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Innovation and diversity in cultural sociology. Notes on Peterson and Berger's classic article

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Focus

Innovation and diversity in cultural sociology

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Introduction

In 1975, Richard A. Peterson and David G. Berger witnessed the publication of their article, "Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music," in *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*). When compared to other articles in that same issue of *ASR*, their article is unremarkable in some ways. For instance, it is not the most theoretically refined article in the issue; that honor likely belongs to another article that explicates Weber's theory of action [Cohen *et al.* 1975]. Neither is their article the most methodologically sophisticated one in the issue, especially given those by Freeman and Hannan [1975] and Treiman and Terrell [1975].

However, when compared to sociological trends of the day, Peterson and Berger's article is quite remarkable. On the one hand, their work altered a stream of scholarship that addresses media content. Certain contributors to this stream – such as Adorno [*e.g.,* 1941; 1975] – lamented that the capitalistic nature of media industries drives out diversity in music, literature and other content. In contrast, Peterson and Berger argued that diversity rises and falls rather than steadily declines; although gigantic media corporations tend to offer homogenous content, their dominance is occasionally punctured by small competitors that unleash a momentary flourishing of varied content. Hence, Peterson and Berger expanded scholarship on content diversity by implicating industry dynamics (*e.g.,* the competition between large and small firms) rather than capitalism itself [DiMaggio 1977]. On the other hand, their article offered a provocative claim: progress in cultural sociology is greatly improved by moving from grand questions regarding culture writ large and turning to specific questions about the contexts in which culture is explicitly made, such as media industries [see also Peterson 1976]. In short, they called for a programmatic approach in cultural sociology that accumulates knowledge in a variety of ways – including building on insights from beyond cultural sociology (*e.g.,* sociology of science) and comparing processes at work across settings (*e.g.,* music and film industries). Thus, they hoped to avoid a cultural sociology wherein "(…) studies offer great insights but fail to build on one another [and where] (…) theory has become sophisticated but not fully operational" [DiMaggio 1997, 263]. Small wonder, then, that Peterson and Berger's title emphasized symbol production in general, with popular music offering one particular example.

Since its publication in 1975, "Cycles in Symbol Production" has arguably become a "classic" in cultural sociology. Studies of artistic consecration [Allen and Lincoln 2004; Corse and Griffin 1997; Schmutz 2005] offer lessons as to why that might be the case. Most obviously, the sheer *durability* of this article supports the classic designation. Although more than 30 years have passed since its publication, "Cycles" still remains relevant. A search on the Web of Science Citation Index[1] reveals 171 works that cite it, with 48 of these citations occurring in the 21st century (see Figure 1).[2] Thus, we find this article informing contemporary research on topics that range from rap music in the U.S. [Lena 2006] to protest art in Chile [Adams 2005]. Its classic status is also supported by the *acclaim* that it receives within sociology. For instance, various literature reviews and textbooks privilege this article. At the very least, they cite it as a pivotal contribution and, sometimes, they detail it and the subsequent scholarship that it inspired [*e.g.,* Alexander 2003; Blau 1988; DiMaggio 2000; Martin 1995].

Finally, it is fair to label "Cycles" a classic because of its *resonance* with the theoretical terrain of cultural sociology. The programmatic call contained in their 1975 article found voice in the "Production of Culture" approach that, according to DiMaggio [2000], gained near hegemony in cultural sociology. Of course, not everyone is completely satisfied with all that this article represents. Some seek to refine it – as when Negus [1999] interrogates not only how the record industry shapes culture (*e.g.,* musical diversity) but also how culture (*e.g.,* assumptions about race)

[1] This index underreports the actual number of citations, for it does not track all sociology journals nor does it track citations found in books. Nevertheless, these figures do show the ongoing vitality of "Cycles." They also suggest the varied reception of this classic article. Of the 171 articles that cite "Cycles," 78% were published in the U.S. and 15% in Europe.

[2] Jacobs [2005] designates as "high impact" those *ASR* articles that attain 100 or more citations.

shapes the record industry. Others seek to move cultural sociology in new directions – as when DeNora [2000] emphasizes what people do *with* music rather than what industries do *to* music. Thus, within the broader theoretical terrain, this classic article continues to provide, for some, a model to emulate and engage and, for others, a model from which to depart.

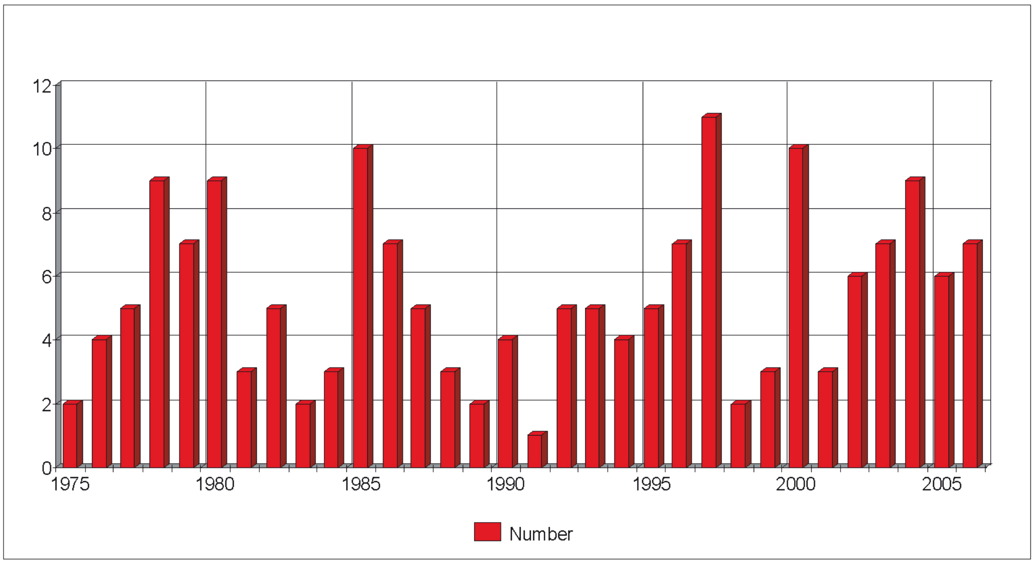

FIG. 1. Peterson & Berger [1975] citations.

This essay proceeds in two broad sections. The first section addresses, in detail, the roots and realization of "Cycles in Symbol Production." In particular, I note important themes in Peterson and Berger's earlier works and show how these themes found culmination in their innovative article of 1975. The themes are 1) organizational adaptation in media environments, 2) the trajectory of genres, and 3) the diversity of media products. The second section examines the subsequent treatment of these themes within and beyond sociology – offering examples of research that supports or extends the arguments contained in "Cycles." My intent in this essay is neither to offer an exhaustive literature review nor to adjudicate between contradictory findings. Instead, I hope to show how this classic article stimulated the intellectual diversity of cultural sociology. This essay also works against the unfortunate tendency in which important works are reduced to a descriptive phrase [see DiMaggio 1995, 395-396]. In the case of scholarship that stems from Peterson and Berger's article, we will see that it entails much more than the common slogan, "big corporations are bad for media content."

I offer a confession before proceeding. Some sixteen years ago, while still a graduate student, my initial exposure to "Cycles in Symbol Production" proved pivotal. It inspired me to ask a host of questions, to theorize about the fate of music and musicians in environments dominated by multinational corporations, and to pursue a series of studies. Given that a few corporations continue to dominate media markets around the world, issues raised by Peterson and Berger in 1975 are still germane. I therefore hope that this essay will inspire readers to ponder anew their article.

The Classic Article Considered

Its Roots

"Cycles in Symbol Production" was not an isolated work but, instead, built on themes found in previous efforts by Peterson and Berger. Consequently, consideration of some of these earlier works helps situate the 1975 article. Their 1971 article, "Entrepreneurship in Organizations," introduced an important theme: *organizational adaptation* and its implications for media production. Peterson and Berger addressed how firms adapt to the turbulent environment of music recording. Such turbulence greatly challenges traditional bureaucracies – wherein authority and decision-making flow from well-defined and previously-specified rules and routines. Indeed, drastic shifts in consumer demand and short-lived musical fads easily outpace any bureaucratic responses. Drawing on interviews and observation, Peterson and Berger described several ways that record firms can adapt. First, some firms remain small and avoid bureaucracy, so as to respond nimbly to the vagaries of audience tastes and to remain flexible in their musical production. Second, if record firms remain bureaucratic, some aspire to grow large and dominate the industry, thereby insulating themselves from volatile demand and musical fads while minimizing the challenges posed by small competitors. Of course, such an approach bodes poorly for musical variety. Finally, some firms are both large and responsive to shifts in demand and musical fads. They do so by remaining bureaucratic in their sales and manufacturing divisions while "de-bureaucratizing" their musical production division. This arguably combines the best of both worlds – the quick response of small firms and the expansive capabilities of large firms.

Peterson and Berger [1971] historically located the adaptation of record firms. From the 1940s to the mid-1950s, four firms controlled the vast majority of the U.S. recording business. Their dominance was great enough to stabilize the environment, allowing a conservative approach that entailed a limited range of music. Despite what audiences might have preferred, these giant bureaucracies emphasized relatively few songs – with multiple versions recorded by their respective stars (*e.g.*, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra). From the 1950s onward, the environment grew increasingly turbulent, partly because of the proliferation of small competitors who dealt in a range of emergent musical styles with growing appeal (*e.g.,* rock and roll). Large firms adapted by becoming less bureaucratic. Within their music production divisions, they now relied on the expertise and "instinct" of autonomous personnel (*i.e.* "entrepreneurs") rather than bureaucrats to grapple with this new musical environment. Some of these entrepreneurial personnel were firm employees, but others worked on a contractual basis – including such notable producers as Phil Spector. These large firms also acquired artists and small firms conversant in new musical styles, thus co-opting competitive challenges. Such moves allowed the large firms to re-establish their dominance. Consequently, Peterson and Berger expected that these firms would return to a fully bureaucratic approach in light of this now stabilized environment.

The *trajectory of genres* is a theme found in another early work that examines the interplay between "communal" music and "popular" music. Peterson posited that communal music (such as "folk" and "fine art" music) is sustained by specific communities and by live performances, whereas popular music is sustained by corporations and the sale of products to the masses. Furthermore, he argued that while communal music "[develops] slowly by exploring and expanding the range of aesthetic possibilities (…) pop music is characterized by a succession of fads (…) [But pop music] is open to major influences from beyond its bounds at certain historical periods" [Peterson 1972, 137]. Drawing on historical materials, Peterson bolstered his argument by tracing the trajectory of jazz in the U.S. It initially emerged as folk music, later became a popular music consumed by large numbers of Americans (losing its innovativeness in the process), and finally developed on the margins as fine-art music.

Beyond showing this trajectory, Peterson explained the initial innovation of commercial jazz and its subsequent homogenization. Jazz's emergence as popular music in the U.S. of the 1920s was a notable innovation because it entailed the combination of elements from previously separate musical traditions – elements largely associated with particular communities of African Americans and elements associated with white performers in popular music. This newly-commercial jazz diverged from previous popular music because of its driving rhythms, extensive improvisations, and celebration of instrumental prowess. Peterson accounted for the timing of this innovation by pointing to aspects of content (*e.g.*, audiences were ready for something musically new) and the broader social content (*e.g.,* urbanization and the hedonism of the "Roaring Twenties" were conducive to this type of jazz). Perhaps most importantly, he pointed to changes in the music industry. New technologies – such as commercial radio – allowed small competitors to challenge the dominance of large music firms by championing this new musical style. However, this innovation was relatively short-lived in the realm of popular music. Innovative jazz was replaced by "swing" jazz that was formulaic and that reigned in once-adventuresome rhythms, improvisation, and virtuosity. Peterson accounted for this homogenization by once again stressing content (*e.g.,* audiences grew bored with early jazz) and context (*e.g.,* the Roaring Twenties gave way to the Great Depression). Regarding the industry, the dominance of a few music firms had returned, and those firms "sanitized" jazz and rendered it less vibrant than it was in the early 1920s. This chapter revealed an ebb and flow in popular music, in which innovative content thrives for a brief period in the commercial realm and, then, gives way to mundane content. Nevertheless, the *potential* for innovation remains because communal music continues to be vibrant beyond the realm of popular music – as when fine-art jazz (*e.g.,* Be Bop) explored new musical terrain with relatively little commercial success but with great acclaim from aficionados.

A final work raised a related theme: the *diversity of media content*, whereby the range of available content waxes and wanes over time. This chapter by Peterson and Berger [1972] had two thrusts. First, it examined lyrical themes in U.S. popular music from 1750 to 1970. The authors did so by relying on previous scholarship for lyrical themes in the early period (1750-1890), utilizing Berger's unpublished content analysis of "hit" songs (*i.e.,* those that are best-sellers) for the second period (1890-1950), and conducting their own content analysis of hit songs for the final period (1950-1970). In general, they found a wide range of political and topical lyrics in the first period, a tremendous reduction in lyrical themes in the second period (with love themes preeminent), and an expanding range of themes in the final period – with love themes declining and other themes (*e.g.,* social critique) ascending.

The other thrust dealt with the industry structure that accounts for such lyrical patterns, emphasizing the causal role that it has on content. When the music industry is dominated by a few large companies (*i.e.,* an "oligopoly"), then the range of lyrical content is severely constrained (as it was from 1890-1950). In such a situation, oligopolists face "no competitive pressures to *test* the boundaries of permissible lyrics" [Peterson and Berger 1972, 289] and, hence, do not stray far from lyrical themes that have sold well in the past. In contrast, a music industry that is small and lacking in copyright protection (1750-1890) or that is competitive (1950-1970) enjoys an expanded range of lyrical themes because such situations make complacency difficult for firms. Despite the competition and diversity found in the final period, the authors foresaw a change: "Since 1968, however, three movements have done much to dampen the radicalizing potential of mass media disseminated popular music. These are the same factors which 'tamed' jazz (…) They are the 're-oligopolization' of the industry, the emergence of moralist critics of the rock ethos, and the co-optation of rock's critical thrust" [*ibidem*, 297]. As in their 1971 article, they expected that the 1970s would bring challenges to popular music.

The works described in this section are modest in their theorizing and analyses yet are also evocative, nicely setting the stage for the realization of the 1975 article. Taken together, they suggest that content of popular music suffers when a few large firms dominate the music industry – especially when those firms rely on a bureaucratic approach to musical production. These works also suggest that this situation is not permanent because, given the right situation, communal music and small record firms are poised to disrupt the *status quo*. Peterson and Berger directly addressed such suggestions in "Cycles in Symbol Production." In bringing together themes of organizational adaptation, genre trajectory and product diversity, this article stands out from their earlier work in terms of its explanatory framework and its empirical measures. I address these before turning to it findings.

Its Realization

Peterson and Berger's explanatory framework contained an element that both complemented and extended their earlier work: a reliance on economic theory. This represented a departure for them, in particular, and for sociologists, in general. Sociologists who had previously investigated innovation in the arts and science often drew upon theories from *within* sociology (as Peterson and Berger did in their 1971 article on entrepreneurship), but as Peterson and Berger [1975, 159] observed, "(…) no investigators have explicitly utilized the theory of industrial market structure and product innovation developed in economics." In turning to economics, they were able to draw upon decades of scholarship that included a debate regarding markets and innovation [this debate has continued beyond 1975: see Adams and Brock 1991]. Schumpeter [1942] is an exemplar for one side of this debate, emphasizing the positive contributions of large firms that dominate a given market (*i.e.,* oligopolists). Given their size and position, he argued, oligopolists have the capacities and resources to pursue extensive research and to absorb costs associated with development and experimentation. As a result, they are more likely to innovate than their small counterparts.

The other side of this debate took issue with Schumpeter's argument [see Adams and Brock 1986; Greer 1992; Scherer and Ross 1990] and raised concerns similar to those invoked by Peterson and Berger [1971]. Oligopolists tend to have extensive levels of bureaucracy and elaborate decision-making routines because of their large size, making them conservative rather than innovative. Oligopolists also benefit from the *status quo* and are likely to favor stability rather than change. As a result, "each oligopolist strives for that product which pleases the most without offending any major group of consumers. This process makes for a homogeneity of product" [Peterson 1975, 159]. On this side of the debate, *small* firms drive innovation. Such firms typically lack the bureaucracy that constrains oligopolists, and their concerns with improving a marginal position can prompt experimentation and risk-taking. Peterson and Berger [1975, 159] wrote, "(...) when many firms successfully compete, there is a continual quest for product innovation and the single mass market tends to break up into a number of segments each representing a slightly different taste. Thus, competition makes for innovation and diversity."

Peterson and Berger's explanatory framework also included an element that could be labeled the "historical accident" argument [see Anand 2000]. It emphasized the unique confluence of events that momentarily undermines the dominance of oligopolists and opens the door for small firms. Economic work on the U.S. film industry offered precedence (Conant 1960). In the early and mid 1900s, film oligopolists maintained their position, not necessarily by satisfying audiences, but by preventing competitors from doing so. In the early 1900s, they used patents to exclude small competitors, and in the mid 1900s, they conspired to bar small competitors from theatrical exhibition. However, government intervention via antitrust ultimately ruptured the control that these oligopolists once enjoyed, thereby ushering in periods of competition. Peterson and Berger also stressed such disruptive contingencies, including the impact of new technologies and generational shifts in musical tastes. These "historical accidents" prompted innovation and diversity by providing new avenues for small firms to reach consumers whose demands are not met by oligopolists. Peterson and Berger also contended that the effects of these accidents are short-lived. Hence, they posited a cycle in which long periods of homogeneity are briefly punctuated by short periods of diversity.

Given their explanatory framework, Peterson and Berger faced two empirical issues: how to measure the extent to which a few oligopolists dominate the market over a span of decades (*i.e.,* "concentration") and how to measure the available range of products over a similar span (*i.e.,* "diversity"). The manner in which they resolved both issues has inspired both imitation and criticism. As a result, it is expedient to examine them in some detail. Regarding the measurement of concentration, Peterson and Berger turned to the popularity "charts" contained in the leading industry trade paper, *Billboard.* On a weekly basis, these charts rank the relative popularity of "singles" (*i.e.,* recordings of individual songs), taking into account such things as sales and radio airplay. Peterson and Berger proceeded by documenting all singles that attained a "Top 10" ranking in any week from 1948 to 1973. They then identified the record firm that is responsible for each Top 10 hits. Finally, they constructed "concentration ratios." Simply put, these ratios document the annual percentage of Top 10 hits enjoyed by the leading firms. In 1948, for instance, four firms accounted for 81% of Top Ten hits and eight firms accounted for 95% – with both of these ratios denoting high concentration rather than the thriving of competition.

As for the measurement of diversity, Peterson and Berger took two approaches. First, they turned again to the *Billboard* charts and used them to gauge diversity by counting the "sheer number of performers and records reaching the top ten weekly charts" [Peterson and Berger 1975, 163]. High numbers of hit records and (new) performers circulating on the charts indicate heightened diversity. Second, they returned to the content analysis of lyrics, thereby echoing their 1972 chapter in which a broad range of themes denotes diversity. Note that they provided measures of "diversity" rather than "innovation" – despite mentioning both concepts in their article. Victoria Alexander [2003, 110] later observed, "Peterson and Berger do not adequately distinguish innovation and diversity, assuming that (unmeasured) innovation precedes measured diversity."[3]

With their empirical measures in hand, Peterson and Berger's analysis unfolded in the following fashion. They identified periods of heightened concentration and reduced concentration (*i.e.,* competition). They suggested factors that accounted for such periods – including the "historical accidents" that enable competition. Finally, they examined how the various types of diversity fare in the face of concentration and competition. The strength of their analysis lies in the historical material that they brought to bear rather than in the quantitative figures that they offered. In terms of the latter, they visually inspected and compared concentration ratios and diversity measures over time, thereby leaving issues of statistical significance unaddressed. That said, we can now turn to the findings.

The period from 1948 to 1955 was one of "corporate concentration" in the U.S. record industry. During that period, four firms were a major force – Capitol, Columbia, Decca, and RCA Victor. Not surprisingly, annual concentration ratios for the four leading firms ranged from 71% to 81% – showing that most Top 10 hits accrued to a few firms. It did not appear, furthermore, that the "Big Four" faced many

[3] I find helpful the distinction of DiMaggio and Stenberg [1985]: innovation is an attribute of an individual unit (*e.g.,* a path-breaking song, performer, or scholarly article) and diversity is an attribute of an aggregate (*e.g.,* the variety among songs, performers, or scholarly research).

competitors: eight-firm concentration ratios during this period ranged from 91% to 100%, with no more than 14 firms ever enjoying a Top 10 hit in this period. Such high concentration was relatively unusual in the mid 1900s. In fact, a U.S. government survey of nearly 420 industries revealed that less than one-fifth of them had four-firm concentration ratios in excess of 60%.

Given that production costs were so low at this time – that is, competitors should have abounded in an industry where the final product (a single record) could be produced and distributed for less than $5,000 – what could account for the Big Four's powerful position? Both the Big Four and ascendant record firms benefited from their presence in channels that stood between them and consumers, what Peterson and Berger called "downstream." On the one hand, these firms had formidable ties in merchandizing channels of radio and film. The parent companies of Columbia and RCA were owners of the major radio networks of the era – CBS and NBC, respectively – that blanketed the nation with musical programming and thereby promoted recording acts. Meanwhile, Capitol, Decca and RCA had affiliations with motion picture studios, and the emergent ABC-Paramount and MGM Records had parent companies that also owned studios; in an era where film musicals were commonplace, such connections were useful for record firms. On the other hand, each of the Big Four possessed sprawling distribution channels by which their products reached retailers across the nation. Besides possessing such downstream capabilities, the Big Four also took active steps to quash competition, as when they pressured retailers not to carry the records of small firms and when they covertly offered sizable sums of money to radio stations in exchange for the broadcast of their respective performers and recordings (*i.e.,* payola).

This corporate concentration begat what Peterson and Berger labeled a "homogeneity of product." In terms of the lyrical content of hit songs, they pointed to the earlier analysis of Berger, as well as that of others, and summarized that "over 80% of all songs fit into a conventionalized love cycle where sexual references are allegorical and social problems are unknown" [Peterson and Berger 1975, 163]. This lack of lyrical diversity was echoed by the non-content indicators of diversity. Given that the *Billboard* charts were constructed for 51 weeks out of the year, there could potentially be 510 songs each year (51*10) that attained Top 10 status. In actuality, the annual number of Top 10 hits ranged from 48 to 62 during this period, with only 7 to 13 singles attaining a Number 1 status. This shows a lack of variety among the supply of records, with few new singles entering the charts. Trends among performers were also telling: the percentage of Top 10 hits by established performers hovered near 40% across the time period, spiked at 60% in 1949, surged to 46% in 1954, yet suddenly plummeted to 17% in 1955 – with the latter being a portent of things to come. Peterson and Berger argued that this homogeneity resulted from industry concentration rather than demand. Annual record sales faced negative growth for half of this period, suggesting that audiences were less than enamored with the sanitized recordings offered by the likes of Perry Como. In contrast, personnel at *Billboard* documented the thriving of communal music on the periphery of the market – showing audience interest in the musical variety that lay beyond the commercial mainstream.

The period from 1956 to 1959 saw heightened competition in the U.S. record industry, resulting in the Big Four losing their sway. The number of firms that had a Top 10 hit rose from 20 in 1956 to 42 in 1959. That flurry of firms translated to falling concentration. Four-firm concentration ratios went from 66% to 34%, while eight-firm ratios dropped from 76% to 58%. "Historical accidents" played a role in this burgeoning of competition by changing the nature of the downstream. The film industry was embroiled in travails. The rise of commercial television had greatly reduced movie attendance and, therefore, revenues. Antitrust action meant that movie studios had to divest of their substantial number of theaters, posing additional financial burdens. Faced with these developments, motion picture studios moved away from the production of musicals, thereby reducing an important promotional venue for record firms. Perhaps more importantly, other studios followed the example of MGM and Paramount and likewise established their own record divisions (*e.g.,* United Artists, Warner) in search of new sources of revenue. The radio industry likewise faced difficulties. With the ascendance of commercial television, CBS and NBC had transferred the bulk of their radio programming (and advertising) to television, leaving a tremendous void behind in radio. Local radio stations filled that void by offering specialized programming that targeted specific segments (*e.g.,* teens) within their community rather targeting the nation as a whole with general-appeal programming (as the networks of the past had done). Disc-jockeys became prominent in this new radio environment, with many taking pride in identifying previously unheralded performers and musical "sounds." Meanwhile, the Federal Communication Commission would eventually investigate the legality of payola. These changes reduced the advantages the Big Four once enjoyed "downstream." They also resulted in the influx of competitors. Because of the film industry, the Big Four now faced a handful of competitors with potentially-deep pockets (*e.g.,* United Artists), and because of the radio industry, they faced a legion of competitors that now had the ears of disc-jockeys and audiences.

The heightened competition of this period directly led to product diversity. A notable shift in lyrical content occurred. Whereas love themes were dominant in the previous period, we now see conflict of various types given voice in hit songs – including conflict with parents, teachers, and workers. Lyrics about love also grew more pointed, if not suggestive. The expanding range of themes coincides with changes among the non-content indicators of diversity. The number of Top 10 songs nearly doubled, rising from 59 in 1956 to 92 in 1959. Meanwhile, a majority of Top 10 hits were performed by new performers across this period, reaching a peak of 73% in 1959. Peterson and Berger noted that this period of diversity also saw communal music (*e.g.,* rock and roll, rhythm and blues, country) penetrating the commercial mainstream; Perry Como had now given way to Elvis Presley. Apparently, audiences were happy with this state of affairs, as sales for the record industry rose by more than 250% in this period.

Peterson and Berger identified three periods for the remainder of their study's time frame. Although each period had unique elements, the periods all pointed to the return of high concentration levels. From 1959 to 1963, industry concentration reached its lowest point, with four firms accounting only for 25 to 28% of Top 10 hits. While the Big Four firms benefited from the rising sales of the industry, they continued to struggle in terms of market share. During this period, they annually faced 36 to 41 firms that likewise enjoyed a Top 10 hit. Indeed, ascendant firms – such as Warner and MGM – were starting to claim an increasing market share. As a result, a "secondary consolidation" occurred with eight firms enjoying a higher share of Top 10 hits in 1963 (55%) than they did in the previous three years; concentration had begun to rebound. Indeed, during the period from 1964 to 1969, industry concentration was clearly on the rise. Even though the annual number of firms with Top 10 hits varied from 30 to 37, four firms accounted for 34% of those hits in 1964 and 42% in 1969; eight firms would eventually account for 64% of these hits in 1969. Amidst this period in which the industry enjoyed tremendous economic growth, three record firms associated with movie studios – Paramount, United Artists, and Warner – bolstered their position by acquiring smaller record firms. From 1969 to 1973, "reconcentration" had arrived. The annual number of firms enjoying Top 10 hits dropped from 23 in 1969 to 19 in 1973, a downward trajectory that approached the low numbers of late 1940s. Concurrently, four firms once again accounted for a majority of Top 10 hits in 1973 (56%), while eight firms claimed 81% of the 1973 hits. In this last period, the Big Four of yesteryear – Capitol, Columbia, Decca, and RCA – now grappled for market shares with current powerhouses, such as Warner and ABC, and with a few powerful "independents," particularly Motown and A&M.

Peterson and Berger mostly accounted for the rebounding of concentration by looking at factors *within* the record industry rather than, say, the downstream or audiences *beyond* the industry. Firm strategies regarding performers played a role. The Big Four initially viewed rock and roll as a momentary fad, resisting the music that had already undermined their market dominance. Yet, around 1962, "RCA, Capitol, Decca and Columbia decided that they could never recover the singles market on the strength of their pre-rock artists" [*ibidem* 1975, 166]. Two of the Big Four enjoyed early success by signing the Beach Boys and the Beatles (Capitol) and Bob Dylan (Columbia). Thereafter, the search for superstars in rock and other emergent genres continued. Those successful in this search, such as Capitol and Columbia, reaped the benefits of increased market shares. Firm structure also played an important role in this reconcentration, although Peterson and Berger were vague as to how. Most of the leading record firms were now part of diversified conglomerates with holdings not limited to the record industry. Moreover, many of the leading record firms now differentiated their music production divisions. Whereas in the past, leading record firms typically released most of their products on one or two labels, they now had a host of subsidiary labels at their disposal. Thus, Warner now offered recordings on such labels as Asylum, Atlantic, Elektra, Reprise, as well as its original Warner label. Presumably, the capabilities associated with conglomerates and with expanded music divisions led to sizable market shares for certain firms, such as Warner, and to heightened concentration for the industry.

The fate of diversity in the face of growing concentration proved intriguing. Diversity was not necessarily at its peak during the period when concentration was at it lowest (1959-1963) but rather during the period when concentration began to rise again (1964-1969). For instance, the number of Top 10 hits and Number 1 hits attained their highest levels in 1965 (111 and 27, respectively) and 1966 (120 and 27, respectively). The percentage of new performers reached 68.6% in 1964, thereby exceeding the 60% attained when concentration bottomed out in 1962. Lyrical diversity likewise peaked in the 1964-1969 period, expanding to include issues of race, sexuality, and politics. Peterson and Berger suggested that this late blooming of *lyrical* diversity could have resulted from a general lag between competition and the flowering of diversity, a delay in record firms' affording performers the creative autonomy to explore new lyrical topics, and the turmoil that accompanied both the civil rights movement and Vietnam War; they were silent regarding the late blooming of non-content diversity. It is also intriguing that diversity did not fully disappear in the final period (1970-1973), despite the return of high concentration levels. While finding some hints of declining lyrical diversity in 1969 and 1970, Peterson and Berger conceded that "[a] brief inspection of the hit song lyrics from 1973, however, does not suggest a return to pre-1955 homogeneity." Regarding non-content diversity, they found that "(…) the number of songs reaching the top ten and number one position [has] not declined" [*ibidem*, 169].

Peterson and Berger used the phrase "the frailty of diversity" when speaking of the 1970-1973 period and the ambiguous results it yielded. They acknowledged that this diversity was due to leading firms' strategies (*i.e.,* the pursuit of performers in rock and other genres) and structures (*i.e.,* the reliance on multiple music divisions). Note that those are the very elements that also allowed these firms to obtain sizable market shares in the 1960s. "Since they have a wide range of artists under contract with one or another of their various subsidiary labels, they can take advantage of every changing nuance of taste (…) Diversity was maintained in the 1970-1973 period because the largest firms in the industry allowed their various divisions to compete with one another" [*ibidem*, 169]. Nevertheless, Peterson and Berger choose to emphasize the frailty of such diversity. On the one hand, they expected that accountants would eventually quash the inefficient practice of letting subsidiary labels within a single firm compete against each other for consumers. On the other hand, they expected that the cycle in popular music had yet to run its course across the 26 years of their study's time-frame, especially when compared to Peterson's earlier work on the trajectory of jazz [Peterson 1972]. Consequently, they emphasized that their study had indeed supported the hypotheses regarding concentration's negative impact on diversity and the cyclical nature of that relationship, whereby long periods of homogeneity are briefly interrupted by short periods of diversity.

"Cycles in Symbol Production" not only brought together themes of organizational adaptation, genre trajectory, and product diversity, it also pointed to the need for subsequent research. On the one hand, questions remained as to whether the U.S. recording industry had indeed entered another cycle of high concentration and low diversity, and if it had, how long would that cycle last? On the other hand, questions remained as to whether the cyclical argument applied to *other* media settings – including those within and outside of the United States.

Peterson and Berger did not engage those questions together, however. Berger continued to pursue some of the themes found in "Cycles"– such as organizational adaptation in the radio industry (Hesbacher *et al.* 1976) and lyrical themes in popular music (Anderson *et al.* 1981). However, his most impressive work lay beyond the concerns of the 1975 article – a photo-biography of jazz bassist, Milt Hinton (Hinton and Berger 1988). As a key proponent of the "Production of Culture" approach, Peterson frequently returned to themes contained in "Cycles" – especially in works that laid out the production approach [*e.g.,* Peterson 1976; Peterson and Anand 2004] and in empirical projects that exemplified, as well as advanced, this approach [*e.g.,* Peterson 1990; 1997; see also Peterson 2005]. That said, he also moved well beyond "Cycles," as demonstrated by his influential work on the omnivorous tastes of high status individuals [Peterson 2005b; Peterson and Kern 1996]. In fact, Peterson and Berger [1996] did not jointly return to the themes of "Cycles" until some 20 years later, when responding to the work of subsequent scholars. I now turn to the work of others that flowed from this classic article.

The Classic Article and Subsequent Scholarship

Shortly after publication of "Cycles in Symbol Production," Paul DiMaggio [1977] offered an elaboration of its arguments and foreshadowed how subsequent scholarship would proceed. He suggested that concentrated industries are not all alike, especially because some target a large and singular audience and others target a varied audience that is segmented by class, status, etc. In particular, DiMaggio spoke of the "mass culture" model in which the actions of centralized oligopolists lead to low innovation and low diversity, which resonates with the core arguments of Peterson and Berger [1975]. However, echoing *other* aspects of Peterson and Berger's [1971; 1975] work, he also spoke of the "class culture" model in which the actions of decentralized oligopolists (*e.g.,* allowing their respective divisions to compete) lead to low innovation but yet *high* diversity.[4]

In subsequent scholarship, we can see how these two models map onto the themes contained within "Cycles." In the mass culture model, high concentration leads to low *product diversity.* Scholars have accounted for this by largely focusing on the impact of oligopolists. Such organizations can limit the range of available content by impeding the commercialization of an emergent music (*genre trajectory*). Oligopolists can also grow removed from demand and content variety when, ironically, seeking to address both in a rational and systematic fashion (*organizational adaptation*). In the class culture model, high concentration and *product diversity* can coexist. Scholars have accounted for this in two ways. First, they have generalized Peterson and Berger's original argument by showing the contingent impact of concentration – thereby stipulating when it does and does *not* hamper diversity. Second, scholars have accounted for this diversity by focusing on other actors besides oligopolists. Hence, they have heeded those cultural entrepreneurs who expand the range of content by consecrating certain genres as "art" (*genre trajectory*) and the array of small businesses that addresses specific and delimited audiences by offering highly specialized content (*organizational adaptation*).

In the pages that follow, I sketch the influence of Peterson and Berger's 1975 article by presenting research that offers it either support (mass culture) or extension (class culture). In particular, I note how this ongoing research has addressed

[4] DiMaggio [1977] also mentioned a "pluralistic culture" model in which concentration is low and innovation and diversity are both high.

the themes of diversity (concentration's negative impact *vs.* concentration's contingent impact), genre trajectory (commercialization *vs.* consecration) and organizational adaptation (rationalization of large firms *vs.* specialization of small firms). Hopefully, this brief overview will make clear why the 1975 article attained its classic status and how it contributed to the diversity of cultural sociology. Given the substantive focus of "Cycles," I mostly discuss research that deals with music industries in the U.S. However, given that article's programmatic call, I also reference research on other industries and nations.

The Mass Culture Model

Diversity of Media Products: Concentration's Negative Impact

It is not surprising that "Cycles in Symbol Production" has spurred the endeavors of subsequent scholars. On the one hand, it dealt with an important topic that can be maddeningly difficult to research. As Peterson and Berger [1975, 163] succinctly stated, "One judge's homogeneity may be another's diversity." On the other had, it proved innovative by providing a clear example of how to grapple with this topic. Not surprisingly, a number of researchers within and beyond sociology approached the mass culture model via straightforward replication. They began with the theoretical argument of Peterson and Berger, made adjustments in their empirical analysis, and considered evidence for the mass culture model in other settings. Rothenbuhler and Dimmick [1982] provide the quintessential example of this replication, examining the U.S. recording industry from 1974 to 1980. Mostly relying on measures devised by Peterson and Berger, they found that concentration increased substantially across this time span (*e.g.,* four firms eventually accounted for 76% of Top 10 hits) while diversity suffered (*e.g.,* the annual number of Number 1 hits dropped to 17). Certain economists have also supported the mass culture model amidst their pursuit of other theoretical concerns [*e.g.,* Alexander 1990; 1994]. For instance, Black and Greer [1987] combined the annual information contained in Peterson and Berger [1975] and Rothenbuhler and Dimmick [1982] – relying on these previously compiled measures of concentration and diversity for 1948-1980.[5] By way of various correlations, Black and Greer demonstrated that, across this 33 year period, rising concentration

[5] Greer [1992, 496] offered a scatter plot that effectively summarizes the relationship between concentration and diversity across these years.

levels led some *two years* later to declining diversity.[6] Such works brought "Cycles" into the late 1970s and confirmed Peterson and Berger's expectations regarding the frailty of diversity.

Support can also flow from research that both replicates and takes issue with empirical aspects of "Cycles" and related research. A study from the Netherlands provides the best example. Its author, Michael Christianen [1995], found fault with those measuring innovation and diversity via popularity charts.[7] After all, hit records represent a fraction of all recordings released at a given time. Recordings that become hits often do so because of the efforts of record firms and other gatekeepers and, as a result, represent the *final* outcome of a filtering process rather than the *initial* supply. Concerned with this initial diversity and innovation, Christianen eschewed such popularity charts and, instead, gained access to a comprehensive dataset containing all recordings released in the Netherlands from 1972 to 1992. As a result, he was able to track more than a hundred thousand recordings that were released by 60 record firms and that spanned 27 genres. Further differentiating his empirical work from that of Peterson and Berger, he devised other measures for key concepts. He assessed "diversity" both in terms of the total number of recordings annually released in the Netherlands, as well as the annual number of recordings released in *each* of the 27 industry-designated genres. He gauged "innovation" by assessing the annual number of artists who had debut recordings. Finally, he measured "concentration" in several ways, eventually stressing the share of sales attributed to leading firms.

What of his findings? Note first some trends. The number of titles released each year displayed a general upward trajectory, eventually peaking in 1992 at 10,456. This speaks to an expanding diversity across the time period. Regarding the diversity within genres, nearly all of the 27 enjoyed a growing number of recordings across the years, and only one (German vocal music) remained at a comparable level. However, when collapsing the 27 genres into five groups, he found that those genres associated with both North American and pop music enjoyed growth while genres

[6] This lagged effect of concentration on diversity is intriguing in light of Peterson and Berger's [1975, 167] speculation about the delayed impact of low concentration on lyrical diversity in the mid-1960s.

[7] To be fair, scholars use popularity charts for pragmatic and conceptual reasons. Media firms in the U.S. typically do not make available systematic and longitudinal information regarding their products and performance [see Dowd *et al.* 2005; Thornton and Ocasio 1999]. Popularity charts, then, provide one of the few ways to track firms and industries in a comparable fashion over considerable stretches of time [Dowd 2004; Peterson and Berger 1975]. Popularity charts are important conceptually because they are one of the organs through which industry personnel view their market and evaluate success. Hence, data from these charts resonate with how the industry is largely perceived [Anand and Peterson 2000].

associated with Dutch music and classical music sharply declined. This could be seen as a weakening of diversity. However, Christianen looked rather favorably on this: "Hardly any new musical styles have developed in continental music. It is clear that the Anglo-American music styles have a competitive edge (…) European music consumers are very fortunate to have the results of Anglo-American creativity at their disposal" [*ibidem*, 66]. Regarding innovation, the annual *number* of debut-albums demonstrated a general upward trend, yet the annual *percentage* of debut albums actually declined for much of the period before enjoying an upward surge from 1988 to 1992. Finally, economic concentration mostly declined across the time frame, with a brief upsurge following the compact disc's release and then a downturn for the remainder of the time frame.

Now consider his regression analyses. Christianen generally found an inverse relationship between concentration and *both* diversity and innovation. Moreover, it was smaller "independent" firms that drove the thriving of diversity and innovation in the later years, as the larger firms focused more on their established artists than on new artists. By focusing on the total supply of recordings, the impact of independents was more evident than had he focused only on hit records, as small firms are often hard-pressed to attain such hits. Not surprisingly, Christianen also noted that large firms now sought to re-establish their market position by making considerable efforts to locate and sign new performers

Despite relying on different data and measures than had Peterson and Berger – as well as addressing a different time and place – Christianen nevertheless confirmed key aspects of their argument – including the negative impact of concentration and the innovative role of small firms. Moreover, he ended his article much like Peterson and Berger did theirs. He noted the pronounced tendency for leading firms to rely on multiple divisions (and, hence, many decision makers) in recent musical production, and he wondered about the implications of this for diversity and innovation. "At the moment, no data on the decision makers within record companies are available. Future research will have to shed a light on the relationship between this variable on the one hand, and diversity and innovation on the other" [*ibidem* 1995, 91].[8]

These examples show that "Cycles in Symbol Production" served as a touchstone for scholars located in various disciplines, as well as in different nations. Some

[8] Christianen [1995] closed his paper by arguing that economic theory provides a better model for assessing concentration and diversity than does the one offered by Peterson and Berger [1975]. Indeed, he maintained that the latter says little about the relationships between such factors as technology, law, and market structure. Ironically, such factors are the very ones touted by Peterson [1990; Peterson and Anand 2004] in his Production of Culture approach.

of their analyses were quite basic – relying on the visual comparison of trends or simple correlations – and none approached the historical detail of Peterson and Berger [1975]. Nevertheless, their collective engagement with "Cycles" is important for several reasons. It signaled the type of cumulative project that Peterson and Berger sought for sociology, extending past analyses across time and place. This engagement also demonstrated the potential to link research that, on the one hand, addresses high concentration in other media industries [*e.g.,* Adams and Brock 1989; Bagdikian 2000; Litman 1990] and, on the hand, details the waxing and waning of product diversity in media industries [*e.g.,* Benson 2005; Dominick and Pearce 1976; Kaestle 1991]. Indeed, Bielby and Bielby [2003] have demonstrated this potential with their study of the U.S. television industry; they found, among other things, that the range of creative talent (*e.g.,* freelance writers) and programming sources (*e.g.,* independent production companies) declined as the four major networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC) accounted for a greater share of programming. Finally, as we shall see below, the collective engagement of the scholars above has provided a valuable baseline for subsequent research which showed that concentration and diversity could co-exist in the music industry of the 1980s.

Trajectory of Genres: Delayed Commercialization

Sociologists have long commented on the relentless nature of commodification, whereby entrepreneurs and businesses eagerly place a price tag on an ever-expanding array of goods and services [Zelizer 1994]. Peterson and Berger [1975; Peterson 1971] provided what was then an unusual vantage on this commodification process: they demonstrated that oligopolists are sometimes hesitant, if not resistant, to a new type of "product." Indeed, that is one reason why high concentration can lead to low diversity: if oligopolists prefer a stable environment and routine production, they will avoid those innovations that "de-stabilize" and "de-routinize" their situation [see also DiMaggio 1977]. Communal music is one such innovation that can potentially challenge oligopolists. Nevertheless, historical accidents can force them to embrace rather than resist the commercialization of genres that were once on the periphery.

Several scholars followed Peterson and Berger's [1975; Peterson 1971] innovative lead by examining the tentative moves of oligopolists (and monopolists) toward new music. They have proceeded, in part, by heeding the historical context of their particular cases. Consequently, they have moved beyond simple replication and, for instance, explored further how issues of race and aesthetics figure in the delayed commercialization of communal music. John Ryan [1985] did so in his detailed study of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) – the *sole* "performance rights" organization in the U.S. from 1914 to 1939. ASCAP extracted royalties from businesses that used the music of its members in live performances (*e.g.,* nightclubs, radio) or in prerecorded renditions (*e.g.,* hotels, motion picture studios); it then distributed the resulting revenues to its members. However, "ASCAP supported certain genres of music and discouraged others because of personal and aesthetic as well as monetary concerns (…) they genuinely believed in the superiority of their product" [Ryan 1985, 119]. For example, it initially shunned such communal music as ragtime and jazz. Consequently, this curtailed the commercial viability of these genres. Indeed, virtually all African American composers of this era lacked a collective means to profit from (or control) the public performance of their music – including such luminaries as Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong. This persisted until a confluence of events (*e.g.,* the rise of a competing performance rights organization, antitrust intervention) undermined ASCAP's monopoly. In the wake of these developments, ASCAP would likewise expand the range of music and composers it represented. Dowd [2003] built on Ryan's work and documented how oligopolists in three industries – the recording industry, the radio industry, and the performance rights industry – stigmatized what was then called "race" music and worked against its success. He then detailed how disruptions in each of these industries (*e.g.,* new competition, government action) allowed the eventual commercialization of "rhythm and blues" music, thereby compelling oligopolists to accept and engage this genre.

Issues of race and aesthetics also played a role in the commercialization of recorded jazz. This form of music first emerged in the U.S. in 1917, with small firms playing a major role in its diffusion during the 1920s [Phillips and Owens 2004]. Ironically, dominant firms were the first movers in recording this genre. Columbia recorded what would later be the initial stars of recorded jazz (the Dixieland Jass Band), but it did not release the recordings for fear of incensing elite audiences. Meanwhile, Victor Talking Machine (the forerunner to RCA Victor) recorded and released the Dixieland Jass Band, earning millions of dollars in the process before dropping this jazz from its offerings. "The future of our industry lies in encouraging the sale of high-priced goods and the best records. It does emphatically not lie in pushing cheap machines and jazz," noted one trade paper of the day [*ibidem*, 382].

Phillips and Owens argued, in contrast to Schumpeter [1942], that Columbia and Victor chose not to sustain this innovation of communal music because, on the one hand, they lacked competency in this musical genre and, on the other hand, they feared consumer reprisals for dealing in an "illegitimate" genre associated with

African Americans. The authors drew on historical materials to support their argument. For instance, they documented the resistance to jazz that stemmed from well-heeled individuals who not only ran the nation and its businesses but also were socially connected to the owners of both Victor and Columbia. Despite the hesitance of leading record firms – and the distaste of old-money elites – small record firms quickly showed the economic viability of recorded jazz.[9] How, then, would dominant firms respond? Phillips and Owens predicted that they would gravitate towards jazz recordings that were more "legitimate" than those offered by small record firms. In particular, they would likely excel at recording the "symphonic" jazz associated with white performers rather than the "hot" jazz associated with African American performers (*e.g.,* jazz that is mostly pre-arranged and relies on written music rather than jazz that is largely improvised and played "by ear").

Phillips and Owens assessed their predictions in an impressive fashion. They compiled a dataset representing all jazz recordings in the Midwest from 1920 to 1929, examining nearly 2700 recordings and 500 jazz groups. They then documented the number of efforts (*i.e.,* takes) it took to record a given song. They expected that dominant record companies would be more adept at recording in a single "take" those groups whose name included the word "orchestra" (*e.g.,* symphonic jazz) and less adept at recording African-American groups (*e.g.,* hot jazz). Of course, other things could have played a role in the number of takes required. Consequently, they simultaneously controlled for more than 20 factors – including the size of the jazz group (more members increases the chance of mistakes), the experience of the jazz group (seasoned groups make less mistakes than new groups), and the experience of the firm in recording jazz (committed firms are more adept than novice firms). Their regression analysis demonstrated that dominant firms were indeed less competent than their small counterparts in hot jazz yet more competent in recording symphonic jazz. Although initially resistant to jazz recordings, dominant firms would eventually embrace this music, albeit it in a sanitized fashion. As Phillips and Owens concluded, "dominant firms participated in a redefinition of jazz that would ultimately result in its legitimation" [*ibidem*, 393].

Ryan [1985], Dowd [2003], and Phillips and Owens [2004] all offer support for the mass culture model. They demonstrated the aversion of dominant organizations to communal music and showed the historical accidents that broke down such

[9] At least two factors allowed the thriving of small record firms during the early 1920s. The patents held by Columbia and Victor had begun to expire, significantly reducing the barriers that once confronted most record firms. Also, small firms were able to tap consumers that Columbia and Victor had mostly overlooked – those with a penchant for jazz, including a sizable number of African American consumers [Dowd 2003].

aversion – including the success of new competitors. These works have done more than that, however. Phillips and Owens, for instance, have pointed to the importance of competency. They made clear that large record firms were challenged when producing certain types of music. That is, oligopolists actually made more mistakes in the recording of hot jazz than did their small competitors. That "incompetency" may be partly responsible for the dynamic described by Peterson and Berger [1972, 288] – "(…) a communal music has never entered the mainstream unchanged. For the most part, the rawer elements of rhythm, melody, and lyric have been altered or kept entirely out of the mainstream pop renditions (…)"[10] These works have also revealed that cultural concerns can keep oligopolists from innovating. That is, incumbent organizations may reject a new type of music because it lacks legitimacy with important constituents. Thus, as Zelizer [1994] contends, commodification is *not* an acultural process but is, instead, infused with human values. Finally, these illustrative works stand alongside a broader array of works that likewise demonstrate the halting, if not contested, process by which new genres become commonplace in industries of music [*e.g.,* Grazian 2003; Peterson 1997], film [*e.g.,* Jones 2001; Watkins 1998], and publishing [*e.g.,* Griswold 1981, 2000; Haveman 2004].

Organizational Adaptation: Rationalization of Large Firms

"Cycles in Symbol Production" was unusual for its time because of the fine line that it walked. On the one hand, it went against economistic thinking that consumers are powerful forces in the market; that is, supply (*e.g.,* oligopolists) responds to demand (*i.e.,* audiences). On the other hand, it went against the thinking of Adorno [1941; 1975] and others who held that consumers are pliable; *i.e.,* demand responds to supply. Thus, this classic article "(…) contradicts the conventional idea that market consumers necessarily get what they want (…) What is more, the counter assertion that repetitive presentation can induce consumers to buy whatever they hear (…) is also brought into question for, as we have found, consumers may simply withdraw from the market (…)" [Peterson and Berger 1975, 170]. To walk this line, Peterson and Berger pointed to the manner in which oligopolists adapt to their environment, especially their tendency towards centralized bureaucracy. When that tendency is

[10] Lena provides a provocative counterexample in which corporations did *not* "sanitize" content. She content-analyzed some 1200 rap recordings that appeared on *Billboard* popularity charts from 1979 to 1995. "Sincerity and a ghetto identity were deeply associated in early rap lyrics, as facet of 'authenticity work' (…) Rappers often foreswore the corrupt values of commercial enterprise" [Lena 2006, 487]. However, *later* rap hits released by large record firms eventually took a different tone ("hardcore") – emphasizing such things as materialism, violence, and sex.

realized, the production of oligopolists is driven more by precedence and routine than by demand.

Since 1975, various scholars have also walked this fine line – including those that examine the rationalization that lies at the heart of bureaucracy. As Max Weber [1958; 1978] suggested years ago, rationalization includes a shift in evaluation standards – away from an *ad hoc* assessment of markets based on instinct and intuition and toward a calculated assessment based on systematic (*e.g.,* quantitative) measures. Yet, as neo-Weberians have shown, this shift does not necessarily lead to an improved grasp of the marketplace because such measures are often "*symbols* of modernity and efficiency, rather than (…) instruments of modernity and efficiency" [Dobbin 1992, 121; emphasis added]. When interviewing recording executives in Britain, Japan and the U.S., for instance, Negus found a veritable culture of numbers: multinational record corporations now assess their markets with quantitative data that flow from retail, broadcasting, and marketing services. By reducing complex and ever-changing markets to a few numbers, this rationalization provides an aura of stability and predictability and an impetus away from risk-taking. However, as Negus demonstrated, it also glosses over the *qualitative* difficulties of locating and nurturing creative talent and of assessing demand not reflected in the numbers. Furthermore, this shift from hunches to numbers did not apparently result in improved performance. "Record companies do not seem to be able to manage talent more effectively and still produce far more failure than successes" [Negus 1999, 62]. Similarly, Bielby and Bielby [1994, 1289] found much symbolic talk of rationalization among the major networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC) that dominate U.S. television; indeed, these networks adapted to the uncertainties of program selection by "substituting imitation, routines, and rules of thumb for rational calculation" The networks' program selection is a lengthy and drawn-out process – with them evaluating thousands of "concepts" for shows, purchasing hundreds of scripts, and eventually airing tens of shows. Rules of thumb abounded in the selection of shows for the autumn of 1991: the four networks favored shows associated with previously successful personnel and steered clear of those that did not fit into well established genres. In short, attempts at rationalized decision-making resulted in programming that resembled past content. Nevertheless, programs that met the "rules of thumb" were *not* significantly more likely to find commercial success.

Recent developments in the U.S. radio industry provide a "natural laboratory" of sorts for examining the rationalization of large firms, especially in the wake of massive deregulation. Early government regulations placed substantial limits on the ownership of radio stations. The 1934 Communication Act, for instance, stipulated that a firm could only own a single AM station in a particular community; at the national level, firms could own no more than 5 AM and 5 FM stations.[11] These limits stemmed from, at least, two government positions of the day: the radio airwaves are public (rather than private) property, and the public benefits from a variety of local voices. However, the federal government would eventually ease these limits – raising them to 7 AM and 7 FM stations in 1953 and 12 AM and 12 FM in 1985. Deregulation advanced decidedly in the 1990s amidst growing concerns about the profitability of radio stations. National ownership limits rose to 30 AM and 30 FM in 1992, and those limits essentially disappeared with the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The 1996 Act also lifted constraints on single markets – allowing "duopolies" in which a firm owned two stations in the same market and "super-duopolies" in which a firm could own multiple stations in a given market, such as five stations in small markets [Ahlkvist and Fischer 2000; Fairchild 1999; Leblebici *et al.* 1991].

This recent deregulation set off two interrelated trends – the consolidation of the industry via mergers and acquisitions, and the rationalization of firms that owned groups of stations (*i.e.,* "chains"). Consolidation was swift and extensive. Within two years of the Telecommunications Act, half of all U.S. stations had changed ownership (with many of them becoming part of chains), and a sizable share of stations were involved in duopolies and super-duopolies (more than half in some markets). Not surprisingly, industry concentration soared as radio giants like Clear Channel emerged – the latter owning more than 1200 stations [Ahlkvist and Fischer 2000; Greve *et al.* 2006; Lee 2004]. Rationalization proved attractive to the firms that owned chains. "Group owners can employ economics of scale when conducting research, data can be shared among stations, and *programming decisions based on research* can be more easily centralized and systematized" [Ahlkvist and Fischer 2000, 306; emphasis added]. This reliance on numbers stands in stark contrast to other modes of operation that Ahlkvist and Faulkner [2002] observed. Some small stations, for instance, grant autonomy to local personnel, allowing the tastes and preferences of such individuals to guide programming decisions; that is, these individuals play what *they* think the audience should hear. Other small stations stress an empathy with their local audience, relying on contact and conversation with listeners; in other words, these stations play what they *think* audiences want to hear. In contrast, group-owned stations tend to grant low autonomy to local personnel, and they gauge the audience by way of popularity charts, marketing studies, and consultants. That is, they proceed by the numbers [Ahlkvist and Fischer 2000].

[11] These ownership limitations played a role in the rise of radio networks. In order to offer broadcasts that spanned the nation, a network combined its "owned and operated" stations with "affiliated" stations owned by other parties [Leblebici *et al.* 1991].

This rationalization in the radio industry impinges both on content and audiences. In their rigorous study of 141 radio stations, Ahlkvist and Fischer found that group-owned stations, as well as stations in large markets, offer more standardized programming than other stations; that is, they tend to broadcast repeatedly a relatively small number of songs. This standardization is driven in part by the reliance of both group-owned and large-market stations on consultants and audience research; hence, rationalization works against variety. While Ahlkvist and Fischer documented such rationalization in 1994, two years before the Telecommunication Act, Lee documented its impact as deregulation reached its zenith. He tracked the range of radio formats (*e.g.,* country, adult contemporary, modern rock) available in five local markets between 1989 and 2002. He documented, among other things, that the number of hits songs *within* various formats dropped sharply during the years following deregulation. Decisions about what to broadcast, he argued, shifted increasingly from local personnel at a given station to those corporate personnel who oversee a numerous radio stations. "Hence, listeners are more likely to hear the same set of singles within a given format across geographic locations" [Lee 2004, 335].

This rationalization, in turn, apparently distances radio stations from their audience. Indeed, Ahlkvist and Fischer [2000, 320] clearly demonstrated that "use of research and consultants discourages attention to audience feedback." Rossman detailed a particular occurrence of this during the "Dixie Chicks controversy" – whereby this music group created a firestorm of protest among country music fans when, during a London concert, its singer disparaged George W. Bush about the Iraq War. Lager chains were less likely to respond to the outcry of listeners, thereby continuing to play Dixie Chicks songs while other stations dropped their songs from playlists. "This is congruent with the chains' greater dependence on research which (…) may be less effective at responding to unpredictable shocks (such as a scandal) than are less rationalized approaches to programming" [Rossman 2004, 74]. Given such disconnects between audience and chains, it is not surprising that markets with a disproportionate number of group-owned stations are likely to have activists calling for and establishing alternative radio outlets [Greve *et al.* 2006].

Max Weber [1978] argued that bureaucracy not only includes the routinization of tasks and the expansion of hierarchy, it also includes a type of rationality in which the means by which action is conducted will become more important than the end goals. Not surprisingly, Peterson and Berger [1971; 1975] maintained that extensive bureaucracy is inimical to innovation and variety. Their position is borne out by the above studies that deal with large organizations in the recording, television, and radio industries. In these cases, a reliance on quantitative measures and rules of thumb arguably simplifies daily operations for oligopolists; however, it also leads to content that is formulaic and standardized (as Weber would have expected). These studies also make clear that rationalization is both symbolic and instrumental. Consequently, quantitative measures do not necessarily lead to success (as neo-Weberians and Adorno would have expected). Indeed, rationalization may actually insulate oligopolists from the audiences that they seek to describe with ratings, marketing studies, and consultant reports. In that regard, the studies above resonate with other work that deals with the problems and pitfalls of audience measurement [*e.g.,* Ang 1991; Anand and Peterson 2000] and they complement research that shows how media retail firms seek to construct and rationalize their consumers [*e.g.,* du Gay and Negus 1994; Miller 2006]. Yet, as we will see, audiences do not rely only on oligopolists – they also turn to specialist organizations that are decidedly "non-rationalized" in their actions.

The Class Culture Model

The Diversity of Products: Concentration's Contingent Impact

"Cycles in Symbol Production" spurred a new wave of research on product diversity from the 1980s onward. However, this research went beyond mere replication and, instead, entailed a shift from a mass culture to a class culture model. Signs of this shift appeared in research that challenged the continued applicability of the mass culture model. For instance, scholarship in several nations went against the assumption of a zero-sum relationship between oligopolists ("majors") and small firms ("independents"), whereby majors try to prevent the success (if not existence) of independents. Hennion [1983] saw that majors in the French recording industry benefited from the presence of independents, as the latter provided both a flow of new products and information about the market. Hellman [1983] similarly spoke of a new environment in which independents served as barometers of taste for the majors; hence, he maintained that "symbiosis" rather than cycles now applied to the Finnish record industry. In assessing the Anglo-American situation, Frith [1987, 110] argued forcefully, "the old model of the record business, in which major and independent labels compete in a cycle of diversity and standardized oligopoly, no longer fits." Other research challenged Peterson and Berger's expectation that accountants would eventually quash competition between the divisions of given record firms and, in turn, usher back in centralization among the majors. Instead, accounting played a role as executives monitored the performance of their various divisions – rewarding those divisions (and genres) that performed well and penalizing (if not eliminating) those that performed poorly [Negus 1999]. Competition between divisions had not met its demise but had become commonplace. Indeed, Christianen [1955] pointed to more than fifty subsidiary labels of PolyGram, as well as the numerous divisions that spanned those labels [see also Bakker 2006].

Signs of this shift also occurred in research that sought to replicate "Cycles" in some form or fashion. For example, studies that applied content measures of diversity yielded ambiguous (and contradictory) results. Anderson *et al.* provided an early, if not basic, example by classifying the musical characteristics of more than 600 Number 1 hits. Doing so yielded eight genres that they tracked from 1940 to 1977. They generally found that competition in the U.S. recording industry helped spur musical diversity, with traditional pop genres replaced by rock genres. However, they also complicated the cyclical model by noting that "patterns of innovation do not always begin with new manufacturers" [Anderson *et al.* 1980, 42]. While small firms have had a sizable impact during periods of low concentration, medium-sized record firms have also thrived by refining extant styles. Meanwhile, large firms, especially those that relied on multiple divisions, could retain their market position by embracing (if not sponsoring) new styles. In my own rudimentary study [Dowd 1992], after content-analyzing performances contained within a random sample of 105 Number One hits, I found that market concentration had no bearing on either the melodic or chordal structure of those songs. Instead, song attributes (*e.g.,* length of song) and performer attributes (*e.g.,* autonomy in the production process) proved significant. Alexander [1996; 1997] content-analyzed sheet music for 33 randomly selected Number 1 hits. He suggested that both low and high levels of concentration dampen musical diversity.[12]

Studies that sought replication via the non-content measures of diversity likewise proved intriguing. Burnett combined the earlier data of Peterson and Berger [1975] with the later data of Rothenbuhler and Dimmick [1982]. He also extended this data to 1989, while yielding old and new measures of diversity (*e.g.,* the annual number of Top 10 hits, the annual number of performers) and two measures of concentration (the ratio of Top 10 hits attributed to the leading four and eight firms). He found, for instance, that concentration levels in the late 1980s surpassed those in the late 1940s, with four firms accounting for 82% of Top 10 hits in 1989 (*vs.* 81% in 1948) and eight firms accounted for 96% in 1989 (*vs.* 95% in 1948). Meanwhile, the number of Top 10 hits showed an upward trajectory in the 1980s, reaching the highest level since 1966. The annual number of new artists also grew in the 1980s,

[12] Peterson and Berger [1996] rightly noted that Alexander's analysis of sheet music was problematic because such printed forms of music typically contain a simplified version of the musical recordings they represent. Hence, Peterson and Berger recommended the approach that eventually found publication in Dowd [2000], in which I transcribed the actual performances.

after declining throughout the 1970s. When considering his various analyses of the relationship between concentration and diversity, Burnett [1990, 160] summarized "that this negative relationship has persisted into the early 1980s but has since broken down." Thus, he asserted that the mass culture model no longer applied, especially as the majors have distributed a variety of performers across their subsidiary labels and as the majors have pursued contract with independents that, in turn, bring additional performers and genres into the industry [see also Burnett 1992].

Lopes [1992] complemented the efforts of Burnett, both empirically and conceptually. Consider the latter: he clearly articulated an alternative model that incorporated the divisional nature of majors and their symbiotic relations with independents, thereby moving beyond the mass culture model. He did so by delineating between two systems of production – the "closed" system that utilizes in-house personnel and centralized production versus the "open" system of production that relies on semi-autonomous divisions within the firm, as well as contracts with independent labels and free-lance producers. He equated the "closed" system with the time period that Peterson and Berger [1975] analyzed, wherein they spoke of bureaucratic firms with one or two labels. In contrast, he equated the "open system" with the time period that came after 1975. Moreover, the majors have adapted this open system because of the advantages it provides in terms of absorbing and adapting to new musical styles. Lopes also provided an indicator of the open-system of production – one that compared the annual numbers of labels and firms. If the majors had indeed shifted to numerous subsidiary labels and independent contracts in their production of music, then the total number of labels in a given year should exceed the total number of firms. "This ratio of labels to firms is significant because it indicates that there is a large number of individuals associated with major record companies, either as independents or through division labels, who decide which artists an which musical styles eventually are recorded" [Lopes 1992, 62]. In short, he offered a compelling proxy for the "decision makers" measure that Christianen [1995] sought when discussing the multi-divisional nature of contemporary majors

Drawing on the insights of Burnett and Lopes, I embarked upon a series of studies to refine further the class culture model in which concentration and diversity can co-exist. I diverged slightly from them by arguing that the open system actually began in 1955, when all of the majors had established subsidiary labels to tap emergent demand for such genres as rock, R&B, country, and jazz [Dowd 2004; see Peterson and Berger 1975]. From that point onward, as demonstrated by the label-firm ratio, decentralized production mostly increased across the decades. In "Musical Diversity and the U.S. Mainstream Recording Market, 1955 to 1990" [Dowd 2000], I directly assessed the musical content of recorded performances. I first transcribed the performances of 105 Number 1 hits; I then coded each song in terms of 29 elements that captured its rhythmic, chordal and melodic structures; and I finally combined the 29 into a single score that detailed how musically dissimilar a given song is relative to others. The general upward trend in musical dissimilarity was quite striking, as Number 1 hits became more musically dissimilar across the decades. Regression analysis showed that various factors lay behind that trend. As the class culture model would predict, for instance, concentration positively affects musical diversity as the decentralized production of the majors brings a greater array of musical material into the mainstream market.

In the remaining studies, I extended the time frame from 1940 to 1990, tracked some 22,000 hit songs, and analyzed non-content measures of diversity. Two of these measures addressed demographic diversity, thereby assessing the percentage of performing acts that are African America [Dowd and Blyler 2002] and the number of acts that are female [Dowd *et al.* 2005]. The other two measures were more in keeping with Peterson and Berger [1975] – assessing diversity via the number of new performing acts, and the number of new firms [Dowd 2004]. The regression analysis for each type of diversity showed an array of factors to be significant. The racial integration of the musician's union, for instance, contributed to a greater share of African Americans with hit records [Dowd and Blyer 2002]. That said, the regression analyses all show that the expansion of decentralized production offsets any negative effect of concentration. Hence, diversity is pronounced in the 1980s despite the high levels of concentration.

"Cycles in Symbol Production" continued to serve as a touchstone from the 1980s through the 2000s. The manner in which did so was striking, however. Whereas proponents of the mass culture model drew on the heart of "Cycles," proponents of the class culture model drew on elements that are hinted at in Peterson and Berger's earlier work. Hence, the above work does indeed show that decentralized oligopolists can sponsor diversity, that inter-divisional competition is not fleeting, that diversity in the 1970s and beyond is not that frail, and that the open system first emerged in the 1950s. Regarding the latter, note the following quote: "Beginning in the late 1950's, a welter of different sorts of arrangements between corporations and labels emerged. It has been difficult in some cases to decide whether a label represents an independent company or is an appendage of another firm" [Peterson and Berger 1975, 171]. It is a testimony to the richness of this classic article, that subsequent research could extend the arguments in this generalized fashion. The above research also speaks to broader issues. More specifically, it joins other scholarship in showing that the effects of concentration or competition are not uniform but, instead, contingent upon the manner in which oligopolists approach their market [*e.g.,* Dowd and Dobbin 2000; Thornton and Ocasio 1999]. Given this contingent nature of concentration, Peterson and Anand [2004, 316] can acknowledge that "the oligarchic firms were able to dominate by buying or building niche market divisions and making diverse music that generally was not innovative." That is, mass culture had given way to class culture.

Genre Trajectory: Consecration

"Cycles in Symbol Production" pointed to one type of genre trajectory – the movement of a communal music like rock'n'roll into the commercial mainstream [see also Peterson and Berger 1972, 288]. It remained silent on another type of trajectory that Peterson [1972] previously identified – the ascendance of a genre to the status of fine-art (*i.e.,* consecration).[13] In this earlier work, he maintained that jazz achieved its vaunted position *beyond* the commercial mainstream, doing so among what he labeled "vital cults." This presaged work by DiMaggio [1982] and others who likewise located high culture in general beyond the commercial realm. However, recent scholarship has focused on the consecration of genres that are squarely in the commercial realm, thereby examining their "aesthetic mobility." As Santoro [2002, 130] insightfully observed, "processes of social and symbolic distinction work not only *between* what is generally defined as 'high' and 'low' culture but *within* the same (so-called) popular cultures as they are produced and disseminated through mass media and cultural industries." This scholarship thus shows how genre trajectories can expand the diversity of media content by making available not only entertainment but also what many, if not most, deem to be art.

Some have approached consecration by examining the diffusion of the "art" category throughout a given commercial realm, such as in the U.S. film industry. Baumann [2001, 404] observed, "at the beginning of the twentieth century, film in the United States was considered popular entertainment and was strongly identified with working class audiences." How did it enjoy aesthetic mobility? First, it benefited from *external* changes in the broader society. Two were notable – the advent of commercial television and the expansion of higher education. These combined to create an audience for film that was numerically smaller yet more appreciative and knowledgeable. This audience now tended towards the middle class, therefore raising

[13] Peterson [1997; 2005a] would later examine another trajectory that occurs within (and around) particular genres: the ongoing and evolving construction of authenticity. Numerous scholars have drawn on this work as well [*e.g.,* Grazian 2003; Lena 2006; Santoro 2002].

the "status" of film. Second, changes *internal* to the film world also enabled aesthetic mobility, especially as they celebrated the artistic nature of film. The proliferation of film festivals from 1953 onward were important in that regard, as was the later propagation of film studies departments among U.S. colleges and universities. The diffusion of *auteur* theory to the U.S*,* which emphasizes the artistic imprint of film directors, likewise proved key by "allowing a perception of film as art to be applied to standard Hollywood fare" [*ibidem*, 411].

Finally, a *legitimating* ideology was crucial in the aesthetic mobility of film. The bulk of Baumann's analysis addressed this third factor. He content-analyzed more than 450 film reviews that were proffered from 1925 to 1985 in leading U.S. periodicals (*e.g., New York Times*). Not only did film reviews grow longer over time (in sheer number of words), they also grew more analytical and aesthetically oriented. Reviewers focused increasingly on aspects of the filmic text (*e.g.,* composition, symbols), and they more and more evaluated films with terms (*e.g.,* brilliant, genius) and techniques (*e.g.,* comparison of creators) associated with high culture. Baumann thus summarized, "in the 1960s the coincidence of the factors described above created the thrust necessary for a major turning point in perceptions of the artistic status of film" [*ibidem*, 420]. Amidst this aesthetic mobility, film directors were contemporaneously cast as artists rather than mere entertainers – as when Alfred Hitchcock was re-interpreted through the lens of *auteur* theory [Kapsis 1992]. In the aftermath of this aesthetic mobility, prestigious bodies (*e.g.,* National Film Registry) were positioned to select and celebrate landmark films – thereby solidifying a canon of sorts [Allen and Lincoln 2004; Hicks and Petrova 2006].

Others have approached consecration by examining the genesis and later aesthetic mobility of particular genres. Santoro [2000; 2002; 2006] has produced an exemplar in his analysis of the c*anzone d'autore* ("author's song"). This genre designation became commonplace in the 1970s and, although ambiguous in its meaning, supplied "the device through which, in Italy, popular music has been drawn closer to 'high' culture" [Santoro 2002, 112]. The origins of this genre, however, were much more base. Its roots extend back to a for-profit industry and to what was once a marketing category – *cantautore* (roughly translated as "singer-author").[14] The Italian recording industry of the 1950s, Santoro argued, was focused almost solely on commercial appeal rather than aesthetic merit. This same industry, however, would be wracked by considerable flux in the late 1950s, thereby creating space for change.

[14] Other terms were bandied about in the early 1960s, *cantanti–autori* ("singer-authors") and *cantanti-compositori* ("singer-songwriters"), but they lacked the staying power of *cantautori* (Santoro 2006).

For instance, a hundred or so record firms entered the marketplace, spurring both competition and the search for original material. In 1960, amidst such flux, RCA Italy created a new term for its catalogue by contracting *cantante* (singer) with *autore* (author). It initially used the term for performers whose songs were in keeping with the tradition of light popular music (*musica leggera*) – more likely inspiring dance than introspection. Yet, by 1964, *cantautore* would have completely different connotations.

The initial ascendance of the *cantautore* benefited from changes that were *external* and *internal* to the Italian recording industry. The expansion of education within Italy and the flow of international music (*e.g.,* jazz, rock, *chanson*) into Italy combined to create ready audiences for new music and served as inspiration to the next generation of *cantautori*. Moreover, the general political climate of the day, as well as a dearth of international performers that toured Italy during this period of unrest, created further openings for emergent genres – especially those with lyrics that tilted toward social commentary. Regarding internal changes, the influx of new generation of *cantautori* was the essential. Rather than simply have the label applied to them, they claimed it as their own and, in the process, transformed its meaning. This was not surprising given their distinctiveness from previous *cantautori*. This new generation found its influences more in Italian folk music (*canzone popolare*) and international music than in light popular music (*musica leggera*). Furthermore, they had little musical training but had broad interests in culture and the arts. Little wonder, then, that their songs featured elaborated lyrical content but simple music. Finally, this new generation sought commercial success yet also sought to remain somewhat apart from the commercial apparatus – acting "as non-conventional and critical spokesmen for a bourgeois world that was changing" [*ibidem*, 117].

Legitimating ideology likewise played in the aesthetic mobility of *cantautore.* The early 1960s saw a proliferation of materials that considered and extolled the artistic contributions of the *cantautori* – ranging from comments found on album liner notes to elaborated discussion in reviews and interviews. "By the mid-1960s, *cantautore* no longer designated simply a singer who is also a songwriter but the singer and the songwriter of a *different* song" [*ibidem*, 116]. Thereafter, the actions of Luigi Tenco would significantly affect the legitimating ideology. Tenco was among the earliest of the *cantautori*. Although savvy critics appreciated his compositional efforts, Tenco's broader popularity remained somewhat limited. To reach a wider audience, in 1967, he participated in the competitive song festival at San Remo ("Festival della Canzone") – the pre-eminent event that attracted millions by way of radio and television broadcasts. Tenco did not fare well at this competition. Shortly thereafter, he committed suicide in his hotel room and left the following note: "I loved the Italian public and I devoted five years of my life to that public in vain. The reason that I am doing this is not because I am tired of living (…) but as an act of protest against a public that could select *Io, tu e le rose* [*Me, You, and the Roses*] and a panel that could choose *La rivoluzione* [*The Revolution*]" [quoted in Santoro 2006, 344].

At least two dynamics unfolded in the wake of Tenco's suicide. First, the press and others grappled with how to make sense of it. The tragedy was framed in different ways by various groups. Yet, eventually, Tenco was cast as an artist who had made an important political gesture rather than as mentally unbalanced or socially disconnected – turning this "cultural trauma" to "cultural consecration." Second, cultural entrepreneurs established the "Club Tenco" that, in their words, "unite all those who, responding to the message of Luigi Tenco, propose with their own means to bestow value on the *canzone d'autore,* aspiring to artistic dignity and poetic realism even in light music" [quoted in Santoro 2002, 118]. From this Club would eventually flow an array of journals, book series, conferences, and festivals that all touted the merit of the *canzone d'autore.* This flow would broaden as academics – including those in literature – would designate this genre as worthy of study. While the exact boundaries of this genre remain unclear, its category as an art form is now well established. Indeed, given its consecration, *canzone d'autore* shapes the reception and discourse surrounding such emergent genres as hip hop [Santoro and Solaroli forthcoming].

The above works show a diversity that is underemphasized in the mass culture model – whereby media content that is merely entertainment can exist side by side with vaunted media content. Like other notable studies, those above demonstrate the range of actors that play roles in the upward trajectory of genres [*e.g.,* Corse and Griffin 1997; Gray 1997]. For instance, professional musicians were the initial mediators of jazz, with connoisseurs and, later, academics connoisseurs mediating its aesthetic worth [Lopes 2002]. In some ways, then, the aesthetic mobility of popular culture mirrors what DiMaggio [1982; 1991] found regarding the construction of high culture in the nonprofit realm. In the commercial realm, cultural entrepreneurs (*e.g.,* connoisseurs) push and shape the consecration process. High status individuals (*e.g.,* the well-educated) serve as a resource in the consecration process – both as an audience and a pool for creative talent. Finally, academics (*e.g.,* film studies scholars) and non-profit organizations (*e.g.,* Club Tenco) offer legitimating stamps of approval. However, there is at least one notable difference. DiMaggio [1991] has spoken of the erosion of high culture, where its claims to superiority are enjoying less support among listeners with eclectic tastes. In contrast, the consecration of popular culture seems more pronounced in recent years [*e.g.,* Bielby *et al.* 2005; Janssen 2002; Schmutz 2005]. Perhaps, aesthetic mobility in popular culture comes at the expense of high culture – especially as audiences are growing more omnivorous [see Peterson and Kern 1996; Zavisca 2005]. In any event, the consecration of media genres rings true with the class culture model

Organizational Adaptation: Specialization of Small Firms

The mass culture model takes a "top down" approach by mostly focusing on the large organizations that dominate the marketplace and glossing over the small firms that populate it. The question, then, is how to square this top-down approach with recent developments. When looking beyond media industries, we see that as the twentieth century drew to a close, a number of industries were marked by both heightened concentration and a proliferation of specialist firms – such as the eruption of micro-breweries in the beer industry [Carroll *et al.* 2002]. We see similar developments within media industries, as well. Four multinational corporations now dominate the global recording industry. Yet thousands of record firms are also in operation, supplying 20 percent of the market [Burnett and Wikström 2006]. Various scholars have answered the aforementioned question by taking a "bottom up" approach. That is, they have problematized the adaptation of small firms – some in a quantitative fashion and other qualitatively. We start with quantitative approach.

Proponents of "resource partitioning" emphasize the *ongoing* existence and efforts of small firms. "Although individual small organizations do not often carry the social, economic, or political significance of large organizations, there are important scientific and policy reasons to study them collectively" [Carroll *et al.* 2002, 4]. Such small organizations deserve sustained study because, at the very least, they typically pursue a different strategy than do large firms. Small "specialist" firms adapt to their environment by targeting homogenous demand (*e.g.,* a particular segment of the population) rather than the heterogeneous demand (*e.g.,* a broad swath of the population) that large "generalist" firms target. Consequently, specialists and generalists face different, yet interrelated, fates. Indeed, concentration among generalists plays a key role in their divergent fates [Carroll and Hannan 1995]. Partitioning proponents theorize that when concentration is low, numerous generalists are competing both for resources by which to address a vast expanse of consumers and for the actual attention of such consumers. Consequently, there is little room in the marketplace for specialists. However, high concentration occurs when relatively few generalists are competing with each other for resources and consumers. Given that generalists tend to move to the center of a market in search of the broadest demand, there is now room for specialists to address *particular* demands in the periphery of the market (*e.g.,* niches). As Burnett [1996, 118] summarized, "concentration and diversity are closely linked: concentration leads to a focus on narrow product lines (creative stagnation), thus creating the opportunity for new companies and entrepreneurs to pursue more diversity and experimental products."

Resource partitioning proponents have compiled an impressive body of studies, addressing both media and non-media industries. Their studies of newspapers, for instance, have effectively shown that specialists thrive amid high concentration and suffer in the face of reduced concentration. When tracking the fate of 2808 U.S. newspapers from 1800 to 1975, Carroll [1985] found that specialist papers (*e.g.,* foreign language publications) have longer life spans when concentration levels are high rather than low. Among all daily newspapers in the Netherlands from 1968 to 1994, specialists (*i.e.,* local papers) generally enjoy heightened circulation when concentration is at high levels [Boone *et al.* 2002]. Finally, among 734 newspapers in Bulgaria from 1987 to 1996, specialists are more likely to disband when concentration levels decline [Dobrev 2000]. Another study has shown that specialists help spur the emergence of new genres. Mezias and Mezias began by assessing the viability of specialists in the U.S. film industry from 1912 to 1929 – defining "specialists" as those that either produced *or* distributed a motion picture and "generalists" as firms that did *both.* When considering the activities of 192 firms across this time period, they found that heightened concentration facilitated the entry of specialists into the film industry. Mezias and Mezias then inspected the debut of new genres during this time period. Relying on the 27 genre categories created by the American Film Institute, they found that "specialists are significantly more likely to participate in the production and distribution of films that mark the creation or transformation of a genre" [Mezias and Mezias 2000, 317]. These patterns from last century have continued relevance today because, as Zukerman and Kim [2003] have discussed, the U.S. film industry has witnessed a succession of divisions between specialists and generalists. The current division has taken the form of major ("Hollywood") vs. indie ("art house" films) – with each side of the division marked by specific genres and particular types of critical reception.

Quantitative research on resource partitioning thus portrays a symbiotic relationship within various industries – where many specialists thrive in the presence of a few generalists. However, qualitative research on the recording industry sometimes offers a different portrayal, noting that specialists can have an uneasy, if not challenging, relationship with the generalists that dominate the industry. These divergent portrayals result more from analytical concerns than methodological issues. In short, David Hesmondhalgh [1998a; 1998b; 1999] and others [*e.g.,* Gray 1988; Lee 1995] are not focused on the aggregate viability than can result from the niche *strategy* of small firms; instead, they are focused on the aesthetic and/or political *mission* of specialists. Consider, for instance, that oligopolists have rationalized such things as a star system that favors a few performers and genres, massive distribution networks by which recordings reach retailers and consumers, and contracts and royalty rates that reflect the interests of the firm rather than performers. Specialists that intentionally resist this rationalization – such as punk indies that took a favorable approach to performers (e.g., high royalty rates) – attempt to survive in a marketplace that operates counter to their mission. For those that do survive, they face pressures to rationalize (e.g., contracting with majors for distribution) and run the risk of resembling the majors that they initially resisted. Hence, this qualitative research points to the considerable variety that specialists bring to the marketplace but also the limited (or short-lived) impact that it may have. Let us unpack, for instance, the case of British dance music.

Some have claimed that the dance music industry in the U.K. represents a challenge to the mainstream recording industry, especially given the former's de-emphasis on "stars." Hesmondhalgh took seriously that claim by focusing on its context, its mission and its challenges. Regarding the context, he wrote, "The success of dance music in one regard seems clear: it has been the basis of significant *decentralization* of British and subcultural music production" [Hesmondhalgh 1998a, 236]. This decentralization was linked with the evolution and diffusion of dance as a leisure activity. While the disco boom of the 1970s spurred the proliferation of dance clubs across the nation – clubs that relied on recorded rather than live music – the 1980s witnessed the diffusion of "underground" dance beyond large cities and university towns, propelled along by such things as raves and illegal parties at warehouses. This decentralization was also fostered by the rise of digital technologies that resulted in the propagation of "bedroom" studios – which could render recordings for a fraction of what it costs at traditional recording studios. When this inexpensive technology was combined with a burgeoning press devoted to dance music – as well as with the free publicity associated with "moral panics" regarding raves, – dance music became a viable entity that required little promotional costs. Finally, this decentralization tapped into the remnants of the once common independent record stores. While their numbers had fallen considerably since the era of punk, those that remained trucked in the numerous and inexpensive dance recordings that flowed from various locales, while newly established shops often specialized in dance as well. Note that the description thus far resonates with the resource partitioning argument, as a vibrant collection of specialists emerged within a highly concentrated recording industry.

Rather than focus on the range of genres and subgenres contained within this alternative industry, as partitioning proponents might do, Hesmondhalgh turned to its mission. What set this industry apart was that "the relative lack of emphasis on authorship within dance music became a key ideological goal." This was manifest, for instance, when specialists would release recordings with no information, thereby obscuring the compositional and performative authors of the song. It also occurred when singers were used as one of so many elements in the collective production process, with various pseudonyms hiding their identities. This "politics of anonymity" stood in sharp contrast to the star system found in the mainstream industry (as well as with the *canzone d'autore*). Indeed, this mission had several important consequences. First, the reception and evaluation of dance music relied on the specialist firm as the identifier rather than performers. Second, connoisseurs emphasized the development of genres and sub-genres contained within these recordings. Thus, in this particular setting, subcultural capital flowed to those familiar with the intricacies and minutiae of stylistic development [see also McLeod 2001; Thornton 1996]. Finally, specialist record could claim to be anti-corporate by avoiding the "star system" while at the same benefiting from the lower costs associated with doing so.

While production and promotion costs were low, they were not inconsequential because dance specialists still had to cover these costs. A fair number had not done so and, as a result, gone out of business. Some specialists sought to avoid that dilemma via various strategies – with each one pushing the specialists toward rationalization. One strategy involved "crossover" success – whereby they tried to attain success beyond the insular dance music industry. To do so, the specialists would often strike an agreement with one of the major record corporations, relying on its extensive production and/or distributions capacities. Of course, that did not sit well with their immediate audience, as the obscurity of recordings (not their broad popularity) was what they found enticing; moreover, connections with corporations were equivalent to "selling out" and thus foregoing the political mission. Of course, crossover success worked against the politics of anonymity because "stars" were key in the markets beyond the dance music industry. This played into the deep pockets of the majors. Moreover, the majors clearly desired (and obtained) in-roads into this special market. "So although the closed-off, subcultural nature of dance music provides a challenge to the majors, it has been a challenge that they have largely accepted" [Hesmondhalgh 1998a, 249].

Weber [1978] sometimes spoke of forces that worked against instrumental rationality – such as the pursuit of action based on substantive values rather than efficiency concerns. While such value-driven action could transform social arrangements (witness the Protestant Ethic), he was not optimistic about its long-term persistence in a rationalized world. The qualitative work described above has a similar take. Punk, post-punk, dance, and indie genres [Hesmondhalgh 1998a; 1998b; 1999] were rife with potential to challenge the mainstream record industry – yet each was arguably contained or coopted by oligopolists and the rationalized marketplace that the latter created. Nevertheless, the quantitative work of resource partitioning suggests that waves of specialists will continue as long as few oligopolists preside over media industries. Therein lies the potential for specialization to serve as a counterforce to rationalization and, in turn, promote heightened diversity in a class culture.

Conclusions

I opened this essay with the assertion that "Cycles in Symbolic Production" is a classic article that has, in turn, inspired the research agendas of ensuing scholars. Following that assertion, I proceed to locate that article in the *oeuvre* of Peterson and Berger and then elucidate its arguments and analyses. Finally, I sketched examples of how its influence has diffused within and beyond sociology over the past thirty or so years.

Rather than summarize such a sketch, I close by referencing the work of Wendy Griswold. When speaking of literary works that are deemed "great" and possessing of "power," she has the following to say: "'Great works' (…) are continuously rich in meanings and implications that can never be depleted." She then goes on to say, "A powerful work is 'original' in the restrictive aesthetic sense of the term: it locates itself within a set of conventions that it strains, plays with, perhaps inverts but does not totally ignore. Such a work intrigues or disturbs its recipients without utterly mystifying or frustrating them" [Griswold 1987, 1105]. While Griswold is obviously speaking of very different matters than the ones I have raised in this essay, I do find her words somewhat applicable. To wit, Peterson and Berger's 1975 article is a classic not because it is perfect nor because it has settled a score. Instead, it is a classic because its imperfections are interesting and useful and because it raises new scores to settle.

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Innovation and diversity in cultural sociology

Notes on Peterson and Berger's classic article

Abstract: This essay claims that the publication of "Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music" in 1975 proved to be an important moment, as this innovative article would later stimulate intellectual diversity in the sociology of culture. I support this claim by first offering a detailed overview of this article, showing how it brought together important themes of organizational adaptation, genre trajectory, and product diversity. I then offer examples of how subsequent research has addressed these themes, both in terms of supporting and extending the original arguments made in this classic article.

Keywords: culture, concentration, diversity, media, music.