

Cultural Symbols and Cultural Power

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The Problem of Cultural Power

How is culture powerful? The answer to this question depends on what the analyst means by “culture,” as every analytical elaboration of the concept comes packaged with either an explicit or implicit account of the way that culture “matters” in social action (Swidler 1995, 34–35; Sewell 2005, 175ff). Accordingly, I will limit the short discussion that follows to a specific conception of culture as a (more or less coherent) system of “meaningful” symbols (e.g. Geertz 1973). To make matters even more concrete, I will provide my own coupling of an analytical reconstruction and critique of previous accounts of a one (central) element in this conception of culture: namely, the notion of *cultural symbol*.

My wager is that we can make headway on the more general question by providing a more focused account of how cultural symbols can be powerful. Along the way I will be rejecting an intuitive, still influential, but highly misleading—because of the umbilical cord that ties it to mid-twentieth century functionalism (Kuper 1999)—model of the ways that symbols come to be powerful. Focusing on the “culture as system symbols” argument is strategic because this conception of culture is shared across seemingly heterogeneous traditions of cultural analysis, inclusive of Neo-Weberian/Geertzian models of culture as a “symbolic web of meanings” (Biernacki 2000), neo-hermeneuticist conceptions of culture as resource for interpretation (Alexander 2003), neo-Saussurean conceptions of culture as a signifying system governed by relations of difference and substitution, symbolic interactionist conceptions of culture as emergent (bottom up) clusters of significant symbols, and phenomenological conceptions of culture as underlying conceptions constitutive of a life-world among others.

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A Definition of Cultural Symbols

But first, a definition of the centerpiece concept of cultural symbols. I define cultural symbols as *motivated mappings between external form and cognitive meaning, used for both the private evocation of and the public externalization of those meanings.*

There are two key points to note about this definition. First, note that the definition stipulates that cultural symbols have an inherently *bipolar* structure, consisting of a mapping between two distinct but interrelated components. On the one hand, cultural symbols must take objectified, *external form* along some sensory modality; this sensory modality can be aural, visual or kinesthetic. The external form of the symbol is “its most important observable characteristic” (Turner 1967, 20). On the other hand, this external manifestation of form is coupled to some conception (the *cognitive* component). This conception is evoked in the mind of the persons who either use or are exposed to the cultural symbols. The conception may be entrenched (conventionalized) or emergent (novel) and may be endowed with various degrees of structure, ranging from seemingly inchoate to more patterned experiential content. This is the *meaning* of the symbol (Shore 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997). The external (sensory) manifestation of a symbol is its *objective pole*, while the meaningful aspect is its *semantic pole* (Turner 1967). This is in strict analogy with the classic (Saussurean) conceptualization of linguistic symbols and with Victor Turner’s (1967) adaptation and extension of this bipolar model in cultural and symbolic anthropology.

Cultural Symbols and Cultural Power

My basic argument is that one of the ways in which the model of “culture as significant symbols” (with which I do not have any a priori issues) gets into trouble is in its conceptualization of cultural power. A virtue of this model is that it forces the analyst to provide an explicit account of the *relation* between cultural symbols (which are necessarily external) and mental experience (Geertz 1973). The problem is that for a lot of cultural analysts in sociology (e.g. Wuthnow 1989; Swidler 1986) the mere mention of mental experience raises the ugly prospect of “psychologism” and the ghosts of Parsonian normativist functionalism. One way to avoid the issue, and the one that has become the dominant solution among cultural analysts in sociology, is to adopt a wholesale (“Geertzian,” or “Wuthnowian”) methodological anti-mentalism. I believe that this strategy raises more problems than it solves, while isolating cultural analysis in sociology from the cutting edge of cultural theory in other disciplines (e.g. Shore 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997), but will not provide a detailed argument here.

What Cultural Symbols Can’t Do

A more interesting route is taken by phenomenologists (explicitly) (e.g. Berger and Thomas Luckmann 1966) and by power-discourse models inspired by Foucault and Saussure (implicitly) in providing a positive account of the way that cultural symbols link the external and the mental. This was even the position taken by Geertz, in his much neglected—by everybody in sociology except for Sewell (2005, 175ff)—essay on the “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind,” (1973) in spite of his contradictory anti-mentalistic

pronouncements. The strongest (and for that reason analytically more coherent) versions of this approach propose the substantive hypothesis that mental contents, insofar as they are the product of some form of learning or enculturation (conceptualized as the “internalization” of external symbols), are themselves symbolic. That is, just as symbols exist “in the world,” they exist (in similar “symbolic” format) as “symbols of mind” (Kolers and Smythe 1984). This leads to a theory of cultural power: Culture is powerful because symbols either “structure” or “constitute” our mental experience and thus come to delimit the parameters of our thinking. Humans are symbol using animals “trapped” in a web of symbols of their own making because without symbols they would not be able to make sense of this experience (Geertz 1973; Sewell 2005).

I propose that any coherent theory of cultural symbols needs to break with these well-entrenched tenets of classical cultural theory. Two basic observations deserve to be highlighted in this respect.

The first thing to note is that it is incoherent to suppose that mental experience can be “symbolic” in the same sense that external cultural symbols are symbolic (Kolers and Smythe 1984); mental experience is inherently grounded in perception and action (Barsalou 1999). In this sense, the “components” of mental experience do not and cannot share the bipolar structure of cultural symbols, which must couple external vehicles to semantic content in order to be meaningful. The phenomenological contents of our mental experience, on the other hand, are *directly* meaningful; they do not require symbolic “transduction” to be made so (Barsalou 1999). Precisely because external cultural symbols are bipolar couplings of form and meaning, the mind cannot be thought of as a “repository” of symbols as naive models of learning and memory implicitly presuppose (Shore 1996).

The second thing to note is that it is also incoherent to suppose that perceptual states lack structure or form an incoherent flux waiting for the order provided by linguistic or cultural categories (Merleau-Ponty 1964). This intuitive account, inherited from a misleading interpretation of Durkheim’s (1995) sociological Kantianism, must be rejected. My argument is in line with contemporary research in cognitive semantics, which shows that abstract cultural categories are grounded on image-schematic conceptualizations extracted from perception and action and not the other way around (Barsalou 2003).

Note that one implication of rejecting these traditional premises is that we can also reject the corollary that familiarity with linguistic symbols is a necessary component of meaningful experience. Even if persons did not have recourse to linguistic symbols, experience would be meaningful in this embodied sense, as it was for our prelinguistic ancestors, and as it certainly is for prelinguistic infants and our non-language using non-human animal brethren.

Let me repeat this because the claim that I am making is somewhat radical and bound to be received with skepticism:

- Cultural symbols do not exist because they are required to produce meaningful mental experiences. Contra Geertz, even if cultural symbols did not exist, persons would still have a subjective—and even an intersubjective—grasp of the world as a meaningful structure.
- This grasp is based on our fundamental capacity to interact in the world and with our conspecifics at a basic embodied level and to extract the basic contours of experience from patterns of repeated exposure and repeated actions.

This means that it is important for cultural analysts to differentiate between:

- a) The “cultural symbols” constitutive of the external world of public culture (Geertz 1973).
- b) The “perceptual symbols” constitutive of mental experience (Barsalou 1999).

Making this distinction can allow analysts to develop a convincing theoretical accounts of the inter-relation between the two.

What Cultural Symbols Can Do

So far I have produced a negative argument, telling you what cultural symbols cannot do. So how are cultural symbols powerful? What can cultural symbols do if they neither “constitute experience” nor are they required to “make sense” of experience? As already hinted in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph, cultural symbols, rather than constituting our subjective semantic potential, *serve to evoke or access this pre-existing potential in patterned ways*. The semantic pole of a cultural symbol is typically linked to a set of perceptual symbols in their role as the *simulators* for the concept (s) that constitutes the “meaning” of the symbol (Barsalou 1999). This *evocation model* of the way that cultural symbols operate contrasts sharply with both the “constitutive” model inherited from structuralism and with the “sense-making” model inherited from functionalist hermeneutics and social phenomenology.

The basic presumption is that the cognitive meaning of symbols is not “symbolic” in the strong sense. Instead, the potential to invoke a given semantic content must pre-exist the establishment of a link between the external form of the symbol and the specific slice of mental experience that constitutes its cognitive meaning. In this respect, cultural symbols (in contrast to perceptual symbols) do not “mean” anything directly; instead, they serve as prompts for persons to engage in (individual or collective) acts of *meaning construction* (Shore 1996). In this way, the semantic potential of cultural symbols depends on the meaning construction potential embodied in persons. This implies that not all persons will be able to extract the same conceptions when encountering the “same” objective pole of a cultural symbol. The meaning-construction potential is irreducibly experiential; it does not emerge from the “internalization” of cultural symbols. Instead, a large panoply of (domain general) imaginative, cognitive, affective and motor-schematic *capacities* are put to use by persons in order to create meaning “online” (Shore 1996). Without the meaning-construction potential generated by experience (left-behind as perceptual symbols), cultural symbols do not mean much. Rather than providing the person with the capacity to create meaning, cultural symbols *afford access* to richly detailed, multimodal forms of mental experience.

Concluding Remarks

This account provides a solution to an important theoretical ambiguity inherent in the “culture as symbols” account. If cultural symbols are bipolar couplets of form and semantic meaning, and if semantic meaning is itself “symbolic” in the strong sense, then we would fall into an infinite regress—this is usually referred to as the “symbol grounding” problem in cognitive science (Shore 1996). The only solution is to postulate a non-symbolic, non-arbitrary “ground” of “direct” meaningfulness and I propose that this comes from embodied practical experience, which provides “analog”

and iconic meanings that serve as the grounding for the more traditional “bipolar” symbols postulated in traditional cultural theory. While these perceptual symbols have direct meaning, cultural symbols do not “mean” anything directly; instead, they serve as prompts for persons to engage in (individual or collective) acts of meaning construction grounded in non-arbitrary symbols. This also implies that external cultural symbols are neither “internalized” nor “represented” in the mind. Rather than providing the person with the capacity to create meaning, cultural symbols afford access to richly detailed, multimodal forms of mental experience

The model of cultural power that implied by this account conceives of (external) cultural symbols as providing *access points* to conceptual content and as environmental prompts to initiate acts of personal or collective meaning construction. External cultural symbols are important because in everyday experience, cognitive meaning is evoked by constantly shifting features of our experiential context (including the “inner” (interoceptive) experience of the body). This results in the Jamesian “streams of consciousness” flow of cognitive meaning. This stream, by definition, lacks strong structure (although this is not to say that it is unstructured). This also implies that the structured evocation of meaning (as seen typically in ritual performance) must rely on some sort of external support or “scaffolding” and this scaffolding is provided by cultural symbols.

This is in fact a key to understanding the “power” of cultural symbols and the reason for their ubiquity in all known human associations (not, as argued above, because they are necessary for abstract thinking in general). Cultural symbols coordinate access to the delimited chunks of conceptual knowledge in action, in a way that would be difficult (if not impossible) in their absence, especially if left to “naked” human cogitation. This is most important in the case of rituals (and other “complex” cultural symbols), where conceptual knowledge must be evoked in the right sequence and in the prescribed occasion. While this account does not go as far as postulating that cognition would be impossible without external symbols, it does recover a workable and potentially empirically generative version of the original insight shared by Saussurean, Durkheimian, and Geertzian approaches to the issue of cultural power.

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