

How culture works

Perspectives from media studies on the efficacy of symbols

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How does culture work? That is, what influence do particular symbols have on what people think and how they act?

An anthropologist might find the question bizarre, one that by the asking reveals a fundamental misunderstanding. Culture is not something that works or fails to work. It is not something imposed on or done to a person; it is constitutive of the person. It is the precondition and the condition of human-ness. The meanings people incorporate in their lives are not separate from their activities; activities are made of meanings. Culture, as Clifford Geertz says, “is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.”¹ Insofar as this is true, the question of the “impact” of culture is not answerable because culture is not separable from social structure, economics, politics, and other features of human activity.

And yet, even Clifford Geertz and other symbolic anthropologists are far from having given up efforts at causal attribution when it comes to culture. If we think of culture as the symbolic dimension of human activity and if we conceive its study, somewhat arbitrarily, as the study of discrete symbolic objects (art, literature, sermons, ideologies, advertisements, maps, street signs) and how they function in social life, then the question of what work culture does and how it does it is not self-evidently foolish. Indeed, it can then be understood as a key question in sociology, anthropology, and history, closely related to the central question in Western social thought since Marx (as James Fernandez has asserted) – the debate between cultural idealism and historical materialism.² It is the problem raised by Max Weber’s essay on the Protestant ethic: do systems of ideas or beliefs have causal significance in human

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affairs over against material forces? It is the problem suggested by the debates in Marxism about the relation of “superstructure” to “base.”

Even if “culture” and “society,” superstructure and base, ideal and material forces in history, are ultimately inextricable, people do regularly distinguish between words and things, between “symbolic” and “real” agents in the world. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” shouts the child who fights back tears after being called a name. Thomas Jefferson, arguing for religious toleration, held that whether his neighbor believes in no god or in twenty gods makes no difference to him: “It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”³ This argument – that culture does *not* work because it makes no “real,” material difference – relies on the same cultural distinction as the child’s retort. How much can it be believed? Is W. H. Auden right that “poetry makes nothing happen”?⁴

Now, there are some serious drawbacks to this commonsense distinction between “real” and “symbolic” things. First, it wrongly takes cultural to be immaterial, “just words,” when, in fact, culture ordinarily comes embodied both in some kind of material form and some kind of social practice. Symbols appear to us embodied, institutionalized. Watching television, reading the newspaper, going to school, talking to the family at dinner, or participating in a church service or an election or a high school commencement ceremony are all “rituals,” if you will, in which symbols are embedded and embodied. The symbols do not exist apart from how they are conveyed, and our own participation in them and with them constructs not only their power but their very meaning.

Still, in what follows, I tend to adopt the naive, commonsense view that the efficacy of cultural objects may be analyzed apart from the cultural tradition the object draws on or the social practices in which it is embodied. In defense of this approach, I would say only that I could not do everything and, besides, that I think symbols and symbolic objects are more disembodied and more isolable today than they once were. To the extent that the culture that interests us is decontextualized, conveyed by media to individuals without the co-presence of other human beings, symbol is reduced to information, experience to meaning, communion to proposition. These are matters of degree, of course: reading a newspaper is a ritual that organizes speaking and interaction, as is participating in a church service; going out to the movies is a cultural performance, as is a ritual circumcision of boys at puberty, but I

think some distinctions can be made here, and that these “modern” rituals are of a different order.

A second problem with the commonsense distinction I am working with is that it identifies culture with cultural symbols, and thus tends to reduce culture to “messages.” It thereby loses another feature of culture – that it is the unspoken backdrop to our thoughts, acts, and messages. Even so, the unspoken presuppositions that constitute culture do turn up in palpable form, do get transmitted from person to person and from one generation to the next through cultural objects. So even if an examination of “objects” does not exhaust the study of culture, it is certainly a key part of the study and, methodologically, the objects offer privileged access to culture.

In history and the social sciences, answers to the question of the efficacy of cultural symbols or objects cluster around two poles. At one end, cultural objects are seen as enormously powerful in shaping human action – even if the cultural objects themselves are shown to be rather simply derived from the interests of powerful social groups. Ideas or symbols or propaganda successfully manipulate people. “Ideology” (or the somewhat more slippery term “hegemony”) is viewed as a potent agent of powerful ruling groups, successfully molding the ideas and expectations and presuppositions of the general population and making people deferent and pliable. This position, which in its Marxist formulation has been dubbed “the dominant ideology thesis,” is equally consistent with what David Laitin identifies as a conventional, social-system, rather than social-action, view, or the “first face” of culture.⁵

At the other end, concepts of culture cluster around a more optimistic view of human activity, a voluntaristic sense in which culture is seen not as a program but as a “tool kit” (in Ann Swidler’s words, although she is not herself a tool-kit theorist) or “equipment for living” (in Kenneth Burke’s).⁶ Culture is not a set of ideas imposed but a set of ideas and symbols available for use. Individuals select the meanings they need for particular purposes and occasions from the limited but nonetheless varied cultural menu a given society provides. In this view, culture is a resource for social action more than a structure to limit social action. It serves a variety of purposes because symbols are “polysemic” and can be variously interpreted; because communication is inherently ambiguous and people will read into messages what they please; or because meaning is at the service of individual interest. Symbols, not

people, are pliable. This is what Laitin calls the “second face” of culture in which culture is largely an ambiguous set of symbols that are usable as a resource for rational actors in society pursuing their own interests. Taken to its logical extreme, this position assigns culture no efficacy in social action at all. It suggests that while people may need a symbolic object to define, explain, or galvanize a course of action they have already decided on an appropriate object will always be found to clothe the pre-existing intention.

Neither extreme position is very satisfying and, I think, for obvious reasons. The arguments made on behalf of each extreme seem to me perfectly adequate grounds for rejecting adherence to the opposite extreme. The study of culture is the study of what meanings are available for use in a given society from the wider range of possible meanings; the study of culture is equally the study of what meanings people choose and use from available meanings. Views that take culture as a social mold emphasize that meanings can be made by individuals only from symbols available to them. Views that take culture as a public resource emphasize that culture works only when individuals use it. Both views, of course, are correct, so far as they go. If you emphasize the limits of available culture, you will sympathize with the culture-as-social-mold position, but you will then misrepresent human actors as passive victims of history. If you emphasize the importance of individual choice and interpretation, you will lean toward the culture-as-resource position, but in doing so you are likely to succumb to “an overly energetic (and overly political) view of how and why people act.”⁷ If you want to understand culture fully, without inscribing in it an unrealistically glum or unreasonably cheery view of human behavior, you will seek a model that incorporates both faces of the cultural process. To understand the efficacy of culture, it is essential to recognize simultaneously that (1) human beings make their own history and (2) they do not make it according to circumstances of their own choosing.

It is not surprising that a good many thinkers have sought some kind of middle position that recognizes both the constraining force of culture (thereby supporting the social mold or hegemonic position) and the instrumental and voluntaristic uses of culture by individuals (thus lending weight to the tool-kit position). In sociology, Anthony Giddens has posed his theoretical project in terms like these, seeking to find a way to give credit both to “structure” and to “agency” in sociological explanation. In anthropology, Marshall Sahlins is trying to find a model that

would incorporate both “structure” and “history.” Raymond Williams, in cultural studies, has reinterpreted the relation of “base” and “super-structure” to demonstrate their mutual interdependence. Perhaps the most famous middle ground is Weber’s and his familiar metaphor that although human action is guided by both material and ideational forces, ideas serve particularly as “switchmen on the tracks of history.”⁸ Weber is no longer understood (and it was in my judgment a mistake to ever have read him this way) as an “idealist” opposed to Marx’s “materialist” model of human affairs; today neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians become hard to distinguish and the idealism/materialism divide is criss-crossed with bridges and tunnels. In the extensive literature on the effects of the mass media, many scholars have argued that ideas “reinforce” more than they “change” people’s prior views and habits and actions. While for a long time this finding led theorists to jump toward the tool-kit camp, more recently adherents of hegemony theory have recognized “reinforcement” as itself a powerful form of cultural action.⁹ Other students of the mass media have sought other kinds of middle-ground metaphors – George Gerbner, for instance, has written of the “cultivation” effects of the media and Max McCombs and others have written of the “agenda-setting” function of media, the cultural object determining not what people think so much as what they think about.¹⁰ Again, these are positions midway between emphasizing social structure and emphasizing individual social action.

An elegant statement of a “middle way” comes in Michael Walzer’s effort to evaluate the impact of the Biblical “exodus” story on Western thought. He recognizes that people have interpreted the exodus story in different and even in radically contradictory ways; the power of the story is not so much that there are limits to the number of plausible interpretations but that the interpretations we encounter are of *it* and not of some other story:

Cultural patterns shape perception and analysis.... They would not endure for long, of course, if they did not accommodate a range of perceptions and analyses, if it were not possible to carry on arguments inside the structures they provide.... Within the frame of the Exodus story one can plausibly emphasize the mighty arm of God or the slow march of the people, the land of milk and honey or the holy nation, the purging of counterrevolutionaries or the schooling of the new generation. One can describe Egyptian bondage in terms of corruption or tyranny or exploitation. One can defend the authority of the Levites or of the tribal elders or of the rulers of tens and fifties. I would only suggest that these alternatives are themselves paradigmatic; they are *our* alternatives. In other cultures, men and women read other books, tell different stories, confront different choices.¹¹

I want to pursue a middle position myself here. It is not that the other middle positions I mention are wrong but that, rhetorically, they have worked more to deny one extreme position or another (or both) than to elaborate a language and set of tools for enlarging the theoretical power of a middle way. The problem in elaborating a middle position is precisely what other “middle positions” have recognized but have not accounted for: sometimes culture “works” and sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes the media cultivate attitudes, sometimes not; sometimes music transforms or transfixes, sometimes not; sometimes ideas appear to be switchmen, sometimes they seem to make no difference; sometimes a word or a wink or a photograph profoundly changes the way a person sees the world, sometimes not. Why? What determines whether cultural objects will light a fire or not? How does culture work? This way of asking the question is related to the approach of the anthropologist, Dan Sperber, and what he calls an “epidemiology of representations.” He argues that to explain culture is to address the question, “why are some representations more ‘catching’ than others?”¹² That is the question I ask here – so long as it is understood that the answer has to do not just with features of the cultural “organism” but also with the susceptibility of people to it, and not just with their “natural” susceptibility but their variable susceptibility depending on the circumstances of their life at a given moment.

I focus especially on the influence of the mass media because this is the field I am most familiar with. I am most of all interested in the direct influence of cultural objects. Does TV lead to a more violent society or a more fearful society? Do romance novels buy off potential feminist unrest? Does advertising make people materialistic? Do cockfights in Bali provide an emotional training ground for the Balinese? Did Harriet Beecher Stowe help start the Civil War? Did Wagner give aid and comfort to the rise of Fascism? These are naive questions. They are, nonetheless, recurrent questions, popular questions, and publicly significant ones. (Should advertisements on children’s television programs be banned? Should pornography be forbidden? What impact do sex education classes have? Or warning labels on cigarette packages?) There are a variety of more subtle questions concerning the role of culture in social life, but these questions of whether “exposure” to certain symbols or messages in various media actually lead people to change how they think about the world or act in it are powerful and central.

The dimensions of cultural power

What we know, from a great many studies of mass media's influence on audiences and many other studies of attitudes and attitude change conducted over the past decades is that there will be no simple answers to the question of the influence of culture on people's attitudes, beliefs, or behavior. No cultural objects work with everyone. None of them affects even the people they do affect in the same way. None of the effects can be presumed to stay the same across different situations even for the same individual. None of the objects has only one message nor can their authors normally control which message an audience receives or even which audience receives a message. It is no wonder that empirically minded individuals find themselves attracted to the tool-kit pole of the culture debate.

An illustration of the difficulties of determining the "work" of culture comes from a key moment in the history of American foreign policy. From 1944 to 1946, George Kennan had been sending memos from the American Embassy in Moscow that, he recalls, "made no impression whatsoever in Washington, if, indeed, they were ever read." In 1946, with wartime cooperation over, with Ambassador Harriman returning home and Kennan in charge, the State Department asked him for an opinion on how to explain Soviet behavior. Kennan took a hard-line stance as he had for several years, arguing that the Soviet leaders were stubborn autocrats who could not be trusted. The reaction in Washington, Kennan writes in his memoirs was "nothing less than sensational":

It was one of those moments when official Washington, whose states of receptivity are intricately imbedded in the subconscious, was ready to receive a given message.... Six months earlier it would have been received in the Department of State with raised eyebrows and lips pursed in disapproval. Six months later, it would probably have sounded redundant, a sort of preaching to the convinced....¹³

Then what did the memo *do*? It is not easy to say. It would be too much to say that it was the decisive factor in changing American policy toward the Soviet Union. Did it *accelerate* a shift in policy? Or *crystallize* a shift already underway? Cultural analysis requires a language for action like this, poised somewhere between determination and ineffectuality. It is just this sort of problem of characterizing cultural work or cultural action – for memos, songs, novels, advertisements, or news stories – that I want to address.

Another example comes from historian Richard McCormick, in his study of the American muckrakers. He asks what muckraking's impact was on public thinking – given that a perception that “business corrupts politics” was already well established in American culture. He asks, “What is the meaning of this awakening to something that Americans had, in a sense, known about all along?”¹⁴ This is essentially the same problem Kennan pondered. Both cases are especially interesting because they are instances where a given cultural object (a telegram, a set of magazine articles on a single theme) has been conventionally understood to have had enormous influence. In both cases, close examination makes one wonder if, ultimately, poetry (or telegrams or magazine articles) makes nothing happen.

Does culture “work”? Instead of asking whether it does, I ask about the conditions – both of the cultural object and its environment – that are likely to make the culture or cultural object work more or less. I will try to do this without bowdlerizing the concept of culture – but I recognize a tendency in this enterprise to reduce culture to information, to neglect the emotional and psychological dimensions of meaning, to ignore culture that is unconsciously transmitted or received, to focus on the most discrete and propositional forms of culture. The examples I present here draw primarily from media studies and so do not represent all of what one might mean by “culture,” but I think they set the general questions clearly.

I want to examine five dimensions of the potency of a cultural object. I call these, for the sake of alliteration, retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution.

Retrievability

If culture is to influence a person, it must reach the person. An advertisement is of little use to the manufacturer if a consumer never sees it; it is equally of little use if the person sees the ad but cannot locate the product in a store or find out how to order it by mail. Advertising agencies spend time and energy learning to place ads where they are most likely to be seen by the people most likely to be in the market for the product they announce. Cosmetic ads appear more frequently in *Vogue* than in *Field & Stream* because more cosmetic purchasers read *Vogue* than read *Field & Stream*.

In the language of marketing, we can call this “reach,” in the language of cognitive psychology, we can refer to it as “availability,” but the general term I will use, to suggest more easily the sociological dimension of the phenomenon, is “retrievability.” The literature that has examined this most closely is that of cognitive psychology. If a cultural object is to reach people, it must be “available” to them. In everyday life, psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman observe, people make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.¹⁵ For instance, people constantly assess the probabilities of future events when their information about the future is limited. They estimate whether the value of the dollar will go up or down, who will win the next election, how a child will respond if the parent cannot afford a bicycle at Christmas, or how likely it is one will be run down by a car crossing the street.

Short of foolproof algorithms for decision-making, people adopt a variety of heuristic principles to reduce the complexity of their predictive tasks to manageable proportions. One heuristic people use is what Tversky and Kahneman call the “availability” heuristic. People assess the likelihood of a future event “by the ease with which instances or occurrences can be brought to mind.” This would be an excellent device if the actual frequency of occurrence of the event in the past determined the availability of the event in a person’s mind, but very often this is not the case. People are not statisticians (and even statisticians are not statisticians in their everyday-life decisions). People do not call to mind actual frequency charts. What they call upon are remembered instances of the event in question. Some instances are more retrievable than others. Events that are more recent or more dramatic or have been discussed or rehearsed more often will then have greater power to affect judgment than other events. They are more “available.” A person will be more careful crossing the street if he or she has just witnessed an accident a short time before. That person will be more cautious than the person who learned of the accident on the evening news where it is more distanced, less vivid. The news viewer will be more cautious than the person who neither saw nor heard of the recent accident.

From the individual’s perspective, then, some elements of experience are more readily drawn upon as bases for action than other elements. From the perspective of someone who would seek to manipulate cultural objects to advantage, the question is how to make some key elements of culture more available to audiences.

What puts a cultural object in the presence of (and therefore potentially in the mind and memory of) an individual in an audience? Sociologically, there are a variety of dimensions of retrievability. A cultural object or cultural information is more *economically* retrievable if it is cheaper for people to retrieve. Marketers know that price is a barrier to customers' trying out a new product, so they distribute free samples or announce low introductory price offers, reducing the economic barrier to direct, experiential knowledge of the product. Libraries send bookmobiles to neighborhoods to attract readers who would find getting to the nearest library inconvenient or expensive.

Culture can be socially as well as economically retrievable. Books in a library's general collection are socially more retrievable than books in the Rare Book Room where a person must go through a librarian and show some identification or announce a special purpose for examining a book. It is as much the etiquette of the Rare Book Room as its formal constraints that erects a barrier to its use. Working-class parents get more information about their children's public schools from school newsletters than from parent-teacher conferences while middle-class parents make better use of the conferences. The working-class parent often feels socially awkward or inadequate talking with teachers and finds it difficult to breach the social barrier to the school system's personnel directly.¹⁶

There are other categories of retrievability – ways in which a part of culture becomes more or less accessible to the awareness, mind, or memory of an individual. All the categories concern the retrievability of culture either in space or in time. The examples of social and economic retrievability I have already mentioned have to do with the availability of culture in space – whether a cultural object or piece of information is geographically in the presence of the individual. There are also ways that cultural retrievability may be expanded or limited temporally. A written message lasts longer than a verbal one, other things being equal (which is not to say it will be as rhetorically potent as the verbal message). If a cultural object is connected to a culturally salient event institutionalized on the cultural calendar, it will be more available – not only more present, that is, but more easily remembered over time. Many people know that Gillette Blue Blades sponsored the World Series on television throughout the 1950s even if they did not shave at the time and even if they have forgotten almost all other commercials from that era.

The calendar is one important storage device for cultural symbols; culture will have greater impact when it is part of a key cultural storage institution. The school textbook, the literary or musical canon, the list or diagram or recipe, the aphorism are other such devices. The calendar, as an instance, is certainly one of the most important knowledge-fixing (and knowledge-activating) mechanisms ever invented. Every alteration in the calendar is of lasting significance. In January 1986, the American calendar officially added a new holiday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. For many people, this may mean little more than an extra day off from work. But in grade school classrooms across the country, for tens of thousands of children who never heard Martin Luther King nor heard of him, for tens of thousands for whom the names Little Rock and Selma and Montgomery and Brown vs. Board of Education have no meaning, this calendrical gesture may be transformative. An era of American history will survive, however reinterpreted, however watered down in the collective consciousness in a way it would not have otherwise.

The “list” figures here, too.¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. holds no logical place on any culturally sanctioned list of important people or events: he was not a state capital, not a war, not a President. Probably more people today could identify Millard Fillmore than his more important contemporaries like Roger Taney or John C. Fremont – because school children memorize lists of Presidents but not of Supreme Court justices or Presidential aspirants.

It seems obvious that culture works better if it is brought into the physical presence of a potential audience, and that it has more lasting impact if it is incorporated into a culturally sanctioned form of public memory such as the calendar. Yet for the producers or would-be promoters of a cultural object, retrievability is problematic – a marketer, for instance, must not only advertise the wares but make sure that they are literally “available” on shelves in stores. Cultural calendars are not easily altered. It is no trick to establish a special day or week that no one pays any attention to, but truly to change the calendar – to invent and institutionalize a new recognized holiday, requires a great deal of political and cultural work.

Making a cultural object physically present and cognitively memorable may become a matter of political strategy. Aaron Wildavsky illustrates this nicely in his study of the Congressional budget.¹⁸ To get one’s pet project funded, a legislator needs to design strategy to make the project

visible (available) when that will help it, invisible (out of reach) when visibility would hurt it. If you think the project is unpopular, you try to get it lumped together with popular items. If your project is very popular, you may want to list it separately so that it will avoid inclusion in across-the-board budget cuts. If you want to introduce a new project, it may be best to do so in a modest way, the “wedge” or “camel’s nose” strategy, minimizing its visibility. A year later, the original small appropriation will have acquired the protective coloration that comes with being part of the “base” budget. It will be relatively less visible, relatively less vulnerable.

This example indicates that creating greater availability, almost always the strategy in marketing or advertising or publicity, is not the strategy of choice in all spheres of cultural work. Secrecy may be more important or careful targeting of audiences – not only so that some special people see a cultural object but that some other special people do not see it. (This happens occasionally in marketing, too. A commercial product’s manufacturers who hope for a wide, general audience may be alarmed to find the product especially popular and visibly popular with a minority group – especially a stigmatized group. The manufacturer may make efforts at “demarketing” – at reducing the visibility, popularity, or availability of the product with the minority group consumer.)¹⁹ There are various arts of making culture less available: censorship, bureaucratic language designed not to communicate, contracts with fine print designed not to be read, taxes on newspapers designed to keep political information out of the hands of the less affluent. Distraction is also a way to make some culture less available by replacing it in people’s attention with other forms of culture. Retrievability is a manipulable function of culture because people’s attention is a scarce resource.

Rhetorical force

Even if a cultural object, be it advertisement or ritual or novel, is within reach, what will lead someone to be mindful of it? Even if it is in view, what will make viewing it memorable and powerful?

Different cultural objects have different degrees of rhetorical force or effectiveness. What makes one novel more powerful than another, one advertisement more memorable than another, one ritual more moving than another, is a matter that does not afford easy answers. This is no

place to write a dissertation on rhetoric – that is, of course, a field of study in itself devoted to examining the nature of persuasion. Nor do I intend to review the literature – mostly inconclusive – on whether positive appeals work better than negative appeals in advertising or politics, whether clarity aids or hinders in persuasion, whether humor’s help in attracting attention outweighs its tendency to diminish its subject, and so forth. What I am raising – but also skirting here – is a central topic of criticism, be it of art or music or literature. Is this film powerful? If so, why? Does this novel lead its readers to ponder the deepest dilemmas of the human condition? If so, how did it achieve this?

If the cultural object is taken to be a communicative act, there may be a rhetorical aspect to each of its analytically distinct features. There may be a rhetorical aspect of the sender (higher-status speakers will be more persuasive to an audience than lower-status speakers); of the receiving audience (messages that flatter the audience without arousing suspicion of the speaker’s insincerity will be more persuasive than messages that do not flatter); of the medium (people in a given culture may find one medium, say, television, generally more credible than another, say, radio); of the form or format (a whispered confidence is more persuasive than a public, joking insinuation); of the cultural situation (a painting in a museum more easily wins attention and respect than a painting in an antique store or on a bathroom wall); and of the message itself.²⁰

This last factor is the most slippery; indeed, some would be sure to deny that a cultural object or message can ever have such a thing as rhetorical force in its own right, separate from its relationship to the audience and its relationship to the cultural field it is a part of. It may be that rhetorical force – that indefinable quality of vividness or drama or attention-grabbing and belief-inducing energy, cannot be defined, even in part, in an essentialist way and that these qualities are always relational – to the audience, the speaker, the medium, format, and cultural situation. The quality in music or painting or literature or speech that keeps the audience from falling asleep may have more to do with the audience than with the cultural object. Certainly people attend more to “interesting” than to uninteresting objects, but no concept is more relational than the concept of “interesting.”²¹ And yet we know that some writers (say, of sociology) write in a way that keeps an audience engaged, even if the ideas may be of modest consequence, while others write in a way that almost guarantees boredom, even if their ideas may have great merit. This is true even for the same

audience, familiar with the same set of related materials, seeking the same kind of instruction or inspiration. There is something, even if that something is far from being everything, to a concept of art or craft, something to the idea that one person or group may create a cultural object more vivid, funny, appealing, graphic, dramatic, suspenseful, interesting, beautiful, stunning than another.

This becomes a matter of great interest in the sociology of social problems, that is, the study of how certain problems make their way onto the public agenda and are accepted as “problems” society needs to confront. Barbara Nelson’s study of how child abuse got on the political agenda in the United States, for instance, gives a great deal of credit to a key article by Dr. C. Henry Kempe in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1962. The article, “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” did not report medical data on physical injury to children that had not appeared with some frequency in radiology journals in the 1950s but it did, unlike the earlier literature, credit the injuries to willful parental violence. And it provided what Nelson calls a “powerful, unifying label” in the term “battered-child syndrome.” Not only was this a powerful phrase, but it was powerful without becoming too threatening to absorb: it medicalized, rather than criminalized, the phenomenon under discussion. It thereby brought it under the protective (and reassuring) aegis of the medical profession and made it acceptable for general discussion and absorption into the political culture.²²

And yet it is equally true that cultural objects do not exist by themselves. Each new one enters a field already occupied. If it is to gain attention, it must do so by displacing others or by entering into a conversation with others. The power of a cultural object or message exists by virtue of contrastive relationships to other objects in its field. A new painting can be understood only as it follows from or departs from traditions of painting that have gone before, both in the artist’s own work and in the history of art to which the artist’s efforts are some kind of new response. Even the lowly advertisement speaks within a field of advertisements and, indeed, is designed with contemporaneous rival advertisements in mind. Whether an advertisement or a painting or a novel appears striking to an audience will depend very much on how skillfully the object draws from the general culture and from the specific cultural field it is a part of. George Kennan’s famous telegram offers a good example. The rhetorical power of the telegram did not rest on its passionate prose alone. What helped make the telegram so influential was the form in which Kennan put it – an 8,000 word telegram! The

whole memo gained in visibility because of its gargantuan size in relation to the genre (telegram) in which it came. Kennan visibly changed the scale of telegraphic communication. He was unmistakably calling out, “Look at this! This is vitally important!” Kennan made his words count to the fullest by playing against the telegraphic form.

One field of culture poses problems of special interest in this respect: science rejects vividness, drama, and splash as legitimate features of discourse. Science cuts against aesthetic conventions. In science, the duller, the better. Boringness is a kind of virtue in science; deadpan is the appropriate rhetorical style; poker face is the appropriate pose. It may be that in a very well-organized cultural community, as science or certain subfields of science can be, local conventions may overpower more general cultural conventions. At the same time, scientific rhetoric is not immune to seeking after “interesting-ness,” it is just that “interesting” may be defined in a slightly different way. But certainly scientific achievements are valued contrastively – what counts as an achievement is normally a *contrastive* act, a finding that differs from conventional wisdom.²³

Resonance

The importance of the conventions of the subcommunity brings me to the third feature of cultural power: the degree to which the cultural object is resonant with the audience. A rhetorically effective object must be relevant to and resonant with the life of the audience. This is a simple and familiar point. It is made, for instance, by George Mosse when he argues in a study of the power of political ideology and ritual that rulers cannot successfully impose culture on people unless the political symbolism they choose connects to underlying native traditions.²⁴ So far as this is true, an analysis of cultural power inevitably leans toward the second face of culture, the “tool-kit” sense of culture as a set of resources from which people choose, depending on their “interests.” The audience gains some control over culture – as does the Jewish mother portrayed in Rebecca Goldstein’s novel, *The Mind-Body Problem*:

All mothers worry. Jewish mothers worry more. But my mother can find something to worry about in anything. No topic is innocent. In some way, direct or Talmudically indirect, some danger to her family might be lurking. “It’s her way of loving. Try to understand,” my father would tell me when I’d

come complaining about something I'd been forbidden to join my friends in doing: going to the beach (the undertow); tennis (sun-stroke); hiking in the woods (sex maniacs).... She watches the news on television from four in the afternoon until eight in the evening, and then again from ten until twelve. If the phone rings at eight I know who is calling, to tell me to get rid of my house plants (a four-year old has died from nibbling on a castor oil plant), not to answer the door (a man and son team has raped three women in northern New Jersey), not to make any plans to visit Seattle (a geologist has predicted that Mt. Rainier could go off sometime in the next 25 years). She reads the New York Times, the New York Post, the Daily News, the local Westchester paper, and a certain tabloid expression of Jewish paranoia published in Brooklyn (typical headline: COPS SECRETLY ARMING BROOKLYN BLACKS TO RISE AGAINST JEWS). I am always getting clippings in the mail.²⁵

This is a very dogged and directed user of culture, but all people share something with her. Ronald Blythe reports on the village forgeworker in England who enjoys watching historical drama on television because he admires the ornamental grillwork so often part of the sets for these programs.²⁶ People are more likely to pay attention to an automobile advertisement for the car they have just acquired than they are to be influenced by an ad to buy a car. After buying, they read ads to confirm their investment and to find language to be able to defend it to others. A study of viewers of "All in the Family" found that prejudiced viewers thought Archie Bunker was the hero of the show and managed to miss the edge of satire directed against him while tolerant viewers took Archie to be the butt of the sitcom's jokes.²⁷ People not only attend to media selectively but perceive selectively from what they attend to. Obviously, then, people normally participate in culture-making; as some literary theorists would say today, readers are co-authors, "writing" the texts they read. This can be taken too far, I think – and does go too far if it falls altogether into the tool-kit view of culture – but there is a great deal of truth in it.

For producers of mass media culture, the issue of "resonance" will be experienced as a central problem. Whether a new television show, book, or record album will be a "hit" is notoriously difficult for the "culture industry" to predict.²⁸ The broader the audience a message reaches, the less likely the message is to be specifically relevant to a given individual receiving it. Media reports of crime, for example, apparently have little influence on people's fear of crime and less influence still on the kinds of crime-preventing precautions people take. Why? Because, it has been suggested, the media report on spectacular crimes – which people rarely encounter in their own or their

acquaintances' lives – and because the crimes reported rarely take place in the neighborhoods where most of the media audience lives.²⁹

The relevance of a cultural object to its audience, its utility, if you will, is a property not only of the object's content or nature and the audience's interest in it but of the position of the object in the cultural tradition of the society the audience is a part of. That is, the uses to which an audience puts a cultural object are not necessarily personal or idiosyncratic; the needs or interests of an audience are socially and culturally constituted. What is "resonant" is not a matter of how "culture" connects to individual "interests" but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame. Jack Walker's study of the diffusion of legislative innovations among American states convincingly portrays legislative innovation as a process of "cuetaking," legislators borrowing from other states when they want to (because they approve the innovation) or when they have to (because key constituents have become aware of the innovation in another state). However, states do not follow cues from all other states but from those states they believe themselves to be in "the same league" with. Thus, Missouri legislators are obliged to keep an eye on neighbor states to their south and east but not on neighbors to their north and west. The legislators' "interests" are culturally constituted by Missouri's historic identification with the South.³⁰

The "culture" that resonates or fails to resonate is itself no more autonomous than interests: it has as much an interest-driven history as individual interests have a culture-generated constitution. Barbara Herrnstein Smith makes this point with reference to Homer:

The endurance of a classic canonical author such as Homer ... owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture. Repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that continuously *constitutes* the high culture of the orthodoxly educated population of the West, ... that highly variable entity we refer to as "Homer" recurrently enters our experience in relation to a large number and variety of our interests and thus can perform a large number of various functions for us and obviously has performed them for many of us over a good bit of the history of our culture.³¹

Jane Tompkins's study of the economic, political, and social forces — the extra-literary forces — that led Nathaniel Hawthorne to be canonized as a "classic" author makes a similar point.³² One of the reasons a symbol becomes powerful is that — sometimes more or less by chance

— it has been settled on, it has won out over other symbols as a representation of some valued entity and it comes to have an aura. The aura generates its own power and what might originally have been a very modest advantage (or even lucky coincidence) of a symbol becomes, with the accumulation of the aura of tradition over time, a major feature.³³

Relevance or resonance, then, is not a private relation between cultural object and individual, not even a social relation between cultural object and audience, but a public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience.

Institutional retention

Culture interpenetrates with institutions as well as with interests. It exists not only as a set of meanings people share but as a set of concrete social relations in which meaning is enacted, in which it is, in a sense, tied down. If you tie a string around your finger to remember to water the house plants, and fail to heed the string, you may suffer social consequences. It may take a few days or a week for the leaves on your house plants to turn brown, but it may take only a few hours after you return home for your spouse or roommate to be angry with you for failing to remember your chore. To take up the example of Homer, you may well believe that the Bhagavad Gita is as great an epic as the Iliad, but this judgment will not receive social or institutional support in the West. You will have some difficulty getting your friends to read the Gita if they have a choice of reading the Iliad instead because there are no social sanctions, apart from your own disapproval, if they fail to read it. There are sanctions, however, (or there used to be – culture does change, after all) for not knowing Homer. You might, for instance, fail high school English. That is tied-down, institutionalized culture.

A good many cultural objects may be widely available, rhetorically effective, and culturally resonant, but fail of institutionalization. If they never turn up in a school classroom, never become a part of common reference, never enter into the knowledge formally required for citizenship or job-holding or social acceptability, their power will be limited. A “fad” is the phenomenon that epitomizes this situation: a fad is a cultural object that makes its ways into public awareness and use, is widely adopted, and then fades completely or almost completely from view.

Powerful culture is reinforced in and through social institutions that have carrots and sticks of their own. Some culture – say, popular entertainment – is only modestly institutionalized. For certain social groups – notably, teenagers – familiarity with popular entertainment is a key element in social life and there are serious sanctions for lack of knowledge or lack of caring about it. For most adults, popular entertainment is framed as “this is fun” or, in other words, “this does not matter.” That is quite different from the social-cultural framework for “serious” art where the culture – and a whole series of powerful institutions from schools to museums to government funding agencies – tell us “this is relevant.” It may be fun but it is fun that bears on the meaning of an individual’s life – or, so the frame tells us, it should.³⁴

A scientist peddling an idea to a funding agency, an artist seeking a gallery to exhibit his or her work, or an inventor trying to find a manufacturer for a new solar heating device will quickly discover the force of institutional retention. Cultural efficacy in these cases will require not only some broadly understood resonance with the *Zeitgeist* but a specific institutional relevance and sponsorship. Social institutions not only preserve and pass on in powerful ways the culture they certify but they act as gatekeepers in the certification process itself.

The more thoroughly a cultural object is institutionalized – in the educational system or economic and social system or in the dynamics of family life, the more opportunity there is for it to exercise influence. This is not the same thing as retrievability. If an object is retrievable, it can still be disregarded with impunity; if an object is institutionally retained, there are sanctions, social or economic or legal, for disregard.

Resolution

Some elements in culture are more likely to influence action than others because they are better situated at a point of action or because they are by nature directives for action. An advertisement is a cultural text of high “resolution” in that it normally tells the audience precisely what to do to respond. It says: go out and buy. Books of advice or instruction – Jane Fonda’s exercise books, a cookbook, Dr. Spock, the Boy Scout Handbook also give precise directions and can usually be readily enacted. Sacred texts are highly resolved in another sense – they are performative cultural acts, that is, the very act of reading them is itself part of the desired response; reading the book is itself an enact-

ment of the devotional behavior the text urges. But most cultural texts are not imperatives in so clear a fashion or, indeed, in any fashion. They may be powerful in a variety of ways but their low “resolution” means that they are unlikely to stimulate action in concrete, visible, immediate, and measurable ways. (It may be that culture achieves its end precisely when it keeps action from happening; the aim of art may be to inflict waiting and reflection, and Auden’s claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” might be read – though I do not think he intended this – as a strong claim about something poetry does, not a statement that poetry does nothing.)

James Lemert has studied what he calls “mobilizing information” in the news media. Mobilizing information tells the reader how to respond in action to the news story. A news story on a 4th of July parade might include information on the parade route. This is more likely to get someone to the parade than a story that gives no indication of how a person might actually observe the parade. The American news media have an unwritten policy that it is acceptable, even desirable, to print mobilizing information about topics on which there is a cultural consensus – the 4th of July parade or a charity drive at Christmas, but not to print mobilizing information about topics of controversy (the parade route for a political demonstration, for instance). The news media thereby choose a path of low resolution in a way that demobilizes or depoliticizes the public over issues of political controversy. This is another case where a cultural producer – here a news organization – acts to limit the direct cultural power of its own creation.³⁵

In studies of the mass media, there is often said to be a “hierarchy of effects.” An advertisement, for instance, can fail to find any viewers. But if some people do see it, they may not attend to it. They may attend to it, but not learn from it. Even if they learn from it, they may not be led to prefer the advertised product. Even if they do come to prefer the advertised product, they may not actually buy it.³⁶

In cultural anthropology, Melford Spiro has proposed a kind of “hierarchy of effects” model in discussing the impact of religious teachings on people. He argues that there are five levels on which people may learn an ideology. Most weakly, they may learn about an ideological concept. Or, more powerfully, they may learn about it and come to understand it. More powerfully still, they may believe the concept to be true or right. Further (level four), the concept may become important to them; they may come to organize their lives contingent on the belief

in question. Finally, they may internalize the belief so that it is not only cognitively but motivationally important. It comes not only to guide but to “instigate” action.³⁷

If an object is low in resolution and its apparent impact seems to stop at the lower levels of the hierarchy of effects, it does not mean it fails to exercise cultural power in the long run. In the short run, most cultural producers have to be content with limited evidence of their power. “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” This line from Henry Adams was reproduced in a series of advertisements by the Container Corporation of America in the 1950s; I cut it out and tacked it on a bulletin board in my room when I was growing up. It served for me as an encouragement and inspiration to keep on with my studies and to think about teaching as a career, but this is certainly not the kind of cultural impact Henry Adams could have counted on (nor, given his experience with college professors at Harvard, would he necessarily have wanted to). Nor is “affecting eternity” a very comforting consolation for teachers who, day to day, see all too much evidence that they may be having no impact whatsoever.

Spiro’s model considers the impact of an aspect of culture that is highly formalized and transmitted through written materials (among others) in formal institutions – schools and churches. The question of “resolution” does not arise in quite the same way when the cultural object one deals with is encountered almost as if it were a part of oneself and inseparable from social action. This is how ritual transmits culture: the viewer is also actor, the audience is participant, and the distinction between the producer and consumer of culture is blurred if it exists at all. Culture is simultaneously attended to, institutionalized, and resolved in action. Thus, the bride and groom in the marriage ceremony repeat the wedding vows after the presiding officer, surrounded by witnesses, encircled by other symbols of the wedding. The repetition of the vows becomes, in the often shaking voices of the couple, a palpable act of marriage, a commitment in itself, not just a statement about a commitment. The ritual as an act, the saying of vows as a “speech act,” is performative, at once a cultural and social experience. In situations like this, the language I have used here thus far does not fit easily; in just such situations separating “culture” from social action is most difficult. But it is precisely because culture is differentiable from everyday life, and in some ways stands increasingly and visibly apart from it (in the institutions of the mass media, formal schooling, organized religion, printed discourse, and professionalized

music, dance, and theater) that the problem of the efficacy of culture arises so insistently.

Some conclusions and qualifications

So long as retrievability (and the evident capacity of the powerful to manipulate it), resonance, and institutional retention are central features of cultural effectiveness, culture will not act fundamentally to alter social direction, change minds, or overturn apple carts. Generally, culture acts as a reminder, a sign that makes us mindful – and mindful more of some things than of others. The extreme case is the all but contentless cultural object that I have used for illustration earlier, the string a person ties around her finger to remind her to water the plants when she gets home tonight. The string does not provide new information at all: she was already aware that the plants should be watered. The string makes this information more available to her and so helps make the knowledge she already had more actionable. The string may be more effective if it is brightly colored or if it is on her right hand (if she is right handed) or if she ties it tightly enough so that it hurts or if she has frequently resorted to this device in the past. Then the string becomes not only within reach but rhetorically effective.

This is not to say that culture cannot radically alter or subvert. Sometimes ideas *are* switchmen on the tracks of history. What is reminder to most people may be altogether novel to others, or, if not novel nonetheless transformative. John Adams complained that no idea in Tom Paine's "Common Sense" was original with him, but he grudgingly recognized that "Common Sense" helped ignite the struggle for independence as no other document had.³⁸ One reading of Henry George's book on the single tax was a decisive inspiration to a number of the most significant political reformers of the turn of the century.³⁹ Speeches of John F. Kennedy inspired a good many young people to careers of public service. Attendance at an evangelist's meeting has produced conversion experiences that turn people's lives around. At certain moments when society is in flux, more people are searching the skies for cultural leadership and a demand for meaning may become as important as the character of the supply of available significances. If such instances are exceptional, they are nonetheless enormously important. They are very often the moments of revolution or transformation.⁴⁰ But one of the more subtle tasks of the sociology of culture is to find a language to discuss the influence of culture even in the normal,

everyday world where culture reminds more often than it informs, and highlights more often than it galvanizes.

Ann Swidler's strategy for handling this problem is to say there are characteristics of societies rather than of cultural objects that shape what power culture will have. In unsettled or transitional times, with norms in flux, people will be more receptive to culture and more influenced by it than they are in settled times when tradition typically holds sway. Thus to understand the power of culture, the sociologist is well advised not to look to "culture" as such but to its social setting.⁴¹

My own approach is different. Swidler is right that audiences may be more recruitable to cultural symbols or messages at some moments than at others. At the same time, this tends to put the entire weight of the argument on this one side, as if to deny that there are differences among cultural objects that make some of them better recruiters than others. Both features – of the cultural object as much or more than of the audience – seem to me within the realm of what may be studied and what certainly will make a difference. For Swidler, the power of culture in settled times is the power to keep things settled. What she recognizes, but I would insist on, is that this is real power, often challenged and needing to assert itself in the face of challenge, regularly negotiated, ever in the process of renewal.

To say that a cultural object is more powerful the more it is within reach, the more it is rhetorically effective, the more it resonates with existing opinions and structures (without disappearing entirely into them so as to have no independent influence to exert), the more thoroughly it is retained in institutions, and the more highly resolved it is toward action, helps provide a language for discussing the differences in influence of different aspects of culture. It obviously leaves a great many questions unanswered. One of these is identifying measures of cultural influence. What should be the measure of a culture's "working"? Culture might, for instance, have a very large impact on a very few people. This is the measure sociologist David Phillips has taken in showing that certain mass media portrayals of violence seen by hundreds of thousands of people apparently lead a handful of people to commit acts of violence themselves.⁴² Here the few specific acts that culture engenders are so significant that the data are hard to ignore, even though the percentage of the total audience measurably affected is minuscule.

On the other hand, a cultural object could have a very small impact on a great many people. The Live Aid concert in 1985 led thousands of people to make small contributions to famine relief efforts.⁴³ Most culture theory and certainly the various brands of hegemony theory take this approach: the power of culture is that it has a small but sometimes crucial effect on a great many people. To complete the implicit two-by-two table here: sometimes culture may have a large impact on a great many people – as Orson Welles’s broadcast of H. G. Wells’s “War of the Worlds” apparently did or as a fire alarm normally does. Sometimes culture may have a small impact on a very few people – perhaps the Kennan telegram is such an instance. Clearly, measuring the influence of culture will take different forms. The analyst must recognize different intensities of influence operating over different periods of time. Social science is not very good at very much of this. Commonsense is not often better. Where social science often cannot locate (that is to say, measure) cultural influence that certainly exists, commonsense often cannot contain its impression of enormous impact within the social, political, and economic contexts in which social science rightly says it must be understood.

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Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14.
2. Wendy Griswold offers a nice definition of a cultural object as “shared significance embodied in form.” Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 5. Fernandez’ remarks is in “Macrothought,” *American Ethnologist* 12 (November, 1985), 749.
3. Thomas Jefferson, from *Notes on the Stage of Virginia*, cited in William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 58.
4. Auden’s famous remark is in his poem, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” *Another Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).
5. The “dominant ideology thesis” is the phrase of Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980). They identify the thesis with the work of Jürgen Habermas,

- Herbert Marcuse, Ralph Miliband, Nicos Poulantzas, and in some form “in almost all forms of modern Marxism” (1). David Laitin’s position is reported in David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
6. Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986) 273–286. Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 293–304.
 7. Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984) 1126–1156 at 1151, “The idea that actors are always pressing claims, pursuing goals, advancing purposes, and the like may simply be an overly energetic (and overly political) view of how and why people act.” The two positions I identify are assimilable to the most general oppositions between “structuralist” and “culturalist” approaches to the study of human communication (in the language of British cultural studies) or other pessimist/optimist distinctions, such as “system” versus “agency,” or “structure” versus “history.” See the review essay by Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, and Janet Woollacott, *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process* (Open University Press, 1981), 19–37. Reprinted from *Media, Culture, and Society* 2 (1980) 57–72. What may be confusing is that in the debate between culture and structure, the “culture” side tends to be optimistic and sees leeway for human volition to affect the course of history. In the debate between “hegemony” and “tool-kit” views, however, there is a kind of reversal, with hegemony theorists emphasizing the importance of culture but, at the same time, insisting on its deterministic character. The tool-kit people, more likely to insist that “real life” variations in economic, social, biological, and political status mediate the impact of hegemonic culture, are materialists but not determinists. My concern in this essay is not so much with the “culture” versus “structure” debate in the large but, siding with the view that culture makes some difference, trying to arrive at a language that would help specify what difference that might be.
 8. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Giddens takes this book to be “an extended reflection” on Marx’s comment that “Men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing” (xxi). That seems to me not just the subject of Giddens’s work but a general charge to social science. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Max Weber, “Social Psychology of the World Religions,” in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, editors, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 280.
 9. Elihu Katz, “On Conceptualizing Media Effects,” in Thelma McCormack, editor, *Studies in Communications* (Greenwich, Ct.: JAI Press, 1980), 119–141 at 134. This essay is a very useful review of the literature on media effects. A similar observation is made in Donald F. Roberts and Christine M. Bachen, “Mass Communication Effects,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 32 (1981) 307–356 reprinted in D. Charles Whitney, Ellen Wartella, and Sven Windahl, editors, *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* 3 (1982) 29–78 at 48.
 10. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, “The Mainstreaming of America: Villence Profile No. 11,” *Journal of Communication* 30 (Summer, 1980) 10–29. Gerbner, et al. write, “Given our premise that television images cultivate the dominant tendencies of our culture’s beliefs, ideologies, and world views, the observable independent contribution of television can only be

- relatively small. But just as an average temperature shift of a few degrees can lead to an ice age or the outcomes of elections can be determined by slight margins, so too can a relatively small but pervasive influence make a crucial difference. The 'size' of an 'effect' is far less critical than the direction of its steady contribution." (14) Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972) 176–187.
11. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 134–135.
 12. Dan Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations," *Man* (N.S.) 20: 73–89 at 74.
 13. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1967), 292–298.
 14. Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," *American Historical Review* 86 (1981) 247–274 at 264.
 15. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185 (Sept. 27, 1974) 1124–1131. See also the collection, *Judgment Under Uncertainty*, Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, editors, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). A useful effort to relate a similar cognitive psychology to sociological issues is Jean-Louis Missika, "Abstracts for Decision: The Parsimonious Elements of Personal Choice in Public Controversy," *European Journal of Communication* 1 (1986) 27–42.
 16. Steve Chaffee, "The Public View of the Media as Carriers of Information Between School and Community," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (Winter, 1967) 732.
 17. On lists, recipes, and diagrams as forms of information storage and transmission, see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
 18. Aaron Wildavsky, *The Politics of the Budgetary Process*, 3rd edition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 102–126.
 19. Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, "Demarketing, Yes, Demarketing," *Harvard Business Review* 49 (November–December, 1971), 74–80. See also Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 90–128, for a review of the persuasive powers of advertising.
 20. There are few social scientific studies of the impact of different rhetorical strategies. In market research, there are plenty of such studies, but they are of scant theoretical interest. To learn that a big print ad draws more attention than a small one, or color more than black-and-white, other things being equal, is not an astonishing conclusion. It does, of course, however modestly, suggest that not *everything* is in the eye of the beholder. Some constancies in the objects themselves have consistent sorts of effects of audiences. For a useful review of much of this literature, see William McGuire, "Attitudes and Attitude Change," *Handbook of Social Psychology* v. 3, 2nd ed. (Reading, Ma.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 177–200. This may be less than we imagine, however, if we can believe some recent psychological studies that find information presented "vividly" is no more persuasive than information presented straightforwardly. See Shelley E. Tayler and S. C. Thompson, "Stalking the Elusive Vividness Effect," *Psychological Review* 89 (1982) 155–181. See also Donald Kinder and Shanto Iyengar, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 34–46. On political rhetoric, the recent work of J. Max Atkinson is of interest. See *Our Masters' Voices*:

- The Language and Body Language of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984). Atkinson believes that there are indeed powerful effects of different rhetorical strategies.
21. Murray S. Davis, "That's Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1 (1971) 309–344.
 22. Barbara J. Nelson, *Making an Issue of Child Abuse: Political Agenda Setting for Social Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 58–59.
 23. Joseph Gusfield, "The Literary Rhetoric of Science: Comedy and Pathos in Drinking Driver Research," *American Sociological Review* 41 (February, 1976) 16–34.
 24. George Mosse, "Caesarism, Circuses, and Monuments," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6 (1971) 167–182.
 25. Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem* (New York: Random House, 1983) 66.
 26. Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (New York: Dell, 1969), 134.
 27. Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception," *Journal of Communication* 24 (1974) 36–47.
 28. See Paul Hirsch, "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems," *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (1972) 639–659 on books and records; Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) on television; and Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) on consumer goods generally.
 29. Tom R. Tyler, "Assessing the Risk of Crime Victimization: The Integration of Personal Victimization Experience and Socially Transmitted Information," *Journal of Social Issues* 40 (1984) 27–38 at 34.
 30. Jack L. Walker, "Diffusion of Innovations among the American States," *American Political Science Review* 63 (September, 1969) 892.
 31. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," in Robert von Hallberg, *Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 35.
 32. Jane Tompkins, "Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation," *American Quarterly* 36 (1985) 617–642. Also in Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
 33. See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Edward Shils has tried to get at the social meaning of tradition in *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
 34. On the concept of frame, see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) and John MacAloon, "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies," in John MacAloon, editor *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 241–280.
 35. James B. Lemert, "News Context and the Elimination of Mobilizing Information: An Experiment" *Journalism Quarterly* (Summer 1984) 243–249, 259. See also James B. Lemert, *Does Mass Communication Change Public Opinion After All? A New Approach to Effects Analysis* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 117–160. News of crime has relatively slight influence on people's actions to keep from becoming crime victims because it so rarely provides concrete information on how to stay clear of crime. This is another example of the problem of resolution. See Tom Tyler, et al., *Journal of Social Issues* 40.

36. See George Comstock, Steve Chaffee, Natan Katzman, Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Roberts, *Television and Human Behavior* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 316–319, and also Donald F. Roberts and Christine M. Bachen, *ibid.*, 291–292.
37. Melford Spiro, “Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma,” *American Anthropologist* 68 (1966) 1163.
38. Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 79.
39. Lincoln Steffens, *Upbuilders* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1909, 1968), 297.
40. Thanks to David Laitin for the idea of a “demand” for meaning here. Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* may be seen as a model that fits here. At certain moments of intellectual crisis (an accumulation of anomalies) and social receptivity (the old scientists dying off), there is a ripeness for and “demand” for new paradigms.
41. Swidler, “Culture in Action.”
42. David Phillips, “The Impact of Fictional Television Stories on U.S. Adult Fatalities: New Evidence on the Effect of the Mass Media on Violence,” *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (May, 1982) 1340–1359.
43. See Michael Ignatieff, “Is Nothing Sacred? The Ethics of Television,” *Daedalus* 114 (Fall, 1985) 57–78, for a subtle commentary on the uses and abuses of television coverage of famine.