

CULTURE, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND AGENCY: A STRONG APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the similarities between the new communitarianism and the “cultural turn” in the social sciences. It argues that the addition of *sociological hylomorphism* – i.e., the view that all social reality is a synthesis of ideal and material dimensions – to a strong theory of culture assists cultural sociologists in their scientific studies of the complex issue of “cultural and agency” while helping new communitarians in their search for most suitable symbolic levers for societal transformation. It does so especially by enhancing a strong theory’s ability to locate specific *attributes* and *social sites* of symbolic bundles that foster agency. The more robust approach furthers the search for both by postulating that: (1) symbols have ideal and material dimensions as do cultural and social structures; (2) cultural and social structures are analytical properties of the same concrete social formations; (3) symbols have sites in both cultural and social structures; (4) symbolic bundles move back-and-forth across cultural and social boundaries which means that these two structures *interpenetrate*; (5) symbols and cultural structures are not synonymous and neither are “objects” and social structures; and (6) only when symbolic bundles are accessed by social-structural actors do they possess the capacity to become agentic; and (7) agency is defined in terms of actors’ consciousness, knowledgeability, commitment, and power. These assumptions permit us to argue that a symbol’s agentic profile rests on balancing four properties: being energizing, contributing to reality-testing, producing ethical gain, and being malleable. They also assist in understanding how “cultural” symbols are interpreted and institutionalized by prospective agents in social structures and in locating the main agentic sites of symbols in the latter. As a consequence, we are able generate a series of hypotheses about social structures’ key symbolic bundles and their distinctive agentic profiles. The significant agentic potentials of scientific knowledge and ideologically linked discourses are discussed and compared.

The new communitarianism and the so-called cultural turn in the social sciences, not coincidentally, arose at about the same time roughly a quarter of a century ago. Although rarely regarded as connected, these two movements have much in common and indeed have a lot to teach each other. Three overlapping themes have propelled both: (1) a rejection of rational-choice theory via an inclusion of shared understandings (notably moral ones) and human emotions in constituting social practices; (2) a critique of determinism (especially the Marxian variant) via a stress on social agency; and (3) a rejection of a crude materialism via a recognition that symbolic factors are also decisive for appreciating both the quest for individual autonomy and the need for social order. In particular, both cultural sociologists and new communitarians have looked to the realms of culture and symbols to help explain our capacities to be creators and not just creations of our social worlds.

The aim of this paper is to offer greater theoretical clarity to the study of how symbolic bundles – regardless of whether they are seen as lodged in cultural structures or manifested in social structures – make actors “freer” and “more creative” and the degree to which these factors are tied to forces which dictate our lives. Over the past two decades, cultural sociologists have been more explicit about this pursuit. New communitarians, however, implicitly share this agenda. A focus on the decisive roles that values, beliefs, and emotion-laden symbols is central to their enterprise. Moreover, the movement rejects passive acceptance of the *status quo*, consciously pursues societal transformation, and searches for the symbolic levers that can contribute to this.

My inquiry begins with Alexander’s (1987, pp. 307-11) notion of a strong theory of culture because it offers key first steps for communitarian thought and cultural sociology. A strong theory consists of two elements: (1) acceptance of the “relative autonomy of culture” by

assuming that cultural *attributes* are more than reflections of social-structural ones; and (2) a move beyond the Parsonsian tendency to make values the main *sites* for cultural analysis. To these I add a third ingredient, *sociological hylomorphism* – i.e., explicit acknowledgment that all social reality is a synthesis of ideal and material dimensions – which is implicit in a number of recent theories of culture.¹ This addition to a strong theory provides a more comprehensive context for locating specific *attributes* (aside from cultural autonomy) and *sites* (aside from those linked to values) of symbolic bundles that foster agency.

In its philosophical sense, hylomorphism, starting with Aristotle, contends that knowable reality is neither monistic (i.e., ideal *or* material) nor dualistic (i.e., *separately* ideal *and* material) but is *simultaneously* ideal and material. The ideal (“meanings”) and material (“objects”) only exist *within* and via the composites they constitute.²

Sociological hylomorphism asserts that the entire subject matter of the social sciences – the “subjective” as well as the “objective” – is a synthesis of ideal and material dimensions. For instance, a study of the interaction of religious and economic institutions cannot determine the relationship between the ideal and the material (let alone assign ontological priority to either) because religious “interests” are never only ideal and economic ones are always more than

¹ See particularly: Alexander (1988, 1992); Archer ([1988] 1996); Berger (1991); Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994, 1996); Hays (1994); Kane (1991, 1997); Meyer *et al.* (1995); Rubinstein (2001); Sewell (1992, 1993, 1999); Somers (1995a, 1995b, 1999); and Wuthnow (1987, 1989).

² Hylomorphism was the decisive feature of Aristotle's metaphysics, played an important role in ancient Greek and medieval Arabic philosophies, and was a central element of medieval scholasticism, most notably in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. In the 20th century, analysts have noted strong hylomorphist themes in the works of Popper (1972, 1994, and Popper and Eccles [1977] 1983), in Dewey's ([1929] 1960) critique of dualism and Whitehead's (1925) notion of the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

material (Alexander 1983, p. 32; Sewell 1993, pp. 19-20). When added to a strong theory of culture, sociological hylomorphism helps overcome pivotal theoretical antinomies (*viz.* “false dichotomies”) which plague theory, especially: monism vs. dualism, idealism vs. materialism, ideal vs. material “interests,” symbols vs. objects, and agency vs. structure (whether cultural or social). The revised strong theory repudiates cultural determinism (along with social determinism) by arguing that: (1) individual and collective agency expands when actors within social structures are able to access, interpret, and wield symbolic bundles; and (2) these symbolic bundles are best viewed as situated in both cultural and social structures. It accomplishes this by stressing that cultural and social structures “overlap,” “interfuse,” are “mutually constituting” (Rubinstein 2001) or *interpenetrate* (Parsons 1966, 1971; Berger 1991) and hence that neither of the two structures nor the practices that spring them are wholly ideal or entirely material.

In particular, all symbols are objects and all objects are at least potentially symbols. Objects are not just empirically observable items like screwdrivers or books but include speech and gestures as well. When this paper speaks of “symbolic bundles” I am merely indicating that an observer’s focus for the moment is *primarily* on the meanings which actors impute to an object or cluster of objects while bracketing *for the most part* issues of the physical laws governing them or their technical manipulation.

Symbols are also *polysemous* (see, e.g., Kane 1997, pp. 255-59 and Sewell 1999, especially p. 49). Although a symbolic bundle is the fusing of meanings (*signifieds*) and objects (*signifiers*), the relationship between the two is never natural, automatic, or permanent. Rather, the bond is always ambiguous, multifaceted, and historically specific. “The same symbol – mother... –,” Sewell (1999, p. 49) notes, “is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety

of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church).” Actors are always challenged by the polysemous nature of symbols. They have to assign the “right” meanings in terms of the time and location in question. This ability to engage in the *interpretation* of polysemous symbols is fundamental for making people into actors over-and-above their capacities to instrumentally *strategize* about the opportunities and constraints that surround them (Alexander 1988). Indeed, actors are more likely to become agents when they are not only able to interpret – i.e., to find the most appropriate meaning in any situation – but when they can also *reinterpret* – i.e., invent revised or new meanings for old symbols in new contexts (see, e.g., Kane’s [1997] analysis of how the meanings of “land,” “rent,” “confiscation,” and “constitutionalism” were transformed during the Irish Land Wars of the late nineteenth century).

Social formations, such as groups, communities, organizations, and societies, are “real” and observable *entities* that simultaneously include ideal and material dimensions. On another analytical level, formations embody at least two abstract *dimensions*: (1) *culture* or patterns of symbolic representations of meanings (or understandings) that actors produce, disseminate, reproduce, and use across time and space; and (2) *social structure* or regularities in the patterns of relationships that the actors in the social formation produce, reproduce, and use across time and space. These two dimensions are not distinct entities but only exist *within* and via the social formations (e.g., society) they constitute. In short, webs of symbolic bundles and of patterned relationships are two pivotal analytical features of all social formations.

Cultural and social structures are themselves analytical synthesizes of the ideal and material. Although meanings – i.e., abstractions – form the principal referents of a culture and the symbolic bundles that organize it, anthropologists have long reminded us that these bundles

have *material* and not just *immaterial* dimensions. Unless meanings -- which are by themselves immaterial -- are communicated and apprehended by actors, they cannot be “articulated” as parts of human culture (Taylor 1989, pp. 91-93). Neither social scientists nor the people we study have direct access to meanings. Only via interpretations of people’s “artifacts” which are their visible creations (such as tools, weapons, books, art objects, flags, cathedrals, etc.) and their “performative repertoires” (such as language, gestures, rituals, routines, and rhetorics) can researchers and participants alike make sense of the worlds they are in.

And social structures are hylomorphic and not just material. As regularities in the multiple acts by multiple actors, social structures encompass more than recurrent networks within social formations that cope with the allocation of observable resources in the face of ever-threatening scarcity. The objects that actors use as well as the constraining ones are never just material and are always to some degree ideal; indeed many are best analyzed primarily as symbolic bundles, some of which actors believe refer to immaterial entities or properties.

Symbolic bundles are *neither* solely cultural *nor* social. Culture and social structures “share” and are “shared by” symbols (like icons, tools, rain dances, pornography, football games, parades, and revolutionary speeches, for example), and hence they interpenetrate (Parsons 1966, 1971; Berger 1991). Interpenetration means we should see symbols as having the capacity to move back-and-forth across the analytical boundaries of culture and social structure. It is the key for studying how symbolic bundles in a cultural structure can be used in the other structure to promote agency. But this is a “two-way street;” symbolic bundles first apprehended by observers and actors as situated in social structures are as likely to enter into cultural structures as *vice versa* (see, e.g., Kane 1997, Mann 1993, Sewell 1980, pp. 194-242 and 1999).

Visualizing symbols in both cultural and social structures means that we are not forced to

choose between seeing symbolic bundles *either* as relatively bounded and coherent cultural structures (e.g., Lipset's [1963] comparison of the value structures of four English-speaking democracies) *or* as practices, "tool kits," or repertoires of techniques available to actors in social structures (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1966, Swidler 1986, and Tilly 1995). They are both. (See Archer [1988] 1996 for a similar formulation.) Sewell's (1999) formula of "culture as system" versus "culture as practice" best captures these two aspects of symbolic bundles and their close relationship. "Culture as system" spotlights symbols as they are configured in a cultural structure (bracketing the creation, perception, retrieval, and use of their parts by actors playing roles in social structures); "culture as practice" focuses on how these vehicles of meaning interpenetrate or are *socially manifested* as symbolic bundles in social structures that are capable of shaping the practices of individual and collective actors. Hereafter, to avoid needless confusion, I call only the former ("culture as system") culture *per se*.

To this point, I have argued that the injection of sociological hylomorphism into a strong theory of culture advances our ability to locate which *attributes* and *social sites* of symbolic bundles foster agency by acknowledging that: (1) symbols have ideal and material dimensions as do cultural and social structures; (2) cultural and social structures are not separate entities but analytical properties of the same, more concrete social formations; (3) symbols have multiple analytical sites in both cultural and social structures where they are subject to different logics; (4) the fact that symbolic bundles move back-and-forth across cultural and social boundaries means that these two analytical structures *interpenetrate*; (5) symbols and cultural structures are not synonymous, anymore than "objects" and social structures are; and (6) the universality of interpenetration as well as interpretation and institutionalization clarify how symbolic bundles in "cultures as system" may also form "cultures as practice" in social structures where they have

varying capacities to spur (or constrain) agency.

Cultural patterns as they interpenetrate with social structures can assist in turning actors into agents. Yet “culture as system” is merely a bounded network of symbols with a propensity toward internal coherence. Cultural coherence by itself (whether “thin” or “thick”) does not constitute action nor automatically render symbols as agentic. As symbolic bundles are interpreted, institutionalized, and accessed by actors in social structure, they appear less coherent and more like contingent assemblages of diverse ingredients. Only in this form, however, do symbolic bundles possess the *attributes* to become “tool kits” or repertoires for practice.

In short, just invoking the “relative autonomy of culture,” “culture as practice,” or even interpenetration does not get a revised strong theory very far in finding which symbolic attributes render actors more or less as agents. To move this search along, I turn to the four ingredients of Etzioni’s “active orientation”. Superficially, a reader might be tempted simply to equate his concept with what many theorists currently call “agency”. However, the latter term has too often been either ill- (or un-) defined or treated as some ineffable moment of *individual* freedom and creativity which renders it inaccessible to rigorous scientific analysis. Etzioni’s “active orientation” avoids this pitfall (1968, see especially pp. 1-18) by providing a nuanced and multidimensional formulation. He says that both individual and collective actors in social structures are more likely to become (what is now commonly called) agents when they are able to generate, use, and properly balance four elements: *consciousness* (a heightened self-awareness or capacity to pay attention); *knowledgeability* (a generalized capacity for cognitively monitoring of one’s own situation and practices as well as those of others); *commitment* (a willingness to morally invest in one or more shared goals by evaluating our own and others’ practices); and *power* (a command of available levers for overcoming resistance to achieve these goals, i.e., to

deliberately foster or prevent change).

Once observers acknowledge what an agent looks like, they are better able to ask *which characteristics of symbolic bundles elicit these traits*. In other words, a direct relationship exists between the ingredients that define agency (*consciousness, knowledgeability, commitment, and power*) and the attributes of symbolic bundles which evoke these qualities in actors.

The chances that potential agents in social structures become actual ones increases insofar as available symbolic bundles possess four attributes: they are *energizing, reality-testing, an ethical gain, and malleable* for the actors involved. Symbolic bundles are *energizing* when they stimulate actors to pay greater attention to what they are doing (for at least some of the time) – *viz.* when symbols can awaken their *consciousness*. Symbolic bundles are *reality-testing* when they help actors to enrich their store of information so as to bring it into greater accord with contingent events and thus enhances their *knowledge*. Symbolic bundles advance *ethical gain* when they stimulate actors' production, reproduction, application, and affirmation of moral understandings as they interpret (not just strategize about) their situations so that their *commitment* grows. Finally, symbolic bundles are *malleable* when actors are capable of converting them into assets for *power* that they can strategically deploy to overcome resistance and pursue objectives.

Until now, study of the *social sites* of interpenetration has focused excessively on the impact of cultural values on social structures. Other sites must be examined and in terms of all four agentic attributes. In the final analysis, a particular symbolic bundle's agentic potential must always be subjected to empirical examination. However, some broad patterns present themselves: Social manifestations of cultural belief structures (which aid us in answering the question of what *is* and *is not*) are most likely predispose actors towards reality testing; bundles stemming from

cultural expressive symbols (which help to find appropriate ways to channel *feelings*) seem particularly conducive for energizing actors; and those linked to cultural values (which assist us in answering the question of what we *ought* and *ought not* choose) are probably most suited for providing actors with ethical gain.

At best, norms, as the prime social manifestations of cultural values, have a mixed agentic profile (although scientific norms seem to depart sharply from this pattern). And the rituals, other collective practices, and habitus which are the social manifestations of cultural expressive symbols generally have an even lower agentic capacity than do social norms. On the other hand, social knowledge, associated with both empirical and nonempirical cultural belief structures, tends to have the widest impact. The agentic potential of various religious doctrines (*viz.* social manifestations of nonempirical cultural beliefs) has been extensively studied, notably by Weber (e.g., [1904-05] 1996 and [1922] 1963), but deserves renewed attention in today's geopolitical context. The diversity in forms of philosophical knowledge alone indicates that these social manifestations should also be studied even after Collins's (1998) monumental work. Yet, among all forms of social knowledge, empirical, especially scientific, accounts have been seen as most agentic because their symbolic bundles are the most "error reducing" both in terms of reality-testing and ethical gains and are also highly energizing and malleable.

Paradoxically, an empirical knowledge bundle certified as "scientific" becomes even more agentic when social actors explicitly fuse it with evaluative interpretations. Clearly, this is the path the new communitarianism has been taking. Although this fusion brings scientific knowledge and ideologically-inspired social discourses closer than has been assumed in positivistic epistemology, it also raises the Mannheim Paradox which Geertz regards as the enduring challenge "to the objectivity of sociological analysis...and the rustless weapon of its

enemies” (Geertz [1964] 1973, p. 194). In the final analysis, the pursuit of agency by actors and observers as well as public intellectuals requires sensitivity to the differences separating scientific knowledge and such discourses in social structures as well as to their similarities. If they are treated as indistinguishable, scientific knowledge would have no edge for carving effective means out of conditions in the struggle to find malleable symbols to achieve goals. Nevertheless, the unique ability of cultural ideology’s social manifestations (especially as actors’ intertwine discourses, rituals, and other collective practices) to span *is*, *feeling*, and *ought* exigencies, makes them strategic research sites for exploring the role of culture and social-structural symbols in agency now, in historical context, and most certainly in the future.

In conclusion, an injection of sociological hylomorphism into a strong theory of culture advances our ability to locate which *attributes* and *social sites* of symbolic bundles foster agency. This expanded strong theory also boosts our ability to see agency as more than an ineffable moment of freedom and creativity by defining it in terms of potential agents becoming more conscious, knowledgeable, committed, and powerful. In doing this, the theory assists cultural sociologists in their scientific studies of the complex issue of “cultural and agency” while helping new communitarians in their search for most suitable symbolic levers for societal transformation.

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