



RECONSTRUCTING THE SOCIAL SPACE OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT This paper retraces the conceptual development of Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology. It centres on three major conceptual achievements: first, the distinction between inside and outside and its more peculiar variants (like system and environment or friend and foe); second, the elaboration of the temporal axis as a distinct dimension of cultural analysis; and finally, the close focus on performativity that took centre-stage in cultural analysis during the last years.

KEYWORDS classical social theory • cultural sociology • Durkheim • performance

There is no shortage of cultural studies and cultural sociology can hardly claim to be a pristine field thrusting for new concepts and perspectives. But if an astute and sophisticated theorist with a classical pedigree enters this field and reconstructs its basic dimensions, we can, indeed, expect remarkable contributions. During the last decades Jeffrey Alexander was regarded as the undisputed chief guardian of the classical heritage in social theory. Recently, he has proclaimed 'the strong program of cultural sociology'. In the following remarks I will not refer in detail to Alexander's cultural studies on the specific topics – ranging from the early research on the Watergate scandal to the recent studies on the cultural construction of the Holocaust in the American media. Instead, I will try to outline what I consider to be the three major conceptual achievements in Alexander's new cultural sociology.

THE FUNDAMENTAL INSIDE/OUTSIDE DISTINCTION

Scholarly discourse reaches beyond the confines of local practices. It does not proceed by consent or dissent among those present in a local site, but it aims at the approval of an invisible and anonymous readership including all those who are endowed with reason. This universalism comes at a price – it requires disembedded principles of argumentation and basic distinctions that can be presupposed by and with respect to any participant in the discourse. Therefore, fields of scholarly discourse are frequently operating with reference to one constitutive distinction that defines the perspective of the discipline. The historical perspective, for example, is structured by the chronological distinction ‘before or after’, the perspective of law is defined by the normative distinction consistent or inconsistent with the legal principles, the perspective of economics results from the basic alternative between more or less profitable actions, etc. Of course, this focus on one basic distinction does not exclude reference to other modes of constructing reality – neither does economics disregard temporal sequences, nor does history dispense entirely with profit expectations and legal norms, but we can at least imagine historical studies that, for example, do not account for legal norms. The temporal reference to the past is, in contrast, constitutive for any historical research as the distinction between relative costs, benefits and profits is constitutive for economics.

While other social sciences like economics or history can be easily defined by one constitutive distinction, the focus of sociology on its domain is less obvious. From its classical foundations till its most recent debates, sociological theory abounds with paradigms of social action and social order, but there are few, if any, attempts to deal with the question of what the constitutive distinction of the sociological perspective is in contrast to other social sciences. One of the most stimulating answers to this question has been provided by Jeffrey Alexander’s new cultural sociology. It suggests that sociology’s basic distinction runs between the inside and the outside and that this distinction is at the core of cultural communication. Far from disregarding the distinction between the inside and the outside, classical social and political theory conceived it in normative or even spatial terms. Despite all its conceptual refinements, mainstream sociology remained within the confines of a Hobbesian model of society. Society was seen to be a large group of actors living on a territory and being controlled by a normative system. Certainly, the normative system had to be reinforced by power differentials, backed by solidarity and shielded by cultural world views, but its core reality consisted of normative expectations, roles, rules, laws, etc. – in short, the model of society was provided by the rule of law in the territorial state. It was the Durkheimian tradition of sociology that prepared the ground for a radical departure from the Hobbesian model of society and a reversal of the relationship between community and law as implied in this model.

The Hobbesian model explained society by the range of peaceful interaction engendered by the monarch's authority that, in turn, resulted from a contract among selfish individuals. In contrast, the Durkheimian tradition considers the social community to be the starting point and the normative institutions to be derivative; the relation between social community and normative institutions is, however, not a matter of rational choice and strategic interests, but of ritual performance and symbolic representation.

Replacing the individual by the social community as ontological a priori shifted the attention to the boundary between the people and their outside. Durkheim disregarded this encompassing boundary and focused on the grid of social structure within society. Here, too, boundaries are constructed, but these boundaries do not limit meaningful interaction with other groups. Alexander's new cultural sociology, however, conceives of the distinction between the inside and the outside in more fundamental terms. It marks not just membership, but delineates the range of trust and meaningful action. The outside refers to absurdity, evil, chaos, to a realm where understanding the other is difficult if not impossible, where Quine's principle of charity does not apply, where Schütz's natural attitude can no longer be assumed, where nothing can be taken for granted any more. Trust, meaning and rationality are different phrasings of the same bond that ties and merges community and culture in contrast to the outlands of absurdity, evil and bestiality. It allows for a transition from specific questions, investigations, and communications to general, diffuse, calm and continuous certainties. It produces the latency of social order beyond the threat of violence. Thus, the relationship between community and society as presupposed by classical sociology is reversed. It is not the society that has to be complemented by ties of solidarity but the social community that creates and constructs its normative institutions.

This reversal reflects the democratic turn from the primacy of the law to the sovereignty of the people. It is the people who construct the constitution and not the other way round. Alexander's fundamental distinction achieves for sociology what Hobbes' distinction between the state of nature and the social contract did for political theory – it demarcates the domain and provides a paradigm for its constitution. By linking trust and meaning in the inside-outside distinction, Alexander reveals a level of constitutive processes that can hardly be surpassed in its fundamental ambition. This fundamental ambition is, however, occasionally concealed behind a verbal camouflage that risks being misunderstood. Pedantic critics may read Alexander's phrasing of civil society and its boundaries as the attempt to blow up the American conception of civil society to a universal paradigm of social community. But Alexander uses the historical particularities of the American civil society and its ideas of virtues and decency only as an especially well known and familiar illustration for a fundamental distinction that underlies every construction of social communities. As a culturalist,

Alexander does not exempt his own cultural presuppositions from critical accounting and reflexive 'bracketing'. But in order to penetrate the surface and to reveal its basic structure, cultural analysis has to start by presenting the phenomenology of the case. And this is exactly what is at the core of Alexander's reconstruction of civil society.

ADDING TIME TO THE INSIDE/OUTSIDE DISTINCTION

By exploring the basic architecture of culture, Alexander's new cultural sociology does not only focus on the boundary between the inside and the outside but it addresses also the issue of discontinuity in cultural memory. Thus, the cultural construction of the social space is completed by a cultural construction of the temporal dimension.

Traditional sociology conceived of discontinuity only as institutional or structural transformation or as transition between tradition and modernity – thereby reflecting the historical experience of revolutions and progress. It could disregard the question of beginnings because the past before the revolution was never without any social institutions or social structures. In contrast, social actors and social communities have to imagine their origin, they have to mark the beginning of the story, they have to account for the fundamental discontinuity between the prehistory and the history of a community – even if reliable and precise information about the remote past are rarely available. Cultural history and the rapidly growing field of collective memory have called these inventions or imaginations of a beginning 'founding myths' that tell a story of individual and collective heroism breaking the path for the community. Most of these mythological stories about founding heroes and revolutions convert violence into victory and blur the traces of victims and perpetrators. They are commonly regarded as cultural constructions that tell us more about the contemporary community of believers than about the events of the past. In contrast the trauma of victims is mostly taken as an unshakable and naturally given reference for collective identity and solidarity.

Jeffrey Alexander's new cultural sociology not only complements studies on triumphant founding myths with a focus on its counterpart, i.e. the traumatic origins of a collectivity, but also discovers these traumatic origins as a cultural construction. In a similar way as Weber presented the charisma of heroes just as an imagination of his or her followers, Alexander discovers also the collective trauma to be a cultural construction of those who are not the direct victims but identify themselves with the victims. The suffering of the individual victim is enclosed in his or her body and has to be strictly separated from its cultural reconstruction in collective memory. Alexander's uncompromising cultural constructivism provides a bold breakthrough for a sociological analysis of issues that for most sociologists are still exempted from a constructivist approach and taken for naturally given. Here,

Alexander continues the critical stance towards positivism and naturalism that we know from his early metatheoretical writings and translates it into a substantial research programme. His theory of cultural trauma as the attempt to tell the dark beginning of the story can be considered to be the sociological counterpart to the deconstructivist perspective on myths as provided by René Girard.

THE PERFORMATIVE TURN

Relying on the fundamental distinctions outlined above, Alexander's new cultural sociology has recreated the space of culture by refining and advancing the conceptual tools of cultural analysis, metahistory and literary criticism, i.e. narrative, tropes, metonymy, textuality, representation, etc. Far from neglecting issues of agency, he mostly deals with texts and symbolic structures on the one hand and the boundaries of communities – in particular in terms of civil society – on the other. Following the veins of poststructuralism, the analysis of texts and structures hardly left a slot for the account of social reality as an event that occurs in a locality and at a particular time. Classical social theory accounted for the dimension of events and occurrence in terms of intentional action that was framed by shared knowledge and common norms. This intentionalism is pushed to a most radical twist by rational choice theory. Its heuristic required every social institution or structure to be explained as the intended or non-intended outcome of rational action performed by individual actors and these individual actions were considered to be the only real events in social processes. Rational choice theory led to a raging debate in which Alexander defended the cause of sociology against the reductivist imperialism of rational choice theories. Indeed, the heritage of classical action theory must not be confined into the narrow cage of economic individualism.

Most action events do not occur as the result of rational calculations of costs and benefits, but instead as the repetition of action patterns and it is this very repetitive character that allows for understanding the meaning of actions as rule-guided activities. This understanding is an irreducibly social endeavour – it is never created by one single individual alone and it never refers to one single and isolated act. Instead, it results from the framing or rule constructing activities of several actors who assume and indicate a common life world. This conception of action dates back to Wittgenstein, Schütz, Goffmann and Garfinkel.

Jeffrey Alexander – with his unfailing sense for new theoretical movements – has recently noticed a coalescence of various strands of this tradition and envisioned a new paradigmatic thrust that he calls 'the performative turn in the social sciences'. 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 – hence it is much less restrictive and more encompassing in its assumptions than the idea of rational choice between utilities. Drawing on such diverse writers as Kenneth Burke and Victor Turner, Durkheim and Stanislawski, Alexander merges cultural sociology with conceptions of symbolic media and ideas from dramatology to end with a bold theoretical vision that indeed could break the path for a new cultural sociology beyond the tyranny of the text. 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 the performed drama for reality. Because it provides a conceptually refined perspective on the microstructure of this fusing between performance and audience, Alexander’s latest version of his Strong Program not only offers reinterpretations of central concepts like charisma or disenchantment, but it changes our knowledge about the basic structure of social action.

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