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Making things political

Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman

In this short essay we focus on the everyday situations in which people politicize or depoliticize issues. By "politicizing" we mean action, collective or individual, that makes issues or identities into topics of public deliberation or contestation. Depoliticizing means making once-salient issues or identities inaccessible to deliberation or contestation.

Until recently, political scientists and sociologists examining political culture have focused either on society-wide traditions or on consciousness. Research on society-wide traditions has emphasized the role of shared values or widespread discourses of the good citizen or good society (Almond and Verba 1963; Bellah *et al.* 1985). Studies of consciousness have emphasized propaganda, agenda-setting, or subtle media effects (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1980; Hall 1977; see Gramsci 1971). Both approaches, at bottom, have assumed the conventional definition of power as A's ability to make B do something against B's will, or to prevent B from even thinking of alternatives.

Our definition of political culture, in contrast, is a communication-centered and setting-sensitive definition. Rather than conjure up a society's culture in general, we focus on situated communication. Rather than make individual or collective actors the subjects of politics, we focus on relationships and speech genres in settings that actors usually can recognize and "typify" already (Cicourel 1981), using their own understandings. While we could not possibly deny the horrific power of the media to convince people of half-truths, neither do we reduce political culture to ideological domination. Our research shows that people can express and think thoughts in one situation that they cannot easily express or even think in another. Similarly, we do not deny that a relatively few political and moral discourses may circulate widely in a society, but people in complex, diverse societies use them in too many different ways, in different settings, for the notion of shared traditions to be very useful for research purposes. The differences between two societies may very well be in how they distribute situations, how people learn what it is possible to say and do in a union versus a political party versus a charity group, or even in different kinds of political parties (Faucher-King 2005). Focusing on how people in various societies learn the proper etiquette for a political party versus a religious charity is different from asking how different societies create a certain kind of taken-for-granted consciousness in people. On this point our

view differs also from some uses of Foucault's work which equate power with the creation of subjectivities, without talking about how the creation, maintenance, and transformation of identities vary from one situation to another.

Rather than assuming that some issues or groups are inherently more political than others, we call for examining how and where, if at all, people acting in concert make things political. We argue that before asking, "Who is wielding power over whom," researchers have to take a prior step, to ask how people, groups, or institutions politicize and depoliticize issues or people. Rather than reading off amounts of power from people's race, class, gender, or other social positions in the same way wherever the people go, and rather than assuming that these categories mean the same thing and weigh the same everywhere, we investigate how and where, if at all, inequalities are not just reproduced and transformed, but also formed in everyday interaction. We investigate how inequalities *materialize* differently in different everyday situations. That is why our approach to cultures of politics focuses on interaction in everyday situations, whether in institutions, formal organizations, or informal settings.

With our focus on interaction, we say that cultures of politics are shared methods of politicizing or depoliticizing. Like other cultural sociologists, we maintain a "strong" sense of culture as a relatively autonomous force in social life—symbolic patterns that cannot be explained away by relations of domination and subordination. We agree with cultural sociologists who say that symbols exert their own enabling and constraining influence on action. We depart from some cultural sociologists, however, when we follow culture's effects all the way down to the level of everyday interaction.

Shared methods of politicizing: elements of a cultural analysis

First, following Durkheim (Alexander 1988; Durkheim 1995 [1915]), we start by focusing on a society's "collective representations," though we do not suppose all members of a society share or affirm collective representations uniformly. By collective representations we mean conventional vocabularies or moral narratives that put people's motives into words and stories that others easily can apprehend. In interviews, in pamphlets and position statements, at pitched moments of conflict in groups, Americans tell each other that it is good to be active in community life because "I am doing God's work," or "We are giving back to the community," or "It feels good to help other people," or because "The people united will never be defeated." These are structured vocabularies of motive, moral languages we use to make our acts meaningful and compelling to others, as sociologists such as Robert Wuthnow (1992) would point out. To understand collective representations such as these, we look to Geertz (1973), Ricoeur (1991), Burke (1945), or Frye (1957) for models of culture's durability, its patterned qualities. As cultural sociologists, we start with these symbols. However, we do not end with them because the symbols sometimes absorb radically different meanings from the contexts in which people invoke them. The same words mean different things depending on who is saying them, to whom, in what situation. The differences are not simply random.

Discourses or representations become meaningful in specific settings, in relation to the organizational style of action that people share in the setting. An *organizational style* is members' routine ways of coordinating action and defining the meaning of membership in some collectivity, as the group is acting (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Organizational styles are enduring, often structure-like, cultural forms, not momentary improvisations. To find organizational style, a researcher can notice several broad areas of action and meaning-making. First, organizations draw *boundaries* around themselves on a wider social map; those boundaries bring "the organization" itself into being, defining what is "inside" or "outside" it. Second, organizations sustain *bonds* that define a set of good members' obligations to each other that may vary according to the category of person—a man's obligations versus a woman's, for example, or a volunteer's versus a paid staff member's. Third, organizations observe speech norms that define the meaning of speaking differently in different face-to-face situations within the overall organization—in the coffee room versus in the boardroom, for instance. The fact of organizational style implies that organizations cannot be reduced to an unpredictable flow of emergent definitions of the situation, as some symbolic interactionists (e.g. Blumer 1969) might argue. Rather, people quickly have to recognize what kind of meaning-making situation they have entered, or else everyone would be constantly learning from scratch how to act differently at school versus in a courtroom versus in a volunteer group. And finally, words, gestures, or images are not the only bearers of meaning. Important symbols solidify into material conditions, or what we call "equipment" (Thévenot 2006; Glaeser 2000)—architectural spaces, bureaucratic forms, furniture, zoning patterns, highways, for example, that are products of previous meaning-making, but are hard to ignore once they are built, even if they no longer bear the meanings that the original creators intended. Equipment helps materialize style in interaction.

In this short essay we will focus much more on organizational style than collective representations since style inflects representations in everyday interaction, and our concept of style makes our approach quite different from other approaches to political culture. The equipment is part of an organizational style, but we focus on the other aspects of the concept to highlight how our approach to meaning differs from others'. Readers interested in fuller treatments of our approach can consult other works (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2005; Eliasoph 2010). Here we use ethnographic illustrations from our studies of church-based community service groups (Lichterman 2005) and youth civic engagement projects (Eliasoph 2010)—both in a mid-sized, Midwestern US urban area.

Politicizing is more than "sounding political"

Many studies have used the concept of "framing" to investigate political culture in social movements, civic organizations, and legislative assemblies (Snow *et al.* 1986). Originally used by Erving Goffman to denote the implicit assumptions about speech that operate in a particular setting, the concept often refers to the ideological theme or worldview said to motivate some instance of communication. This renovated frame concept is one popular means of studying collective representations. Organizational style helps us explain the successes or frustrations of politicizing, whereas the currently widespread notion of framing would not. The concept of organizational style also keeps us from assuming that "political"-sounding language must be a sign that only politicization and not also depoliticization is happening.

One example is the case of the Justice Task Force, a local group of liberal church representatives in a Midwestern US city who wanted to publicize the dangers of welfare policy reform in the 1990s. Members of the task force shared a vocabulary of social

criticism familiar to many US grassroots progressives; they criticized corporate capitalism. Yet the way they communicated about corporate interests often scared away people who did not share their style, *even people who likely agreed with their viewpoints*. The Justice Task Force's communication style encouraged members to talk angrily whenever possible (speech norms), reject people who did not have the same intense commitment to left ideology (group bonds), and think of the group as lonely prophets poised against corporate power, complacent state officials, and false images circulated by the mass media (group boundaries).

The Justice Task Force put together educational workshops intended to teach churchgoers that welfare reform benefited the rich and the corporations at the expense of the poor. At one meeting, twelve members listened as one member delivered an hour-long, ideologically sophisticated critique of corporate neoliberalism. The host of a radical radio talk show came to the meeting, sat silently for a long time, and finally he told us in a rising voice that he represented "a race [African American] that doesn't live as long. ... There are lots of Blacks who don't care a lot about ideology." He thought the group should be able to "act on our faith underpinnings." And at last he blurted out, "We know who the number-one activist is, the one who risked everything—Jesus!" There was an awkward silence. No one else spoke up for Jesus. The radio announcer did not come back to another meeting. The Justice Task Force thought any association that was serious about welfare policy should be bound together by leftist solidarity, not faith in Jesus. They did not consider whether or not some African Americans would be more accustomed to and comfortable with a different *style* of group, with more religious bonds, in order to voice the same criticisms of welfare policy, and their response to the radio announcer in effect depoliticized racial identity. Customary ideas about what makes a good group kept the Justice Task Force small, marginal, and socially homogenous, unable to talk even with people who would agree with much of its collective representations of welfare reform "on paper." Their method of politicizing disempowered the message.

Another example, from the youth civic engagement projects in the same city, shows that how people do or do not politicize their actions can diverge remarkably from the image one would get if one only analyzed the representations or frames in their public statements. Part of the agenda for these projects was, at least in some organizers' minds, to make a connection between volunteering and political activism. Organizers spoke about not just feeding the hungry, for example, but of encouraging young people to ask, "Why is there hunger in such a wealthy country?" From the organizations' written statements, and from organizers' discussions, it would look like these projects were "politicizing" young people by framing issues in terms that would link social change with individual caring. Moral vocabularies of compassion and social justice lived together on paper and in organizers' discussions.

Yet, youth participants never actually did talk about why there was hunger in the US. One of the extremely rare moments of political controversy arose when a girl tried to flirt with a boy but got the organizational style wrong and also failed at flirting: her gambit was to get his attention by vehemently telling him that she was anti-abortion and pro-capital punishment. Acting as a typical member of the organization, the boy politely tried to avoid saying that he disagreed with her positions. Talking politics had to be out of place in these organizations if they were to be welcoming to all. Controversy would divide people, not bring them together. Although nearly all the organizers were vaguely liberal, they did not consider it fair to impose their ideas on young people, because

they did not want to exclude any participants, even the anti-abortion, pro-capital punishment girl. The organizational style called for smoothing out differences—including political disagreements—in the name of inclusive group bonds, extremely permeable boundaries, and polite, upbeat speech.

Organizers encouraged their program members to attend County Board hearings, to testify that their programs deserved money. This may look like an unequivocal example of "politicizing," because youth participants were putting pressure on the state. But from our perspective, what is most interesting is the how—how this activity, which looks, from the outside, to be direct political activism, came to appear to youth as uncontroversial and apolitical. Every year of the study a new group of youth filled the programs, and each year's members thought that if they won they would get money instead of other county programs, such as those for old people or disabled babies. Every year, youth wondered if there would be a way for everyone to get what they needed, and every year adult organizers neglected to address this question. Every year the question quickly died, and a potentially political set of hearings became depoliticized when controversy was removed from the conversational docket.

Depoliticizing is more than social-structural domination

The adult organizers and funders of the Regional Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) hoped that volunteer work would bring diverse youth together, make them better citizens, and make them feel more like equals who could even help usher in a more egalitarian society. Even though participants were not equals in the rest of their lives, organizers hoped they could leave their unequal pasts behind when they joined hands together as volunteers. Organizers spoke in the language of can-do volunteering, another widespread civic vocabulary in American life (Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 2006), and linked it to social critique. They often said that getting one's hands dirty, doing the work, walking the walk, would set participants on an equal footing in a volunteer group. So, talking about members' inequality was certainly taboo in the Regional YEP's monthly meetings and in the service projects that members planned and attended.

The inequality was unavoidably noticeable even to the casual observer. Most of the poor and minority youth who participated in the meetings of the civic engagement projects, which were in the evening, came to them from their afternoon, after-school "prevention programs." The non-poor, middle-class or affluent volunteers were almost all white, with only a very small handful of Latinos and Asians, and no Blacks, thus reflecting the overlap of racial and class inequality in the region at the time. Rather than coming as members of prevention programs, these volunteers came partly for the purpose of plumping up their CVs for college admission.

Creating this haven from inequality meant learning how to ignore the differences. Members could not talk about how they got there or why they perceived the same activities differently. Yet, organizers had to talk about youth participants as members of categories when communicating with important outsiders—the government agencies and big nonprofit organizations that funded them. Hybrid organizations (Hall 1992) like YEP are supposed to serve the needy, not just the privileged. Diversity helped justify the volunteer projects' existence, and, indeed, they were much more diverse than typically homogenous voluntary associations (Verba *et al.* 1995; Popielarz and McPherson 1995).

Typical voluntary associations create, in other words, one kind of social inequality; these "hybrid" (Hall 1992) projects created their own.

A purely social-structural analysis might ask if YEP projects "reproduced" inequality or cultivated "resistance" to oppression, to echo Michael Burawoy's (Burawoy *et al.* 1991) or Paul Willis's (1981) dichotomy. However, the sum of all these differences was not a simple reproduction of pre-existing inequality. YEP projects *created a specific kind* of inequality in everyday interaction, one that materializes in organizations when they bid participants speak as if they are equals when they know they are not. Minority youth participants knew where they stood partly because they had heard statistics about people like them—from organizers themselves who had to chase funding by publicizing how effective their programs would be in lowering the high drop-out rate for black teens. Organizers had to document that their programs helped minority youth defy the odds, statistically speaking, for crime, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse, for example. Organizers had to make sure that members' inequality was visible, literally, so it was always important in public events to put visibly non-white youth on the podium, while poor, rural white youths' presence was not as urgent. Youth participants inevitably overheard all this, yet most organizers considered it a mistake when a black thirteen-year-old who was asked to speak from personal experience recited statistics about the drop-out rates for black males in town, and described how it felt to be treated like someone who would fulfill that prediction. He breached the organizational style that encourages people to act as if they are socially equal and proscribes talk that puts people in (unequal) social categories.

Statistics can politicize or not, depending on who is using them, and for what ends—to denounce, as other black speakers did, or to document for fundraising purposes, as organizers did, or to describe the feeling of being treated as a failure waiting to happen, as the black boy did, for example. Whites and non-whites talked about statistics for different purposes, for different audiences, with different meanings, and different political implications. White organizers most often mustered statistics in grant applications to convince funders to fund the after-school and summer programs—a political, social project for the organizers, who wanted to improve the life chances of the low-income, minority youth in their programs. In contrast, non-white, especially African-American speakers, mustered statistics in emotionally powerful public speeches, for the purpose of raising consciousness among an audience of potential activists—a different kind of politicization.

The over-arching point here is that in organizations like these inequality feels different and has different effects than it has in an organization in which inequality happens in other ways—through separation of participants, rejection of participants, or outright stigmatizing of participants, for instance. Each of these different ways of creating inequality in organizations can lead people to different political ends, with potentially different political effects. Certainly class and racial inequality mattered in YEP projects and structured the experiences of participants. At the same time, organizational styles politicized and depoliticized inequality in patterned ways that we could not simply read off from the class and race positions of YEP organizers and volunteers.

Even if class and race inequalities by themselves do not offer a complete guide to power relations, can't we assume that differences between ordinary citizens and state agencies translate reliably into a story of power and domination? What can a focus on "cultures of politics" teach us regarding this kind of structural inequality? It shows that

elements of organizational style—in this case group boundary-drawing—can have unintended depoliticizing consequences even apart from what external, state entities force groups to do or avoid doing.

Two other congregation-based community service alliances will illustrate our point. In the first case, members of the Humane Response Alliance (HRA) *assumed* from the beginning that their association was an adjunct to the state and would work inside the categories of state policy. As one of HRA's leaders said, the group needed to find a role within policies "set by the local government." No one pressed the issue further.

Of course churchgoers could not simply offer their own social services and usurp government authority without consequences. Yet they did not need to define themselves so strongly in terms of the state's own categories, especially in the US context, in which people assume that citizens are free to organize civic efforts apart from state mandates. They did not have to propose doing the state welfare service's job in order to come up with some other role beyond that "set by the local government," and one state employee came up with just such a role. He suggested that the HRA organize forums that would enable people newly cut off from financial assistance to speak directly to state agents and describe their troubles. In our terms, the state employee was suggesting that HRA help people *politicize* welfare reform in new ways, while HRA leaders already had *depoliticized* welfare reform—removing it as a potential object of deliberation or contention. To find power working inside the HRA's own style, its own definition of its boundaries and relationships, is a more nuanced, useful story of power relations than to say, as some critical observers might (McKnight 1995; Habermas 1975), that "the state colonized the HRA."

In the other example—an evangelical-sponsored support program for former welfare-receiving families—many volunteers considered the program nonpolitical, even though the program director conceived the program as a church-based complement to welfare reform. It would be easy for a researcher to assume the volunteers enlisted in this "Adopt-a-Family" program because they were ideologically or politically invested in welfare reform. Some researchers would assume, on the contrary, that our job would be to show how ideologically manipulated these volunteers were.

Both approaches would impute silent motives to people by fiat, and neither attends to the volunteers' own ways of distinguishing "political" from "not political," so neither can offer much help in understanding how ordinary citizens make sense of policy agendas. Many of these volunteers were strikingly indifferent to the various political ideologies surrounding welfare policy. They sounded neither supportive nor critical of welfare reform; it was not very salient to them one way or the other. They articulated their motives much more in terms of an evangelical Protestant-inflected version of compassion. They said that volunteering for this program was a way to perform "Christ-like care." They enacted Christ-like care in a very particular style; they imagined themselves and their adopted families acting in a pure world of caring and gratitude beyond the realm of politics altogether. They saw Adopt-a-Family as one service opportunity among others their pastor told them about, and not an opportunity to step into history and take a stance on the enormous change in the social contract, as many social scientists might view the program. Attributing ideological or political motives to these volunteers would have produced a very distorted picture of their participation. The volunteers' own ways of politicizing or depoliticizing welfare reform became clear only from following their own communication and their own relationship-building in the program.

Cultures of politics in global perspective

Given our attention to how people draw lines between political and nonpolitical, our approach is especially useful for understanding "politics" in places where an already sedimented political culture does not define some relationships and forms of speech as "politics" *a priori*. In Albania, for example (Sampson 1996), or Uzbekistan (Makarova 1998), figuring out what to count as "politics" is not easy for the analyst, much less the actors. Would an Islamic gathering place in Uzbekistan—a *mahalla*—that plans funerals, doles out something that looks to a Westerner like social welfare, and builds schools be a "political" entity, making political decisions? Asserting that it is or is not "political" is not as interesting as saying *how* it becomes political, how issues or identities become topics of public deliberation or silencing, and how the process of politicizing creates and recreates the typical *mahalla* in Uzbekistan. When squatters in India siphon water from the city's water mains without paying, is it more "political" if they do it visibly to make a public statement, or if they make under-the-table deals with local politicians, or if they simply take what they consider to be rightfully theirs (Chatterjee 2004)? Along with many scholars in the "post-colonial studies" tradition, we argue that they might all be "political" in different ways that highlight different aspects of the issue, shape different arguments and, eventually, different outcomes.

In Brazil, on the other hand, we find the opposite situation: a crammed-full public sphere, with profuse and big distinctions between positions. Members of youth activist organizations in Brazil carry different, practical definitions of a good member and a good group (Mische 2008). Depending on the organization, good members are ones who plot and argue, or value harmonious, consensus-building members, or prize rational deliberation. Argument, feelings, and rational discourse characterize all of these organizations to some extent, but groups vary widely in whether they put these different kinds of communication front-stage or back-stage. As Mische argues, newcomers can recognize one of these group styles by observing how members push some feelings, ideas, and relationships off the horizon here, but spotlight them there. Once again, politicization is more than sounding political. The variety of styles cannot be placed on a single spectrum of more or less politicization by group; rather, they represent different definitions-in-practice of "politics."

Conclusion: qualities of political engagement in everyday interaction

Our interaction-centered approach to cultures of politics differs from prominent alternatives of the past twenty-five years. Older approaches have ignored differences in setting and reduced political culture to dominant ideology that social elites use consciously to manipulate subordinates completely (Ewen 1976; Lasch 1979). A more nuanced version of this argument holds that people carry dominant ideologies ambivalently, and sometimes contest domination. In Stuart Hall's example, a working-class person who is watching the national news on TV hears "the national interest" and decodes that message as "the interest of the ruling elite," but may identify partially with the ruling elite's interest too because it seems so commonsensical. In contrast, a member of the ruling elite assumes what the newscaster assumed when writing the piece, which is that the national interest is the same as his or her own interest. Hall's Gramscian approach improves

greatly on the "dominant ideology" approach, but still ignores settings and assumes that the listener's social background is all we really need to know. Political culture is, for these analysts, a process of either accepting or resisting dominant ideology, albeit ambivalently, a lot of the time.

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of political culture (Bourdieu 1984) advances a step by not reducing political culture to class. In his framework, different groups—which themselves result from struggles to define collective identities—compete to politicize or depoliticize issues. For him, different political languages are more or less prestigious and convincing depending on the prestige and skills of the group that uses them. In Bourdieu's approach, then, interaction serves largely to reproduce inequalities in power between actors competing in grossly slanted fields. "Field" is a concept that seems, at first glance, to resemble our notion of setting. Bourdieu says that he treats fields as games, within which different moves have different meanings: what is deemed worthy for fine, museum art, for example, is not considered worthy for cool graffiti-inspired art. But in most of his work, hierarchical power struggles appear in the end to be the only really important game; after his earlier ethnographic studies (Bourdieu 1977) he rarely got close enough to the ground to see how people create fields and make moves in them, in everyday interaction. Settings and styles reduce to hierarchical positions.

Our examples show, in contrast to these two approaches, that it is difficult to describe actual instances of politicizing and depoliticizing completely in terms of domination, resistance, or relative group position. Methods of politicizing and depoliticizing are more situation-specific, more a product of organizational style, than these other approaches presume. We do not argue that people all have the same chances to politicize issues. Rather, our focus on cultures of politics helps us ask how and when people decide they are doing something "political," instead of defining individuals, organizations, or issues as political, powerful, or not powerful by scholarly fiat. Instead of being absolutely certain about which inequalities matter where, or which side should win, a focus on cultures of politics asks how people learn to create situations that politicize or depoliticize issues. Of course, sometimes it seems obvious to any fair or good-willed person which side should win, but how they play the game also matters.

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