

EUROPEAN WORKERS: MEANING-MAKING BEINGS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This concluding essay suggests how contemporary developments in cultural sociology can enrich and extend the American sociology of work. While recent studies in the sociology of work consider more fully the role of sense making and representations in workers' lives, we propose additional possibilities for conceptual and theoretical cross-pollination. We propose questions that a cultural sociologist might ask about European workers in the age of neo-liberalism.

Methodology/approach – We examine how authors in this volume and its companion (Brady, 2011), and other students of workers approach culture-related phenomena. In particular we focus on how they use culture as explanans and explananda. Borrowing from Lamont and Small (2008) and Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010), we present a set of analytical tools that cultural sociologists use widely. We then draw from culturally focused studies of workers to illustrate how researchers have used these concepts.

Findings – Research on European workers documents important political and economic trends that affect this group, but it examines less frequently

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how individuals understand, experience, and respond to these changes. With tools from cultural sociology, we can explore these understudied aspects of the conditions and lives of European workers.

Originality/value of paper – *To our knowledge, this is the first systematic discussion of how concepts from contemporary cultural sociology can enrich research on European workers.*

Keywords: Workers; work; cultural repertoire; symbolic boundaries; narrative; frame

INTRODUCTION

The research in this volume and its companion (Brady, 2011) has strong intellectual roots in the American sociology of work and industrial relations, which draws primarily on the sociology of organizations, political economy, neo-Marxism, and labor studies. In this concluding essay, we suggest how contemporary developments in cultural sociology could enrich this subfield by proposing new questions and providing the analytical tools to answer them. Our endeavor complements a previous volume of this journal that aimed to pollinate the sociology of work with insights from economic sociology. In her introduction (Bandelj, 2009), the editor argued convincingly that the sociology of work should extend the theoretical boundaries of work by examining such neglected activities as care work, work in the informal economy, and prison work. She also argued that the sociology of work can be enriched by conceptualizing paid work as socially constructed and embedded in social relations, culture, and politics. Similarly, we urge sociologists of work to consider a wider range of issues, this time from a cultural perspective.

Culture is in no way absent from research on work and workers. It has been central to the investigations of historians and sociologists who are influenced by the linguistic turn, by the Birmingham school of cultural studies, and by the Bourdieu-inspired approach to the construction of social categories. To cite only a few of the most illustrious books on the topic: *The Fabrication of Labor* (Biernacki, 1995) demonstrates culture's independent effect on the development of factory practices. Specifically, this book traces the national origins of cultural definitions of labor as a commodity; the incorporation of these definitions into work practices and regulation measures on the shop floor in Germany and Britain; and the ideological consequences of these industrial

practices for labor movements. Focusing on post-revolutionary France, *The Rise of Market Culture* (Reddy, 1984) examines how market conduct was culturally acquired, gradually becoming part of economic agents' self-understanding through the efforts of intellectual elites (see also Sewell, 2010 for recent work on consumption). It demonstrates that before the acquisition of this market orientation, textile production in pre-revolutionary France had grown without a model of free-market exchange. *Learning to Labor* (Willis, 1977) shows how working class adolescents understand and construct classificatory oppositions (manual versus mental labor, masculine versus feminine actions, free versus conformist activity) and how these lead them to accept working class jobs "voluntarily." Last, *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society* (Boltanski, 1987) analyzes the development of "cadres" (managers). It considers how representations and self-representations of this group contributed to its emergence and consolidation as a socio-professional category.

The sociology of work has also drawn inspiration from authors as varied as Gramsci (1971), Goffman (1959), and Thompson (1963). Other scholars of work have addressed culture-related topics such as consensus and dissent in the work place, ideology, dominance, and resistance. A classic in this genre remains *Manufacturing Consent* (Burawoy, 1979), which bears the imprint of traditional Marxist questions (see also Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984). Other qualitative sociologists have studied the American workplace without using the conceptual toolkit of cultural sociology (Arlie Hochschild, Vicky Smith, and Richard Sennett among others). Especially in recent years, additional affinities have developed between cultural sociology and the sociology of the American and European working class, which includes strongly culture-inflected studies (e.g., Anteby, 2008; Fantasia, 1989; Kefalas, 2003; Lamont, 2000; Roscigno & Danaher, 2004; Sallaz, 2009; Schwartz, 1990; Sherman, 2007). Similar sympathies have emerged in the sociology of professions (e.g. Molnar, 2005; Morrill, 1995). In addition, several scholars of organizations, primarily based in business schools, have addressed the cultural aspects of work (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Bechky, 2003; Kunda, 1992; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Weeks, 2004). Although important, in our view their research is less central to the American sociology of work, partly due to institutional factors.

Recently, sociologists have returned to studying work culture, "broadly defined [as] sets of values, beliefs, norms and sentiments about work and the symbols and rituals that express them" (Leidner 2010, p. 419). This question is central to the interactionist tradition in the sociology of occupation developed by Everett Hughes (1984) and his students, who focused on

“efforts by the members of an occupation to act on their values in order to maintain their prerogatives and their dignity rather than comply with other’s standards” (Leidner, 2010, p. 421). For instance, in *Dignity at Work*, Hodson (2001), like Burawoy, analyzes struggles over control of work, inclusion and exclusion, goals and rewards: “Workplaces often have their own distinctive cultures – what industrial sociologists called shop-floor cultures – which can alter occupational values or override occupational barriers” (Leidner, 2010, p. 421). Similarly, in *Cultures of Solidarity*, Fantasia (1989) revisits the formation of class consciousness in contemporary America by emphasizing how meaning-making results from collective action. Recently, Desmond (2007) examines why men join and stay in the risky profession of wild firefighting. This author argues that workers develop an ethos of self-reliance that reduces their perception of danger on the job.

Despite these new openings, cultural questions remain somewhat peripheral to the sociology of work in the United States, which to some extent maintains its traditional focus on economic or workplace outcomes such as: workers’ compensation, rise in income inequality, the decline of unions and their redistributive role, work flexibility, the globalization of competition between workers, changes in collective bargaining structures, and welfare state provisions.¹ Cultural questions are not especially central to the American-based interdisciplinary literature grounded in political economy and labor relations, and influenced by political science (we have in mind the work of Eric Olin Wright, Wolfgang Streeck, Joel Rogers, and many others). This may be in part because some researchers associate cultural analysis not with new developments in cultural sociology, but with cultural studies as practiced in the humanities, which may be faulted for being over-theoretical, for its elusive conceptualizations, and for its unsystematic treatment of empirical evidence. Relatively low levels of intellectual cross-pollination may also stem from: nonoverlapping professional networks; the path-dependent process by which ideas travel; the association between the study of culture and neo-Durkheimian approaches, which are far from popular among students of labor influenced by the neo-Marxist tradition; and the political relativism of theories associated with post-structuralism and the linguistic turn, which are often seen (somewhat incorrectly) as akin to cultural sociology.

Against this broader intellectual landscape, American sociologists of work who study European workers have not denied the importance of culture to work-related outcomes; some authors, including those in this volume and its companion (Brady, 2011), address cultural concepts

explicitly (e.g., Fullerton, Robertson, & Dixon, 2011; Martin & Kaya, Chapter 5, this volume; Wallace & Lowe, 2011). Rather, we believe that they could fruitfully integrate new conceptual developments from cultural sociology and address more explicitly the cultural aspects of work-related issues. Thus, in this chapter, we point to other potentially productive areas for cross-fertilization. We suggest that sociologists of work should actively borrow from cultural sociology to consider even more fully the layers of meaning that mediate all human relations, including those in work-related settings. Building on an emerging convergence between cultural sociology and the sociology of work, and drawing directly on Lamont and Small (2008) and Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010), we present analytical tools that researchers can use to examine the conditions and lives of European workers – concepts such as strategies for action, frames, repertoire, symbolic boundaries, institutions, and narratives. We illustrate the potential payoff of these concepts and contrast them with older approaches, such as those centered on values.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, we discuss central aspects of a cultural perspective, including how it privileges sense-making as a sociological object. Then, we describe how contributors to this volume and its companion (Brady, 2011) employ cultural concepts in their analyses. Drawing on cultural sociology, we suggest alternative or complementary questions, namely those concerning the experiences and understandings of workers. Next, we describe key analytical tools from cultural sociology and how researchers can use them to study European workers. We close by considering questions that could guide future inquiry. In particular, we argue for a greater focus on boundary work in the sociology of European workers in the age of neo-liberalism.

WHAT IS A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE?

Cultural sociology examines the symbolic aspects of social life. It addresses both how culture affects social phenomena – in particular action – and how cultural elements, such as narratives, worldviews, and identity, arise, change and are maintained. It is often contrasted with the sociology of culture, which focuses on cultural institutions and the production, diffusion, evaluation, and consumption of cultural goods. Like many critics of rational choice approaches (including those who study work), cultural sociologists contend that every human action involves meaning, as agents interpret and evaluate their environment and actions through distinct filters.

These meanings enable and constrain action, together with other types of determinants, be they spatial, social structural, or temporal (Sewell, 2005).

In the past decades, cultural sociologists have developed increasingly nuanced models of how culture shapes thought and action. Previous conceptions of the link between culture and action rested on the Parsonsian notion that cultural values engender actions consistent with those values. Traditional social psychological perspectives posit a similarly straightforward link between attitudes and behaviors, such that acts result from attitudes. Yet, social scientists have noted countless cases in which individuals behave in ways inconsistent with their articulated values and attitudes (e.g., Swidler, 1986; Wilson, 1996), which has led scholars to reformulate models of culture and action.

More specifically, to simplify somewhat, cultural sociologists conceive of humans as actors in worlds filled with publically available symbolic goods, such as stories, scripts for action, ways of interpreting people and events, and styles of self-presentation. This view can be traced to the phenomenological sociologist Schutz (1982), who argued that people are born into a life-world that already contains schemes of interpretation, recipes, “natural conceptions of the world,” typifications, and signs. These symbolic items provide people with tools to interpret other people, to anticipate others’ behaviors, to imagine oneself in the future, and, thus, to act. Using the metaphor of a “toolkit,” Swidler (1986) sees culture as the supply of “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views” (p. 19) that people draw on to create “strategies of action.” In a Durkheimian mode, Sewell (1992) argues that cultural schemas can “harden” to the point that they become well-established, diffused “structures” that constrain and enable action. Thus, cultural sociologists emphasize how actors draw on available meanings and create meaning, such as evaluations, interpretations, and understandings of their life-world.

This perspective concords with an institutionalist view of social reality as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), Meyer and Rowan, (1991), and many others (e.g., Hall & Taylor, 1996; Dobbin, 1994). It is at odds, however, with a neo-Marxist view that culture is the reflection of material reality and with an instrumentalist view that conceives culture exclusively in its role in maintaining relations of domination. Instead, cultural sociologists contend that culture – for example, practices, dispositions, and orientations – contributes to the constitution of relationships in a wide range of domains and institutions (the exercise of power, but also in the realms of love, work, family, religion, etc.). At the same time, cultural analysts recognize that practices, dispositions, and orientations are constrained by cultural and social structures, including time, space, technology, material scarcity, and the availability of social resources.

Cultural sociology is especially useful for examining social phenomena that center on the creation and interpretation of meaning. These phenomena include, but are not limited to: identity, homophily, processes of exclusion, individual and group decision making, organizational procedures, patterns of daily life, how people adapt to structural constraints, and responses to sudden change. Thus, cultural sociology can accomplish three main analytical goals: reveal the meanings that operate in a situation, help us understand (*verstehen*) how these meanings contribute to social processes, and explain why situations lead to an observed outcome. Moreover, cultural sociology provides tools to examine culture as an *explanandum* (an outcome to be explained) and an *explanans* (what explains the outcome).

Culture-related *explananda* include individual and group beliefs, choices, tastes, styles of interaction, and perceptions. In studies of workers, such *explananda* may include work attitudes (see Wallace & Lowe, 2011), perceptions of work situations (Desmond, 2007), political orientations (Croteau, 1995), job-related decisions (Destro & Brady, Chapter 3, this volume), perceptions of job insecurity (Fullerton et al., 2011), class consciousness (Fantasia, 1989), and responses to the precariousness of working class life (Kefalas, 2003). Through examining meaning, researchers can explain such outcomes with social structural and macro-economic factors, including union density, income inequality, and unemployment rates. That is, in addition to approaching these variables through straightforward indicators, scholars can tap how workers interpret and experience them. For example, it may be useful to consider how workers interpret and assess the unemployment rate, given factors such as their personal experience with job searching and their understanding of other workers’ experiences. A cultural sociology approach would also consider culture as *explanans* – in this case, how workers’ sense-making enables and constrains their action.

HOW IS CULTURE TREATED IN THE TWO VOLUMES

Among the contributions to the two volumes, Tugal’s (2011) paper, “The Islamic Making of a Capitalist Habitus: The Turkish Sub-Proletariat’s Turn to the Market,” attends most to sense-making processes and patterns. This author finds that upon moving from the county to the city, the Turkish sub-proletariat embraces capitalism with little resistance and without the “fatalism of despair” that characterizes the integration of other “traditional”

groups into “modern” life. This relatively smooth cultural transition occurs because Turkey’s pro-capitalist *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) uses religion to cultivate a modern habitus in the rural population. In focusing on the fundamental orientations of migrants to economic activity and on how political actors frame and manipulate ideas and symbols, Tugal homes in on the cultural aspects of proletarianization. In his account, cultural phenomena are what must be explained (the pro-capitalism of workers) and what do the explaining (religion). In contrast, some contributors use culture as an explanatory variable, an outcome variable, or an explanation for statistical associations; other authors do not attend to culture. We address their contributions in turn.

The authors who focus on culture as an explanatory variable privilege national cultures and political ideology tapped through survey data. Indeed, in “Work Values and Job Rewards among European Workers,” Wallace and Lowe posit that national-level factors, including national cultures, may account in part for work values and job rewards, as well as explain cross-national variations in these outcomes. Similarly, in “Reexamining the Relationship between Flexibility and Insecurity: A Multilevel Study of Perceived Job Insecurity in 27 European Countries,” Fullerton, Robertson, and Dixon assert that explanations of perceived job insecurity must include macro-level cultural factors; specifically they observe that variations in the meanings of part-time work across nations may account for some of the cross-national differences in perceived job security. For his part, in “Activating Workers? The Political Economy of Active Social Policy in Postindustrial Democracies,” Swank (Chapter 2, this volume) finds that the ideological position of the median voter is positively associated with the adoption of active unemployment policies by their national government. Finally, in “From Class to Market: Unionization in East European Ex-Communist Countries, 1990–2006,” Martin and Kaya assess what factors explain union decline in this region. They focus on macroeconomic and institutional explanations, as well as widespread belief in the illegitimacy of unions.

All these authors acknowledge that, in combination with broad social structural phenomena, cultural factors may explain important outcomes for European workers. While we recognize the importance of focusing on national cultures and policies, we propose that scholars expand this approach by tapping a fuller range of cross-national cultural explanations. For example, they might link work values to outcomes such as exclusion, examine the centrality of work to a person’s self-concept, analyze how people draw on wider narratives of the market and the state to understand their risk of job loss, and examine if cross-national differences in the

meaning of flexible work explain cross-national variation in perceived job insecurity, as Fullerton and colleagues suggest.

Other contributors consider culture as an outcome to be explained by social structural factors. They examine the perceptions, attitudes, and values of individual laborers, generally in reference to national-level determinants related to the economy and politics. Their approach is often akin to neo-Marxist and social structural approaches. For instance, drawing on survey data, Wallace and Lowe explain the work values of individuals with cross-national variables, such as the continuous presence of democracy, contentious politics, state capacity, union density, economic integration, service employment, and income inequality. An inductive exploration could complement this approach with interviews that reveal a fuller range of work values than most surveys do, such as values’ connection with concepts of moral worth and with boundaries drawn against the poor or immigrants (Lamont, 2000).

For their part, Fullerton and colleagues analyze a thoroughly cultural outcome: workers’ perception of job security, which they define as a process by which individuals observe and evaluate the micro- and macro-environments in which they are embedded. These researchers, too, explain attitudes with social structural factors, including national unemployment rates, national levels of union density, availability of unemployment benefits at the national level, and a country’s post-socialist status. They find that, unlike in the United States, European workers feel most insecure in countries with *low* levels of part-time and temporary employment. In-depth interviews might make sense of this surprising result by probing inductively how workers evaluate social structural determinants, as well as other aspects of their micro- and macro-environments; questions could include what laborers consider relevant to their work and how their conception of job insecurity is embedded in webs of meaning, such as whether they blame “the market” or themselves for their situation [see Sharone (2010) for an insightful comparison of such meanings in Israel and the United States]. Alternatively, one could document through frequencies the distribution and combination of different work-related frames, as illustrated by Harding’s (2007) study of how low-income populations understand their romantic relationships.

For his part, Swank examines the domestic and international factors that policy makers consider in creating active unemployment policy, including the presence of Left governments, coordinated market institutions, international trade openness, political veto points within the polity, and industrialization. While this author focuses on how individual policy makers assess broad economic and social structural factors, other scholars have considered how policy makers construct the problem to be solved (e.g., poverty) and its solutions (Guetzkow, 2010; Steensland, 2006; also Sato, 2010).

As is often the case in the American sociology of work, these last three papers concentrate on explanans that can be captured through quantitative indicators, and this methodological choice bears fruit. For a fuller understanding of causal processes, researchers could complement this focus by analyzing the role of semiotic dimensions. After all, the impact of these aspects cannot be assessed until they are documented.

A final subset of authors uses cultural theories to explain statistical associations. Wallace and Lowe use Inglehart's (1997) post-materialist values thesis to account for cross-national variations in work attitudes between post-socialists and capitalist countries. They argue that workers in post-socialist countries show relatively higher levels of work centrality and work commitment than in capitalist societies, where residents seek self-actualization and fulfillment outside the productive realm. Consistent with this well-established line of work, the authors predefine post-materialist values and do not examine other cultural orientations that can affect work attitudes including: the compatibility between work and family life, the possibility of finding a partner in the workplace, the size and diversity of the pool of coworkers, cultural homophily among employees, work and religious orientations, and publically available ways of framing the meaning of work. It would be important to complement this research with interviews with workers to establish inductively what they consider in evaluating the centrality of work to their lives and their commitment to work.

Of note, most contributors to these volumes do not include culture-related phenomena or variables in their analyses. This fact stems from the kind of questions they ask and from their choice of method and evidence. Several authors privilege empirical questions about statistical relationships, especially between macro-level factors. For instance, in "Labour, Globalization and Inequality: Are Trade Unions Still Redistributive?" Baccaro (Chapter 8, this volume) examines whether trade unions and collective bargaining are related to rising income inequality within countries. Similarly, in "Whose Interests do Unions Represent? Unionization by Income in Western Europe," Becher and Pontusson (Chapter 7, this volume) use survey data to examine where union members are located in the income distribution in order to consider whether the economic composition of unionized workers has implications for redistributive social policy. For their part, Destro and Brady (Chapter 3, this volume) ask "Does European-Style Welfare Generosity Discourage Single Mother Employment?" by examining the statistical association between welfare expenditures and the employment rates of single mothers. While these chapters measure the relationship between various phenomena, they do not fully explore cultural aspects of the phenomena under study; other researchers could examine, for

instance, the meaning associated with unions and their redistributive role, how people make sense of income inequality – including inequality between unionized and non-unionized workers – and whether they believe the welfare state has perverse effects.

In pointing out these potential research questions, we are not arguing that all inquiries should have a cultural dimension. Instead, we highlight what aspects of reality are made visible and invisible in a research tradition. Taken on a case by case basis, these foci are certainly justifiable. But when considered in the aggregate, they may limit a fuller understanding of the social phenomenon under consideration and miss some of their important aspects. We suggest that the sociology of work should study all aspects of the work world and focus on the interplay between social structure and cultural structures. This requires gaining a better understanding not only of the distribution of cultural orientations among workers but also of their salience and meanings. It necessitates examining the categories through which workers understand, experience, and negotiate the world around them, as well as how they solve work-related and other challenges. These questions are important if we are to consider how European workers think and act, including how they might react to many of the challenges they face, such as deskilling, youth underemployment, ethnic competition in the workplace, and increasing competition with workers in the Global South, among others. Drawing on the concepts from cultural sociology could help address these questions and extend inquiry beyond topics stemming from the sociology of organization, political economy, and the history of the European left and unions that focus on improving workers' conditions and control.

WHAT CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE STUDY OF WORK: POTENTIAL FOR CONCEPTUAL POLLINATION

While research on European workers favors culture-related concepts such as national values, attitudes, and ideology, but for a few exceptions (e.g., Vaisey, 2009), cultural sociologists generally use analytical tools such as strategies for action, frames, repertoires, symbolic boundaries, institutions, and narratives. These concepts are essential for examining intersubjective meanings and cultural structures. Researchers typically use these analytical tools to capture and contrast empirical realities through archival work, case studies, observation, or interviews. Moreover, one can document their relative

salience in a specific environment, establishing for example how frequently individuals draw on the frames of working class solidarity, possessive individualism or human rights to make claims. Furthermore, as we see, cultural sociologists also use these concepts to study cross-national cultural differences, and often prefer them to the concept of national culture, which is associated with the much-maligned notion of national character (Inkeles, 1979; for a critique, see Lamont & Thévenot, 2000). Drawing on Lamont and Small (2008) and Small et al. (2010), we advocate a broader usage of such concepts, which are both more pliable and more specific than the concepts of values, attitudes, and ideology. While these authors discuss the benefit of these and other concepts (e.g., habitus, cultural capital, social identity) for poverty studies, we believe that these analytical tools can extend and enhance research on workers in general, and on European workers in particular. Because each of these concepts points to different aspects of symbolic activity, they enable a more parsimonious analysis of the various dimensions and processes of sense making. They also allow for culture-related explananda, such as habitus and symbolic boundaries, to be accounted for by culture-related explanans, including institutions.

Returning to the literature on work, we explain the advantage of using such concepts instead of the older culture concepts, such as values and attitudes. Focusing on intersubjective frames, narrative structures, and institutions is particularly crucial in light of recent research in social psychology, which reveals that attitudes are relatively poor predictors of behavior. Indeed, according to Son Hing (2010), “A recent meta-analysis of 88 studies revealed that the overall attitude to behavior relation was .38 (...) Thus, 14% of the variance in people’s behavior could be accounted for by their attitudes.”

As Durkheim and many others suggest, shared taken-for-granted cultural representations are a necessary and significant dimension of social relations and are crucial to all aspects of social life. They are essential to sociological explanations. For this reason, they deserve consideration in and of themselves, independently of their impact on attitudes. We begin our discussion with the older concept of “values,” which we contrast with the concept of strategy for action.

Values vs. Strategies for Action

Values are prominent in folk understandings of human behavior and motivation, in political discourse, and in social science research. In each case, values specify the *ends* toward which behavior is directed (as opposed

to the means to achieve them or the lens through which to interpret action). Researchers using a Parsonian conception of culture often see values as functionally necessary to coordinate economic and political institutions. The functionalism inherent in this view suggests that values that are incompatible with the cultural and political systems will not endure. However, again, the core proposition of this perspective – that values are robust predictors of behavior – has received mixed empirical support.

Working outside of a functionalist perspective, contemporary cultural sociologists are more attuned to how the outcomes of values might be contingent on other factors than values themselves. This perspective casts doubt on the notion of a linear relationship between values and behaviors in two ways. First, it suggests that behavior or practices are constituted in part by how social actors interpret their environment, which shapes their sense of what actions are possible and desirable. Second, this perspective posits that behavior requires particular knowledge to uphold certain values (Swidler, 1986). The first point can be illustrated by how belief in individualism and personal responsibility, which many Americans consider to be a positive value, influences action and social trajectories in unexpected ways. Although many people get jobs by mobilizing their social networks (Granovetter, 1974), Smith shows that individualism may actually undermine one’s ability to find a job. In her studies of job-seekers among low-income black and Latino women and men (Smith, 2007, 2010), Smith finds that some fail to use their networks because they distrust others and believe strongly that people ought to succeed through their *own* efforts. Similarly, one’s ability to pursue goals and values hinges on having tools and strategies of action (such as knowing how to apply for college, how to network properly, how to request favors from acquaintances [Swidler, 1986]). Here, tools for action – not values – guide behavior. A focus on strategies in work-related phenomena helps explain why working class boys seek working class jobs, rather than middle class positions (Willis, 1977). It is also potentially fruitful for understanding how workers deal with challenges.

Frames

Between values and behavior lie lenses through which actors interpret action, known as frames – a second crucial concept. The concept of frames has roots in the work of Schutz (1982), Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Goffman (1963, 1974), among others. Frames are lenses through which we observe and interpret social life, which foreground or highlight certain issues

and hide others. Frames encode expectations about consequences of behavior and the relationships among various aspects of our social worlds, supplying understandings of “how the world works” (Young, 2004). Frames can also be understood as intersubjective realities (or cultural structures) that are made available to individuals by their environment. They are the object of a growing comparative empirical literature, especially in the field of social movements (e.g., Ferree & Gamson, 2002; Saguy & Benson, 2005).

By examining the frames that different individuals or groups bring to social interactions and decision making, we can begin to understand two related issues. First, the concept of frame is based on the premise that individuals can perceive the same events differently based on their prior experiences, understandings, and their environment. Frame analysis, then, can capture the heterogeneity in people’s understandings of how the world works. Second, frames help social scientists understand the relationship between culture and action. How one thinks about work is likely to be influenced by other frames: how one conceives opportunities or thinks about salvation, for example. Frames also define horizons of possibilities, individual life projects, or what is thinkable. They do not, however, strictly cause action. Rather frames constrain the behaviors that actors conceive of, thereby making certain actions more or less possible and likely. For instance, in a study of the politics of white American workers and the middle class, Croteau (1995) finds that working people frame the political system as irremediably corrupt and distant from common people’s lives. This view constrains their behavior, making them less apt to become involved in social movements. In contrast, middle class activists see the political system as broken but fixable, which increases the likelihood that they will participate in social movements. In this study, a cultural analysis of how different groups understand formal politics explains what material or social structural factors cannot account for.

Repertoires

Cultural sociologists use cultural repertoires as an umbrella concept to discuss the symbolic elements from which people create strategies of action. Whereas strategies of action refer to the behaviors themselves, repertoires are the set of ideas, stories, discourses, frames, and beliefs that people draw on to create a line of action in the first place. This concept rests on two premises: first, that people have a set of strategies in their minds (how to apply to college, how to fire a gun, how to wear a condom, how to be a good son-in-law); and second, that people

are unlikely to engage in an action unless they have the symbolic tools to do so. This concept comes from Hannerz (1969), who described repertoires as a set of “modes of action” and meanings. Each individual has a repertoire of these cultural tools and calls on them when action is required. Swidler (1986) has proposed the metaphor of a “toolkit” to explain how the repertoire works. As an alternative to the Parsonian focus on unified systems of values or norms, she suggests that a repertoire is a cache of ideas from which people draw as they navigate their environment. Similarly, Tilly wrote about repertoires of contention on which European and other workers have drawn to make claims. He described repertoires as “the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups” (Tilly 1986). Dubet’s (2009) *Injustice at Work*, for example, shows that in interviews French workers often denounce meritocracy as unfair because it benefits those who are performing best at the expense of weaker members – a position that is never found among American workers Lamont (2000) studied. Lamont also shows that French workers are far more likely to define morality in terms of solidarity than their American counterparts, who emphasize work ethic, responsibility, and self-reliance. She argues that Republicanism, Catholicism, and a strong leftist tradition have informed and sustained this notion of solidarity, including working class solidarity, while its salience has declined in the United States throughout the 20th century. This conception of solidarity feeds French strategies of political action, including petitions and street demonstrations, which are more frequent in France than in most other advanced industrial societies (Mayer, 2010).

This notion of repertoire is at odds with the idea that specific groups “have a culture.” It suggests instead that different groups, such as the poor or blue-collar workers, do not possess different values from the rest of society but rather have access to various repertoires from which to construct their strategies of action. These repertoires explain variations in lines of action. Moreover, while some repertoires are shared across social groups, others are made salient to a group by their specific life conditions (as suggested by Hays, 2003). This is the case for instance for low-trust in interpersonal relationship in low-income neighborhoods.

The concept of repertoire has become an important alternative to those of national culture or ideology. Instead of positing a one-to-one correspondence of ideology and culture with geo-political borders (one society, one nation, one culture), as indicated earlier, the notion of repertoire is useful for analyzing the relative availability of cultural schemas across national contexts. Specifically, in their comparative work on France and the United States, Lamont and Thévenot (2000) and their collaborators considered the

relative salience of various types of justifications across national contexts. They show that Americans are much more likely to use market arguments than are the French, and that Americans use market justifications in contexts where French people would have used other types of arguments (e.g., civic, political, and moral). Also, while the notions of national culture (or national character) and ideology downplay the interactional production of meaning, the concept of cultural repertoires also captures how actors make sense of their ability to pursue certain lines of action. Thus, laborers' attitudes toward work, for example, might stem from their individual experiences and interactions on the job, from structural aspects of work arrangements, and from widely available repertoires of criteria of evaluation pertaining to work. Investigating sense-making at multiple levels could complement survey research on attitudes and values by addressing what experiences and symbolic goods – including cultural repertoires – workers draw on to make sense of their productive activities. It would thus complement the work of Wallace and Lowe and others who examine cross-national variations in cultural outcomes.

Symbolic Boundaries

Another way to study workers is to analyze symbolic boundaries, the conceptual distinctions that we make between objects, people, and practices. This concept recognizes that schemes of social categorization are culturally constructed. They constitute a system of classification that defines a hierarchy of groups and the similarities and differences between them. They typically imply and justify a hierarchy of moral worth across individuals and groups. The act of constructing and sustaining symbolic boundaries is termed “boundary work.” Centrally, this activity involves constructing collective identity by differentiating oneself from others through drawing on criteria such as common traits and experiences as well as a sense of shared belonging. Symbolic boundaries are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the more readily visible social boundaries of residential and occupational segregation, racial and class exclusion, and patterns of intermarriage (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

In an ethnographic study of a white working class neighborhood in Chicago, Kefalas (2003) shows how residents draw symbolic boundaries to protect the lifestyle and place that give them meaning and a sense of stability. These workers see themselves in a precarious position and they fear that ghetto-related dangers will encroach on their neighborhood, jeopardizing what they have strived to attain: a shared normative order, a safe place, and their main

material asset, a home. Facing these perceived dangers, they try to defend their neighborhood's borders and their cherished way of life. Specifically, they draw moral and symbolic distinctions between themselves and “bad” neighbors. These workers enact these boundaries on their houses by keeping immaculate lawns and homes, which “make it clear to the rest of the world that they are fundamentally different from those just below them on the social ladder” (p. 100). These symbolic efforts arise largely from the economic transformations and precariousness that contemporary workers experience.

Institutions

Although social scientists use differing definitions of institutions, they typically employ this concept to examine phenomena at a similar level of analysis. Whereas values, repertoires and symbolic boundaries rest with individuals, groups or interpersonal relations, institutional conceptions locate culture in organizations or at the societal level.

According to Scott (1998), there are three dominant approaches to institutions that differ in their understanding of how institutions drive behavior. These approaches emphasize the role of formal rules, laws, and regulations; that of norms with informal sanctioning of deviance; and that of frames and taken-for-granted understandings that define situations and actors. For their part, Hall and Taylor (1996) compare rational choice, historical, and sociological forms of new institutionalism. They argue that rational choice and historical varieties tend to separate ‘institutional explanations’ embedded in organizational structures from ‘cultural’ explanations, understood as commonly held values. By adopting a view of culture more like the one we have showcased so far, sociological institutionalists bypass this juxtaposition by capturing both the frames of meaning, moral templates and repertoires as well as the formal rules, procedures and norms privileged by political scientists.

In the companion volume, Tugal (2011) provides an example of a moral template embedded in institutions. He captures how Islamism has the effect of a political institution, leveraging religion to transform the subsistence-centered habitus of the sub-proletariat into a capitalistic habitus. Rather than conceiving Islamism as a uniform ideology which would predictably produce anti-capitalist and revolutionary behavior, the author examines the processes of sense-making that bring the action of sub-proletariats in line with capitalism. Institutions are a preferred explanation for many undertaking cross-national comparative research. By viewing institutions as formal rules, laws, and regulations, students of labor markets may overlook

the taken-for-granted meanings as well as the moral templates that could drive work-related behaviors, as is the case for Turkish sub-proletarians.

Narratives

Finally, cultural sociologists use narratives to examine how actors construct understandings about the social world and themselves. Somers and Gibson (1994) see social life as permeated by narratives, which present a beginning, middle, and end, linking disparate events and aspects of the social world in causal sequences through “emplotment” (Ewick & Silbey, 2003; Polletta & Ho, 2005; Somers & Gibson, 1994). Narratives are especially rich and complex cultural forms, containing types of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and elements of collective action frames (Polletta, 2006, p. 11), and often incorporate salient human emotion and shared human experiences. Narratives are important to social science because they encode understandings of the world and shape action: choices of action are influenced by the internal consistency between action and a personal identity narrative that actors construct. By crafting narratives, actors not only make sense of their experiences, the constraints and the opportunities in their lives, but on these bases they can also project a sense of self into the future.

Joyce (1994), Steinmetz (1992), and others have used narrative to examine aspects of the lives and experiences of workers. Steinmetz argues that working-class formation depends not only on agreements about common goals and strategies but also on the availability of narratives that make class a salient part of individual and collective histories. A class-focused narrative typically has a tight beginning, middle, and end; it involves defined characters, highlights the intersection between individual and collective history, and downplays alternative accounts based on forms of identity such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, and race. Thus it gains internal cohesion and plays an important role in working-class formation.

Narrative can also play an important role in the workplace by maintaining workers’ belief in and dedication to their jobs – including exceptionally risky ones. Desmond’s (2007) ethnography of wild firefighters in the United States examines why men accept and stay in a job that so clearly endangers workers’ lives. It shows that the Forest Service that employs firefighters proffers a powerful organizational myth: that firefighting is not risky because wildfires kill only the incompetent and those who breach official protocol. In framing risk as a function of individual failing (which any sensible worker can avoid) and in recounting how specific

firefighters have fallen due to personal oversights, the Forest Service legitimates its activities and ensures workers’ compliance. Although Desmond does not employ explicitly the concept of narrative, he shows that this organizational ethic of individualism follows a narrative logic: as with storytelling, people link disparate events in a plot through cause-and-effect relationships to make sense of an event. In this case, they tie the events surrounding a firefighter’s death to the fatality to explain why the accident occurred. And like many stories, firefighters’ accounts of death contain a moral message: individuals are responsible for their own downfall. This way of understanding danger and death structures the stories that supervisors and firefighters alike tell when a crewmember dies, reinforcing the dominant organizational belief in self-determination. This cultural focus thus makes sense of these workers’ willingness to do dangerous jobs and of their seemingly unrealistic view of occupational risk, *explananda* that purely material or structural factors could not have explained.

Polletta (2006) also focuses on the role of narratives in the production of collective identity, focusing on social movements. She criticizes the literature in this field for “conceptualiz[ing] culture narrowly: more as furthering people’s interests than as constituting them” (p. 6). She argues that social movement actors created narratives characterizing 1960’s sit-ins as occurring “spontaneously.” The internal coherence of this narrative facilitated the emergence of a collective identity of “student-activist,” which then increased the appeal of the student movements for other potential members. Polletta’s work illustrates how narrative analysis can complement research on contentious politics and account for mobilization in fledgling movements, tactical choice in movement groups, and competition between activists (p. 21). Worker movements, union membership, and social protest against policy change should be equally amenable to narrative analysis, which would pay closer attention to how interests are constructed and conditioned by both individual and broader collective narratives [see Gerteis (2007) on race and working class formation in the South for a similar emphasis].

ALTERNATIVE PRISMS: QUESTIONS A CULTURAL SOCIOLOGIST MIGHT ASK

To bring this essay to a close, we suggest how to broaden the sociology of work with the tools of cultural sociology. The questions we highlight focus

especially on the comparative study of workers, in line with the central topic of these volumes. They are: (1) how cultural repertoires might help workers navigate the challenges they face in the age of neo-liberalism; (2) whether with the increase in inequality of the last 20 years and the concomitant decrease in good working class jobs, workers are detaching themselves from major social institutions (family, religion, associations, and employment) and investing more in consumption, leisure activities, and the expressive self; and (3) whether and how these changes shape the various social identities of workers (including class). Finally, we advocate a broader focus on inclusion as a neglected dimension of boundary formation.

Understanding the social resilience of workers requires considering not only the organizational tools at their disposal – tools that have traditionally been the object of the sociology of work (unions, collective bargaining structures, work flexibility, etc.) – but also the cultural repertoires that may sustain their sense of self-worth and ability to respond to new challenges. Such repertoires – for example, religious repertoires that valorize morality over socioeconomic success or facilitate mobilization and involvement in politics – may buttress workers' empowerment and sense of social and cultural membership. As suggested by Lamont, Fleming and Welburn (forthcoming), in doing so, they may buffer against precariousness and other challenges associated with market fundamentalism and neo-liberalism (e.g., privatization of risk and individualization) (Hacker, 2008); on cultural repertoires and institutions as social resources, see also Hall and Lamont (2009).

The concepts of frames and narratives may also be helpful in understanding the challenges themselves. Given that some unions have moved from redistributive wage policies to policies focused on increasing national competitiveness (see Bacarro, this volume), cultural sociologists might mobilize such analytical tools to study the processes of sense making behind this transition. At the institutional level, Ancelovici (2010) shows how French unions draw on different repertoires to diagnose the problems they face, leading them to different revitalization strategies. Specifically, faced with dramatic union decline the seventies, the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) was able to draw from a heterogeneous repertoire of action (which included anti-statist elements) to respond, and fared relatively better than the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT). This second union could not revise its traditional radical strategies of action in part because it had a narrower and more homogeneous repertoire to draw from. It consequently experienced great loss. Sense-making capacities and responses can thus have an important impact in mediating the effects of political and economic changes.

Social scientists have argued that as the work and economic conditions of workers are declining, they are increasingly likely to detach themselves from major social institutions (religion, family, associations, and work) and to experience anomie and isolation (see Wilcox & Marquandt, 2010; also see Castel, 1995 notion of “disaffiliation”). Separating their self-concept from the sphere of work and other institutions such as religion that value the increasingly unattainable status of male provider, male workers may be more likely to define themselves autonomously from the labor market. Instead, they might invest more (emotionally, symbolically, and economically) in consumption, leisure activities, and the expressive self. Spectator sports, popular culture performance and consumption, Internet networking and participation in digital communities, and a range of similar activities may be gaining importance when market positions are unstable. Thus, more than ever, the study of workers may require looking beyond where laborers work, into where they play, shop, socialize, and reside.

Concomitantly, identities other than work-based ones are becoming more central to the self-concept of workers. Workers should be considered not only through the prism of inequality, but also in relation to processes of individualization, coupling, friendships, their relationship to time and space, and their relationship to the future and politics, etc. While the concept of habitus may be particularly useful in such inquiries, the notion of symbolic boundaries can also be crucial, as the analysis of principles of judgment and classification can serve a useful empirical anchor. A deeper understanding of the interface between the world of work and other aspects of the life-world of workers will be essential for a more thorough understanding of inequality, which continues to motivate many sociologists of work who typically remain focused on economic and workplace outcomes. While this may be a successful strategy of claiming distinct intellectual territory, the sociology of work may be missing important research opportunities by doing so.

Finally, in recent years, the study of symbolic boundaries and group formation has grown by leaps and bounds (Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007) and has much to contribute to the sociology of work. Indeed, social scientists should analyze workers not only through the prism of exclusion and closure but also through that of inclusion (the neglected side of symbolic boundaries); that is, through a focus on sociability, connectedness, recognition, intimacy, homophily, and types of associations that structure social relations, but whose unintended effects (social distance, indifference, closure) are rarely fully included in the dynamic study of social processes leading to greater inequality (e.g., Gallie, 2004). Cultural

sociology provides the tools for developing this line of research. Additionally, while we focus on how the sociology of work can benefit from cultural sociology, another paper must explore how cultural sociology can be enriched from attending to work, including how meaning is constrained by work activities and work contexts. With these issues in mind, it is time to “get to work”!

NOTE

1. It should be noted that overall the European sociology of work has been more attuned to questions of identity and representation than its American counterpart. This is particularly evident in the French journal *Sociologie du Travail*.

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