



The Relationship Between Social Structure and Culture in Robert Wuthnow's Theory and Its Critique from the Perspective of Ali Shariati's Thought

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between culture and social structure has long been a central debate in sociology: Do social conditions generate culture, or does culture itself drive structural transformation? Some scholars regard culture as the outcome of structure, while others emphasize its transformative role. Robert Wuthnow, adopting an objective approach, treats culture not as a subjective phenomenon but as a tangible and observable product. He explains the connection between ideology and structure within a theoretical framework, though structural factors tend to dominate despite his attention to human agency and the concept of "moral order." In contrast, Ali Shariati conceptualizes the culture–structure relationship as reciprocal and dialectical. While acknowledging the influence of structure on culture, he also emphasizes culture's capacity to reshape structure. This article analyzes Wuthnow's cultural theory and critiques it from the perspective of Shariati's dialectical thought, demonstrating that although Wuthnow attempts to transcend reductionist explanations, his theory ultimately leans toward structural determinism. Shariati, by contrast, offers a more comprehensive interpretation of the mutual interaction between culture and structure.

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1. Introduction

The nexus between social structure and culture constitutes a fundamental problem in the sociology of culture. Classical and contemporary theories have typically framed this relationship in terms of either structural determinism or cultural autonomy. Yet the challenge of transcending reductionist frameworks and theorizing the complexity and bidirectionality of this relationship remains pressing.

Two seemingly divergent yet methodologically resonant approaches exemplify this debate: Wuthnow's cultural theory—empirically grounded, symbolically oriented, and structurally inclined—and Shariati's dialectical thought—rooted in Islamic theology, philosophy of history, and a commitment to intellectual emancipation.

This paper addresses the following research question: What are the theoretical similarities and differences between Wuthnow's cultural theory and Shariati's dialectical approach in explaining the relationship between culture, social structure, and human agency? Although analytically sophisticated, Wuthnow's theory, by virtue of its latent structuralism, underestimates the transformative potential of culture and agency. Shariati, by contrast, drawing on dialectical logic, highlights the reciprocal influence between culture and structure and situates human agency within a theological–ethical framework that transcends purely descriptive explanation.

The literature reveals a significant gap: while many works analyze Wuthnow's theory or Shariati's thought separately, no systematic comparative study has been undertaken. This article aims to fill this lacuna by juxtaposing three thematic axes—moral order, agency, and the ontological status of culture—thereby contributing to a renewed understanding of socio-cultural transformation.

2. Methodology

This study employs a theoretical–comparative design. Rather than collecting empirical data, it reconstructs and compares two theoretical frameworks in light of a shared sociological problem: the mechanism by which culture and structure interact. The main analytical tool is conceptual-critical analysis, through which key theoretical constructs (e.g., moral order, agency, ideology, culture, structure, and consciousness) are identified, interpreted, and assessed.

The theoretical framework integrates two paradigms. First, Wuthnow's cultural theory, operating within a symbolic–analytic model, employs concepts such as resource banks, chains of action, and moral order as interpretive instruments. Second, Shariati's dialectical model emphasizes reciprocal causality, historical consciousness, and purposive human action. The comparative analysis focuses on three themes: (1) the mediating role of moral order in the structure–culture relationship; (2) the scope of agency within social processes; and (3) contrasting views on the ontological status of culture—whether reflective or generative, conservative or emancipatory.

Data collection relies on textual and documentary analysis of primary sources from both theorists. The analysis prioritizes terminological precision, internal coherence, and categorical correspondence to ensure a rigorous comparison.

3. Findings

The comparative analysis produced three principal findings:

1. **Moral Order in Wuthnow's Theory:** Wuthnow views moral order as a central mechanism linking social structure to cultural discourse and ideology. However, this concept lacks intrinsic normative content, functioning instead as a formal schema filled by the “social

resource bank.” Morality thus assumes an adaptive rather than prescriptive or transcendental role. In contrast, Shariati—drawing on Shi‘ite theology—treats morality as pre-structural, teleological, and directive, establishing a fundamental point of divergence.

2. **Conceptualization of Human Agency:** While Wuthnow acknowledges agency through the notion of “chains of action,” he ultimately restricts it within the logic of structural responsiveness. Shariati elevates agency to a history-making force, consciously bound to ethical responsibility and existential commitment. In his model, agency is not merely reactive but capable of rupturing and reconstructing social structures.
3. **Ontological Status of Culture:** For Wuthnow, culture is primarily a symbolic reflection of established order, subject to change only in moments of structural crisis. Shariati, however, envisions culture as an autonomous and insurgent actor—a site of resistance, transformation, and emancipation from historical domination.

Taken together, these findings reveal that Wuthnow’s model, despite its anti-determinist aspirations, remains structurally causal. Shariati’s framework, by integrating agency with theological consciousness and ethical intentionality, provides a broader paradigm for theorizing socio-cultural transformation.

4. Conclusion

The divergence between Wuthnow and Shariati extends beyond theoretical content to their underlying epistemological, anthropological, and theological assumptions. Wuthnow privileges structural-causal explanation mediated by moral order and social resources, while Shariati situates human action within a historically conscious and theologically infused ethic of responsibility. In Shariati’s schema, agency is purposive and generative, and culture becomes an active producer of historical meaning rather than a passive reflection of structure.

This study underscores the value of theoretical frameworks that integrate consciousness, ethics, and theology into the concept of agency. It recommends that future research on cultural and social change adopt models recognizing the dialectical symmetry between culture and structure, while avoiding reductions of culture to structural outcomes. Shariati’s theory—combining dialectical reasoning, ethical orientation, and theological depth—offers a paradigmatic alternative for rethinking the dynamics of socio-cultural transformation.

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