

Mechanisms and Meaning Structures

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Abstract

This article proposes a model of cultural mechanisms based on the premises of structuralist cultural sociology and symbolic interactionism. I argue that the models of cultural mechanisms provided by the developing analytical sociology movement are inadequate, while the dominant theories of culture in action from cultural sociology are limited by their adoption of the individual as the primordial unit of analysis. I instead propose a model of culture in action that takes social situations as its primordial unit and that understands culture as a system of meanings that actors laminate into the situations they face through interactive processes of interpretation and performance. I then illustrate and develop the model through an analysis of the Great Stink of London in 1858, a sewerage crisis that triggered significant institutional transformations.

Keywords

mechanisms, culture, structuralism, explanation

Indeed, sociology can be thought of as a discipline devoted to the analysis of social situations.

—Cottrell (1950:711)

From its dominant position in midcentury sociology, the situation as a general unit of social analysis has fallen on hard times. Some microsociological and social psychological strongholds still exist (Diehl and McFarland 2010; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 1996; Lichterman 2008; McFarland 2004; Seeman 1997), and ethnographers routinely work on situations, but Cottrell's 1950 pronouncement is no longer apt. Situations have become a category that most sociological explanations silently transit without a theoretically significant trace. Situations are not just "treated like a black box with [their] internal workings left largely unexplored" (Diehl and McFarland 2010:1715) but are treated like a black box the workings of which do not much matter.

Situations, understood as the temporal and spatial conjuncture of circumstances experienced by an actor at a given moment (Goffman 1986), are an ontologically necessary

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dimension of social life (Abbott 2001b). But if they have no distinctive consequences for social action or social theory, then the decline of this unit of analysis makes little difference. In this scenario, while action, understood as interpretive and strategic effort (Alexander 1988), occurs in situations, other dimensions of a theory of action—such as dispositions, motives, practices, or cognition—can provide a satisfactory microfoundational framework for sociological explanations without attributing the situation itself any significance. I suggest the opposite: the situational level of analysis has unique bearing on the character of social action because it is intrinsically relational and meaningful and thus resists unwarranted assumptions embedded in theoretical frameworks that take the individual as their primordial unit of analysis. Furthermore, the relational character of situations challenges the dominant theory of culture in action, encouraging a focus on intersubjective cultural systems rather than individual “particles” of meaning. The crux of my argument is that by rethinking how situations work, we can develop a better model of culture in action that specifies concrete mechanisms without abandoning an understanding of meaning as an intrinsically intersubjective and relationally organized feature of social life. The analytical model I develop here argues, simply, that actors realize cultural systems qua systems in situational interactions, and this mechanism is essential to understanding the causality of culture.

I advance these arguments in four sections. The first identifies a problem at the confluence of analytical sociology and two contending frameworks for doing cultural sociology. This problem involves both the facile understanding of culture that undermines the enterprise of analytical sociology and the inadequacy of available answers to the problem of culture in action. I advocate a shift from the particulate imageries of culture typified by terms such as beliefs, symbols, and values, which are agnostic about the relationality of social meaning, and toward more systematic imageries that understand beliefs, symbols, values, classifications, categories, representations, performances, scripts, narratives, and other elements of meaning as parts of cultural systems. The second section considers and rejects the possibility that the symbolic interactionists might ride to the rescue in this contretemps, although they do indicate a promising direction for specifying the mechanistic foundations of cultural structures: the interactive definition of the situation. Third, I adapt this concept to develop a model of cultural mechanisms based on an understanding of situations as venues for the performative realization of cultural structures as relational and interactive social phenomena. The fourth section applies the model to the Great Stink of London in 1858, an environmental crisis that, through a series of cultural mechanisms, triggered a revolution in London’s sewerage and other municipal institutions.

MEANING AND MECHANISMS

How do meanings work as mechanisms? Most sociologists would accept that their business is often ultimately a matter of “behavior . . . meaningfully oriented to that of others” (Weber 1978:23), but this has not translated into a widely shared commitment to understanding how meaning works as a cause in social life. The developing analytical sociology program is emblematic of this situation. Its proponents have incorporated culture into their explanatory framework, but they have done so on the basis of an impoverished understanding of what culture is and how it can be understood to do explanatory work. By ignoring developments in cultural sociology, they have missed an important opportunity for theoretical and empirical synthesis. This is particularly unfortunate because the analytical sociology program and its call for mechanisms-based explanation is a timely effort to rethink what sociological explanation is and how we should do it. In this section, I consider the existing model of culture adopted by the analytical sociology program. It is inadequate. I then consider two alternatives developed under the auspices of cultural sociology.

The basic claim of the proponents of analytical sociology—the “mechanistas” as Gross (2013) recently called them—is “that proper explanations should detail the cogs and wheels of the causal process” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:50; see also Elster 1989). Mechanism-based explanation “breaks up the original explanation-seeking why question into a series of smaller questions about the causal process” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:51). The point is not to identify a particular unit as the exclusive basis for explanation, but rather to construct detailed accounts of how causal forces move through social systems. This is a useful call for specificity. But analytical sociology has an individualism problem. Hedström and Ylikoski (2010: 60) reject the conflation of mechanism-based explanation and methodological individualism, noting the potential significance of relational factors such as network structure. They claim that while methodological individualism advances a particular theory of human action, analytical sociology is instead an argument about causal inference that is agnostic on such questions. In practice, however, there is no difference. Hedström’s structural individualism, for example, admits relational factors in principle but continues to insist that even these “should be understood in terms of interactions of individual agents” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:60), and these individuals’ actions are typically understood in analytical sociology through the prism of its DBO (Desires, Beliefs, Opportunities) microfoundational model (Hedström 2005; Hedström and Bearman 2009; Manzo 2010). This position, however, fails to sufficiently respond to the relational critique leveled against it (Abbott 2007; Gross 2009), because the argument of relational sociology is precisely that many elements of interaction are not ultimately reducible to individuals but are emergent properties of interaction.

This problem is particularly evident with regard to situations and culture. In their seminal essay on social mechanisms, Hedström and Swedberg (1998:23) introduce the concept of “situational mechanisms” to describe macro-to-micro transitions, but they naturalize situations as given contexts of action rather than as socially and culturally constructed environments of action. Rydgren (2009) exemplifies this limitation in his chapter on cultural mechanisms in the major program statement for analytical sociology, Hedström and Bearman’s (2009) *Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. In an earlier article, Rydgren (2007:226) writes that “only by specifying the situations in which people are embedded may we assess the reasons for their beliefs and actions and understand group-specific uniformities in belief formation.” In his *Handbook* chapter, though, he fails to engage with the cultural work that goes into defining the situations in which actors are embedded. He instead takes situations to be precultural and depicts beliefs as the cultural response elicited by these concrete, unconstructed realities (see also Rydgren 2007:240–41). Beliefs are an insufficient framework for modeling culture (Gross 2009) because they relate only to the individual level of analysis. Rydgren defines beliefs as individuals’ confident propositions about the world, which are formed by the choices they make and are constrained by the correctness or incorrectness of their preferred categories in light of a given social environment (Rydgren 2009). All is at the individual level, and thus much is missed.

The failure of this “sociocognitive” (Rydgren 2007:226) approach reflects a deeper foundational fallacy of the analytical sociology program. While its founding documents pay lip service to limiting their ontological commitments (Manzo 2010), they nonetheless postulate entities with properties as one of the basic building blocks for explanations (Hedström 2005). Most cultural sociologists and theorists of social constructivism would argue that this is an entirely unwarranted assumption: social entities and their properties are usually the result of complex and contentious social processes, with both entities and properties emerging from cultural, relational, and mechanistic processes (Abbott 2001a, 2007; Latour 2007; Levi Martin 2011). This observation regarding the instability of entities and their properties as a

Table 1. Examples of Cultural Mechanisms.

Examples of Relational Cultural Mechanisms		
Reproductive transformation of cultural categories	Sahlins makes the argument, taken up by Sewell as an important general mechanism, that the conservative application of structural classifications can, under certain conditions, be a primary driver of the transformation of structure.	(Sahlins 1981; Sewell 2005a:200–04)
Diffusion of significance	The characteristics of elements within a cultural system, and especially sacred or polluted elements, can spread via physical or representational proximity, thus influencing the properties of other elements over time. Priests have an attenuated sacrality derived from their association with divinity; marrying someone of a lower caste may threaten one's social status; associating oneself with a revered constitution may confer legitimacy on one's views.	(Alexander and Smith 1993; Douglas 2005; Durkheim 1995; Norton 2011b)
Exemplification	Classification itself plays a pervasive mechanistic role by turning raw experience into the experience of things as instances of categories, provisionally turning them into social entities with ascribed properties.	(Douglas 1992; Geertz 1981; Norton forthcoming)
Performative fusion	Social performances can succeed or fail. Either outcome can have potentially powerful effects on how actors intersubjectively structure situations, how they act, and what outcomes occur, because performances of this kind are high-stakes bids to provide a generally accepted answer to the question of what's going on, and thus have the potential to reshape social reality in both success and failure.	(Alexander 2004, 2010; Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006)
Narration	Narratives can shape beliefs about how the past has shaped the present and thus what matters in a situation.	(Norton 2011a; Rydgren 2007; Smith 2003; Somers 1994)
Independent effects	"Legal cynicism refers to a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety . . . [exerting] an influence on neighborhood rates of violence independent of the structural circumstances that originally produced such cynicism."	(Kirk and Papachristos 2011:1191–92)

Note: The model of the structure of situations provides a framework for integrating these into explanations.

foundational assumption is not simply a critique of the model of culture adopted by analytical sociology. The inadequacy of their model of culture has caused them to undermine their broader objectives of enhancing sociological explanation by systematically excluding a wide range of cultural mechanisms (see Table 1). Rectification of this problem needs to start with a more robust model of culture.

But which model? The question of culture in action has been central to cultural sociology for good reason: to understand culture in action is to understand culture as cause. It is thus the defining question for understanding cultural mechanisms. This founding preoccupation of the cultural sociologists received its most widely cited answer in Swidler's toolkit theory of culture, based on an understanding of culture as the repertoires of action that individuals

use in response to environmental cues. Other answers to this question exist, the most important of which can be loosely collected under the banner of structuralist approaches to culture (Alexander and Smith 1993; Douglas 1992, 2005; Geertz 1977; Norton 2011b; Reed 2008; Sahlins 1981; Sewell 2005b; Tavory and Swidler 2009; Wagner-Pacifici 1986, 2005). I argue that structuralist approaches have significant advantages over the more cognitive models of culture in action descended from Swidler's (1986) seminal intervention. Structuralist approaches to culture, however, also have a significant weakness, which analytical sociology and its call for the specification of concrete mechanisms puts in sharp relief. Structuralist approaches often leave the causal mechanisms connecting cultural systems to concrete action implicit in their models. This can leave the impression that the same mechanisms proposed by the cognitivists—namely, individual-level cognition and strategic action—specify the microfoundations of structuralist theories of culture as well. Alternatively, it might suggest that structuralists are not doing explanation at all, but are just describing contexts. Neither impression is a satisfactory account of how we should understand the mechanisms involved in a structuralist account of culture in action.

“What are the microfoundations of culture in action?” We can crack this question by first thinking about *where* we should locate these microfoundations: in individuals or in situations? Swidler (2000) provides the most prominent answer to this question, and Vaisey (2009) later extended her ideas in important new directions. For both authors, the locus of culture in action lies with individuals' mental sense-making processes. This claim is perhaps odd at first glance, as situations are one of the key units of analysis in Swidler's (2000) *Talk of Love*. But Swidler understands situations as the settings that actors respond to through culture. Culture, in her view, is the array of more or less well-learned, situationally cued repertoires that actors have at their disposal to “organize individual experience and action” (Swidler 2000:7). Vaisey (2009:1684) shares Swidler's understanding, drawing on a dual-process model from cognitive psychology to answer the question, “What role does culture play in shaping what people do?” He argues that culture influences action both as deliberative justification and as a motivating “internalized schematic process” (p. 1687) consisting of “largely unconscious networks of neural associations that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action” (p. 1686), thus contributing to sociology's growing interest in cognitive models of culture (Cerulo 2002, 2010; Martin and Desmond 2010; Srivastava and Banaji 2011; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010).

Both Swidler's and Vaisey's understandings of culture in action, however, view motivation as a problem at the individual level of analysis. They make similar assumptions that culture is primarily something that happens in peoples' heads, rather than in the interstices of the relations between people and the situations they face. As Reed (2002:794) has written of Swidler, in taking situations as non-culturally mediated contexts of action that trigger culture, she rejects the view that “the very comprehension of the external environment is guided by internalized meaning-structures that mediate social reality.” And while Vaisey's account provides a helpful dispatch from sociology's frontier with cognitive science, arriving at the notion of cultural schemas embedded in subconscious neural networks as the motivating dimension of culture, it misses the more sociologically central role that culture plays in shaping what people do (Vaisey's organizing question). To wit, culture provides a meaningful structure to situational environments of action, populating them with categorically defined entities and relations. Vaisey's (2009) framework implicitly recognizes this—the neural schemas that produce motivational effects in his model are derived from experience—but his dual-process model covers only a fraction of the ground he claims for it, because it understands meaning only as something actors take from situations through cognition. He neglects meaning as something actors give to situations when they act on

their perceptions and as something that emerges from interactions as a pattern of negotiated local meaning connecting a concrete situation to the immediately mobilized aspects of an abstract code.

For example, upon seeing flashing lights in my rearview mirror, one could argue that I am motivated to pull over because of subconscious neural networks that have encoded social learning with regard to police encounters. However, I am just as motivated by the fact—that is, the socially enforced interpretation—that the car behind me is signaling for me to do so, it is a police car, and these social meanings are embedded in a system of conventional relations that make my actions in this situation highly consequential. My neural schemas may well have told me it was the police, but I am also motivated by the conventions and definitions that others will likely bring to the situation. Meaning is not just mental, but publicly performed as real. Cognitive models have important limitations: much that is sociologically significant about meaning is determined between actors rather than in their heads.

The similarities between individualist cultural sociology and analytical sociology emerge from their common commitment to the individual as the primordial unit of explanation, and their limitations are thus aligned. But microfoundational models of motivation based on social relations, rather than neural networks or repertoires, are both possible and promising (Abbott 2007; Birkbeck and LaFree 1993; Collins 2004; Emirbayer 1997; Powell and Colyvas 2008; Snow et al. 1986; Somers 1998). Structuralist cultural sociology, for example, accommodates a different premise—that situations are also a primordial location of meaning. From this perspective, meaning is understood as emerging from the relations between actors, environments, and cultural systems—networks of signs and signifiers understood in meaningful relation to one another. Structuralist cultural sociology, however, while committed to meeting “hard headed and skeptical demands for causal clarity” (Alexander and Smith 2003:14), has not been immediately interested in adopting the language and logic of inference of mechanisms. One exception is Reed’s (2011) integration of mechanisms and meaning into a framework of sociological explanation. Reed (2011:153–61) claims (rightly in my view) that social meanings form mechanisms, and provide them with their specificity as proximate, forcing causes of social action. His argument, however, is an epistemological intervention into the debate over mechanistic explanation. My argument here seeks to specify culture as a particular kind of mechanism, the workings of which have not been sufficiently specified.¹ I argue that the best way for structuralist cultural sociology to specify its mechanisms without accepting the limitations of individualist programs is by explicitly recognizing the situation as its primary unit of analysis. This turn to situations has strong precedent in cultural sociology (Collins 2004; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2008; Wagner-Pacifici 2000, 2005; Wherry 2008), but its significance has been neither sufficiently theorized nor appreciated.

SITUATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

Situations have a number of theoretically suggestive characteristics. Poised at the intersection of individuals and structures (Diehl and McFarland 2010:1715), they are the minimal unit for analyzing social relationships (Abbott 1988, 2007; Emirbayer 1997; Somers 1998). A wide range of variables usually employed at heterogeneous levels of analysis—such as individuals, relations, structures, actions, practices, processes, agency, motivations, institutions, organizations, and contexts—all operate in situations, making this level of analysis fertile analytical territory for constructing complex, synthetic, multi-scalar social analyses. And while all explanations need not account for situations (Jepperson and Meyer 2011), as an ontologically necessary dimension of social processes, a sociological explanation that makes no sense at the level of social situations is no explanation at all.

These characteristics make the long lineage of the situation in sociological theory unsurprising. Interest in the situation began with the pragmatism of James, Dewey, Mead, and Peirce. In addition to the continuing influence of pragmatism itself (Bernstein 2010; Gross 2008, 2009; Joas 1993, 1996; Rorty 1989), its focus on situated, problem-solving actors was central to the development of the Chicago school's emphasis on locating analyses in concrete times and places. Thomas, Park, Znaniecki, Redfield, Wirth, Cooley, and Baldwin, among others, all contributed to the prominence of the situation in early to mid-twentieth-century sociology (Rochberg-Halton 1982).

Situational analysis in this tradition was attuned to some form of cultural analysis from the outset through its focus on the central theoretical problem of the definition of the situation. First used by W. I. Thomas and Znaniecki (1918; W. I. Thomas 1937), according to Wolff's (1964:182) well-known *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* entry,

the phrase *definition of the situation* . . . quickly became in American sociology and social psychology the dominant phrase for denoting two facets of the theory of social acts (q.v.). (a) It pointed to the requirement of determining the meaning of a situation to the actor, thus involving social science in the use of categories of meaning, motive, and attitude. (b) It stressed the fact that a dimension of such meaning was cultural in character: i.e. shared, symbolically formulated, and transmitted through the process of socialization; internalized in the personality of the actor and yet also confronting him as the shared attitudes and beliefs of his fellows.

This problem of the "situational context of meaning" played a prominent role in Chicago school sociology (Abbott 1999) and continued to be influential as a theoretical question in its own right (Brittan 1973; McHugh 1968; Perinbanayagam 1974; Rochberg-Halton 1982; Stebbins 1967, 1969) and as an organizing problem for symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969)—including Goffman's (1964, 1986) dramaturgical concerns—and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; McHugh 1968; Ritzer 1985).

Micro-sociologists from Blumer on, however, usually understand the problem of situational meaning in terms of interaction and negotiated order, rather than as trans-situational systems of relational meaning (Fine 1996; Fine and Kleinman 1983; Hall 1997; Mesler 1989; J. Thomas 1984; Wolkomir 2001). This is in contrast to the fusion of thinking about interaction and social structures that goes under the heading of structural symbolic interactionism (Clarke 2003; Fine 1991, 1992; Hall 2003; Musolf 1992; Snow 2001). Work in this subarea engages with social structure as a crucial determinant of the parameters of situational action. It does not, though, make much use of a structuralist understanding of meaning (Harman 1986; Rochberg-Halton 1982). For the interactionists, meaning is still largely analyzed as something that emerges in interaction through processes such as symbolization (Link et al. 1999; McFarland 2004; Portes 2000; Snow 2001). Blumer (1969:2) argues that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," a starting point perfectly consonant with structural approaches to culture, but he then specifies that meaning "is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows." Symbolic interactionism largely skirts questions related to the determinants and character of that emergent, interactional meaning, and especially whether and how meanings are structured for actors in ways other than those posed by the immediate interaction order. This is the key problem that a structuralist model of cultural mechanisms addresses. In doing so, such a model makes it possible to incorporate the situational level of analysis into explanations in which the object of analysis is at a more macro level than the interaction itself—another important departure from symbolic interactionism. An analysis of the trans-situational cultural structures that actors refer to in making situational meaning

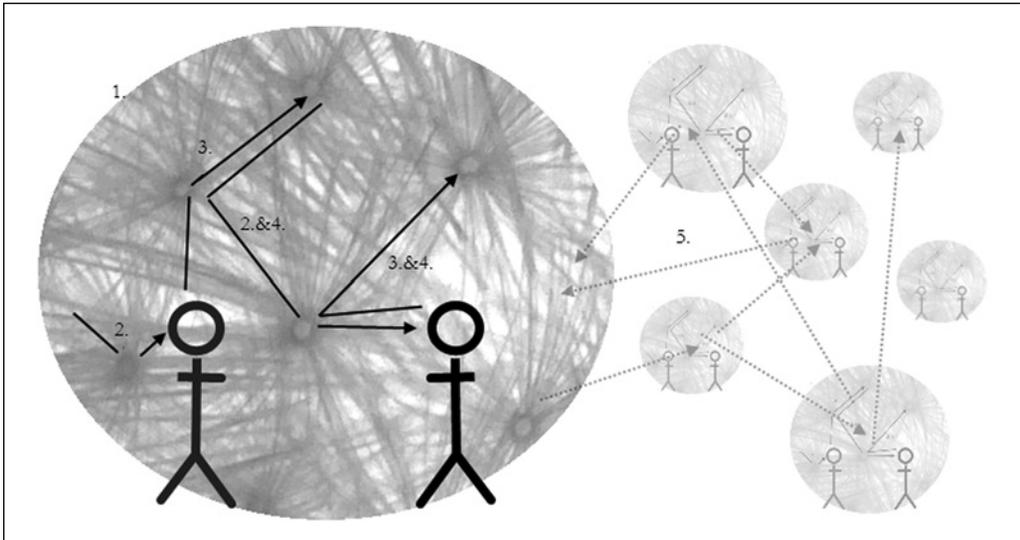


Figure 1. A Structuralist Model of Cultural Mechanisms.

1: Code, 2: Interpretation, 3: Performance, 4: Interaction, 5: Colligation.

is conducive to theorizing the colligation of disparate situations through their orientation to these common structures of meaning. Cultural mechanisms, in this sense, offer an important pathway for understanding how the macro emerges out of the micro—precisely what a mechanism ought to do.

MECHANISMS, MEANING, SYSTEMS, AND SITUATIONS

In light of the theoretical infelicities discussed in the preceding sections, the approach I take to developing a mechanisms-based model of cultural structures in action is based on two propositions. The first is that these mechanisms are intrinsically situational and rooted in interaction. They do not ultimately resolve themselves at the individual level. Second, particulate imageries of culture are partial, potentially misleading, and most important, *different* from systemic, relational imageries as a matter of analytical import and empirical usage. Thinking about singular elements of culture (e.g., strong beliefs) as causal factors is different from thinking about the systems of roles, scripted actions, identities, and narratives that contextualize beliefs and direct their situational realization.

The model I propose is of a general nature. It captures the basic forms that I take to describe a structuralist theory of cultural mechanisms. They are, in keeping with the analytical sociologist's understanding of mechanisms, sufficiently general to be transposable between different cases. To effectively contribute to the explanation of actual cases, they also need to be empirically specified. This is an effort at synthesis and exposition rather than novelty—I take its elements to already be fundamental to structuralist cultural sociology. The model is roughly sketched in Figure 1. Situational action occurs in the context (1) of trans-situational systems of collective meaning that actors use to (2) interpretively answer Goffman's (1968:8) question—"What is it that's going on here?"—with the result that they provisionally decode the social significance of situational elements. Actors communicate those interpretations by (3) acting as though they are (and thus contributing to their realization as) real environments of action in a process of social performance, (4) while ongoing situational interactions draw actors into concrete local formulations of meaning as interpretively and performatively realized. What differentiates this model from

symbolic interactionism is that it understands meaning to emerge from both the interaction order (4) and the more abstract relations embedded in the codes that actors depend on to communicate and comprehend their proposed answers to “what’s going on?” As noted earlier, this addition facilitates an understanding of how situations are (5) colligated by actors in ways that explain more macro outcomes. My contention here is that this nexus of meaning and interaction in a situation is one of the primordial settings for social action, and its operation provides a description of the main mechanism through which we should understand the causality of cultural structures. Although my focus is on developing this nexus to better specify the causality of culture, this should not be confused with an empirical claim to cultural supremacy. The background model of explanation operative in this article is, in addition to being mechanistic, fully conjunctural, with the expectation that any explanation will involve multiple, analytically independent social structures, processes, and forces. Whether culture is central to the project of explanation in any given context is an empirical question, as is the question of the conditions that lead to the salience of culture and the question of how culture interacts in conjunctures with other aspects of the case. Explanation is complicated, and my argument is not that cultural mechanisms of the sort described here are everything; rather, they are something we can work with.

Code/Cultural System

The first question to consider in rethinking the definition of the situation from the starting point of meaning as embedded in cultural systems is what exactly a cultural system is. The theoretical imagery that I prefer for thinking about culture lies between Geertz’s half-hearted concept of cultural systems² and the idea of a code as developed most robustly under the auspices of Saussurean semiotics. A code is the system of conventional rules and relations through which meaning can be communicated and understood. The natural language of a community is the most common example used to illustrate the concept, with linguistic meaning-making depending on the familiarity of the parties involved with the conventions of the language being used. To communicate, speakers organize their words under the auspices of a code made up of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and listeners use the same system to decode and understand the utterances. For someone who does not speak Dutch, say, an utterance in that language will be totally impenetrable, at least insofar as the parts encoded in the Dutch language go (other codes relating to things like gestures, facial expression, intonation, and setting will still be operative and often sufficient for pretty good communication).

A code, though, is any system of relational conventions, and by taking natural language as the master metaphor for understanding what a code is, we risk importing features of the metaphor into other contexts where they are unwarranted. A particularity of natural language as a code, especially in the context of communication between highly competent native speakers, is how elaborately worked over, developed, comprehensive, and precise the code can be. Highly competent actors who share a language can often communicate with exquisite precision and clarity about the world. On the other hand, the conventions of linguistic usage in a natural language are so precise that native speakers can usually easily identify even good non-native speakers through their myriad small infelicities and deviations from the local conventions that make up the code. These features of natural language are potentially misleading when thinking about other kinds of codes. Codes are typically partial, complex, multiple, overlapping, vaguely determined, and imprecise. When they are shared by actors, they are often shared unevenly, partially, or on the basis of quite different understandings of how the code works. Codes afford more elaborate miscommunications and conflicts, as much as they afford better understanding and the fusion of horizons of

meaning. Compared to natural language, the plethora of codes that actors can bring to bear on any given situation create an unstable and inchoate foundation for meaning. Nonetheless, this is a far more sociologically warranted foundation for meaning than the precision suggested by the metaphor of a message communicated in a shared natural language—the precise overdetermination of meaning of which high structuralism and Parsonian systems theory have rightly been accused (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009).

For this reason, it is useful to temper the precision suggested (but not required) by the concept of a code with the notion of a cultural system. A cultural system is also a system of relations in which meaning can be communicated and understood. It does not, however, imply an efficient system. Nor does it imply the precise determination of meanings. Meaning in cultural systems is shaped by the relationships between different elements in the system, but it is not determined in a singular way. When actors orient themselves and the situations they face toward cultural systems, the relations of meaning embedded in those systems become likelihoods and possibilities for interpretation and communicative action (not to mention miscommunicative action). As Fine (1993:70) neatly summarizes this Goffmanian view, we should be “asking not which definitions are possible, but also what definitions are likely and what the consequences are for those who ignore the definitions.”

The key to developing a concrete, mechanistic understanding of cultural systems in action is to specify the relationship of this concept of culture to situations. To do so, the Thomas Theorem (Merton 1995) is a good starting point. W. I. Thomas and Thomas (1928:572) famously claim that “if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences.” But definition is misleading as a master concept for understanding situational meaning if it is taken to represent a second-order phase of deliberate sense-making after a situation has begun. We should instead think about situations as intrinsically meaningful units of analysis; they are social environments that come into existence only with the definition of their characteristics. Just as Ryle (1996) argues that winks differ from twitches not in the number of things done—a little bit of twitching plus a little bit of winking—but because winks are embedded in an “already understood code” (see also Clark 2011; Geertz 1977), situations do not involve some relations, some things, and some definitions. Rather, social things and relations *are* situational definitions. We individually, collectively, historically, and interactively recognize things as the things that they are because an already understood code of social meaning defines them. The question, then, is how to explain and model the realization of cultural systems in situations without assuming that actors ever make decisions in light of complete, singular, and extensive cultural codes.

Interpretation, Performance, Interaction, Colligation

Cultural systems are real parts of the situational environment of action because actors *both* act and experience them as though they are real. This is so because cultural systems, understood as the set of relevant conventions of meaning, are the preeminent technique people use to figure out what is going on and who one is in a situation and to map their courses of action. Moreover, actors treat cultural systems as maps to understanding what other actors will do and how they will understand a situation. Due to this duality of the actor’s role in a social situation—the actor as the author of communicative action and the actor as audience for communicative action—a mechanistic model of the cultural structure of situations requires two analytically distinguishable modes of action: interpretation and performance. These concepts have a number of virtues as the building blocks for a model of cultural mechanisms. Interpretation suggests both the automatic, commonsense experience of multilayered social realities in terms of habituated social meanings (Geertz 1975; Goffman

1983; Silver 2011) and individuals' active and creative efforts to map the cultural topography of strange situations and pressing contests of meaning (Spillman 1995). Performance suggests action that makes some aspect of meaning real. Performances of situational meaning by oneself and others are simultaneously incorporated into actors' understanding of what a situation is about—what is going on—closing the loop between interpretation and performance.

In keeping with the concerns of the interactionists, the realization of cultural systems through the mechanisms of performance and interpretation should obviate any concern that a focus on codes and systems is static. Alexander (1988:313) captures the interactive character of this model of culture in action, writing that interpretation "is part of an interactional process, not merely a quality within individual consciousness. . . . It is a deeply hermeneutical process of understanding that proceeds through gestures that typify a tiny selection of ongoing experience, gestures through which we seek to exact from others the same typifications we apply to them in the course of communication." The social performance concept integrates action and interaction into meaning structure (Alexander 2004; Alexander et al. 2006; Austin 1976; Butler 1989; Callon 2008; Goffman 1986). It generally suggests a model of symbolic action, where actors assert (i.e., perform) particular social meanings that others' reciprocal actions accept, reject, ratify, challenge, modify, or confuse. There are various formulations of this approach. Butler (1989), for example, understands gender as a performative social reality, and Alexander (2004) develops a model of the success/failure conditions for social performances based on how effectively actors fuse their actions (and especially the text of their performances) with background representations through their use of typified scripts and staging elements (see also Norton forthcoming).

For the purposes of situational structure, social performance suggests both the symbolic character of action and a key dimension of the syntactical construction of the environment of action. Social environments are structured by the performances of others. I may believe that I have a right to film a police action, but if those involved in the situation—and in the subsequent sequence of situations leading to a fine, sentence, or impoundment of my tape—reject my performance of right and ratify the police officer's performance of an arrest by, say, taking my camera or helping to push me into a car—a police car—then the situation is structured by the police power to arrest me for filming the scene (Smiley and Moskovitz 2011). The performative realization of cultural systems in time and space likewise incorporates the material environment into an understanding of cultural microfoundations as objects of various sorts are interpretively and performatively incorporated into symbolic action. As Sewell (2005a:135) writes, "the activation of material things as resources, the determination of their value and social power, is dependent on the cultural schemas that inform their social use." Definitions structure situations in concrete ways because interpretations are performed in the material world; but, they also reference a trans-situational system of classifications that orient and coordinate the performances of other actors involved in the situation, giving definitions an intersubjective, environmental character as they are interactively combined. Situational meanings thus emerge in interactions in ways that are predisposed to recognition and coordination because actors are oriented toward the actions of others as well as toward the codes from which others are building their performances. Mead's (1934) understanding of a symbol as something always completed in the response of another captures this sense of meaning in interaction. This is not to suggest, however, a bias toward consensus; the interaction order arrayed around meaning structures can just as easily take the form of contested struggles over meanings shaped by intersubjective, trans-situational cultural systems (Spillman 1995). A roughly common orientation is just as necessary for a clearly structured struggle as it is for consensus.

According to this model, a situation is an environment of action structured by an intersubjectively performed network of typified social classifications and other elements of cultural systems. The car behind me is not just a car, but a police car; the police car behind me with its lights and sirens on is performing the meaning of police power by signaling a command that I pull over; and my decision to comply or not involves not just an action on my part—this is too thin—but a performance of meanings that in the context of a webwork of codified conventions calls for responses from the other actors in the situation; between us we structure the situation of our interaction. A situation is an environment of social action meaningfully structured by the actors involved, but not just by these actors. Their actions depend on what they understand, and what they understand depends on categories that are trans-situational, intersubjective, and over which they have little direct control. Often, it does not matter if I recognize that a cop is a cop or a jail is a jail (Fine and Kleinman 1983). But sometimes it does—especially if my failure to recognize and ratify a formerly stable classification becomes endemic. A cascade of destabilizing meanings is precisely the mechanism that Sewell (1996, 2005a) identifies to explain the significance of the Bastille for the French Revolution. We can better explain these sorts of big, consequential events by a theory of situations that incorporates codes, for codes are a mechanism for theorizing common orientations across multiple situations, and thus for explaining how actions across multiple, potentially quite different situations, can be similarly oriented in ways that enable the colligation of situations into sequences of social action that mean something different, and potentially more consequential, for macro-sociological outcomes than they each mean alone. In this model of action, situations are structured by broader networks of social meaning and by actors' performances that introduce these meanings into the situation, manipulate them, and accept or reject them. Each actor in a situation could introduce quite different meanings that could lead to quite different situational trajectories. Definitions of situations are, as Goffman had it, syntactically constructed in our interactions, but the elements of performative structure come from the cultural systems in which interacting actors build and inhabit situational environments.³

These are the main elements and mechanisms of the model that I believe underpins the structuralist understanding of culture in action: an often rather cacophonous assemblage of cultural codes and systems, parts of which actors realize in interactions comprising concrete situational interpretations and performances (I return to colligation in the following). I would like to note a few features embedded in this model that are analytically important but perhaps easy to overlook. First, it is an interactive model and interactive in a number of directions. It is based on the interactions of actors, of course, but also on the situationally variable interaction of actors with cultural systems, and on the relational interactions within and between cultural systems discovered and enacted by actors, creating the possibility for emergent properties of local situational meanings. Second, it recognizes what Fine and Kleinman (1983) call "obdurateness"; they focus on materiality, but they also briefly discuss "social obdurateness." The reality of a situation defined by others, potentially entirely outside our control or influence, is an important corrective to an overly voluntarist interpretation of the Thomas Theorem. We make our definitions of situations real, but they are not the only real things in situations, not least because others are busily realizing their own definitions, potentially on the basis of far more significant resources than we have available. The model thus lashes together a strongly constructivist understanding of social action with a strongly constraining understanding of social structure. We construct the reality of situations, but I do not. This too describes how structure and agency are configured in the model.

A perhaps less obvious aspect of this model is what Sewell (2005a) calls fatefulness. Cultural systems are varied and complex aspects of the environment of action, potentially

incorporating many relations and possibilities from which actors can build their performances. They shape patterns of likelihood and are thus real. We should not neglect the fact that they are realized through decisions that become concrete actions. When actors act, their particular actions fatefully reshape the environment of action. The new environment includes the action and is thus different from what went before. Any action potentially reshapes the configurations of meaning in a situation, and does so fatefully. This fatefulness implies that what becomes real is always only one consequence of many likely or possible outcomes. Probability reconciles structure and agency well enough for this model.

Finally, the model rests on a threefold division of temporality. All cultural codes change, but many salient codes change slowly across a wide range of situations. For many analytical applications, codes can be treated as fixed. This first time scale is thus the temporality of codes, which is usually, but not exclusively, slow. The second is the domain of the symbolic interactionists, the interaction order, or the temporality of face-to-face situations where actors fatefully interpret, perform, and otherwise act. The third time scale is what I will call local time—the synthetic, symbolically constructed temporality performatively asserted by situational actors. It is at the scale of local time that colligation⁴ happens, as actors construct the relevant pasts and futures of the moments of their interaction, narrating, plotting, historicizing, and thus specifying the meaning of the present. Local time is the time scale that actors laminate into situations through their references to past events, recent history, imagined futures, and long-standing identities and relationships (Griffin 1992; Maines 1987; Mische 2009; Zerubavel 1987). It is an analytical frame that captures the introduction into interactions of things not immediately or fully present and things existing at very different time scales than the temporality of the face-to-face interaction. Crucially for a theory of cultural mechanisms and their application to macro-sociological questions, local time is a mechanism that describes how actors colligate the past and the future into the temporality of the interaction; it thus describes the site where actors transmute social actions inherently bound to a single set of circumstances removed from all others in time and space into trans-situational sequences, meaningfully arrayed, and potentially laden with the probabilistic directionality that we parse as causality. In this sense, local time is its own cultural system—a system of representations of things not immediately or exclusively present that actors interpretively and performatively incorporate into the immediate present, as they do with other elements of culture. Now to put the model through some paces.

CULTURAL MECHANISMS AND THE GREAT STINK OF LONDON

In June 1858, London plunged into a sewerage crisis as the River Thames, clogged with the metropolis's excrement, began to stink in a remarkable and disgusting way. So bad was the stench during this Great Stink of London that Goldsworthy Gurney, Inspector of Ventilation for the New Houses of Parliament, was forced to hang sacking drenched in chemicals from windows overlooking the river. Work crews dumped tons of crushed limestone into the Thames and the sewers that were disgorging tons of raw sewage into it daily, in an attempt to control the smell.⁵ Nevertheless, the Great Stink intensified and persisted for weeks. As Clifton (1992:24) writes, the "'Great Stink' concentrated minds wonderfully," and they ultimately concentrated on the transformation of London's sewerage institutions. The Great Stink triggered a massive program of sewer building, a transformation of the structure of municipal authority, and the invention of new funding structures for public works. To be sure, it was not stink alone that drove this transformation. The effects of the Great Stink were also contingent on a revolution in metropolitan governance occurring over a much longer time scale. Still, a question remains that is quite suited to mechanisml investigation: through

what cogs and wheels did a biochemical phenomenon trigger a rapid and massive institutional transformation? A structuralist model of cultural mechanisms is essential to answering this question.

By the spring of 1858, the Thames had become an open sewer for London. Some 250 tons of sewage poured into the Thames daily, slowly churning back and forth with the tides in the river's slow flow to the sea. Joseph Bazalgette, an engineer for the London sewer system, evocatively recalled the state of affairs:

The drains of London were pouring down their filth into the river at low water. There was no outflow from them at high water. The tide kept the sewage up the drains then; but when the tide had been running out for hours and the water in the river began to run low, then the drains began to pour out their sewage and of course when the tide came in again it was all swept up by the stream. When the tide ebbed it all came down and so it kept oscillating up and down the river, while more filth was continuously adding to it until the Thames became absolutely pestilential. (Halliday 1999:5)

Parliament had already recognized the need for a change to this system with the Metropolis Local Management Act of 1855 (MLMA). The most important provision of the act was its creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). Although the MLMA charged the MBW with constructing new drainage works for the metropolis, it imposed such stringent restrictions and requirements for oversight that the Board proved incapable of action. This was the situation in June 1858, when London was hit by a heat wave and low water levels in the river. Beginning on June 16, letters noting the worsening situation began to appear in newspapers, and by June 18, *The Times* suggested that the situation had become an extraordinary crisis: "We believe this to be the uncleanest, foulest river, in the known world . . . [something] must be done. We must not wait, like old London, for a Plague to be stopped by a Great Fire."⁶ Although the government initially resisted calls from Parliament and the press to respond to the Stink, a decisive moment in the transformation of smell into a trigger for institutional reform came on June 25, when the government decided it would act. A few weeks later it proposed the Metropolis Local Management Amendment Act (MLMAA), which made sweeping institutional changes to deal with the stink and the causes actors attributed to it. Under the auspices of the MLMAA, the MBW built 1,300 miles of sewer lines, two new pumping stations at Barking Creek and Crossness, and the Victoria and Chelsea embankments of the Thames. They created a sewerage system with an aesthetic many readers would find quite reassuring. It whisked waste from the water closets and drains of the metropolis through invisible, subterranean pipes and deposited it far enough down river that Londoners never had to see—or smell—it again.

To explain the efficacy of the Great Stink in triggering institutional reform, we must focus on cultural mechanisms of the sort described earlier—it was not the stink itself, but the meaning of the stink that was the focus of these mechanisms. In particular, three linked mechanisms were crucial in shaping the event's outcome: pollution (the perception of stink as dangerous), guilt, and purification. Figure 2 gives an abstracted map of the event and its key stages.

Stink and Danger

Douglas (2005:44) famously defines dirt as "matter out of place," but the Great Stink presents the problem of dirt in a modified form, for it was not matter that was out of place as the crisis built, but a sensation out of place. The stink of decomposing human feces was familiar

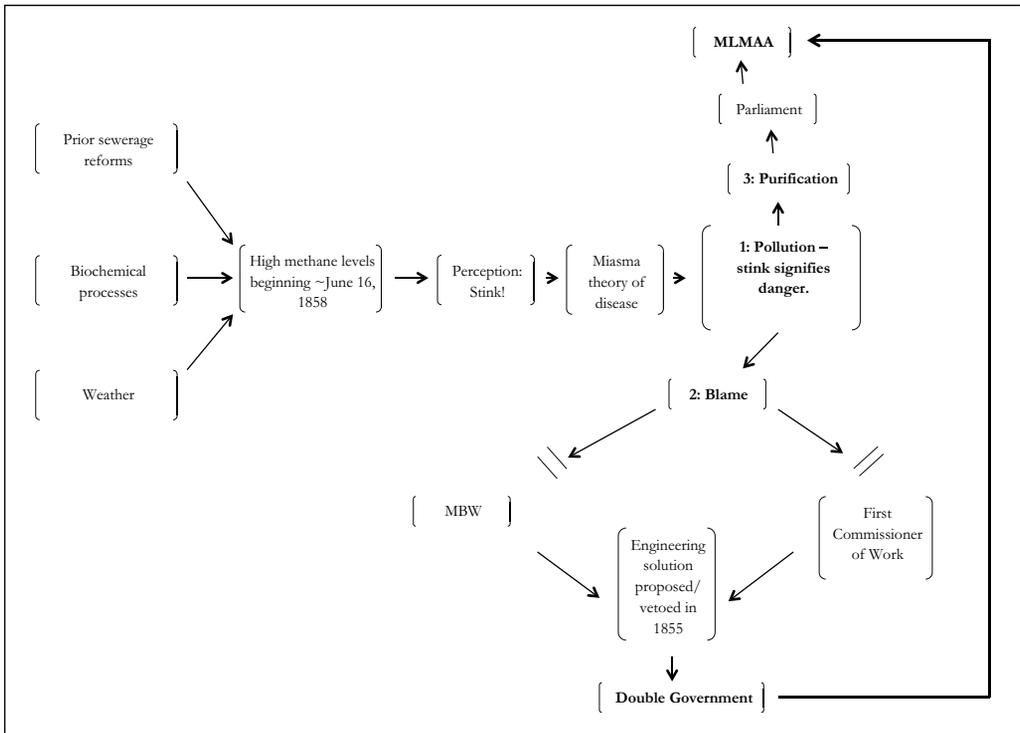


Figure 2. Cultural Mechanisms in the Great Stink of London.

to all who shat in the Victorian world. But the culturally defined sense of that world was rapidly changing under the influence of mid-nineteenth-century public hygiene reformers. Edwin Chadwick, the most prominent reformer, had long campaigned against what he took to be the manifest dangers of traditional methods of handling human waste. Those methods involved large pits under houses, emptied at night by legions of night soil men who patrolled the city with their carts. Chadwick and his allies struck a mighty blow against this system with their *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* in 1842. The Public Health Act of 1848 reflected the consolidation of a new elite consensus about the proper disposal of human waste: it should be removed from the community through sewers that, above all, separated people from fecal matter. This vision, however, was only partially achieved by the late 1850s, and the metropolis's new drains simply deposited their contents into the Thames, removing waste from neighborhoods by centralizing and concentrating it in the river. Under normal circumstances, this was apparently in sufficient harmony with the newly consolidated symbolic systems through which Londoners sought to control their bodily waste, and it persisted more or less quietly until 1858.

To turn again to Douglas (2005), a society's ideas about dirt are patrolled in two directions: that of purity and that of pollution. Purity is generally channeled through rituals that symbolically configure something as clean. The use of a toilet connected to drains, for example, was the new ritual form toward which Londoners were moving in the mid nineteenth century (we, in contrast, might be quite nervous about all of that filth without a decent soap culture to ward it off). On the other hand, pollution is associated with the defilement of the pure through improper management of the boundaries defining its separation from the impure. Furthermore, the social meaning of pollution typically incorporates the threat of specific danger. As Douglas (2005:140) writes, "pollution powers . . . inhere in the structure

of ideas itself and . . . punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined.” During the decade prior to the Great Stink, public health advocates led by Chadwick had achieved significant successes in their efforts to redefine and clarify the lines of structure in the disposal of human waste in London, and they had done so through the performative re-codification of contact with human waste as a form of pollution.

As Douglas’s observations predict, this new codification of pollution incorporated a theory of danger attendant on proscribed contact. For the Victorian hygiene reformers, the dangers of pollution were encoded in the miasma theory of disease. The miasma theory was quite ancient, and it had become a foundational code of medical meaning for the mid–nineteenth-century public health movement. Its central tenet was that disease spread through invisible clouds of gas that could be identified as dangerous by their foul smell. Chadwick, in particular, rose to fame partly as a result of his efforts to eradicate the miasmatic “fever nests” that poisoned the urban poor and blighted both their morals and their prospects for more gainful employment; this was his performance of the reality of the relations of the miasma theory. As Chadwick famously testified in 1846, “all smell is disease.”⁷ In the hands of public health reformers, miasmas became the causal vector that explained the danger posed by the proximity of the populace and their excrement. It was a sensual, pungent vector, because according to the miasma theory of disease, to know danger one needed only to inhale.

The conjuncture of the biochemistry of decomposition and the meteorological dynamics that produced a hot, dry summer in 1858 created a situation that, interpreted according to the codified meanings of the miasma theory, comprised a massive and threatening pollution at the heart of the metropolis. Actors across a range of social situations interpreted and performed that danger as real. The best evidence for interpretation of the stink as a signifier of dangerous pollution comes from the daily newspapers and parliamentary testimony at the time of the Stink. On June 18, for instance, readers of *The Times* would have read of miasmatic danger:

The stench in the Temple to-day is sickening and nauseous in the extreme; we are enveloped in the foul miasma which spreads on either side of this repository of the filth of nigh three millions of human beings [the Thames], and day and night every breath of air which we draw for the sustenance of life is tainted with its poisonous exhalations.⁸

These reports show the explicit centrality of questions of purity and pollution and the association of the latter with horrible communal danger in the quite terrifying specter of epidemic disease. As *The Morning News* put it, the “purity” of the river had been “poisoned” as it had been made the “receptacle of everything that [was] nasty, impure, repulsive, and pestilent.”⁹

Parliamentarians, embedded in the same cultural systems as the journalists, similarly concluded that the Stink signified pollution and danger. The “pestilential condition of the River Thames” was first broached on June 18.¹⁰ In the weeks that followed, parliamentarians described the river and its stench as “putrid,” “evil,” “pestilential,” “poisoning,” and “noxious” and the situation as a “calamity” and a “catastrophe.”¹¹ These rhetorical constructions of danger, death, and disease contributed to the growing urgency of the situation. Mr. Owen Stanley warned that “the metropolis might yet suffer from such a pestilence as had not been known since the time of the great plague,” and he warned that “the matter was one of the most pressing nature, and could not be neglected without danger to the lives of the community.”¹² In both the press and Parliament, actors interpreted stink in light of the prevailing codes of purity and pollution, and this nexus of code, interpretation, and the public,

performative expression of meaning was the central mechanism for turning a smell into a crisis. In the ensuing days, actors' performances of the meaning of the stink were oriented toward a common, codified conviction: the smell was dangerous and the intensity of the smell coming from the river signified a serious threat to all who inhaled it.

To understand the cultural character of pollution as a sociological mechanism, one must note the obvious: smell is not dangerous. Olfactory contact might well signify that something dirty is close, and thus have an important evolutionary logic, but smell itself does not make us sick. The cultural character of the association of the Great Stink with danger is confirmed by the mortality statistics for the period: the Registrar General's weekly returns for the height of the crisis indicate that the death rate in London was equal to its 10-year average.¹³ Contemporaries were motivated to act by the meaning they attributed to the smell, rather than the sort of objective consequences that would be reflected in mortality statistics. Using a structuralist model of cultural mechanisms, we can better explain why they believed what they did and how those beliefs contributed to the structuring of the situational environments of action that were the ultimate locus of social action. The following analyses of processes of blame and purification shift the focus from interpretive dynamics to how the performance of codified meanings in concrete social situations shaped the practical response to the dangerous pollution of the Stink.

Blame

In addition to being an interpretation of a physical state of affairs, pollution is also a powerful moral signifier, with important connotations for the power, status, and standing of the actors and objects with which it is symbolically associated. Two basic operations describe the movement of symbolic pollution through social systems. Metaphor describes the spread of pollution through the successful performance of the *similarity* of some thing, person, or relation with the polluted signifier. The key operation in the case of the Great Stink, though, is metonymy: the spread of pollution through the successful performance of the *contiguity* of persons, things, or relations with the polluted signifier. The key performative/interpretive moment with metonymy is the situationally realized assertion that X should really be understood and treated as part of polluted Y and is thus itself polluted by this contact.

In the case of the Great Stink, the question of symbolic contiguity was a question of cause. Who or what had caused such a vast and terrifying pollution of the metropolis? Who, that is to say, was to blame? Contemporaries first focused on the MBW for their causal association with the dangerous pollution of the Stink. *The Times*, for instance, opined early in the crisis that the MBW should be

confined in a river steamer and compelled to ply, without intermission between London and Vauxhall bridges until they have agreed upon a plan, or the last man of their number has been summoned away to regions where the stench which they have protected can trouble them no more.¹⁴

To many observers, this interpretation seemed obviously correct. The MBW, after all, had been charged with designing and building a system for sewage removal in 1855, and their failure was a direct cause of the Stink. In terms of the model of cultural mechanisms described here, we should understand blame as the situational interpretation and performance of culpability, but given that the explanation we are interested in depends on the colligation of numerous situations over space and time, blame must also be understood as a collective interpretation and performance. Assertions of blame have to be ratified and perpetuated by others in other situations to become collectively constructed realities.

In the case of the Great Stink, the symbolization of the MBW as blameworthy ultimately failed to become a widespread collective representation (Figure 2), and this failure is best understood at the level of codes. Interpretation and performance are embedded in codes of meaning in reference to which they make sense. In particular, blame always depends on a tacit, local causal theory that can be understood as a code. According to Evans-Pritchard (1963), for instance, among the Azande, blame for any number of misfortunes can be pinned on witches, and that performance of blame is embedded in witchcraft as a code of social meanings. In the case of the Great Stink, performances of blame were embedded in a code of relations that defined the powers of municipal government. The grounds for blaming the MBW were clear enough, but so were the grounds employed by many in Parliament and the press for counter-performances asserting that the MBW should not be held to blame. As Mr. Cubitt, a member of both Parliament and the MBW put it, “the fault was with Parliament.”¹⁵

This assessment focused on the nature of the powers and responsibilities given to the MBW in 1855. While the 1855 Act gave the Board a clear responsibility for the design and construction of a drainage scheme for metropolitan sewerage, the Board’s codified powers to undertake this task were extremely limited.¹⁶ For the MBW to execute any plan, it needed the approval of the First Commissioner of Works, a member of the government. The Board’s two proposals were vetoed for falling outside the letter of the law.¹⁷ As one Parliamentarian put it, “though the task of purifying the Thames had been thrown upon [the MBW] the powers requisite for its execution had been denied to them.”¹⁸ This structural disjuncture of responsibility and authority came to be the focus of blame during the crisis: the problem was, to use the contemporary concept, double government.¹⁹

To be clear, I mean to suggest that contemporaries’ refusal to blame the MBW for the Great Stink was a concrete sociological mechanism with direct consequences for the social process in which it was involved. It was not a belief we can impute, nor was it a neural schema. It was a consequential performance of moral meanings that took place in concrete situational interactions where contemporaries struggled over contending meanings embedded in a mishmash of demanding relational conventions. It was this mechanism that led to the counterintuitive legislative empowerment of the MBW, the body whose failure to act had indubitably led to the Stink. The solution to the crisis would focus on the performatively asserted cause of the crisis: double government was to blame.

Purification

This solution, however, did not proceed automatically from the crisis any more than did processes of pollution and blame. At the start of the crisis, one of the most plaintive tropes was, as *The Times* put it, “do something—pray do something.”²⁰ But as another paper put it: “What is to be done? Who is to do it? And who is to pay for it. These are the three questions that the Thames Sphinx asks us; and we must answer them satisfactorily or die.”²¹ The government’s initial reluctance to act should be seen in the context of the quite recent codification of public health as a core responsibility of government.²² Government ministers first rejected assertions of their ultimate responsibility to resolve the crisis, insisting the MBW was responsible for draining the metropolis and thus the onus to save the city lay with them. The First Commissioner of Works gave a succinct précis of the situation, structured by an interpretation of its normalcy: “on behalf of the Government, I distinctly repudiate . . . responsibility. The law gives us no power of action whatever in the matter and without legal power, even if the means were at hand, I need scarcely say it is impossible for any Government or body to supply a satisfactory solution to the difficulty.”²³

A prominent alternative view, however, interpreted the danger of the situation as imposing higher-order responsibilities that overwhelmed this narrow, legalistic view. MPs identified “Her Majesty’s Ministers as the guardians of the public health”²⁴ and spoke of “the duty of the Government to adopt measures to remedy the evil, the consequences of which no one could foresee.”²⁵ *The Times* chimed in, writing that “it is all nonsense for a member of the Government to get up in the House of Commons and say that the Government have got nothing to do with it. They have everything to do with it.”²⁶ The performance of this interpretation of governmental responsibility for coordinating the purification of the metropolis and rescuing the community from danger by the press and a growing chorus of MPs ultimately led to the government’s capitulation on June 25. The Chancellor of the Exchequer acknowledged that although “no legal responsibility can devolve on the Government in respect to [the situation]; but I admit that a moral responsibility lies upon us to do all in our power to prevent public disaster.”²⁷ In this, he merely ratified and acceded to the codification of governmental responsibility that had emerged as a widely held collective representation through colligated performances of the codified relation of the government to communal threats. The government’s capitulation to this view meant legislative action would be the lynchpin of the drive to purify the city, reinscribing the emerging relationship between state power and hygienic paternalism.

Resolution

As the crisis continued and its significance evolved, the press, the opposition, and the back benchers began to define the Stink in concrete situations in mutually reinforcing ways (e.g., in Parliamentary debates, votes, the writing and publication of newspaper items, and perhaps in the conversations of their nonofficial and unrecorded daily lives, although we can only guess about the latter). Rejecting the interpretation suggested by the government’s ministers that responsibility for responding to the situation of the Stink lay elsewhere, this growing and influential chorus performed the Stink as an acute danger that revealed the threat posed by double government: the government was responsible for rescuing the community from both the dangers of the river and the polluted structure of governance that had created it. As this performance gathered strength, it became a reality of the environment of action, which government ministers then took seriously in determining their next moves. It was never, however, an obvious or necessary situational context emerging from the Stink itself. That double government was the villain—rather than the MBW, the First Commissioner, or even the Chadwickeans whose drains were also a clear cause of the state of the Thames—was not the obvious meaning of the Stink from the outset. It was a meaning determined through a cumulative series of situational interactions shaped by the structure of the meaning systems that actors successfully brought to bear in interpreting the Great Stink and in performing the reality of their increasingly collective definitions. The collective and performed incorporation of a stench into a system of cultural codes made the stink meaningful and translated that meaning into a concrete situational reality.

The MLMAA was an eminently pragmatic and rational response to a situation so defined. Absent an analysis of the cultural mechanisms involved, however, it would seem surprising that a time of perfectly average mortality was interpreted by all to be a time of urgent communal danger or that the body legally responsible for avoiding such a crisis would be empowered by their failure rather than destroyed. Instead of excoriating and disbanding the MBW, the MLMAA dismantled the structure of double government metonymically polluted by the stink and empowered the MBW, making it the proximate agent of metropolitan purification.²⁸ Purity from danger.

CONCLUSION

The social and political consequences of the Great Stink, as with any historical event, emerged from the conjuncture of numerous causes. The cultural mechanisms of pollution, blame, and purification, although only part of this process, were crucial in triggering action—because actors interpreted stink as dangerous; in determining the focus of action—double government; and in determining the course of action—Parliament's passage of the MLMAA. These outcomes depended not just on beliefs and cognition, but on the emergence of concrete structures of situational meaning and on the colligation of these meanings by actors who sought to represent the larger meaning of what was going on and to figure out what to do about it. They defined their situation interactively and across many situations where similar structures of meaning were negotiated, considered, and ratified or rejected. A full explanation of the changes to metropolitan sewerage institutions following the Great Stink would require more work to specify not just the sort of analytically autonomous (Kane 1991) cultural mechanisms described here, but also other social structures and mechanisms. The analysis of the Great Stink presented here is meant to illustrate a way of thinking about cultural dimensions of the more complex conjunctures that sociological explanation requires us to unravel.

The model of culture in action developed here departs from the individualizing imageries of beliefs and cognition to focus on meaning as a relational construct, collectively created in concrete social situations that are colligated through their common orientations to trans-situational codes and structures of meaning. Action may be motivated by interests, habits, or deep cognitive structures, but the argument here suggests that whichever of these factors makes empirical sense to model a given set of relations, actors are always motivated by the interactively achieved definition of the social environment. That definition is intimately linked to the cultural systems that actors bring to bear, which they laminate into situations through the mechanisms of interpretation, performance, interaction, and colligation.

The theory developed here poses questions for mechanisms-based accounts of explanation as well. While this analysis of the Great Stink focuses on mechanisms, it is not a micro-level explanation if micro is taken to mean individual level. To say that Londoners and MPs interpreted and performed the Great Stink and the state of the Thames as dangerous encompasses a greater level of complexity than an individual analysis. This analysis suggests that actors in lots of different situations across different geographic and institutional locations defined what was going on with the river in the same way, and this was a mechanism precisely because the interpretation of the river's stink as signifying danger structured so many otherwise diverse situations. By promoting such mechanisml accounts at more macro levels of analysis, the theory of the structure of situations adds weight to Jepperson and Meyer's (2011) argument against models of explanation that insist on macro-micro-macro causal pathways, with the micro understood both as referring to individuals and as the exclusive location of mechanisms. This argument confronts proponents of analytical sociology with a major new genre of mechanisms, and a significant reformulation of the social ontology underlying its understanding of adequate explanations, for its relationalism is incompatible with methodological individualism.

According to the approach developed here, structuralists' understanding of culture describes a general social mechanism that is one of the main ways that structural and processual forces are directed, reproduced, realized, and transformed. This social mechanism describes how situations work as structured environments of social action. The situational context of social action and outcomes suggests, expanding on the Thomas Theorem, that social things need to be intersubjectively defined as real to be real in their consequences—and definitions are neither neutral nor obvious in their operation. Indeed, the process of definition is embedded in cultural systems that are sustained, reproduced, directed, and

transformed through interaction. This model specifies the nexus of those systems with social action in a way that is not reduced to individual psychology or interests. We thus need to take account of the operations of cultural systems as systems, long the specialty of structuralist cultural sociology, in the construction of mechanist explanations.

By adding cultural systems realized through situational interactions to beliefs, justifications, and other individual-level imageries of cultural mechanisms, we have not made explanation any easier. But when calls for specificity are answered with simplicity, we should rightly wonder where the rest has gone.

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NOTES

1. For an alternative specification of this nexus, see Wagner-Pacifici (2010).
2. As Geertz of “_____ as a Cultural System” fame put it: “I don’t do systems” (Geertz 2000:X; 2002).
3. Silver’s (2011) formulation of the relationship between situations and performances of meaning differs from that proposed here in its emphasis on the reasonability of culturally inflected performances as means to achieve situational outcomes, that is, lines of actions already embedded in situations. My focus is on the content rather than the form of situationally meaningful interaction, and on how particular configurations of meaning shape ongoing, temporally and spatially specific processes.
4. Colligation is normally used as a category of analysis, describing how researchers construct temporal sequences that are relevant to addressing the questions or research problems on which they are working. It is a short hop to using the concept as a category of practice describing how actors construct the temporal contexts of the situations they face.
5. *The Morning News*, June 21, 1858.
6. *The Times*, June 18, 1858.
7. 1846. “Report from the Select Committee on metropolitan sewage manure; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index.” *Parliamentary Papers*, v. 10, p. 651.
8. *The Times*, June 18, 1858.
9. *The Morning News*, July 1, 1858.
10. *Hansard*, June 18, 1858, col. 27.
11. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 421, 426, 436, 425; June 28, 1858, col. 572; July 15, 1858, col. 1508, *ibid.*, respectively.
12. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 424–25.
13. *The Times*, July 1, 1858.
14. *The Times*, June 18, 1858.
15. *Hansard*, June 18, 1858, col. 29.
16. See note 13.
17. *Hansard*, June 18, 1858, col. 37–38.
18. *Hansard*, July 9, 1858, col. 1165.
19. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 424.
20. *The Times*, June 26, 1858.
21. *The Illustrated Times*, July 3, 1858.
22. *Hansard*, June 18, 1858, col. 29.
23. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 433.
24. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 424.
25. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 436–37.
26. *The Times*, June 18, 1858.
27. *Hansard*, June 25, 1858, col. 440.

28. Incidentally, these legal and institutional changes made the MBW a quite important body in late nineteenth-century metropolitan governance. Over the following decades, the MBW gained responsibility for roads, thoroughfares, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the embankments, parks, Hampstead Heath preservation, slum clearance, bridges, tramways, flood defenses, gas, livestock slaughter, tallow-making, child care inspection, supervision of buildings and street names and numbers, and entertainment venues, and also played an important role as a financing body for various projects undertaken by local administrative bodies (Clifton 1992).

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