

Cultural structures, social action, and the discourses of American civil society: A reply to Battani, Hall, and Powers

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Our essay, “The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies”¹ (hereafter DACS), published in this journal some six years ago, has frequently been cited both as an example of late-Durkheimian cultural sociology and as an illustration of culturally-oriented approaches to civil society. Until the appearance of Marshall Battani, David R. Hall, and Rosemary Powers’s “Cultures’ Structures: Making Meaning in the Public Sphere”² (hereafter CS) however, DACS has not been honored by being subject to a systematic effort at falsification. We welcome the opportunity that this critical challenge provides for reiterating, and defending, our theoretical and empirical position.

Let us begin by acknowledging that, in our view, Battani, Hall, and Powers, have not succeeded in their falsifying ambition. Of course, we do not wish they had been more successful. We would have hoped, however, that they had been more precise about our theoretical model and empirical claims. Describing our argument merely as old wine in new bottles, Battani et al. hammer away mightily to fit our round pegs into their square holes. They succeed only in recapitulating rigid, archaic theoretical categories, with the result that they fail to do interpretive justice to the empirical material they themselves introduce.

Battani et al. claim that our structural emphasis in DACS ignores contingency and creativity (CS: 782, 786–787). Evoking such anti-individualist and determinist metaphors as “enactment” and “expressivism,” and citing such idealist *bêtes noires* as Hegel and Parsons, they claim that DACS focuses on the cultural environment of action at the expense of situated intentionality. However, by arguing that “*action* creates meaning” (CS: 809, original italics), they are, in effect, moving backward in theoretical history, erecting the kind of either/or dichotomy

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that underlay the debilitating split between macro and micro thinking for so many years.

Paradoxically this step into the past is rhetorically underpinned by the kinds of value-laden, quasi-Durkheimian, culture-structures that Battani et al. spend so much time refuting in their article. Using language strikingly reminiscent of the micro/macro polemics of 1960s and 1970s, they characterize good and bad cultural theory using binary oppositions. Our cultural model is described as “superficial,” as “glossing meaning,” and as allowing only puppet-like “enactment.” By contrast, their model is “richly textured,” “multiple and contingent,” and provides space for creative “action” (CS: 781–782, 787, 806–809). It is tempting to take a playful detour into deconstructive theory here, as we, the structuralists, highlight the ambiguity and irony of an argument that refutes binary oppositions but unknowingly reinstates them to theoretical centrality. But to do so would be frivolous, and besides, space constraints prevent us from pursuing this course.

This limitation also prevents us from commenting in depth on Battani et al.’s rather remarkable claim that action theory has always been central to structuralism (CS: 784) – hence the supposed redundancy of our own effort to bring them together. Still we cannot resist asking why, if our critics are correct, Levi-Strauss got so hot under the collar when polemicizing against Sartrean “history” in the last chapter of *The Savage Mind*?³ Or, why Foucault’s humanist adversaries have so persistently mourned the “death of the subject” for the past thirty years? Our entire effort is premised on exactly contrary understandings, namely that there is a gigantic split between structural and action theory and, second, that this split can be overcome. At the heart of our article is the challenge of integrating action with structuralist semiotics. As we see it, a major contribution of DACS is to illuminate the work that actors must undertake in fitting codes to events via processes of typification and *ad-hocing*. We are at pains to point out that “cultural structure [is] the basis for creative action and interpretation rather than mere constraint” (DACS: 201). While we are, to be sure, primarily concerned to establish the internally structured nature of culture that in our view allows it relative autonomy, we make a great effort to demonstrate that, precisely because of this autonomy, actors have a great deal of freedom in their relation to it. Far from being puppets on cultural strings, we describe actors as strategic, emotional, and intentional, and as continuously intent on using these cultural codes to defeat opponents and their arguments.

Battani et al. claim, furthermore, that our argument about culture-structure fails because its symbolic reference and its level of generality prevents us from explaining how particular sequences of social crisis are resolved. Of course, the fact that cultural structures exist prior to action – which is by no means the same as asserting, as Battani et al. do, that the former must then be considered a priori in an idealist sense – ensures that there are extra-situational, conventionalizing limits on communicative action. Yet, although we do insist that action must be accountable in terms of cultural structures, in no way does this argument suggest, as Battani et al. claim, that an understanding of orientations to cultural structures can explain how social conflicts and crises are resolved in a causal sense. In fact throughout our earlier essay we are explicit about why this cannot be so: “It is one thing to lay out the internal structure of cultural order and quite another to say precisely what role this culture plays in the unfolding of real historical events.... *For any particular causal problem – for example, whether or not social crises are created and resolved – particular and detailed models of social structure, action, and culture must be developed*” (DACS: 159, our italics). Our critics can claim they have refuted our argument, in other words, only because they completely ignore such explicit nuancing. Acknowledging that “certainly in these cases one can see democratic and counter-democratic codes invoked on both sides,” they make the observation that, nonetheless, “the conflict over meaning was not resolved on the basis of appeals to this code” (CS: 805). It should be clear that far from falsifying our argument with this finding, our critics have only succeeded in savaging a theoretical straw person.

Presuppositions (theoretical-cum-ideological) about the freedom of action, rather than more accurate empirical observations, lead Battani et al. to reject out of hand our findings about “the remarkable durability and continuity” in American civil society “of a single culture structure over time” (DACS: 198). Arguing that there are many different forms of culture, and drawing attention particularly to narrative, aesthetics, and genre, Battani et al. attack DACS for insisting that culture is entirely organized around semiotic dichotomies (CS: 782, 787–788, 801). The problem with this criticism is that, yet again, DACS makes exactly the same argument! In fact, when we introduced our own distinctively structural approach to culture, we warned that, while “we may think of a cultural system as composed of ... structures,” we also “may think of these structures themselves as being of several different kinds.” We go on to note that, in addition to dichotomous codes, “one important kind of ‘cultural structure’ is the narrative,” and we lament

that this “dimension of even the most secular societies has been vastly underestimated in empirical social science and, until recently, in cultural theory” (DACS: 156). It should not be surprising, then, that while DACS concentrates on dichotomous codes, in other studies we and our colleagues have analyzed the narrative and genre elements of culture at some length.⁴ Even if Battani et al. were unfamiliar with all of these other discussions, DACS’ cautionary stipulations about the significance of other kinds of culture structures could not have been more explicit.

Finally, in their central challenge to our major empirical finding, Battani et al. argue that their own research falsifies our claim about the centrality – even within the cultural realm – of the structure we describe as “the discourse of American civil society.” Investigating controversies over commemorative public art and school textbooks, they suggest that other kinds of meaning structures were much more influential (CS: 807–809). In the first case, they point to aesthetic distinctions in art evaluation. In the second, they point to the conflict between fundamentalist religion and pluralist secularism.

Our initial response to this argument is to point out, once again, that DACS never comes close to making a claim for monolithic causality. To the contrary, in textualizing our findings about an overarching civil code, we go out of our way to acknowledge that “differing traditions and sub-cultures [exist] in America” and that there are a “variety of specific cultural traditions . . . that have historically characterized American political debate” (DACS: 166). Among these we point particularly to the widely discussed competition throughout American history among the Republican, liberal, and religious traditions.

Where we differ from Battani et al. is not in acknowledging the existence of these other traditions, but in focussing on their relation to the civil sphere. We insist that insofar as these and other robust cultural traditions enter into the civil public sphere, the activities to which they refer can be legitimated only by making reference to the structures of civil discourse itself. This last point leads directly to the more basic criticism of Battani et al.’s empirical claims. DACS is very clear that the argument about civil discourse structures must be understood in the framework of a broader, macrosociological understanding of a pluralistic, differentiated society. Every one of these spheres has its own central structures of discourse, regulating internal disputes over justice and claiming the right to adjudicate between competing inter-

ests and aims. Civil society is one such “sphere of justice,” to employ Walzer’s vocabulary.⁵ The religious and art worlds are others. Yet, without in any way denying this pluralistic model, DACS does insist that insofar as disputes and controversies succeed in moving beyond the boundaries of particular spheres and into a wider civil sphere, the discourse of civil society trumps.⁶

Our model predicts, therefore, that the dichotomous culture we describe would, indeed, have entered deeply into the controversies our critics have described. It is not surprising, of course, that disputants made reference to artistic and religious criteria, and no doubt there were other normative criteria involved as well, such as economic, scientific, and political claims. Nor is it surprising that irony and ambivalence have figured in such discourses, given that the objects of material culture in question – a sculpture and a book – had been deliberately created to generate complex interpretive responses. It would be surprising, however, if the adjudication of these diverse claims were not, at the same time, centrally involved with the democratic and counter-democratic codes we have described in DACS. The problem with Battani et al.’s analysis, as we see it, is that they fail to take this next step. They make no effort to explore the manner in which these sphere-specific evaluations are taken up in the broader civil society. Lacking any real model of the public sphere, they become enmeshed in an exposition of varied and localized interpretations of artifacts, rather than demonstrating how interpretations and interpreters are, in turn, encoded in a much broader, and shared, symbolic landscape.

Although we have neither access to Battani et al.’s primary data nor the space to offer anything approaching a satisfying reinterpretation of the disputes they analyze, it does seem clear, in terms of the data they themselves provide, that the cultural dichotomies of civil society were centrally involved. Thus, while Battani et al. conclude that the Moscone sculpture was rejected “*because of its aesthetic*” (CS: 796, original italics), they earlier attested, to the contrary, that “affirmations of the sculpture as a great work of art only bolstered the argument that it was inappropriate for a public place” (CS: 795). It would seem to us that this earlier statement, not the later one, has it exactly right. Not arguments about art *per se* but arguments about the relevance of aesthetic criteria within the civil sphere were decisive in legitimating the successful effort to block the public display of the Moscone bust. In fact, our critics themselves suggest that, in making claims about this civil relevance, high arts claims were polluted via their association with key

elements of the anti-democratic code: “The pedestal on which Arneson chose to display Moscone’s bust was controversial because it commemorated the anti-democratic values of irrationality, madness, deceit, power, passion, hysteria, etc.” (CS: 807). That the sculptor “used these values in an ironic way” (ibid.), or that irony itself was a central trope in leveraging civic discourse, does not detract in any way from the centrality of the discourse itself.

The data provided in Battani et al.’s account of the controversy over textbooks make the case for civic centrality even more compelling. Once again, it seems to us, their own empirical data point directly to the key significance of civil framing: “Each side in this debate did indeed invoke these images to advance their claims as legitimate and those of their opponents as illegitimate. Each camp promoted its position as reasonable, sensible, and realistic and motivated by conscience, honesty, and a sense of commitment to ‘American values’” (CS: 798). According to the authors’ own report, moreover, key elements from the democratic code informed participants’ public accounts of educational goals: “When asked what children should be taught in schools, besides an emphasis on academic and technical skills, both opponents and proponents of the texts presented a laundry list of words like responsibility, honesty, fairness, and respect for others” (CS: 802). In other words, neither side of the argument disagreed that education must produce competent citizens, with competence being defined by the categories of what we have identified as the discourse of American civil society (and our critics as a “laundry list”). What participants in the dispute do seem to have disagreed about, rather, was the pedagogical method for producing this result. Judging from the published discussions, the dispute over course materials boiled down to an argument over the intellectual and moral capacities of children. Claiming that children were “impressionable and highly susceptible to the ambiguous and potentially corrupting messages” of the proposed textbooks (CS: 801), fundamentalist opponents of the teaching materials argued that, precisely because students were not yet competent in civil terms, more clear-cut, authoritative, and directive material was necessary. Defenders of the more sophisticated, adult-style textbooks, in turn, justified their support by describing “children as less innocent and malleable” and as more “capable.” They could be given more interpretive freedom because they were closer to achieving the qualities of full-fledged members of civil society as defined by the sacred side of the discursive code relating to social actors (see DACS: 162).

While Battani et al. are thus compelled to acknowledge the obdurate empirical reality of the symbolic set we describe as the binary discourse of civil society, they do so in an *ad hoc* manner that presents it merely as one discourse competing in a chattering crowd of equals. A better approach, we suggest, is systematically to theorize the internal organization of these diverse discourses and their relationship with the civil sphere. In particular, there is a need to recognize the hierarchical arrangement of cultural spheres, whereby the discourses of civil society operate as a court of appeal. Matters that can no longer be black boxed as sphere-specific contests, controversies that become “public issues,” must translate their contending claims into this meta-discourse. Exploring this process of translation is a crucial arena for future research, which will no doubt clarify the relationship between the domain of analysis we have proposed and that of our critics.

Notes

1. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, “The discourse of American civil society: A new proposal for cultural studies,” *Theory and Society* 22/2 (1993): 151–207.
2. Marshall Battani, David R. Hall, and Rosemary Powers, “Cultures’ structures: Making meaning in the public sphere,” *Theory and Society* 26/6 (1997): 781–812.
3. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966).
4. Empirical studies by ourselves and others in our school have addressed many of the themes that are central to Battani et al.’s own argument. In theoretical and empirical studies we have explored irony, aesthetics, narrative, genre, and the relationship of these to social action, concrete historical outcomes, and civil society. Here we can suggest only a few representative works. See for example: Jeffrey Alexander, “Modern, Post, Anti, and Neo: How Intellectuals Have Understood The Crisis of our Time,” in *Fin-de-Siecle Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1995), Anne Kane “Theorising Meaning Construction in Social Movements,” *Sociological Theory* 15/3 (1997): 249–276, Agnes Ku, “Boundary Politics in the Public Sphere,” *Sociological Theory* 16/2 (1998): 172–192, Ronald Jacobs, “Civil Society and Crisis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101/5 (1996): 1238–1272, Ronald Jacobs and Philip Smith, “Romance, Irony and Solidarity,” *Sociological Theory* 15/1 (1997): 60–80, Steven Sherwood, “Narrating the Social,” *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 4/1–2 (1994): 69–88, Philip Smith, “Executing Executions,” *Theory and Society* 25/2 (1996): 235–261.
5. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
6. For an extremely insightful discussion of such inter-sphere adjudication, one that bears a striking similarity to our own position, see Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot, *De la Justification* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).