

Review essay

**Beyond the problem of meaning:  
Robert Wuthnow's historical sociology of culture<sup>1</sup>**

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The revival of historical sociology in the last twenty years has focused on class, state, revolution and political mobilization, family and demography. New attention to cultural factors – a central part of earlier historical sociology – is overdue. Robert Wuthnow's *Communities of Discourse* is a major effort to meet this need.<sup>2</sup> It reflects also the current rapid growth of the sociology of culture. Especially in America, however, sociology of culture suffers from a strange disciplinary deformation. For some reason, many sociologists think they must repress the interpretation of meaning in order to be rigorous. Sociologists of culture, therefore, often try to study cultural phenomena without attention to the substance or content of culture. Wuthnow is no exception.

Simply in terms of scale, Wuthnow's book is a major achievement. It reveals a prodigious amount of scholarly labor, not only in amassing historical detail, but in thinking through an analytic scheme broad enough to encompass the diversity of three great movements of cultural production: Reformation, Enlightenment, and European socialism. Wuthnow's book also offers numerous insights into specific historical developments and more general relationships between ideology and social structure. It is, thus, not a book to be dismissed or disregarded.

Nevertheless, *Communities of Discourse* is a book to be criticized as well as appreciated. Despite its impressive scope and massive contents, it is a highly selective, sometimes distorting, reading of key movements in Western culture. Its selectivity seems in some cases arbitrary, but in others reveals the emphases and blinders of the dominant sociological approach to culture.

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In the present essay, I first summarize Wuthnow's analytic approach and main overall argument. Then I comment briefly on his three empirical cases, raising methodological and conceptual issues throughout.

### **Approach and main argument**

Wuthnow's accounts of Reformation, Enlightenment, and socialism figure first as important case studies in developing a model of ideological movements, and second as serially linked bases for examining the overall relationship between cultural and social change in the capitalist era. The latter use of the case studies is much less developed. Wuthnow does not ask many questions about cumulative change in Europe or the part played in it by the three movements he studies. But the case studies themselves are empirically rich, for the most part carefully constructed, and occasionally very insightful.

Wuthnow shows how economic expansion provided resources that had their main cultural effect by facilitating the growth of state agencies. These agencies transferred resources to cultural producers. They enlarged the size of potential audiences by providing education and employing many of those educated. They provided the focal point for new public spheres focused on issues raised by state policy (increasingly addressed in rationalized terms), and called forth contention among cultural producers for state favors and attention. New state elites, moreover, weakened the grip of longer established, especially landed, elites. Not least of all, the new state elites opened a space for the circulation and contention of new ideas by simultaneously differentiating state agencies from established elites and opening divisions among themselves. The competition for alliances that resulted both restricted repression and encouraged creativity.

State structures channeled the results of economic expansion in ways that diversified the policy options that could be pursued, deflected resources away from established elite cultural elites, organized the conflict between segments of the ruling elite, and brought culture producers into this context of political conflict. (p. 574)

The first thing to note about this argument is that it is a single template into which all three movements are fit. This disguises variation among the three movements. Though Wuthnow brings out some of this variation in his case studies, the book as a whole emphasizes the commonal-

ities among the movements, implying that these exist because of a common set of causal relationships. In the last chapter, Wuthnow suggests that this has to do with the location of all three movements within the era of historic capitalism, but this theme is not developed and we do not learn what precisely Wuthnow thinks is distinctive to capitalism and thereby sets these cultural movements apart from, say, those of Ming China or earlier European history.<sup>3</sup> Nor does Wuthnow focus much on the impact of each movement on its successors, or on the overall course of European history.

Wuthnow's general argument is most persuasive for the Enlightenment case, partly because here the content of the intellectual movement (which Wuthnow does not examine) has a good deal in common with the structural foci he analyzes; that is, state power, economic growth, and public discourse were all manifest themes of Enlightenment debates. The argument works somewhat less well for the Reformation, partly because Wuthnow does not offer much discussion of the manifestly religious motivations of the Reformers, and accordingly leaves open a variety of questions about whether other factors besides state and economic changes might have inspired their work. There seems at least some surface plausibility, for example, to the claim that corruption and organizational decay within late medieval Catholicism played a crucial role. The argument works least well for socialism, where Wuthnow's insightful suggestion as to how Bismarck contributed to German socialism has to be greatly exaggerated to see the latter as basically a matter of elite production and competition.<sup>4</sup> In the socialism case, Wuthnow has added methodological difficulties because he focuses on a much more arbitrarily demarcated segment of a broad movement than in his other cases. He also shifts his attention away from cultural production as such and toward party politics.

One of Wuthnow's main questions is how certain, but not all, incipient waves of cultural innovation are able to escape from the social context of their origins and take on a quasi-independent existence, to become genuine movements with a major impact on the history of culture. Ideas, thus, "are shaped by their social situations and yet manage to disengage from these situations" (p. 5). In asking how this comes about, Wuthnow focuses on what he calls the problem of articulation:

...if cultural products do not articulate closely enough with their social settings, they are likely to be regarded by the potential audiences of which these settings are composed as irrelevant, unrealistic, artificial, and overly abstract,

or worse, their producers will be unlikely to receive the support necessary to carry on their work; but if cultural products articulate too closely with the specific social environment in which they are produced, they are likely to be thought of as esoteric, parochial, time bound, and fail to attract a wider and more lasting audience. (p. 3)

This sounds plausible. But are those cultural products that go on to achieve lasting importance really those that achieved a balance between fitting too closely into their original contexts and not at all? This would seem to imply that works of enduring importance are seldom widely appreciated in the era of their creation. Obviously, cultural products rarely become "instant classics"; it is only later generations of school-children who are required to study these canonized texts. But from Shakespeare through Goethe, not all poets died impoverished and not all playwrights failed to get their works produced in their lifetimes. More specifically in connection with Wuthnow's empirical cases, can we say that Martin Luther or John Locke achieved their enduring significance because of limits to how closely their products fit into their milieux? It seems to me that, on the contrary, the works of both were extremely closely articulated with their immediate social contexts. Of course, they were controversial; they did not simply blend unnoticed into the commonplace. Yet if this "disengagement" to which Wuthnow refers involves the challenges that so often embed great cultural products in struggle, it cannot be measured in terms of audience size, level of patronage, or other external attributes of their initial reception. It is a matter of content. The issue is at least in part how well the works of Luther or Locke, Marx or Rousseau, speak to issues and concerns that remain current long after their author's deaths. This does not mean that the external social factors affecting production, selection, and institutionalization are not important. It does mean (a) that they are not adequate to explain cultural outcomes by themselves, and (b) the question of what works take on importance outside their original contexts cannot be answered neatly in terms of a balancing act of articulation.<sup>5</sup>

Wuthnow bends over backward to avoid accepting the commonsense notions that works endure either because they are intrinsically great or because they were immediately recognized as important. In doing so, however, he completely loses sight of the importance of content (and also thereby obscures the endogenous sources of cultural production, argumentation, and change). For example, he tells us that

the controversy concerning a proper interpretation of the Lord's Supper that broke into the open among Luther, Carlstadt, the Bohemian Brethren, Speratus, Zwingli, Schwenkfeld, Krautwald, and Oecolampadius in 1525 and 1526 consumed enormous energies on the part of all its major protagonists and produced most of the central interpretations that were to predominate among Protestant bodies for the next several centuries. (p. 129)

Yet, Wuthnow does not tell us anything further about the content of this controversy, the interpretations themselves, or about its protagonists. His main point, that controversy internal to an ideological movement both spurred cultural production and pushed it toward greater rationalization, is well taken and useful. But one is led to feel that the empirical details are just window-dressing, and that this is a pity, for the content of the discourses may be an important factor both in understanding them and in explaining their production, selection, and institutionalization. Even Wuthnow himself seems occasionally to acknowledge this, as when he remarks, regarding the Reformation, that "the degree to which specific doctrines were accepted depended mostly on differences in culture and language" (p. 118), though he doesn't tell us anything about what he takes significant differences in culture to be. Perhaps even more important, we do not learn from Wuthnow's account of the Enlightenment, for instance, why it matters so much to us, why it has had such a profound impact on our whole conception of modernity. Many of the "objective" features described would be characteristic of the Baroque, say, but that is a much less fundamental movement. Why so?<sup>6</sup>

Wuthnow's avoidance of content is not casual or idiosyncratic. It is a considered choice and part of a general tendency in the sociology of culture. Wuthnow identifies himself as, "epistemologically," an interpretative sociologist. He does not believe in the positivist goal of discovering facts untainted by observers' or analysts' interpretations. Yet, he refuses to address content, it seems, because he fears the loss of "objectivity." His reasoning seems to stem largely from the attempt of a practitioner of a beleaguered and suspect specialty (the sociology of culture) to find legitimacy in a basically positivist, empiricist discipline. But this puts Wuthnow in tension with his own material.

Wuthnow goes to great lengths to argue that the sociology of culture needs to abandon "the problem of meaning."<sup>7</sup> This means, first, the Weberian fear of meaninglessness, which Wuthnow suggests is historically and culturally specific.<sup>8</sup> From the fact that the problem of mean-

ing in this sense “turns out to be contingent on cultural constructions rather than being an inherent feature of culture itself,” he concludes that “culture certainly can be studied without making meaning the central concern”<sup>9</sup> and that it should be. This is a much stronger claim and it is hard to see how it follows. Why can’t a single study – let alone a discipline – combine attention to social structural determination and meaning?<sup>10</sup> Wuthnow seems to associate a focus on meaning with a radical subjectivism (necessarily individualistic) and a forsaking of all standards of scientific replicability. His concern is with moving toward a more objective treatment of culture, by adapting a mixture of structuralism/post-structuralism and established sociological research methods.

Wuthnow elects to move “beyond meaning,” to study only the objective observable features of culture. “Culture is understood here not as some subjective or idealized world view that is to be distinguished from behavior but as a form of behavior itself and as the tangible results of that behavior” (p. 15). But what does “tangible” mean here? Are the sales figures for a book “tangible” while its contents are not? And what about the activity that makes culture? LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) says in an essay on writing that “hunting is not those heads on the wall.” Would Wuthnow disagree?

Though resolutely social structural, Wuthnow is not a simplistic reductionist or determinist. His arguments about cultural determination are in a strong sense sociological. In each of his case studies, Wuthnow argues against attributing the new wave of cultural production to the rise of a new class, to the direct impact of market relations or other economic factors, or to the conversion of isolated individuals. Rather, he says, “the critical mediating connection between shifts in environmental conditions and changes in ideology appears in all three of the episodes examined to have been the specific institutional contexts in which ideologies were produced, disseminated and authorized” (p. 546). It is thus differences in institutional contexts – notably state power – that explain why the Reformation flourished in Germany and Britain, for example, and failed in Eastern Europe, France, and Spain. Broad environmental variables – economic growth, for example – are unable to differentiate adequately (p. 113).

*Communities of Discourse* thus is not a book about Reformation, Enlightenment, and European socialism as such (though one can learn a good deal about them from it). It is a book about social factors affecting the production, selection, and institutionalization of dominant or

enduring ideologies during these three movements. Within these limits, the empirical part of the book is persuasive and impressive. Abandoning meaning, however, drastically shrinks the place of action (and makes narrative accounts rather lifeless).

Wuthnow conceives of his approach as paying attention to human agency, and as rooted partially in a sociology of practice. It's not clear, however, what Wuthnow means by this. He praises and identifies himself with Ortner's account of recent cultural anthropology, in which practice is given pride of place.<sup>11</sup> Oddly, he does so only a few pages after his dismissive account of Pierre Bourdieu, and apparently without recognizing that Bourdieu is Ortner's main exemplar of a "practice-oriented" anthropology!<sup>12</sup> Wuthnow's declaration of an emphasis on action sits poorly with his generally structuralist position in which culture is treated as something produced collectively, but without subjects. It is almost as though he thinks of the discursive field as itself an actor, or of the discourse as "interpellating" subjects, in Althusser's sense.<sup>13</sup> Yet in his case studies, Wuthnow leaves very little room for creative action.

In each case, the analysis proceeds from an initial consideration of the social environment at the start of the period to a comparative examination of the contexts in which the new ideology became or failed to become institutionalized, and concludes with a discussion of the internal structure of the resulting ideology and the degree to which this structure articulated with the social conditions under which it emerged. (p. 18)

Creativity, one imagines, like the quality of writing or the force of ideas themselves, is one of the subjective dimensions of culture which the sociologist must ignore in pursuit of objectivity. Wuthnow is more interested, perhaps, in cumulative patterns of activity or in the observable outcomes of "action sequences." Actions themselves are inaccessible to the sociologist, being "shrouded in the historical record," or

...too idiosyncratic to be amenable to systematization. Yet the very concept of action sequences serves as an important placeholder: it reminds us of the importance of human agency, even if that agency occurs within the constraints of institutional structures, and it reminds us that cultural innovations do not emerge full-blown all at once but are the result of years and decades, and for this reason have a sequential effect on their own development. (p. 7)

"Placeholder" is an apt term for the role of "action sequences" in Wuthnow's account. Both in its narrative structure and in its conceptualiza-

tion as about a "movement," each of his case studies describes individual and collective actions. Calvin drew up ordinances in Geneva, Louis XIV resisted the parlements, German workers voted for the SPD. Wuthnow occasionally even interprets actors' intentions. But neither actions nor sequences are very central to his interests. None of the three movements is analyzed mainly in terms of its narrative unfolding, the impact of specific events and actions on what could and did follow, its "historicity."<sup>14</sup> Nor do the case studies work very much in terms of systematic analysis of differences among actors. Whether the actors are Reformation theologians, Enlightenment writers, or socialist trade unionists, Wuthnow is only concerned in passing with who said or did what. He constructs mainly aggregate accounts. For the most part, environmental conditions are the crucial determinants of ideology. Of course, preexisting ideological constructs also have an impact. The point of action sequences is mainly to show that what the members of a movement did also had an impact on what they thought and said. Socialism's discourse, thus, "interacted with its own activities and with its broader theoretical agenda" (p. 485).

More helpfully, Wuthnow does pay attention to the ways in which different ideologies included "figural actors," or characteristic subjects that might serve as models or standards for their followers. Thus, for example, Reformation ideologies provided models of "faith in practice," which posited a certain image of the responsible individual. Ironically, it was the publicly circulated texts instructing Protestants on their personal responsibilities and autonomy (under God) that helped to create the private individual (p. 143–144). This was revised and secularized by the Enlightenment (p. 579). In some of the book's most interesting (but tantalizingly underdeveloped) passages, Wuthnow considers the genres of autobiography and the novel, as they offered discursive means for portraying and exploring the figural actor of the bourgeois self (e.g., pp. 320ff, 334ff, 339ff, and chapter 10 generally). In socialism, the proletariat appeared as a figural actor (p. 498), though Wuthnow has difficulty pinning down the implications of this shift from individual to collective.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, though his sources in this section are very unclear (ranging temporally from early Marx to Althusser), Wuthnow winds up with the surprising conclusion that "socialism does not merely leave a great deal of discretion to the individual by default but explicitly calls on the individual to exercise discretion knowledgeably and responsibly" (p. 510).<sup>16</sup>

A subordinate theme in *Communities of Discourse* is the repeated redefinition of the individual in each of the three movements.<sup>17</sup> Though Wuthnow doesn't make the connection very explicitly, he seems to link this to a growing differentiation of society. This helps to create individuals in the modern sense (*pace* Simmel) by locating them at the intersection of multiple roles and groups, and problematizes identity because of the increasing indeterminacy of selfhood and selection of appropriate courses of action (cf. p. 320). The differentiation is also crucial, it would seem, to Wuthnow's theme of disengagement, the freeing of cultural production from immediate and complete situational determination. Thus an overall course of social development would seem to be "an increasing level of differentiation between other arenas of social activity and those in which ideology is produced" (p. 552; see also p. 3). Wuthnow does not spell out just what he means by so distinguishing the arenas in which ideology is produced from others (e.g., is the family not productive of ideology? What of markets?). More precisely, one might suggest (following Bourdieu) that a key characteristic of modernity – part of the process of institutionalization that Wuthnow makes central – is the segmentation of social and cultural life into a number of quasi-autonomous fields. Some of these specialize in ideological production. As the institutional organization of the aesthetic, political, economic, familial, legal, religious, or other fields becomes stronger, references to "culture" or "the social environment" in general become weaker explanations of behavior. Wuthnow's proposition that various background causes work mainly through institutional mediation, is thus not a constant, but a matter of historical change.

### Cases

Wuthnow's accounts are written in considerable detail and reflect massive reading of the secondary literature. Though occasionally he lapses into over-generalized accounts of each movement – especially socialism – his description is generally strengthened by the construction and comparison of separate case studies of several European countries. One of the strengths of the book is Wuthnow's demonstration that similar factors were at work in different settings, but in different combinations and extents that can be related to different outcomes. We can see this readily in Wuthnow's account of the Reformation.

A relatively stable agrarian social order was disrupted by early capitalist economic expansion. This increased the autonomy of towns and

strengthened certain princes at the expense of other traditional rural elites. Where landlords had previously “struck a felicitous bargain with the church as the condition for their patronage” (p. 32), townsmen were now able to demand (or choose) reforms ranging from vernacular worship to access to the Sacraments, which had the general feature of increasing their participation in religious services. At the same time, central authorities in some cases supported the Reformation as part of their pursuit of autonomy. “It required the full resources of the central regime – or where that was lacking of territorial regimes, or of exceptionally strong municipal regimes – to bring the Reformation to fruition as an institutionalized ideology” (p. 45).

Having developed an account of the relation of state autonomy to Reformation in its successful centers of Northern and Central Europe and Britain, Wuthnow turns to negative cases – for example the failure of Reformation in France and Spain. He shows that economic expansion was present in France, Spain, and Eastern Europe, but that this expansion did more to strengthen traditional landed elites than to upset their power. The Reformation flourished only where it received support from dominant elites, and it in turn reinforced the decision-making power of the regimes that supported it. It was no accident that the largest purchaser of bibles was the state (p. 118).

The much-debated effects of early capitalism on the Reformation, therefore, can be said to have operated strongly through the institutional mechanism of the state. ... Religion was not the prime concern of merchant capitalists, nor did they particularly need it to legitimate their endeavors, as some interpretations have argued. If they accepted religious teachings it was for personal reasons that undoubtedly bore as much relation to their spiritual interests as to any other part of their lives. But religion was always a central concern of those vested with formal power. (p. 117)<sup>18</sup>

Wuthnow’s account of the Reformation is overwhelmingly focused on selection and institutionalization. He has relatively little to say about what led to the production of Reform movements, as distinct from their eventual success or failure. This would seem to be partly because that would necessarily take him into discussions of ideological content and of subjectivity that he wishes to avoid. In any case, Wuthnow operates throughout with a sort of “resource mobilization” approach to cultural change: there are always innovations (or potential innovations), he implies, just as there are always grievances and dissatisfactions. The important question is which are encouraged, selected for widespread adoption, and ultimately institutionalized. We can note in the above