The Public Representation of Culture and History

Introduction

NEIL J. SMELSER
JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER
Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences

This article introduces this issue of American Behavioral Scientist in several ways: (a) It provides background information about the conference on which the issue is based, (b) it provides an intellectual and historical context for the idea of the public representation of culture and history in American society, (c) it develops several substantive propositions (derived from different articles in the issue) dealing with factors that produce contentious conflicts over the public representation of culture and history, and (d) it summarizes the articles in the issue in the order that they appear.

BACKGROUND TO THIS ISSUE OF
AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST

In October 1995, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation approved a grant of $500,000 to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. The focus of the grant can best be described as "common values, social diversity, and cultural conflict." The grant grew out of the foundation's (and the center's) concern with the whole range of cultural debates and conflicts that has troubled American society in the last quarter of the 20th century. The exact focus of these debates and conflicts is hard to pin down, but it includes the whole territory covered by the terms *common values* (or the absence thereof), *cultural pluralism*, *cultural diversity*, *multiculturalism*, *civil society*, and the *culture wars*. The terms of the grant called for the center to devise a series of activities to improve our analytic understanding of these often confused and baffling phenomena and simultaneously to turn attention toward the vexed question of how institutional change, programs, and policies might be productively and responsibly brought to bear on the issues of cultural conflict and national integration.

Concretely, we devised three activities directed toward these goals:

- We held a general conference on Common Values, Social Diversity, and Cultural Conflict at the center on October 17-19, 1996. Invitees were mainly academics who had thought and worked on the issues. We believe that conference was a success in that the contributors were able to achieve a rare measure of objectivity and analytical distance from the subject matter and, in many cases, to generate original and helpful insights. We asked the authors to revise the essays. They will appear at about the same time as this issue, under the title *Multiculturalism and Its Discontents: Cultural Conflict and Common Ground in Contemporary American Society*, edited by the two of us and published by Princeton University Press.
- We held a second conference on The Public Representation of Culture and History, held at the center on April 16-18, 1998. This conference provided the papers for this issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*. The meeting narrowed our focus in two ways. First, we chose a specific type of cultural expression and cultural conflict, and second, we concentrated on the specific institutions of museums and memorials, schools, higher education, the press, foundations, and the national census. At the same time, we broadened our sights by inviting a mix of scholars, some of whom took an "academic" approach to understanding the issues involved, others of whom—past and present institutional leaders—spoke more from the trenches. This distinction has proved to be difficult to sustain in practice, but it is a helpful way to divide the contents of this issue. Roughly speaking, Part I contains essays by noninvolved scholars, and Part II consists of essays written from the point of view of those engaged in the day-by-day institutional and organizational struggles.
- A year-long collaborative research project on Integration and Polarization, is currently in progress at the center under the leadership of Alexander. This group is informed by the results of the first two conferences. It is dealing with cultural traumas and collective efforts to come to terms with them and will produce a comparative and historical book on the topic.

INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND TO
THE APRIL 1998 CONFERENCE

In the history of social thought and social science, a number of otherwise divergent strands of thinking have converged on a single theme: the importance of a common culture (including values) and its concrete symbolization as central to the unity and integrity of societies. Émile Durkheim regarded common beliefs and their expression in ritual as arising from and reinforcing—indeed, almost synonymous with—social integration. Talcott Parsons posited that, as a precondition for their integration, all societies require a set of dominant values on which there is general consensus. Antonio Gramsci, representing one line of the Marxian tradition, argued that the ruling classes in society are advised to take an interest in asserting their cultural—as well as their economic and political—ascendancy to stabilize the societies they rule. Finally, students of authoritarianism assume, often implicitly, that when a society is divided on cultural fundamentals and when its leaders lack legitimacy, they "compensate" for this deficit of integration by relying on systems of political coercion. In a word, both those social thinkers who celebrate the unifying significance of culture and those who

debunk that function in one way or another have been compelled to recognize and address the issue of culture and its representation.

The cultural debates and conflicts mentioned at the outset of this introduction reside in the same territory. At one pole, we find an espousal of "radical" multiculturalism. Here, the principal argument is for difference—the coexistence of different racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and lifestyle groups with their own autonomous, separate, and equally legitimate cultures. Any talk of mainstream or common values is typically dismissed as window dressing or code language for dominant White, male, Eurocentric interests. At the other pole we find a "conservative" position. Spokespersons regard the multicultural impulse as essentially destructive and look toward a future based on a putative past of inclusion in, if not assimilation to, a common set of national values. At both poles we detect a certain utopian core: The one envisions a kind of unspecified integration through difference and independent group self-realization; the other envisions an improbable past that downplays conflict and domination and exaggerates commonality and peaceful pluralism.

As organizers of the Hewlett conferences, we tended to reject both these extremes, opting for a middle-ground approach that focuses on culture-carrying and conflict-mediating institutions. More particularly, for the second conference we wanted to look at public institutions, organizations, and processes that represent culture and values: how they represent them and why, the consequences of those representations, and the conflicts that swirl around them.

One convenient approach to understanding the idea of cultural representation is to distinguish between a centralized, vertical representation of culture on one hand and its decentralized, horizontal representation on the other. (The word *convenient* must be emphasized because the distinction is relative, and all societies rely on both modes of representation to some degree.)

Examples of the centralized representation are found in the history of the two nations to which American society owes most of its cultural and political heritage—England and France. In England, the traditions of monarchy, aristocracy, and established church constituted an apex that penetrated downward into the whole range of political, religious, military, educational, and class institutions and, correspondingly, infused all public and informal interaction. Although enormously eroded, this complex still pervades the understandings, conflicts, discourse, and humor of much of British life. Prerevolutionary France had a similarly pervasive establishment of monarchy, class, and religion. That system was coercively dismantled during the French Revolution, but in its place was erected a pervasive state apparatus, representing the French nation (*la patrie*) that came to manifest itself in the centralized monitoring of culture—language, education, history, and public ceremony. In both England and France, then, the representation of culture traditionally has been a matter not only of central but centralized concern.

In many respects, the birth and early development of the American republic is a story of the systematic renunciation of the "establishment-down" organization

of the young nation's political, social, and cultural life in the name of freedom and equality. The Constitution built in an array of suspicions of and safeguards against central government. Religion was officially disestablished at both the state and federal level by the separation of church and state. Monarchy and hereditary entitlements were "uninstitutionalized." Freedoms of association, belief, expression, and the press were assured. Education became a matter of local and state determination.

In shedding the European model of "monarchy and tyranny," the young United States created what might be called an integrative paradox for itself. If the pattern of centralized, vertical, and managed integration was to be renounced, what then was to be the basis of social unity and integration? There is no simple historical answer to this paradox, but part of the answer was that the young nation placed a high priority on (a) commitment to the moral values embodied in the Declaration of Independence ("republican virtue"); (b) the law as a mediating mechanism between abstract principles such as freedom and the concrete exigencies of maintaining order in a free society, as embodied in the Constitution; (c) popular education as a cultural medium; (d) reliance on such informal integrative mechanisms as public opinion and social conformity; and (e) a pattern of continuous generation and regeneration of culture and society through social process—associating, cooperating, debating, planning, experimenting, emulating, implementing, confirming, and rejecting, often at the local level. It was this last pattern that especially caught the eye of Tocqueville.

This new, and at that time unprecedented, pattern of cultural integration—what might be called a civil society model—is a remarkable invention in many respects; at the same time, it has shown evidence of fragility as a social apparatus when it comes to representing culture, values, and history publicly. Its advantage is found in decentralized participation in that representation. Some representation of culture emanates from the national level—the inauguration of the president, the choice and naming of national holidays, the remembering of wars, and the building of national monuments in Washington, D.C., for example. A great deal of official public remembering and cultural symbolizing, however, is more regional and diversified—the decentralized decisions on state capitol buildings, the remembering of the Civil War, and the construction of regional and local museums that produce diversified results. In still other arenas, cultural representation is more or less privatized. One of the consequences of the constitutional separation of church and state is to relegate the realm of religions beliefs to the private sphere, to remove religion from the realm of the officially established to the realm of denominational competition. Except for such highly generalized religious symbolizations as "One Nation, under God" in the salute to the flag and imprinting "In God We Trust" on the national currency, the religious representation of culture is a denominational matter. These arrangements are, in one sense, a boon for political authorities. They permit the nation and the states from being drawn into religious controversies, except in so far as religious groups

invade the public domain, as in the refusal to salute the flag or in the pressure on the part of religious groups to include prayers in public schools.

SUBSTANTIVE THREADS IN THE
CONFERENCE AND IN THIS ISSUE

Despite the fact that the United States is located near the decentralized end of the continuum, it must still sustain a great many traditions, institutions, and practices that symbolically represent national culture and history. Some of these representations are completely public and official, for example, the building of national monuments, war memorials, and national museums and the celebration (and the closing of businesses) on national holidays such as Thanksgiving Day, Veterans' Day, Memorial Day, Presidents' Day, Martin Luther King's Birthday, and the Fourth of July. Days celebrating the admission of the state into the union and historic events such as Paul Revere's ride are localized but parallel examples. Other representations are more or less completely private and unofficial, as in the case of individual families that symbolize their own cultures and histories by celebrating birthdays, attending reunions, and developing family rituals such as common meals or annual walks together. Between these extremes are organizations and activities that are generally accepted or that put themselves forward as semipublic in their representational responsibilities and significance. This is a heterogeneous category, but it would include newspapers and magazines, private foundations, private museums, ethnic groups that engage in periodic parades or other festivities, and academic and sports organizations that troop the colors or play the national anthem at athletic games.

From the articles prepared for the conference and printed in this issue, there emerged an interrelated set of principles of cultural representation and cultural conflict. We can summarize these by a positing a series of axioms or generalizations:

- The more public or official an organization or activity is, the more contentious it is likely to be. A public organization or ceremony is assumed to represent just that—"the public," or the totality of the relevant community. The decennial census, for example, is an official national act that is undertaken by the government, expends public funds, and affects the whole nation politically (see Riche). A public school is "public" in that it covers and serves all people in a district or community, is supported by public funds, and is typically governed by a democratically elected school board. The logic behind this axiom is that any part of the public that feels it is not represented by the organization, activity, or expression has, by definition, a legitimate claim that it is excluded and should be included (see Tyack). If, on the other hand, an organization is institutionally defined as private or unofficial, this axiom does not apply. Returning to the religious example, if people outside a church or denomination find the beliefs and rituals offensive, they may object, but they cannot claim that they, as members of a larger public, are not represented. Religion is not institutionalized in the public sphere. The main alternative is to

form a separate religious group, for which there is, in principle, room for an indefinite number.

- The more—and more organized—groups that regard their interests as involved in a cultural representation, the more contentious the representational process is likely to be. We see this principle realized in many articles in this issue. Adams contrasts the temple concept of the museum with the "forum." Simplifying matters somewhat, the former implies one elite or another regarding themselves, and being more or less accepted by others, as knowing and representing the values and interests of the community and as "symbolizing" these in appropriate museum acquisitions and displays. The latter occurs when an indefinite number of interested and vocal groups exercise what they regard as a legitimate claim to be part of, and to have a say in, representational, expressive action. Adams describes a historical trend from the temple to the forum in museum life. Prewitt tells much the same story with the modern philanthropic foundations, evolving, in a rough way, from self-directing elite organizations to bodies responding to a multitude of social and political interests in their giving policies and activities. The same story could be told for institutions of higher education as their constituents have multiplied and now include not only traditional faculty, student, staff, and alumni, but also the surrounding residential communities, federal and state granting agencies, environmental agencies and social movements, and an expanding number of political groups and social movements (e.g., racial/ethnic/religious groups, the women's movements, animal right's movements) that declare themselves stakeholders of colleges and universities and take an interest in their curricular and research activities (this is a major theme in Hackney's essay). Schudson describes a similar growth in the number of constituencies taking an interest in the press, including a social movement to curb media excesses. On a completely different front, Calvin Trillin (1998) has demonstrated how the New Orleans Mardi Gras has been transformed from a festival run by a small, unchallenged elite into an activity in which numerous community groups have a say.

These general trends appear to have generated ambivalent results. On one hand, if we are committed to the ideals of a democratic polity, we welcome the increasing permeability of the walls of organizations that represent and symbolize cultural values because this means that more voices and interests are involved in collective activities. After all, this is what we have traditionally meant by democratic participation in the "horizontal" American polity. On the other hand, the more permeable the walls, and the more voices trying to be heard through them, the greater the probability of contentiousness and culture wars. This is one of the paradoxes of a society committed to democracy and democratic participation. We like to expand it, but we do not always like what happens as a result.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS ISSUE

As already indicated, we have organized the articles (imprecisely) into those that attempt to offer analytic understandings of the dynamics of cultural representation, with main reference to American society (Part I) and those reflections

of institutional leaders who have been or are struggling with the complex organizational and political realities of representation (Part II). The reasons for the imprecision of this division is that some of the contributors have or have had one foot in the academic world and another in the administrative leadership world, and in addition, the contributors themselves move back and forth between analytic and applied thinking.

Part I begins with considerations of two American institutions that have from the beginning been caught in the swirls of contestation: the schools and the U.S. Census. Tyack argues that the content of school textbooks has involved struggles and compromises among political leaders, school administrators, advocates for social causes, and commercial publishers of textbooks. The cumulative and perhaps inevitable result of repeated episodes of conflict has been an increase in the length and complexity of textbooks as more and more voices are accommodated. As Riche demonstrates, the national census has also been the object of repeated political contention, largely because of its link to distributing power (and, more indirectly, public money) by categorizing eligible voters and determining electoral districts. The typical picture is a struggle between the major political parties, one that believes that the inclusion of new groups will benefit its own party and disadvantage the other, and the other that believes that the inclusion will be damaging to itself and helpful to its opponents. This dynamic has continued right up to the contemporary political struggle over the use of sampling to make more complete and accurate counts.

Schwartz and Bayma's analysis of the politics of the Korean War Veterans Memorial offers a rich account of the complex interplay of patriotic values, the interests of veterans, the designers of symbols, spatial constraints, and the politics of racial/ethnic inclusion. Although the memorialization of war has never been without its political side, as a general rule, the greater the disagreement about the legitimacy and purpose of a war, the greater the level of public contestation about its memoralization and the more watered down by compromise its symbolization.

Next come articles on two institutions—public museums and private foundations—that have experienced a historical drift from a situation in which relatively uncontested elites determined the activities of the institution to a more pluralistic situation in which institutional leaders have become more like managers of conflict among interested political groups and fashioners of compromise in the implementation of their missions. Neither Adams nor Prewitt reify this trend, and both are aware of the complexity of forces affecting their respective institutions. Still, the parallels in their accounts are very striking and no doubt are generalizable to a much wider range of institutions in recent American history.

American higher education is certainly one of those institutions, as Hackney's article indicates. His major point is that American education, especially the university, has always led in the reflection and representation of American values but has also been the focal point of pressure for contending forces that

wish it to do that representing in particular ways. As our society has become both more differentiated and more diverse, the number and types of voices entering into this contestation have also increased. As a result (and in our words) the walls of the university have also become more permeable.

Finally, Schudson presents us with a story of the changing mode of cultural representation by the media, especially the press. His focus is on the increasing political cynicism and increasing emphasis on entertainment in the news media. Both of these trends have drawn sharp criticism and have excited movements for journalistic reform. Schudson finds the reasons for this in the changing character of information and technology, in an increase in the professional autonomy and assertiveness of journalists, in a general decline in institutional trust, and in the continuing competition for readership in journalistic audiences.

The articles in Part II move closer to the nuts and bolts of how individuals and organizations engage in the uncertain activity of how to achieve vitality by carving out a legitimate mission and giving this mission credibility and effectiveness. Gardner focuses on leadership as a general mechanism—how leaders strive (not always consciously, it should be stressed) to tell a "story" that will resonate with and establish credibility and legitimacy within their own organizations and with various constituencies and consumers.

In Ross's account of the recent history of Heritage College, of which she is president, she gives a frank account of how that college achieved its own cultural credibility as an institution of higher education within an improbable environment—an outlying, low-income community largely composed of diverse ethnic/cultural groups that held basically negative stereotypes about and often hostile orientations toward one other. The aim of (her) leadership has been to overcome these stereotypes through the self-conscious and continuous confrontation of these negative factors in the context of the college itself, to draw diverse students into a range of instrumental and self-reflective activities, and thereby to augment the feelings of commonality and community in the college.

Greenwood, North, and Dollenmayer give us an extremely wide-ranging account of the cultural significance of universities—as source of change and wisdom; as direct influence on a nation's culture; and as seat of teaching, knowledge-creation, and public service. What comes through in their account is that these functions, although eternal in one sense, have carried very different meanings and ways of expressing themselves and, consequently, have generated great conflict. Looking to the next millennium, the authors see a greatly enhanced contribution to technological skills, scientific expertise, global leadership, and the nation's continued struggle with problems associated with universities' own diversity.

Stewart's article focuses on merit, a long-standing ingredient of how educational institutions represent themselves and, indeed, strive for legitimacy. Merit, on its face, is a concept and a criterion, but if we dig deeper we find it is a snarl in that it opens up a whole panoply of cultural issues. It lies at the heart of affirmative action in particular and racial tensions in general; it is at the core of

admissions, social sorting, and educational credentialing; and it is central to any consideration of the role of expertise in a democratic society. Stewart attempts to cut into this vast range of issues by proposing a criterion of "articulate judgment" that can invigorate educators in their search for the kind of systematic and pervasive criteria they depend on to fulfill their complex missions.

The articles by Chace and García throw down a challenge, the one to institutions of higher education, the other to K-12 schools. Chace observes that the students of the 1990s resemble those of the 1950s in that they are conformist, consumerist, personally ambitious, and risk-aversive—a "No Complaints Generation." Colleges and universities serve these interests well in their own drift toward instrumentalism and professionalism. Where they have failed, however, is to engage students in the pressing political issues, institutional problems, and cultural transformations of our time. By so failing, he argues further, the academy has become desanctified. Unless it reaffirms its interpretative role, campuses may experience a troubled future based on the further intensification of manifest class differences among students.

García sees schools falling short in providing the skills and outlooks for the new global and high-skilled needs of the contemporary occupational world, as well as for the cultural transformations that American society has experienced. He argues wholesale reforms of schools that will make an ineffective system effective and will better "represent" its culture. New pedagogic theories are required; new appreciations and new approaches are called for to meet the unprecedented diversity of students and their families; and a new reflexivity about the culture of the classroom and schools is in order, as is an increased engagement of all participants in the educational process.

REFERENCE

Trillin, C. (1998, February 1). New Orleans unmasked. *The New Yorker*, pp. 38-43.