

Interview with Ann Swidler  
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March 9, 2001

*LM: At the end of Habits of the Heart, the book through which many of us first come in contact with your work, there is a discussion of sociology as public philosophy. Does that discussion capture your relationship to sociology? Has your orientation to sociology remained pretty constant, or has it evolved over the course of your career? How do you think of yourself as a sociologist?*

AS: That's a tough question, because I guess I have to say that the sociology as public philosophy part of *Habits* didn't come from me, it really came from Bob [Bellah]. That essay was a kind of added-on feature, that, had it been me writing the whole book, I think we, that is the non-Bob part of the gang of five, really generated much of the argument of the book and so I don't feel like it's his book and not our book—the fact that we had done all this fieldwork really meant that when it came to constructing these arguments, they emerged kind of organically out of the material we had. But, I would say that one part of his [Bob's] thing there, and I really will treat it as his thing, I think I deeply share and profoundly agree with, and the other part I find totally alien. And the alien part is that he still has a habit left from the fifties, of dividing the world into positivism, which is evil, and somehow good, more humane, more qualitative—something else that's deeply socially engaged. I really think that rests on a set of errors that are just silly. There hasn't been any real thing called positivism since the late nineteenth century. No one has thought that there are facts out there that just speak for themselves. I don't think that, no one thinks that. So I think part of it is kind of railing against enemies that don't really exist, and I am not involved with that.

But the other side of what he's talking about there is, I think, really deep, which is that—I don't know if I can really quite put this right—because in all of the social sciences and maybe even outside, there is a problem about what's real. And it has to do with whether—I don't think I'm going to be able to express this very well except as sort of a philosophical idea—OK, either what's real is some kind of objective truth that's based in the nature of reality or God or something like that, and you're just stuck with it. It's there, and there's nothing you can do about it. *Or*, there's something like relativism, which is that anything we kind of wish were true, make up, believe, can trick other people into believing—*that's* real. And that can be either a kind of disillusioned cynical relativism or it can be a very sophisticated kind of postmodern, Foucauldian, “things become true because you make them true.” The thing that Bob has understood, that I take incredibly seriously, is that you can exercise *reason*, and rational thought about what's real, without adhering to the notion that there's only one possible reality that's this objective thing that imposes itself on the way we have to live. And that instead, we grasp reality by grasping that, as human communities we are *really* dependent upon one another, we *really* have problems to solve that can only be solved in common, and we *really* have cultural traditions that we bring to bear in solving those problems.

And I think of this as a kind of third way, that's neither this kind of easy relativism, nor what is a very hard empiricism. It's almost like you are standing somewhere except it's always hard to define what that place is where you're standing. That understanding, that there is a way of bringing reasoned understanding to bear on our actual circumstances, and it's not a matter of going out and being moralistic and preaching at people, it's not a matter of saying, "Oh, I do moral research because I'm qualitative and I really listen to my interviewees and blah, blah. And other people do immoral research because they're interested in facts." It's not a matter of that. It's a matter of really understanding that reason and evidence can be brought to bear on what are objective parts of our situation as human beings who have always lived under certain kind of constraints that we all share as human kind, and who currently live in a *shared* world and that what kind of, sort of thinking, or understanding we develop also will itself construct elements of the kind of world we live in. So it's something like that that I take really seriously, and that I feel I learned from that *Habits of the Heart/Good Society* collaboration and that I never would have figured out on my own.

*KB: With that question, part of what we wanted to get at is if there some sort of pre-scientific, driving motivation that inscribes your relationship to the discipline and what you hope to do with sociology?*

AS: I think like almost all sociologists, you start with what you think are a set of sort of social-historical moral commitments, and then elements of that take on a life of their own, and you become genuinely intellectually engaged in why those things are the way they are. First of all, I have to say that when I became a sociologist, I was so, *enthralled* with sociology. It was one of these kind of eureka, love at first sight, I can't breathe kind of experiences. I don't know how to say this—intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, it was a consuming revelation to me. And so there, I can't really say if it was because—I actually don't *know* what it was—it was just an overwhelming thing to me that I could really understand how the world worked. I think it was mainly at that level. And then, I became preoccupied with something—and if I actually go back to a paper I wrote in high school I see was a very long-term interest to me in something like whether the institutions developed at certain periods of history were adequate to the problems at that point in history. And the way I conceptualized it in college—my graduate school essay I said I wanted to solve the problem of science and government—we live in an increasingly technocratic world, in which the problem of, the sort of technical problems of government have transcended the capacity of democratic institutions. So I went to grad school actually intending to concentrate in political sociology and sociology of organizations. And it's very clear, if you look at what I took my first year of graduate school, I took political sociology, sociology of organizations and a course in science and government. And I really had this idea that—again, as things became more and more technically complex, you know, you would have people voting for representatives or something, who would be making decisions about things the people who voted couldn't understand. And so literally, how could democratic processes possibly work in those circumstances?

Now, I guess what I would say is that neither political sociology as it was then understood, which was really about power and who has it and why people who don't have it don't have more of it; nor sociology of organizations, which was extremely interesting but had nothing to do with institutions, it was really about how the—well, the sort of culminating book at the time I was in graduate school was James Thompson's *Organizations and Action* which really solved the problem of why organizations that have different technologies have different structures and in fact solved it so completely—it's such a great book—that people stopped studying it. Because it was actually over. It was done. There was nothing left to study.

*KB: That's neat—because there's not much we know.*

AS: Right! But we know that! We actually know why organizations with different technologies have different structures. We know. So people stopped, and it took them a few years to start studying these other things, like organizational fields, because the other thing they had been studying for about thirty years was done.

And so, then I started realizing increasingly that I was interested in what I called the sociology of ideas, and actually this fellow graduate student, a guy named Steve Hart, and I taught a course together while we were graduate students called Sociology of Ideas, and there wasn't really anything called the sociology of culture. I mean, as a field. We had this old guy Leo Lowenthal, who was a member of the Frankfurt School who did sociology of literature. He may have taught something called the Sociology of Culture, but I never took it. If he did, what that meant at that time was the sociology of literature. He had written on Hamsun and Dostoyevsky and things like that. But I think Steve Hart and a few of us realized that if you weren't really paying attention to the *meanings* that things had, you couldn't attack these other problems. That was a huge area that was left out of the social science we were studying.

So, I would say it probably was normative commitments that somehow shaped our interest in that, but it was also a sense that that was where there was just a huge hole. And then there was this Weber seminar—we decided we weren't reading enough Weber so we set up a seminar in which we read *all* of Weber, like a book a week. Then, this same guy, Leo Lowenthal, who was Marcuse's best friend—he was very cool, and very old -- he had an ongoing seminar that had come out of one of these student-movement semesters when Berkeley was shut down, which it constantly was when we were there, and because he had escaped Nazi Germany he wouldn't shut his seminar down, but he held it at his house. At the end of the semester, the students said, "you serve wine and cheese, why are we stopping?," and so this thing kept going and a whole bunch of us—well, I wasn't in that because I wasn't in that course—but they invited in new members every once in a while and they invited me in. And *that* was where whatever the sociology of culture was, first entered my consciousness.

From then on, I was actually trying to solve what I would say was an intellectual problem more than a moral problem, which was something like, "Why do ideas matter in the way they do?" And I kind of felt like I couldn't solve the other problem until I'd

gotten a handle on that. But, I want to complete the circle—I did this book on alternative high schools, that was trying to get at how ideology works in concrete settings, then ended up doing the *Habits of the Heart/Good Society* collaboration and some work on social inequality, writing these essays on culture, working this big book on love in American culture that's coming out now, and now what am I doing? I'm back to trying to figure out how institutions get constructed and what it would mean to have institutions that are capable of organizing human communities that transform the social landscape—something like that. And that would be how culture contributes to the constitution of institutions.

*LM: This seems like a good opportunity to segue to raise one of the questions we, as sociologists of culture just starting our careers, were most interested in asking you—we really wanted to know what it was like to be one of the lead race car drivers around the cultural turn.*

AS: What a great metaphor!

*KB: Did you just come up with that?*

*LM: Yeah. Can you reflect some on the history of that, and also on the trajectory of culture in sociology?*

AS: I do have some comments on that. I guess what's amazing is that, of course, culture is totally central to human life and institutions, and why did it get so marginalized in sociology? I think you have to ask that question. Maybe part of it has to do with—look, when I was at Berkeley, Bob Bellah was there. I TA'd for him. He was on my dissertation committee. You know, he was there, to be learned from. But the idea that sociology of religion had become this little subspecialty where you studied, you know, people's denominational memberships and so forth, and I think that maybe part of the problem was that Parsons, in the great Parsonian synthesis, had defined culture as central to what societies were, but he had defined values in such an abstract way, that you actually couldn't study them. There was nothing concrete that you could study. And so sociologists ended up studying social institutions that were part of his AGIL paradigm—so you studied religious institutions, you studied legal institutions, you studied the economy, you studied the things sociologists study, education, family, blah, blah, blah.

Whereas culture itself was—it was the essence of everything, but it was nowhere. You couldn't actually study it, so there was no method that corresponded to it. And to the degree that anyone was supposed to study it, in the Parsonian division of labor among disciplines, anthropologists were supposed to study it. So you did have the Kluckhohns, Florence and Clyde Kluckhohn, writing about *values*, and how the Navajo differed in their values from the this-and-that. That, I think, hit a dead end. Because there are actually real reasons why that's the wrong way to think about it. The attempts to do that ended up being circular and tautological—you couldn't define values apart from what people did, but values were supposed to cause what they did, then how did you know there was anything separate from the behavior itself which was the values? But if you

ask people about their values, it turned out they didn't correlate very well with what they did—so it was just a mess. And so I think except for a very few people, people stopped studying that stuff. There wasn't a method, and there wasn't a good—there just wasn't anything to get hold of.

So sociology became kind of “value-free” territory in that sense. There wasn't any cultural thing to study and the only place it survived at all was in the sociology of religion. Again, the people in the real Bellah tradition *were* studying culture in the widest sense, and in fact if you look at Bellah's religious evolution essay, his “Civil Religion in America,” it's clear that he believes that in the contemporary period, religious institutions carry only a relatively small part of religious functions, or whatever you want to call that of a society. But mostly, that whole area got marginalized and there was just this little tiny thread of the sociology of literature. When I and people like me started getting interested in culture again, I took that seminar with Lowenthal and I was in that seminar on literature—Jeff Weintraub was in there, there were whole bunches of other people, a whole bunch of us over many years, so I overlapped with several cohorts of people there.

The book that changed my life was Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*. And that is such a great book, and that is sociology of literature, but in so much deeper and wider a way—even though it's actually not written by a sociologist, he's actually a lit. crit. English professor-type—but it is such a sociologically powerful book. It brings production, audiences, meanings, structures and literary form all into one place. It's a paradigm of a great sociology book. So by the time I finished my dissertation I knew I was interested in sociology of culture. I went off to Harvard as a new assistant professor, and, it was like a miracle. I got there, I said I was going to teach sociology of culture, they said “what's that?” and I had never taken such a thing.

*LM: Did such a thing exist beyond the sociology of literature?*

AS: Well, there was a reader called *Sociology of Culture: Arts and Ideas*, or something like that, by Albrecht, Barnett and Griff. If you wanted to reconstruct that history you could see what that had in it. It was stuff on the sociology of the arts—obviously a relatively narrow field, not an area that many departments would have had an interest in hiring someone in. But, when I got to Harvard, Paul DiMaggio, Wendy Griswold, Steve Brint, Paul Starr, although he wasn't terribly relevant to this, were all there as graduate students. And Paul [DiMaggio] was already doing a sociology of audiences of country music. That was his thing. And I actually constructed that first course, that graduate seminar in the sociology of culture, out of the readings I'd done in that Lowenthal group, plus Paul DiMaggio's note cards. And I had never read all this stuff. And so I put that course together, and then I generated a structure that pretty much is the structure that became Wendy Griswold's cultural diamond—like, you had to look at the text or the object, in relationship to audiences in different social groups and in relation to production and distribution.

So that was just incredibly fruitful, and the person who was the kind of—look, you can't create a dissertation committee if you are a new assistant professor even if

you're quite sure of yourself and have a lot of, whatever, arrogance or guts or something—if there isn't any senior faculty member people could work with. But Harrison White had written *Canvases and Careers*—he was interested in sociology of arts. And he was actually quite interested in the structures of careers in odd worlds, and actually arts careers are very interesting because they are so unlike standard organizational hierarchies. So, I don't know if you know the Faulkner stuff on the Hollywood studio musician, or whatever, in which you've got to look at the networks in which people promote each other. So I think he [White] always liked artistic career-path stuff, because it had different shapes than organizationally-based careers do. So anyway, there was enough support on the faculty side for this—he was the senior person, plus me, plus Paul and Wendy came a little later, but there were enough to generate a huge group of incredibly interesting people who were thinking about the sociology of culture. And Paul knew, and I have to give real credit there, Pete Peterson, who'd been working all along on the sociology of country music, the sociology of music, that the Peterson and Berger article on cycles in symbol production had already been published. So I don't know if I *particularly* played the key role here, but I think there was something ready to happen. About two years later, they created the culture section of the ASA, and suddenly there was this explosion! Everyone was interested in culture. People were retreating like mad from the study of social inequality, class, and sort of basic Marxist themes, and they were retreating to anywhere they could.

*KB: Why?*

AS: Well, the Sixties had died. I came to Harvard in 1975, and I think that was a kind of nadir for the society as a whole. If you look at all these social indicators—*Inequality by Design*, 1973. This is like the black death, or something. This is the oil shock, this is the beginning of a terrible recession, and the moment at which, for instance, investments in higher education stop. From the Sputnik crisis through the 1970s, people were building classroom space in higher educational institutions at a tremendous pace. And those investments stop in 1973, and the economy goes into a tailspin, and we stopped all sorts of social investments. It was horrible—I'm not saying I, personally, was miserable, it was a great period for me. But I think that people who had Left-type sympathies started moving in a critical studies direction, thinking that analyzing how people's culture created the barriers to progressive social change somehow seemed more satisfying than studying the actual problems of the poor people and why they were poor.

So I mean there was a kind of retreat, which actually I disapprove of. And it didn't just happen in sociology, it happened across the social sciences, so you get this kind of cultural studies thrust. I know this from my husband, that if you look at the *Encyclopedia of Social History* in 1990, or 1980, or something, maybe 1985, there's nothing in there about society. It's all about, ah, the history of Mother's Day, or history about, you know, it's all this cultural studies-type stuff. And any *real* thing about whether people are going to die in childbirth or not, or how many children they have, what size households they live in, what their communities are like, what the economic base of their social relationships is, is just gone.

And so, just to get back here—what I’m leaving out here is Clifford Geertz, and the incredibly important role *The Interpretation of Cultures* played in giving us something to study. So we’re getting interested in culture and Geertz is defining this incredible new idea of treating text as the object of analysis, and *reading* the text as the *practice* that a social science that deals with culture would engage in. But I just want to say that I think through that Harvard experience, I and many other people who study culture will say that we ended up with this section in the ASA with this enormous number of people, but the work, for the most part, was terrible. It was sort of, you know, interpretive readings of Disneyland, or an interpretive reading of the evening news—so people knew they were interested in culture, but there was no criterion about what good work was, there were no systematic procedures—there was sort of “I’m going to escape that boring empiricist stuff where people follow these disciplined procedures where people actually have to know what they’re talking about and have a bunch of really creative things where I don’t have to be disciplined and I don’t have to know what I’m talking about.” So there were six or eight or ten years there, maybe, from roughly guessing from about 1980, you know, til about the end of the eighties, where culture was growing, and everyone was excited, and there was more and more stuff being done and the section was growing like mad—but the actual content was, on the whole, lousy. And I think it had maybe to do with there not being enough things that used systematic methods, and no one knew what the core questions were.

And so my sense now is that, since maybe about the early nineties at least, there’s a lot of interesting stuff being published. And part of the reason it’s as interesting as it is, has to do with this revival of good ethnographic work that is tied to—so ethnography isn’t marginalized as this little cute thing where you study people’s interactions with their own noses, but it’s actually that you can do ethnography about important social *things*, like political culture and what-not. I think also, the more systematic ontological approaches that Griswold especially has pioneered, where you compare systematically the audience reception of the same body of work in two different social groups, or you compare systematically the way heavy metal and rap are treated by the critics, or you compare systematically, like the Jacobs’ work, how the white press and the black press in L.A. treated the Rodney King beatings. And also that some of the more disciplined ways of dealing with rhetoric and discourse analysis have permeated the social sciences so that you get somebody like Robin Wagner-Pacifici who actually has skills for analyzing, in a *very* sophisticated (so sophisticated you often can’t understand it) but in a very complex way, how a series of discursive moves interact in a body of stuff over a period of time.

So...when I sit on an orals committee, and I sit on committees of people doing stuff on culture and social movements, Kim Voss will often do the social movements, and she’ll say, well, “What are the three major theoretical approaches to social movements?” And the student will say, “Oh, collective behavior approach, resource mobilization approach, new social movements approach, and the process model, does it or doesn’t it really differentiate itself from the RM approach, blah, blah, blah.” And we’ll have that whole debate about whether new social movements is really a separate approach, and—fine. I come to sociology of culture, and I might say, “What do you learn from looking at audiences that you wouldn’t know otherwise,” or, “Can you really link up production of

culture to significant outcomes, that are culturally significant?” or something like that. But there are no three main theories—there are no theories at all. In other words, you can’t say the central debate is whether A is right or B is right.

And I’ve tried to formulate some central debates because I believe you can’t make progress without -- and here I’m following Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* -- unless you can say what your theory is and what the alternative is and you can use evidence, just evidence, to differentiate among theories and add to the plausibility of one or the plausibility of another. And sociology of culture is just not there. And I actually see a great deal of my task as being to bring, even if they have to be somewhat crude, ah, so that we can start adjudicating among alternative theories and we can know when we have made progress. So I would say that the things you really have to answer if you want a field [are], what are the central questions and how we can bring research to bear on those questions. And trying to get there -- I don’t even think you have to be there -- I don’t think you have to stop studying important things because they’re messy—I’m much more willing to get into what’s messy and be crude about trying to study it but so I try to formulate a set of questions, and I think there is kind of debate, and I would put Jeff Alexander on one side and me on the other, about are cultures basically unified, coherent, or are they incredibly diverse and internally contradictory. And of course, it will turn out, when we really sort this out, there’s no answer to the question posed that way, but that debate would lead you to say, “OK, at what levels are cultures systems that operate, and where do the systems operate and at what level are they reproduced?” And then, Bill Sewell has been contributing to that debate—his 1999 debate on “Culture(s),” I think it’s in that Lynn Hunt and Vickie Bonnell collection, *Beyond the Cultural Turn* -- that’s a really interesting essay, and he makes a stab at saying, in *one* sense, that culture is inherently unified, and in *another* sense, they are empirically always messy. But that’s one thing I’ve tried in various places to formulate, a sort of different, quote-unquote “what are the questions here?” That’s where I would say that sociology of culture is increasingly exciting and systematic answers and cumulative bodies of stuff on audience reception, but a lot of it is still, “we need to formulate the questions.”

*KB: Since you think that having a set of central questions defines the existence of a field, what are the central questions for the discipline as a whole?*

AS: I don’t think you can do it for the discipline as a whole. Well, that’s a superficial answer based on never having been asked the question, and having never given it a moment’s thought before. I mean, I certainly wouldn’t want to go back to the days of, oh, functionalist versus conflict theory, which I thought were both totally inadequate. So, if you asked for biology, “what are the central questions of biology?,” the nature of life, or something. Nobody would try to answer that question except maybe a few weird people out on some fringe. I guess I don’t think you have to be able to answer that question in order to know what the crucial questions are in stratification, or in organizations—that it’s at *that* level that you do get central debates. If I think of something later, I’ll come back to it.

*LM: To back up a little bit, how did you come to sociology in the first place? Were there people or experiences in your life that led you to sociology?*

AS: Ah. Like more personal things?

*KB: Yes, or maybe how your biography informs your work?*

AS: Well, I'm sure they do. I think one of the things is that my father was a committed New Deal government worker. He worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority. And this was this incredible example of how government can shape the social world. So I grew up basically thinking government was good. On my wall, as a kid growing up, was a picture of F.D.R., and of Frank Norris, who was the senator who helped found the TVA. So there was this portrait of Frank Norris right there on our wall. And my parents were also liberals, or progressives in terms of the South, so I definitely grew up with a commitment in social justice and equality, although, it is amazing how limited that was by the blinkers of the 1950s, when to sit in an interracial diner, for example—well, (a), it meant that your synagogue would get firebombed the next day, but also, you thought you were just doing a *great* thing. For example my rabbi—oh, that's the other thing. I was a Jewish kid in the South in the 1950s, and if you need a "marginal man" experience to make you think the social world is interesting, that's it. So there was this kind of impersonal and pleasant anti-Semitism built into life. It wasn't that people didn't like you because you were Jewish, it meant that Jews could only join this club and not that club, and you couldn't join the country club, and it was even in a very nice way. Like they had these high school sororities that Jews couldn't join, but Jews had B'nai B'rith Girls, and I was a member of B'nai B'rith Girls, that was a city-wide organization. And in my high school there was this ferocious war between the Kappas and the Deltas, and I wasn't allowed to join, and my parents were intellectuals, and I wasn't really a Southerner of that sort anyway. But the Kappas and the Deltas both talked to me because they couldn't talk to each other because they were at such war with each other, that actually there was an advantage to being the only Jewish kid in my little girls' school—

*KB: Because you were neutral.*

AS: Exactly. I was neutral. So probably all those things shaped my interest. As for why I got into sociology, I had read a lot of Freud when I was in high school, and so when I got to college, I went to Radcliffe; when you had to pick a major, I picked Social Relations, because that had sociology and psychology and all that. And I'd never heard of sociology. And when the tutors got up, who, unbeknownst to us were just grad students who gave little seminars on their pet topics, so one [tutor] would get up and say, oh, maybe, divorce and the consequences of divorce, or drug use, and they each kind of got up and gave schpiel. And then one guy got up and said we're going to study Marx, and Weber, and Toqueville and Freud—and then he said—"and in the second week"—and kept going. And so I picked him.

Then, I remember the experience. He said—he was a Parsonian—so he said, “What would you need to have a theory of society? What would that mean? Find something and try to explain it sociologically,” or something like that. So I just wracked my brain—I just lost my mind. It was a horrible experience, actually. I spent a week in mental torment trying to figure out what you would need to *explain* things. I was looking for regularities—like that the streets were full at 5 p.m., but they’re not as full at 9 p.m., or something like that, that was a regularity. How would you explain that? People go to work, and the work is regulated, and—I just ended up in a total muddle. And somehow, I don’t know if it was that week or a week later or something, we read Marx. And he [the tutor] was saying that, you know, Marx says that basically class and material interests determine everything, and I think there’s even a sentence in the *Communist Manifesto* where he says, even the pyramids were built by exploitive labor. So this guy says “Why pyramids?” And that was it. That was the Parsonian critique of the Marxist analysis. And I was—that was it. Why pyramids?

I was hooked.

It was just such a profound thing for me. It was just this *enormous* question—that even if you have power, and even if you have your material interests, why do people direct their power and their material interests in the ways that they do? So that’s it.

*KB: And the rest is history. You talk about culture in settled and unsettled times, and it seems like that distinction pervades your whole opus, and that your interest seems to be in culture in unsettled times. And it strikes me as sort of a pragmatic approach—that when there are disruptions, culture becomes more important. I wonder what the question is here—I wonder how that jives with the “culture is ordinary” kind of approach? How did you get interested in this?*

AS: Well, I guess if you wrote the standard “begat” type of intellectual history, I think I’m a product of the Durkheimian stream, the Parsons-Geertz-Bellah. And Geertz and Bellah were colleagues, they were the same age, well, maybe not exactly. But they were in the same cohort in graduate school, they are peers—and they were in interaction with each other when they formulated their most central ideas. So Geertz was getting “Religion as a Cultural System” at the same time that Bellah was writing “Religious Evolution,” which I think was the bigger influence. If you read the footnotes to Geertz’s essay, it says he thanks Bellah for this incredibly powerful thing and actually the big theoretical breakthrough came in that direction. But I also read an enormous amount of Weber when I was in graduate school. And the first thing I actually published was on Weber—it’s actually a very good essay, I like it. And it was published in this really obscure place. And I wrote it for Bellah. No—actually I wrote it for Bendix, but Bellah was the one who loved it and said, “Oh, publish this, it’s wonderful,” and I sent it off to *Sociological Inquiry*.

*LM: That’s not so obscure.*

AS: I think it was pretty obscure. Wait—what was the question?

*KB: We were talking about settled and unsettled.*

AS: Yes. I guess I would say that my huge revelation when I read Weber was the question of whether ideas have influence in social life, is a question about a variable process, not a constant process. That is, that what Weber is analyzing is when, and under what special conditions do ideas have a big impact. So there's no answer like you would get from a regression equation that says, "Oh!—ideas account for 5% of the variance in social life," or, "Oh, they account for 25% of the variance," or "Oh, they account for 17.2% of the variance."

*KB: And you can't control for lack of ideas!*

AS: Right! No, there is no answer to the question posed that way. And the question is when, and under what conditions—Weber was only interested in situations where ideas didn't matter much, but he wanted to find the exact set of social circumstances when the power of ideas was at its maximum. And that's a very hard idea to *keep* in your consciousness—it's always true, but it tends to kind of fade out when you're engaged in all these other debates. But if you can really get it into your head that ideas or culture or whatever really have more power at some times than other times. And I think that the way culture normally gets defined, which is that it's this deep structure that underlies everything and permeates everything, and this is where—I love Sewell's work, but I think there's a danger there. When you really accept his little formula, which is that culture is constitutive, ubiquitous, and he's got some third word—it's everywhere and it is everything—then, you can no longer ask systematically about variation. You can't ask about variation between things that are more or less cultural—because culture has disappeared into and is infused in everything, and you can't ask why culture matters more sometimes than other times. Now, in Sewell's own work, he of course is interested exactly in isolating when culture matters the most, and that's where the Bastille essay—which is his single greatest work -- I've basically read everything he's ever written, and I believe that *is* the single greatest piece of *all* his great life work -- that's obviously meant to identify a kind of moment at which the power of the cultural is maximized.

So I guess I would say that, and part of what I'm going to talk about a little this afternoon no matter what questions people ask me—I'm going to be very responsive and listen to everyone's questions and then whip out whatever I want to say—but that the problem when I was writing "Culture in Action" is that, you know, you needed some way to formulate the idea that sometimes culture operates as this kind of soup we all swim around in, and then I argue that it's so incoherent and diverse and taken-for-granted and so forth, that people can pretty much justify anything in some kind of language, and that there are holes and slippages and contradictions and they don't bother anybody, because life is going to go on even if they say the wrong thing, or think the wrong thing. And the idea that hegemony operates in some kind of way where people literally can't see alternatives to the world in which they live, if you look at *any* empirical stuff, that is not true. People can see radical alternatives. Americans are incredibly radical. If you actually read Josh [sic] Gamson's *Talking Politics*, he gets his little focus groups in there;

and people actually say “oh, the bosses always win, the whole system is rigged, the society is completely corrupt and you can’t even”—on and on. *And* they’re saying, “If you work hard you can get ahead and everyone has an equal chance, and the rich people have a right to keep their money because they earned it.” And you think, “Brrrr [shivering noise]—what is going on here?” And, actually, they think a bunch of things in between. OK, so most of them don’t think communism would be good, that’s true. They don’t. But that’s not why we don’t have communism. I just don’t think that’s how things work.

So I wanted a model that would explain that kind of incoherence, but would also allow for the possibility that there are these moments or periods at which culture has these incredibly powerful effects. And in my later work, I’ve been trying to get a better handle on how to describe those contexts, and those moments, and those places in which there are actually systematic and kind of directional effects of culture.

*KB: But how does that work, say, for something like structure, since people usually oppose culture to structure? Are there some things that are more structural than others, and there are times when structure has more influence than others?*

AS: Yeah. I think that’s what Sewell is saying. Look, when he looks at this event, the storming of the Bastille, and he tries to define an event, a change in structures, how do you get that? And he sort of says that there are all sorts of preconditions leading up to this, that open things up, and leave them more incoherent. Here maybe we can think about something like Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, these kind of periods when it’s not that anybody’s driven by an inherent logic of what they’re doing to say, “Ah!, we’ve got to develop a new theory.” It actually can’t work that way, and actually people can tolerate huge amounts of incoherence, and they can always find enough stuff to justify whatever they were going to do anyway, or whatever the established, to use my language, the strategies of action they’re operating in. And as long as those are stable, you know, you can do all kinds of things. You might get interested in the Hari Krishnas, you might—you know, look at the *Habits of the Heart* authors—Steve Tipton is kind of Buddhist, and Bob Bellah shifted from being a Presbyterian to an Episcopalian, and Bill [Sullivan] was Catholic and became Episcopalian so they’re sort of in the same place. And I sort of stayed Jewish but got a little more so, and none of this required any of us to give up our jobs, or change our marriages. I mean, there’s enough, kind of, loose connection to have most things most of the time stay relatively stable. And that doesn’t mean that culture has nothing to do with the directions in which they do evolve. But it’s brought to bear in very specific places in very specific contexts. Unless you can pay attention to those things, you’re sort of stuck in the general soup, which is appropriate to some kinds of cultural stuff, but you if can get this more differentiated kind of vocabulary and the places they operate, that would be enormously helpful.

*LM: But the question that still puzzles me, and has puzzled me every time I read something you’ve written is where culture does reside in settled-ness. Where do we find it?*

AS: Hmm. Yeah. That's a very good question,... and I think that's a pretty good way to define some of what the problem is. On the one hand, there are cultural resources constantly being generated and offered in the public arena. And that is a process that is quite well-described. And there, you can look at how newspapers formulate these things and how they formulate particular ones, and movies formulate these things and you can look at how they formulate particular ones, and the problem is not to figure out *where* this stuff is, but to say, how do people pick and choose? Why does some of it work for them? Most of it, they ignore. And that's actually the opening chapter of my book. There's so much of that stuff out there, how is it that ninety-nine times out of a hundred we actually ignore most of it. You know it's there, like, there's a sidewalk preacher, and, you say, "Oh, it's a sidewalk preacher," so you walk right by. Or the Hari Krishnas are chanting, and you walk right by them. And your mother is saying things to you and you kind of ignore it, or think you know better, or whatever.

And so, there's an enormous amount of stuff, and most of the time, most people aren't using most of it to organize their understanding. But some parts of it, some people are taken quite seriously. There's a book that I cite by one of our former graduate students, a guy named Dave Hummon, where he studied people's images of urban and rural places, very important for Americans who think small towns are good and big cities are bad, and so forth. Now, if you interview people, most people have the same stereotypes. They all know what the common framework is. Now, they vary—some people consider themselves cosmopolitans, and they really like big cities and they have an analysis of why, and some people are anti-big city and they can say why. Most people know the framing discourse, let's say, but most people don't take it terribly seriously. They don't use it to explain anything. So they recognize it, but they don't use but about fifteen percent of it. People really take this stuff seriously and they say things like, "I grew up in a small town and that's why I'm the way I am. I'm hard working and my mom and dad taught me, and blah, blah." And you say well, "What do you think you'd be like if you grew up in a city?" And they say "I'd be on welfare!" In other words, for them, this is actually a powerful, explanatory framework that organizes an enormous amount of their thinking. So for them, that thing that for most people is just kind of out there.

So I guess my image is that a lot of this stuff, you ask me where it is, it's out there. It's floating around out there. That doesn't fit very much with the argument that culture is this deep....But there a lot of different things, and people participate in even lots of them, even lots of them that are mutually contradictory. You know, I go to synagogue Saturdays, and I see the world as defined by certain parameters and when I leave I see the world as defined by other parameters. I go to this Conservative congregation, so a lot of people keep kosher but I really don't, and a lot of people don't drive on Shabbat, but I do, and a lot of people don't spend money on Shabbat but I actually like to go out for coffee right before services. And I'm thrilled about Shabbat because I'm going there and saying the blessings which are sort of religiously obligatory in my not-very-good-Hebrew, some of the time I'm sort of struggling with myself—I don't always get through the whole prayer because I'm trying to learn the Hebrew, and so, I'm going much more slowly than everyone else. Everyone else is at the end and I'm

halfway through. But my girlfriend who's from Germany and her girlfriend who's from Germany and who studies Holocaust memorials, they come too, so I get to sit with them and go out to lunch after. So I'm going to be thinking about God and about lunch. Kind of in the same breath. I won't have a tremendous amount of trouble saying God is One and thinking about lunch, and I might even be thinking about lunch during the prayer, when you're really not supposed to. So, I mean, I do think that's one level, but there *is* something deeper that organizes our thinking. And I think we're starting to get to a place where we can actually name some of that other stuff. And I actually have a theory about what some of that deeper stuff is. I don't think it's deep in the same sense that it organizes everything else. That is, I think there's a structure but I don't think hierarchy, but that's got parts, and this is where I would usually reveal my latest thinking on this, but I can't really talk about that because it's too complicated and I would have to write on the board.

*LM: And we can't really capture that on audio.*

AS: Unless this could come with a little photograph on the website! I'll do that in the talk at two o'clock.

*KB: Maybe we could put a visual aid on the website! We do have a few more minutes, and we have a few more questions—which one should we ask?*

*LM: Which ones are left?*

*KB: Let's ask about Bourdieu. It's clear that Bourdieu has been a big influence on your thinking—in terms of strategies of action, thinking of culture as causal—could you talk about that?*

AS: Well, I'll tell you, Bourdieu's been a big embarrassment. Because I generated my whole line of thinking without having read Bourdieu, and then I read Bourdieu, and thought, "WHOOOPS! Oh, my God! I have to cite this guy! I have to read this stuff!" So it was embarrassing. And so yes, there are a lot of similarities, and if I had really read Bourdieu at all before I started—and it wasn't even that it hadn't been published, I just hadn't read it, which makes it particularly embarrassing.

But I think that the best way to talk about that is to talk about the relationship between what he calls the habitus, and what I have called, well, in my current formulation I call them "cultured capacities" and "strategies of action." So I see two things where I think he sees one thing. I am more crude. I think the fact that he—I think for Bourdieu, it is a methodological, theoretical and substantive argument he makes, in which everything is literally collapsed into everything. He's trying to overcome these subject/object, cause/effect kinds of distinctions that he thinks are at the root of our inability to solve problems in the social sciences. And so he is building into—let me back up and say that a lot of people are concerned with how the social world gets into the individual. And the old view, the Parsonian thing, you know, is socialization. Agents like the family and society interject this stuff and they have a Freudian method—they

actually have an answer to how this stuff gets in. So they actually have an answer to the question about how this stuff gets in, it's that the superego carries it around. You go through this traumatic thing, your father represents society, you go through the Oedipus complex and at the end of that, pow, you've been imprinted with what society wants you to know. I think modern theorists realize that that's not adequate, and that explanation doesn't work very well. I think Randy Collins has a wonderful account of how it is that people learn messages from their social experience that then reshape who they are. So he's got this kind of emotional economy, where every time someone denigrates you, or shakes hands first, or allows as how they can open their gum in front of you but you can't take out your gum and open it in front of them or whatever things are, you are either emotionally diminished or emotionally enhanced. So being interviewed by you when I'm the important person who knows things and you're the people who ask, enhances me. So when I walk out of here—that's why I got on a plane and came here—so I could be bigger when I got home! And I will be!

*KB: We were hoping to be diminished, ourselves.*

AS: I won't be diminished, I'll definitely be enhanced.

*LM: I think we will be too.*

AS: Yes, I literally will have gained a few ounces of fluff by the time I get home. So Bourdieu is trying to do the same thing, and what he's saying is that—it's actually not too different in a weird way from George Herbert Mead—he's saying you can't enact your part in the social order without internalizing what we do and therefore you reproduce your position by becoming a skilled actor in the game you're a part of. And that's why he, on the one hand, is always emphasizing agency and people aren't just passive victims and they don't just obey rules, and they strategize constantly to maximize their operations. But by doing that they reproduce the whole thing because they couldn't become the skilled actors they are without having, literally, internalizing the whole social world and their place within it.

Now, I'm always trying to pull things apart more so I can see how they operate. I am sort of willing to be crude and flat-footed in my thinking in order to do that. And so I think of what Bourdieu would call the habitus I think of as a set of skills. And I like using that crude a term because it clarifies a few things. One of the things it clarifies is that these transposable dispositions he's always talking about in his long, incomprehensible definition, is the idea that you have skills, and you can be more or less good at them. And some people are really good at deploying their cultural equipment. And I share with him the notion that the cultural equipment is the self. Except he hasn't been very interested in detailing—that's one of the fascinating things, why doesn't he talk about this? I'm very interested in the idea that one important cultural skill for example, is being able to read others, so that you know when somebody has dissed you, for example. In some social worlds, that's an incredibly important skill, and some people don't have it....Some people really lack this and you can think of people you know who just don't read things very well. And other people read them incredibly well. Or, people are good

at reading the character of other people, or you're good at displaying who you are, or deferring to powerful people. So in other social worlds, and I make the point in my book, is that one thing that we're not very good at, because it's really not part of the institutional order that we live in, but it was incredibly important when people had all these patrons, is the skill of figuring out who's loyal. So you look at all those Shakespeare books, and at King Lear, and why does he think Cordelia is the disloyal one and Regan and Goneril are the loyal ones and he makes this terrible mistake, and Henry is always unsure about who his real friends are, and who are your real friends? And that is about a social world that depends enormously on a patronage structure. It's not the social order Shakespeare was describing, it was the one he lived in. These Elizabethans, and later, is this whole elaborate system, and who is whose loyal dependent, and the great landlords get their political power from having lots of people dependent on them, so you had to know who their loyal retainers are and who's disloyal.

And this is not the dimension on which *we* are skilled at assessing others. So you can think of skills as being everything from the things Bourdieu might notice, like whether you had good table manners, or whether you knew how to assert that a piece of art was good, and some of those skills are highly specialized and you might only come up with them late in college, or something you see people do it and you think, "I might go and try that." Take someone like Kitty [Catherine] MacKinnon....She can one-up anybody, and it's the source of her power. Whatever you say she can go one step further. You know—so, sexual abuse of women, marital rape, sex is rape. It's an incredible skill, and when you see how you can survive in certain kinds of meetings—it's a skill. So these things that exist at the basic level of things you need to know—whether someone is being hostile to you or friendly, what do you need to be able to read, they exist at the level of, can you focus—I was always very good at SAT-type things—I'm actually not that smart, I mean, I don't know what the capitals of countries are, I don't know any geography, I don't know any history, or any dates, I can't tell you when the Civil War begins and ends—but why was I good? Because I could concentrate every erg into one place for three hours on those things. Literally I could live in altered state, and that's a skill most people don't have. Most people don't cultivate it, and most people don't have it.

So I talk about styles, skills, and habits. That's my little trinity. And I think in a way, it's not as theoretically sophisticated as the habitus, but it's a more differentiated conceptual stuff that allows you to sort of see what the parts are, and then I try to argue that those get mobilized into these enduring strategies of action. There the difference with Bourdieu is that for him, the strategies are temporary, and the habitus is permanent. For me, skills and habits are this incredibly diverse set of things, and you can be adding to them and they're constraints. They really constrain you, because they are really really hard to get. And they do link you to your past.

*KB: And once you learn them, they're the ones you have to use.*

AS: And, if you didn't learn them when you're young, I think some of them are really hard to acquire later. Now, some people, I mean, look at people from really working-

class backgrounds who get stuck in academia. That would be a really fascinating thing to study. Some people appear to inhabit their own skins with ease....Some academics from working class backgrounds can be really good at being upper middle class and retain loyalty to their working-class backgrounds somehow by not trying too hard, or not seeming to try too hard....Whereas other people, and I've had students like this, you have this wonderful graduate student who you know is incredibly smart and who is doing great work, if you send that person off to an Ivy League institution as an assistant faculty member, his or her life will be ruined. You just know it because they can't make that transition in style. It's just too hard. They just can't negotiate that gap. It's just too big.

And then I think that what happens when you consolidate a strategy of action—I'm just repeating the argument in "Culture and Action" here—but you're more likely to consolidate a strategy around the skills you have than to completely rebuild your skill set for a strategy that you'd like to have but you don't yet have. Now I think that's variable, and people make big leaps and all that. But that's what I'd say about Bourdieu. For him, the habitus is this incredibly enduring thing that contains everything. So, yes, it can be transposed, and blah, blah, blah. And Sewell quotes that thing where he says it reproduces exactly and *only* the characteristics necessary, I've forgotten the phrasing, exactly. And then he sees these strategic moves as very creative and constantly shifting. Whereas I see a little bit differently the strategies as more enduring things, just because most people, most of the time, can't live without an organization of action that sort of sustains the link between—

*KB: Do you mean an organization of the self?*

AS: Yes, on some level, they have to know what they rely on and know where they're going. Whereas I think the skill set is actually a lot more diverse than that. That's why, you can go home and be one person, or, you can have a really strong split—like, I met an Orthodox Jewish guy on a plane once who was incredibly devoted, incredibly Orthodox. Kosher meal, the works. But when he was traveling, he liked to sleep with prostitutes, and he was trying to find out from me what was a good neighborhood in which to find these prostitutes. And he just said, "Well, you know, when you get married, and you've been married for thirty years, and your wife, just starts to seem like your mother." And he was naïve enough, and I wanted to say "Freud, page 133! He could help you!" And so this is the code shifting, or whatever it's called. Most of us can live with this kind of incoherence and not worry about it.

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