

CULTURAL FRONTS: TOWARDS A DIALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

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Every single day since birth we have been forced to situate ourselves inside a vast number of different discursive environments and social situations that touch what we consider necessary to 'live well', that help us construct the meaning of 'who we are', and that introduce and reinforce the 'common values' we share and pursue. As we produce material life in order to survive (food, housing, clothing), we also find ways to exist in the middle of an intricate, dynamic, and constant flow of social discourses. Some of these discourses come from professional organizations whose very job is to define, regulate, and concentrate the meanings of common needs, identities, and values considered worth achieving and preserving. These tendencies are the *centripetal forces* in society.

We will see through the *cultural fronts* approach, however, that what is considered and lived as normal, taken for granted, evident, given, truthful, and obvious at any one time should be understood as a collective, but provisory and momentary, symbolic order. This precarious arrangement and organization of meaning is always subject to endless symbolic organizational counter-flows between cultural institutions (for example, schools versus churches on sexual information; scientists versus journalists on 'objective' interpretations of events; 'good' physicians versus 'healers' on the treatment of a simple cold; 'true' artists versus 'popular' singers, and so on). This precarious order is also submitted (or should be) to other kinds of counter-flows and definitions coming constantly from 'bottom-up', that is, material deployed from the unspecialized zones of everyday life. These counter-flows can be seen as *centrifugal* forces, which not only escape from the centralizing tendencies of institutions but take form as cultural dialogues that can eventually change the 'normal' definitions of life.

Among the most important consequences of modernity have been the processes in which institutional specialists in the symbolic elaboration of the world have appeared, changed, and sometimes disappeared. Through intense

discursive work, these cultural institutions, their agents, and their practices have reshaped the meaning of the public sphere. But the craft of redefining public life (in a centripetal direction) never occurs without other influences. It has had to conquer a *symbolic occupied territory*, filled and threatened by competing centrifugal interpretations, in a constant struggle. The study of such cultural dynamics as cultural fronts permits us to know how our dearest commonalities and most beloved feelings have been created. Cultural fronts therefore opens up possibilities for understanding the development and construction of diverse modes of symbolic convergence and integration.

Hegemony and cultural fronts

When symbolic convergence and integration depend on the discursive work of a more or less allied social group, in social science we often say that we have a relative state of hegemony (Fossaeft 1983). Whether active or passive, hegemony implies the recognition of authority and cultural legitimacy of a certain group. But the traditional concept of hegemony as it was used by V. I. Lenin in Russia, and later by Antonio Gramsci in Italy (González 1994), generally has been applied in a rather limited way and without sufficient theoretical and methodological connections to the experiences of everyday life; that is, without clear and plausible links to the forces that shape the concrete and actual meanings of our lives. Thus hegemony has remained a highly abstract concept. Typically it has been understood as something that happens at the macro-scale of the nation-state or the world system: all social classes fall under the command of a certain block of dominants. The concept often has been theorized to overlap with political domination and economic exploitation.

We need a less confining understanding of hegemony to serve us well. I'm thinking here more in terms of the way the concept is discussed by Stuart Hall (1979) and James Lull (1995, 2000), where hegemony is considered not a direct stimulation of thought or action but a framing of competing definitions of reality to fit within the dominant class's range.

This useful concept, hegemony, permits us to analyze how collective social agents have established historical and specific symbolic relationships with each other. Hegemony lets us identify the totality of relationships in society from a cultural perspective; that is, from the point of view of all the representations of the 'world' and 'life' that are skillfully elaborated, either by social institutions or by social agents, in an endless dialogical way. Because the tensional and dynamic construction of the common meanings that are created between ordering and dissipating social forces have not been well described, hegemony has been under-utilized or poorly utilized in empirical accounts of the very production of life (Bertaux 1977).

Cultural fronts: the fundamentally human formations at stake

Because of this poor implementation of hegemony in theory and research, the core role of a number of fundamentally human elements or transclass cultural formations has been neglected. What is missing, as the Italian anthropologist Alberto Cirese has brilliantly pointed out (1984), is a discussion of the plausible creation of diverse and expansive commonalities. Similarly, the space of position-taking in the search for 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) is established precisely from the actions of competing contestants operating on symbolic transclass formations. These fundamentally human elements should never be taken as immanent essences or as 'natural'. They all have been historically generated in relation to primary needs to survive as a biological species – feeding, housing, caring, loving, believing, eating, gendering, aging, trusting, honoring, and so on – and all of them have been generated and molded through the long term of history. Crucial contemporary issues like gender definition, ecology, economic development, and ethnicity have been shaped into discursive formations that are shared across social divisions: women have been subjugated mercilessly in every social stratum; ecological movements cannot be expanded as the exclusive property of any particular nation; economic policies over migration affect post-national realities, and so on. Transclass elements are constructed, not given, and owe their actual shape and symbolic existence to the tensional forces of different sociohistoric contingencies and contestants.

Hegemony is the name given to the *momentum* of the objective relationships of forces that exist between different collective social agents (for example, classes, groups, regions, and nations) situated in a determined social space which we observe from a *symbolic* point of view – that is, where the creation and recreation of meanings take form in the enactment of all social relations.

I find myself more comfortable, therefore, not conceiving of hegemony as a negative given fact like a syndrome of class control or a cancer to extirpate. Instead, I believe we can create a dialogical understanding of our common symbolic existence if we ask questions about how, from where, and between whom specific relations of symbolic authority have been structured, deconstructed, and re-created across a specific history. By history I mean changes and movements that are prompted by social agency and symbolic force performed both by specialized cultural institutions (acting as centralizing or 'centripetal' strengths), and by networks of social agents (the dissipative or 'centrifugal' forces).

Viewed within this framework, no society can organize its everyday production of life without hegemony. Thought of in a positive way, we can study any society as an integrated, structured set of objective relationships that emphasizes symbolic interaction. The cultural fronts approach, therefore, should be considered a kind of methodological intervention that permits us to interrogate

the totality of social relations from different but complementary points of view (Fossaert 1983). Following Fossaert's elaboration of three dimensions of Karl Marx's ideas, if we interrogate a society as a whole based on the way it produces economic value, then the representation of the totality of relations appears to be a system of exploitation. We can also analyze society in terms of the ways power is organized and exercised; then, the society will appear as a system of domination. Third, when we analyze society by focusing on how that society creates its ideologies as representations of the world, we observe the totality of structured social relationships as a system of hegemony. Moreover, economic value, power, and ideology are dimensions of all social relationships and should by no means be understood as isolated levels or crystallized stages. Gramsci's notion of hegemony (1975) in fact deals well with the specificity of this complex relation. He was clear that hegemony should not be mistaken for simple domination (González 1994: 21–53).

Because of its specific 'signicity' (Cirese 1984) and the implicit elementally human potential to create and recreate multiple possible worlds, hegemony should therefore *not* be necessarily linked in some rigid way to class domination and exploitation. The social relations of hegemony, unlike its dialectical relatives economic exploitation and political domination, imply not just two human components (exploited in one case, dominant in the other), but a triad of elements: the hegemonic (centralizing) pole, the subaltern (centralized) or subordinated pole, and the other (dissipative) possible element in the midst of an occupied symbolic territory.

In any hegemonic relationship the possibility always exists for a social agent to become no longer 'subordinated' when specific configurations of common meanings indicate that efficacy over this 'other' no longer exists. At the same time, the 'other' status opens a range of possible new configurations of meaning, still not yet 'hegemonic' (as another centralizing force), because it has not yet articulated the *collective will* of allied social agents or enemies around its symbolic framing enterprise (Gramsci 1975). Thus, we can think of hegemony productively as a framed space of possibilities, as an expansive space of multiple convergences. It should be noted in this regard that hegemony depends not only on the work of anticipation and elaboration, but also on the potential to articulate meanings and actions as centrifugal forces in strategies of social interpretation.

In contrast to crude explanations of social relations that are limited to discourses of political-economic exploitation and domination, hegemony can be built and destroyed only through communication.

Centralized order and reflexivity

Part of the symbolic efficacy of the sort of hegemony we actually know and experience resides in the fact that we don't know what we don't know (Maturana and Varela 1992). The opacity of our relations is mainly caused by a

lack of self and social reflexivity. Acquiring reflexivity means to empower oneself, at least to the point where some significant degree of self-determination can be achieved. That is at least part of the reason why the study of contemporary culture through the cultural fronts approach can be useful, not only in terms of the creation of scientific knowledge but in grassroots terms of getting involved in the reflexive reconstruction of self and society.

Identity: always dialogical, always plural

Identity is a rather rigid concept frequently used by social theorists to describe the ways different symbolic universes are constructed and used. In the contemporary world, however, the complexity of systems of self-reference has increased enormously. Accordingly, I will address questions of 'identities' rather than 'identity'. Furthermore, it is the everyday experience of the structured social worlds that brings about differentiated and differentiating representations and perceptions of these increasingly multi-dimensional social worlds. Thus, we recognize and talk about ourselves as 'being part of a number of imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). For instance, a single person can feel 'Latino', 'Mexican-American', or just 'Mexican' depending on the kinds of complex cultural tools the person employs in a specific social context (Werscht 1998). The person may feel proudly Latino when Ricky Martin, Selena, or Carlos Santana is launched to the top of entertainment business by the media. The same person can also feel deeply touched as a Mexican-American in the midst of a demonstration against an anti-immigration law. That same individual may feel simply Mexican through family and *barrio* memories when eating enchiladas, drinking Corona beer, and 'listening' (singing, shouting, dancing, crying) at a massive live concert when Los Tigres del Norte performs 'El otro México' or 'Los Hijos de Hernández'.² This person certainly will never meet either the 'Latino Community' as a whole, or the 'Mexican-American minority' in person. But through contact with various cultural texts and complex narratives, a man or woman, boy or girl, can have the sensation – the deep feeling of being part of something bigger – in which he or she is included in one way or another.

The concepts of *cultural field* and *social network* will now be introduced to help understand the two main forces (order and chaos, centripetal and centrifugal energy) merging in those intertwined symbolic zones I call cultural fronts.

Facing plural identities: communication between cultural fields and social networks

We know that any kind of identity is constructed into a determined situation, and that any construction is a selection of traits that fit particular social situations. Beyond this, we must recognize that each situational construction has a trajectory; it is built up historically. Consequently, we have a very complex

system of different 'we's' and 'others', of selfness and otherness. All these symbolic universes are constantly created and recreated with tremendous invested human energy. They are moving forces going in different directions. Their equilibria are precarious. Human behavior of all types is always linked with, and constructed in relation to, the material dimensions of these symbolic spaces which we can refer to as cultural fields:

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).

(Bourdieu 1993: 97)

The cultural fields are wide; they must be understood as complex structures of relations connecting institutions, agents, and practices that have been divided into varieties of specialized discursive formations coinciding with the structured social division of labor.

The cultural fields always evolve into crucial dynamics with *social networks* in which non-ideological specialists – families, folk, common people – read, interpret, interact with, and negotiate any specialized discursive production. Furthermore, the resulting valenced vectors are always constructed in a dialogical way; specialized valenced vectors intercross with the discursive conditions of everyday life. For example, churches, schools, hospitals, museums, restaurants, dance halls, broadcasting organizations, and many other institutions play a strong role in shaping our very selves from birth. All these institutions operate not only as vectors in the construction of 'our selves' but also in the construction of 'our differences' with others. This increasingly complex world of subjective differences also becomes a site where plural identities are perpetually constructed as systems of classification, and where attendant social practices take form.

But how can these very different and contradictory systems of classification be solidified, articulated, and merged? They can be shared only through communication. Since the beginning of the modern world, but especially since the advent of technologically mediated communication (Thompson 1995), cultural fields have been intertwined in a very specific kind of metasymbolic work. This process can be understood as a *second-order*, specialized, discursive, societal elaboration of pre-elaborated meanings.³ It is only through symbolic work and elaboration that elementally human events (birth, death, feeding, healing, believing, expressing, amusing, learning, consuming, and so on) are labeled, narrated, and metabolized – symbolically 'centralized' from a socio-historical

and skillful elaboration, designed precisely to conquer and occupy symbolically the semantic space of those deeply human events. This process of symbolic occupation involves both the quality and quantity of people whose space of possible meanings has been shaped and centralized around the particular definitions of a certain social group. We can find a good illustration of this in the work of Jane Tompkins (1985), for instance, who shows how stereotyped female characters and melodramatic plots in literature were designed to touch large audiences between the years 1790 and 1860. These are precisely the years of the formation of a national identity in the USA, embracing such central notions as independence and westward expansion. Tompkins brilliantly shows how sentimental novels of that period, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, operated 'as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time' (Tompkins 1985: 126). This kind of literature was either not taken seriously or deplored by most literary critics, but it immediately appealed to thousands of readers. Instead of disappearing, it has endured for generations.

In such cases, all the specialized discursive vectors are in constant interaction with an infinite number of non-specialized discursive elaborations that together create and sustain the common social discourse. This dynamic interplay gives us our first sketch of the total social discourse of any society (Fossaert 1983). In order to understand this complexity, we can invoke the familiar example of any society's 'gross national product' – the sum of the total economic value produced by a population within a concrete nation-state. In a similar way, the total social discourse should be the 'sum' of the total symbolic value generated within the confines of a particular geo-human location. As we can imagine, it is endless, always in arborescence, and cannot be quantified. It looks infinite because it really is.

These constellations of objective differences and positions can be connected only via an intensive discursive production whose precarious equilibrium can be interpreted as the momentum of hegemony. However, I do not consider hegemony to be the sum of the circulating dominant ideology. Hegemony as considered here does not have a measurable, fixed, or deterministic character. Hegemonic consensus and all its junctures must be considered to be very unstable. Every situated hegemony is always subject to a variety of symbolic struggles in which various social agents – corporations, institutions, classes, groups – invest mightily in the hard work of discursive elaboration of possible links and commonalities. Those conflicted crossings of precarious equilibrium are what I call cultural fronts.

Cultural fronts can be used both as a theoretical construct in cultural studies and social science generally, and as a methodological strategy for making observable and understanding the complexity of symbolic power in everyday life. In order to understand this complexity, we need a complex approach. The study of a cultural front can be accomplished only by constructing multi-dimensional configurations of empirical information.

Borders and arenas: open concepts

The meaning of a 'cultural front' has itself been polysemic from the beginning. The term has been used mainly in Marxist lines of critical theory as a way to link political struggles with mass mobilization (Mattelart 1977). More recently, Michael Denning (1997) has studied in detail the proletarian avant-garde that shaped American culture in the wake of the General Strikes of 1934; the cultural front came of age in the labor movement, in New Deal art projects, and in the emerging media industries. New York University Press has launched a book series named 'cultural fronts' with the same radical commitment across a range of cultural issues (Nelson 1997; Linton 1998). As a theoretical tool, cultural fronts should therefore be understood as an open systemic concept. It cannot be applied separately from its relations within other theoretical constructions: hegemony, cultural field, social network, and so on. As Bourdieu points out, 'concepts have no definition other than systemic ones, and are designed to be put to work empirically in systematic fashion' (Bourdieu 1993: 96).

I use the term 'cultural fronts' to refer to some key ways for organizing such critical social analyzes. Various located symbolic universes constantly produce 'borders', cultural boundaries that are determined by the objective positions of social agents. The borders must be considered as porous limits constructed under terms that represent and express the interests and strategies of various sociocultural formations and collective entities – nations, classes, groups, and regions.

Cultural fronts can be understood also as sites or struggling 'arenas', versions of which are constructed through elaborate discursive work which traces the dynamics of situated conflicts and tensions. For example, a regional sanctuary of Catholic devotion can be understood as a cultural front (González 1994: 97–157) because its physical space operates like a border between at least two ways of understanding and practising the Catholic religion. The cultural front is the arena in which popular religion – that of poor peasants and the urban proletariat – intertwines and mixes in micro spaces with the 'official' and 'legitimate' definitions of faith, deities, and saints that occupy the religious discourse of the field claimed by the upper socioeconomic classes and by the religious hierarchy. We can empirically document and describe that discursive co-existence as relatively peaceful, but at the same time traces of intensive and sometimes passionate cultural struggles emerge too. These spaces are the sites of symbolic struggles around the meaning of 'divine images' and their relationship with humans. We can find the same symbolic borders and arenas in the midst of a public ritual like a local celebration or feast. There, the 'regional identity' of an imagined community is created through the process of connecting and dismissing cultural traits as the public limits of 'amusement' are elaborated through discourses and practices that differ among social classes (González 1994: 185–225). We might also think of cultural fronts in terms of the crossover appeal of

some television genres such as the Mexican soap operas (*telenovelas*), and the range of meanings that can be constructed over the same cultural experience of viewing (González 1998).

The transclass nature of cultural fronts

The work of cultural fronts thus consists of constantly defining and redefining what is constructed as socially shared meanings. Cultural fronts are transclass symbolic formations because they are by no means exclusive to any single portion of the society. Even more, they can potentially be shared across all social sectors and strata, groups and regions. Within this dynamic, communication-based process, what has to be constructed historically is the 'true' meaning of specific common needs for everybody.

Think, for instance, of the 'commonsense' need for technology like a truck, which is regarded as a basic tool to survive, as films like *Hands on a Hard Body* have shown us.⁴ Trucks are transclass discursive concepts because inclusive identities are created over them ('We are Texans', 'Don't mess with Texas!'), as a number of bumper stickers and advertisements clearly remind outsiders and insiders of the Lone Star state, regardless of social differences. Trucks are transclass because, extending from their functional specificity, they have been elaborated to represent common values, like the meaning of 'democracy' and 'freedom' for all Americans, despite the wide range of political and religious differences that Americans actually have.

We can also substantiate the transclass nature of cultural fronts by looking critically at *Culture Wars*, an interesting book by James Hunter (1991). Departing from Gramsci's ideas about hegemony and the role of intellectuals in society, Hunter focuses on contemporary everyday battles for making sense of American institutions like family, art, education, law, and politics as key and conflictive issues for the moral definition of the nation. He focuses on a number of common issues that resonate with our concept of cultural fronts. For Hunter, the 'culture wars' that the United States is experiencing these days are linked to structural changes of modernity: in particular, the growth of people with higher education since 1960, and the strong competition between different religious and non-religious institutions for the establishment of moral authority. He also claims that contemporary (transclass) American culture wars represent the most important event since the Civil War for defining national identity: 'the culture wars intersect the lives of most Americans, even those who are or would like to be totally indifferent' (Hunter 1991: 50). Hunter identifies five sites of conflict at stake:

this conflict has a decisive impact on the *family* – not just on the critical issues of reproduction and abortion but on a wide range of other issues such as the limits (if any) of legitimate sexuality, the public and private role of women, questions of child raising, and even the definition of

what constitutes a family in the first place. The cultural conflict concerns the structure and content of public *education* – how and what American children will learn. Also affected is the content of the popular *media* – from the films that are shown to the television shows that are aired to the books that are read and to the art that is exhibited. It has a critical effect on the conduct of *law* particularly in the ways in which Americans define rights – who should have them and who should not and with whose interests the state should be aligned. Not least, this cultural clash has tremendous consequences for electoral *politics*, the way in which Americans choose their leaders.

(Hunter 1991: 50–1; emphasis mine)

Those created symbolic configurations in the everyday social world engender different appropriations that help produce the construction of sets of different cultural 'selves'.

Entering the cultural fronts

Cultural fronts are multi-dimensional configurations produced within the dynamics of multiple historical changes and symbolic structures. These processes take place precisely at the vortex of a tense and uncertain equilibrium. We can use the case of the different readings and social uses of the liturgy in the class-divided religious behavior of Mexican Catholics to show how this works. Here, we see how contrasting, even directly opposite versions of the liturgy have undergone tremendous symbolic negotiations and changes over time. In sum, varying social agents have very different perceptions of what a religious practice should be. The upper classes and the Church hierarchy embrace a 'status justification' religion. At the same time, the lower classes and peasants are more likely to have strong feelings and expressions of their relationship with mighty powers that take the form of 'salvation religion', as the classical work of Max Weber has shown (1978). Both sides of the society share the same images and temples, but create very different meanings from the symbolism that characterizes the Catholic Church in Mexico. Such struggles over meaning represent the dynamics of one cultural front.

On the one hand cultural fronts are structural, making up a set of relationships. On the other hand cultural fronts constantly move, refract, and help produce a pot of boiling cultural conflicts and tensions. The tentative structure and order made up of multidirectional, non-linear flows and trajectories of meaning creates chaotic conditions. The stability of such constructed symbolic universes is constantly subject to the variable actions, interactions, and negotiations of many symbolic forces. We can think of a cultural front as a whirling space of motion that, once arrived at a critical bifurcation, suddenly crystallizes into recognizable, yet still unfixed, structures and semblances of symbolic order. In this scenario we can locate the particular sites of concrete cultural struggles.

Cultural fronts: sub-processes, processes, and meta-processes

We find tension, instability, and precarious order at different levels of analysis. Following the suggestions of Piaget and Garcia (1989), any cultural front can be established and studied at three levels. First, at the level of *sub-processes*, we have to describe the intra-object relations between each one of the front's own elements. Normally, this stage implies a thick description and phenomenological approach to the specificity of each component. For instance, an accurate description of the key spaces of interaction during a regional fair can satisfy this level. Or, in our study of the production of Mexican television soap operas (González 1998: 90–1), the intra-object level was concentrated in relations and activities of the production crews.

At the second level, the *processes*, we identify the inter-object relations that link components or elements. We enter this level only when we establish sets of differing relations between, for instance, the components of a regional fair (marketplace, expositions, ballroom, cockfighting arena, and so on). The level of processes in the soap opera study arrived when we established relations between all the production crews and the organizational structure of the broadcasting corporation, Televisa.

Finally, the highest level of complexity comes when we study the *meta-processes*, in which we have to establish the trans-object relations between our analytical components. Meta-processes can be interpreted as third-order relations, that is, relations concerning the meta-relations of phenomena. They actually operate as, and should be considered to be, contour conditions, or external perturbations, for second-level processes. That is why Piaget and Garcia (1989) use the expression 'trans-object relationships'. For example, the symbolic structures of the regional fairs interact with the cultural entertainment industries through icons, objects, artists, messages, and broadcasting practices. In the case of Mexican soap operas, the meta-process level is the structure of the field of entertainment and the world market of fiction. With these tools we can set forth very different levels of cultural conflagration and conflict: *intra-cultural* front (first-order relations), *inter-cultural* fronts (second-order relations between different cultural fronts), and *trans-cultural* fronts (third-order relations). That is what I mean by the systemic construction of cultural fronts as an analytical framework and methodological instrument.

Constructing cultural fronts: the methodological strategies

The kind of methodological strategy that complex social processes implies and merits is at the same time itself multiple. It includes the use of various research questions and techniques for an adequate construction of observables, and the employment of complementary methods of analysis for processing and

handling the information in order to make our theoretical objectives plausible. The construction and analysis of any cultural front requires at least four kinds of information sources and a format that can facilitate analysis at the three levels specified above.

The first information source is *structural information*, regarding the multidimensionality of any social space. The second is *historical information*, mapping the different social trajectories of the various agents and strategies at play. The third kind of data needed for constructing a cultural fronts approach is *situational information*, which can be used to describe the ethnographic contexts in which the conflicts, struggles, and merging results are located in terms of time, space, and activities. The fourth type we need is directly *symbolic information*, requiring a social semiotic strategy that can make detailed descriptions of the located social construction of meaning in detail. Let me now elaborate on these entry points.

Structure

Any attempt to study the cultural dynamics of a given society as cultural fronts should be situated in a broad spectrum of objective social relations. 'Objective', in this sense, refers to the existence of different social relationships in a wide range that is independent of individual human will and knowledge: the structure beyond the social agent. These are by no means only economic relations. They are at the same time political and symbolic relationships resembling what the French ethnologist Marcel Mauss (1974) called a 'total social fact'. These relations are the philosophical principles and the practical bases for the configuration of any social space where we find different loci – positions, sites, or places. These loci are defined both by the relative distances between them and by the struggles between them. Any attitude, action, practice, or interaction depends, in principle, on the social position of the actors or the institution. The observation and description of any feature or characteristic of a social agent therefore must be related in a non-mechanistic way to these social relations.

Let's put forward a couple of examples here. It is because of their position in the subfield of popular music entertainment that the Mexican *ranchero* band, Los Tigres del Norte, sing certain kinds of songs, use particular traditional customs, and express a sort of easy, simple thinking in their television interviews. Once a cultural entity occupies a key position in the cultural field, the social forces that have been created 'talk', 'perform', and 'make sounds' through their individual actions. So, the recognized characteristics of (in this case) Los Tigres del Norte (lyrics, melodies, rhythms, and virtuoso playing of the accordion) lie beyond any individual thought or action of its individual members. Fame – the symbolic recognition of situated cultural properties for specific audiences – derives more from a structural position than from any 'freewill individuals'.

The same principle operates in the public behavior and performances of

Puerto Rican singing sensation Ricky Martin. Martin may or may not like *ranchero* music, but, because of his objective place in the field of entertainment, he will never sing or dance a *ranchero* song. Even the shape of band members' and singers' bodies and their techniques of self-presentation are not individual choices. If the biological Hernández brothers and their group (Los Tigres del Norte), or Enrique Martín Morales (Ricky Martin) never existed, another social agent would cover and occupy the structural position in which they are located. That agent would generate, cultivate, and show the properties created and required from the given structural position. Personal style or 'flavor', therefore, exists only if it is recognized within the strict limits of a given symbolic market. The market is the structure that gives or withdraws relative value to specific performances. Any given structure operates as a set of objective constraints, with or without the awareness of the social agent. We need to generate appropriate information about the structure and about the composition of the social space in which we wish to study particular cultural fronts. We can construct this information by using several techniques that help us identify and describe the social distribution of 'valid' resources operating in that specific field. We are already used to describing the structure and composition of the economic, social, and cultural 'capitals' at play (Bourdieu 1993). But we must keep in mind that capital is not a thing, but a social energy – an objective, active relationship. The dynamic quality of culture creates serious analytical problems with some theoretical approaches, for instance the 'culture wars' perspective of James Hunter (1991) mentioned earlier. Hunter locates very well the conflicts, attitudes, and performances of cultural contestants, but he doesn't offer the structural analysis we need to explore the processes and meta-processes of conflicts in modern societies.

History

Images produced by structural descriptions of social space should be understood as a point (or a momentary state) of a larger trajectory. That trajectory should be traced through a detailed historiography that is elaborated from a variety of documents and other sources. When possible, it should include oral testimonies (Bertaux and Thompson 1993).

From these sources we can trace and elaborate the long-term positional changes of the cultural elements, agents, places, and relationships we observe. That constructed history must *not* be understood as linear. The historical creation and re-creation of social settings can be delineated well only by analyzing multiple threads of social and cultural experiences. Following and reconstructing the long-term formation of cultural fronts gives us the perspective needed to understand the intertwined footprints, traces, and paths of the symbolic struggles and strategies that have converged and merged into 'normal' or commonly shared understandings of socially differentiated groups. The claim behind the cultural fronts approach is that what we experience today as

obvious, taken for granted, normal, everlasting, and so on, derives tentatively from a series of cultural confrontations. These struggles can be located in how social agents 'in their own way' define and elaborate basic transclass elements: needs, identities, values. It is upon these fundamentally human elements (Cirese 1984; González 1994: 62), that meaning – shared commonly across social positions, but always unstable – is constructed. Only by interrogating historically specific cultural sites can we delineate in some detail the nature of this instability.

We can follow the sociocultural trajectory of the aforementioned Los Tigres del Norte or Ricky Martin, for instance, by moving from their actual positions backwards. We can see them as placed in different positions in the field, and we can get information regarding their entrance into the specialized social space of entertainment. Both Los Tigres and Martin necessarily had to learn their 'place' from their interactions with other situated agents. Thus, we find, for example, stories of their 'discovery' and the ways they began to gain media visibility, and from that point, we learn of the taste of large audiences. Good historiographies would also trace the different stages of the musicians' physical transformations. In the case of Martin (Figure 6.1), this includes body-building in order to become more generally admired and sexually attractive. In the case of Los Tigres del Norte (Figure 6.2), they must achieve the stylized look of the folkloric *northern*. They must really look like 'Mexicans'. To meet this structural requirement, the movements and bodies of Los Tigres

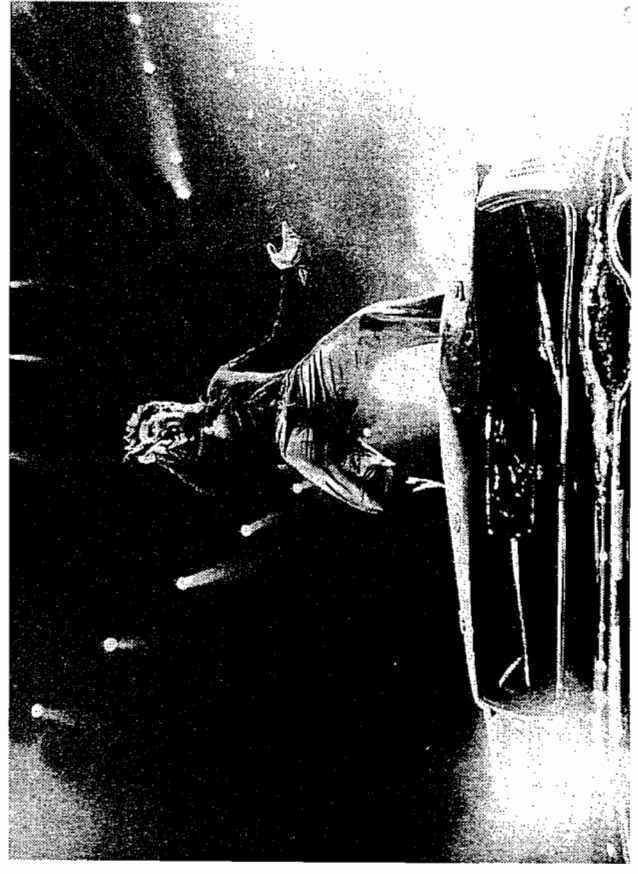


Figure 6.1 Ricky Martin (Max Becherer: San José Mercury News ©1999)

being Mexican in the truly difficult, marginalized position outside their homeland. For more than twenty years, the songs of Los Tigres del Norte have functioned as a memory reservoir for hundreds of thousands of poor Mexican immigrants – one of the lowest positions in the American socioeconomy (Trueba 1998). With only gradual transformations of their physical appearance, musical skills, and performances, Los Tigres del Norte, like Ricky Martin, are products of big cultural organizations. Sony Music is making very good profits in the global market from both. A large share of the total sales of 'Latin music' is linked to the growing buying power of the 'Latino community' in the USA. Los Tigres del Norte were in fact quite 'famous' long before Ricky Martin, but they still share one thing with him: they are famous in their respective dominated zones in the cultural field of popular music.

To help illustrate the point I am making here, I will now quote some readers' reactions to a *Time* magazine (24 May 1999) cover story about Ricky Martin and the Latino pop music explosion. First, two opinions from the 'top':

I don't know about Martin's music (I'm a Mozartian), but it's nice for a change to see a pop singer who doesn't look as if he came out of a garbage dump.

(Ray Damskey, California)

I recall reading in *Time* about Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and other trend-setting singers, but somehow Martin just doesn't fit into the same class as these cultural icons. I saw Martin's 'break-through' performance at the Grammys and I found it repulsive. Is this where music is today? Can I become a musically successful by wearing tight clothes and dancing? I think we're being fooled.

(Ben DuPriest, Atlanta)

And one from the 'bottom':

Martin is an example of a person who persevered and worked hard to attain his dreams. But most important, he and singers Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony are examples of the duality of cultures that Hispanic youngsters face every day as they grow up in a bilingual and bicultural environment. I'm glad that my kids have several role models.

(Vivian Alejandro, Tucson)

Studying cultural fronts implies a search for and construction of successive changes and transformations of cultural agents and the modulating stakes of different positions they occupy over time. Construction of a cultural front can operate as a useful methodological strategy once we define the limits of the study. For instance, the focus could be the transformation of specific, localized musical tastes of Mexican immigrants into fandom for nationally renowned artists

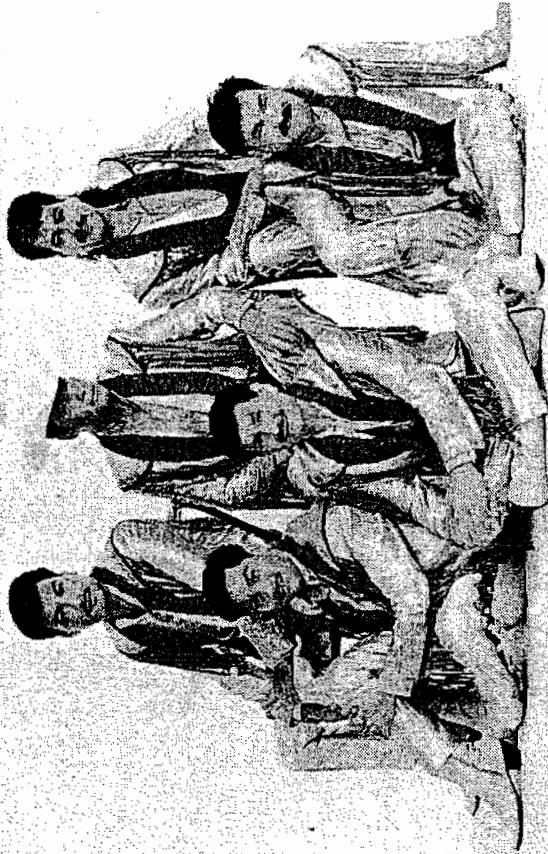


Figure 6.2 Los Tigres del Norte (by permission of Fonovisa)

don't have to fulfill the aesthetic design imposed on Ricky Martin or other performers of his genre. Here we can clearly see the constructed and edited image of these 'stars', and how the structure is sensitive to the tastes of their particular publics. The body building of Ricky Martin and his racial traits (a white, Caucasian look), as well as good organizational image management through public rituals and media events such as the Grammy Awards on television, made his 'discovery' possible. So, a specific structural momentum and an adequate launch platform permitted the kind of quantum spin of Martin's performance abilities to be valued from the still-marginalized Spanish market (that is, a specific dominated position in the global social space), to the 'big leagues', 'the global entertainment industry'.⁵

Ricky Martin can transcend some constraints (voice, choreography, clothing, external appearance) that never would be structurally allowed to Los Tigres del Norte. The *ranchero* band has been formed historically and structurally to satisfy another taste, which is hard to swallow outside the structural position and properties they actually fulfill: the musical and aesthetic taste of lower social classes in Mexico and the same classes of Mexican immigrants living in the USA. The songs of Los Tigres have been formatted to follow a very long narrative tradition known as *corridos*. In that genre, lyrics are always sung in Spanish. They tell stories of the pain, suffering, discrimination, and pride of

for the lower classes all over Mexico. Or if we are interested in an even broader arena, we could study the reconstruction of different strategies for creation of a transnational icon extracted from the dominated cultural field of industrial entertainment that was made originally for the lower positions in the social space. Along both trajectories we could find a number of different struggles (at levels *intra*, *inter*, and *trans*) for the construction of a common symbolic platform in which all the social agents involved could recognize, at least in part, something of their own. When this higher level of organizing cultural meanings fails, however, we confront a critical shift of momentum in which the precarious equilibrium that defines some phase of hegemony is threatened and the possibility of change opens up structurally.

With these two first approaches – which resemble *genetic structuralism*, as Bourdieu has said – we must identify the space of objective relations that is largely independent of the consciousness and will of the agents (Bourdieu 1993). In the next two sections of this chapter – on situational and symbolic considerations – we will focus on the space of such position-takings. We will go first to everyday life in order to understand and describe the systems of classification and actions operating in specific social settings and public rituals, and then we will move to the symbolic specificity of cultural fronts.

Situation

Once we have studied the structural representations and historical trajectories that configure the processes we want to analyze as a cultural front, we have to deal with the quotidian circumstances and negotiations of a given situation, context, and interaction in which real social actors communicate and otherwise interact. This is the place where social actors and activities merge in specific, 'natural', everyday settings. As we have seen before, all these settings must be understood as components of a structure of relationships that take their actual forms through trajectories of historical change. However, by no means can the contexts in which different social actors produce different social activities be simply deduced from the structural organization of the social space. In order to study a cultural front in detail, we must locate specific social activities in a web of social coordinates (space, time, people, actions, goals). Such work can best be accomplished ethnographically (see, for example, Goffman 1967: 47–95; Mauss 1974; Spradley 1980; Babbie 1997: 202–30; Galindo 1998: 347–83; González 1998: 233–53; Werscht 1998; Jensen and Jankowski 1991; Lindlof 1995).

Descriptions of cultural contexts usually produce a number of observations that can be integrated into taxonomies through which we can make observable locally situated systems of classification from the 'insider's' or 'native's' point of view. Becoming crucial at this stage is the *second-order reflexivity* of the 'observer' who monitors the very production of his or her own observation (Maturana and Varela 1992). The cultural fronts approach thus intends to understand the creation of precarious consensus in complex societies in which the researcher

participates as an active and skillful social agent, and not just as a non-intrusive subjective presence making 'clean' observations. So, for example, we can make several ethnographic descriptions in different settings that could lead us to catch slight nuances, or even explicit clashes, about what really 'good music' is and is not. We can observe live presentations, visit retail music stores, listen to schoolyard chats, attend to radio and television shows, study musicians' organizations, and watch bands and singers participating in various public rituals, for instance. Erving Goffman (1967) is among those who stressed the importance of societal rituals for the construction and social recognition of the self. It is the situational context that makes possible the construction and display of specific systems for classifying cultural phenomena in real and vivid confrontations (for instance, discriminating between the 'real' good performer Ricky Martin, and the 'evident' bad taste and poor musical abilities of Los Tigres del Norte).

We can observe also that in the case of the Catholic religion in Mexico, lower-class believers communicate in their own indigenized, ritualized ways with mighty entities like Sanjuanita or El Santo Señor de Chalma, while others affiliate with the higher powers of the Church – God, the saints, the virgin – by means of *ex voto* narrative paintings, discursive displays of 'god's grace' embraced sentimentally by the faithful (González 1990: 97–157). We can then compare religious practices of the popular classes such as these with the far more conventional actions performed and valorizations given by the upper classes and by the Church hierarchy responding to the 'commoners' traditional, naive, and irrational' practices. This way the upper classes differentiate themselves from 'low taste' and 'idolatrous misbehavior'. In situational analysis, we give analytical emphasis to multiple clashes of such rituals and narratives, showing and linking alternative identities with the pre-eminence of those that actually (that is, structurally and historically) control and manage the rules, spaces, objects, and collective icons (for instance, the sanctuaries).

The aim of the situational entry, therefore, is to identify the symbolic taxonomies⁶ actually operating in natural settings and in public rituals where different social positions are expressed and confront mobilizing sociocultural resources and forces such as religious icons, musical genres, or communications technology. Here we can actually see how deep transclass factors like gender, race, and age shape the ways we experience fundamental human activities such as loving, caring, believing, healing, expressing, feeding, thinking, consuming, amusing, and being visible in society (Cirese 1984). Through a detailed elaboration in which several semiotic and discursive operations are made possible, these symbolic constructions can be designed, shaped, and modulated to cross over the limits imposed by social space positions and the class-originated *habitus*. The relationships which take form within these cultural performances make possible the 'social space of stances' (Bourdieu 1993), in which different cultural fronts are created, deployed, and eventually clash. In musical terms, for instance, these operations could imply modification of a style to appeal to a larger, more differentiated audience. This brings about the constant reshaping

of complex symbolic forms (Thompson 1995) to anticipate a more expansive passive or active consensus. That consensus or ideological agreement is linked to a first-order elaboration, designed to evoke either passive or active recognition of an elaborated hierarchy of meanings and narratives as a more complex form of organizing and transmitting symbolic vectors across time and space.

The role of the public ritual as a cultural front in the construction of consensus narratives in this process has already been highlighted (White 1990, 1991) as key to understanding how hegemony works. In the contextualized study of the cultural fronts, therefore, we can identify various strategies to compose, limit, and occupy common symbolic territory by analyzing how social powers frame discourses. But we can also identify the polysemic portrayal of rhetorics which have the potential for diverse and even contradictory interpretations of the very same community of symbols. No exerted power can exist without multiple resistances, and, similarly, no discourse goes forward without counter-discourses. That takes us now to the symbolic dimension of the cultural fronts.

Symbolism

The study of cultural fronts must always be connected with historical and social determination, but at the same time it must resist any kind of reductionism. We are contemplating meaningful actors, actions, relationships, and processes, so we need to be able to describe in some detail the dynamics of how meanings take form in actual social settings and public rituals. Certainly we cannot deduce directly and mechanically any determination of meanings from structural and historical conditions. We must work in detail with the symbolic specificity that underlies and permeates the constant and complex discursive elaboration of experience. In fact, that specificity operates as a sort of *second reality*, as cultural semioticians sometimes say, but it is as real as the first-order reality of human beings. Any struggle or conflict in which we can locate structure, history, and contexts has its own symbolic specificity, and is in no way secondary. Symbolic specificity is thus crucial for understanding cultural fronts.

On the one hand, there is a complex structure of specialized organizations (cultural fields) occupied in the creation, preservation, and delivery of complex symbolic forms. Throughout world history these fields have produced their own specialists – priests, scientists, educators, philosophers, journalists, singers, painters, and many others. All these symbolic producers have supervised the creation and recreation of multiple specialized and complex discourses and practices known as religions, sciences, pedagogy, philosophies, journalism, arts, and so on. They have their own internal stakes, rules, and struggles to preserve or change, maintain or challenge, the specific relations that define a field. All cultural fields have a variable degree of autonomy with respect to other social constraints and meta-processes coming from the 'fields of power' (Bourdieu 1993). What Bourdieu calls a 'field of power' should be understood as an

objective frame of meta-processes in which trans-object relations operate; that is, relations across all the different fields that establish, for certain periods, a type of hierarchy among them. So we can find 'trans-fields' levels of struggle for the exercise of symbolic power.

We must therefore understand the fields of power like the 'field of fields', a global social space in which every field and element occupies a position that is in constant tension. In order to preserve the fields and operate with maximum symbolic efficacy, each cultural institution must generate and maintain a public, an audience, a clientele, or followers over time. The audiences are placed, but arrive in constant motion, in a determined state of distribution and access to the specific social energy of this very field. The specialized institutions must be able to obtain and focus people's attention; that is their bio-time (Romano 1998). These institutions must design multiple, flexible, symbolic strategies to anticipate the potential audience for their productions (a book, song, sermon, news story, scientific paper, and so on). The core of these organizational strategies should always feature some discursive elaboration upon an elementally human theme. That way the public should be able to identify, select, and attend to the symbolic productions of the specialized agents. Thus we find ourselves to be 'Christians, fans, followers, amateurs, members, consumers, or militants'. This symbolic efficacy is then translated into *habitus* and into a kind of 'distributed self'. Clearly, nothing like pure individuality or isolated taste exists. Thinking this way, the non-subjective approach to subjectivity (Bourdieu 1993) can be reinforced with the notion of 'distributed cognition' (Salomon 1993), to create a productive dialogue with the neo-Vygotskian developments of the mind as action (Werscht 1998).

The ideological livelihood of modern societies implies, on the one hand, the specialized discursive elaboration of meaning by a set of specific institutions and agents, and, on the other hand, non-specialized social agents living in a pre-interpreted social world (Giddens 1989). The persistence and prevalence of large-scale discursive formations is constructed through a process of gaining and losing ideological efficacy. When a constructed symbolic configuration can no longer be part of our 'selves', that is, when it is no longer embodied in social agents, then a process of dilution and decay begins. This is the moment in which the elements of its composition can be disembedded, reordered, and reorganized around a different kind of symbolic and discursive axis. As human beings we cannot stop producing meanings. We are ourselves meaningful entities. We dwell not only in the material world but inside discursive, symbolic universes too.

This question of discourse, therefore, is crucial. Any discourse implies a territorial, specific composition of meaning. The specificity of that composition, however, is always linked to counter-compositions and counter-discourses that make up discursive social space, a kind of discursive market in which any entry generates, gains, or loses value. That is the space of position-taking. These processes occur as time passes through the actions of social agents, whether

specialized or not. We thus need a social semiotic and discourse analysis to make observable the porous borders and symbolic confrontations that are constructed between different positions. The symbolic space created in between discursive elements should always be considered as an occupied territory. Mikhail Bakhtin has described these territories in linguistic and symbolic terms: 'Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others' (Bakhtin 1996: 294).

Bakhtin's insight can be perfectly applied to a dialogical understanding of culture as well. Indeed, Bakhtin's seminal work and the dialogical influences it contributes to cultural fronts merit a full discussion that is not possible here. None the less, let me use some of Bakhtin's thinking to help explain the forces that are deeply embedded in our finest mediational tool for creating social worlds – language:

Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited – and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. But at the same time it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallizing into real, although still relative, unity – the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday) and literary language, 'correct' language.

(Bakhtin 1996: 270)

We can approach the study of cultural fronts by analyzing different cultural 'voices' or languages ('cultural *heteroglossia*') that converge and clash in this precarious order, this 'unity' we call hegemony. To do so, we must reconstruct the detailed and conflictive history of symbolic confrontations, observing how 'legitimate' cultural fields ('literary language'), try to impose unity and order – the *centripetal* vectors and strength – in the middle of a multiple and chaotic space of dissipative social networks – the *centrifugal* forces (Figure 6.3).

The cognitive target of the cultural fronts is exactly that provisional unity, trajectory, and composition of symbolic social space generated in the clash of contradictory cultural forces. My claim is that through the detailed internal (*intra*) study of the construction of different cultural fronts, we can establish and identify a number of non-linear symbolic flows and fluctuations that create in other scales (*inter* and *trans*) the sort of dissipative structure of hegemony. From this perspective, hegemony can be understood as a complex attractor of different forces that forms a structure that stays far from equilibrium. Originating in physics and the biological sciences, the idea of non-linear flows, fluctuations, and dissipative structures is increasingly being applied in a number of domains

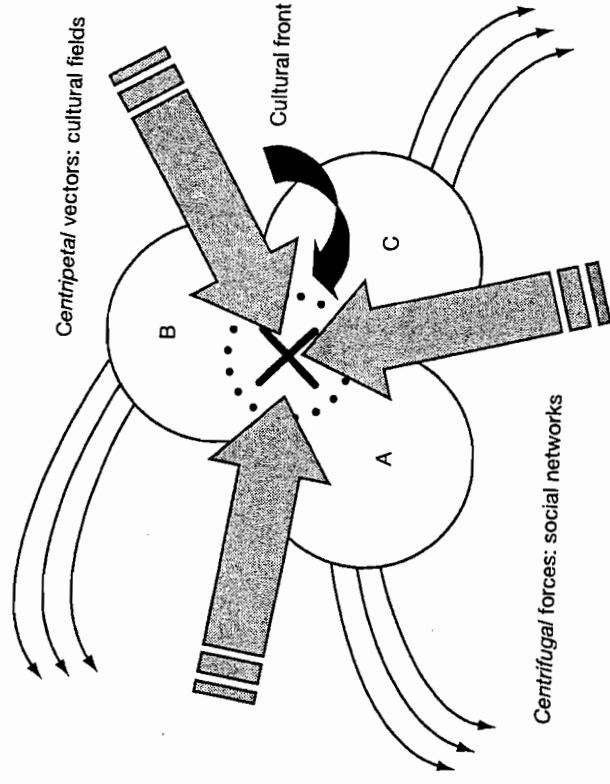


Figure 6.3 Cultural fronts as order out of chaos

like economics, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics because they are useful to describe and understand the dissipative structures that compose any relational framework (Prigogine 1984).

Conclusion: cultural fronts, grounded reflexivity, and empowerment

A key issue in the study of the cultural dynamics of modern societies is the construction of commonalities of meaning within disputed symbolic spaces between different social agents who are loaded with different skills and resources. Cultural fronts has been proposed as an open concept that rejects any positivistic definition, advocating instead a systemic understanding through interacting, differential levels of complexity. Each level needs its own kind of observables, understood as a relation established between *information* coming from the object and *meaning* coming from the subject. In order to analyze symbolic processes as cultural fronts, we must elaborate and deal with four different types of related observables: structural, historical, situational, and symbolic information.

Through these complementary configurations we can understand from a well-grounded standpoint that any possible common meanings can only be constructed from intense, contested, discursive elaborations of a variety of transclass cultural elements, or basic human themes, normally linked to needs,

differential identities, and plausible values. These elements and themes must be thought of not as 'essences' but as symbolic occupied territories. Those meaningful and mobile territories can be understood as porous boundaries between different situated ways of defining possible common understandings. At the same time the territories are struggling arenas, even cultural battlefields, where diverse, sometimes opposite, elaborations and definitions of common meanings interact.

Cultural fronts has been proposed as a tool for understanding how, where, and when social relationships of hegemony are created. With the help of a dynamic systems approach, we have a powerful tool for the study of hegemony as a *space of possibilities* instead of a *negative fact* that is inevitably linked to class domination and exploitation.

Studying symbolic processes as cultural fronts has another important implication that is linked to the social organization for the generation of knowledge. Social research is typically thought of as an individualized, isolated task that is normally performed in vertical, authoritarian structures. That social definition of research activity should be contested. The methodological strategy of cultural fronts implies a different organization – a horizontal network in which different voices, abilities, and skills can be merged and auto-organized to produce reflexive knowledge about our own common sense.

For this reason, the cultural fronts approach suggests second-order reflexivity in the sense that, as the research project goes on, the research team can deeply ponder the relationship between observer and observed. Unlike a positivistic approach in which subject and object are to be kept separate, and where the project shouldn't be 'contaminated' with the subjectivity of the researcher, a cultural fronts approach deals squarely with the critical reflexivity of those who produce the knowledge (the research team or network). The process and results of the work can be used in action research as a critical tool for the empowerment of social agents and researchers. The very act of dismantling and making observable the trajectories, structures, contexts, and symbolic specificity of pre-constructed social meanings can be used as a tool for increasing the degree of our own self-determination.

One ongoing attempt to do what I am describing here is a national research project that is producing a system of cultural information in Mexico (*La Formación de las Ofertas Culturales y sus Públicos: FOCYP*). A group of researchers connected by information technology throughout Mexico is mapping the differential development of eight cultural fields in the country spanning the past hundred years. For us, perhaps even more important than the cultural knowledge this project is producing, is the creation of new, more democratic research communities, a dialogical reconstruction of Mexican people's collective memories, and a thoughtful reflection on our most beloved dreams and expectations (González 1997). The challenge therefore is to create a wider space for those who have been historically conquered, excluded, and expelled from their own symbolic territories to be able to reflect and confront,

define and identify, that which they believe is dead and alive in their own culture. These are all steps along an infinite path of symbolic activity and dialogical reflexivity in which meaningful encounters with the 'other' are crucial. Indeed, a complex cultural attitude is surely needed as we navigate the turbulences of the Communication Age.

Notes

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- 1 I use 'momentum' (quantity of motion of a moving object) instead of 'state' (condition) to name such complex and mobile symbolic relations.
- 2 Los Tigres del Norte are probably the most important *ranchero* band, both in Mexico and the United States, mainly because of the traditional flavor of their music and lyrics, and because of the appropriation of the music by Mexican workers in the USA. Through their music, the lived experience of millions of Mexican immigrants has been elaborated into a musical narrative that has enormous appeal and meaning.
- 3 I use the expression 'second-order elaboration' to describe a more complex level of discursive work upon first-order interpretations of the world, all of them taken for granted, or *doxa* (Bourdieu 1993).
- 4 This film has been shown for a complete year in Austin, Texas.
- 5 Ricky Martin gained world visibility through a combination of public ritual and television, first in July 1998 when his song, 'La Copa de la Vida' was selected for the opening ceremony of the World Cup in France. His performance was well received (mainly in terms of economic profits), and he was invited to the Grammy Awards Ceremony in 1999 (another combination of public ritual and broadcasting), in which his song and style were received as 'fresh air'. Suddenly, 'Livin' the Vida Loca' became a big hit. Martin then went straight to the cover of various magazines and the most popular prime-time American television shows.
- 6 A taxonomy implies making explicit some principle of the hierarchization of relations and symbolic objects.
- 7 An 'attractor' is a concentration point in which all trajectories converge in equilibrium. The social relations of hegemony can be attracted as a complex attractor if the convergence point functions to draw and frame different trajectories of meaning as an ideological 'center' (see Coveney and Highfield 1996).

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