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# The strength of weak culture

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## Abstract

The theoretical work of Granovetter on the strength of weak social ties needs to be extended to the study of cultural objects and relations. The tie that binds an actor to a cultural taste might be strong (purposive, intensive in time or commitment, fostered by a tightly integrated community bound by social symbols and representations) or weak (banal, non-instrumental, non-demanding, non-exclusive). Weak culture can be “strong” in several different respects. We elucidate various possibilities and conundrums: whether weak culture bridges across otherwise disconnected social groups, or bonds actors to a wider collectivity than is possible on the basis of strong-culture commitments; weak culture as signifying elaborated (as opposed to restricted) genre codes, versus the moderation of genre commitments; and weak culture as enabling publics and institutional domains as well as enabling movement across domains. Then, in analysis of items from the US General Social Survey Culture Module (1993;  $N = 1606$ ), we illustrate the strength of weak culture (operationalized as “liking” versus “loving” musical genres) in producing perceptions of an integrated national society.

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## 1. Introduction

In the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, young Jim Nolan has just become a member of the Communist Party and is being taken along by the older, more experienced Mac McLeod—as the two organizers travel to a small California town to encourage the local apple pickers to go on strike, following the slashing of fruit pickers’ wages to fifteen cents by the growers’ association. These events unfold at the opening of John Steinbeck’s 1936 novel, *In Dubious Battle*. In a quiet moment on the road with Jim, hopping a freight train toward the orchards and the workers, Mac

...rolled a brown cigarette. “Jim,” he said. “You ought to take up smoking. It’s a nice social habit. You’ll have to talk to a lot of strangers in your time. I don’t know any quicker way to soften a stranger down than to offer him a smoke, or even to ask him for one. And

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lots of guys feel insulted if they offer you a cigarette and you don't take it. You better start.” (Steinbeck, 1936: 41)

Soon the two organizers reached a gathering of apple pickers, sitting in a ring around a small fire, and

. . . Mac squatted and motioned Jim to sit beside him. He pulled out his sack of tobacco and made a careful, excellent cigarette; then, as an afterthought, “Would any of you capitalists like a smoke?”

Several hands thrust out. The bag went from man to man. “Just get in?” the lean face asked.

“Just. Figure to pick a few apples and retire on my income.” (Steinbeck, 1936: 51)

Soon after, the conversation threatens to turn into what Mische and White (1998: 700) precisely define as a “situation,” fraught with uncertainty and danger:

Mac repeated softly, “All them nice apples. if we don't pick'em, they'll rot.”

“If we don't pick'em, somebody else will.”

“S'pose we didn't let nobody else pick?” Mac said.

The men around the fire grew tense. “You mean—strike?” Lean-face asked.

Mac laughed. “I don't mean nothing.” (Steinbeck, 1936: 51)

In the novel, smoking is a not very exceptional activity but just a “nice social habit,” in particular among men, a form of what we will analyze as “weak culture” that encourages talk, especially in the case of “strangers” (“*Just get in?*”).<sup>1</sup> The Communist organizers would like to give instruction to the workers—but as Goffman ([1974] 1986: 561) notes, in developing the theory of “Frame Analysis”—instruction-giving often belongs to the realm of formal occupational roles, and it is unlikely that such an interaction will occur “without a bordering of small talk cast in still another domain.” The offering of a cigarette and the accompanying small talk can be seen to provide an important opportunity for local action in what Leifer (1988) has called “the interaction prelude to role setting,” here applied to these vignettes from Steinbeck's novel. Goffman (1981: 125–128) observes the role of “small talk” in initiating and terminating interactions in more formal settings, such as business or service encounters. Goffman further relates switches in and out of small talk to code switching,<sup>2</sup> and also to changes in the alignments of speakers to one another that he analyzes by means of his concept of “footing.”

In this article, we wish to pursue further and analyze the function of weak culture in evoking, structuring, and providing strategies for organizing social networks.

<sup>1</sup> Collins (2004: 323) writes that, in the first half of the twentieth century and “among the humbler classes, the exchange of cigarettes or even cigarette butts was a way to strike up a friendship or at least a transient obligation.” Some other tobacco rituals discussed by Collins (2004: 297–344) emphasize hierarchy rather than camaraderie. Reciprocal gift-giving and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are concepts that weave through Collins's typology.

<sup>2</sup> Goffman (1981: 126) quotes the observation of sociolinguists Blom and Gumperz (1972) that “when residents [in Hemmesberget, northern Norway] step up to a clerk's desk, greetings and inquiries about family affairs tend to be exchanged in the dialect, while the business part of the transaction is carried on in the standard [language]”.

## 2. The strength of weak culture

The seminal theoretical work of Granovetter (1973) more than three decades ago on the strength of social ties needs to be extended to the study of cultural objects and relations, and keyed to encompass not only structure but also the dynamics of code switching. The word “culture” appears in only one paragraph of Granovetter’s agenda-setting article, a paragraph in which he distinguishes his structural tie-strength theory from opposing explanations of social organization rooted in what he proceeds to dismiss as “variations in culture and personality” (Granovetter, 1973: 1373).

By way of contrast, our starting point is that one’s relationships with cultural objects and one’s relations with other persons have much in common (see also Pachucki and Breiger, 2010 on unifying the study of social networks and culture). Douglas (1996: 81–82) insightfully calls on scholars to understand consumption as not especially about choices among commodities “but between kinds of relationships.” Shoppers often define themselves by the items they reject. “The cause of the rejection is that the person does not want to be associated with another who would definitely like to be seen with these shoes on, or this tie or scarf” (Douglas, 1996: 63).

More generally, with Bourdieu (1984) we assert that persons and tastes are mutually constitutive: a person is defined relationally by the tastes he or she displays; objects are defined relationally by the type of people associated with them.<sup>3</sup> DiMaggio (1987: 441) adopts just such a point of view in his discussion of genre: “genres consist of those sets of works which bear similar relations to the same sets of persons,” noting further that the logic behind this imagery “will be familiar to students of network analysis as one of ‘structural equivalence.’” Lamont (1992) stands back from the determinism of (some strands of) these arguments, focusing light on the relative permeability of symbolic boundaries (“some boundaries are weaker than others,” Bourdieu, 1984: 182) in ways that anticipate some of our arguments.

Lizardo (2006) shows that people’s orientation toward tastes affects the structure of their social networks. Although social networks and tastes are mutually constitutive, and to some degree joint products of larger social forces, Lizardo’s recent work supports the notion of causation flowing more effectively from tastes to networks than the other way around. Lizardo calls for tastes to be understood as foci, or “cultural structures that serve to organize social interaction around commonly shared knowledge and interests” (Lizardo, 2006: 785, extending Feld, 1981, on the focused organization of social ties). Furthermore, a commitment to highbrow culture tends to promote strong ties, and a commitment to popular culture tends to promote weak ties. Lizardo maintains that it is because highbrow culture is less widely consumed—*not* because it is more highly valued—that it promotes strong ties. A similar effect should be observed for any specialized or niche-oriented consumption pattern. The more niche-oriented a particular cultural object, the more a linkage to that object will tend to support the growth of stronger ties (Lizardo, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> The entirety of Bourdieu’s theorization of “taste” is much more complex than we present it in this paper (see, e.g., Ch. 3 of Bourdieu, 1984). We emphasize the mutual constitution of tastes and agents, as when Bourdieu (1990:131-132) writes that “taste (or the habitus) as a system of classificatory models is objectively referred, via the social conditionings which produced it, to a social condition: agents classify themselves, expose themselves to classification, by choosing, in conformity with their tastes, different attributes, clothes, types of food, drinks, sports, friends, which go well together and which they also find agreeable or, more exactly, which they find suitable for their position. More exactly: they classify themselves by choosing, in the space of available goods and services, goods that occupy a position in this space homologous to the position they occupy in social space. This means that nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies.” In brief: “Taste is what brings together things and people that go together” (Bourdieu, 1984: 241).

Our intuition is that Lizardo's work has implications as well for the strategizing of social ties. Imagine a young professional on a first day at a new job. She goes into the break-room where some coworkers are discussing musical genres. One says he really enjoys "oldies" and the new employee does too. That is a start, but it is not really a basis for much more than a very weak tie between the two; practically *everyone* likes oldies. However, it is something to make small talk about, thus providing the ideal medium for the pure form of sociability that is so central to Simmel's sociology. ("Only the sociable is a 'society' without qualifying adjective, because it alone presents the pure, abstract play of form. . .," Simmel, [1910] 1949: 255). By way of contrast, a learned disquisition on one's love of opera (an uncommon and "elite" genre) could be interpreted by the newly met coworkers as too overtly instrumental, a premature effort to claim a role (Leifer, 1988) or a relationship, which would be outside Simmel's upper bound for pure sociability in talk.<sup>4</sup>

The repercussions of such transgressions might be small, but larger-scale boundary violations may incur significant reprisals. Basing one's ties in sociable substrate is by definition low-risk, and yields weak ties. Or as Simmel ([1910] 1949: 259) stated this point, "in the serious affairs of life, men [we would say, men and women] talk for the sake of the content which they wish to impart or about which they want to come to an understanding," whereas "in sociability talking is an end in itself."

From whence derives the strength of sociability, this weak form of culture? As illustrated in our vignettes from Steinbeck's novel, weak culture helps to bridge to "strangers" and beyond closed groups of dedicated adherents (such as members of a Communist Party), and may be used strategically to reach outward. As reflected in our references above to Goffman's work, weak culture provides a necessary substrate from which planned social relations grow or are revealed, a dialectic of intentional communication and bonding that is observable in indicators such as code switching.<sup>5</sup> And not least, sociability, as "the play form of association," implies that "the social game has a deeper double meaning," in that not only is sociability a play form "*in* a society," but also and at the same time, "actually 'society' is played" (Simmel [1910] 1949: 258, original emphasis), mirrored in sociability and at the same time structured by it.

How do strong ties get formed? The crucial aspect of their genesis is that they cannot be formed from pure Simmelian sociability alone. For example, what if the veteran employee in the break-room admits to loving heavy metal, the most hated music genre of all (Bryson, 1996)?<sup>6</sup> If it turns out that the new employee loves it too, then that potential tie is likely to be off to a strong start. This sort of statistical improbability<sup>7</sup>—that two heavy metal fans would meet by chance at

<sup>4</sup> In this context, a business or factory office in the US, we are willing to consider opera as a "strong" cultural form that is not widely shared. In an ethnographic study of opera fans in Buenos Aires, Benzecry (2009: 131) finds that "passionate opera fans enjoy opera based on their belief that opera is something that needs to be learned in order to be properly enjoyed." Whereas high commitment (passion) suggests strong culture, connoisseurship (the practical mastery of nuanced artistic distinctions) might be more consistent with weak culture, a point we further discuss in Section 3.2. In brief: any allocation of genres to the categories of "strong" or "weak" culture must be context-dependent.

<sup>5</sup> As editor Corinne Kirchner pointed out to us, other indicators of the switch from "pure" sociability to targeted or planned communication are possible, such as moving closer or farther from the conversational partner, speaking more or less softly, or other possible non-verbal signs, instead of or in addition to code switching.

<sup>6</sup> Here again, context matters (see also note 4 above). Although heavy metal was the most disliked genre in the US according to the 1993 General Social Survey (Bryson, 1996), a recent Finnish study found that only 33% of the respondents reported disliking this genre (Purhonen et al., 2010).

<sup>7</sup> "The extreme improbability of the particular encounter between particular people, which masks the probability of interchangeable chance events, induces couples to experience their mutual election as a happy accident, a coincidence which mimics transcendent design ('made for each other') and intensifies the sense of the miraculous" (Bourdieu, 1984: 243).

the office—generates the sort of emotional excitement that Collins (2004) expounds with reference to interaction rituals: “*Really?! You’re kidding! Me too!*”

And then one—quite unthinkingly—tries harder than usual in order to “make it work,” that is, to form and sustain a relationship. It is that *trying* that is the stuff of the strong tie.

### 3. Conceptual conundrums in the study of weak culture: an agenda

Our review and thinking about sociological studies that touch on the strength of culture as a variable leads us to identify conundrums and lack of clarity that should provide an agenda for further work.

#### 3.1. Bonding or bridging?

In one of its senses, weak culture signifies banality (as in the smoking vignettes in Steinbeck’s novel), a social life without the contents. Not that this kind of pure sociability is unimportant. To the contrary, as noted, Simmel ([1910] 1949) theorized it as the very essence of social interaction, as well as the basis of his studies of fashion and coquetry (Simmel, [1910] 1949, 1957), among other topics. However, does sociability provide a bridge to other regions of a large social network, or (on the contrary) is it most useful as a form of identification, bonding actors who have strong ties? Even raising this question suggests that both weak culture and strong culture are distinctively different yet potentially highly effective species of social capital, in that Putnam (2000) and Burt (2005) have suggested that social capital more generally can (in various guises) have separate functions of bonding and bridging.

An example of the bridging function of sociability is talk about sports in the private contract security industry in Toronto (Erickson, 1996). When asked what interests they had in common with others at work, the people (very largely, men) in Erickson’s study revealed that sports talk is both “remarkably popular and remarkably evenly spread across classes.” The important implication is that sports talk is “very useful in tending work relationships between” as well as within classes, to the point where “the correlation of culture with class is no predictor of the use of culture in class relations at work.” Talk of sports is “a classless topic in which all can participate equally” (Erickson, 1996: 235).

On the other hand, Homans (1961: 320–323) has theorized that sociability is related to mutual sociometric choices and to bonding actors of equal status. Homans was reviewing the structuring of social relations among delinquent young women at the New York State Training School for Girls, the site in upstate New York that provided the locale for important early quantitative studies of social networks. The investigator had asked the young women to make sociometric choices of others in the same setting on the basis of three main criteria: wanting to live with another, work with her, and spend leisure time with her. Choices on living and working were very much alike (the two networks overlapped substantially) and were related to the ordering of esteem among the women. Leisure choices provided a substantially different network, one with more mutual ties and one in which those chosen were much more similar to the chooser on the basis of esteem. In addition, leisure choices were very likely to be based on what Homans called “idiosyncrasies,” such as “a taste for, say, bird watching.” One young woman went so far as to declare, in explaining her choice for a leisure partner, “You’ll think this is a crazy reason but it’s the truth. She likes noise like I like noise. . . Susan and I race all over the place in our spare time. . .” Homans points out, however, that a narrow niche of banal interests leads to a more restrictive social circle (“the more idiosyncratic were a girl’s values, the fewer people, naturally,

she could find to share them”). More recently, an ecology of identities (including the size of the categories that people occupy) has been central to Smith-Lovin’s (2007: 113) theorization of identity weakness or strength.

A key possibility concerning this conundrum—setting the scope conditions according to which weak culture might provide bonds that solidify primary groups or, on the other hand, provide bridges across conventional categorical boundaries, as was the role of weak ties in Granovetter’s theory—is that the concept that White (2008: 36–37, 280–281) discusses as *decoupling* may operate. Returning to talk of sports, Erickson (1996: 223) provides an instructive example, noting that although sports talk helps to build cooperative ties across class levels, at the same time, foreign-born people and women who work in the private security industry know (on the average) much less about sports in comparison to their male colleagues; therefore, sports talk provides one occasion for the marginalization of women and the foreign-born from “the informal networks that both keep companies integrated and help further individual careers.” Talk of sports provides weak-tie coupling of men across class lines, while such talk simultaneously decouples women and the foreign-born from the mainstream men, creating exclusionary boundaries that could contribute to strong-tie bonding within each of the excluded groups.

From the point of a strategic orientation toward bridging holes in a network (a topic that Burt has pioneered in his 1992 book and subsequently, but not we believe with reference to sustained consideration of culture), an actor might be well advised to develop “network variety”—contacts with people situated at many different locations within a social network, which is important “because contact with different types of people includes contact with different types of culture” (Erickson, 1996: 227)—or to cultivate knowledge that bridges across many different genres (“multicultural capital,” Bryson, 1996), which is associated in the United States with higher education as well as with cultural strategies that exclude genres liked by people of low education.

In addition to calling attention to the concepts of decoupling and network variety, we would like to pursue the conundrum raised above—that is, the extent to which weak culture is associated with bonding or bridging—by considering the question: what do people talk about when they discuss important matters? Bearman and Parigi (2004) put this question (essentially, the “important matters” question that has appeared several times on the US General Social Survey and which provides a fundamental venue for network analysis at the level of a representative sample of American adults) to a representative sample of North Carolina adults, who were asked (as the national-level respondents had not been), *what* they discussed.<sup>8</sup> And the answer to that? “Just about everything is the simple answer” (Bearman and Parigi, 2004: 537). Many of the topics that people admitted to discussing as “important matters” seemed banal and inconsequential, such as the cloning of headless frogs, getting a new haircut, or the new traffic lights installed in town. Many of these topics “bear only the vaguest and most tenuous relationship to the achievement of instrumental ends” (Bearman and Parigi, 2004: 553). Even topics in the news that were mentioned as important matters (such as the “nanny” in Boston who murdered her charge, a state trooper who was shot on interstate 95, and moral issues in the Clinton White House) seemed much more chatty than instrumental. Does this throw into doubt the usefulness of the “important matters” survey question? We would answer, not necessarily, though we would agree with Bearman and Parigi’s suggestion to focus in the future on specific conversational domains.

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<sup>8</sup> An excellent introduction to the principal network item in the General Social Survey, as well as to the use of representative social surveys for collection of network data on the local networks of the respondents, is provided in Burt (1984). Throughout his article, Burt refers to the “important matters” survey question (“who are the people with whom you discussed important personal matters” during the previous six months) as a measure of “intimacy”.

Given our Simmelian perspective on the strength of pure sociability, we see “headless frogs” and similarly banal and chatty topics as a social glue that can bond people to their strong-tie associates with whom they can afford to engage in a play form of social association, even as it might bridge across class or racial gaps (as when acquaintances known only at the workplace might be conversation partners for remarks in passing about a spectacularly lurid or salacious local news story).<sup>9</sup> So, from our perspective, the interesting question about weak culture is not that it is (by definition) often banal, but rather the conditions under which it bonds actors or, on the contrary, bridges regions and levels of social networks.

### 3.2. *Genre differences versus moderation of commitments*

Much of the literature that comes closest to an explicit discussion of the relative strength and weakness of culture is about genre differences (such as highbrow culture in contrast to lowbrow), ignoring the issue that individuals might choose, either strategically or unintentionally, to intensify their commitment to a genre (such as jazz music) and their involvement with it, or on the other hand to moderate that involvement, which we see as a variable that is separate from the number or popularity of genres with which a person is involved.

Basil Bernstein has famously theorized about two distinctive linguistic codes (regulative principles that “select and integrate ‘relevant meanings’;” see the review in Atkinson, 1985).<sup>10</sup> Restricted codes are forms of discourse that emerge in tightly bounded groups where everyone has “access to the same fundamental assumptions” (Douglas, 1982: 22). As Ansell (1997) describes them, restricted codes imply a powerful but parochial form of group cohesion based on solidaristic mobilization. Elaborated codes, by way of contrast, encourage individualism and personal introspection rather than conformity; they are less parochial and limited in their emotive appeal.<sup>11</sup>

Ansell (1997: 363) has explicitly drawn a parallel between these two forms of culture (restricted and elaborated) and Granovetter’s structural theory of social ties (strong and weak). Restricted codes parallel the idea of “strong,” transitive, and multiplex networks that nonetheless are brittle in the sense that they tend not to lead outside the cliques of adherents. Elaborated codes parallel “weak” intransitive and specialized ties limited in their emotional intensity but promoting cosmopolitanism and social integration. Thus, Ansell avers, “network theory maps easily onto the pure case of restricted and elaborated codes.” A recent study implying a similar distinction is Yeung’s (2005: 399) examination of the “counterintuitive finding” of earlier work on communes (Zablocki, 1980), according to which communes exhibiting a high social network density of “loving” ties had a lifespan only half as great as those with a low density of such ties. In a comparative study of the lattices of personality types and relationship types in both kinds of commune, Yeung (2005: 409) finds that communes with elaborated meaning systems (which,

<sup>9</sup> A recent study of creativity narratives among college students (Pachucki et al., 2010: 139–140) finds that, across all types of creativity identified in the study, “social interactivity emerges as a major focus for these students; many feel they are making a unique and creative contribution when they are helping others, exercising leadership, organizing events, and simply hanging out and talking.” Thus, “the majority of creativity is associated with everyday experiences and social interaction, in contrast to a popular and scholarly focus on extraordinary individual achievement in domains like art and science” (Pachucki et al., 2010: 122).

<sup>10</sup> Our discussion here closely follows Ansell (1997: 362–364).

<sup>11</sup> A related strand of work applies the distinction between restricted and elaborated codes to the study of music. Bergesen (1979) treats the codes of spirituals, jazz, blues, and soul music as ways to understand religion in African American history. Cerulo (1995) provides a quantitative framework for comparative study of the code elaborateness of national anthems.

following Ansell, we will label as “weak culture”) are those that have low tie density (weak social network ties).

Another link between elaborated codes and weak culture is the concept of connoisseurship. Snobbery explains the musical tastes of the snobs, Simmel wrote, not of the connoisseurs (Boudon, 1996: 185). Connoisseurship, or what Bourdieu (1984: 472) calls “the practical mastery of classification,” allows the connoisseur to show reserve and nuance in displaying one’s tastes, a species of weak culture, whereas the restricted code of the snob does not allow fine distinctions of judgment. The strength of this kind of weak culture is that it provides legitimation for appropriation of goods that are highly valued, both symbolically and materially. As Bourdieu (1984: 279) writes with reference to advertisements for fine Burgandy wines, “Through his mastery of a verbal accompaniment, preferably technical, archaic and esoteric, which separates informed tasting from mere passive consumption, the connoisseur shows himself worthy of symbolically appropriating the rarities he has the material means of acquiring.”<sup>12</sup>

Later and apparently independently of Ansell, Lizardo (2006: 783–784) lumped together Bernstein with aspects of theories put forward by Bourdieu and by Randall Collins to assert that popular culture has “generalized conversion value” in that pop culture (in contrast to highbrow culture) can be more easily converted into “weak-tie connections with heterogeneous others.” Elite (highbrow) culture, for Lizardo, has “restricted conversion value” in that it is more likely to sustain recurrent, strong-tie networks and maintain existing boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

The story told so far is very congenial to our framework in that Granovetter’s strong and weak social ties are seen to be paralleled or mirrored by strong and weak forms of culture; moreover, in Lizardo’s highly innovative thesis, culture is causative for social network form, rather than the (conventional) other way around.

However, there is a different and also highly promising approach to genres and ties that has a different emphasis and that is not considered by Lizardo. Whether the genre is classical music or jazz, it is possible for an individual to “consume” it for just a couple of hours a week in a fairly superficial way or, on the other hand, to listen to it for many hours each week, to study it, to join a group that performs it, to actively seek out venues where it is performed, and to hate other forms of music. Therefore, in addition to the genre question (whether it is high or low), and in addition to the omnivore question (the distribution of high and low genres that are consumed), there is the question of preference strength (or weakness); Mark (1998) puts forth the “weak preference hypothesis,” according to which the number of weak musical preferences a person maintains is related positively to the number of niches (i.e., locations in demographic space of people who manifest a given genre preference) that overlap at that person’s location in demographic space (Mark, 1998: 466).

In a way that leads into our next major conundrum (regarding “publics”), we point out that this question of the relative moderation (or intensification) of one’s self-presentation with respect to tastes is related not only to sociability but also to domain switches between public and private realms. Here once again we have recourse to Simmel, who, in his keynote address to the inaugural meeting of the German Sociological Society in 1910, put the outrageous question to his quite proper audience (which included Weber and Tönnies) as to whether a woman is more likely

<sup>12</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting the connections among reserve, weak culture, and connoisseurship, a point that we developed with reference to Simmel and Bourdieu.

<sup>13</sup> Of course it also needs to be recognized that works of so-called “shallow popular culture” may often be analyzed to reveal a “sophistication of stylistic form and philosophical depth of thematic content” (Bergesen 2006: 2), which Bergesen recognizes in his title, *The Depth of Shallow Culture*.

to wear a low-cut dress at a small social gathering or at a large party. His answer, which illustrates his sociology of sociability, is that “a lady would want to appear in such extreme *décolletage*” not in an “intimately friendly situation with one or two men,” but instead at a large and “formally constituted gathering” where she could “abandon herself to the impersonal freedom of the mask” (Simmel, [1910] 1949: 256). We take it that one of the strengths (or at least, qualities) of weak culture (the kind that characterizes large social gatherings) is precisely its constitution of a public.

### 3.3. *Publics, switching, and culture strength*

In our paper’s introductory section we interpreted the presence of small talk and smoking in Steinbeck’s novel in part by reference to Goffman’s ([1974] 1986: 561) observation that purposeful talk is often unlikely to occur “without a bordering of small talk cast in still another domain.” A distinctive feature of weak culture may be that it constitutes “decontextualized passages through complex and uncertain transitions in role sets and institutional trajectories” (Mische and White, 1998: 705), the latter (role sets and institutional trajectories) being the stuff, in contrast, of strong culture. Mische and White (1998: 701) discuss the coffee break, which to us provides a good and commonplace instance of weak culture and an occasion for banal sociability, which nonetheless presents—just because of its banal taken-for-granted nature—opportunities for shifting in and out of other domains. That is, switching is always possible from one structuring principle (juice drinkers on one side and smokers shunted off to have their own little conversation) to another (sales managers over here, production clerks over there). This kind of switching is of course highly routine, but it is “as much problematic as it is routine” (Mische and White, 1998: 701), offering opportunities as well as constraints, constructed as much after the fact as before. The coffee break is a public venue that might also serve as a set of boundaries among other publics.

Also in our paper’s introductory section, we referred to Leifer’s (1988) theory of local action, which we might term a form of weak culture that takes place (as for example at a cocktail party or a large social gathering) prior to the securing of coveted roles (the latter constituting, in our view, a form of strong culture); it “marks an intense involvement in interaction itself” (Leifer, 1988: 869), and differs from Simmel’s concept of sociability in that Leifer’s actors are ruthlessly strategic competitors who refrain from locking in to an understandable strategy (such as a particular template for a plan of attack when playing the game of chess) in order to encourage their opponent to do so first (and hence to be beaten by a rational counter to their now-exposed plan of rationality). White (2008: 288) argues that local action could be seen as robust action, which is “just that which permits gaming and speculation to continue, which prevents anyone from seeing clearly an outcome that would end the social tie.” Clearly, the strength of local or robust action is that it is a form of weak culture that precedes yet leads to a stable role structure.

So what is the conundrum? The conundrum is that this processual emphasis on switching, and on weak culture as providing locations and occasions to refashion boundaries among domains and publics, has no parallel in the literature at Granovetter’s structural level of the strength or weakness of social ties. We do have insightful models of the optimum distribution of social ties as between strong and weak ties (Boorman, 1975; Jackson, 2008), assuming that actors act rationally. We have a major effort to expand linguistic processes and mechanisms of embedding to social institutions (White, 2008: 74). But we have nothing on the structural side of tie strength theory that parallels code switching, changes in real time of an individual’s deployment of strong versus weak ties to particular others in order to weave social action while weaving a story (on which, see White and Godart, 2007 on struggles over identity and control). Still awaiting development is a sound micro-dynamics as to *how* actors move between strong and weak ties.

#### 4. Liking versus loving, and the strength of weak culture

Weak culture makes a difference. If this concept is recognized by researchers as a relevant variable, often its effects are tangible in empirical analysis. We here provide one illustrative example. Our data context, one often used by analysts of musical taste (Bryson, 1996; Han, 2003; Mark, 1998; Sonnett, 2004; Tampubolon, 2008), is the 1993 Culture Module, part of the US General Social Survey described by Marsden and Swingle (1994)—a survey that has retained its relevance for more than fifteen years due to the questions it asks and the (larger) research questions that it has allowed to be opened up. We would like to emphasize that, in contrast to the elaborate and sophisticated analyses cited above in this paragraph, we are providing an illustration of our ideas rather than a definitive test.

A representative sample of US adults were asked whether they believed that Americans are united or divided about their most important values.<sup>14</sup> We take as our dependent variable the chances that a respondent answers this question by asserting that Americans are “divided” in their values. Specifically, we employ logistic regression to model the logarithm of the odds of a response of “divided” rather than “united.”

If strong culture has “restricted conversion value” that is likely to lead to well-defended boundaries among taste genres (see Section 3.2), we might well expect that strong culture will be associated with a perception of division among Americans in their values. On the other hand, if weak culture is more likely to lead to ties and cultural desires that span taste boundaries on the basis of its “generalized conversion value,” then we should expect weak culture to be more associated with a perception that Americans are less “divided” and more “united” in the values that they hold.

Our measure of weak and strong culture follows from our discussion of weak culture as moderating commitments (Section 3.2). Respondents were asked their evaluation of eighteen kinds of music (ranging from “Latin/salsa” to “classical/chamber music” to “show tunes” to “Gospel;” discussion of the eighteen genres is provided in Bryson, 1996 and in Han, 2003). We take the response “like it very much” as a strong tie of affiliation between a respondent and a musical taste. An alternative, that the respondent says that she or he “likes” a particular kind of music, indicates to us a weaker tie of “liking” rather than “loving” a cultural form. Overall, people “loved” relatively few genres, and they “liked” relatively more.<sup>15</sup> Our variables *N1* and *N2* count the number of genres loved and liked (respectively) by each respondent. For purposes of comparison, our variables *N3*, *N4*, and *N5* provide counts (for each respondent) of the number of genres about which she or he expressed mixed feelings, dislike, and extremely dislike, respectively.

Precedent for considering the importance of the number of genres “liked” as opposed to “loved” comes from van Eijck’s (2001) analysis of a Dutch survey of musical tastes. For each of 13 genres in the Dutch survey, respondents could indicate whether they listened to it “often,” “every now and then,” or “seldom or never.” Following Peterson’s (1992) argument that the ability to display passing knowledge is crucial for status claims, van Eijck (2001: 1169) hypothesized that status groups will differ most markedly in the number of genres listened to

<sup>14</sup> The exact question wording (Marsden and Swingle, 1994) is: “There is a lot of discussion today about whether Americans are divided or united. Some say that Americans are united and in agreement about the most important values. Others think that Americans are greatly divided when it comes to the most important values. What is your view about this?” Responses that were coded are “Americans are united,” “Americans are divided,” “don’t know,” and “no answer.” Overall, about 32% answered “united,” 63% replied that Americans are “divided,” and fewer than 5% are coded in the remaining categories.

<sup>15</sup> Sixty-one percent of the 1606 respondents loved from one to three genres, and only 4% loved more than six genres. However, 50% of the respondents liked four to seven genres, and 32% liked at least seven.

Table 1  
Coefficients from logit regression models predicting response of “Divided”.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>N1</i> (“Like very much”)	.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)	.01 (.04)	
<i>N2</i> (“Like it”)	−.07* (.03)	−.06* −0.03	−.06 <sup>a</sup> (.03)	−.06** (.02)
<i>N3</i> (“Mixed feelings”)	−.06 <sup>a</sup> (.03)	−.05 (.03)	−.04 (.03)	
<i>N4</i> (“Don’t like it”)	0.02 (.03)	−.03 (.03)	.03 (.03)	
<i>N5</i> (“Dislike very much”)	−0.01 (.03)	0 (.03)	0 (.03)	
Degree		−.24 <sup>a</sup> (.13)	−.21 (.13)	−.26* (.13)
AfrAmer			.38* (.19)	.40* (.19)
Intercept	1.22** (.46)	1.16* (.46)	1.05* (.46)	1.00*** (.12)
<i>df</i>	1521	1519	1518	1522
Deviance	1934.1	1930.0	1925.8	1933.5

Standard errors are in parentheses. *N1* through *N5* give number of genres loved, liked, evoking mixed feelings, disliked, and hated (respectively).

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

“now and then” as opposed to “often.” The hypothesis was confirmed, though the actual differences between status groups were small.

As indicated in Table 1, expressing the view that Americans are “divided” rather than “united” about their most important values is negatively and very significantly predicted by the prevalence of “weak culture” as measured by the number of musical tastes that are simply “liked” (variable *N2*), even when controlling for the number of genres “loved” (*N1*) as well as the other possible evaluations. Each additional genre liked decreases the log-odds of a belief in “divided” values by .069, and this coefficient (of *N2*) is significant at the .02 level. By way of contrast, all but one of the remaining evaluations have no significant impact on the dependent variable. The one exception is the number of musical tastes about which the respondent has mixed feelings, which reduces the log-odds of a “divided” response by .056 and is significant at the .07 level (see coefficient of *N3* in Model 1). Sonnett (2004) provides an extensive discussion of what he terms the “ambivalence” of people who have “mixed feelings” about some of these eighteen genres (our variable *N3*) which suggests to us that the “mixed feelings” response is close to our interpretation of weak culture (variable *N2*).<sup>16</sup>

Is our measure of weak culture just a proxy for education? To find out, we looked at a second model that adds the variable (labeled “degree”) of whether or not each respondent was a college

<sup>16</sup> Although there are 1606 respondents, 79 have missing values on the dependent variable (these pertaining to coded responses of “Don’t Know” and “No Answer” to the question on whether Americans are divided or united in their values), and one additional respondent has a missing value on the educational variable, thus resulting in the degrees of freedom reported in Table 1.

graduate and has an American BA degree or equivalent. The variable of being a college graduate (see Model 2 in Table 1) indeed lowers the probability of saying Americans are divided (rather than united) at the mildly significant .07 level. However, even controlling for education, “weak culture” (the number of genres merely “liked,” variable *N2*) is highly significant (at the .04 level) in lowering the probability of giving a “divided” (rather than “united”) response. In Model 2 none of the other evaluations (*N1* or *N3* through *N5*) have a significant impact on the dependent variable. Weak culture is not a proxy for education.

Given the importance of race in marking boundaries within American society, our third model includes a measure of whether or not each respondent is reported to be African-American. In Model 3 this race variable is the most significant ( $p = .046$ ) and, moreover, African Americans are *more* likely to think of Americans as divided (rather than united) in their most important values. In the presence of race, the education variable becomes insignificant at the levels we code ( $p = .11$ ). Nonetheless, even controlling for race and education, the “weak culture” variable (*N2*) remains noticeably significant ( $p = .055$ ), reducing the log-odds of a “divided” response by .058 for each additional musical genre that a respondent “likes.”

In the final model of Table 1 we tried to simplify, including only education, race, and our measure of weak culture. The fit of Model 4 is not significantly worse than that of Model 3 (at the .10 level). All variables are significant, with education decreasing the propensity to report that Americans are divided in their values, and being African-American increasing that propensity. In Model 4 there is a strongly significant ( $p = .0013$ ) effect of weak culture (variable *N2*) on decreasing the log-odds of a “divided” response. Indeed, according to Model 4, a respondent who is not a college graduate and who is not African-American has a 70.9% probability of saying that Americans are “divided” about their most important values if that respondent likes 2 genres. If the same respondent likes 8 genres, her predicted probability of saying that Americans are “divided” drops greatly, to 46.9%. Weak culture has a strong and significant impact on shaping attitudes toward the extent to which the United States is unified in its values, even in the presence of reasonable control variables. We believe that weak culture will be shown to be an important variable in many other contexts in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

In recent years sociologists have taken notice of the strength of weak identities (Smith-Lovin, 2007), the strength of weak agency (Pedriana and Stryker, 2004), the weak preference hypothesis (Mark, 1998), and the depth of shallow culture (Bergesen, 2006). Clearly there is a need for systematic theorization of, and empirical research on, culture strength and the dynamics of its impacts on social organization and outcomes, in an extension of Douglas’s (1996) theorization of group and grid that speaks to recent developments in social network analysis and cultural sociology. The theoretical work of Granovetter (1973) on the strength of social ties needs to be extended to the study of cultural objects and relations.

What are the definitions of strong and weak culture? Although we have avoided this question until now, and although indeed the various aspects we have treated are not entirely mutually consistent (as was also true of the strength definitions of social ties that Granovetter put forth),<sup>17</sup> we would like to propose the following aspects of culture strength/weakness as emerging from our

<sup>17</sup> Granovetter (1973) famously defined the strength of a social tie as a “(probably linear) combination” of the amount of time, intensity, and reciprocity of the relationship. But he also defined a weak tie as a bridging tie between otherwise disconnected clumps in a social network. These definitions are in far from perfect alignment with each other.

discussion. In contrast to strong culture, weak culture evidences a moderation of commitment in binding actors to tastes. Weak culture can be “strong” in encouraging perceptions of a unified, rather than a fragmented national society (an empirical finding that we probed in Section 4). Connoisseurship, a form of weak culture that emphasizes the practical mastery of elaborated systems of nuanced distinctions and that allows displays of reserve, is “strong” in that it legitimizes the appropriation of goods of high symbolic and material value. There might often be a parallelism between culture strength and the strength of social ties. That is, restricted cultural codes might often be accompanied by strong social ties, and generalized codes by weak ties (Ansell, 1997; Lizardo, 2006; Section 3.2). However, such a parallelism need not be the case. Collins (2004: 393, n. 12) suggests that all bridging ties have to be at least minimally successful as interaction rituals, and that, conversely, strongly interconnected cliques of mutual ties might characterize a set of actors that is “emotionally flat and perfunctory in the symbols they pass around.” Moreover, as in Erickson’s (1996) masterfully incisive analysis of sports talk (Section 3.1), weak culture might bridge across class divisions among men, even as it enforces a strong boundary between men and women (and others who have low knowledge of a strongly salient weak-culture domain). Strong culture is purposively oriented, whereas weak culture is often banal. In that the only motivations with which weak culture is concerned are formal social ones (as Simmel said of fashion; Simmel, 1957: 544), weak culture is the stuff of “pure sociability,” interaction in and of itself. Such interaction may be bonding or bridging. The ability to “switch” between strong and weak culture, or the provision of institutional affordances for doing so, is crucial for the definitions of (tense and fraught) “situations” (Mische and White, 1998) and for the kind of code-switching (Blom and Gumperz, 1972) that binds together social actors sufficiently so that they can work together to accomplish instrumental aims. Weak culture often provides a prelude to role taking (Leifer, 1988), a boundary between different publics, and a site for domain switching (White, 2008; Section 3.3).

Our essay has been suggestive, though hardly conclusive. Even our illustration of the strength of liking (vs. loving) of musical genres begs the question of whether a similar relation could be found in the literary or visual fields. While raising more questions than we have been able to answer, it is nonetheless our hope to have contributed to a more systematic examination of the strength and also the weakness of culture as an organizing axis for social and cultural dynamics.

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