

JSSR BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

RESPONSE

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I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mary Ellen Konieczny for organizing the Author-meets-Critics panel at the Association for the Sociology of Religion last August in Montreal, and to Rhys Williams and Sally Gallagher for making possible the publication of this symposium in JSSR. I am, of course, deeply grateful to critics John R. Hall, Paul Lichterman, and Rhys Williams for their attentive reading of *Beheading the Saint* and their incisive comments, as well as to members of the audience for their important questions. I have greatly benefited from these exchanges and welcome the opportunity to respond in the next pages.

Causal Chains

John R. Hall specifically addressed the issue of causality in my analysis, pointing out some ambiguity in the ways I discuss causal chains. The point is well taken, and I am happy to clarify the issue here.

Causality is invoked, in the book, at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, I articulate an argument that cultural sociologists often make, namely that cultural processes such as identity (trans)formation are not merely reflective of “deeper” structural-institutional ones, but that they are constitutive of them. In the case at hand, I argue that the secularization of national identity and the articulation of a new secular, territorially based *Québécois* identity in the 1960s was not the result of the secularization of institutions and the building of the modern welfare state in Québec, but that, rather, a new conception of the nation fueled structural/institutional reforms. I demonstrate that through a meso-level analysis of debates about of the annual St. Jean-Baptiste parades and the material modifications in the representation of the national icon, modifications that preceded institutional changes (see timeline on p. 88). Heated contests over Catholic French Canadianness afforded by the annual parade in honor of the patron-saint were far from being passive reflections of ongoing institutional reforms; they instead made possible the articulation of a secular Québécois identity that, in turn, provided ideological muscle for ambitious institutional reforms. Of course, the St. Jean-Baptiste feast was not the only occasion to discuss and debate national identity; but it was a privileged one because of the cyclical and ritual nature of the event. At these macro and meso sociological levels, then, I privilege a Weberian model of causality that takes into account a multitude of factors, and claim that there was an elective affinity between cultural processes and institutional reforms during the Quiet Revolution.

At the micro level, my causal claim is more limited in scope but more direct: here, I show the direct consequences of specific material modifications of the national patron saint’s icon from the removal of the lamb from the saint’s side to the child-saint’s maturation; from the severing of the saint’s head to the interpretation of that incident as “a beheading” in the days and weeks that followed. I show the causal chains of signification

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created by a rich web of visual, material, and discursive/scriptural interpretations that led to a widely shared “reading” of the event and the resulting abolition of parades and subsequent invention of new modes of national celebration. With the material and discursive “beheading” of the saint in 1969, the macro, meso, and micro levels fatefully intersected to produce an event in the Sewellian sense, crystallizing a secular Québécois identity that had been in construction for a decade *and* institutionalizing that new identity through the abandonment of the saint as a national symbol, the abolition of the parades as a form of collective celebrative, and the institutionalization of new national practices.

To be clear: I am not claiming that the parades and the beheading “caused” the Quiet Revolution. That period of transformations was in full speed already by the mid-1960s, initiated by the sudden opening of the political opportunity structure made possible by the death of Québec’s Premier in 1959 and the coming to power of a new generation of liberal nationalists. I am not claiming either that a new Québécois identity would not have been articulated had it not been for the protests over the parade and the final attack the symbol of Catholic French Canadianness. The definition of that new identity may not have been achieved at the same pace, with the same force, and with the same impact, however, without the debates about, and the attacks on, the saint during the parades, and without the proverbial *coup de grâce* that symbolically and then institutionally closed a chapter in Québec’s history and opened a new one.

How, then, might we clarify causal relationships between cultural and other developments? How might we connect cultural transformations to structural ones in more direct causal or explanatory terms? I wish I had an easy answer to this question, or that I were able to provide a clear causal model. In analyzing complex historical processes, I find more productive to privilege nuance over parsimony. What I see as my accomplishment in this book is the revealing of layers of meaning and identification of the connective links between the microcultural and the macrohistorical levels. The general lesson of my work is to be found in the approach; in that attention to multiple levels of analysis. The potential cost here is that there is no single, easy, “take-away” point. But social life is messy and what I strive to do is shedding light on the complexities of social processes instead of simplifying them for greater impact but at the expense of nuance.

A Visual and Material Sociology of Identity (Trans)formation

All three critics point out that the case of Québec is especially well suited for a visual and material sociology of identity (trans)formation, but wonder whether that specific type of cultural sociology would be as powerful to understand collective identities in places where esthetics---say, visual and material culture---are less central than it is in traditionally Catholic communities. Rhys Williams ponders whether and to what extent it would work for the analysis of Protestant societies, which tend to emphasize texts more than images, and Paul Lichterman for societies where the past is not as materially present as it is in Québec or Europe. In other words, what is the comparative purchase of my approach, and can it be exportable to other cases?

I take my critics’ concern as an indication of the approach’s fruitfulness, since they are convinced of its analytical power for the case of Québec. My concept of the national sensorium was first developed in my work on Poland (2011), and is certainly transposable. The national sensorium consists of the visual depiction and embodiment of historical narratives and national myths in cultural forms, the built environment and the landscape. National narratives are communicated to, and experienced by individuals through a variety of

material practices: by *wearing* a flag pin or a political button; *carrying* a placard, a cross, or a torch at a political demonstration; *draping* oneself in a flag; *moving* through a landscape dotted by places of martyrdom or victory; singing the national anthem at a sporting event and *eating* certain foods on specific holidays, social actors sensorially experience national narratives and myths, rendering the abstract idea of the nation concrete. As they become real and close---embodied---these myths often acquire political traction and mobilize groups. Within a certain sensorium and esthetics, elite constructions can cue paradigmatic stories and sentiments, *or their subversion* in iconoclastic acts. I argue that it is the relatively shared set of stories, images and material symbols, and the disagreement as much as the consensus evoked in response to them, that generate “a nation”---however, thinly coherent its culture may be.

Such practices and processes are not specifically Catholic; the United States is a historically and “culturally” Protestant nation, and it has a highly developed national sensorium, which mixes secular and religious symbols in its own distinctive way. My companion concept of esthetic revolt likewise is useful to capture the dual process whereby social actors discursively contest and materially rework iconic symbols, granting those symbols new significations that push forward the articulation of new identities, and provide momentum for institutional reforms. In today’s United States, the American national sensorium is being challenged on two sides: from ultranationalists who adopt the rituals and symbols of white supremacy, borrowing from the KKK, Nazi Germany, and Trump rallies to create their own national esthetics; and from African American and their White supporters who kneel during sporting events’ national anthem to protest racism in American society and implore fellow citizens to face up to America’s promise of equality and fairness. Both are examples of esthetic revolts that have acquired political traction and are shaping nationwide discourse about Americanness. The point is that national sensoria differ from nation to nation. And even radical iconoclasm or esthetic “emptiness” is a crafted sensorium, and speaks. It is up to the analyst to identify the key sites, symbols, and rituals of national reproduction/subversion in the societies they study. Would a *parade* be as significant an analytical lens in other cases? Probably not (aside from other obvious cases like Ireland, where parades celebrate ethnonational identities, commemorate violent events *and* become the platform for political protests). In the United States, football games might well be the social space where the nation “happens.”

Religion beyond Religion

We know that the cultural is political and that the political is cultural. The challenge is to show the specific ways this is so, and to explain their manifold hybrid articulations. Instead of looking only at institutional rearrangements, I show that the relationship between national identity and religion is mediated by, expressed in, and reconfigured through the engagement with material things that impact the senses, and the performance of rituals in concrete sites and during public, and highly publicized, events. As Paul Lichterman pointed out, I look outside the familiar spaces of religion, directing my gaze at the *politics* of religion far beyond worship settings. By examining the process of *patrimonialization* of religion, that is, the discursive, material, and legal ways in which religious symbols, artifacts, and practices are sacralized as secular elements of the nation and its history, I show the continued significance of religion under conditions of secularity. If we were to look only at more “traditionally religious” spaces in Québec, we might very well miss that religion still matters, as well as how and why it does. I hope that *Beheading the Saint* provides useful cues for the sociology of religion.