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Cultural theory and its spaces for invention and innovation

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Abstract This article approaches the topics of invention and innovation by way of cultural theory. Building on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and John Austin, the article offers definitions of invention and innovation in semiotic and performative terms. It conceptualizes invention as a process of resignification, and frames innovation as a felicitous performative. Structuralist theory appears to foreclose the potential for these two terms to exist in the empirical world. This article explores these barriers but also locates conceptual spaces for invention and innovation, and identifies these phenomena as they occur in contemporary empirical sites.

Keywords Structuralism · Resignification · Performativity · Invention · Innovation · Tool kit · Metaphorical extension

1 Introduction

In this article I examine the spaces for invention and innovation offered in structuralist, immaterial theories of culture. It is an unusual place to start investigating processes of inspired material change, as cultural structuralism appears to have written pronouncements into its core about the fabric of culture that render creativity and innovation if not theoretically impossible then exceedingly rare, and in these latter cases, as resulting from accident or from outside disruption. But inconvenience is not a sufficient reason for avoiding the most compelling theories of meaning and interpretation to enliven the social sciences in recent times. If we accept that humans are meaning oriented actors, then theories of meaning, regardless of how many challenges they pose to the very existence of our empirical

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phenomenon, must be confronted. This article represents a step toward addressing these challenges.

First I will outline Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign and John Austin's theory of the performative and offer a brief definitions of invention and innovation in semiotic and performative terms. Second I will offer a broad overview of structural theories of culture that have extended and revised Saussure's theory and identify how this literature appears to challenge at a fundamental level the potential for invention and innovation to occur. Third, in order to give an example of how structural theory seems to foreclose invention and innovation I reconstruct Marshall Sahlins's analysis of modern industrial food production. Sahlins's work demonstrates the structural impediments to innovation. However, a more contemporary example I give illustrates that efforts to invent and innovate in the food production and consumption arenas are occurring while they nonetheless face profound signifying challenges in the current era. Fourth I will show how Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender enlivens the definitions of invention and innovation offered here. Next I turn to Jeffrey Alexander's cultural analysis of how the computer was folded into moral discourses as it was introduced to the American public and moved from representing a distanced sacred object to the ubiquitous totem of personal expression that we experience it as in the early twenty-first century. After discussing these strong structural formulations, I will briefly discuss two more pragmatic approaches to meaning and invention and innovation, those offered by Ann Swidler's toolkit theory of culture in action and innovation scholar Donald Schön's theory of the displacement of metaphors.

2 Definitions

In *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure (1986[1916]) introduced the sign as a constituent building block of a cultural system. Against a naturalist theory of meaning, Saussure argued that a sign's meaning is not a reflection of a natural thing or order, nor is it determined by any necessary relation to a material object. A sign unites "not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (56); rather, a sign is a fusion between a signifier and a signified, or respectively, a visible or audible representation on the one hand, and a concept or meaning on the other. For instance, as it is written or spoken, as a signifier the word "sister" could represent anything, and the sound of it has no necessary or ontological tie to the particular social relationship that it names; in fact, the existence of the word in different forms in different languages indicates that no one of these forms is the necessary, natural, or correct representation of the social relationship. The same principal is true for arbor or equos, tree or horse, or whatever the sign may be.

Signs are embedded in a system, and each sign's meaning is derived from its relation to other signs within the system. Meaning, the stuff of interpretation, is created within this system, which is in itself relatively autonomous from the material world. The cultural system is a product of human signifying practices as they have accumulated over time; it is durable, constitutive, and relatively immutable. From this insight Saussure arrived at a critical rule that has shaped

cultural sociology over the past few decades, namely, "the arbitrary nature of the sign." Culture is the word we use to describe this sign system. Saussure's semiotic theory of culture has led culturally-minded sociologists to analyze how this relatively autonomous system of meaning shapes social actions and institutions. The actions of interest in this paper are those of invention and innovation.

In his speech act theory philosopher John Austin (1975 [1962]) indirectly brought the issue of innovation to the fore when he identified "performatives" as words that create new social understandings when they are uttered instead of simply making truth claims. Performatives do things, he pointed out, while constatives are merely true or false. Thus, performatives can be understood as structurally available symbols that social actors can invoke to innovate or to suggest new social understandings. When a couple utters the words, 'I do,' during a wedding ceremony, for instance, they have altered the social landscape; they have created something new, a marriage, and this innovation will dictate that individuals as well as social institutions will treat them in substantially new ways.

Put one way, an innovative sign, or a sign that achieves the status of being innovative, is by definition a felicitous speech-act: something that once uttered brings the contents of the speech into reality and social being. It is a new formulation that when uttered forces us to see things in a new light. Judging a concept innovative is an ex-post facto practice: brilliant ideas are uttered all of the time, yet very few of them make it into the popular currency. As Austin pointed out, oftentimes speech acts are infelicitous, or unhappy, in that they fail to create new understandings and social conditions. If part of our project to is to identify the social conditions that facilitate or inhibit innovative thinking, then we are also interested in when a new concept is capable of being felicitous, and the conditions in which it fails to resonate with the broader social arena, and can be interpreted as infelicitous. Why do some innovative concepts succeed and create new understandings, and under what conditions do concepts fail to capture intellectual and popular imaginations?

Performatives occur within the structured cultural context. We can see in the marriage ceremony example that though a couple's relationship is changed into something new for themselves, their families, their acquaintances and the state, this innovation is also but another instance of an oft performed ceremony called a wedding. The performative is felicitous because it takes place within a structured, conventional process designed for facilitating just this innovation. Marriage itself it not necessarily changed, rather the institution is reiterated in the performance. If, on the other hand, a man tries to marry another man, then there was and still is in many social contexts a considerable likelihood of infelicity, of performative failure, and of failed innovation.

Combining Saussure's model of the sign, Schumpeter's distinction between invention and innovation, and Austin's theory of the performative, I define *invention* as the cognitive effort to decouple an established relation between a signifier and a signified and to re-associate the signifier with a different signified, i.e. the creation of a new sign. Schumpeter called innovation the successful implementation of an invention. Consequently, if invention is the creation of a new sign, then *innovation* in my argument is defined as the successful expansion into broader social

acceptance and usage of this new coupling between the elemental components of a sign. And here I incorporate the work of philosopher John Austin, and restate innovation in his terms: innovation is a felicitous performative in which a new coupling of a signifier and signified permeates the social landscape and itself becomes rooted in convention.

3 Cultural barriers to and spaces for invention and innovation

The remainder of this article explores the cultural and interpretive dimensions of invention and innovation. By saying that invention and innovation are functions of interpretation, I mean to suggest that we use meaning systems to attribute these statuses to objects or ideas, or to say that determining if something—be it a social institution or a material object—has changed qualitatively, substantively, or substantially, is necessarily an interpretive act. Achieving the status of invention or innovation as I have defined them is a rare and unique occurrence. In fact, occurrence is too tame of a term. An innovation is an event (see Mast 2006). It signifies a rupture in the routine order of things, a rupture that then is folded back into an incrementally reconfigured understanding of the routine. This rupture is semantic, but it is also "real" in that the interpretive dimensions of culture write the contours of material objects' boundaries because materiality is infused with and constituted by meaning.

How do innovations as events come into being? They have to stand out against the sensory deadening backdrop of everyday routine. Yet innovations cannot and do not speak for themselves. They have to be interpreted and narrated as such. Interpretations themselves are part of a complex cultural and symbolic process—their constituent elements are the background systems of meaning that constitute our sense making processes. Put another way, these background systems of meaning are what Clifford Geertz (1973: 5) called "webs of significance," and these webs are organized around what Emile Durkheim (1995[1915]) called "collective representations." Collective representations, sign systems, symbols, myths (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958], Barthes 1972 [1957]), narratives (Jacobs 2002; Somers and Gibson 1994), binary codes (Alexander and Smith 1993): These are concepts created to describe the vast and elusive thing called culture, and these concepts quickly show how much of culture seems to stand in the way of the processes of innovation. How so?

As the source of the constituent elements of interpretation, culture has been theorized to be a background system of meaning that is historically situated and extraordinarily durable. As a system of meaning, it pre-exists any individual's entry into the world. We are born into it, and we use it to make sense of our experiences. Because we are born into it, and because it is our resource for sense making, that means that we have very little capacity to reflect back on it without automatically using *it*—the historically established systems of meaning—to interpret *itself*. If culture is the symbolic material that constitutes our understandings of the world, then understanding and interpreting something new or unusual involves invoking pre-existing symbols, codes, and narratives, to help us do the sense making. Thus the process of identifying something as new and different contains the activation of

preexisting cultural elements that draw the distinctions and differences between spaces and objects in the material world.

During the twentieth century, theorists like Saussure and the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]) demonstrated that cultural sign systems have a relative autonomy from the social and material worlds. Suggesting that meaning structures have a relative autonomy from social practice means that no one person has much of an ability to control or alter these interpretive structures. As background systems of meaning, these taken for granted collective representations constitute our notions of the good and the bad, purity and pollution (Douglas 1966), the democratic and the counter-democratic (Alexander and Smith 1993), and the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1995 [1915]). Even when more contemporary theorists of culture, like the anthropologists Clifford Geertz (1980) and Victor Turner (1977 [1969]), tried to incorporate dimensions of dynamism into these structural or semiotic theories of culture, by using the notions of dramaturgy and social drama, for instance, they still seemed stuck showing how dynamic cultural practices in actuality reaffirmed the status quo ante, or how "liminal" moments often culminate in reinforcing the prior structural arrangements. If liminal moments represented the potential for inventive and innovative action, then in these theorists' cases they were most typically only momentary and their long term consequences typically resembled the status quo ante moments; they were not innovative at all.

In a powerful display of this orientation's explanatory reach, the anthropologist Sahlins (1978) set out to turn historical materialism on its head by demonstrating that the industrial complex of meat and protein production is organized around the cultural logic(s) of the edible, around understandings of humanness and cultural proscriptions such as the incest and cannibalism taboos. What are interpreted as edible and desirable protein sources are rooted in western culture's understandings of an animal's or animal part's symbolic proximity or distance from humanness, or, in his words, that "[e]dibility is inversely related to humanity" (175). The more closely an animal or body part is associated with humanness, the less desirable it as a protein source, and the less attractive and expensive it functions as a food commodity. Animal muscles are interpreted as less human and therefore more edible than internal organs, while in western culture consumption of the latter meets with resistance as it rubs up against the cannibalism taboo. When Americans faced rapid inflation of food prices in 1973, Sahlins shows, government officials responded by encouraging citizens to eat cheaper parts of the animal such as the kidneys, heart, or entrails. Press responded critically and denied the innovative effort; they recognize the inventive act, the effort to resignify the meaning of the material horse, but denied this effort its felicity, its social purchase and acceptance and thus they denied it of achieving the status of innovation. Paraphrasing Marie Antoinette's famous dictum, a statement typically invoked to show how preposterous and offensive a suggestion is, the Honolulu Advertiser ran an editorial cartoon in which stuffed innards were linked together to spell, "Let them eat entrails" (172–173).

In another example, Sahlins shows how while cows are considerable edible, the idea of exploiting horses or dogs as sources of protein meets with considerable social resistance because in western culture horses and dogs are understood to be

closer to humans than cows in the symbolic order. Sahlins shows that while invention and movements toward innovation occur periodically, with people seeking to decouple the sign of "horse <–> companion" and recouple the signifier with the signified of protein source (horse <–> food), resistance is almost always quick and impassioned. Often times as a result of such innovative movements the original, conventional sign relation (horse <–> companion) becomes inscribed in law in order to prevent any further attempts at inventive signifying slippage. Consequently the symbolic invention fails to take root, it fails to find conditions of felicity, and innovation is stymied.

Yet inventive sign recouplings do occur. In her article in *The New Yorker*, "Grub: Eating Bugs to Save the Planet," Goodyear (2011) examines how insects and grubs may function as alternative sources of nourishment in the face of global issues stemming from population growth, increasing demand for protein, and these demands' negative impacts on energy production and consumption. The well entrenched industries associated with raising symbolically normalized sources of protein such as cows, pigs, and chickens demand large amounts of energy and produce large amounts of varieties of waste. Another source of nourishment and protein is widely available, consumes much less to produce or harvest, and is already consumed in various forms by upwards of eighty percent of the global human population, namely, bugs and grubs. Yet these potential sources of nourishment struggle to find their way into the everyday Western European and North American diet. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966: Ch. 3) would no doubt argue, insects are symbolically clustered in the realm of dirt and filth. An insect on an American dinner plate, except in rare and select places, represents "matter out of place" and will produce a ritual cleansing of the plate. The signifier of the grasshopper is firmly associated with pestilence and filth. Goodyear identifies what I call *resignifying inventors* who are trying to decouple this symbolic fusion of insect and filth. They describe their struggle to introduce these "mini-livestocks" thusly: "The problem is the *ick* factor—the eyes, the wings, the legs… People won't accept it beyond novelty. When you think of a chicken you think of a chicken breast, not the eyes, wings, and beak. We're trying to do the same thing with insects, create a stepping-stone, so that when you get a bug nugget you think of the bug steak, not the whole animal" (40). In this case invention and innovation are occurring and fighting a contingent and yet to be determined resignifying battle; insects are increasingly finding social purchase as entrepreneurs explore market opportunities and cultural creatives dabble in the emerging culinary practice.

Perhaps more than any other theorist, Judith Butler (1990, 2004) has explored the cultural landscape's immutability and its spaces for invention and innovation, particularly in regards to gender. Butler examines the semiotic functions of the gendered body, and draws heavily on Austin's concept of performativity to outline a theory of resignification. Reading her work through the lens of the definitions of invention and innovation I offer above, invention is the decoupling of the gendered body from the gendered cultural understandings associated with a body's lumps, curves, extensions and absences. As a visible object, the female body communicates layers and depths of cultural meanings associated with femininity. It instantly conjures in the observer's mind expectations and assumptions about how a

particular body can and should act. The invention for Butler is the decoupling of the material object, the gendered body, from these cultural assumptions. The body is the signifier, while the assumptions and understandings of femininity that are written on and constitute the curves or lines of that body are the signifieds. Semiotic invention in this example involves decoupling the visible representation, the signifier, from the cultural expectations or the signified. Butler identifies the practice of dressing in drag as a site of what I am calling *signifying innovation*: by dressing in drag social actors disrupt the normalized interpretive process; they mix previously separate or distant signifiers by wrapping the lines of the female body in the vestments and garb associate with male clothing. Drawing on John Austin, Butler argues that this practice represents a performative act. The invention is the mixed gendered body, and the repetition of successful performances of this practice can produce enduring innovations in gender identities and relations. What I am calling invention Butler calls subversion; innovation is the normalization and broader social acceptance of such inventive acts. Invention and innovation do not imply an abatement of culture or a culture-free moment but rather culture in motion, meaning in flux. While sign relations change, they do so in a deeply citational cultural context; they do so through and against their meaning associations.

The future of these inventive and innovative efforts, or the question of whether they will be felicitous or infelicitous, raises the issue of how new signs are met by established social conventions. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's (2003) work on the public receptions of early computers shows in stark terms the cultural processes of interpretation and reception. Alexander's is a story of an invention well on its way to successful innovation. But what we now take for granted as an everyday and routine part of our social existence traveled a long symbolic distance, and changed its symbolic composition considerably along the journey.

Looking at popular interpretations of computer technology over the past decades, Alexander found that when the American public first encountered a computer, they treated it as a "sacred and mysterious object" (187). Sacred objects, according to Emile Durkheim, must be kept separate and protected from the profane and the mundane. They are ritually guarded. *Time Magazine* reported that the computer was "unveiled," … "in the presence of high officers of the Navy," and that it appeared as a "bewildering 50 foot panel of knobs, wires, counters, gears, and switches." The article continued that the machine would solve problems "on earth as well as those posed by the celestial universe" (ibid). The imagery suggests the revelation of a sacred object, unveiled in the presence of powerful people dressed in highly symbolic garb, and metaphorically indicates that this innovation will reduce the distance between heaven and earth. *Popular Science* reported that "everybody's notion of the universe and everything in it will be upset by the columns of figures this monster will type out" (188). In 1965, Alexander continues, a new, more powerful computer was unveiled, and described by *Time Magazine* as "Arranged row upon row in air-conditioned rooms, waited upon by crisp young white-shirted men who move softly among them like priests serving in a shrine, the computers go about their work quietly and, for the most part, unseen from the public" (ibid). In *Reader's Digest*, a technical expert asserted that "forces will be set in motion whose ultimate effects for good and evil are incalculable" (ibid). As computers became

more powerful over time, as we get nearer to the present, that is, the references likening the computer to the divine became more obvious and ubiquitous, not less frequent, as we might expect (given the more pragmatist model of social action suggested by the tool kit theory of culture, discussed below). Alexander found that one national church leader described the Bible as a "distillation of human experience" and asserted that computers are capable of correlating an even greater range "of experience about how people ought to behave" (188). One final line from *Time Magazine* further frames the computer in heavily moralized terms: "When we want to consult the deity, we go to the computer because it's the closest thing to God to come along" (ibid). The religious-like metaphors, and deeply moral framing mechanisms, are obvious.

We find more pragmatic formulations of invention and innovation in the works of consultant and philosopher of innovation, Donald Schön, and the sociologist, Ann Swidler. While neither of these thinkers engaged the theories and concepts coming out of the cultural turn of the 1960s and 1970s, both of their works demonstrate sensitivity to the symbolic dimensions of invention and innovation. Both also suggest a more robust dimension of reflexivity in human action, something akin to what I have termed resignification above, by focusing on the mixing of metaphors or the tangibility of symbolic tools, while both minimize the constitutive power of the background symbolic context.

Schön (1967 [1963]) pointed out (see Adolf, Mast, and Stehr, M&S, this issue) that innovation occurs when cultural concepts and systems of understanding from the past come into contact with the initially inexplicable in the present, and our understandings of both the historically derived concepts and the new situation are changed in the process. Schön described this process as one of metaphorical extension that produces a displacement of concepts. Schön's work points us toward the more tangible, cognitive dimensions of culture, the processes by which we actively engage cultural concepts, reflect back on them, and work to apply them to new situations. Ann Swidler argues that culture can be conceptualized as representing a "tool kit," or a set of interpretive frameworks and strategies that social actors can choose from selectively to solve problems and make sense of things during "unsettled cultural periods" (Swidler 1986: 280). The tool kit metaphor suggests that particular discourses or discreet symbol systems reside somewhere near our awareness in a kind of grab bag or tool box out of which we can grab interpretive tools to make sense of new or changing circumstances. Metaphorical extension and the "culture is a tool kit" framework emphasize that we can choose interpretive frameworks selectively to solve problems and to make sense of unusual things. In them culture is rendered handy, accessible, and usable.

A tool kit is practical storage device, which conceptually makes it sound like an easily accessible reservoir of ideas. It is quite pragmatic in its imagery: a person might smash his or her thumb, but the person will fix the metaphorical pipes well enough to stop the leak and get the water running again. And, to exercise this metaphor further, to illustrate perhaps another source of innovation, one that is consistent with Schön's theory of the displacement of concepts, of old concepts changing when they meet new phenomena, is to suggest that innovation could be

encouraged and facilitated by educating people to have in their kits a handful of "tools" that they know how to use really well—the tools should be markedly different and deeply understood—so that when they encounter a problem or new phenomenon, they have a few deeply intuited but markedly different symbolic resources they can bring to bear on the situation. Further, Swidler's "tool kit" suggests a problem that needs to be fixed. Donald Schön cites John Dewey, C. I. Lewis, and Wittgenstein, in his theory of innovation and the displacement of concepts, stating that these thinkers looked at concepts as "tools for coping with the world, for solving problems" (5). The idea of the problem, the thing that needs to be fixed, points to another source of innovation.

In conclusion we turn to one final example of invention and innovation, one that illustrates many of the theories and concepts discussed above. Imagine a storage device, one with means of internal organization. Its main functions are to protect and to contain, but it also must be moveable. Into it you will place things that are valuable and useful to you, things that you will need to access shortly. And then you will move the entire thing a considerable distance. Writing in *The New York Times*, Sharkey (2010) narrates a moment of invention and delayed innovation: The year was 1970. Bernard D. Sadow was returning from a family vacation. He was carrying two suitcases through the airport when he "observed a worker effortlessly rolling a heavy machine on a wheeled skid. I said to my wife, 'You know, that's what we need for luggage.'" Sadow, who was working at "a company that made luggage and coats," set to attaching casters from a wardrobe trunk to a large suitcase when he returned to work. "'I put a strap on the front and pulled it, and it worked,'" recalled Sadow for Sharkey's article. He received a patent for "Rolling Luggage" (No. 3,653,474) 2 years later.

Sadow had a problem, heavy suitcases. He witnessed a solution, one that presumably tens or hundreds of thousands or more people had witnessed prior to his eureka moment. And he had intimate knowledge, or a tool kit, cultivated in his job that enabled him to see the solution and to realize it in a shop. As Sharkey suggests in his report, Sadow brought together two very old technologies, the wheel and the sack, and two metaphorical (i.e. signifying) arenas that most people struggle to keep separate, that of vacation and labor. Inventive resignification? Yes. Felicitous performative and innovation? Not so fast.

"This invention… did not take off immediately… 'People do not accept change well,'" Mr. Sadow reported to Sharkey, "recalling the many months he spent rolling his prototype bag on sales calls to department stores in New York and elsewhere." Cultural codes of masculinity and the conventional aesthetics of travel and work shaped people's understandings of how to handle these containers, and delimited the interpretive boundaries dictating by whom, how, and what they could be used for. It was also an unsettled time in the travel world, as "airplanes decisively replaced trains as the common mode of long-distance travel." Sharkey, who reports on business travel, states that "Mr. Sadow's suitcase was ultimately supplanted by a more popular innovation—the now ubiquitous Rollaboard and its imitators." The Rollaboard, Sharkey reports, was invented in 1987.

4 Conclusion

A literature review on innovation indicates that the term is very much a pressing concern: organizational studies are consumed by the topic, it is considered central to the notion of corporate and national competitiveness, technology today seems to be engaged in an exercise of making the very term innovation appear routine and mundane, and we turn to innovation as a means to make sense of and exist in the increasingly globalized human experience. In this article I have offered a cultural theory and definition of invention and innovation, ones derived from structuralist and poststructuralist theories, in attempt to draw future researchers' attention to the interpretive dimensions that both foster and constrain creativity and reception. Material objects such as food, human bodies and their costumes, technological artefacts like the computer, everyday low-tech objects designed for ease and efficiency like the roller-bag and materiality more generally are infused with and constituted by meanings that are derive from the cultural system. As such, invention and innovation are cultural phenomena in as much as they are merely economic or technical ones. Future research on invention and innovation will be strengthened to the extent that it incorporates theories of meaning into its explanations.

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