Objectives. (1) Provide an introduction to the study of culture, broadly defined; (2) Expose you to a range of ways in which culture is conceptualized and studied in sociology and related disciplines, and (3) Prepare you to apply insights from sociology of culture to your own empirical work. The course provides an overview for the curious and a platform from which students who wish to take an exam or teach a course in this area can pursue independent work.

Readings. Readings on available on B-courses. The only required text is:


Life with Zoom. Seminars depend on the active engagement and participation of every student. This is relatively easy to achieve in classrooms. It is harder online, so I will attempt to structure the class in a way that allows maximum participation with a more structured class.

Each week, I will produce a short 10-20 minute podcast that will provide background on the theme and contextualize the readings. I will try and do this by the Friday before each class on Tuesday. I will also provide you with a list of questions to guide your reading after I prepare the podcast. Every week, I will show up on Zoom at 2 to just chat. Our class sessions will consist of three break sessions of 30 minutes each where students will discuss different readings and questions in each session. I will provide questions to structure your sessions, some of which will come from the reading questions and ask for a member of each group to report back on the group’s deliberations. The groups will meet for 15 minutes and then we will have a collective discussion for 15 minutes on what the groups came up with. After the third breakout group, we will use the remaining time in the class to compare and contrast the readings and consider the general questions that the readings present. I intend to have this last part of the session be more of a question and answer period, where you can ask me to clarify issues in the readings and explain issues that you find to be obscure or difficult.

Zoom is not ideal to generate discussion. But, I hope that by now, many of you will have gotten used to the format and figured out how to make class time meaningful time. By adding more structure, I intend to take a more active role in directing the conversation.

Overview. Across the social sciences beginning in the 1980s, there was a turn towards invoking culture as a concept to make sense of the social world. This call originated in anthropology, history, literary studies, and sociology. What we now call cultural studies has its roots in this
intellectual ferment. In Sociology, the Sociology of Culture went from barely existing in 1980 to becoming the focus of one of the largest sections in the American Sociological Association in just over ten years. It remains one of the broadest, fastest-moving and most fuzzily-bounded of sociology’s subfields.

As the subfield in which sociologists confront the problem of meaning and how meanings are extracted, communicated and organized, it is germane to almost everything that sociologists study, making it a foundational field of value to scholars in every subfield of sociology including historical sociology, gender and sexuality, race, economic sociology, political sociology, and the study of inequality. The sociological version of the Sociology of Culture is distinct from the cultural studies version and draw on somewhat different roots. While cultural studies has had influence on sociology and vice versa, there remain many differences in theory, method, and how to think about culture. One big difference is that the sociology of culture in sociology tends to be more focused on the cognitive processes by which people come to understand their worlds and come to make distinctions and judgements and thereby considers how we can use culture as an explanation for their actions. It is concerned with how cognitive processes impact how social groups form and how their identities and group boundaries arise. This means that the sociology of culture tends to be empirical and concerned to show the direct effects of cultural understandings on behavior and outcomes for individuals and groups.

Cultural studies, which has roots in history and literature, assumes that everything in social life is a cultural object and open to deconstruction. The main goal in cultural studies is to draw potential linkages between power and culture. Culture here can be a set of ideas or ideology which can misdirect attention from underlying social relations, serve to further the interests more directly of those in power, and offer justifications for the existing system of power. Culture isn’t just a tool of the powerful. Oppressed groups can create oppositional cultures to respond to their disadvantage. Cultural studies tends to be less empirical given its roots in literary criticism and philosophy (history offers an exception here). So, it is perfectly acceptable in cultural studies to write an essay about one television show or movie through interpretation. Historians tend to use culture to understand pivotal moments in history and how groups come to awareness and frame their situations. One scholar whose work bridges some of the gap between these approaches is Pierre Bourdieu, to whom we will pay a lot of attention.

Having said that, the two approaches to culture are not well bounded and we will also consider works that have influenced both sociology and cultural studies. This being a sociology course, I will pay most attention to what those whose academic identities are cultural sociology (that is supposed to be a little ironic). The study of culture is a field in flux, open to new ideas and methodologically diverse, as sociologists of culture employ the full range of methods from ethnography and interviews, to experiments and standard statistics, to computational text analysis and network analysis. It is an interdisciplinary enterprise, as historians, literary critics, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, data scientists, and even the occasional economist have joined the study of culture. This ferment is represented in the representation of all these disciplines on the reading list.

I begin the class by introducing several sociological perspectives on culture. My main goal is to consider how we think about the link between culture and social structure and the various ways people have discussed those terms. Then we take a deeper dive into what we know about social cognition that helps provide a foundation for understanding how people use culture in everyday
life. We consider schemas, frames, dual systems theory, classification, social identity, group boundary formation, and logics and institutions as building blocks for cultural sociology.

We then build on these theoretical and conceptual discussions to move to how people study culture empirically and in different social contexts. We first consider two central themes in the sociology of culture: cultural consumption/reception and cultural production. A more typical sociology of culture class would continue by exploring how culture operates in different ways, by exploring language, values and norms, popular culture, and the measurement of culture. I have decided as a non-cultural sociologist specialist to instead take us into the larger field of sociology to see how people use culture in different ways in their attempt to study other sociological objects. We will discuss culture and inequality, culture and race, and culture used to explain contemporary American politics.

The most important tension built into cultural sociology is the relation between meaning and power. For some cultural sociologists, meaning is always embedded in power and reflects the conflicts between the powerful and the less powerful. For others, it is possible to study meaning without studying power as it provides clues to what people think and why they do things. At the extreme, to the degree that culture is about values, norms, and morality, for some scholars, it has little to do with power and more to do with people’s conceptions of right and wrong.

Finally, culture also plays a big role in our theories of social change. Almost all of our theories of change, from Weber, to Berger and Luckmann, to Swidler, to Bourdieu, assume a crisis in social structure and a novel response by people to reframe and re-understand their situations in order to create a new world. Culture plays an extremely important role in this by providing new or recombined meanings to help create a new social world. The last two weeks I take up the question of culture’s role in facilitating new forms of collective action. We first consider the social movements literature where this insight has been exploited most systematically.

We conclude with a week I call “Power to”. Max Weber made a famous distinct between the idea that there was a tension in our idea about power. While power was frequently about power over something, power was also the ability to accomplish something. Much of modern social life depends on our creating culture to facilitate action. Pieces of culture like the Amazon seller ratings help us do stuff. I consider how people have theorized the ways in which culture can be used to engage cooperation, create entirely new kinds of social structure, and provided new forms of schema, frames, logics, and institutions in spheres outside of politics.

I have decided to limit our readings to three per week, one for each of our breakout sessions. I provide an extended reading list at the end of the syllabus for those of you interested in pursuing particular themes. I hope that you will complete the course with a solid grounding in the study of culture and an overview of the many substantive contexts in which you can put that grounding to work.

Requirements:

The quality of any graduate seminar depends in large part on the extent to which students have read the materials and are prepared to discuss them. Emphasis is on mastery of, and critical and creative response to, the assigned material. In this era of Zoom and Covid, it is most important. So please take time to do the readings and come to class prepared to discuss them.
For each reading be able to answer the following questions: 1. What question is the author trying to answer? 2. How does the author define "culture" (or the aspect of culture on which she or he focuses)? 3. If the paper is empirical, how does the author operationalize the cultural element and how tight is the fit between operationalization and definition? What is the nature of the author's evidence and how does she or he bring that to bear on the research questions? 4. If the paper is theoretical, whom is the author addressing and with whom is she or he arguing? How tight are the connections between the links in the argument, and what, if any, premises are smuggled in unheralded. 5. Finally, what does the reading accomplish? What have you learned from it that will make your own work better?

**Week 1: January 19 Introduction**


I will produce a podcast discussing the classical roots of the idea of culture in Sociology. In class, I will also introduce you to two of the varieties of the sociology of culture, cultural studies and the sociology of culture. My plan is to discuss their origins, the “cultural turn” in the human disciplines more generally, and how we will structure our foray into culture. I will also consider some of the methodological disputes in the field about how one might actually study culture.

**Week 2: January 26 What is culture and how should we think about it?**

Each of us in this seminar probably has her or his own working definition of “culture,” which makes us pretty much like everyone else who has ever written about or studied the subject. In the early 1950s, two anthropologists wrote a whole book that consisted of several hundred disparate definitions of culture promulgated by anthropologists. Today, one would need a bookshelf and would need to include people from another half dozen disciplines.

I selected several of the more influential efforts, ranging from the (not-so-recent) first chapter Peter Berger’s and Thomas Luckmann’s constructionist manifesto. Berger and Luckmann’s views of how we come to understand situations and how we use our learned knowledge to evaluate them still remains pretty close to how we think of culture in action today. They successfully link what goes on between our ears and what we have learned through socialization to meso and macro situations in which we find ourselves. Their idea of taken-for-grantedness fits nicely with cognitive psychology’s finding that much of cognition is automatic and habitual.

Ann Swidler’s 1986 *ASR* paper is the single most influential paper in the sociology of culture, in many ways transforming the field. Her view is that culture has more to do with strategies than with values, that people engage with culture when they have problems to solve, that culture is more like a toolkit than a seamless web, and that culture works differently in settled and unsettled times have all become central (if sometimes disputed) tenets of the sociological perspective.

Paul DiMaggio’s 1997 *Annual Review* paper argued for the relevance of such insights from research on social cognition as schemas, dual cognitive processes (automatic and reflective), and modularity to the sociology of culture. Since then, this perspective has become mainstream and
sociologists of culture draw liberally on work in social cognition and cognitive neuroscience to understand how people use culture in their everyday lives.


**Week 3 February 2: Foundations: Schemas, Dual Process, and Social Context**

I thought this was a sociology seminar, you ask yourself, so why are we reading psychology? This week is a crash course in everything you need to know about cognition to think sensibly about how culture enters into people’s lives. Sociologists have expropriated the ideas of schemata, scripts, and frames from psychology. The Rumelhart article sums up how psychologists think about cognition and what is actually stored in our brains.

Then, we take up the issue of dual process models. Modern psychology has demonstrated that there are two kinds of thinking, one that is fast and automatic and based on habit (what Bourdieu would call habitus) and the other that is self-reflective and slow and requires active reasoning. Both of course, rely on schema, scripts, frames, and memory.

We read Steve Vaisey’s presentation of these ideas and where they come from. Semin and Smith take up the question of how a particular scripts or schema are activated. They suggest that social context provides us with clues that reinforcers that either consciously or unconsciously affect which schemas, scripts, or frames get activated in any given situation.

They both sound like both Berger and Luckmann and Swidler. I consider the convergence between what psychologists have found about how cognition works and our theories of institutions and “culture in action” to be important. While the goals of the sociology of culture are to understand action at the micro-, meso, and macro- levels, I suggest that our model of human cognition needs to be based on how people actually operate. That fields that have nothing in common come to similar conclusions from very different starting points suggests that we are on to something in how humans work. It gives us a common micro foundation to consider how we create social life with cultural tools based in how humans do the social construction of reality.


**Week 4 February 9: Foundations: Classification**

Classification, is of course, about language and how language causes us to make distinctions between things. The schemata we read about last week are, in effect, tools for generalizing across situations. If people were unable to categorize specific instances (of persons and groups, of other entities, of places, of events, of situations, and so on), schematicity would be impossible. Culture depends on shared systems of classification. To understand culture, one must understand classification.

There are three different sociological views of classification. One views classification as a way to have power over others or obtain power for oneself and one’s group. Here, classification is the outcome of a struggle whereby one group is able to enforce a distinction for others, a distinction which privileges their view of how things should work. A second perspective views classification as more about making moral claims and forming boundaries and identities. Here, classification describes “us” vs. “them”, and ascribes positive characteristics to us. Finally, a third perspective views classification as a way to build collective identity around a shared definition of a situation. This view emphasizes the active creation of classification as a collective attempt to give meaning to create collective understandings. Later in the class, we will consider this in a week I call “Power To” reflecting that culture enables collective action. Of course, all three kinds of classification routinely occur in everyday life, sometimes in the same case.

We illustrate these three perspectives with three different readings. We begin by reading Bourdieu’s discussion of classification struggles to understand what is at stake and how the process of classification takes place, why, and for whom. DiMaggio documents the organizational processes through which 19th century nonprofit entrepreneurs erected a strong boundary between “high culture” and “popular culture.” Here, the boundary between high and low social status is forged as a distinction between what sophisticated tastes appreciate and the masses lack. But where exactly to draw that boundary and how? Here, a shrewd institutional entrepreneur gets rich people to buy his conception of such culture and in doing so frames what is art. He does so by appealing to their sense of morality and entitlement based on their superior standing. Mora’s superb study of how the alignment of several actors’ political, economic, and organizational interests led to the transformation of numerous national-origin groups into the classification of Hispanics in the late 20th century. In this story, classification is more ambiguous. While there is certainly power at work here, the creation of the category reflects a kind of compromise to attain more power for disparate groups, but at the same time, at the price of reducing the meaning content of a word to its lowest common denominator.


http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/4/4/303.full.pdf+html


http://asr.sagepub.com/content/79/2/183.full.pdf+html

**Week 5: February 16 Foundations: Identity and Groups**
One of the main ideas in the sociology of culture is that the self is a collection of identities that define who we are, what groups we belong to, and what our status is in society in any situation. In social psychology there is a long tradition that has tried to link the personal identity and self-worth of individuals to their membership in and participation in groups. We begin this week by considering Matthew’s review of the literature on social identity and self-categorization. This literature shows how people are prone to identify groups as “good” or “bad” and work to reward members of their in group, punish those outside of that group, and strategies to work to improve their group’s position if their group has lower status.

We then consider Lamont’s and Molnar’s review of what we know more generally about culture and the formation of groups in Sociology. They argue that at the core of group identification processes are cultural conceptions of boundaries between groups. These boundaries are both cognitive in the sense that people recognize and act in terms of them and social in the sense that they actually define patterns of interaction and valuation. The review considers boundary formation by considering the cultural mechanisms at work in macro group distinctions like gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism.

Finally, we consider problems of using the idea of identity to underpin groups in sociology. The Brubaker and Cooper paper tries to consider how the term identity is frequently used in sociology in a way that makes it try and do too much and thereby deliver too little. They propose how to think of the elements of identity and its role in group formation and interaction.

We will return to substantive consideration of identity in groups by considering inequality, our current political polarization, and race.


**Week 6 February 26 : Foundations: Coherence, Logics and Institutions**

In Sociology, the traditional way to think about culture is shared values and norms. This idea usually leads to thinking that a society or at the very least, a group, has a coherent enough world view that we can consider their culture as a whole. Research has shown that the most expansive view of this notion of culture is wrong. We have just spent 5 weeks considering how it is that people don’t share a single culture and that their identities are situational. People don’t have consistent views and are frequently unable to express them. Yet, they do act all of the time, pay attention to social cues, and give skilled performances, mostly without thinking much about it. They do so in a wide variety of contexts and can access meaning either through habit or reflection. They engage in meaningful action, that is action that makes sense to whomever it is
directed.

This causes us to wonder what is it that gives culture its coherence – that makes cultural elements hang together into a meaningful pattern in any given situation? It is here that we need to return to the notion that people invoke particular pieces of culture in particular situations. What provides these situations with coherence is that they suggest larger cultural logics available to people and choices about which ones make sense. Institutions represent one way to think about situations. Institutions suggest permanence (a la Berger and Luckmann), are frequently taken-for-granted and do not require us to figure out what is going on from scratch. They offer us contours to decide what to do. Institutions are a cultural form as they express the common understanding of a situation and the repertoire of possible responses. They are the product of history and once in place prove durable precisely because of their being presented as “normal” or taken for granted.

This week’s readings consider how institutions create larger cultural logics that then structure the situations and choices that people make. What makes sense in a situation is a function of that larger logic.

We consider three perspectives on this. Ann Swidler’s chapters are wide-ranging and thoughtful. She distinguishes between codes, situations, and institutions as the public facing elements of culture. These help make sense of how it is that people pragmatically accomplish things without attributing too much coherence to their framings and actions. Swidler hints that culture can be more superficial and deeper. For her, institutions can be the source of our deepest understandings of social life.

Friedland and Alford’s paper is an influential classic, which started a cottage industry of studies of “institutional logics,” viewed as central axes of coherence and conflict. They have one of the most macro views of culture and argue for considering how the most deeply held common understandings of culture prove to be important to making sense of how people navigate social life. They argue for making sense of deep cultural logics being located in the very nature of the major institutions of society like the economy, religion, and the state. These master logics or master frames come to dominate and structure of thinking about particular institutions and give rise to social structures that reflect these logics. These logics operate to structure situations and can be borrowed and transposed by actors into new and novel situations.

The Friedland and Alford paper has led to an outpouring of work on institutional logics. Much of that work is done at the meso-level, to use another term at the field level. Here, cultural logics may define the field, but they may also be part of the conflict in fields. Haveman and Gualtieri’s excellent encyclopedia entry takes stock of the state of play more than 25 years later. It is one thing to say that social action in a particular situation of arena is guided by cultural logics and quite another to figure out how to measure and understand the way in which such logics play out in real life.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. Ch. 8, “Codes, Contexts and Institutions” (pp. 160-180) and first part of Ch. 9, “How Culture Matters” (pp. 181-206), and in Talk of Love: How Culture Matters. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. NYU Classes Resources Folder.


**Week 7 March 2: Consumption and Reception**

We have now completed our tour of theory. Armed with our understanding of how culture works and potentially structures social situations, we turn to some of the main topics in cultural sociology. At the core of cultural sociology is the ways in which we use and consume cultural products. There are two aspects to this. First, what do cultural products (music, movies, books, art, food, and more generally lifestyle) say about who we are and why do we resonate to some but not all products? Second, next week, we take up the question of how the production of culture is organized to meet the demand for culture products.

Much work on cultural consumption and reception has been driven by Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital, which we shall encounter again when we look at culture and inequality. Bourdieu had a deep interest in cultural reception (evident in his early books on photography and art museum visitors). *Distinction* looks at the social grounding of taste. Here, we focus here on the chapter on the *habitus* – a central concept in his sociology and in the sociology of culture more broadly. Not all work on consumption and reception is in the Bourdieu tradition. McDonnell, Bail and Tavory address the critical issue of *resonance*, offering a pragmatic theory that places resonance in the interaction of reader and text, rather than in the text itself.

For our last session, we consider two empirical papers which illustrate how each of these perspectives has been used (I know I broke my real about only three readings, but only this week!) . Peterson and Kern’s paper, which has generated a research cottage industry (see supplementary readings) contends that in contemporary western societies, high-status tastes are no longer focused on high culture, but instead on combining capacities for appreciation of multiple cultural forms. To be high class means to be eclectic in your tastes. Some have taken this for a refutation of Bourdieu’s argument, but it is easy to see that being omnivorous can be a claim to distinction just like going to the opera.

Reception studies agree with Roland Barthes that a text’s meaning is produced by readers as much as by authors, but few studies have gotten at how that happens. Rawlings and Childress’s study of the emergence of meanings over time in book groups that read the same novel examines the role of dispositions (habitus) and situations in generating common readings. It is a thoughtful study of how individuals use their cultural knowledge to form taste.


Week 8 March 9: The Production of Culture in the Arts

Work on the production of culture has three origins: one from Bourdieu, based in field theory and capital theory; one from Richard Peterson, based organizational sociology and industrial-organization economics; and one from Howard Becker, based in symbolic interactionism and the study of work.

Rather than read the theoretical pieces (all indexed in the supplementary readings), I thought we would read three interesting papers on how cultural producers are influenced by their position in a field, by the logic of capitalism, and by the organizations in which they sit.

A good example of the organizational approach, of particular relevance to current and prospective sociology professors, is Manza et al.’s compelling analysis of why sociology textbooks are so similar and so out of date.

Rachel Skaggs’ study of songwriters addresses the important topic of creativity with a study of the creative process in a field where songwriters have had their autonomy heavily shaped by the current course of the industry.

Digitalization of all media has completely transformed the media industries (including industries like book publishing and newspapers that one would once not have considered “media industries”). These developments are represented here with Christin’s innovative ethnography of two online newsrooms, which both tracks the impact of digitalization on newsrooms and, by comparing French and U.S. examples, examines how differences associated with nationality condition that impact. It shows that in spite of efforts to push creative workers towards the logic of making money here disciplined by “clicks”, resistance is not futile.


Week 9 March 16: Culture and Inequality I- Bourdieu

It is hard to overestimate the influence of Pierre Bourdieu’s book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* on sociology in general and in particular, on understanding culture and social inequality. We have already read the conclusion of that book (his discussion of classification) and the link between habitus and lifestyle. I have decided to spend a whole session reading parts of the book in order to lay his whole argument in front of you.

The reason to do this, is to situate the problem of culture and taste in a broader understanding of social reproduction and the transformation on the economy. All societies have mechanisms by which they reproduce their particular hierarchies, particularly those that privilege some groups and families over others. Money, educational, cultural, and social capital all play a role in the intergenerational transmission of social status. Culture operates to define which group you are in and how your claims on status are materialized in tastes for different kinds of things. One of the most interesting aspects of this, is that over the course of the past 100 years, advanced industrial societies have shifted from rural, agrarian forms of class formation and privilege to ones now based on credentials, money capital, and education. Bourdieu’s breathtaking analysis explains the structure of all of this and suggests how current forms of capital are important for social and cultural reproduction even as what is distinct and valued is altered. In essence, what counts as distinction changes as the underlying axes of stratification are altered.

Our first session will focus on chapter 1, “The Aristocracy of Culture”. Bourdieu lays out his general argument for how and why culture is connected to social class. He describes the linkages between home, education, and work status and the ways in which these different social positions impact what we know, what we like, and who we think we are. He borrows heavily for his analysis from Norbert Elias’ *The Civilizing Process*.

Then, we will take up his general argument about social class in the chapter entitled “The Social space and its transformation.” Bourdieu lays out two arguments here. First, he considers how social classes form and how many of them there are. Here, Bourdieu sounds more like Weber than Marx. He argues that class is not just the relation to the means of production, but also a product of cultural, social, and educational capital. These varieties of capital mean that the possibility exists for multiple classes or class fractions. Then, he links this together with the long run transformation of the French economy from an agricultural one with remnants of an actual aristocracy to an industrial one where land and title mean little. As the economy changes over time, families and individuals confront those changes with the resources that they have and their ability to use the forms of capital they can convert into new advantages (or in the case of lack of conversion, continued disadvantage in a transformed economy).

Finally, we tackle the core of his results in the chapter entitled “Class tastes and lifestyles.” Here, Bourdieu takes the survey he did and tries to map out the complex link between those with high and low cultural and economic capital and their styles of life. It is this part of the book that shows the most interaction between structure and culture. It elaborates the oppositional nature of culture and demonstrates that people’s cultural choices have structure and can represent an attempt to define themselves in opposition to others.
Week 10 March 30 Culture and Inequality- II In the wake of Bourdieu

It is useful to consider more work that examines how class and culture interact. We begin with a paper by Lamont, et. al. that describes critical cultural processes that bridge micro and macro levels of culture and inequality. They lay out the various ways in which culture might impact cultural reproduction either directly by individuals using their cultural capital for advantage, but more importantly, indirectly through the kinds of mechanisms we have been discussing through the class. It sets out an ambitious research agenda that goes beyond the one outlined by Bourdieu in *Distinctions*.

I select two empirical studies that advance a cultural sociology agenda in the study of the ways in which culture aid the reproduction of social inequality. Rivera’s study of elite professional hiring processes explicitly draws on Bourdieu. Her study also illustrates some of the mechanisms described by Lamont et. al. Culture goes on behind our backs in the sense that people are drawn to like people like them socially and culturally. This means that we tend to get reproduction of all kinds of inequalities.

Calarco frames her study in the language of “cultural toolkits” and symbolic interaction. But, she is focused on how the habitus of children of different social classes have different interpretive frameworks that produce different interpretations of how ambiguous situations should be interpreted. She explores the way in which social class and home culture and school culture intersect to reproduce inequality in the contemporary U.S. Both of these empirical papers illustrate the power of culture as a force reproducing social inequality.


Week 11 April 6: Can Research on Culture Illuminate Political Polarization?

Many of the current political conflicts around the world are organized around groups who literally hate one another. Not surprisingly, many analysts have looked for cultural perspectives to understand the emergence of identities and groups that view their definitions in opposition to one another. These kind of identities appear to be sharpening (case in point, the American presidential election) and make us wonder why and how these divisions and identities are sharpening, and the kinds of political dynamics that produce the sharp conflicts we observe in many societies.
We begin with a paper by Bart Bonikowski that proposes to analyze populism as a kind of political discourse. Bonikowski defines populism as anti-elite, pro-the nation, and anti-groups who do not reflect some ethno-nationalist account of who really counts as a citizen. He then goes on to review the literature about the conditions under which such a framing has cultural resonance with a population. While he discusses populist movements around the world, the application of cultural thinking to the U.S. situation is obvious.

So, what do we know about political polarization in the U.S. and how does it relate to identity? Shanto Iyengar draws on social identity theory to demonstrate that identity and affect, rather than policy preferences, drive the increasing polarization in the U.S. in the past 50 years. Indeed, policy preferences across political parties are not that divergent and have not become so in the past 40 years. Instead, he shows that advocates for both political parties increasingly dislike one another over time. Their division has extended to not just political views, but the desire not to associate with people who hold disparate political beliefs. He attributes this to increased polarization at the elite level and increasingly harsh rhetoric in presidential campaigns. This sobering paper causes one to view Trump as not the instigator of America’s divides, but their exploiter.

Finally, Clinton et al. track the increasing impact of partisanship on behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. They begin by acknowledging the deep divide between Democrats and Republicans. They proceed to show that Political Party shapes people’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The divide between the 82 million people who voted for Joe Biden and the 72 million who voted for Donald Trump is now a classic group conflict with identities of each group aligned against the identity of the other group.


**Week 12 April 13: The Cultural Sociology of Race and Racism**

Cultural sociology plays a huge role in our theories of race and racism. Choosing three readings was really hard to do. First, a caveat. I have decided to focus attention on sociologists who have made arguments about culture and race. Their work parallels what scholars call critical race theory and indeed makes almost all of the same arguments. My justification for this, is that this is a sociology class and seeing how sociologists view the role of culture in the production and reproduction of racism is important.

I decided to use four of our most articulate and well known scholars, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Joe Feagin, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. I note that Feagin and Bonilla-Silva have been
I am most interested in discussing the role of racial ideology in the everyday construction of racism and how it has become embedded in social institutions, cognitive frames, and patterns of social interaction. I have chosen readings that explain some of the author’s general frameworks about what it means for America to be institutionally, structurally, and culturally racist. I want to consider how racial ideology, defined as the set of ideas that justify and legitimate the alleged superiority of one racial group over the other comes into existence, changes its arguments in response to struggle, but remains resolutely firm in keeping white privilege in the political and economic system. Here we will see the elements of culture that we have been discussing all semester.

We begin with Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation in the U.S.* They offer a very cultural view of race. They argue that race is a master category in society, one that comes to structure social relations and institutions. Their argument will remind you of our discussion about organizational logics and institutions. Our ideas about race is that it is a social and historical construction that comes to guide and structure social interactions in many spheres of everyday life. As such they argue that it has changed as society has changed. But it remains a deep organizing principle.

Joe Feagin has produced a series of works that examine the history of the U.S. through the lens of race. He has argued that the country was founded on white privilege embedded in slavery and supported by racist ideas. He suggests that this racism is based on the fact that whites benefit materially and socially from their dominant position in society. That defense changes as resistance occurs, but remains deeply part of American institutions. The piece we read is from his book, *The White Racial Frame.* Here, he argues that whites share a racial frame that justifies their privilege and gives them language to discuss why their privilege is natural. He draws explicitly on cognitive psychology but shows us that our natural system to rationalize and naturalize the world is done in the service of domination.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva offers us a more elaborated version of this frame. Instead of justifying white privilege in terms of dominant vs. subordinate groups characteristics, Bonilla Silva argues that in the post-Civil Rights era, white racisms shifted to a frame that implies that racism has disappeared. He presents a good case that this set of ideas helps continues to be used as a justification of discrimination because of the segregation of African Americans and whites.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 2016. *Introduction.* Ch. 1 (pp. 1-29) in *Racial Formation in the U.S.*


Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2018. “The Style of Color Blindness: How to Talk Nasty about without Sounding Racist.” Chapter 3 (pp. 53-73) and “Peeking inside the White house of color blindness” Chapter 6 (pp. 120-141) in *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of*
Week 13 April 20: Culture in Movements for Social Change

As I said above, All of our theories of social change posit that the most radical kinds of changes occur when existing institutions break down. At these moments, people can be cognitively liberated to see why the existing world has failed and provided with new identities and new frames about what the new world should look like. At the core here, is the idea that at such moments, new cultural understandings about who we are, what is right and wrong, and what kind of society should be created come into play.

Given the ubiquity of this perspective, I thought it would make sense to have a week discussing social movement theory. Scholars who have studied social movements have realized that while political opportunities (i.e. crises) and the ability to mobilize resources to create a social movement matter in making social change, engaging in the creation of new frames and identities, many of which evoke strong emotions, is pivotal to motivating people to act.

We start with the Benford and Snow’s paper reviewing how the concept of framing has informed social movement research. The concept of frame is drawn from Goffman’s work and Goffman himself views the concept as akin to schema. But, there is a subtle shift in how framing gets used in social movement theory from how it gets used in the situation of an individual understanding a situation. In the context of collective action, framing is about mobilizing people to do something. It requires making an appeal to them, who they are, who they might be, and what is right. Framing allows groups with disparate conceptions of a situation to cooperate.

Myra Marx Ferree’s paper, based on a book-length study by a team of U.S. and German researchers, focuses on the key concept of framing and shows how feminist ideas led in very different directions in the two countries.

Francesca Polletta’s influential paper addresses the important theme of narrativity, including the relationship between narrative construction and rhetorical power in persuasive speech.


Week 14 April 27 Power to.....

We end with a very different view of how culture works to structure meaning in social life. Earlier I suggested that much of cultural sociology starts out with the idea that culture works to structure and reinforce differences in power amongst individuals and social groups. We have dominant ideas which can generate oppositional culture, but fundamentally, culture is way to preserve the power of those who are on top. But, we have also seen a cultural sociology where culture is about
resonance. Here, culture provides people with identities to give their lives meaning. The sharing of cultural values and cultural symbols are powerful ways in which we feel like we belong. Successful social movements can change those meanings and identities and restructure the way that society works.

In this last week, I want to take our discussion of culture in a different direction. As we have already seen, one problem cultural sociology presents us with is that people are cognitively limited at sizing up situations, understanding what is going on, and making decisions about what to do. This takes us back to the problem of everyday life. How do we manage to wander through the world and actually do things? Sure, habit means we don’t have to think much. But we still need to respond to clues, even if our responses are automatic. This leads us to consider a different way in which culture structures everyday life. One problem of the focus on institutions and logics, and even schemas and frames, is that they are frequently too vague and clunky to explain much of what actually structures social situations. Have any of you ever downloaded a schema into your brain or seen a cultural logic float into a situation to explain what we are all doing?

This has gotten scholars to consider how it is we create social spaces that people with their limited cognitive capacities and difficult problems of gaining and interpreting information actually come to act. Here, we create cultural devices to act as shortcuts for people to make decisions about what to do. The creation of these devices allows us to make all sorts of decisions quickly and with minimal information. Here, culture is way to accomplish something: simply put, power to. One place where we see a concern to using culture to understand what people do, is in the social structuring of markets. Consumers and producers need extensive knowledge and clues to make markets. We consider three ideas about how this works that are more complementary than contradictory.

First, we consider the review by Biggart and Beamish on the role of conventions in economic life. There has been an outpouring of interest in making sense of how markets work from a sociological perspective. Economics with its stripped down view of what a market is, have generally ignored the social structures that have appeared in markets to make both buyers and sellers be able to engage with minimal effort. The creation of cultural conceptions that create conventions that actors can share and use to make decisions is all over markets. Consumers and producers need extensive knowledge and clues to make markets. We consider three ideas about how this works that are more complementary than contradictory.

One of my favorite is how shops decide to price their products. Economics suggests a complex set of calculations by which sellers need to find the right price to attract buyers. But research has shown that sellers use a very simple convention to establish prices. They take the wholesale price of an object and double it. This cultural convention is easy to use and anyone can price without much effort. It is widely in use and the starting point for most pricing decisions. This means when you shop and some store offers 10-20% off, they are still making substantial profit. Note, only when something is more than 50% off does the seller not make money.

The second article we consider is Espeland and Sauter’s case study of how rankings of law schools came to have impact on how law schools behave. They describe how this works through the process of commensuration, by which we take something that is difficult to evaluate its qualities and find a way to produce a simple ranking of different objects. But, once a system of commensuration exists, it enables actors to make decisions and figure out where they stand in some kind of hierarchy. The cultural construction of things like credit scores, algorithms to decide
who gets into college, or scores ranking products like wine are powerful ways to equate what we should do. Commensuration is an important part of modern life because it allows us to compare things quickly and easily without much work or attention. The process and justification of creating such rankings is a cultural construct. It can, of course, create power for some and disadvantage for others.

A third way in which cultural devices get created and deployed revolves around the use of expert knowledge to form judgements and create new market devices. This idea comes from Foucault’s notion of “dispositif” which refers to the various institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within society. Foucault himself saw these devices as “power over” things and people but also “power to” accomplish things. Sciences studies, particularly the work of Bruno Latour has picked up on this idea and Michel Callon and his colleagues have imported it in the study of market formation. Here, we read a short article by Lucien Karpik that summarizes how such devices structure markets for buyers and sellers.


**Supplementary Readings**

This list of supplementary readings performs three functions. First, if you are especially interested a given week’s topic, you might want to do some extra reading and learn even more. Second, if you are planning to do research in the sociology of culture or take a generals exam in culture, this list may be helpful. Third, it was frustrating winnowing all these great readings down to just a few per week; putting them on this list makes me feel better, even if you don’t read them (sort of like putting sections of papers one is writing into footnotes because one can’t bear cutting them, even though you know the editor will make you delete them before publication).

Let me begin with a few books you might look at for overviews of the Sociology of Culture.

  This book provides snippets of the greatest hits of cultural sociology from authors far and wide for the past 50 years.

  This book provides a remarkable introduction suitable for an advanced undergraduate or graduate class to the topic.

  This is a text by some British scholars written from a more cultural studies perspective but with attention to the American sociology of culture. Intended for advanced undergraduates or graduate classes.

A cutting edge tome on how to measure culture (mostly using quantitative data including a discussion of various kinds of text analysis).

**Week 2 (What is Culture?): Supplementary**


Martin, John Levi. 2010. “Life’s a Beach but You’re an Ant, and Other Unwelcome News for the Sociology of Culture.” *Poetics* 38: 228-43. [http://home.uchicago.edu/~jlmartin/Papers/Life's%20A%20Beach%20but%20You're%20An%20Ant.pdf](http://home.uchicago.edu/~jlmartin/Papers/Life's%20A%20Beach%20but%20You're%20An%20Ant.pdf)


**Week 3 (Schemas and Dual Process): Supplementary**


**Week 4 (Classification): Supplementary**


Durkheim, Emile and Marcel Mauss. *Primitive Classification*.


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**Week 5: Identity (Supplementary)**


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**Week 6: Coherence and Institutional Logics (Supplementary)**


**Week 7: Consumption and Reception (Supplementary)**


Warde, Alan, David Wright, Modesto Gayo-Cal. 2008. “Understanding Cultural Omnivorousness: Or, the Myth of the Cultural Omnivore.” *Cultural Sociology* 1,2: 143-64.

**Week 8: Production of Culture (Supplementary)**

Sociology 126, 1: 6-51.


Week 9: Bourdieu

Week 10: Culture & Inequality [Supplementary]


**Week 11: Can Sociology of Culture Illuminate the Current Predicament?**


Week 12: The Cultural Sociology of Race and Racism (Supplementary)


Week 13: Culture in Movements for Social Change (Supplementary)

Week 14: Power to (supplemental readings)


