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Libraries, Social Movements, and Cultural Change: Toward an Alternative Conceptualization of Culture

David A. Snow[1], Peter B. Owens[1], and Anna E. Tan[1]

Abstract

While sociological conceptualizations of culture span a wide range of metaphors, from codes to elephants to toolkits, they are often insufficiently attuned to the processes through which cultural challenges are advanced by individual and collective actors, and the place of political and institutional power in constraining or nurturing these challenges. Drawing from relevant institutional and cultural theories, this article advances an alternative conceptualization of cultural systems as a vast and interconnected network of libraries. This new conceptualization offers three strengths over existing cultural approaches. First, libraries are viewed as dynamic repositories for cultural materials, containing vast holdings that may be accessed, used, and interpreted in unpredictable ways. Second, libraries are not neutral collection points but rather are enmeshed in a broad complex of forces that both organize and legitimate cultural resources through processes of selective acquisition, categorization, and preservation. Third, because of their entanglement in political and institutional power relations, libraries are often focal points for cultural contestation over the legitimate interpretations and uses of cultural resources. We focus on processes of cultural revitalization, fabrication, and canonization to illustrate the relationship between libraries and power relations, and provide examples of cultural challenges, from antiquity to the present day, via these contestational processes.

Keywords

culture, collective behavior, social movements, political sociology, religion

Students of culture generally agree that it includes at least three elements: products, such as music, art, architectural forms, and clothes; practices, such as writing, gesturing, fashion, and lovemaking; and systems of signs and symbols, such as languages and their associated structures of meaning. Because culture includes all these things, some colleagues refer to culture as a kind of kitchen-sink soup that is difficult to configure because it contains almost everything. They add, with exasperation, that it is too mushy and hard to get a handle on. But such a response glosses over a kind of cultural practice that is itself universal: the practice of invoking or creating metaphors—metaphors that provide us with analogical handles to make sense of the muddiness and mushiness of the worlds in which we live.

The sociology of culture as an area of inquiry has its own analogical metaphors.[1]

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One of the most prominent, judging on the basis of citation counts, is Swidler's (1986, 2001) "toolkit" analogy. Others include Bourdieu's (1990) conception of culture in terms of "repertoire" and "habitus," Vaisey's (2009) conception of actors as riders on an elephant, Alexander's (2003) conception of culture as "codes," and Geertz's (1973) conception of culture as an ideological system. All these are analytically useful in one way or another, but for our purposes, none of them are fully satisfactory because of insufficient attention given to cultural change, agentic actors such as social movements that often seek to challenge and/or change aspects of culture, and power's role in the constitution and maintenance of culture. Most helpful in this regard is Sewell's (1992) emphasis on structures as an array of resources that are available for potential reinterpretation and creative use (see also Friedland and Alford 1991). The ability to reinterpret cultural resources (here defined as the products, practices, and signs and symbols constitutive of any cultural system) and utilize them in novel ways arises directly out of the creative potential of human agency.

Following Bourdieu, we also acknowledge that powerful institutions can constrain both the availability of certain cultural resources and the range of salient interpretations that they may offer. Although some cultural resources are virtually public goods, the range of salient interpretations available may be highly circumscribed through the canonization (i.e., authoritative institutional availability) of particular meanings. Likewise, resources that are less institutionalized and more open to a range of interpretations may also be harder to locate (such as various archival holdings), sometimes necessitating extensive efforts to uncover them.

Building on and extending such prior insights, we propose in this article an alternative conceptualization of *culture as a vast and dynamic library or network of libraries*.[2] We first elaborate on this conceptualization, denoting its theoretical and empirical utility for sociology of culture scholars. We then highlight the ways in which researchers might appropriately extend our conceptions to the cultural underpinnings and activities of social movements and the practice of power more generally.

Culture as Library

We think a library is a particularly apt metaphor for culture for a number of intersecting reasons. First, libraries are, at their core, repositories of culture. They are reservoirs of information about all matters and facets of life, from the local to the global, expressed historically in written form but evolving with communication technology to include today not only books, periodicals, newspapers, and varied and sundry manuscripts but also maps, prints of art, CDs, cassettes, videotapes, DVDs, e-books, audiobooks, and large databases, and even, if we consider museums as nested under the library umbrella, historic and cultural artifacts of all kinds. Historically, libraries vary dramatically in terms of the volume of their physical holdings and thus the physical space in which those holdings are housed, ranging from a small community or county library in the United States to the Vatican Apostolic Library, or Vat, for short, which is arguably one of the world's largest and foremost cultural repositories. Its collection, which has been accumulating "since the mid-fourteen-hundreds, is so vast that even the people who run it haven't always known what they're sitting on top of" and are thus unaware of the cultural resources contained therein (Mendelsohn 2011:25). Of course, cultural resources are not only often unused, but they are also sometimes hidden intentionally, as in the case of the Gnostic Gospels (Pagels [1979] 1989), or inadvertently as when materials are misplaced, miscategorized, or uncategorized.[3] But historic differences in the size and location of spatially distinct libraries, as well as associated categorization processes, are much less consequential today following the rise of the Internet and the widespread digitization of information, which allow access to many cultural resources that heretofore would have been difficult or impossible to access. The point is that there is no other available information system or resource that is comparable with the library as a repository of culture. And they are not just static repositories, based on accretions of the past;

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rather, they are dynamic repositories, for their accretions are both old, even sometimes ancient, and new or contemporary.

A second feature of the library that makes it an apt metaphor for culture is that its organization and functioning embody and mirror key elements of social differentiation and stratification that organize social life more generally. In inspecting the organization and functioning of libraries, one quickly confronts issues of accessibility (libraries vary in terms of accessibility by populations historically and contemporaneously), inclusion and exclusion (libraries vary in terms of what gets included and excluded), and categorization and interpretation (libraries do not simply aggregate and contain but categorize as well—through classification of their holdings, libraries facilitate the retrieval and interpretation of its volumes).

Consideration of these issues in relation to the accumulation and legitimation of cultural resources suggests that libraries are intrinsically enmeshed in power dynamics. Foucault, who utilized library holdings as his primary data sources, identifies direct interconnections between mechanisms of power and the accumulation and legitimation of cultural knowledge (e.g., Foucault 1978:92–102). Bourdieu's (1993) work on cultural production similarly focuses on how institutions constrain both the availability of cultural resources and their legitimate meanings and interpretations through a process he termed "symbolic violence." The institutions wielding the cultural authority to "canonize" or "consecrate" cultural items such as books or paintings, granting them enhanced legitimacy and standing relative to other works, span a range of institutions, from museums and educational systems down to intellectual circles, book reviewers, and other assorted agents. The process of canonization is thus a complex one, which we discuss in more detail later. The key insight here is that libraries are not neutral collection points but rather are enmeshed in a broad complex of forces that organize and legitimate cultural resources through processes of selective acquisition, categorization, and preservation. Understanding culture as a vast library or network of libraries, then, helps direct attention toward these various processes.

A third feature of the library metaphor that we think advantages it over other existing metaphors is that it provides for a more dynamic conception of culture as contested terrain and facilitates understanding of cultural change. Much of this contestation follows the potential polysemy of cultural resources (Sewell 1992): The same cultural resource can yield different meanings and uses for different actors. However, this potential may well be limited to the extent that the range of "legitimate" interpretations and uses is institutionally circumscribed in a given cultural field (Bourdieu 1993).

Another factor that enables such contestation is the changing social contexts in which even well-established resources are understood and used. Here, we follow Mead's (1932) proposition that knowledge about the social world flows from an iterative revision of our understandings of the past, relative to present-day events and concerns. Although it is possible that an essential "past," true "in-itself," exists apart from our assessments of it, in Mead's conceptualization, there are many pasts that arise through constant dialogue with the present. Thus, even preexisting library holdings with well-established interpretations and uses can often be taken down off the shelf, dusted off, and "read" in a new and unexpected light. In Foucault's (1978) terms, these rereadings and reinterpretations may often serve the interests of dominant institutions in repressing or delegitimating alternative interpretations and resource utilization, but they can also be used to justify and legitimate explicit or implicit resistance to dominant institutions. The library metaphor incorporates such perspectives into current theorizing on the relationship between culture and social action by focusing on the social and political forces that both enable and constrain the potential polysemy and creative use of cultural resources.

Social Movements as Agents of Cultural Change

Social movements are among the most frequent users and interpreters of culture broadly

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construed: Because of the various challenges movements present to political and cultural institutions, they are often deeply involved in the resurrection, appropriation, memorialization, and institutionalization of cultural resources (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Fine 2012; Snow, Tan, and Owens 2013). These resources include events (Armstrong and Crage 2006), historical figures (Fine 2012; Jansen 2007), and even classical literature (Krebs 2011), among many others. In appropriating and adapting existing cultural resources to their own ends, movements may revive and reinterpret these extant resources, or create new resources in a *bricolage* fashion by melding together existing cultural materials. Elsewhere, we refer to these processes, respectively, as cultural revitalization and fabrication (Snow et al. 2013).

Revitalization involves the resuscitation of a forgotten, jettisoned, or unused cultural item—be it a cultural practice, product, or sign or symbol—and aligning it with movement claims and goals and/or imbuing it with new meanings and associations that are resonant with present issues and concerns. A recent example is provided by Glenn Beck's rescue and revitalization of obscure conservative thinkers, such as W. Cleon Skousen and his writings, namely, *The 5,000 Year Leap*, which Beck said was "essential to understanding why our Founders built this Republic the way they did" (Wilentz 2010:36). Beck, among many others, rescued and revitalized such dust-collecting items and their arguments to help frame various contemporary issues and events of particular relevance to the Tea Party movement. As one Tea Party observer noted, it "is a thoroughly modern movement, organizing on Twitter and Facebook . . . [b]ut when it comes to ideology, it has reached back to dusty bookshelves for long-dormant ideas" (Zernike 2010).

In contrast to revitalization, fabrication involves the construction or creation of something relatively new out of existing cultural resources, drawing from the cultural cache of these resources but fusing them together in a *bricolage* fashion. The fabrication may be a straightforward construction devoid of any deception or misrepresentation, or it may intentionally misrepresent and deceive. In either case, extant cultural resources are being drawn on and articulated and elaborated in a fashion intended to mobilize. One prominent case of the modern age involved Heinrich Himmler, the head of the Nazi SS (Schutzstaffel or Protection Squadon) and arguably the second most influential leader in the Nazi movement and regime, and his use of the Roman Senator, historian, and author Cornelius Tacitus's book titled, *Germania* (AD 98), as the basis for elaborating and legitimating the highly mobilizing master frame of Aryan Supremacy (see Krebs 2011; Snow et al. 2013). In such cases, works of antiquity are not only being revitalized but are also used to create new, and thus fabricated, resonant systems of meaning and calls to action. But the salience and durability of such fabrications is not merely a function of their resonance with contemporary events and existing cultural claims or expectations. Equally important are the power dynamics that play a critical role in determining which cultural revitalizations and/or fabrications gain ascendance over others, especially since often there are competing revitalizations and fabrications.

Utility for Understanding the Practice of Power

To get a handle on the importance of the power dynamics in play, we turn to the previously mentioned process of canonization, which illustrates as well the other features of culture embodied in the library metaphor. We invoke the meaning of canonization which directs attention to a body of beliefs, principles, practices, and/or cultural products, such as books, music, and art, that become authoritatively sanctioned or approved and thus canonized within an existing cultural system. We suspect that canonization processes vary on a continuum ranging from being highly strategic, intentionally exclusionary, and contentious at one end to being more cumulative, consensual, and less strategic at the other end.[4] To illustrate this contrast, one can consider the processual differences between the gradual linguistic drift that leads to colloquial language and contemporary slang becoming canonized within

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official English-language dictionaries, with the purposive challenges and cultural contention on the part of activists and advocates to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) *II* in 1974.

The more intentionally exclusionary the process is, the greater the juxtaposition of that which is being authoritatively sanctioned to that which is seen as not meriting inclusion and thus standing outside of or beyond the canon, often in a challenging and contestable position. One of the foremost examples of this process of highly strategic canonization, and the contestation often associated with it, is provided by the establishment of the 27 books of the New Testament as the canonized basis of Christianity.

Whatever one's beliefs regarding the New Testament's "sacred" status, there is little, if any, question regarding its contested character (Barnstone and Meyer 2008; Bauer [1934] 1971; Ehrman 2003; Pagels [1979] 1989, 2005, 2012). Early on, during the first several centuries after the birth of the historical Christ, and well into the fifth century, there was no single, "orthodox" or canonized Christianity. Rather, there were numerous competing Christianities, with different understandings or interpretations of Christ's nature (e.g., divine vs. human vs. both or a fusion of the two natures) and teachings scattered throughout early Christendom (Bauer [1934] 1971, Ehrman 2003; Jenkins 2010; Pagels [1979] 1989).

The process by which Christian orthodoxy was established is illustrative of strategic canonization, and, as such, rests as much on "struggles over power" as on theological differences (Bauer [1934] 1971; Ehrman 2003:175). There are a number noteworthy periods in this canonization process that highlight the conflict and power dynamics in which it was embedded (Ehrman 2003; Jenkins 2010; Pagels [1979] 1989). We briefly note one here for illustrative purposes, which is keyed to the Roman Christian community and its belief in the dual nature of Christ and the church's hierarchical structure of bishops, priests, and deacons, "who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only 'true faith'" (Pagels [1979] 1989:xxiii). This critically noteworthy period occurred in the middle of the second century when some 52 texts now known as the *Gnostic Gospels*, and others like them, were denounced as heretical by Catholic bishops, perhaps, most importantly, Ireneaeus, the Bishop of Lyons and author of a five-volume harangue titled *The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Knowledge*. The result was that such denigrated texts were banned and destroyed or hidden, as was the case with the Gnostic Gospels, which were discovered some 1,600 years later (in 1945) buried in the cliffs of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.

This and the banning and criminalization of other "heretical" texts represented an exclusionary step in establishing and bounding the New Testament canon and what could be included in the emerging sanctified Christian library. While the conflicts over the correct or orthodox teachings, understandings, and practices of early Christianity involved much saber rattling and some associated bloodshed, these doctrinal disputes were waged mainly with words, thus constituting framing wars of sorts. As early Christian scholar Bart Ehrman writes in *Lost Christianities*: "The battle for converts was, in some ways, the battle over texts, and the proto-orthodox party won the former battle by winning the latter. One of the results was the canonization of the twenty-seven books that we now call the New Testament" (2003:180).

Leaping forward to the present, we not only find a plethora of canonical disputes, but we also find that they also are fought almost solely with words and usually over texts. In some cases, the issue is over the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts within the library, both literally and metaphorically, as has often occurred in the United States. An annual, almost ritualistic, example is book banning, which entails initiatives, usually collective, to exclude certain texts from the cultural repertoire of presumably accessible texts. For 2012, for example, it is reported that "[a]t least 464 formal complaints were filed . . . to remove books from schools and libraries" in the United States (Grinberg and CNN Library 2013). Each year

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brings forth new candidates for banning, but it is almost certain that each year's list will also include a number of "classics" that have been longstanding targets for banning, such as Salinger's *The Catcher and the Rye* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Whether successful or not, such banning initiatives represent efforts to bound and trim, and redefine in some ways, the acceptable cultural canon.

In other cases, the focus is on redefining the canon by broadening it or constituting an alternative parallel canon. Prominent examples include the challenges to the so-called Western Canon, particularly in literature but also in the humanities more broadly construed and in the social sciences. These canonical challenges, which are still ongoing in various degrees, have been associated with the ascent of postmodernism, the second and third waves of the feminist/women's movement, multiculturalism, the Afrocentric movement, and the movement for various ethnic- and race-based study programs (see, e.g., Bernal 1987; Binder 2002; Goldberg 1994; Rojas 2007). As in all canonical conflicts, guardians and supporters of the challenged canon often mount their own counter challenges (e.g., Bloom 1994; Hirsch 1987).

In still other cases, the conflict is over what should be included or excised from the available texts themselves. Perhaps most illustrative of this variant of canonical conflict are the contemporary challenges to evolutionary theory, and science more generally, waged by the proponents of the creationist/intelligent design movement (see Binder 2002; Kehoe 2007, Stobaugh and Snow 2010; Wilson 2002). This canonical conflict dates back to the famous 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial" in which the ban on teaching of evolution in schools was upheld.[5] However, the tables were turned in the 1960s as science and evolutionary theory eventually gained canonical status, thereby ousting the creationist account from the biology textbooks and indirectly forcing the creationists to recast their thesis in terms of creation science and intelligent design. With the authoritative ascent of science beginning in the 1960s and a series of unfavorable, contrary U.S. Supreme Court decisions, beginning with *Epperson v. Arkansas* in 1968 and culminating most recently in the 2005 *Kitsmiller v. Dover Area School District* ruling that intelligent design is not science, the creationist/intelligent design movement has been rendered comparatively impotent at the national level (Binder 2002; Stobaugh and Snow 2010). But the battle over curricula control and its canonical status is still being waged at the local and state levels, where school boards exercise considerable control over textbook content and adoption (see, e.g., McKinley 2010). And, in doing so, they authorize and legitimize some books while symbolically banning other books, or at least relegating them to the back of the library stacks.

In all these canonical contestations, we see that the conflict was essentially over the cultural legitimacy of one or more texts and/or their content, and, thus, whether they should be included in the library, both metaphoric and literal, and/or privileged or sanctioned by their placement in the library. Moreover, the winners in these canonical conflicts are typically those aligned with those in power or in position of political dominance within the cultural or institutional fields of relevance. Much as a real library is not simply a passive repository but rather made up of a host of managed collections overseen by authorities, culture too is variously subject to authoritative monitoring and ordering. This was clear in the case of the canonical conflict over the establishment of the Christian canon (Ehrman 2003; Jenkins 2010; Pagels [1979] 1989), and it has also been the case in most subsequent conflicts. As Binder (2002:5) found in her comparison of the challenges levied by Afrocentrists and creationists,

> School personnel delivered fundamentally the same *ultimate* fate to Afrocentrist and creationists: they fought to preserve their institution's core curricula in history and science. Aided sometimes by the courts and sometimes public opinion, school staff eventually rebuffed both sets of challenges, so that little, if any, of either Afrocentrists' or creationists' initial curricular demands had serious lasting or widespread effects on students' classroom learning.

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Concluding Comments

We have suggested an alternative conceptualization of culture as library and grounded it in a litany of both literal and metaphorical examples of canonization processes and conflicts in different places and times. We have also argued that the analytic utility and novelty of the library metaphor for understanding culture and cultural codification and change processes, such as revitalization, fabrication, and canonization, are keyed to power and social control and their dynamics. But we have referenced these considerations only illustratively, so we conclude by elaborating how the library metaphor and the associated processes of canonization highlight the salience of power and power dynamics in constituting culture and thus underscore the analytic utility of the library metaphor.

First and foremost, as suggested by our broad assortment of illustrative cases, inclusion into almost any library's holdings is often characterized by contention over the worthiness and legitimacy of the presented or appealed materials, thus giving rise to canonical disputes. Since cultural canons, whatever their form, are tools of social control, canonical disputes over the inclusion or exclusion are more than symbolic victories of discourse. More significantly, challenges to the existing canon are efforts to reconfigure relations of power, establish the legitimacy of the cultural challengers' claims, and shift the taken-for-grantedness of existing cultural classifications. The removal of the controversial deviant diagnosis for homosexuality from the *DSM*, for instance, signaled the dismantling of such a categorization from the canon, triggering similar efforts from subsequent movements such as the transgendered community to challenge the canonical status of the labels of deviance or marginality (Lev 2006).[6]

Second, even though many, and probably most, library collections are a public cultural resource, not all residents or citizens have equal access to its contents. Power remains salient in the form of powerful board members, community figures, interest groups and, of course, patrons providing financial support. The utility of the metaphor is further highlighted by this comparison's aptness when scaling between the smallest of local libraries and such revered national institutions such as the Library of Congress and the aforementioned Vat.

Finally, in focusing on the cultural change and/or the codification processes of revitalization, fabrication, and canonization, and examining them through the window of the library metaphor, we challenge the dichotomy of "settled" versus "unsettled" times (Swidler 1986, 2001) as the conditions under which cultural change occurs. Instead, we advance an alternative notion that the cultural systems of all societies are, at minimum, almost always simmering with challenges of various sorts, though these challenges vary widely in their degree and scope. As relations of power reorganize, new marginalized groups are constantly emerging, advancing their own canonical alternatives or, more commonly, clamoring for inclusion into some dominant cultural framework. Social movements, we have argued, play a central role among these agents of cultural challenge and change, pounding almost ceaselessly upon the library walls, both literal and metaphoric.

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Notes

1. *Analogic metaphors*, which demonstrate the ways in which one thing is like another, can be contrasted to *iconic metaphors*, which portray the uniqueness of a thing. Iconic metaphors "picture what things are, rather than how things are alike" (Brown 1977:115). For a more general examination of analogy, see Hofstadter and Sander (2013).
2. Such a network of libraries has been aided by the rise of the Internet and other information

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technology, allowing access to many cultural resources that before would have been difficult or impossible to access.

3. Regarding the latter, see, for example, Ehrman's discussion of the discovery—in the library of the fifth century (of the Christian era) orthodox monastery of Mar Saba about 12 miles southeast of Jerusalem—of "a previously unknown letter by Clement of Alexandria, a famous proto-orthodox church father of the early third century," which referenced a second version of the Gospel of Mark with passages not found in the New Testament (2003:70-7167-89). Partly because of the potential implications of such a letter, there has been much debate about whether it was authentic or forged (Ehrman 2003:67–68). But there is also the related question of whether it was accidentally or intentionally left uncategorized. Whatever the answers to such questions, they foreshadow our discussion of the political trials and tribulations associated with the inclusion or exclusion of selected artifacts into a cultural canon.
4. These canonization processes may occur at all levels of culture, from national cultures to subcultures and, arguably, even to the so-called world society/culture.
5. In this particular case, the proponents of evolution, namely, John Scopes and Clarence Darrow, were the challengers, attempting to wedge the theory into the curriculum and thereby neutralize, or at least soften, the then canonical status of the creationist account of humankind's ascent (Larson 1997).
6. See, also, Taylor's (1996) parallel examination of the relationship between feminism, self-help, and postpartum depression.

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