Book Review/Compte rendu

Paul D. McLean, *The Art of the Network: Strategic Inter-action and Patronage in Renaissance Florence: Politics, History and Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 304 pp. $US 22.95 paper (978-0-8223-4117-8), $US 79.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-4100-0)

In recent years, social network analysis has been attacked for ignoring the cultural constitution of social ties, the component of networks that is patently phenomenological. The validity of this criticism is far from given. Beyond the surface meaning of a tie, culture in interaction is difficult to pin down, and with the payoffs unknown it is understandable that there has been little substantive effort to understand it. If it could be shown that, at least in part, culture could explain interaction, interaction could explain culture, or the two were somehow constitutive of one another, there would be sufficient motivation to pursue a cultural analysis of social networks. How one might do such an analysis has so far remained unclear. Paul McLean's *The Art of the Network* goes some way to achieve a fusion of cultural analysis with network analysis in order to better understand their interface in historical context.

The broad promise of the book is an account of the interplay of structure and agency, construed here as a sort of structuration between cultural interaction and interactional culture. McLean focuses on a single set of interactions, the sending and receiving of favour-seeking letters that activated patron-client ties in Renaissance Florence. These letters are simultaneously interactions and expressions of cultural repertoires that exist at historical moments. The content of letters provide the cultural components of interaction. The identification and classification of the rhetoric in these letters is the key to understanding the interface between interaction and culture. For McLean, "structure" means knowledge about the rules of interaction. "Agency" refers to individual and strategic variation in the deployment of these rules in context.

McLean's core insight, following a synthetic critique of Swidler, Bourdieu and Goffman, is that network action is an "art form," strategic action that involves the cobbling together of a number of elements from a pre-existing cultural repertoire. Among other things, repertoires contain a ready-to-use set of identities by which letter writers can frame themselves, their associates, and the letters' recipients. The goal is to portray and sell "authentic" images of the self and others because at stake is competition over scarce resources, specifically favours and privileges, crucial

to build careers. As such, interaction is a contradictory effort aided by cultural knowledge, to both liken oneself to and distinguish oneself from others. McLean suggests that while this use of cultural repertoires in letters draws from pre-existing identities, it produces and reproduces other identities that gain and lose salience over time, resulting in slowly evolving repertoires of interaction that eventually begin to resemble our own.

McLean's insight that interaction is pieced together strategically from a cultural repertoire seems to follow from biases in the sample of letters that he analyses. Not only are his documents those that happened to survive through time, McLean introduces another bias by selecting out those letters that are less likely to display strategic interaction, and thereby interaction's "art form." While this bias should place limits on the claims he can make, McLean makes two implicit suppositions in an attempt to escape these limits. First, he assumes that the motivation for writing a letter is extra-cultural, a result of the individual seeking advantage or favour. This allows him to "explain" interaction without reference to the content of interaction, which is variable but not, as it turns out, explanatory. Second, he assumes that writing a letter involves cultural knowledge, without which interaction is unlikely. This allows him to speak of interaction generally, ignoring the fact that he has censored data where the cultural repertoire he seeks is not present. Together, these two suppositions produce circularity: given that individuals want to get ahead, their use of pre-existing culture is a strategic expression of interaction. Not surprisingly, his data corresponds precisely to this argument, turning an explanatory project into a descriptive one, that results in the taxonomy of a cultural repertoire.

Nonetheless, McLean does well with what he has, as his efforts give us something to think about: at a metatheoretical level, he demonstrates that it is indeed *possible* to see culture in interaction. By providing a lucid and plausible account of how interaction is constituted by cultural work, he does a great service for those who wish to be analytical about culture in social networks. McLean's rich description of rhetorical devices with which interactions are expressed provides a useful taxonomy for further explanatory analysis of culture and interaction. The task then is to seriously evaluate whether his taxonomy has explanatory utility for problems that are of interest to most network analysts, such as network emergence, flows, and dynamics — problems that McLean himself avoids.

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