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Why Cultural Sociology Is Not 'Idealist': A Reply to McLennan
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A Reply to McLennan

Jeffrey C. Alexander

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY is a broad and powerful new movement, not only in the United States but beyond it as well.[1] New theoretical movements challenge vested intellectual interests. Cultural sociology insists on the ideal power of material interests, and the material power of ideal interests.

The ambition animating Gregor McLennan's lucid critical essay is to protect, and restate, older and more traditional forms of sociological explanation. Citing what he considers my insistence on 'the basic deficit of neo-Marxist or materialist perspectives on culture', McLennan asks, 'How can those still sympathetic to the latter modes of analysis respond to this new challenge?' (p. 2).

One can do so in very different ways. One could respond in a spirit of engagement, with a critical yet sympathetic reading that would have the effect of revising the conventional wisdom, be it neo-, post- or anti-Marxist, or just plain old materialist in a mundane sociological way. This would constitute a progressive response to the cultural-sociological challenge. McLennan has chosen to take a more defensive and reactive road instead.

To be progressive, one needs to be open to the difference of the other, to see some of its qualities as desirable. One must understand its complexity, and appreciate how its position might well beyond one's own. It was by taking the progressive road that Marxism was able, throughout a good part of the 20th century, to maintain its vitality, incorporating Weber, Simmel, Freud, functionalism, phenomenology, structuralism, post and decon. Has this open-minded manner of responding to new intellectual movements come to an end?

As I have said, McLennan chooses a reactive rather than a progressive stance. In this sense, he takes the easy way out, and he makes his job even easier by converting my cultural sociology into a straw man. It is said to be 'tendentially idealist' and 'ultimately one-sided'. Accused of symbolic determinism and 'autonomism', cultural sociology becomes, in short, a sitting duck. Materialism can be preserved, for there is nothing to learn from the other side.

But it really isn't that easy. My position has never been idealist, one-sidedly or tendentially. It was not idealist before I created my cultural sociology, and it has not been afterward, though critics who flee from the idea that culture structures have real effects would like very much to claim it to be.

From my earliest theoretical investigations, my aim was to expand the notion of 'social structure' to include culture, not to be displaced by it (e.g. Alexander, 1988: Part I). In my recent investigations, I have developed 'cultural pragmatics' (see note 2), which employs the idea of social performance to model the relationship between collective representations, symbolic action, spatial and temporal materiality, political, economic and hermeutical power, contingent action and audience response.

How can McLennan, who has, for many years, evidenced a keen interest in my intellectual development, manage to neglect this central thrust? In this current effort, he lays out 'four interconnected levels of abstraction' (p. 1) in my intellectual project: post-positivism, cultural sociology, substantive analyses and cultural politics. To render my project more accurately, however, McLennan should not have neglected 'multi-dimensionality', the key term in my earlier *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Alexander, 1982–3). In McLennan's model, this distinctive level of abstraction would sit somewhere between the levels of post-positivism and cultural sociology.

Over the last decade, I have, indeed, been deeply concerned with developing cultural sociology. Yet, my broader interest has always been social theory as such, with theorizing society as a whole. I have explored social structures as institutions, states, politics and interest groups; polarization and conflict; and racial, ethnic, religious and gender domination (e.g. Alexander, 1988: Part II).

I have gained access to these so-called material phenomena primarily through what I have called differentiation theory. Developed most significantly by Durkheim and Parsons, and later by Luhmann, this model holds that institutions become more separated and specialized, and groups more contentious and distinctive, over the course of historical time. From my first encounter with differentiation theory, however, I was engaged in a fight against its tendency toward teleology and abstraction, its movement towards 'systems' and away from the emergent interests, ideal and material, of actual social groups. My aim, therefore, was to conceptualize differentiation, and dedifferentiation, as the result of contingently related institutional structures and situated group interests. It would be difficult, I think, to find any more determined criticisms of the idealist tendencies of differentiation

theory than these (Alexander, 1988: 49–77, 193–221; Alexander and Colomy, 1990).

This sensitivity to the dangers of sociological idealism has continued to inform my cultural sociology and civil society theory today, hence my continuing interest in boundary relations, conflict, contradictions, destructive intrusions, domination, exclusion and civil repair (Alexander, 2000). These are 'realist' concerns. They acknowledge and emphasize the manner in which environments 'outside' of actors' own cultural constructions create impenetrable roadblocks to the realization of their ideals. In making such claims for fractured reality, however, I eschew realist theory, with its reassurance about the ultimately homologous relation between mental representations and outside structures.

Throughout these studies in social structure, I have been intent on finding a way to incorporate meaning in a systematic way. In a neo-Kantian mode but in Dilthey's and Weber's historicizing spirit, I have done so by insisting that culture is a dimension of all action, not a variable that stands off to one, even if very important, side. Culture is analytically autonomous, even if, in every concrete empirical moment, it is part of a multidimensional and complex whole (Kane, 1991). In my first book, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, I tried to reconstruct the culture/structure vocabulary of classical and modern sociology. In my later efforts, incorporating semiotics and poststructuralism, I tried to develop something new, a cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003).

In addition to pushing culture to an honored place in institutional analysis, I have composed meta-theoretical essays that propose systematic models of action, structure and culture mediation. For example, in 'Action and Its Environments' (Alexander, 1988: 301–33), I propose that personality and culture constitute the internal environments of action, and that the social system structures of economy, polity and solidarity present its external environment. The latter exert pressures from the outside, often assuming vis-a-vis action an objective, thing-like form, despite their ontological status as congealed meanings. These external environments can be experienced meaningfully only if they enter action's internal environments. In relation to both internal and external environments, however, actors engage simultaneously in typification, strategization and invention. In my recent work on 'cultural pragmatics' (Alexander, 2004b), I have theorized this interrelation of action and its internal and external environments in a less meta-theoretical, more middle range, explanatory way.[2]

I have also developed this structures-within-culture approach through a series of critical hermeneutic encounters, or readings (Alexander, 1987, 1989). I would like to think that I have been relatively even-handed in these explorations of multidimensionality, criticizing Durkheim, Dilthey and (parts of) Parsons for their idealism, Marx and (parts of) Weber for their materialism. I have also devoted some detail (Alexander, 1995) to exposing what I consider to be the deracinating reductionism of Pierre Bourdieu.

In these three different modes of my work on multidimensionality –

institutional analysis, meta-theoretical models and hermeneutical recon-structions – I have emphasized, not the absolute but *relative* autonomy of culture. My aim has not been, as McLennan would have it, to urge that soci-ology take an exclusively 'internalist' or 'textualist' (p. 4) approach to action, but that it make the textual a major moment in a complex and thoroughly interdependent series of determinations. Why else would I have called an essay that appeared near the beginning of my cultural sociological project, 'Analytic Debates: Understanding the "Relative Autonomy" of Culture' (Alexander, 1990)?

Where do such considerations of 'multidimensionality' – the level of abstraction ignored by McLennan – leave the project of cultural sociology? They put it, first of all, into its rightful place. Cultural sociology is not intended to displace institutional analysis but to provide a new framework for approaching it. According to this new perspective, the internal environ-ments of culture provide deep structures, such that the objectivizing forces that form the external environments of action make sense to individual and collective actors only insofar as they are interpreted inside these meaning-ful frames. Such frames do not 'make up' objective forces; the latter can exert themselves even when they are not meaningfully understood. People can be shot dead without ever understanding why. Fortunately, however, this is an exception in social life. It is more typically the case that violence and coercion are deeply associated with, embedded in, affected by and genera-tive of symbolic frames (Smith, 1991; Alexander, 1997).

'Cultural sociology' as an explicit research program represents a later and, I would like to believe, more subtle effort to model this interlarded relationship in a manner that gets beyond the dichotomies of classical and modern theory. Sociology has never allowed culture to speak its name. By contrast, the other arenas of society – whether economics, politics, religion or family – have been thoroughly described, their structures deconstructed and their internal logics articulated, even as analysts have connected such structures to forces 'outside'. This has not been the case for culture. It has been reduced to ideology or to values, and its contents have largely been read off the architecture of other structures, as a reflection or an inverted mirror.

The ambition of my cultural sociology has been to open up this black box, to provide the internal architecture of social meaning via concepts of code, narrative and symbolic action, so that culture can finally assume its rightful place as equivalent to, and interpenetrated with, other kinds of structuring social force. I have developed this internal architecture by incorporating and reinterpreting certain central aspects of the late Durkheim, phenomenology and micro-sociology, symbolic anthropology, structuralist semiotics, narratology, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Yet, even while elaborating the architecture of culture structure, I have tried not to lose sight of the broader aim, which is to theorize society as a whole.

Binary symbolic structures, cultural traumas, liminal events, pollution and purification, progressive and tragic narratives, secular ideologies of

salvation and apocalypse, invisible discourses of liberty and repression – all these make frequent appearance in the essays collected in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (Alexander, 2003). I would like to believe, however, that these culture structures are never presented in the one-sided and deterministic manner that McLennan would have his readers believe. Yes, I am concerned to establish, through 'rational' methods, the internal symbolic structure of the 'irrational' forces that marked the emergence of the computer, the Watergate crisis, the Holocaust, American democratic ideology, social scandals and the peripatetic ideologies of world-historical intellectuals. If my hermeneutical reconstructions are powerful, my presentation of these culture structures will ring true; they will crystallize and call out the felt social experience of my readers, in the aesthetic manner of art. In this way, I will have communicated to readers that symbolic forces do indeed have an independent effect on social life – because of their own internal power, not because they are homologous, reproductive or reflective of something else. Rather than being inconsistent with this aesthetic dimension, the normative ambition of my work follows closely upon it. It is the capacity for relative empirical autonomy that allows symbolic ideals to regulate material interest, to gain traction vis-a-vis obdurate group groundings and thus to challenge narrowly construed social boundaries via new and extended forms of cultural identification.

This does not evoke symbolic force in an 'autonomist' way. Throughout these empirical-cum-theoretical essays, I place culture structures thoroughly inside pressure-packed, highly contradictory social structures. I show how groups fight to gain control over culture structures, how they are continuously subject to the fissures of historical transformations, the regulative patterning of institutional fields, the political-economics of production and distribution, the fragmentation of audience response, and to such events as wars, revolutions, electoral victory and defeat.

In my investigation of Watergate (Alexander, 2003: 155–78), I suggest that the ritual pollution of the Republican president, Richard Nixon, and the utopian and 'unrealistic' symbolic cleansing of the American republic that followed upon it, could not have taken place if Nixon had not succeeded in pushing his Democratic opponent in the 1972 elections, George McGovern, off the historical stage. Up until this time, the social polarization of the 1960s between frontlash and backlash movements had made it 'objectively' impossible for more universalistic, solidarizing symbolic projects to succeed. Neither could the secular ritualizing of Watergate have emerged, I demonstrate, without the deep alienation between the political center of American society and its differentiated social and cultural elites.

In my 'Modern, Post, Anti, and Neo: How Intellectuals Explain "Our Time"' (Alexander, 2003: 193–269), which first appeared in *New Left Review*, I insist that the serially hegemonic intellectual ideologies of the post-war world are culture-structures, not scientific theories, and that they must be approached, in the first place, in terms of the explanatory concepts of code, narrative and genre. At the same time, my account of these

ideologies goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the rise and decline of each intellectual form depend, not only on its internal culture structure, but also on a whole series of historically contingent 'non-cultural' structures and events: the post-war settlement and American hegemony, the new social movements, the defeat of the 1960s, the triumph of anti-communist social movements in state socialist nations and the expansion of neo-liberal market economies.

In 'The Social Basis of Moral Universalism: The "Holocaust" from War Crime to Trauma Drama' (Alexander, 2003: 27–84), I suggest that what we today understand as the Holocaust could not have emerged if control over its story-telling had not changed hands twice, first from the defeated Nazis to the triumphant Americans, and, second, from a humiliated post-Vietnam America to the rising subaltern social movements and formerly dominated, non-western civilizations. These were material and organizational events, not merely symbolic ones; they determined control over the 'means of symbolic reproduction', one of the central variables in the performance paradigm that was, by that time, taking shape in my work. In 'Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity' (Alexander, 2003: 85–108), which lays out a more abstract theoretical model for investigating such a process, I insist not only on the centrality of symbolic work, but also on the specificity of the institutional fields of symbolic contention, the asymmetric effects of social stratification, and elite conflict as independent effects. Neither in its more empirical nor in abstract form, by the way, is my trauma theory presented as equivalent to the general project of cultural sociology *tout court*, in the sense that it should, or will, displace other middle-range models of how culture affects, and is affected by, more institutional social forms.

These considerations bring into sharper clarity the question of how, and whether, cultural sociology can bring critical distance. McLennan seems to believe that, if one insists that massive, socially structured feelings 'appear to rule the world', then one cannot, in fact, gain critical 'interpretative distance from them, putting that "obvious" symbolic power into wider socio-historical perspective' (p. 3). Presumably, this inability is the other side of hermeneutical understanding, which depends, methodologically, not on distance and objectification but on experience and the projection of imaginative horizons. It is not the purpose of cultural sociology, however, to traditionalize the relation between subject and object, but to connect hermeneutic understanding to historical perspective and to denaturalize the conventions of the symbolic imagination. Only in this manner can interpretive distance be gained, allowing one to achieve, and not just to assume, a moral-critical stance (Walzer, 1987).

Rational-critical suspicion of cultural analysis has hobbled democratic social science, whether liberal or radical, for generations, and it limits in this case McLennan's understanding of my work. He cites with apparent horror, for example, my assertion (2003: 5) that fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, are so 'densely interwoven' that they can be separated only in a post hoc way. Such phrasing alarms McLennan, suggesting to him the polluting

trope of idealism once again. He cautions that 'complex interweaving is not the same thing as wholesale identity or utter inseparability', and that 'distinctions can legitimately be made, even if judgement comes – necessarily – "post hoc"' (p. 3). Was that not exactly my point?

This apparent misreading is theoretically motivated. One of the deeper disagreements between us has to do with the social status of facts and their relation to rational, scientific knowledge. Who inscribes the distinctions between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, and why? From my perspective, it is social actors who make them, and they do so not because of epistemological clarity, but because of shifting cultural frames. McLennan disagrees. 'Sober gains in knowledge and assessment', he writes, 'reconstruct the relevant "facticity"', so that 'the status of the facts' is not in danger of 'becoming simply an *attribution* of the (altered) apprehending mind-set' ([p. 6] original italics).

McLennan's empirical reservations about my Watergate analysis follow logically from this theoretical brief. It is one of the principal suggestions of my own argument that most of the relevant facts about this crisis were publicly available and widely distributed long before the resoundingly anti-Nixon 1973 Senate hearings. It had been already widely reported, for example, that the 1972 break-in, rather than a third-rate burglary, was part of a broad, White House directed plan to disrupt the national elections. The most significant effect of the Senate hearings, rather than the conveying of more rational knowledge, was their symbolic-performative power to create new forms of cultural identification. Inside this newly woven narrative, previously known 'facts' could then be put into a new light. Yes, they had been 'known' before, but their implications and interrelations, and thus their fundamental factuality, had been contested. They had been claims to reality, but not realistic claims.

McLennan wishes, for his part, to see the 1973 hearings as about facts, as if their primary purpose was to add to the store of knowledge about the originating events. 'Subsequent to the hearings', he thus argues, 'it would have been mistaken, not optional, to convey the initial Watergate "events" in terms of a mere "break-in"' (p. 6). In fact, however, about one quarter of the American population continued to believe either that Watergate had indeed been a mere break-in, or that President Nixon, in directing it, had been sincerely motivated, morally innocent and within his legal rights. Such beliefs were mistaken, but they definitely remained optional, and they were deeply significant sociologically for the future of American political life. It was not the growth of science-like knowledge that changed public understanding of the facts of Watergate. Just so, it was not the growth of factual knowledge that shifted public understanding of the Nazis' mass murder of Jews, which, in the decades before Watergate, had shifted from framing it as a horrific war-related atrocity to conceiving it as a genocidal trauma that had never before been enacted by humankind.

It would be comforting if 'knowing the facts' really could change public perception. If knowing the facts about poverty or exploitation shifted public

perception of who and what are responsible for creating them, then the world certainly would be in a better, much more progressive place. McLennan applauds Fredric Jameson's proclamation that the Left should unite around a demand for global full employment, because 'no realistic vision of contemporary capitalism . . . could accommodate this demand' (p. 13). In cultural-theoretic terms, however, no 'realistic' vision of contemporary capitalism is available. There never has been one before, and there is never one that is likely to be.

Capitalism exists simultaneously in the 'social' and the 'cultural' orders. From the latter perspective, capitalism is a 'signified' that cannot stand alone; it must be attached to a 'signifier', whose meaning is derived from its relation to other signifiers in the socially relevant cultural universe, not from the objective nature of the referent itself. The meaning of capitalism must be constructed in terms of narratives and codes, and in the insistent struggle for moral-cum-political hegemony it becomes a potent metaphor for social evil and good (see Somers and Block, 2005). This is where the cultural sociology of capitalism begins, with the clear understanding that the objective impossibility for capitalism to create global full employment does not make people anti-capitalist.

It is the culturally mediated understanding of impossibilities, and possibilities, not their objective existence, that counts. McLennan criticizes my civil society theory for having 'no equivalent touchstone' (p. 13) to Jameson's full employment demand. But there are no secure touchstones, and social theory must embrace, rather than camouflage, this sometimes disconcerting social fact. In reconstructing the social language of civil utopia and the drama of civil repair, I have reconstructed a relatively restricted set of signifiers and performative practices within which an extraordinarily diverse range of social interests and rights have been seen as compelling touchstones over the last 200 years (Alexander, 2001a, 2001b, 2003: 121–54, 2004a).

My investigations of the entrance of the computer into collective consciousness (Alexander, 2003: 179–92) approach technology in a similar way. Tracing the codes and narratives that gave this mere machine such fantastic meanings, I suggest that it is these social meanings, not the technology's actual computing properties, that explain the computer's most interesting social effects. McLennan is uncomfortable with this analysis, yet, without intending to, it seems that he also goes some way to embracing it. On the one hand, he insists that we must separate the 'rhetoric and reality' of virtual society. Following Woolgar's suggestion that the 'uses and conceptions' of information technology are predominantly local and 'practical', he argues that technological rhetoric is 'hokum' and must be 'thoroughly deflated'. In the course of making these arguments, however, McLennan speaks about 'the new magical world of electronic discourse', the 'new machine spirit', and 'the effervescent mind-space of high-tech passion' (p. 7). He seems, in other words, to acknowledge that such collective culture structures do indeed exist, whether hokum or not. We observe here the

mixing of normative ideals and empirical reduction that often characterizes critical social analysis. It is certainly a valid normative position to argue against the wild claims of technological discourse, and to buttress this argument with empirical evidence whenever possible. This is a strategy that I myself take. It is bad social science, however, to suggest that such wild claims do not exist, that they are somehow not powerful because they are not true. They are real, even if their rootedness in the relatively autonomous structures of the cultural world belies realist claims about the ability to reduce social beliefs to mechanisms.

McLennan makes continual if epigrammatic reference to the anti-interpretivist philosophy of realism throughout his discussion. Even when he declares himself persuaded by some of my analysis, he professes himself perplexed as to 'how to even go about assessing its value'. Characterizing 'suggestive capsules of cultural sociology' as merely 'descriptive-theoretical reconstruction' rather than 'explanatory reasoning', he asserts that they are anti-scientific because they must be either rejected or 'taken on board' and 'found more or less illuminating'. Because cultural sociology 'cannot be turned into propositional statements', he writes, it cannot be 'decisively confirmed or refuted' (all quotes from p. 6). In the face of hermeneutical reconstructions of meaning, symbolic action and social structure, is it really necessary to abandon reasoned critique and rigorous theoretical and empirical standards of evaluation? We would be tying ourselves to a very narrow and limiting model of social science if that were the case.

Structural hermeneutics (Alexander and Smith, 2003) does not produce descriptions, although its claims upon the horizon of affected readers often makes its findings appear that way. What cultural sociology produces, rather, are reconstructions of social meaning. These interpretations, moreover, are guided by strong theoretical claims about the nature and interrelation of symbolic forms, and their relation to social life. Cultural sociology makes claims about social causes, identifies individual and collective actors as agents, and takes into account mediating hierarchies and institutions. Cultural sociology, in other words, is very much an explanation, even if it makes no claim to step outside the hermeneutical circularity of its practitioners' social experience or the meaning structures of its own time.[3]

Has Gregor McLennan defended neo-Marxist and materialist perspectives against the challenge of cultural sociology? While I believe he has not, I am very grateful that he has tried. His lucid and persistent engagement with my work continues to compel me to try to clarify it.

Notes

1. This movement, of course, is hardly defined by my own cultural-sociological program. In the Cambridge Series for Cultural Social Studies, which Steven Seidman and I have edited for more than a decade, the volumes range widely theoretically and empirically, though they generally share a 'strong' rather than 'weak' approach to the impact of symbolic discourses on social life. This series has recently been joined by two others, whose contributors also share a culture-sociological

perspective but differ in significantly about what exactly it entails: Julia Adams and George Steinmetz edit *Politics, History, and Culture* for Duke University Press, and Paul DiMaggio, Michele Lamont, Robert Wuthnow and Viviana Zelizer edit *Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology* for Princeton University Press. In a series I am editing for Norton, *Contemporary Societies*, the authors provide an alternative, more cultural and critical approach to the 'mainstream' topics of American sociology, which once were the exclusive domain of more positivist and materialist approaches. Once again, there is significant variation among these contributors to the Norton project, despite their collaboration in this effort at cultural-sociological revision. In the Yale Series for Cultural Sociology, which is published by Paradigm Press, and which I edit with Ron Eyerman, my colleague at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, the outlines of a more focused and coherent theoretical approach can perhaps be discerned. For recent discussions of my particular cultural-sociological approach, see *Thesis Eleven* 79 (2004), which contains a wide range of critical commentaries and interpretations, some of which support the kinds of reservations that Gregor McLennan expresses here. See also *Culture*, the newsletter of the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association, whose winter 2005 edition (vol. 19[2]) contained commentaries on *Meanings* by Mabel Berezin, Robin Wagner-Pacific, Lyn Spillman and Neil Gross, and my response 'Central Problems in Cultural Sociology: A Reply to My (Friendly) Critics'.

2. A book of essays that theoretically extend and revise this approach, and also empirically elaborate it, is being published by Cambridge University Press in winter 2006. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*, edited by Bernhard Giesen, Jason Mast and myself, is the product of the Yale/Konstanz Seminar on Cultural Sociology, which has alternated between the United States and Germany in recent years.

3. I am indebted to Isaac Reed for the details of this understanding of interpretive explanation and cultural sociology, which he is elaborating in his doctoral dissertation.

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