

The Past, Present, and Future of Culture at Northwestern



By Gary Alan Fine, Wendy Griswold, and Hannah Wohl at Northwestern University

Contributions by Robin Bartram, Claudio Benzecry, Michaela DeSoucey, Jun Fang, Stacy Lom, Gemma Mangione, and Rahardhika Utama.

Conception is not always intended, and the birth of Northwestern's strength in cultural sociology was an unplanned-but-blessed event. From the 1960s onward, Northwestern was home to two of the discipline's influential sociologists of art, **Bernard Beck** and **Howard Becker**. Culture was part of the department's DNA (Don't Neglect Art!). Evanston was the origin of *Art Worlds*, and together Beck and Becker mentored a string of students who shaped the discipline, including **Rosana Hertz**, **Mitchell Stevens**, **Amy Binder**, and many others.

By the mid-nineties the Sociology Department contained a number of faculty who did something-and-culture: **Nicola Beisel** did gender and culture, **Wendy Espeland** did theory-and culture, **Al Hunter** did urban-and-culture, and Bernie Beck provided a linkage to the Chicago theatre scene with an emphasis on social relations. Given this promising foundation, when the department recruited senior scholars **Gary Alan Fine** and **Wendy Griswold**, the latter remarked, "Oh, so you're making a play for cultural sociology." "Why, no," she was told, "We're thinking of Gary as a social psychologist and you as a comparativist-Africanist." Bemused and intrigued by the pos-

sibilities, both decamped to Northwestern to accept and extend these proffered identities. Over the next twenty years, the department continued to draw faculty with strong cultural interests – **Mary Pattillo** on urban and African American culture, **Carolyn Chen** on religion, **Hector Carrillo** on sexuality, **Charles Camic** and **Steve Epstein** on science, knowledge, and culture. Aspiring doctoral students (who were quicker to recognize the connections than the original recruiters) began flocking to Northwestern. As a result, current students can approach culture through a combination of perspectives. As alumna **Michaela DeSoucey** described, "It makes a real difference to have more than one 'culture' perspective on the faculty – it made me very sensitive to the peculiar characteristics of culture as a valued and multi-dimensional object of study, as a tool of meaning-making, as well as its social influence on other domains."

The nuts-and-bolts of our program are similar to many others: some platform courses taught almost every year (e.g., Cultural Sociology, Field Methods), some specialized courses taught most years (e.g., Collective Memory, Methods for Cultural Analysis), a workshop in ethnography, and another workshop for advanced students in cultural sociology. Alumna **Stacy Lom** stated, "When I think of 'culture at Northwestern,' the first thing that comes to mind is Culture Workshop, which is one of the things I miss most about being at Northwestern." **Robin Bartram**, last year's student

facilitator of the Culture Workshop, explained that the diverse projects discussed in this workshop were “a consistent reminder about the extent to which questions about meaning and interpretation are the backbone of such a variety of topics and research endeavors.” While common to many programs, students find these courses and workshops to be foundational. What is distinctive comes from the institutional characteristics of the Northwestern Department, and two are key.

First, we have a famously intense sense of community, a collegial atmosphere shared by faculty and students where innovative thinking flourishes and dissertations develop that are creative and unconventional: Why do Americans and the French think differently about goose liver (Michaela DeSoucey)? Why do HIV/AIDS billboards advising the practice of safe sex sometimes convey the opposite message, or no message at all (**Terry McDonnell**)? How do you sell life insurance in China if the Chinese culture abjures talking about death (**Cheris Chan**)? Why is an evangelical church’s proselytizing different in Miami and Madrid (**Diego de los Rios**)? How do plastic surgeons reproduce ethnic stereotypes (**Alka Menon**)? What is the border between nature and the city, and what does race have to do with it (**Kevin Loughran**)? How do people construct museum-going as “good” for our health (**Gemma Mansion**)? How do artists balance creativity with standardization in Chinese art test prep schools (**Jun Fang**)? What is the occupational culture of building inspectors (**Robin Bartram**)? How do contemporary artists develop signature styles and how do these styles constrain them (**Hannah Wohl**)? How do African artists use or reject their ethnicity as a trading chip (**Sakhile Matlhare**)? This represent only a few of the projects through which our students have trained us to be better and broader scholars.

Second, our department is both de-centered and strongly centered. Most faculty and students have a foot outside of the Sociology Department, in Communications, Humanities, Political Science, Law, Global Studies, Theatre and Drama, Gender and Sexualities, Science and Human Culture, Program for African Studies, and other departments. We require students to take three courses outside the department, and dissertation committees with faculty from other departments are common. This commitment to interdisciplinary, to which we hold, is especially important for budding cultural sociologists whose research invariably depends on

external expertise. Alumna **Gemma Mangione** wrote, “I valued that faculty who trained graduate students in the sociological study of culture encouraged us to speak to scholars across disciplines, as they also did in their own work.” Especially unusual is the number of cultural sociologists housed in other departments, particularly in the Department of Communication Studies, home to **Claudio Benzecry** and **Larissa Buchholz**, and the Kellogg School of Management Studies, home to **Lauren Rivera**, **Klaus Weber**, **Brayden King**, and **Paul Hirsch**. These sociologists regularly attend workshops and serve on dissertation committees of sociology students. They expand and enrich our conversations about what culture is and what it does.

The department has also benefited from the strong connections with other universities across the globe. In addition to our joint Ph.D. program with Sciences Po in Paris, we regularly

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Claudio Benzecry

host students from China through international exchange programs. The department also participates in the Arryman Program, which supports exceptionally talented Indonesian students to pursue doctoral work at Northwestern. For example, **Rahardhika Utama**, an Arryman Scholar, has taken courses at Northwestern in the sociology of culture, attending the Culture Workshop and collaborated with faculty members. Building upon his foundation in the sociology of culture, he is researching the cultural dimensions of local politics in Indonesia, specifically how politicians utilize color to augment their symbolic power. Such programs and exchanges allow Northwestern students to benefit from both interdisciplinary and international perspectives.

In some departments, such decentering risks having a hollowed-out center. At Northwestern, all sociologists gather each week (physical co-presence producing emotional energy, Randall Collins would say) in our longstanding Thursday colloquium series. We hear each other in action, button-hole each other about a new idea on the way in (and, more often, on the way out), and celebrate our collective values. The result of these two factors and this combination of faculty and resources attracts a special kind of student and produces a distinctive kind of multi-faceted research. As Claudio Benzecry stated, “The culture tradition at Northwestern is not a thing of the past; it will be alive for many years to come.”