Social Order through a Prism: Color as Collective Representation

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Although color has rarely been examined as a sociological topic, the meaning of color is linked to numerous social domains and serves as a collective representation. Color contributes to social meanings in institutional orders, stratification systems, and identity. While color has some meaning separate from its linkage to particular objects, in most cases colors are situated. We perceive not color, but colored objects. Any given color has multiple meanings that are understood in context. Through our examination of a range of domains in which color has social significance, we suggest that the examination of this field has considerable promise. We conclude by linking the analysis of color to the model of cultural formation suggested by Schudson (1989), focusing on retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution.

Sometimes it appears that everything that might be studied in sociology has already been studied. Scholars have created a sociology of emotions, a sociology of time, a sociology of music, even a sociology of dreams. Thus, it is surprising to learn that there has not been a systematic sociology of color. 1

Part of the problem in dealing with color is that of definition: it is difficult to describe in words what a color looks like without referring to culturally salient objects that have that characteristic (Wittgenstein 1968; Fine 1996, p. 201). Try, for instance, to explain what yellow looks like to a person who has been blind from birth. Color is known through its representation in objects. Thus, Webster’s New Unabridged Dictionary defines yellow as “Of the color of gold, butter, or ripe lemons.” Consider, too, that colors blend into each other, and boundaries are uncertain (Berlin and Kay 1969); the ranges of yellow, gold, green, and white are indeterminate and defined differently in different cultures. In practice, pure colors are separated by zones of uncertainty (Zerubavel 1991). Although we have typifications of pure color, our natural reality contains all hues, recognizing that corporations may manufacture items with these “pure” colors to attract consumers.

The arena in which sociologists have been most attentive to the analysis of color has been in the realm of race. This research, recognizing that race (and, hence, color) is a social construction, does not go beyond the observation—in color terms—that racial labels and color labels have different visual referents.
Our interest in blacks and whites reminds us that "color" does not necessarily refer to objective colors. Those humans who we easily and confidently label "Black" are no more black in terms of formal color designations than "Whites" are white: and, so, a few decades ago Crayola sold a pair of crayons, which would never be confused, labeled "flesh" and "white." According to information supplied by Binney and Smith, the manufacturer of Crayolas, "flesh" was "voluntarily changed to 'peach' in 1962, partially as a result of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement."\(^2\) Brown-tan and peach-tan would not have the same cognitive and emotional richness as black and white.\(^3\)

Despite the absence of sociological analysis, it is clear that colors have powerful cultural significance (Luckiesh 1938; Ladau, Smith, and Place 1989): red lights, yellow peril, blackmail, greenhorns, bluebloods, and the White House. Americans wear red, yellow,\(^4\) green, blue, white, and black ribbons, and each has distinct cultural meanings, if all are not equally well known. In the Atlanta residential telephone directory there are about 4,600 listings for White (many of whom are Black), 1,100 for Black (many of whom are White), and 2,400 Greens, although only 100 Blues, three Reds and no Yellows. Of business listings, excluding proper names, there are 65 for Whites (White Water Rafting, White Columns Inn, White House Bar-B-Que), 51 Blacks (Black Magic Customs, Black Bear Brewing, and some racial markers, such as Black Professional Secretaries Association), 88 Greens (Green Pastures Christian Ministries, Green Thumb Landscaping, Green Frog Productions), 132 Blues (Blue Ridge Grill, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Blue Ribbon Meats), 90 Reds (Red Lobster Restaurant, Red Devil Grocery, Red Clay Computers), and 23 Yellows (The Yellow Pages, Yellow Jacket Hot Dogs, Yellow Cab).

The number of slang terms involving color is striking. For example, The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang lists 51 terms involving the word black, most of them without explicit racial connotations (Lighter 1994, p. 1749). As these and other measures indicate, color serves as part of our cultural "tool kit" (Swidler 1986)—or, put more directly, part of the crayon box by which we shade social reality.

To recognize the importance of color, consider the challenges faced by the color-blind. Most individuals who are color-blind (typically men) have some color vision but are unable to differentiate some colors (typically red and green).\(^5\) Less common and more troubled are the congenital achromatopes who are unable to perceive any color. These individuals must use shading to differentiate objects. Yet these individuals, genetically constrained, have never had the experience of color. What about those who have lost the sense of color while maintaining sight? Neurologist Oliver Sacks (1996, p. 6) reports on an artist who seemed to have lost the ability not only to see color, but to imagine or remember it, even to dream of it. Nevertheless, like an amnesiac, he in some way remained conscious of having lost
To anyone who has experienced it, the world “needs” color, and thus the popularity of movies that have been colorized and hence made more realistic. Advertisements in color have a greater than 50 percent increase in readership than those in black and white (Auchincloss 1978). Evidence suggests that color photographs are easier to recall than those in black and white, either by enhancing object discrimination or calling up relevant color memories that can serve as cues (Gilbert and Schleuder 1990).

Further, the meanings associated with particular colors are not unitary, but are multiple and often contradictory. Blue “stands for” blue bloods and blue-collar; blue humor and bluenoses. Red is the color of love and anger; war and Christmas. Yellow is the color of the sun and health, but also disease and cowardice. Green represents greenbacks, green politics, inexperience, and fertility. Black is worn at state dinners and at gatherings of Hell’s Angels; it is the color of witches and the Black Madonna (Washington 1984). White stands for purity and surrender. These interpretations focus on American culture. Social meanings become even more diverse when seen cross-culturally. With these contradictions so evident, what sense can we make of color as symbolism?

We distinguish between “basic” color symbolism and the more sociologically significant instances of situated color meanings. Basic color symbolism involves those meanings of “pure” color. The symbolism of “black” and “white” is perhaps most obvious in this regard. According to anthropologists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1969, pp. 46–52) in their classic study Basic Color Terms, some societies only distinguish between light and dark, or white and black. These include tribes in New Guinea, South India, and the Congo, suggesting that this division is not geographically localized. Later (in order) come red, then green and yellow (in either order), blue, and eventually brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey; comprising eleven basic color terms. Evidence suggests that children learn colors in a similar order (Kirk, Hunt, and Lieberman 1975). Thus, although there are many societies with white, black, and red as their three basic color terms, there are none with a set of any other three colors. Orange is never found in a culture without green, or brown without blue. In general, the number of primary colors is correlated with the effects of societal complexity and eye pigmentation (Ember 1978). The nearer to the equator, the more eye pigmentation (and the darker one’s skin, hair, and eyes), the more difficult it is to differentiate darker colors, and so members of societies may see the world differently. It is perhaps not surprising that white represents light and black darkness, but it is also often the case that white as a color abstracted from particular objects represents good, and black, evil (Gage 1993). Red represents blood, yellow the sun, green, plants,
and blue the sky and water. Each of these core associations is linked to values and interpretations, as when we think of yellow as a "hot" color, blue as "cool," and red as associated with danger.

Some color meanings involve physiological reactions, but, given the contradictions in symbolism and cultural differences, it is reasonable to emphasize the constructed nature of color meanings. These meanings are neither "universal" (although they do appear to be widely spread) nor "inevitable," but are separate from the particular contexts in which the colors occur—as with free-association tests of color meaning. While everyone knows the basic colors, knowledge of esoteric colors involves cultural capital (and there are class and gender differences in color preferences). Awareness of colors such as sepia, aquamarine, ecru, fuchsia, cerulean, and turquoise involves specialized knowledge—that seems linked to gender. The expansion of color terminology is targeted to women more than men (Frank 1990). Mail-order companies are experts in the creation of color names, preventing customers from claiming that the "iced teal," "sorbet," "firecracker," "envy," or "wicker" was not precisely what was promised, removing the power to complain from the distant consumer. In the process of creating new colors, we have lost our knowledge of such sixteenth-century colors as "Laddie blushe," "Paris mud," "Rat," and "Goose-turd Green" (Heifetz 1994, p. 4). These changes in color labeling seem in accord with the civilizing process, as explored by Norbert Elias (1978).

Although color per se may carry meanings within a social system, typically when we see color it is within a context. Most times we do not see color, but colored objects. The color interacts with the object to condition our responses. Yet color can be generalized from the concrete to the abstract. From our typifications of the meanings of color, we may come to define a noncolored concept as colored. We routinely link color and social life. In understanding the cultural context of color, we can conceive of first-, second-, and third-order color symbolism.

First-Order Symbolism

In first-order symbolism, objects that have a particular color have certain aspects of their meanings rub off on the color—sky, butter, blood, night, sugar. The colors in turn come to typify the objects. Indeed, in examining the roots of color terms we find these conventionalized meanings. White comes from the Indo-European root "hwit" meaning to gleam; red from "rhudira," blood; green from the root "gro," to grow and grass (Heifetz 1994). We teach our children their colors by means of conventionalization of salient and culturally central physical objects that are typified by those colors. In one children's book (Reiss 1969) red is exemplified by strawberries, apples, a firefighter's hat, watermelon, lobster, and tomatoes; yellow by baby chicks, lemons, bumblebees, bananas, and daisies; blue
by the sky, the sea, blueberries, cornflowers, and a police officer’s coat; green by leaves, frogs, gooseberries, pickles, and peas in a pod; and black by licorice sticks, zebras, blackberries, penguins, and night (white is not included). Of course, color symbolism can be generalized from these objects to include the cultural images of the objects, such as giving a red apple to one’s teacher, or opposing pollution because it transforms “pretty” blue water into “ugly” brown.

Second-Order Symbolism

In the second case, objects (typically socially produced) come through convention to “require” certain colors, which provide them with culturally consensual meanings. Nothing in the objects themselves requires this color. At times explanations, grounded in functionalist claims, are given for color choices: for example the greater visibility of certain colors, such as bright yellow for fire fighters’ jackets (Lurie 1981, p. 198). There is no inherent reason that requires that fire trucks are red, that police wear blue uniforms, or that black silk stockings are considered by many to be sexy. These choices are not, of course, inevitable: indeed, in some communities these routine linkages are broken. The color of an object comes to stand for a social position. These conventional colorations allow us to create a social order, as the standard colors of playing cards permit a “thoughtless” game of bridge, in which attention is given to strategy, not identification.

Third-Order Symbolism

Color may at times be linked to objects, events, or emotions that in fact lack such coloration. The linkage of color with feelings or abstract concepts provides such an example. We identify certain objects, persons, places, events, or feelings with colors that they do not in fact possess—at least today: conventional color symbolism, if it ever existed at all, may be anachronistic, even while it remains part of our thought and symbolic tool kit. Here the physical reality no longer provides the color symbolism; the symbolism has become purely cultural. A professional may wear a collar that is blue, and a laborer may wear no collar at all. Bureaucracies are said to specialize in red tape; comedians use blue humor; cowards are yellow. Each of these typifications has a historical grounding, but the original meanings have been lost or transformed in the fullness of time.

Following Durkheim, we argue that these uses of color symbolism permit color to be seen as a collective representation, a conventionalization by which society represents itself to itself. Although the limits—geographical, demographic, and temporal—of this collective representation vary, groups recognize that color can come to have meaning by its association with objects and events, and in turn that color in its various typifications gives meaning to objects and events. In examining the range of color representations, we divide the placement
of color into three broad categories. First, color can be linked to institutions and organizations (nation-states, social movements, businesses). Second, color can be linked to categories of social identity (race, gender, class, age). Finally, color is linked to emotional states and psychological components of the self.

**Color and the Institutional Domain**

Color is an institutional resource. Color represents institutions in dramatic and subtle ways. As Karen Cerulo (1995) notes in her analysis of national symbols, color and design are not randomly tied to national flags, but are correlated with ideology and location in the world system. Color becomes a mnemonic for institutional power. The absence of the color black in the flags of core nations is notable. Black, in contrast, is represented in the national flags of many African nations (for instance, Angola, Kenya, Malawi, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Upper Volta, and Zimbabwe) (Talloci 1982) and in most cases refers to the “color” of their citizens. The creation of the national flag of newly democratic South Africa deliberately included a black triangle. Arab and Caribbean nations are also prone to use black, although for Islamic nations, black typically stands for warfare and the end of colonialism. In contrast, in Europe only Belgium and Germany have black stripes in their flags. Red, white, and blue represent not only the United States, but also the United Kingdom and France. Those colors, representing purity, blood, and dominion over sky and sea, are characteristic of core nations. States use colors in other ways as well, such as in the color of their currencies or even in the external and internal colors of their national buildings. Color may be generalized to represent the people, as the significance of green to represent the Irish. Within societies colors may serve as an integral and defining part of a uniform as a group emblem (Joseph 1986). The white that hospital personnel wear suggests cleanliness and health (*Boys in White* [Becker, Strauss, Geer, and Hughes 1961]). The linkage of the police with the color blue (*Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blues*) and the army with khaki, the Green Berets, and the redcoats are examples that easily come to mind in which colors come to represent in visual form the power and reach of the state. A policeman does not simply wear a blue uniform, but the uniform provides visual legitimation for the use of deadly force.

The linkage between governmental units and color may also be institutionalized through “official” flowers, birds, and other symbolic representations of nature. The official flower of the state of Texas is the bluebonnet. Lady Bird Johnson used her influence to encourage the spread of bluebonnets throughout the Texas Hill Country. As a result, the color of bluebonnets comes to constitute images of a Texas spring to Texans, as bluegrass does in Kentucky. The Baltimore Orioles (black and orange) come to represent the city and the state of Maryland. The colors of other institutional actors serve as images of community. The uniforms of Pittsburgh professional sports teams (the Steelers, Pirates, and Penguins) use the colors of black and gold, which come to represent the city to itself.
University colors, such as Alabama’s “Crimson Tide,” or “Carolina Blue” of North Carolina, or “Big Red” of Nebraska, typify the state beyond the confines of stadia.

Social movements similarly use conventions of color to represent themselves and their ideologies to the public. We speak of the “green movement” or “green politics,” and within this context have a clear meaning as to what is involved. Indeed, this has become a predominant reference of green: of 475 current book titles starting with the word “green,” 60 (12.6 percent) also include the words environment, ecology, conservation, sustainable, or earth. Many other books with green in their title are similarly environmental. The establishment at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 of the International Green Cross to address environmental problems that cross national boundaries is a case in point (Linden 1993).

Perhaps the most obvious linkage of color to social movements is the use of red by revolutionary communist and other socialist movements. The former Soviet Union and its movement allies used red to represent themselves. Even members of the more moderate British Labor Party for many years stood together to sing “The Red Flag” at their annual party convention. The “Red Scare” of 1919 in the United States made clear that color was associated with revolution in the minds of many. Members of the Ku Klux Klan wear white sheets to indicate their purity and to emphasize the boundaries with Blacks and others who are not considered sufficiently white. Fascist black shirts also serve as a linkage between color and social movements.

On a more limited basis, street gangs typically have “colors,” which serve as markers of identification and boundary. The red of the Bloods and the blue of the Crips are potent symbols, and a youth wearing the wrong color (and thus revealing improper group affiliation) may suffer painful or deadly consequences.

Even large multinational corporations are typified by particular colors. The global reach of Coca-Cola, revealed in the public recognition of its linkage with the color red, is a prominent example, as is IBM, known as “Big Blue,” and its chess champion, “Deep Blue.” Less dramatic is the image of the black Cadillac or a green John Deere tractor. It is not that when one sees red, blue, black, or green in other contexts one will immediately think of the corporation, but with a connection primed, the link is easily made. By virtue of choices made in advertising, and the reach of that advertising, the link between color and corporate identity is obvious.

Given the use of color to represent institutions and organizations, individuals and groups may attempt to build upon the power of color as meaning. We label these individuals “color entrepreneurs,” as they create color symbolism to produce meanings for the groups with which they are affiliated. Product designers and those who create logos, television commercials, or political campaign brochures and posters are all concerned with developing a “look.” To the extent that color can come to represent a company, color entrepreneurs have done their work.
Marketers use green to indicate that their products are environmentally friendly or healthy (Healthy Choice cookies, Tide Fragrance-Free detergent). Consumption choices are often linked to the use of color.

Color and Identity Politics

To claim that black and white are essential, if constructed (Frankenberg 1993), social categories is to state the obvious. Each defines the other by virtue of the salience of cultural boundaries. Some argue that it was not until Europeans came to America and had lasting contact with darker-skinned humans that the idea of white became prominent (Lyman 1994, p. 135: but see Jordan 1968). Black and white gain a range of meanings, as evident in phrases such as “Whites only,” “Black is beautiful,” “White power,” and “blaxploitation films,” or in “colored people” and “people of color.” Perhaps most symbolic was the belief that virtuous Blacks would find themselves rewarded with white skin at the Second Coming (Washington 1984, p. 19). The terms “yellow peril” and “redskins” suggest that color symbolism is not limited to black and white. “Blond-haired, blue-eyed” Aryans find the colors of their physical features serve as markers for their internal virtues. Divisions in the East Asian, Hispanic, and African American communities are based on gradations of skin tone (thus, light skinned African Americans are “high yellow” [Foulkes 1994]). Women know well that their hair color can serve to indicate their intelligence (blondes are alleged to be bimbos, as dumb-blonde jokes attest), their sexuality (redheads are said to be fiery), or their personality (for instance, mousy brunettes).

While other social categories are not directly linked to aspects of physical features, color still plays a role. Boys now routinely are associated with blue, and girls with pink (early in this century the appropriate colors were reversed [Kimmel 1996, p. 160]). Consider “scarlet women,” who, like Hester Prynne, may be forced to wear a Scarlet Letter. In part because of the link to sexuality, women are frequently advised not to wear red in the workplace (Molloy 1977). Today yellow is becoming an increasingly popular, politically correct “neutral” color for children’s clothing and decorations, in part because it allows one to make purchases for the child in the months prior to birth and in part because yellow does not stereotype. Yellow, unlike black, brown, and grey, is seen as a color appropriate for dressing the young (Lurie 1981, p. 197), an unserious color for clothing (McDowell 1992, p. 7).

Color is linked to class position and public identity. For instance, black is usually not a color that is widely used among casual, middle-class dressers. Black leather jackets and black-tie clothing connect the ends of the social structure. The black and white of the traditional habit of nuns is immediately recognizable, as is the red of a cardinal’s garb. Men’s red ties are considered to be an example of “power dressing”; bright red lipstick on women communicates something about
the wearer’s moral character, as does black lipstick. With the exception of shirts and undergarments, white clothing is linked to leisure and summer—between Memorial and Labor Days. Dressing in flashy colors, say, all in yellow or red, reveals to others that one is placing oneself (for the moment at least) outside of conventional social norms. In short, color can tie one to a community or separate one.

Despite the dazzling range of consumer products available (e.g., Toffler 1970), it is striking to note that automotive manufacturers do not include yellow as a standard option for most car models, houses are rarely painted deep blue, and, excepting picnics, food is rarely served on red plates. Inappropriate color can place one outside social boundaries.

**Color, Emotion, and the Realm of the Self**

Color entrepreneurs have found a social niche in creating and then playing to the needs of individual consumers, explaining the symbolism of their “favorite” colors, and suggesting what clothing to wear and cosmetics to apply to make one look one’s best and to increase one’s self-esteem. Color is something of which it is expected that one can have a favorite: asking about one’s favorite color is considered a legitimate inquiry and one for which most individuals have a response. (Studies indicate that more people prefer blue than any other color [Valdez and Mehrabian 1994].) Color Choice also leads to attributions about individuals: about their attractiveness and personality.

Color is linked to mood and sentiment, even if these attributions are contradictory or linked to particular hues. Consider the choices that we make each morning in selecting from our wardrobe. One group of entrepreneurs proclaims the value of color therapy. Being exposed to various colored lights supposedly alters one’s emotions and enhances one’s mental health (Rossotti 1983, p. 209). Whatever the efficacy of these therapies, there is no doubt that in cultural terms, color is linked to emotion (Lee and Barnes 1989–90, p. 25). We speak of being in a “black mood,” “having a yellow streak,” “seeing red,” “singing the blues,” and being “green with envy,” or “white as a sheet.” Yet contradictions abound. One can be “true blue” or “blue”; loyal or depressed. Jazz nightspots or poetry cafes often set a mood with blue lighting. Yellow can be bright, mellow, clean (“yellow fresh”), dirty (“dingy yellow”), or sickly; yellow can be a stimulant or a depressant. Red can stand for rage, happiness, passion, excitement, truth, courage, and loyalty (Chambers 1951, p. 467; Theroux 1994). While the discrepancies in color symbolism are profound, in the right context color stands for a collective representation of mood. The recent advertising campaign for M&Ms, personifying the candies, plays off these images with hip blue, sexy green, clumsy yellow, and active red. Interior decorators, especially those who toil for institutions such as prisons and hospitals, use color explicitly as a form of social control and for shaping the selves of individuals who are to be processed. Color is a tool...
that is believed to have beneficial effects on selves and actions. The pastel and
dingy greens of high school corridors are believed to dampen teen libidos in ways
that hot reds would not do. Green is said to be particularly relaxing and serene
(Fischer-Mirkin 1995, p. 39). The Catholic Church is explicit about this linkage
between color and arousal and has "designated as seductive the use of color that
inflamed lust" (Rubenstein 1995, p. 103; Prusak 1974).

A woman whose daily undergarments are white may select black lingerie
for special evenings, not only to appeal to others but for her own sense of situated
self. Advertisers recognize that the hues we select in our bodily accouterments
color our interpretations of our own character, both our interpretations of our
identity and our mood. Further, we often make attributions of certain colors
"looking good" on certain individuals and being unflattering on others. The color
changes the interpretation of the person in ways that are either self-enhancing or
undesirable.

It is important to emphasize that color _per se_ does not have any particular
set of meanings. But when interpreted within a cultural domain, based on previous
contexts (Fine 1992), and grounded in expectations and socialization, such col-
lective representations seem self-evident and unarguable.

**Toward a Sociology of Color**

Color significantly contributes to collective meanings in numerous social
realms—institutional orders, stratification systems, and identity—and societies
develop collective representations of color. These collective representations are
displayed in objects, as the color of an object gives meaning to that object and
helps define the color itself.

In some cases we typify objects with color, even if not all examples of the
object share that color. Further, the meaning of colors can produce imputations
about groups and ideas that have in themselves no inherent color. Color images
then come to represent that set of concepts: nowhere is this better represented
than in the area of emotion.

These conventional meanings do not emerge from the blue: they are not
white noise. Rather, individuals situated in various social segments act as "color
entrepreneurs." actively pushing for particular interpretations and images of color,
creating consensual meanings from cultural possibilities. When successful, such
a linkage can provide considerable rhetorical force in the presentation of material
objects. Although the linkage of color to particular salient segments of the natural
world carries the possibility for meaning, these meanings must still be consens-
ually validated and then expanded to other social realms. Color is not simply a
quality that things have, but contributes directly to the meanings of those things.

This brief sketch of the possibilities of examining color by no means ex-
hausts the topic, but provides only the briefest of overviews, pointing to some of
the theoretical and substantive issues that sociologists should address. A detailed
treatment of each color would provide for a case study of the dynamics of color contradictions. Every color has a rich spectrum of meanings, often in opposition; the particular meaning is judged in context. For instance, the image of black, capturing upper-class culture, deviance, and stigmatized groups suggests rich possibilities. The anecdotal examples that have studded this paper must be bolstered by systematic claims.

Further, certain central cultural topics—sexuality or disease—are symbolized by many colors. For the former, we think of black stockings, red-hot passion, blue jokes, sexy blondes, green M&Ms as aphrodisiacs, and white lace. For the latter, consider the Black Plague, a red rash, blue frostbite, jaundice, green at the gills, and a deathly white pallor. These examples suggest that color is a thoroughly multivalent symbol, given meaning by its situated location. No single meaning exists for any color, even within a particular culture.

Similarly, analyses of historical change reveal the contingent nature of color meanings, linked to current concerns. Thus, it has been said that Victorian England is notably characterized by the color black; one scholar has referred to the nineteenth century as one big funeral (Harvey 1995, pp. 24, 132).

Finally, cross-cultural analysis explores the extent to which color symbolism is widely accepted, as opposed to locally determined. To what extent do tribes in the Pacific have color meanings similar to those of African groups? Do Central Asians share color codes with Caribbean Islanders? Do the French share their color preferences with the British, just as their flags contain the identical colors?

Michael Schudson (1989) in his article, “How Culture Works,” suggests five dimensions of the potency of a cultural object. Schudson speaks of the importance of retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution. While these concepts, as presented, do not apply perfectly to the analysis of color, they are suggestive.

Retrievability refers to the extent to which a cultural object reaches or is available to the audience. Obviously, color as physical sensation is readily available, barring for the moment differential rates of color blindness, but the conventionalized meanings may not be known. Thus, young boys may not know the meanings of red lipstick, black stockings, or blonde women that American men frequently do. Up to a certain age these meanings are not retrievable, and socialization to these symbols is part of the boy “becoming a man.” Likewise, different racial or ethnic groups may have limited access to the cultural meanings of others.

Rhetorical force refers to the effectiveness of cultural symbolism. Certain forms of color symbolism have greater impact than others. The racial divide of Black and White is a vivid example. The linkage of yellow with disease or green with envy, while evident in part of Western culture, does not have the same vividness and perhaps has lost some of its power over time.

Resonance relates to the extent to which one set of symbols fits with other
symbols in the culture. Are cultural images bolstered by the continuing alterations of the culture? The linkage of red with love, seen in "hearts" throughout the culture, suggests that this is a resonant symbol. For instance, the image of the blue collar may be fading or becoming a ritualistic symbol, now that elites wear blue shirts and manual laborers wear T-shirts. The meanings of "true blue" or "blue nose," while still occasionally present, have lost their power as their referents have faded. Further, as other cultural symbols change (different meanings of gender, for instance), particular color symbolism can become more or less effective. When cultural styles mutate, some meanings are lost and others are gained.

Institutional retention is linked to the role of color in organizational communication. Flags are the most evident example of this, but the usage of color by social movements—red on the left and green among environmentalists—suggests that organizations have much to say about which color linkages will have retrievability. Political conventions and other media events are tightly scripted. One of the elements which is scripted is the color of the background used, designed typically to enhance the positive emotions of the audience, but on other occasions, as with Nazi rallies, to point to the need to attack an evil or implacable foe.

Finally, Schudson speaks of resolution—the extent to which cultural symbolism produces action. Again, color in the name of nation-states provides such power. The fact that Americans seriously proposed passing a constitutional amendment that banned the burning of brightly colored cloth rectangles, and that other Americans saw no contradiction in admitting that they would kill and die for those resplendent rectangles, suggests that here is color symbolism with resolution. The fact that other humans much like us kill and die for other colored rectangles reminds us how powerful color can be in provoking action.

While Schudson's model, emphasizing constructed symbols and media communication, does not provide a perfectly adequate analysis of color, it does remind us how complex the analysis of any set of cultural symbols can be. Ultimately, whether we rely on Schudson's categories or others, the continuities and divergences in the interpretation of color raise an array of analytic possibilities. We face an open horizon, and like a transcendent dawn, a symphony of hues awaits us.

ENDNOTES

1This article was developed for presentation as the Alpha Kappa Delta distinguished lecture. It is, therefore, particularly appropriate that the paper is truly a collaborative venture, co-authored with graduate students at the University of Georgia, many of whom are themselves members of the AKD chapter. This paper was developed from a graduate seminar on the sociology of culture in the winter quarter of 1997. This project emerged from the reading of a volume of three elegant essays. The
COLOR AS COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

Primary Colors, by Alexander Theroux (1994), and his companion volume, The Secondary Colors (1996). Additional data were collected by Todd Bayma. This article was presented as the Keynote Address at the Spring Institute, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, and the Alpha Kappa Delta Distinguished Lecture, American Sociological Association, Toronto, Canada, August 1997. Gary Alan Fine’s e-mail is g-fine@nwu.edu. He can be reached at the Department of Sociology, 1810 Chicago Avenue, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208.

In 1958 Binney and Smith changed “Prussian Blue” to “Midnight Blue” in response to teachers’ requests.

This approximation is not limited to skin tone. Redwoods are not red, nor are blackberries black.

Yellow ribbons apparently were a consequence of a 1973 Tony Orlando song, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree,” which details the request of a man being released from prison that his lady love use the ribbon as an indicator of her continuing affection (Heilbronn 1994, p. 158). Subsequently, the idea became popular when Penne Laingan, a Maryland woman whose husband was a hostage in Tehran, tied a yellow ribbon around her tree as a sign of hope and remembrance, and, like a good entrepreneur, promoted the idea in a newsletter to hostage families. Yellow ribbons were later used during the Gulf War, perhaps to avoid the Vietnam Syndrome (Breazeale 1994; Larsen 1994), indicating that we as a nation cared.

This syndrome is found in approximately one in 30,000 to 40,000 people. Red-green color blindness is found, to some degree, in 5 percent of all men (Sacks 1996, p. 6).

Police started wearing blue uniforms in early-nineteenth-century England to distinguish themselves from the red and gold army uniforms.

Khaki originally comes from a Persian word denoting the color of sand.

Sears Roebuck first offered yellow layettes in the 1950s. Prior to that the only choices were pink and blue (Brush Kidwell and Steele 1989, p. 27).

This derives from “true as Coventry blue,” after the permanently dyed blue cloth and thread made at Coventry, England, shipped throughout Europe as early as the fourteenth century (Harris 1970).

The term “the blues” derives from the linkage of blue to sadness, a link as found as early as the 1860s, although the first song title, “The Dallas Blues,” was not published until 1912 (Charters 1993; see also Davis 1995, p. 28).

Yellow flags indicated quarantines. The French word jaune means yellow and is the root for jaundice. In a similar vein, the Nazis forced Jews to wear yellow stars of David to simultaneously mark and degrade them.

REFERENCES


