical sociology, will mate a theory and a model of culture analysis with honored theories and methods of historical sociology, and in general will clear away many of the barriers, erected by theoretical and methodological confusion, to the incorporation of cultural analysis into historical sociology.

Beginning with the most fundamental point, I define autonomy strictly in terms of independence. The theoretical question then seems clear enough: Is culture independent? Now comes the murky element: Independent of what? Independent in relation to other social structures and material conditions? The answer hinges on another question: Is culture a structure in the same sense as an economic or a political system? Does it have discrete elements, institutions, processes, and the capacity to reproduce itself independent of the rest of the social system? (By "structural" I mean that culture is made up of interrelated parts and processes arranged in a logical pattern of classification. Thus we can say alternatively that culture is a system. The advantage of the term "structural" is its double meaning: culture is also a component of the whole social system.) The answer is both yes and no. Yes, cultural forms are autonomous structures; no, they are not independent from the rest of the social system.

This is the paradox that hampers development of cultural theory in historical sociology and leads to analytical confusion in substantive works. On the one hand, the "idealists" (e.g., Hunt 1984; Prager 1986; Zelizer 1985) demonstrate successfully the structure of the cultural form they are studying. Then, however, they conflate that independent quality to be both complete in itself and determinative of other social spheres. On the other hand, the "materialists" (e.g., Clark 1979; Zaret 1985), maintaining that economic and political conditions determine cultural formations, refuse to recognize the structure of culture, therefore denying its independent contribution to historical processes.

My solution to this confusion is to recognize that there are two forms of cultural autonomy - analytic and concrete. Analytic autonomy, termed as such because of the definitional implication of separation, posits the complete and independent structure of culture; it is conceptualized through the theoretical, artificial separation of culture from other social structures, conditions, and action.[1] To find the analytic autonomy of culture, "we must bracket contingency . . . and treat action as if it were a written text" (Alexander 1987, p. 296). This text, with its intrarelational logic of symbolic elements, patterns, and processes, is the structure of culture.

Concrete autonomy, referring to historical specificity, establishes the interconnection of culture with the rest of social life. Whereas analytic autonomy of culture is sought apart from material life, concrete autonomy must be located within, and as part of, the whole of social life. In this sense the autonomy of culture is relative. This relativity, however, does not diminish the independent nature of culture because

[1] Although I do not incorporate his theory into my argument, I acknowledge the work of Talcott Parsons in differentiating culture analytically from social system and personality. Also in the Parsonian tradition, Bellah (1970) contends that "sociologic theory must distinguish between cultural system in a pure sense and [how culture works] in a social system" (Alexander 1987).

just as culture is conditioned materially, in turn it "inform[s] the structure of institutions, the nature of social cooperation and conflict, and the attitudes and predispositions of the population . . . [Culture] is constitutive of social order" (Sewell 1985, p. 161).

In any historical analysis, both forms must be explicated. First, because a culture structure is an abstraction, one of many possible, its validity must be proven. The analyst must demonstrate that the culture structure he or she has found at the analytic level is the one which the social group truly shares and acts on in the specific historical situation being studied. This point can be confirmed only be establishing the concrete autonomy of culture. In this sense analytic autonomy can be regarded as a hypothesis and concrete autonomy as its proof.

Second, the theoretical function of each form is different, though the functions are interrelated. There are two reasons to find the autonomy of culture in its analytic form. First, to counter cultural reductionism we must show how culture is structural. Second and more important, the causal contribution of a cultural form in concrete situations can be assessed accurately only after its independent nature has been established. If Skocpol is correct in asserting that causation is a matter of "conjunctural, unfolding interactions of originally separately determined processes" (1979, p. 320), the structuring of culture must be shown to be "autonomously determined" (Sewell 1985, p. 58).

Another important theoretical implication demarcates analytic from concrete autonomy. Whereas analytic autonomy postulates the structure of culture, concrete autonomy is concerned with the *formulation* of that structure. In fact, this is the method of proof for analytic autonomy. Analysts of both the idealist and the materialist persuasion fail in their examination of the structuring process: the idealists fail because they refuse to account adequately for material conditions; the materialists fail because they refuse to see that culture is structured at the same time, with its own causal consequences, as social structure. "The link between the causes of ideology and its effects seems adventitious because the connecting element—the autonomous process of symbolic formulation—is passed over in virtual silence" (Geertz 1973, p. 207).

The purpose of establishing the concrete autonomy of culture therefore seems obvious: culture is a structural factor that must be accounted for in historical explanation. It is a matter of good historical sociology. By fleshing out the formulation of culture in all its material circumstances, we also receive the bonus of countering determinative and hierarchical analyses of culture in historical explanation.

The remainder of this paper will be concerned with specifying the two forms of autonomy. My contentions about how culture should be analyzed and employed in historical sociology cannot be supported by theoretical argument alone. Thus, in order to demonstrate analytic and concrete autonomy in practice, I will examine two works that incorporate culture into the analysis of the same historical event, but in its different forms. From the analytic approach, Lynn Hunt explicitly separates culture from social structure in *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984). From the concrete viewpoint, Michael Mann examines both the form and the content of ideological structures in "The French Revolution and the Emergence of the Bourgeois Nation" (forthcoming).

By choosing works dealing with the French Revolution, I may appear to position my theory with those who suggest that culture works differently during "unsettled times" (e.g., Swidler 1986). To the contrary, culture functions basically in the same way during times of social stability and times of upheaval: in both situations, culture is a

guide for social action. Cultural changes are more likely to occur, however, during periods of social transformation: the function of culture remains the same, but the cultural processes are different. Furthermore, the role of culture, and of specific culture structures, in social transformation is usually accentuated more strongly in such periods. Because the central concern of historical sociology is social change and development, I have chosen to focus on these cultural processes whose influence on social history has been underestimated until recently.

ANALYTIC AUTONOMY

There are three steps to fleshing out the analytic autonomy of culture: 1) specifying the elements and internal logic of a culture structure, 2) establishing how the symbolic processes work, and 3) reconstructing the development of culture—that is, how it reproduces and/or transforms itself. In its analytic form, we see culture as a structure in and of itself.

Internal Elements and Logic of Culture

The basic element of the "culture-structure"[2] and of its internal logic is the symbol, the vehicle through which meaning is expressed. As explained by Durkheim (1965) and later by Saussure (1966), the meaning of symbols cannot be deduced from the social system: they are arbitrary constructs based on the common experience of group members and shared collectively. Organization of the culture structure is based on symbolic classification; symbols are classified and have significance in terms of each other. Symbolic classification is based primarily on binary opposition (Levi-Strauss 1966). The classic example is Durkheim's division of the world into the sacred and the profane; more recent renditions are pure/polluted (Douglas 1966), good/evil (Alexander 1988b), virtuous/nonvirtuous (Mann forthcoming), breaking with the past/tradition (Hunt 1984), and edible/inedible (Sahlins 1976). The demarcations of these classifications, and the categories within them, serve as boundaries for social action. Hermeneutically speaking, the "parts" of culture are the symbols. The "whole," or what social theorists call the structure, is the pattern of relationships among the symbols.

In this first step we see how culture functions at the individual level. People will understand and interpret their experience in terms of the classifications of a symbol system, and will "act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things" (Sahlins 1981, p. 67). Yet how are symbolic categories "socially given"? And how does culture operate on the social level?

Symbolic Process

For the purposes of this argument, it is useful to simplify cultural systems into two basic components—beliefs and practices. Beliefs, as discussed above, are the intellectual concepts for which symbols have meaning. Rituals are the practice, the acting out of those symbolic meanings. Through the ritual process, symbolic categories are given social significance. For the participants, the believers, rituals are the "enactments, materializations, realizations of . . . the particular [cultural] perspective . . . Rituals are not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it"

[2] The term "culture-structure" was coined by Eric Rambo and Elaine Chan (1990).

(Geertz 1973, pp. 113–14). Through the drama of ritual, people acquire, and to some degree create, the cultural system in the act of portraying it.

Rituals are often enactments of the myth. In turn, the myth encompasses and recounts the belief system. It is the means by which the belief and the action that it prescribes are transmitted historically. Through the transmission, beliefs are perpetuated and the system is maintained.

Ritual has two consequences in which we can see the autonomy of culture. First, by making meaning evident, rituals infuse members of the group with an understanding of experience, a prescription for action in life, and a bond of solidarity to the group. The functional power of ritual therefore provides the culture structure with autonomy. Although ritual is seen here, in the analytic form of autonomy, as internal to the culture structure, it is a process that connects analytic with concrete autonomy, as will be discussed below.

Reproduction of the Cultural System

The second consequence of ritual is that it maintains the symbolic system, and transmits it through myth from generation to generation. This process of self-regulation and reproduction is evidence of cultural autonomy. It renews the system and people's commitment to it, both in times of social stability and in crisis. Alexander's analysis of the Watergate crisis (1988b) is a recent application of Durkheim's concept of ritual process as social renewal.

Yet reproduction of a system implies transformation. As theorized by Durkheim and other structuralists, change in the culture structure is systemic: it occurs within the boundaries of the symbolic classifications of the culture. Factors that normally are regarded as forces of change—for example, impinging external events—are subsumed by the culture structure. Through ritual, culture orders the event in terms of the received pattern of categorical relationships. In other words, people understand new experience and its meaning in terms of the given symbolic classification system, and they act accordingly. The event is reproduced in the image of the structure.

Analytic Autonomy of Culture and the French Revolution

In *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* Lynn Hunt (1984) sees political culture as providing the logic of revolutionary action. The political culture consisted of the "values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions" (p. 10); the structure of the culture came from the underlying patterns of language, images, and ritual activities.

Hunt explains the revolutionary culture in terms of beliefs and practices. The basic belief was "that the French were founding a new nation" (p. 26). Proceeding from this belief, the pattern of symbolic classification was based on the opposition between tradition and innovation (breaking with the past). The symbols that expressed and continually created this collective belief were rich with rhetoric and imagery.

Rhetorically, "the nation" became the most sacred of terms on the revolutionary side of the dichotomy. Other important words were "*patrie*," "constitution," "law," and, more radically, "regeneration," "virtue," and "vigilance." The relationship of these words to each other and to words on the side of tradition "were the means by which people became aware of their positions" (p. 53) in the revolutionary struggle. Moreover, the revolutionary symbols shaped people's perception of themselves and of their interests. For example, "procureurs and avocats (Old Regime legal types)

became hommes de loi (simple 'men of the law')'' (p. 20).

The images of the revolution—embodied in seals, engravings, and statuary—indicate the arbitrary nature of symbolic representation and creation. The symbolic meaning of the ancients as the revolutionary model of society, of female images of the republic, and of Hercules on the revolutionary seal cannot be deduced from social structural conditions. They must be interpreted in terms of collectively created and increasingly patterned beliefs. In this way Hunt demonstrates the autonomous—that is, the culturally determined—nature of symbols.

Rituals were the means by which revolutionary beliefs became manifest. Ritual created, for instance, the appearance of cockades on the hats of the revolutionary-minded. In the creation of symbols some rituals, such as the debates over the choice of revolutionary seals, became arenas for working out factional conflict. This process in turn strengthened collectively held beliefs. Furthermore, rituals such as the planting of liberty trees allowed people to take a political stand: ''they made adherence, opposition, and indifference possible'' (p. 53).

Evidently some rituals were simple and almost everyday activities. Others were very elaborate and ceremonious. In either case, participation was the key to the symbolic and revolutionary process. ''Ordinary activities . . . taking minutes, sitting in a club meeting, reading a republican poem . . . became invested with extraordinary significance'' (p. 72). Participating in a ritual, whether as simple as wearing garb deemed revolutionary or as elaborate as the festivals of Federation, infused people with the sentiment needed to understand the revolutionary experience, and it strengthened the bond of solidarity among participants.

Although the revolutionary culture was in constant flux, the symbolism of the ''mythic present, the instant of the new community, the sacred moment of the new consensus'' was the structural mechanism by which it renewed, regulated, and reproduced itself. ''The ritual oaths . . . sworn en masse during the many revolutionary festivals commemorated and recreated the moment of social contract; the ritual words made the mythic present come alive, again and again'' (p. 27).

This thumbnail sketch of Hunt's structural analysis of French revolutionary culture demonstrates the components of a culture structure that I contend make it autonomous. In any particular historical situation, analytic autonomy posits a culture's independence in relation to other social structures. Yet grave theoretical problems arise if the analyst remains at the analytic level. As discussed above, abstracting out a culture structure does not in itself prove the extent to which that structure is shared by members of the specific society being studied. In addition, at the analytic level the culture structure appears misleadingly to be totally coherent and to command complete adherence from the members of society. In reality, however, culture is more messy than monolithic, either because it is in the process of transformation or because, as Weber shows, institutionalization has weakened its structure. Furthermore, culture structures change radically, and the analytic level of cultural autonomy cannot theorize this change. In order to understand how culture figures into historical processes—that is, to determine the degree of its causality—we must explain both cultural transformation and the strength of culture structures. To this end we must reposition culture in relation to other social structures.

CONCRETE AUTONOMY

Precisely within this relationship we find concrete cultural autonomy. Yet how can we

distinguish the cultural from the social? How can we say what is ideal and what is material?

The theoretical key is that history is a structuring process; therefore the relationship between culture and social structure is one of mutual formulation, both between each other and with society as a whole. Furthermore, this formulation is a continual process, and in constant motion. Accordingly we need to identify the historically specific ingredients and processes of the formula. The basic ingredients in historical events are conditions, actors, contingent events, and arenas of action. All of these elements must be examined and sorted out "multidimensionally," i.e., as determined instrumentally and ideally (Alexander 1983).

Conditions, such as existing social, economic, political, and cultural structures, are of both the ideal and the material variety. It is important to recognize that conditions are the result of previous structuring processes: a structure may be distinctly material, but both cultural and material elements contributed to its formation.

We need first to ascertain actors' *interests*, keeping in mind Weber's (1946) admonition that both ideal and material interests govern people's conduct directly. For example, the ideal and the material interests of the people with whom Weber deals in *The Protestant Ethic* (1958)—urban business people, small landowners, craftsmen, and artisans—are respectively salvation and maintaining economic independence. Second, we must determine how actors' *experience* of conditional factors (i.e., what it means to them in light of their interests) directs their intentional action. This experience is mediated by cultural understandings; yet if these understandings are ineffective in explaining conditions, the culture is subject to change. Catholicism no longer offered a path to salvation in the changing economic and political climate of early-modern England; hence the religious system of the people who were to become capitalists began to change.

Contingent events can impinge both practically and culturally on the given circumstances of the event under study. For example, subsidizing the American Revolution added to the French monarchy's already troubled financial situation. At the same time, the American Revolution demonstrated to the French people that the civil society path to social reform and progress was possible (Mann forthcoming).

Arenas of action are the social historian's entrée to the actual formulation of the culture structure. In these arenas historically specific conditions, interests, experiences, and contingencies meet, interact, and culminate in cultural formations though "the often contradictory or antagonistic action of a large number of actors or groups of actors" (Sewell 1985, p. 61). Arenas may seem to be one-dimensional. When workers strike for higher wages, for example, their action is obviously based on material interests. Yet the act of striking provides ideal benefits: it raises consciousness and builds solidarity among the workers.

In the arenas of action we find the link between analytic and concrete autonomy of culture; that is, where the "sentiment (resulting from the actors' experience of the concrete) . . . is transformed into significance (read cultural-structure) and made socially available" (Geertz 1973, p. 207; text in parentheses mine). Because these arenas of interaction are often ritualistic, the primary process of analytic autonomy now becomes situated in concrete historical process.

Rituals, Solidarity, and Concrete Autonomy

As Michael Mann points out, the social analyst cannot assume that people in an historical event share a common culture. Therefore the object of analysis ought to be

the *extent* to which people share a culture (forthcoming). The extent of sharing a culture—that is, the degree of belief, commitment, and participation in it—can be regarded as the extent of solidarity. Solidarity is based on commonality of interests and experience, but is constructed through symbolic formulation. Accordingly the building of solidarity is at the heart of concrete cultural autonomy.

According to Collins (1988), solidarity is the result of the interactional (social) and symbolic (moral) density of a group. Through these interactional and symbolic processes, people's common interests and experience coalesce, they become a group by constructing a meaning system for action, and can diffuse this ideological or religious system throughout society.

Therefore these processes are ritualistic. They are the practice of beliefs. Yet rituals are not merely renewing in the analytic sense discussed above; they also are creative and transformative at the concrete level of culture. Swidler observes that "ritual acquires . . . significance in unsettled lives because ritual changes reorganize taken-for-granted habits and modes of experience" (1986, p. 279). The use of traditional rituals to construct new ideational systems is cited by Thompson (1963), Sewell (1980), and Zaret (1985).

More important to a theory of concrete cultural autonomy, as Collins (1988) suggests, we can extend the notion of ritual to any process of cultural formulation during historical events. If cultural structures such as ideology emerge from contradictory or antagonistic action (Sewell 1985, p. 61) we must look for arenas in which those processes of formulation occur, such as riots (Darnton 1984), demonstrations, gatherings in social houses (Thompson 1963), and associational meetings (Margadent 1979). In the sense that the *ancien régime*'s ideological structure of privilege was dismantled and the "uncluttered Enlightenment ideal of equal individual citizens" was set in its place (Sewell 1985, p. 69), the meeting of the French National Assembly on the night of August 4, 1789 is the quintessential ritual.

Situated as components of events, functioning as the processes through which interests are articulated, and resulting in solidarity, rituals often are part of the concrete historical event. Through action in rituals, and through the relation of action to symbolic representations, the historian can look for the structuring process of culture. Moreover, because this action also is bound to material interests and conditions, the relationship between the formation of culture and social structure (i.e., how each affects and informs the other) is illuminated. Finally, the actors' solidarity, based on an "anonymous and collective" (Sewell 1985) culture structure if their own creation, will account for their action in the historical event.

Through this process of establishing concrete autonomy of culture (i.e., its independent nature in concrete historical events) the question of the relative causal influence of culture can be answered. To validate this theoretical contention I now discuss a practical application of the concrete form of cultural autonomy: Michael Mann's analysis of ideology and the French Revolution.

Concrete Autonomy of Culture and the French Revolution

Mann (forthcoming) properly analyzes the French Revolution as a historical process. The actors in the sequences of revolutionary events are members of the *ancien régime* and of the revolutionary groups. The conditions launching the Revolution are fourfold. 1) The political condition is a decaying absolutist government and a society based on privilege. 2) Economically, France is feudal; capitalism is emerging, but is held back by traditional social structure. 3) The military has been occupied with

geopolitical war excursions; the last straw was the American Revolution. 4) Finally, the cultural realm is dynamic: the Enlightenment is underway, literacy is growing, and the presence of the Catholic Church is strong.

All of these conditions were critical to the French Revolution. To understand how the revolution began and eventually developed, we need to explain what these conditions meant to the French people. Then, keeping in mind that interpretation of experience is mediated through the cultural structure (ideology in formulation), we can begin to understand the collective, revolutionary action.

Mann contends that ideology did not cause the revolution, but he argues strongly that it was a major factor in how the revolution began and how it unfolded. The revolution began because of the fiscal crisis of the state, brought to a head by involvement in the American Revolution, and by the internal division and the "unconsciousness" in the regime, which prevented it from dealing effectively with the crisis. Mann, however, shows that the transformation was furthered by ideological power—the old regime losing it and revolutionaries gaining it.

How was this revolutionary ideology formulated and how was its power seized? According to Mann, the revolutionary ideology began in the old regime: the court supported and encouraged the Enlightenment *philosophes*; the government swelled the ranks of lawyers; and the Church, wanting people to be able to read sacred texts, promoted literacy among the general populace. While these groups were enjoying a cultural awakening, the *ancien régime* lost control over the fiscal crisis. People, especially the *philosophes* and members of the legal profession, began to look critically at the state and society on the basis of new cultural understandings.

Ironically, this reinterpretation of material conditions was structured by ideas that had begun to take shape within the structure of the old culture—that is, the moral principles of the Enlightenment. The *philosophes*' language changed from defense of privilege to appeals to fundamental laws and customs, especially the "imprescriptible" rights of (propertied) citizens. Likewise the lawyers' language went from defense of privilege to defense of general liberties. United, the *philosophes* and the lawyers produced a movement of principle led by ideologists.

Not only had the old regime inadvertently encouraged new revolutionary ideas; the medium for spreading the message, namely the circulation of the *cahiers*, was begun by the regime in its desperate effort to reform itself. Thus the movement begun by the *philosophes* and the lawyers was joined by the rest of society, primarily the petty bourgeoisie, the upper peasants, and the lower clergy. Through local literary networks, people began to express their needs and discontents; this action can be seen as a form of ritual. Political consciousness expanded as the *cahiers* were discussed in local communication networks.

As Mann describes this formative stage of the revolution, he demonstrates the proposition that action is determined both materially and culturally. Mann sees in the content of the *cahiers* a gradual universalization and modernization of political discourse as well as a growth of capitalist economic rationality. In other words, both the ideal and the material interests of revolutionary-minded people were addressed in the emerging ideology; the revolutionary process was one of "escalating appeals to principle" (forthcoming). When we look at Mann's description of the principles behind the ideology, we can see again its multidimensionality. He says, "'Principle' . . . carries its double meaning of both a general and a moral rule—for the revolutionaries became obsessed with 'virtue' and 'purity' (cultural) as well as with schemes of rational reconstruction (material)" (text in parentheses mine).

This early revolutionary ideology was a symbol system that resulted from collective

experience and served as a guide for action. Mann demonstrates that much of the content of the revolutionary ideology emerged from discourse generated through the communication networks between intellectuals, the petty bourgeoisie and the upper peasants, and the lower clergy. Furthermore, the leaders of the revolution, the "ideologists," emerged from this communication process. Looking at the ideologists multidimensionally, we see that they were leaders not only because they were able to express the will of the people (*la parole*), but also because they represented class interests. Moreover, although the leaders believed in the ideals they expressed, instrumentally they discovered the power invoked by proclaiming principles, which could forge emotional links (solidarity) between disparate political actors.

This synopsis shows how Mann's work approximates successful analysis of the autonomy of culture in the concrete form. By interrelating the state, the economy, classes, and cultural institutions in a historically specific manner—and in doing so, revealing the structure and the structuring of revolutionary ideology—Mann makes evident the causal power of culture in the French Revolution.

THE CAUSAL POWER OF CULTURE: ANALYTIC AND CONCRETE AUTONOMY

How does this idea of analytic and concrete autonomy contribute to understanding the causal power of culture in history?

There are two generally accepted explanations of the causal power of culture. The first finds causality in the social structural nature of the cultural system: culture is a component of the social system, so that culture is a *possible* causal factor, one among many, in any historical event. The second posits culture as constitutive of the social order: because culture is basic to and informs all social relations and institutions, it is always causal. I contend that both types of causality should be recognized. Culture is always a causal factor in historical processes, but the degree of causality is different; in some situations it carries more weight than in others. Although many historical sociologists might agree with this proposition, nobody has offered a theoretical explication of why it is true.

Theoretically, the structural nature of culture must be recognized. This is accomplished by demonstrating analytic autonomy, the empirical identification of specific culture structures. Without reconstructing the cultural system and actually showing its elements and processes, the social historian has no basis for claiming that culture is a determinative structure in its own right. At the same time, the structuring of a cultural system must be examined in its concrete interrelationship with other structures in historical processes: without positioning culture in its historically specific context and showing its interaction and formulation in relation to other structures, the analyst cannot determine its importance as a causal factor in a particular historical process.

I have shown that Hunt is successful in demonstrating analytic autonomy and that Mann comes close to revealing concrete autonomy. Yet because each writer explicates only one type of autonomy, neither offers a complete cultural analysis. To demonstrate the consequences of ignoring either the structure or the social embeddedness of culture, I will compare the analyses of Hunt and Mann as they deal with two phenomena of the revolution—aristocratic plots and the Terror.

According to Mann, "aristocratic plots . . . came to dominate revolutionary consciousness and led directly to the Terror" (forthcoming). Plots came to dominate consciousness because they "contrasted . . . with the openness and 'morality' of the

Revolution's political and ideological infrastructures'' and demonstrated symbolically the contrast between the honest virtue of the ''people'' and the corruption of the old regime. The plots led directly to the Terror because they were real; and the expressed intransigence of the king and his supporters forced pragmatic, moderate revolutionaries into extreme positions and strategies.

Hunt states that the ''Terror followed logically from the principles enunciated in revolutionary rhetoric . . .,'' of which conspiracy had become ''the central organizing principle'' (1984, p. 48). She explains that in opposition to conspiracy and interests, the notion of ''transparency'' became a revolutionary ideal: nothing should separate or hinder communication between citizens. Furthermore, the ''true patriot could have nothing to hide'' (p. 46). Political transparency necessitated public vigilance and denunciation, which became institutionalized in the Terror.

In Mann's rendition we see how concrete events of the revolution influenced the formulation of the revolutionary ideological structure. Yet we are led to believe that the ideological constructs reflected conditions directly: the people's reaction to the king's duplicity was reflected in the ideological concept of open virtue vs. secret evil. We gain little sense of an ideological *system* that influences the way in which people react to unfolding events, mediating their interpretations through its own structural formulations.

Hunt, on the other hand, elevates the concept of conspiracy to the symbolic level. By placing it in the political culture structure, she reveals the relationship of conspiracy to other symbolic concepts such as transparency, virtue, and vigilance. Moreover, in terms of the social context, Hunt recounts both aristocratic plots and the historical French fear of conspiracy, based on threats of hunger and starvation. In Hunt's interpretation, however, the revolutionary political culture structure has become so inviolate that no mutual transformation occurs between people's reactions to events and the political culture. As concrete events in the revolution, the aristocratic plots are interpreted and given meaning only in terms of the now-static political culture of the revolution. Yet as Mann demonstrates, these plots greatly influenced further formulation and transformation of that culture.

Furthermore, in Hunt's vision the culture structure takes on a life of its own and becomes the guiding force of the revolution. During the Terror

> Revolutionary rhetoric was . . . defeated by its inherent contradictions. While being political, it refused to sanction factional politicking. While showing the power of rhetoric, it denied the legitimacy of rhetorical speech. While representing the new community, is pushed toward the effacing of representation . . . .In short . . . (the) text was constantly subverting its own basis of authority (1984, p. 49).

Of course, the rhetoric did not constrain factional politicking, deny the right of speech, or efface representation—*people* did these things. At the precise juncture where the cultural system should be placed in relation to the social context, Hunt abstracts it further, making it completely autonomous and thus completely determinative. Ideology by itself did not produce the Terror any more than ideological contradiction determined the tragic latter stages of the revolution. To understand the concrete role of ideology in both these processes, compare the above passage to a section from Mann's analysis:

> The way was open for the Committee of Public Safety and for Robespierre's fierce revolutionary purity, combining intensified Terror with state activism. . . . Under

> Robespierre and Saint Just the principles became steadily more ethical, less political in content. Their "Republic of Virtue" extolled "purity" and purged "corruption," but its actual policy became less principled. These ideologists had not chosen class sides, and as classes became more self-conscious, the ideologists' indecision became more exposed (Mann forthcoming).

Here we see the interconnected formulation of revolutionary ideology, state policy, and emerging class struggle; all of this took place, as Mann narrates, in the complicated context of war and the *Levée en Masse*.

Though I have argued that Mann's demonstration of the concrete form of cultural autonomy is successful, his accomplishment is inadvertent. Granted, his plan of research and analysis is sound: "By exploring the extension of ideological infrastructures, and investigating the rise and nature of revolutionary principles, we can assess the causal significance of ideological power." Mann even recognizes that in order to identify causal significance, one must emphasize "distinct ideological institutions, symbolic and ritual practices and the content of certain ideologies." Yet in the otherwise correct effort to distance himself from an idealism that "eschews specific causal analysis and instead redescribes an entire social process . . . in cultural terms," Mann refuses to recognize an analytically autonomous structure of culture. The complex pattern of symbols and rituals elaborated by Hunt is mere form (or text) to Mann; in his analysis he divorces this pattern from the ideological content.

True, Mann discusses many of the elements of the ideological structure—symbols such as the "nation" and the ritualistic nature of the *cahiers* and the meeting of the Estates General. In the case of the revolutionary principles, he even examines their semantic interrelations. Yet because Mann does not recognize, much less attempt to identify, the analytic independence of the revolutionary cultural system, the cultural elements *appear* as reflections of material and political conditions—for example, principled resistance in reaction to the fiscal crisis, and the ideas of the ideological elite as representing the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie. I emphasize "appear" because a close reading of Mann reveals that culture is not a mere reflection of material structure. His analysis demonstrates both the independent nature and the causal power of ideology. Unfortunately, however, much of the theoretical import of Mann's work in cultural analysis is lost because of his denial of the analytic autonomy of culture.

Hunt has reconstructed a cultural system, one that she claims is the political culture of revolutionary France. Clearly Hunt believes that culture is constitutive of society and is always causal, and that its structure always can be found. Following her methodology of abstracting culture analytically from the social system, one can find the structure of culture at any time, in any place. So far, this is fine.

Yet because Hunt ignores explicitly the formulation of revolutionary political culture—through specific actors, their interests, and the historical conditions and development of the revolution - our only proof of the actual causal significance of the culture are the abstract correlations she draws between cultural structures and events, as expressed by the cultural text she has shown us. Identification of a symbolic system does not mean that the latter is a determinative structure in the specific historical process being examined. How do we know that a specific belief system helped to determine the course of the revolution unless we know which groups of people collectively constructed that system and were motivated to action by it? Furthermore, because Hunt does not relate the culture structure to specific actors and conditions that we know existed before and during the French Revolution, we do not know

whether the text that Hunt has shown us was the political culture of revolutionary France. Thus although Hunt gives us an elegant structure, we do not know its ultimate social meaning because it is removed from its social context.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical principles of analytic and concrete autonomy should guide the empirical finding of both forms of the culture structure. Although I stated that positing the analytic independence of culture precedes the concrete establishment of autonomy, the practical order of research and analysis would resemble the following: concrete investigation, analytic abstraction, concrete analysis, concrete investigation, analytic abstraction. Let us examine the methodology of Hunt and of Mann to explain this procedure; the methods of each scholar are sound, if limited, guides to constructing a methodologies for cultural analysis in historical work.

Guided by a theory which contends that political unity and coherence stem from underlying symbolic patterns, Hunt first immersed herself in historical materials—both primary and secondary—in order to identify the political culture. Because this stage of research requires examination of any and all relevant evidence, I term it concrete. From her sources Hunt found a "constant repetition of key words and principles, shared attitudes toward politics as an activity and use of symbols" (1984, p. 14). Hunt then analytically reconstructed from these prevalent elements the pattern of revolutionary culture, based on her interpretation of its foundation—the principle of a new nation.

To ascertain the causal power of revolutionary ideology, Mann engaged in the narrative form of exposition: as a historical process, he treated the French Revolution as a sequence of events bound together interactively. By examining specific events and sequences of events, Mann accesses directly the simultaneous concrete formation of both culture and social structure.

Of course, neither Hunt nor Mann engages in the other's method of analyzing ideology in the French Revolution. If Mann had abstracted out the cultural elements that his analysis found to be important, he could have shown an analytically autonomous culture structure.

For her part, Hunt contends that to prove the veracity of a culture structure—i.e., that it is widely shared and serves as a guide for action—there must be a "fit or affinity" between the symbolic elements and practices and the people who practice them (1984, p. 13). Instead of showing how the specific political culture was formulated by revolutionaries during the course and the events of the revolution, Hunt attempts to demonstrate the resonance between the political culture and certain social groups in certain regions of France. Her method of proof is vulnerable to the same criticism as Weber's thesis in the *Protestant Ethic* (1958) (although Weber was well aware of the limits of his theory): the correlation of a symbolic system with the material circumstances of a particular social group does not mean that the social group actually is motivated to action by the symbolic system. Hunt's theoretical failure, discussed above, is part and parcel of her methodological failure: because she does not demonstrate the collective construction of the political culture or the mutual influence and structuring of culture and social structure during concrete events, we do not know the social meaning of the culture structure she has shown us.

By combining the two authors' approaches, we still can accept Hunt's method of hermeneutic induction for abstracting out a culture structure and Mann's narrative

method for demonstrating the concrete causal power of such a structure. One last step is still missing, however. We may know that patterns of cultural elements prevail in a specific historical situation, and we may be able to show how those cultural elements emerged alongside new social structural elements. Yet if we are correct in assuming that historical processes involve different groups with diverse and often conflicting interests, the cultural analyst must investigate precisely how these diverse interests are molded into one ideology. For example, Mann contends that the circulation of the *cahiers* was essential to the structuring of both revolutionary ideology and political policies. Knowing that intellectuals, petty bourgeoisie, upper peasants, and lower clergy participated in the discourse surrounding the *cahiers*, as well as in other media, we find it implausible that a coherent ideology could emerge.

Therefore the final step is to trace, through a form of abstraction, the convergence and transformation of cultural elements from different interest groups into one ideology. In this step one would comb mostly primary sources in chronological order for evidence of this process. As a suggestive example I will use my research on the ideological formation during the Irish Land War.

Like most social movements, the land movement in post-famine Ireland encompassed several social groups, each possessing distinct interests, values, and goals. There were the peasants, who occupied of various-sized holdings; the nationalists, both constitutionalists and radicals; and the Catholic clergy, some sympathetic to the movement and some not. Not only were there conflicts between these groups, but intra-group tension existed as well. Yet these participants in the Land War worked out their differences, producing both a unified ideological structure and a coherent strategic campaign against the landlord system.

We cannot explain the coalescence of these groups merely on the basis of common economic, social, or political interests. True, the Irish were rebelling largely because of the material and political conditions. A unified movement, however, never could have arisen on the basis of commonality of material interests and experience, mainly because "commonality" contained so many contradictory and/or competing interests. Yet neither can we explain the coalescence and solidarity of these groups on the basis of a common ideology, or ideologies with strong commonalities, that they shared as they entered the struggle. The new ideological structure that these groups formulated accounts for the solidarity and coherence of the movement—and the formation of this new ideological structure, culminating from the transformation of various ideologies and cultural systems through the ritualistic nature of hundreds of movement meetings, must be demonstrated.

Documentation of these meetings exists in the form of newspaper articles. Verbatim accounts of speeches and discussions by meeting participants, who attended in hundreds and thousands, reveal the ideological concepts brought to the movement (see examples in Bew 1979). What did the tenant farmers, the nationalists, and the clergy say? What words indicate the interests and beliefs of these groups? By analyzing these events and the discourse over a few years I expect to see the merging of some ideological concepts and the discarding of many others, until finally a new ideology reflecting the coalescence and solidarity of the groups constituting the land movement is evident.

CONCLUSION

Work by Lynn Hunt and Michael Mann represents some of the best cultural analysis being done in historical sociology today. Yet each is evidence of the glaring

deficiencies in this field. In overreacting to functionalist determinism (Bellah 1957; Lipset 1967; Smelser 1959), historical sociology has become dominated by a materialist perspective (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1964; Zeitlin 1984) that relegates culture to the marginal role of reflecting social structural processes. In turn, sociologists who attempt to apply cultural analysis to historical explanation have reacted to material determinism and recognize that cultural systems are crucial to how people formulate their understandings of the world. These sociologists often have gone to extremes in their culturally deterministic explanations (Alexander 1988b; Furet 1978; Little 1969; Walzer 1965).

The most recent work in the field of cultural analysis has only obscured further the theoretical issues involved. In *Meaning and Moral Order* (1987) Robert Wuthnow prescribes giving up the "problem of meaning" in cultural analysis in order to cure its illness of subjectivity and thus to avoid its inherent "idealism." Yet if we abandon our attempt to understand the significance of symbolic structures in the interpretation of concrete experience, we cannot understand the reciprocal process of formulation between culture and social structure. The unfortunate consequences of such a position are illustrated in Wuthnow's most recent work, *Communities of Discourse* (1989). According to his account of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of European socialism, cultural production depends entirely on the ability of elites to mobilize social resources and to institutionalize new belief systems. Yet this view considers culture only in its concrete form (and incompletely at that), without giving it any autonomy in the analytic sense. Because meaning has no place in Wuthnow's theory, he does not explain how these belief systems, as both cultural and social movements, were formulated and embraced en masse by members of the respective societies.

Ann Swidler recommends that culture be seen as "a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different sets of problems" (1986, p. 273). This vision of culture denies both the structural logic of cultural systems and the role of a coherent belief system in concrete social action during specific historical situations.

In *Culture and Agency* (1988), Margaret Archer's theoretical goal is the unification of structural and cultural analysis. To achieve this end, she calls correctly for a more structural analysis of culture. Her approach is based on a dualism—the separation of the cultural system from social-cultural integration. Yet, instead of theorizing culture as an independent structure, Archer reduces it to true/false propositions. In her view, integration of culture into the social system is based on full dependence of the former on the latter. Like Wuthnow, Archer neglects meaning and the process of culture construction, undercutting both the analytic autonomy of culture and a true understanding of the integration of concrete culture with social structure.

The dual nature of cultural autonomy must be recognized; otherwise cultural analysis in historical sociology will continue to be incomplete, and either reductionist or determinist. Both Durkheimian and Weberian theory support this claim, and it is no coincidence that my outlines for finding analytic and concrete autonomy respectively resemble their theoretical approaches. Durkheim is concerned with understanding sociologically the internal structure of culture—what symbol systems and ritual processes do in social life. Weber is concerned with connecting that internal structure to transcendental interests, which are rooted in historically specific political, economic, and normative conditions. Though amalgamating Durkheimian with Weberian theory is tricky at best, cultural analysis in historical sociology must draw on both theories.

If we accept the definition of culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system . . . by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973, p. 89) and through which people interpret their experience of the world and in turn act upon it, we see that both forms of cultural autonomy must be examined in historical work. This definition establishes that culture is a system, as Durkheim proposed, and that people use culture in a meaningful way in their lives. As per Weber, culture is used to deal with the concrete experience of life—economic, political, and social. Systems of thought are constructed collectively, so we need to find those arenas of formulation. Further, because ideational systems function to interpret and give meaning to life, it is necessary to discover what people (through their experience of concrete conditions) bring to rituals that affects the formulation of culture. Likewise we must examine how particular culture structures influence other social structures through mediated action.

Applying the theoretical and methodological approach that I advocate to substantive work is a complicated process. It involves a richly woven analysis of interrelated factors on different levels, based on the combination of traditional and innovative methods of historical and cultural sociology. One way to make this type of analysis manageable is to keep the subject of analysis relatively small in both time and space. Historical events, such as revolutions, are ideal because they provide a window on the reciprocal formulation of cultural and material structures. Much of the current work in historical sociology focuses on smaller units of analysis (e.g., Traugott 1985); therefore this suggestion should not be hard to accept. More difficult perhaps is my second suggestion: Social historians need to abandon their disdain for what they see as the opposing camp—whether materialist or idealist—and to try to understand the relationship between cultural and structural analysis in historical sociology. To this end, the notion of analytic and concrete cultural autonomy provides a conceptual starting place.

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