



## Cultural Meanings and Cultural Structures in Historical Explanation

John R. Hall

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## FORUM ON CULTURE AND EXPLANATION IN HISTORICAL INQUIRY

3.

CULTURAL MEANINGS AND CULTURAL STRUCTURES  
IN HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

JOHN R. HALL

## ABSTRACT

One way to recast the problem of cultural explanation in historical inquiry is to distinguish two conceptualizations involving culture: (1) *cultural meanings* as *contents* of signification (however theorized) that inform meaningful courses of action in historically unfolding circumstances; and (2) *cultural structures* as *institutionalized patterns* of social life that may be elaborated in more than one concrete construction of meaning. This distinction helps to suggest how explanation can operate in accounting for cultural processes of meaning-formation, as well as in other ways that transcend specific meanings, yet are nonetheless cultural. Examples of historical explanation involving each construct are offered, and their potential examined.

Because culture is concerned in part with symbols and meanings, the problem of how (indeed, whether) to theorize culture is a particularly difficult one for historical analysis, felt more acutely than the parallel problem for seemingly more tangible "structural" features of the social world. One conventional solution has been to enforce a division of labor between cultural history on the one hand, and social, economic, and political histories on the other. In the latter histories, especially beginning in the 1960s, formal social theories of causes and processes could be brought to bear in the analysis of such subjects as demographic change, family form, industrialization, and revolution, leaving the realm of cultural (intellectual, art, music) histories as the sites of a thoroughgoing historicism which claimed to eschew all general theoretical concepts. But more recently, efforts to draw a sharp distinction between culture and structure have been undermined by the cultural turn. Now, scholars specifically look to the ways that culture and structure are mutually instantiated, as "cultural structures."<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the reinvigoration of cultural history over the past two decades, as Mark Poster has argued, its practitioners have not widely embraced the theoretically sophisticated poststructuralist and reflexive critiques that have become so important in broader social and humanistic inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as cultural historians do take such critiques serious-

1. John R. Hall, "Social Organization and Pathways of Commitment: Types of Communal Groups, Rational Choice Theory, and the Kanter Thesis," *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988), 679-692; cf. William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992), 1-29; Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914* (Berkeley, 1995).

2. Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York, 1997).

ly, they have given greatest critical emphasis to the ontological deconstruction of *history* as telos captured in metanarratives. On the other hand, the critique of *culture* has mainly centered on the shift in objects of historical analysis from high to popular culture, and from national cultures to subcultures and intercultural contacts.<sup>3</sup> Apart from Lynn Hunt's exemplary use of Freud in studying *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, precious little attention has been given by historians to the problem of how to theorize culture—in any of its manifestations.<sup>4</sup>

However, even after the cultural turn, and with it the waning hope for some general social theory or battery of universal concepts, the problem of theory remains paramount.<sup>5</sup> This problem is felt all the more keenly in the study of culture. For culture itself involves meaning, and therefore representation, and cultural analysis thus inevitably brings problems of reflexivity and standpoint to the fore, since it necessarily involves formulating meanings about meanings, representations about representations. The resistance by historians to theorizing about meaning yields what may seem like a comfortable practice for cultural history, but its consequence is that when any one of the multiple approaches to the analysis of meaning is deployed, any theoretical account of how this is accomplished remains only implicit.

Cultural history can be defined as the study of cultural meanings in their shifting temporal connectedness to enacted social life. The challenge of the genre is to avoid succumbing to: (1) idealism, which would reduce history to its symbolic representations; (2) historicism, which *a priori* refuses to countenance theorization of patterned social processes; or (3) teleology, which narrates history in relation to some presumed ultimate outcome. Social phenomenology offers a basis to avoid these difficulties. It can be used to theorize multiple temporalities, and thus break out of the assumptions of temporal linearity in historical writing that have been the object of poststructural critique. A phenomenological approach does not deny either the historical specificities of cultural meanings or the reflexive standpoint of theory, yet nevertheless salvages the potential for describing patterns of cultural process that transcend culturally specific meanings. To pursue this approach entails positing a distinction between, on the one hand, the social actions wherein culture is created, invoked, revised, and reproduced, and on the other hand, abstract analytic constructs that describe relationships between generic cultural meanings and social processes. On this basis, culture can be theorized at two different "levels"—specific *cultural meanings* and generic *cultural structures*.<sup>6</sup> Yet this very distinction requires an account of the relationship between the specific and the generic, at least if general concepts are to have any utility. This is an enduring problem, of course, but my hope is to cast

3. Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

4. Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992).

5. Martin Jay, "For Theory," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996), 167-183.

6. Hall, "Social Organization and Pathways of Commitment"; John R. Hall and Mary Jo Neitz, *Culture: Sociological Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1993), 11; see also Anne Kane, "Cultural Analysis and Historical Sociology: The Analytic and Concrete Forms of the Autonomy of Culture," *Sociological Theory* 9 (1991), 53-69.

it in a clear light here by use of the phenomenological approach. In this essay I will, first, locate the dual character of cultural history in alternative—"intrinsic" versus "extrinsic"—methodological approaches; second, employ a phenomenology of time and abstraction to suggest why this difference in practices exists; and third, use these findings to reflect on a substantive example, by exploring cultural histories of five contemporary apocalyptic religious movements in relation to a phenomenology of temporality and action.

In the end, my analysis reaffirms Weber's use of ideal types in cultural history, but en route I hope it will clarify the relationship between two kinds of ideal types: models of institutionalized cultural structures and models of enacted cultural meanings. My larger aim is to show how historians might use general concepts in cultural explanation without sacrificing the nuances of history.

### I. INTRINSIC VERSUS EXTRINSIC CULTURAL HISTORY

Historians typically direct inquiry to what Max Weber called a "historical individual," that is, events, sequences, patterns, and outcomes rendered as a relatively self-contained set by identifying the principle of their meaningful coherence (for example, "the cold war"). The degree to which the meaningful coherence of a historical individual as an object of inquiry is constituted *intrinsically* (that is, in terms of social actors' invocations of events) or *extrinsically* (that is, in terms of the historian's own objective frame of reference), is both a philosophical issue and an empirical question of how inquiry is carried out. The practice of "specific history" can be defined as investigation of an object's "intrinsic" meaning, whereas "configurational history" is directed toward extrinsic, theoretically constructed objects. That is, specific history is based on the *verstehende* project of identifying sociohistorical objects in terms of their meaning to historically located individuals who participated in the events being emplotted. The boundary between specific and configurational history can be located by examining the point at which it becomes difficult to argue that an object of inquiry is constituted in relation to intrinsic meanings.<sup>7</sup>

For questions of culture, determining whether inquiry is intrinsic or extrinsic amounts to asking whether its object consists of individuals and groups drawing upon, reworking, and transmitting cultural meanings, techniques, tools, and the like in ways that can be reconstructed through narrative plot linkages. Intrinsic cultural history is a variant of specific history that concentrates on socially mediated historical lineages of cultural replication, innovation, and diffusion, and their consequences in unfolding time. Culture does not float amorphously; it is tied to its bearers, their predecessors, and successors. For example, in my study of Jim Jones's Peoples Temple as an apocalyptic religious social movement that ended in mass suicide, I traced a number of meaningful cultural elements (such as the idea of a "promised land") not only in relation to their historical sources,

7. For the elaboration of this argument, see John R. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry: From Epistemology to Discourse in Sociohistorical Research* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), chapter 3.

but more importantly, in relation to the specific conduits by which they became transmuted as they were adopted within Peoples Temple.<sup>8</sup> The hallmark of such specific cultural histories can be fixed precisely as the analysis of events held to be interconnected intrinsically—in action conduits of cultural transmission and diffusion. By contrast, extrinsic cultural history does not identify such conduits of action. Therefore, it must employ some other structural device of plot, series, or analysis to arrange a discussion of cultural objects and practices (for example, cultural histories of privacy in different historical epochs, sexuality over centuries, dieting in heterogeneous circumstances).<sup>9</sup>

In light of this contrast, Lynn Hunt's study of the French Revolution of 1789, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, represents a transitional case.<sup>10</sup> Basically, Hunt argues that the transformation of political culture during the French revolutionary period produced new, essentially ideological, ways of thinking and acting. As a cultural history of a revolutionary movement, the study describes widespread changes within a short time. But Hunt does not narrate these changes as a single coherent plot. Instead, she uses a series of hermeneutic and structural analyses of specific materials, such as the writings of the Marquis de Sade, to illustrate thematic shifts in rhetoric, symbols, images, and the social strata that became politically mobilized during the revolutionary period. In place of a narrative that links diverse events, Hunt advances a theoretical metanarrative to link her various analyses of the revolutionary political unconscious and its social bearers. Hunt's study thus is a demonstration that detailed event history can employ a metastructure of extrinsic analysis even though the phenomena described might reasonably be asserted to have intrinsic linkages. Perhaps with richer data, Hunt would have pursued a specific history more concerned with intrinsic linkages. In any case, her study employs a procedure that addresses a recurrent problem of specific history. Often, the historical record is too thin for inquiry to tell "what happened" through narrative, even though an intrinsically ordered plot could be constructed if adequate historical evidence were available. Under conditions of limited access to detailed information, a theoretical metanarrative offers an alternative narrative strategy that can maintain specific history's primacy of plot, but in a way that begins to approximate a different practice.

Use of a theoretical metanarrative thus marks a passage from *specific* to *configurational* history, where the convergence of independent historical developments is theorized in a way which transcends meaningful connections among events. Here, sociohistorical models are constructed in relation to epochal shifts, transitions, or transformations. Such models theorize phenomena in terms that range in scale from world-historical change, such as the consolidation of indus-

8. John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987).

9. John R. Hall, "Social Interaction, Culture, and Historical Studies," in *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, ed. Michal M. McCall and Howard S. Becker (Chicago, 1990), 16-45; John R. Hall, "Theorizing Hermeneutic Cultural History," in *The Cultural Turn*, ed. Roger Friedland and John Mohr (Cambridge, Eng., forthcoming).

10. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), 219.

trial capitalism or world systems, to more narrow shifts, such as the emergence of a particular constellation of gender roles in Brazil or the emergence of consumer culture in the United States.

The difference between configurational history and specific history is not a matter of scale but of approach. Whereas specific history proceeds by way of intrinsic narrative, configurational history is concerned with extrinsic objects of inquiry—structures and processes that may be theorized independently of the intentional actions of particular agents and groups. Whereas the balance of inquiry in specific history is tipped toward using narrative to analyze unfolding situations as they are meaningful to the actors involved, configurational history tilts toward analyzing the structural interplay of diverse events and phenomena and their unintended consequences. Under this dispensation, meaningful social action may be relevant to analysis, but its relevance becomes established not on the basis of intrinsic meaningful connections among events, but in relation to an extrinsically defined analytic puzzle. In short, the object of inquiry ought to be understood as a theoretical construction. Thus, whatever the validity of Weber's famous argument about the relation between the spirit of capitalism and Protestant inner-worldly asceticism, we must understand the character of the argument: it is not just about a sociohistorical world made meaningful by its participants; rather, Weber presents us with an analytical construction of historical cultural shifts that transcend any set of intrinsically interconnected historical events.

Specific histories and configurational ones use different ways of constructing the historical object of inquiry—intrinsic versus extrinsic. This point in turn poses an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the relationship between two approaches to studying culture—through intrinsic (specific-historical) versus extrinsic (configurational-historical) analysis. The difference between the two approaches is centered on cultural meaning and how it is to be conceptualized on the one hand in relation to social action, and on the other hand in relation to enduring patterns of social life.

## II. THE WEBER/SCHUTZ CONFLICT OVER THE CHARACTER OF MEANING

Much intellectual energy has been wasted in efforts to employ structuralist concepts of social theory in historical analysis without acknowledging the "contamination" of structure by culture; or, to put the matter in a more optimistic frame, without conceptualizing structures in *cultural* terms. The problem, as some historians have relentlessly informed social scientists, is that social phenomena fail to be "subsumed" under the analytic categories devised by theorists. For example, "capitalism" is a far more variegated phenomenon historically than can be subsumed by the concept "capitalist mode of production." Perhaps the most striking admission of this failure of structuralist concepts came in the 1970s, when Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst acknowledged that no purely economic theorization of "modes of production" was adequate.<sup>11</sup>

11. Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975); and Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation: An Auto-Critique of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1977).

The alternative to structuralist concept-formation is an approach that admits historical variation, but analyzes empirically variable sociohistorical phenomena in relation to what Max Weber called ideal types. In terms of cultural meanings, to pursue our theme here, this approach acknowledges that any specific instance of meaning is unique, but uses a battery of typifications to shed light on instances, the variations among them, and their meaningful and causal significance.

Yet lurking behind Weber's approach is a controversy over the problem of conceptualizing meaning, a problem raised in the 1930s by social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, who drew on the work on time consciousness by Edmund Husserl. Weber's own approach is well known. He asserted that interpretation of subjectively meaningful action is the cornerstone of sociohistorical inquiry. By way of advancing that principle, he rejected psychological reductionism, social organicism and holism, evolutionism, and idealist and materialist teleologies. Central to Weber's position was the principle of *Verstehen*—the observer's interpretive understanding of subjectively meaningful action—as a basis both for analyzing individual action in its concrete social context and for investigating historically enduring “structural” social phenomena. In Weber's view, inquiry may draw on social and other law-like generalizations, but the meaningful aspects of social existence also permit a sort of inquiry that is unavailable to the natural sciences—understanding sociohistorical phenomena in relation to “intentions and (true and false) beliefs.”<sup>12</sup> Whether an observer can discern meanings is a separate issue, one that depends on adequacy of data and interpretation. But for Weber, *Verstehen* is not a research method; it is an epistemological requirement for sociohistorical inquiry.

The requirement of *Verstehen* posed for Weber a significant problem in concept-formation. He held that concepts about social action must evidence “adequacy on the level of meaning.” However, no single meaningful action, much less a complex of social interaction, seems open to unambiguous representation, even by use of “meaningfully adequate” concepts. Concepts about social action must reflect the possibility that empirical meanings (for example, of “work”) may “shade off” from or mix together theoretically clear meanings, or indeed, may make concrete only half-conscious intentions. Given the complex concrete social interweavings of meanings, concepts concerned with meaning could not draw on the “correspondence” approach to conceptualization found in, for example, physics, where all specific instances, for example, of mass or temperature, are completely subsumed under corresponding general concepts (here, of “mass” or “temperature”). In order to acknowledge the potential ambiguities in empirical meanings yet maintain unambiguous concepts, Weber constructed concepts by pulling together clearly defined meaningful elements of a hypothetical concrete phenomenon, such as Protestant “inner-worldly asceticism” or “charisma.” Such “ideal types” (or sociohistorical models) could be used to describe actions, situations, and patterns of association. Any given ideal type's adequacy of meaning

12. Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York, 1975), 127.

would be attained in theoretical terms if the concept's elements were internally consistent with reference to either "typical" cultural constellations of meaning or rationally "correct" considerations. Thus, an important meaningful element of "romantic love" (a cultural construct) involves social trust. Similarly, rule-bound procedure is a salient basis of "legal-rational bureaucracy." Weber would not argue that actual love relationships are equivalent to the ideal type, any more than empirical bureaucracies will take the form of the ideal typical "bureaucracy." Ideal types are not based on the assertion of a correspondence between concept and empirical referent, and they thus have no standing by which it would make any sense to "prove" or "disprove" them empirically. Instead, ideal types serve as meaningfully specified "benchmarks" to be used interpretively, to examine the degree to which empirical social situations approximate their various theoretical accounts.

Here, Alfred Schutz's use of social phenomenology to critique Weber becomes relevant. In Schutz's view, Weber's formulation of *Verstehen* moved too casually from the problem of understanding *subjectively* meaningful action to analysis based on *observed* meanings. Borrowing basic conclusions from Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenological analysis of subjective consciousness, Schutz argued that lifeworldly meaning and action involve a temporally unfolding stream of consciousness of a person situated in a concretely located here-and-now. Schutz's phenomenology describes the relations between the temporal stream of consciousness and the possibilities of subjective meaning.

To summarize, Schutz showed that Weber's concept of subjective meaning does not refer to any simple or unambiguous event of consciousness on a particular occasion (for example, the moment of mentally looking forward to eating dinner with a friend this evening). Instead, Weber's concept glosses over distinctly different ways that meaning might be formulated. In Schutz's analysis, there are three broad possibilities of subjectively meaningful action. It can consist (1) of "the special way in which the subject attends to his [sic] lived experience" in the *here-and-now* (for example, the complex moment-to-moment activity of chopping wood). In more formed-up ways, the subjective meaning of action is either (2) directed toward action in relation to a goal projected to be accomplished in the *future*—in which case meaning takes the form of an "in-order-to motive" (chopping wood to lay in a supply of fuel); or (3) directed toward developing a *retrospective* account of the genetic events that led up to an already-completed action—in which case meaning is given through a "because motive" (chopping wood because of receiving a request to do so).<sup>13</sup> For the acting subject, even in relation to "the same" events, meaning is unstable, contextual, and dependent on temporal perspective. It may refer to the particular ambience with which an individual lives through experience, to the meaning given to action in relation to the future, or to the construction of genetic accounts of events "after the fact" and without reference to goals or anticipated outcomes. In all such possibilities, meanings are constituted and actions initiated in temporal-

13. Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* [1932] (Evanston, IL, 1967), 215 (quotation), 86-95.



ly unfolding lifeworldly moments in specific places, in relation to specific other people and objects.

According to Schutz, each person makes subjective meaning richly and more or less continuously in the flow of everyday experience and action—directed not only to the immediate present, but also to anticipated futures, to memories, and to dreams and fantasies. Each person is simultaneously oriented as both an *actor* and an *observer*, interpreting experience by reference to his or her own stock of knowledge. Meaningful cognition is thus a complexly orchestrated mélange of different mental acts in the course of unfolding life. However, analytically, three component frames of reference of these acts can be identified: (1) the *social actor's lifeworld orientation* as “author” or “agent” in the conduct of life through meaningful social action and interaction; (2) an *observer's lifeworld orientation* that seeks to apprehend original (“subjective”) meanings held by other social actors in their own situations; and (3) an *observer's objective orientation* that apprehends social and other phenomena via some interpretational matrix available to the individual through a general stock of knowledge—for example, religious norms, historical memory, psychoanalytic interpretation, business procedures, political ideology, and on and on (see table 1).<sup>14</sup>

|                    | FRAME OF REFERENCE                         |  |  |
|--------------------|--|--|--|
|                    | Social actor's<br>Lifeworld<br>Orientation | Observer's<br>Lifeworld<br>Orientation     | Observer's<br>Objective<br>Orientation                             |
| TYPE OF<br>MEANING | Subjective<br>Meaning                      | Observer's<br>Subjective<br>Interpretation | Observer's<br>Interpretation of<br>Meaning in<br>Objective Context |

Table 1. Types of meaning produced via alternative frames of reference.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, Schutz's phenomenology does not apply only to social actors and events that are the *objects* of inquiry: inquiry itself is faced with the same array of interpretive frames. The objective frame of reference, informed by manifold objective analytic schema, yields multiple possibilities for both objective analysis of meaning as well as non-meaningful analysis. In addition, Schutz identified an alternative approach: the observer may try to look “behind” the externalized action as object to learn about the subjective meaning of an action, “the meaning context within which the product stands or stood in the mind of the producer.”<sup>16</sup> What is the difference between observers' subjective versus objective interpretations? Recall Schutz's identification of subjective meaning about action as a mental event within an inner temporally unfolding stream of consciousness. Because subjectively meaningful action is temporally structured, any adequate typification of it must specify how it is formed within an individual's temporal

14. *Ibid.*; Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (New Haven, 1970).

15. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry*, 18.

16. Schutz, *Phenomenology*, 133.

stream of consciousness. Three broad alternative typifications can be identified as kinds of temporalized subjective meaning already described: (1) the "ambient" meanings that comprise paying-attention-to-the-world in the here-and-now; (2) meaning in the context of an "in-order-to motive"; and (3) reflected meaning given as a "because motive" or genesis of an action.

On the basis of the typology given in Table 1, it should be possible to identify the reference frame, and hence type of meaning, of any concept used in inquiry. Religious ritual, industrial production, love, and war all take place within the lifeworld through social enactments and the operations of their products (for example, machines and computers). Insofar as sociohistorical concepts are oriented to lifeworldly interpretation, we may expect them to describe patterns of interplay among different kinds of subjective temporal horizons, knowledge, meaning, and action on the parts of (typified or actual) people located in socially organized places. With this standard, it should be possible to clarify the status of concepts such as those that refer to instrumental rational action, charisma, bureaucracy, and sociohistorical objects like medieval European monasticism, patrimonial capitalism, fascism, and so on.

To the degree that a given conceptualization (itself an atemporal abstraction) entails a lifeworldly observer's orientation toward meaningful action, an elaboration of it should be capable of describing a distinctive temporally meaningful lifeworldly situation. The empirical possibilities of meaningful (as opposed to objective) temporality are obviously diverse. Nevertheless, their range can be suggested by four ideal types that identify basic phenomenological possibilities of lifeworldly temporality. First, a phenomenological *synchronic* temporal orientation refers to that full present time of the lifeworldly "here-and-now"—as the locus of individual and collective attention to the world within immediate perceptual reach. Second, a *diachronic* orientation de-emphasizes the here-and-now in favor of a combined reproduction from sedimented memory of the past and anticipation of the future. With the historical development of temporal measurement, the diachronic orientation increasingly invokes objective temporal standards such as the calendar and clock as external analogues to subjectively meaningfully diachrony, and temporality becomes ever more rationalized and diffused into everyday existence as a "commodity" that can be "saved" and "spent." The two other ideal typical temporal orientations derive, respectively, from emphasis on the future and the past. The third is the *strategic* temporal orientation that comes into play in totally goal-directed action: an anticipated future defines the meaning of present action. In strategic time, social actors seek to build upon or respond to events. In the fourth orientation, the present is meaningfully oriented toward the past; *eternal* time becomes constructed as a mythical enduring reality that attains an abstract character of timeless re-creation, "now and forever more."<sup>17</sup>

Even though empirical sociohistorical phenomena are more complex than any ideal type, ideal types provide conceptual tools for theorizing about them. In terms of the distinction that I made earlier—between cultural meanings and cul-

17. John R. Hall, *The Ways Out: Utopian Communal Groups in an Age of Babylon* (Boston, 1978).

tural structures—because lifeworldly meaning is inherently temporal in its construction of social action in relation to past, present, and future (as Husserl and Schutz showed), concepts of cultural structure that are well founded should reflect *temporal* structures of lifeworldly meaning. Any concept intended to describe culturally structured patterns of social life (as opposed to abstract cultural symbols, binary oppositions, and so on) should be open to phenomenological assessment of its meaning-adequacy by examining whether it describes an (abstracted) temporally structured constitution of meanings in the lifeworld. To take one example, the historical development of diachrony may be traced in relation to the subjective and institutional temporalities of capitalism—specifically, the “elective affinity” between a capitalist process of production that depends increasingly on routinized, repetitive activity, and a subjective temporal orientation embodied in Protestant inner-worldly asceticism.<sup>18</sup> A different project of theorizing historicity might explore how the continuities of a diachronically organized social world are “shot through with chips of Messianic time,” as Walter Benjamin so aptly put it.<sup>19</sup> It is this latter example that I will now pursue, by looking at the problem of how to account for “mass suicide” in messianic religious movements of the past quarter-century.

### III. CULTURAL MEANINGS AND CULTURAL STRUCTURES IN THE STUDY OF MASS SUICIDE

One of the enduring problems of social science concerns how to decide when two cases are the same or different with respect to a given dimension. A study of religious violence that I and my coauthors recently completed, *Apocalypse Observed*, suggests that “mass suicide” is not really a coherent “thing.” Rather, there is complex variety to extreme religious violence.<sup>20</sup>

Under these analytic circumstances, close comparative examination of the major recent cases where significant violence occurred offers an alternative both to the historicist refusal of generalizations and to general social theorizing that fails to acknowledge interdependence and social complexity. Rather than simply comparing cases as whole entities, close comparative inquiry searches for what Arthur Stinchcombe has called “deep analogies” of processes at work in multiple cases, while avoiding generalizing from single instances or cases that have mutually influenced one another.<sup>21</sup> Taking this tack, our cultural analysis of the meanings attached to collective religious violence moved inexorably toward a striking conclusion about the violence that we examined, one that would prove elusive to any noncultural analysis that hypostatized “violence” versus “absence

18. *Ibid.*, 40-42; cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958); E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 56-97.

19. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1955], in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York 1969), 263.

20. John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London, 2000).

21. Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Theoretical Methods in Social History* (New York, 1978).

of violence” as the “dependent variable” and compared violent to nonviolent outcomes. Even though the five cases of extreme religious violence—four of them ending in collective suicides—bear a superficial resemblance to one another, two different processes seem to be at work in them rather than one.

Recently, social scientists have made much of what historians have long known—that social processes are “contingent” and “path dependent”: what happens at any given point affects the range of future possibilities. Often “culture” is invoked as influential in the play of contingency. In making such a claim, however, it is important to avoid the old-fashioned notion of Culture as some sort of primordial essence that can be invoked in reductionist cultural explanations (that substitute for reductionist structuralist ones). But how might this trap of contingent cultural reductionism be avoided?

The approach I am proposing depends on fleshing out the distinction I posed earlier between concrete cultural meanings and abstracted generic cultural structures. *Cultural meanings* are the invented, received, synthesized, reworked, and otherwise improvised idea-patterns by which individuals and social groups attach significance to their actions. In a social group, such cultural meanings are neither monolithic nor immutable, and they are specific in their content and sources. The idea of “revolutionary suicide” invoked at Jonestown, for instance, was neither an invention of Peoples Temple nor a generic construct available from some Storehouse of Western Culture. It had a specific genealogy that traced from Huey Newton’s doctrine formulated in the Black Panther Party of the 1960s.<sup>22</sup>

But beyond situated cultural meanings, it is possible to ask whether events such as the mass suicide of Peoples Temple involved generic *cultural structures* that undergird the specific meanings at work. When we do so, by focusing on the range of cultural meanings associated with the apocalypse and with mysticism, it becomes apparent that certain “cultural logics” are associated with religious violence. Culture is not simply a function of the historical play of contingency, much less a random phenomenon. Nor is it primordial essence. Yet as Max Weber argued nearly a century ago, coherent patterns of culture can have causal social significance.<sup>23</sup> When these patterned logics have identifiable generic features that encompass diversely situated cultural meanings, we can call them “cultural structures.” In culturally structured situations where meanings parallel one another, events play out in enacted dramas with remarkably similar plots.

In the study of religious violence, I and my co-authors initially proposed a general model that explained mass suicide as the outcome of an escalating conflict between (1) a solidary religious sect already organized internally on the basis of apocalyptic ideas, and (2) an alliance of ideological detractors of “cults” within the society at large.<sup>24</sup> In this scenario, the autonomy and legitimacy of an apocalyptic sect is seriously threatened as a consequence of escalating conflict with external opponents. Once we acknowledge that violence may take many

22. Hall, Schuyler, and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, chapter 1.

23. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*.

24. Hall, Schuyler, and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, 10-13.

forms, not always resulting in physical injury,<sup>25</sup> it becomes obvious that opponents sometimes act violently themselves, occasionally threatening the very ability of the religious movement to persist. Under these conditions, the sect unleashes a response of deadly violence.

In the analysis of *Apocalypse Observed*, this model comes close to a generic description of what happened at Jonestown, in the conflagration at Waco, and, in a somewhat different way, with Aum Shinrikyō in Japan. It also brings to light important factors necessary to any explanation of the initial murders and collective suicide of the group called the Solar Temple, in Québec and Switzerland. Of course, genealogical connections exist among these episodes, as well as striking differences. Most notable among the differences, Aum directed its violence only toward internal dissenters and external opponents, never pursuing an act of collective suicide. Another important variation came in the case of the Solar Temple, where the murders and collective suicide only occurred more than a year after a dramatic confrontation between the group and external opponents. These are important differences. They seem, however, like ones of degree rather than kind. Jonestown, Mount Carmel, Aum Shinrikyō, and the initial murders and ritual suicide of the Solar Temple are all analogic variations on one cultural structure—*apocalyptic religious warfare*.

The different ways in which the warring apocalypse played out in these episodes have a great deal to do with how the groups construed the temporal meanings of their relationships to the apocalypse. For Peoples Temple, Jonestown was to have been their heaven on earth, where its members could develop their socialist utopia without the direct interference of a capitalist state. Yet this post-apocalyptic tableau was never established free of the conflicts with their opponents. In effect, the leadership at Jonestown finally unleashed a murderous act against those opponents, carried out in the pre-apocalyptic strategic time of war. Then they departed from their promised land—in collective death.

The scenario for the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel was similar, but the Davidians never presumed to escape the Apocalypse. Rather, they intended to survive it, defending themselves against enemies during the last days, if necessary, so that they could inherit the earthly kingdom of God and replenish it with His chosen people. Like Peoples Temple, the Davidians mobilized for apocalyptic struggle, but in this struggle their direct opponents—the BATF and the FBI—unleashed what really did look like a holy war against them. In the minds of many people, the Branch Davidians were victims as well as perpetrators of extreme violence.

As for Aum Shinrikyō, although they had a broad stratum of members who expected to achieve a post-apocalyptic state of grace, the central leadership of the organization took a far more militant approach to apocalyptic war than either Peoples Temple or the Branch Davidians. Rather than entertaining the conceit that they had escaped the Apocalypse or were simply preparing to survive it, the

25. Mary Jackman, "Violence and Legitimacy in Expropriative Intergroup Relations," in *The Psychology of Legitimacy*, ed. John T. Jost and Brenda Major (Cambridge, Eng., forthcoming).

principals of Aum took the first sign of opposition as the basis for initiating apocalyptic war themselves. What at first was aimed against any opponents who stood in their way eventually became a grotesquely quixotic attempt to create a societal disaster on an apocalyptic scale.

By comparison with any of these episodes, the Solar Temple embarked on its original "Departure" under a more complex hybrid of meanings than the line connecting pre-apocalyptic war and post-apocalyptic grace. On the one hand, their theology of soul migration had long prepared them for the possibility of a "Transit" to eternity that had a mystical cast. On the other hand, this Transit was framed in millennialist and apocalyptic terms, keyed both to surviving the end of the second millennium and to the ecological apocalypse of the planet. Yet beyond mystical Transit and apocalyptic survivalism, there were specific incidents of conflict with opponents—a gun sting operation, media exposés, and subsequent government investigations, and the Solar Templars clearly undertook murder and collective suicide in October 1994 in relation to these conflicts.

Despite important differences in timing, intensity, and circumstance, all of these four episodes in one way or another approximate warring apocalyptic religious conflict, marked by a sect's apocalyptic ideology and external conflict with cultural opponents, hostile media, and the state in strategic time. The distinctive character of such conflict can be found by contrasting these cases with two subsequent collective suicides of Solar Templars—at the winter solstice of 1995 and the spring equinox of 1997—and the 1997 deaths of Do (né Marshall Applewhite) and his Heaven's Gate followers at Rancho Santa Fe, California. In neither the second or third Solar Temple collective suicide nor Heaven's Gate was any violence directed outward. Thus, *outward* extreme violence, typically followed by collective suicide, can be taken as the hallmark of the first four incidents—of apocalyptic religious war.

What, then, of the second and third Solar Temple suicides and the Heaven's Gate deaths? These episodes hardly lacked apocalyptic elements, and all of them resulted in unnatural death. But the elements were composed in a different constellation than apocalyptic religious conflict. What was it?

The mystical theology of the Solar Temple provides a clue. This theology suggested the possibility of journeying back and forth between eternity and the temporal world, and it theorized that doing so depended on aligning with key universal forces of energy, themselves mapped onto earthly temporal cycles marked by the Apocalypse as the moment of a critical shift between one earthly temporal era and another. However, there was nothing in this theology that required a war either to survive the onslaught of civilization's decay or to produce the triumph of good. Cosmic forces assured the transition, and those who harnessed those forces through ritual could transcend any merely human apocalypse. The only earthly problem that believers faced was escaping the clutches of the wider society. And this, indeed, was a central motif during the days and months after the initial Solar Temple transit in October 1994. In reflecting on the second and third transits in June 1997, Vivienne Giacobino, the former wife of one of the

people murdered at Cheiry, Switzerland, speculated that the participants in the second and third transits might have taken their own lives both because with the stigma of the first transit, after October 1994 there was no place for them in the wider society, and further, because, amid rumors about more suicides, they felt hemmed in by police surveillance of the sect and occasional roundups of members. Pursued by adversaries who might interfere, the participants in the second and third transits did not engage in any outwardly directed violence. Instead, they acted out a narrative of escape, making the ritual voyage that they had been taught would take them across the barrier from this world to eternity.

The parallels between the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate are striking. In effect, both offered space-age versions of a salvation story dominant in the Western cultural tradition, in which a prophet appears to redeem believers by showing them the path to rebirth into a promised land beyond the travails of this world. Both groups invoked the possibility of moving beyond earthly existence into an eternal transcendence, and both settled on a space voyage as the device of transition. Both groups offered metaphysical notions of the relationship between time and eternity, but in neither case did they pursue a program of meditation within a mystical association that transcends this world through enlightenment while remaining physically in it. Instead, in both groups the mystical idea of transcendence was mapped onto apocalyptic motifs of passage from this world to the beyond. Redemption required departure from Earth by beings whose consciousness was alien to it. In both groups, believers received information about the windows of opportunity for making this journey beyond the fallen world—in the Solar Temple from a redeeming mystagogue, and in Heaven's Gate from a savior-teacher.

Finally, in both groups there was an apocalyptic narrative of escape. This motif is obvious in the second and third Solar Temple departures, whose participants took elaborate steps to elude the efforts of authorities and other outsiders seeking to prevent further ritual Transit deaths. But the same motif of flight operated over a much more extended time in the group around Do and his partner Ti (who died a natural death some years before the collective suicide at Rancho Santa Fe). Early on, Bo and Peep (as they called themselves at the time) had feared that assassination and what they called "the Demonstration" might come too soon—before they could "harvest" all the "ripe fruit." The subsequent *modus operandi* over the entire history of the group was to act out a departure from this world based on extreme ascetic self-perfection as a demonstration of readiness. As the followers worked to prepare themselves for the voyage, they kept moving, avoiding any entanglements with the world, staying one step ahead of any pursuit that might interfere with their religious quest. Their final flight came, like the first Solar Temple Transit, at a time when the world was deemed not receptive to their message, leaving them no further work to accomplish on Earth. Travelling to the Next Evolutionary Level Above Human, they left behind their human "containers" and the world dominated by the Luciferians.

My co-authors and I began our study of apocalyptic religious violence thinking that there was only one pathway of apocalyptic religious violence. Extreme acts such as murder and collective suicide would only occur in a countercultural sect that lashed out in an apocalyptic holy war against the putative forces of evil, namely, their own opponents. It is now apparent, however, that neither the later Solar Temple Transits nor the voyage to Heaven's Gate fit this model. Instead, these episodes involved a mystical apocalypse of deathly transcendence in which flight from the Apocalypse on Earth through the ritualized practice of collective suicide supposedly would achieve other-worldly grace. As these events show, flight from external opposition can become a strong fixation within a group, even when real opponents are lacking, or ineffectual. These cases of minimal or only imagined opposition are not apocalyptic war. Instead, they chart a second pathway of religious violence. In this cultural structure—*mystical apocalyptic death*—ideas of eternal transcendence through ecstasy or inner illumination become mediated by an apocalyptic theology of time. Themes of escape from pursuit and escape from this world bear apocalyptic overtones that align mystical transcendence with death in this life and rebirth in another.

Collective religious suicide is not a singular social phenomenon with parallel dynamics in all cases. Rather, two alternative cultural structures mark different social processes that result in the "same" outcome of collective death. To be sure, not all apocalyptically tinged mysticism ends in suicidal escape, any more than conflict between an apocalyptic group, cultural opponents, media, and the state necessarily spirals into murder and suicidal martyrdom. In this light, the two temporally specified apocalyptic cultural structures are interpretive models rather than causal explanations. Nevertheless, the commonalities among the episodes of religious violence that we examined are striking. All five of them approximate one or the other (or both) of the cultural structures—those of apocalyptic religious warfare and mystical apocalyptic death. By its own distinctive pathway, each heightens the potential for extreme religious violence.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The possibilities of meaningful social action, organization, and process, I have argued, are bound up with the actions of conscious subjects who live "in" time but simultaneously construct time by the ways in which they pay attention to, and live in relation to, the immediate present, the past, and anticipated futures.<sup>26</sup> Their deployments of culture in the course of social action depend upon the invocation, elaboration, and revision of one or more meaningful scripts, myths, traditions, stories, accounts, and scenarios about who we are, what we are doing, and why. Culture in enactment thus involves situated meanings constructed partly in relation to cultural meanings which by diverse routes have become diffused into the lifeworlds of social actors.

26. For a more general account of enacted time in relation to history, see John R. Hall, "The Time of History and the History of Times," *History and Theory* 19 (1980), 113-131.



Sociohistorical inquiry can aspire to describe these situated cultural meanings, their sources, and their causal and cultural significance. But it can also engage in a second task—of describing typical cultural structures of social action, organization, and process. Phenomenologically, these typifications of cultural structure can be assessed as to their internal meaning-adequacy by determining whether they reflect social constructions of temporality in lifeworldly action. In turn, *verstehende* analysis can describe dynamic processes in unfolding time that ensue from one or more playings-out of cultural scripts in relation to lifeworldly conditions. The “warring apocalypse” of religious conflict and the “mystical apocalypse” of deathly transcendence are two examples of cultural structures, constructed on the basis of more fundamental phenomenological considerations about (1) the lifeworldly structures of temporality, and (2) fundamentally alternative social constructions of reality.<sup>27</sup>

The extremely unusual character of the events theorized by these sociohistorical models demonstrates the potential for theorizing even highly contingent sociohistorical phenomena. Depending on the degree of their diffusion, reinvo-cation through historical memory, or independent development, cultural structures may come into play only rarely, or they may establish enduring pathways of culturally infused social patterns, emerging across diverse civilizational contexts. But no matter whether their range is wide or narrow, cultural structures describe schematic sociohistorical patterns that shape social actions insofar as social actors animate them by way of existential cultural meanings. It is in part for this reason that models of cultural structures are necessarily “ideal” types. With meanings, there is always the potential for nuance, for “shading off,” and for the incorporation of more than one “cultural logic” within any given social situation.

Ideal types thus are at best “benchmarks” as Guenther Roth called them, useful for comparative analysis with situated, culturally specific sociohistorical formations.<sup>28</sup> They therefore should not be confused with transhistorical sociological concepts such as Georg Simmel’s “forms” of social interaction (for example, the party, the dyad, or the secret), which may be deployed in efforts to identify *non*-cultural structural regularities in sociohistorical patterns.<sup>29</sup> The conceptualization of cultural structures in sociohistorical inquiry offers an opportunity that is not available to formal structuralism alone—the possibility of examining how situated meanings structure social action in organizationally, processually, and institutionally patterned ways. As Weber showed in a different context—when he theorized phenomena such as bureaucracy and the routinization of charisma—the concept of a “cultural structure” implies that culture does not operate as a *Geist* in some material vacuum.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the play of events in relation to cultural struc-

27. Hall, *The Ways Out*, 10-14.

28. Guenther Roth, “Sociological Typology and Historical Explanation,” in Reinhard Bendix and Guenther Roth, *Scholarship and Partisanship: Essays on Max Weber* (Berkeley, 1971), 109-128; Guenther Roth, “History and Sociology in the Work of Max Weber,” *British Journal of Sociology* 27 (1976), 306-318.

29. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry*, chapter 4.

30. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978).

tures is in part shaped by realities such as the social career interests of individuals, the instability of extraordinary social demands in the face of daily human needs and interests, and the passing of generations.

Analysis of cultural structures will never achieve the transhistorical generality that positivists once proclaimed (and to which neo-positivists still aspire). Because concepts of cultural structure theorize meaningful content, they lack the transhistorical generality of purely formal concepts, and they are thus limited in the ranges of their relevance. However, cultural relevance is an important value informing inquiry; furthermore, the range of relevance of a give cultural structure (for example, bureaucracy) can be quite broad. Thus, lack of transhistorical generality is not the curse that the positivists sought to avoid. Using ideal types of cultural structures—such as the apocalyptic ones I have described here—makes it possible to theorize patterned ways in which social processes saturated with generic meanings play out. Explanation in cultural history may thereby aspire to something more than cultural historicism. It can seek to understand both local meanings and their dialectical interplay with more general sociocultural processes theorized as cultural structures.

*University of California, Davis*

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<sup>18</sup> **Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism**

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<sup>26</sup> **The Time of History and the History of Times**

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<sup>28</sup> **History and Sociology in the Work of Max Weber**

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