



JEFFREY ALEXANDER AND THE CULTURAL TURN IN SOCIAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT This paper traces developments in Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology. The aim is to introduce the reader to the key components of this theory as it developed from a functionalist focus on societal values through semiotics and linguistic structuralism to a theory of cultural trauma and collective performance.

KEYWORDS cultural sociology • culture • performance • structure

Contemporary social theory has undergone a 'cultural turn', meaning that 'culture' has been given a new place in theorizing and empirical investigation. The enormous popularity of 'cultural studies' can be called upon to explain some aspects of this shift, as this outside challenge has forced changes within the more traditional and well established academic disciplines like sociology. Another explanation is that 'culture' has become more central to contemporary life generally, a position held by Frederick Jameson, among others. The argument here is that visual imaging and other 'cultural forms' have so permeated everyday life and consciousness that any interpretations must be more 'cultural'. This argument, which is at times connected to post-modern and post-colonial perspectives, is closely linked to those proclaiming the declining representative power of European theory and European modernity, as such. These views are complemented by conceptualizations of 'new' social movements and the rise to significance of cultural or 'identity politics', of ethnicity, gender, race, religion, rather than class or other 'functional' forms, as constitutive of individual and collective identity.

Though he doesn't fit easily under any of these categorizations, Jeffrey Alexander is a leading figure in this turn to a more sophisticated appreciation

of culture in contemporary social theory. Forceful appreciation of the autonomy of culture in sociological analysis has permitted Alexander to transcend, as well as transform, an earlier adherence to functionalism. At the same time, embracing cultural autonomy offers a counter to the institutional analysis of the 'production of culture' perspective which currently dominates professional sociology. In what can also be understood as a search for new foundations for contemporary social theory, Alexander (1990) traced the origins of the cultural turn to Marx's confrontation with Hegel and to the resulting articulation of two contrasting perspectives on action and order which mark the trajectory of modern social theory. As Alexander regards them, while both sides (objectivist/mechanical and subjectivist/intentional) made reference to 'culture', the former relegated culture to a secondary and derivative status, while the latter suffered from a lack of specificity. Parsonian functionalism was a powerful attempt at synthesizing these traditions, providing grounds for a unified social theory and a more specified and autonomous notion of culture. In Alexander's estimation, however, Parsons conflated 'culture' with 'values', even as he increased the former's explanatory value. It is this conflation, and the assumed societal consensus which accompanied it, that Alexander now seeks to rectify by viewing culture as inherently contentious narrative discourses, or cultural codes, which frame understanding and which are reproduced through social practice. Accordingly,

we cannot understand culture without reference to subjective meaning, and we cannot understand it without reference to social structural constraints. We cannot interpret social behavior without acknowledging that it follows codes that it does not invent; at the same time, human invention creates a changing environment for every cultural code. (Alexander, 1990: 26)

Thus any sociology worthy of the name will be a cultural sociology, capable of explaining social behavior through an analysis of the cultural codes within which it is embedded, while at the same time revealing how these codes are themselves not only reproduced but also altered in the process.

Alexander calls for cultural sociology with a 'strong program', echoing earlier debates in the philosophy of the social sciences. Here the opposition is not realism, but the more modest, self-limiting claims of cultural studies and the sociology of culture, which would carve out their respective academic niche, rather than go to the methodological (in the broadest sense) roots of the issue. Following Charles Morris' classic distinction (Alexander, n.d.) 'strong programs have focused on the syntactics and semantics of meaning' and followed twists in the cultural turn 'to the relations between cultural texts and the actors in everyday life'. The constitutive elements of Alexander's strong program are: (1) Geertzian 'thick description'; (2) a theory of culture which has autonomy built into the fabric of meaning, as well as

a more robust understanding of social structure and institutional dynamics; and (3) constructing a general theory of culture. A sociologically sophisticated narrative theory mediates between Geertzian ethnography and a general theory of culture, transcending structuralism by incorporating the critical hermeneutics developed by Habermas to form what Alexander calls 'structural hermeneutics'.

We can concretize this somewhat by reflecting on a few of the key concepts involved and seeing how they are put to use. First of all, the concept of structure comes out of a critique of the concept of form, which was considered idealistic in its notion that mind preceded language and imposed a form on the world through its use, i.e. language as an instrument through which mind, consciousness, forms the world (Rowe, 1995).

Shifting the focus from 'mind' (and philosophical subject) to 'language' had the strategic effect of turning that philosophical subject into a mere consequence of certain linguistic possibilities that could be demonstrated to exceed any individual user and even specific historical moment. (Rowe, 1995: 26)

Historically oriented philology is concerned with meaning, the changes in the meaning of words over time. The synchronic linguistics developed through Saussure was not so much concerned with meaning as with how meaning is possible. This is also the concern of Geertzian hermeneutics, that is, how meaning is made through social practice in stable settings, under the guiding assumption 'one place, one culture'. Alexander agrees that structure is not a thing, but a relation, a discursive force field composed around binary poles, a field which is dynamic and multiplex. This constitutes his link to synchronic linguistics. Culture is 'structured' as foundational narratives are composed out of the elements of a discursive field; these narratives, in turn, ground individual and collective identities, and thus frame human behavior. As opposed to both structural linguistics and Geertzian hermeneutics, Alexander adds elements of power and reflective subjectivity to his modeling, as situated actors 'perform' narratives through their social practices. Alexander seeks to avoid the 'idealism' which plagued the functionalist conflation of culture and values, by including the idea that

meaning is constructed in an antagonistic way . . . a conflictual and wave-like dialectic that pits good against evil, that highlights the existential and meta-physical contrast between the sacred and the profane. (Alexander, n.d.)

In Alexander's structural hermeneutics, culture is both pre-structured system and reflective praxis, formative, yet malleable, as pre-coded narratives form the background against which the drama of social life unfolds as embedded action.

The roles of narrative and performance theory are important here. Narrative analysis focuses on the form in the content in structural hermeneutics. In his analysis of 'the discourse of American civil society', Alexander

(Alexander and Smith, 1993) revealed how narration gives form and coherence to experience, helping actors, individuals and collectives like institutions make sense. Narrative analysis develops within the dialectics of form and content and universal and particular, revealing how form and content are linked in making sense or giving meaning, just as culture is structured and structure cultured. Individual and collective identities are 'framed' through narratives, just as the narratives are themselves pre-coded structures. Coding here means to be infused with meaning, as codes are also weighted, i.e. scaled according to moral measurement, circumscribed by dichotomies like good and evil, while narrating gives form to individual and collective identity – a beginning a middle and an end – to the story of who we are, why we are here and where we are going. Identity narratives are made and must be maintained, while crisis or trauma are breaks or tears in the narrative which demand repair and necessitate alterations. This kind of cultural structuring, in which individuals are both formed and formative, uncovers how agents are themselves constructed within a web of already existing meanings of culture/structures and at the same time actors in the process of meaning making and reforming the structuring narratives. On the everyday level, meanings and identities are negotiated. Here Alexander borrows a key theme of ethnomethodology, while on the collective level he borrows from Hegelian Marxism the importance of crisis in providing grounds for a restructuring collective narrative frames. In addition to narrative theory, Alexander draws upon performance theory in an analysis of how action is 'scripted' according to inherited narrative frames and through them to deeply embedded cultural structures.

Like individual identities, collective identities must be maintained. In modern societies, mass media play an important role in reconstructing and in maintaining foundational narratives which provide the 'scripts' which structure social action and frame the drama of social life, as well as representing and re-membling the collective. Alexander's study of the construction of the Holocaust (Alexander et al., 2004) illustrates not only the making of the Holocaust, how an 'event' was constructed and coded through mass mediated representation, but also how this process was intimately bound up with collective identity formation and rooted in cultural structures. It is exemplary cultural sociology. There is thick description, an appreciation of the explanatory autonomy of culture and a notion of the latter which is concise, systematic and capable of general application.

The cultural construction of trauma begins with a claim . . . an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative of some horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution.

Alexander reveals how not only media but also 'carrier groups' are central actors in this process, as they are the agents of the trauma process.

Through a 'spiral of signification' these collective agents rework the inherited narrative frame, putting in place a 'compelling framework of cultural classification'. In this way, pre-formed narratives which frame collective identity formation are themselves re-formed, as structuring culture is restructured through social practice and the actions of individuals.

If narrative analysis is helpful in uncovering the embeddedness of social practice by focusing on meaning, performance theory returns attention to the role of action. Returning to the roots of the cultural turn, Alexander argues that in their attempt to counter the sociology of culture's productivist focus on external conditions and institutional settings, cultural sociologists have overemphasized the role of meaning at the expense of action. Performance theory, with its attention to practices, is a necessary complement and counterweight to text oriented narrative analysis.

To show the importance of meaning, as compared to such traditional sociological ciphers as power, money and status, it has been necessary to show that meaning is a structure, just as powerful as the others.

This has now been achieved, both at a meta-theoretical level and through a range of empirical studies. What is now necessary is a theoretical model, mediating between meta theory and case study, a cultural pragmatics, focusing on the action which puts texts into practice, with the aim of showing how cultural traditions, in the form of narrative codes, not only regulate action but also inform dramas, 'the performance of which could display exemplary motives, inspire catharsis'. Again the aim is to infuse actions with 'culture', here understood as more than internalized rules, as coded narrative and dramatic gesture. This addendum is aimed at those 'culturists' who view culture as a 'tool kit' in the practice of everyday life, as well as those guided by the assumptions of rational choice theory. Performance theory reminds us that action is not merely practical and rule following; much more than calculative, it is also symbolic and, equally, action is public as well as social. Performance provides actors and audience with 'an occasion in which actors and audience can reflect upon and define themselves'. As Bernhard Giesen notes,

This performative turn does not conceive of action events in terms of individual economic choice but in terms of a social drama that involves actors as well as audiences and is dependent on special symbolic media and means. The structure of this theatrical performance is rooted in ritual and mimesis instead of rational calculation . . . its core agenda is not the construction of meaning, but the staging of authenticity and the fusing between performance and audience, i.e. the taking of performed drama for reality.

Here again we see the radical nature of Alexander's strong program in the move beyond meaning and text. Human action is cultural praxis, scripted yet potentially transformative, rule-governed yet also rule-making, practical

yet also creative. The task of cultural sociology is to grasp all these dimensions.

While Alexander's strong program attempts to bypass cultural studies by incorporating its theoretical innovations and empirical orientations, there are still things to be learned from that confrontation. Alexander's exemplary analysis of the construction of the Holocaust, for example, might benefit from an inclusion of some of the insights contained in Stuart Hall's classic article 'Encoding and Decoding' (1980) as well as the sensitivity to class, race and ethnicity which continues to mark contemporary cultural studies. In this accounting of mass media and the communication process, Hall showed how power infuses coded narratives to produce 'meaningful discourses' which can become more or less 'dominant-hegemonic'. He also suggests, however, that such discourses may be variously 'read' and 'performed' by differently positioned actors, through what he calls 'negotiated codes'. In this reflexive process of decoding, 'oppositional' codes may emerge to challenge dominant discourses. This emphasis on power, on situated reading and performance would make the strong program even stronger.

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