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# Social Performance

Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics,  
and Ritual

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# Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice: the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action

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The question of theory and practice permeates not only politics but culture, where the analogue for theory is the social-symbolic text, the bundle of everyday codes, narratives, and rhetorical configurings-that are the objects of hermeneutic reconstruction. Emphasizing action over its theory, praxis theorists have blinded themselves to the deeply embedded textuality of every social action (Bourdieu 1984; Swidler 1986; Turner 2002). But a no less distorting myopia has affected the vision from the other side. The pure hermeneut (e.g., Dilthey 1976; Ricoeur 1976) tends to ignore the material problem of instantiating ideals in the real world. The truth, as Marx (1972: 145) wrote in his tenth thesis on Feuerbach, is that, while theory and practice are different, they are always necessarily intertwined.

Theory and practice are interwoven in everyday life, not only in social theory and social science. In the following chapters, we will see that powerful social actors understand the conceptual issues presented in this introduction in an intuitive, ethnographic, and practical way. In the intense and fateful efforts to impeach and to defend President Clinton (Mast, ch. 3), for instance, individuals, organizations, and parties moved "instinctively" to hook their actions into the background culture in a lively and compelling manner, working to create an impression of sincerity and authenticity rather than one of calculation and artificiality, to achieve verisimilitude. Social movements' public demonstrations (Eyerman, ch. 6) display a similar performative logic. Movement organizers, intensely aware of media organizations' control over the means of symbolic distribution, direct their participants to perform in ways that will communicate that they are worthy, committed, and determined to achieve acceptance and inclusion from the larger political community. And during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy (Goodman, ch. 5), perpetrators' confessions and victims' agonistic retellings of disappeared relatives, displacement, and torture

arbitrary, Saussure demonstrated,<sup>2</sup> in that "it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (1985: 38), i.e., the object it is understood to represent. Its meaning is arbitrary in relation to its referent in the real world, but it is also arbitrary in the sense that it is not determined by the intention or will of any individual speaker or listener. Rather, a sign's meaning derives from its relations – metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic – to other signs in a system of sign relations, or language. The relations between signs in a cultural system are fixed by social convention; they are structures that social actors experience as natural, and unreflexively depend on to constitute their daily lives. Consequently, an accounting of felicity's conditions must attend to the cultural structures that render a performative intelligible, meaningful, and capable of being interpreted as felicitous or infelicitous, in addition to the mode and context in which the performative is enacted.

In this respect, Saussure's sometimes errant disciple, Jacques Derrida, has been a faithful son, and it is in Derrida's (1982a [1971]) response to Austin's speech act theory that post-structuralism begins to demonstrate a deep affinity with contemporary cultural pragmatics. Derrida criticized Austin for submerging the contribution of the cultural text to performative outcome. Austin "appears to consider solely the conventionality constituting the *circumstance* of the utterance [*énoncé*], its contextual surroundings," Derrida admonished, "and not a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act [locution] itself, all that might be summarized rapidly under the problematic rubric of 'the arbitrary nature of the sign'" (1988: 15). In this way, Derrida sharply criticized Austin for ignoring the "citational" quality of even the most pragmatic writing and speech; that words used in talk cite the seemingly absent background cultural texts from which they derive their meanings. "Could a performative utterance succeed," Derrida asked, "if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" (1988: 18)

Because there can be no determinate, trans-contextual relation of signifier and referent, difference always involves *différance* (Derrida 1982b). Interpreting symbolic practice – culture in its "presence" – always entails a reference to culture in its "absence," that is, to an implied semiotic text. In other words, to be practical and effective in action – to have a successful performance – actors must be able to make the meanings of culture structures stick. Since meaning is the product of relations between signs in a discursive code or text, a dramaturgy that intends to take meaning seriously must account for the cultural codes and texts that structure the cognitive environments in which speech is given form.

Dramaturgy in the new century emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social action. Cultural pragmatics grows out of this confluence, maintaining that cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, while, at the same time, remaining fundamentally interrelated with it. Cultural action puts texts into practice, but it cannot do so directly, without "passing go." A theory of practice must respect the relative autonomy of structures of meaning. Pragmatics and semantics are analytical, not concrete distinctions.

### The real and the artificial

One of the challenges in theorizing contemporary cultural practice is the manner in which it seems to slide between artifice and authenticity. There is the deep pathos of Princess Diana's death and funeral, mediated, even in a certain sense generated by, highly constructed, commercially targeted televised productions, yet so genuine and compelling that the business of a great national collectivity came almost fully to rest. There are the Pentagon's faked anti-ballistic missile tests and its doctored action photographs of smart missiles during the Iraq war, both of which were taken as genuine in their respective times. There is the continuous and often nauseating flow of the staged-for-camera pseudo-event, which Daniel Boorstin (1962 [1961]) flushed out already in the 1960s. Right along beside them, there is the undeniable moral power generated by the equally "artificial" media event studied by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) – Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem, the Pope's first visit to Poland, and John F. Kennedy's funeral.

Plays, movies, and television shows are staged "as if" they occur in real life, and in real time. To seem as if they are "live," to seem real, they are increasingly shot "on location." National armies intimidate one another by staging war games, completely artificial events whose intention not to produce a "real" effect is announced well before they occur but which often alter real balances of power. Revolutionary guerrilla groups, like the Zapatista rebels from Chiapas, Mexico, represent powerful grassroots movements that aim to displace vast material interests and often have the effect of getting real people killed. Yet the masses in such movements present their collective force via highly staged photo-marches, and their leaders, like subcommander Marcos, enter figuratively into the public sphere, as iconic representations of established cultural forms.

The effort at artificially creating the impression of liveness is not in any sense new. The Impressionist painters wanted to trump the artificiality of the French Academy by moving outside, to be closer to the nature they were representing, to paint *en plein air*. The Lincoln–Douglas debates were highly staged, and their "real influence" would have been extremely narrow were it not for the

hyperbolic expansiveness of the print media (Schudson 1998). The aristocracies and emerging middle classes of the Renaissance, the period marking the very birth of modernity, were highly style-conscious, employing facial makeup and hair shaping on both sides of the gender divide, and engaging, more generally, in strenuous efforts at "self-fashioning" (Greenblatt 1980). It was the greatest writer of the Renaissance, after all, who introduced into Western literature the very notion that "the whole world's a stage, and we merely actors upon it."

Despite a history of reflexive awareness of artificiality and constructedness, such postmodern commentators as Baudrillard (1983) announce, and denounce, the contemporary interplaying of reality with fiction as demarcating a new age, one in which pragmatics has displaced semantics, social referents have disappeared, and only signifiers powered by the interests and powers of the day remain. Such arguments represent a temptation, fueled by a kind of nostalgia, to treat the distinction between the real and artificial in an essentialist way. Cultural pragmatics holds that this vision of simulated hyper-textuality is not true, that the signified, no matter what its position in the manipulated field of cultural production, can never be separated from some set of signifiers (cf. Sherwood 1994).

The relation between authenticity and modes of presentation is, after all, historically and culturally specific.<sup>3</sup> During the Renaissance, for instance, the theatre, traditionally understood to be a house of spectacle, seduction, and idolatry, began to assume degrees of authenticity that had traditionally been reserved for the dramatic text, which was honored for its purity and incorruptibility. The relation between authenticity and the senses shifted during this time as well. With its close association with the aural eroding, authenticity became an attribute of the visual. The visual displaced the aural as the sense most closely associated with apprehending and discerning the authentic, the real, and the true. The aural, on the other hand, was increasingly presumed to "displace 'sense,'" and language to "dissolve into pure sound and leave reason behind" (Peters 2000: 163).

It is difficult to imagine a starker example of authenticity's cultural specificity than Donald Frischmann's (1994) description of the Tzotzil people's reaction to a live theatrical performance staged in their village of San Juan Chamula, in Chiapas, Mexico in 1991. Frischmann describes how, during the reenactment of an occurrence of domestic violence, the audience was taken by "a physical wave of emotion [that] swept through the entire crowd" nearly knocking audience members "down onto the floor." During a scene in which a confession is flogged out of two accused murderers the line separating theatrical production and audience completely disintegrated: "By this point in the play, the stage itself was full of curious and excited onlookers—children and men, surrounding the

actors in an attempt to get a closer look at the stage events, which so curiously resembled episodes of *real* life out in the central plaza" (1994: 223, italics in original).

Cultural pragmatics emphasizes that authenticity is an interpretive category rather than an ontological state. The status of authenticity is arrived at, is contingent, and results from processes of social construction; it is not inseparable from a transcendental, ontological referent. If there is a normative repulsion to the fake or inauthentic, cultural pragmatics asserts that it must be treated in an analytical way, as a structuring code in the symbolic fabric actors depend on to interpret their lived realities.

Yes, we are "condemned" to live out our lives in an age of artifice, a world of mirrored, manipulated, and mediated representation. But the constructed character of symbols does not make them less real. A talented anthropologist and a clinical psychologist recently published a lengthy empirical account (Marvin and Ingle 1999) describing the flag of the United States, the "stars and stripes," as a totem for the American nation, a tribe whose members periodically engage in blood sacrifice so that the totem may continue to thrive. Such a direct equation of contemporary sacrality with pre-literate tribal life has its dangers, as we are about to suggest below, yet there is much in this account that rings powerfully true.

### Nostalgia and counter-nostalgia: sacrality then and now

For those who continue to insist on the centrality of meaning in contemporary societies, and who see these meanings as in some necessary manner refractions of culture structures, the challenge is the same today as it has always been: How to deal with "modernity," an historical designation that now includes postmodernity as well? Why does it remain so difficult to conceptualize the cultural implications of the vast historical difference between earlier times and our own? One reason is that so much of contemporary theorizing about culture has seemed determined to elide it. The power-knowledge fusion that Foucault postulates at the center of the modern episteme is, in fact, much less characteristic of contemporary societies than it was of earlier, more traditional ones, where social structure and culture were relatively fused. The same is true for Bourdieu's habitus, a self that is mere nexus, the emotional residue of group position and social structure that much more clearly reflects the emotional situation of early societies than the autonomizing, reflexive, deeply ambivalent psychological processes of today.

Culture still remains powerful in an a priori manner, even in the most contemporary societies. Powers are still infused with sacralizing discourses, and modern and postmodern actors can strategize only by typifying in terms of

institutionally segmented binary codes. Secularization does not mean the loss of cultural meaning, the emergence of completely free-floating institutions, or the creation of purely self-referential individual actors (cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998). There remains, in Kenneth Thompson's (1990) inimitable phrase, the "dialectic between sacralization and secularization." But action does not relate to culture in an unfolding sort of way. Secularization does mean differentiation rather than fusion, not only between culture, self, and social structure, but within culture itself.

Mannheim (1971 [1927]) pointed out that it has been the unwillingness to accept the implications of such differentiation that has always characterized conservative political theory, which from Burke (1790) to Oakeshott (1981 [1962]) to contemporary communitarians has given short shrift to cultural diversity and individual autonomy. What is perhaps less well understood is that such unwillingness has also undermined the genuine and important insights of interpretively oriented cultural social science.

For our modern predecessors who maintained that, despite modernization: meaning still matters, the tools developed for analyzing meaning in traditional and simple societies seemed often to be enough. For instance, late in his career Durkheim used descriptions of Australian aboriginal clans' ceremonial rites to theorize that rituals and "dramatic performances" embed and reproduce the cultural system in collective and individual actions (1995: 378). The Warramunga's ceremonial rites that honor a common ancestor, Durkheim argued, "serve no purpose other than to make the clan's mythical past present in people's minds" and thus to "revitalize the most essential elements of the collective consciousness" (1995: 379). Similarly, almost a decade after the close of World War Two, Shils and Young (1953) argued that Queen Elizabeth II's coronation signified nothing less than "an act of national communion," and W. Lloyd Warner (1959) argued that Memorial Day represented an annual ritual that reaffirmed collective sentiments and permitted organizations in conflict to "subordinate their ordinary opposition and cooperate in collectively expressing the larger unity of the total community" (279).

These arguments demonstrate a stunning symmetry with Durkheim's descriptions of the ritual process's effects on comparatively simple and homogeneous aboriginal clans. These thinkers jumped, each in his own creative way, directly from the late Durkheim to late modernity without making the necessary conceptual adjustments along the way. The effect was to treat the characteristics that distinguished modern from traditional societies as residual categories. It was in reaction to such insistence on social-cum-cultural integration that conflict theory made claims, long before postmodern constructivism, that public cultural performances were not affective but merely cognitive (Lukes 1975), that they sprang not from cultural texts but from artificial

scripts, that they were less rituals in which audiences voluntarily if vicariously participated than symbolic effects controlled and manipulated by elites (Birnbaum 1955).

The old-fashioned Durkheimians, like political conservatives, were motivated in some part by nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and more cohesive age. Yet their critics have been moved by feelings of a not altogether different kind, by an anti-nostalgia that barely conceals their own deep yearning for the sacred life. In confronting the fragmentations of modern and postmodern life, political radicals have often been motivated by cultural conservatism. From Marx and Weber to the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), from Arendt's (1951) mass society theory to Selznick's (1951, 1952), from Jameson (1991) to Baudrillard, left cultural critics have lodged the nostalgic claim that nothing can ever be the same again, that capitalism or industrial society or mass society or postmodernity has destroyed the possibility for meaning. The result has been that cultural history has been understood allegorically (cf. Clifford 1986, 1988). It is narrated as a process of *disenchantment*, as a fall from Eden, as declension from a once golden age of wholeness and holiness (Sherwood 1994). The assertion is that once representation is encased in some artificial substance, whether it is substantively or only formally rational, it becomes mechanical and unmeaningful.

The classical theoretical statement of this allegory remains Walter Benjamin's (1968 [1936]) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," veneration (!) for which has only grown among postmodern critics of the artificiality of the present age. Benjamin held that the auratic quality of art, the aura that surrounded it and gave it a sacred and holy social status, was inherently diminished by art's reproducibility. Sacred aura is a function of distance. It cannot be maintained once mechanical reproduction allows contact to become intimate, frequent, and, as a result, mundane. Baudrillard's simulacrum marks merely one more installment in the theoretical allegory of disenchantment. A more recent postmodern theorist, Peggy Phelan (1993: 146), has applied this allegory in suggesting that, because the "only life" of performance is "in the present," it "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations." Once performance is mechanically mediated, its meaningfulness is depleted. The argument here is pessimistic and Heideggerian. If ontology is defined in terms of *Dasein*, as "being there," then any artificial mediation will wipe it away. "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction," Phelan predictably writes, "it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology."

We can escape from such Heideggerianism only by developing a more complex sociological theory of performance. It was Burke (1957, 1965) who first proposed to transform the straightforward action theory of Weber and Parsons,

the schema of means-ends-norms-conditions, which simultaneously mimicked and critiqued economic man. This meant taking "act" in a theatrical rather than a nominalist and mundane manner. It meant transforming "conditions" into the notion of a "scene" upon which an act could be displayed. With analytical transformations such as these, cultural traditions could be viewed not merely as regulating actions but as informing dramas, the performance of which could display exemplary motives, inspire catharsis, and allow working through (Burke 1959).

The implications of this extraordinary innovation were limited by Burke's purely literary ambitions and by the fact that he, too, betrayed nostalgia for a simpler society. Burke suggested (1965: 449, italics added), on the one hand, that "a drama is a mode of symbolic action so designed that an audience might be induced to 'act symbolically' in sympathy with it." On the other hand, he insisted that, "insofar as the drama *serves* this function it may be studied as a 'perfect mechanism' composed of parts moving in mutual adjustment to one another like clockwork." The idea is that, if audience sympathy is gained, then society really has functioned as a dramatic text, with true synchrony among its various parts. In other words, this theory of dramaturgy functions, not only as an analytical device, but also as an allegory for re-enchantment. The implication is that, if the theory is properly deployed, it will demonstrate for contemporaries how sacrality can be recaptured, that perhaps it has never disappeared, that the center will hold.

Such nostalgia for re-enchantment affected the most significant line of dramaturgical thinking to follow out from Burke. More than any other thinker, it was Victor Turner who demonstrated the most profound interest in modernizing ritual theory, with notions of ritual process, social dramas, liminality, and *communitas*, being the most famous results (Turner 1969; cf. Edles 1998). When he turned to dramaturgy, Turner (1974a, 1982) was able to carry this interest forward in a profoundly innovative manner, creating a theory of social dramas that deeply marked the social science of his day (Abrahams 1995; Wagner-Pacifici 1986). At the same time, however, Turner's intellectual evolution revealed a deep personal yearning for the more sacred life, which was demonstrated most forcefully in his descriptions of how ritual participants experience liminal moments and *communitas* (1969).

Turner used these terms to describe social relations and forms of symbolic action that are unique to the ritual process. Derived from the term *limen*, which is Latin for "threshold," Turner defines liminality as representing "the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions" (1974a: 237). All rituals include liminal phases, Turner argued, in which traditional status distinctions dissolve, normative social constraints abate, and a unique form of solidarity, or *communitas*, takes hold:

*Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure . . . and from beneath structure . . . It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. (1969: 128)

During liminal moments, Turner maintained, social distinctions are leveled and an egalitarian order, or "open society" (1974a: 112), is momentarily created amongst ritual participants. Liminal social conditions foster an atmosphere of *communitas*, in which ritual participants are brought closer to the existential and primordial, and distanced from dependence on the cognitive, which Turner associated with the structured, normative social order. In such moments, the "unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure" is released, and ritual participants are free to "enter into vital relations with other men" (1974a: 127–8). Turner's re-enchantment imagery is unmistakable. It combines Marxist, utopian formulations of post-revolutionary, radical equality on the one hand, with Nietzschean (2000 [1927]) formulations of Dionysian social action on the other. Through liminality we may return to an idealized state of simple humanity, a community of equals; the dissolution of structure will initiate the erosion of our socially constructed selves, thus allowing us to explore the potency of our "unused evolutionary potential."

When Turner turned explicitly to theorizing about highly differentiated societies, he moved from an analytical model based on ritual to one based on performance. The concept of liminality weathered this transition. Turner modified it, though, because he recognized that relationships between ritual producers and audiences in post-industrial contexts are more complicated and contingent than those he witnessed in tribal settings. Post-industrial actors demonstrate greater degrees of interpretive autonomy and more control over their solidary affiliations than the tribal members he had lived amongst. Thus, Turner introduced the concept "liminoid" to represent liminal-like moments and *communitas*-like sentiments that post-industrial actors experience in (ritual-like) social dramas in more individualized ways, and enter into more freely, as "more a matter of choice, not obligation" (1982: 55). Despite these insightful modifications, the spirit of liminality, and the nostalgic sentiments that shaped it, continued to permeate Turner's work. Indeed, both continue to exert a powerful sway in contemporary performance studies, as will be shown below.

If Turner moved from ritual to theatre, his colleague, drama theorist and avant-garde theatre producer Richard Schechner (1977, 1985, 1988), moved from theatre to ritual and back again. Turner's theoretical co-founder of contemporary performance studies, Schechner provided the first systematic insight

into the "mutual positive feedback relationship of social dramas and aesthetic performances" (2002: 68). His theorizing also provided a path for understanding failed cultural productions. Yet what he himself hankered after was a way to recreate the wholeness of what Peter Brook (1969) called "Holy Theatre." Schechner, even more than Tumer, was animated as much by existential as analytical ambition, and his vision of performance studies was deeply shaped by the nostalgia for re-enchantment embedded in Turner's theorizing. Liminality, in Turner's theorizing, represented the pathway to re-enchantment. Liminality, for Schechner, is the cornerstone of performance studies:

Performance Studies is "inter" – in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, PS [sic] cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries, it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently "in between" and therefore cannot be pinned down or located exactly. (Schechner 1998: 360)

For Schechner, performance studies is a set of performative acts that, if properly deployed, will catalyze liminality in the broader social arena, destabilize the normative structure, inspire criticism, and reacquaint mundane social actors with the primordial, vital, and existential dimensions of life. Put another way, for Schechner, performance studies is a vehicle for re-enchantment.

Clifford Geertz made a similar move from anthropology to theatricality, employing notions of staging and looking at symbolic action as dramatic representation. Yet it is striking how Geertz confined himself to studying performances inside firmly established and articulated ritual containers, from the Balinese cockfight (1973b), where "nothing happened" but an aesthetic affirmation of status structures, to the "theatre state" of nineteenth-century Bali (1980), where highly rigid authority structures were continuously reaffirmed in a priori, choreographed ways. In Geertz's dramaturgy, background collective representations and myths steal each scene. In the Balinese case, cultural scripts of masculinity, bloodlust, and status distinctions seem to literally exercise themselves through the social actions that constitute the cockfight event, leaving precious little room for the contingencies that accompany social actors' varying degrees of competency and complicity. The structural rigidity in Geertz's dramaturgy is doubly striking when juxtaposed to Turner's and Schechner's emphasis on liminality and the social and cultural dynamism that liminal social actors may initiate.

What characterizes this entire line of thinking, which has been so central to the development of contemporary cultural-sociological thought, is the failure to take advantage of the theoretical possibilities of understanding symbolic action as performance. Fully intertwining semantics and pragmatics can allow for the

openness and contingency that is blocked by theoretical nostalgia for simpler and more coherent societies.

In an influential volume that capped the "Tumer era," and segued to performance theory, John MacAloon (1984: 1) offered a description of cultural performance that exemplified both the achievements and the limitations to which we are pointing here. Turner's and Geertz's influence cannot be missed: MacAloon defined performance as an "occasion in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others." Through social performances we tell a story about ourselves to ourselves (Geertz 1973b), and, because performances precipitate degrees of liminality, they are capable of transforming social relations. The communitarian emphasis on holism, on cultural, social, and psychological integration, is palpable.

Taking off from Burke in a different direction, Goffman initiated a second, decidedly less nostalgic line of dramaturgical theory. Half persuaded by game theory and rational choice, Goffman adopted a more detached, purely analytical approach to the actor's theatrical preoccupations. He insisted on complete separation of cultural performance from cultural text, of actor from script. Rejecting out of hand the possibility that any genuine sympathy was on offer, either from actor or from audience, Goffman described performance as a "front" behind which actors gathered their egotistical resources and upon which they displayed the "standardized expressive equipment" necessary to gain results. Idealization was a performative, but not a motivational fact. In modern societies, according to Goffman, the aim was to convincingly portray one's own ideal values as isomorphic with those of another, despite the fact that such complementarity was rarely, if ever, the case.

This cool conceptual creativity contributed signally to understanding social performance, but the instrumental tone of Goffman's thinking severed, not only analytically but in principle, that is ontologically, the possibility of strong ties between psychological motivation, social performance, and cultural text. This opening towards a pure pragmatics of performance was taken up by Dell Hymes in linguistics, and by Richard Bauman in folklore and anthropology. Following also in Austin's emphasis on the performative, Bauman (1986) stressed the need for "highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content."

Earlier in anthropology, this line was elaborated in Milton Singer's (1959) explorations of the "cultural performances" in South Asian societies, which he described as the "most concrete observable units of the cultural structure," and which he broke down into such standard features as performers, audience,

time span, beginnings, endings, place, and occasion. This form of Goffmanian, analytical deconstruction has combined with nostalgic theories of liminality to feed forcefully into one of the two broad trends in contemporary performance studies. Explicitly praxis-oriented, this strain of performance theory emphasizes exclusively the pragmatic dimensions of resistance and subversion, while focusing in an exaggerated manner on questions of commodification, power, and the politics of representation (MacKenzie 2001; Conquergood 2002; Diamond 1996; Auslander 1997, 1999). Raising the ghost of Marx's Thesis XI and giving it a Foucauldian twist, this strand argues that an epistemology centered on thickly describing the world represents ethnocentric, "epistemic violence" (Conquergood 2002: 146; cf. Ricoeur 1971; Geertz 1973a). The point of practicing performance studies, they argue, is to *change* the world. Liminality, which represents ideal sites for contestation, and pragmatism, which romanticizes actor autonomy and individual self-determination, are its natural theoretical bedfellows.

This praxis approach is attracted to sites of contestation where performances of resistance and subversion are understood to flourish in the ceremonial and interactional practices of the marginalized, the enslaved, and the subaltern (Conquergood 1995, 2002). Rejecting the "culture as text" model, this approach argues that subaltern groups "create a culture of resistance," a "subjugated knowledge" that must be conceptualized not as a discourse but as "a repertoire of performance practices" (Conquergood 2002: 150). As a repertoire of practices, culture is theorized as embodied and experiential, and thus wholly unrecognizable to members of the dominant culture.<sup>4</sup> Citationality in these works is limited to representing strategies that "reclaim, short-circuit, and resignify" the hegemonic code's "signed imperatives" (151). While members of the dominant culture are incapable of recognizing subaltern cultures, savvy agents of resistance are described as capable of creatively citing hegemonic codes in order to play upon and subvert them.

This theoretical constraining of citationality to intra-group representational processes has the effect of attributing to subaltern groups radical cultural autonomy. This would seem to lead ineluctably to the conclusion that such groups' identities are constituted wholly from within, and share no symbolic codes with the dominant culture. Yet for subaltern performances of resistance to occur, in which the dominant culture is creatively played upon and subverted, subversive performers must to some degree have internalized the hegemonic code. And to play upon it creatively and felicitously they must be able to *cite* the code in a deeply intuitive, understanding way. One must be able to communicate through the code as much as merely with or against it. Homi Bhabha expressed this succinctly, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (1994: 86). This approach interprets Foucault as a theorist of subjugated knowledges, Turner as

a theorist of subversion,<sup>5</sup> and Butler as a philosopher of a Goffmanian world. It generalizes from empirical examples of resistance to a full-blown pragmatic and cognitivist view of the world.

Whether it is Marxist or Heideggerian, conservative or postmodern, Turnerian or Goffmanian, the blinders of these lines of dramaturgical thinking, while enormously instructive, have also had the effect of leading dramaturgical theory and cultural sociology astray. We will be able to develop a satisfying theory of cultural practice *only* if we can separate ourselves from both nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. Not only disenchantment but re-enchantment characterizes post-traditional societies (Sherwood 1994; Bauman 1993). If social action can continue to be understood by social actors and social interpreters as a meaningful text – and empirical evidence suggests overwhelmingly that this continues to be the case – then cultural practice must continue to be capable of capturing sacrality and of displaying it in successful symbolic performance. Disenchantment must be understood, in other words, not as the denial of some romanticized ontology, much less as proof that, in the post-metaphysical world of modernity, social actors live only in a deontological way (Habermas 1993). What disenchantment indicates, rather, is unconvincing cultural practice, failed symbolic performance.

An alternative form of dramaturgical theorizing is, however, also beginning to emerge. In contrast to the anti-nostalgic, praxis-oriented strand, a second line of inquiry in performance studies has resisted the allure of pragmatic promises of uber-agency while retaining an interest in liminality and the politics of identity. Aligned with Geertzian dramaturgy and Derridean citationality, this approach emphasizes the culturally structured scripts that social actors orient towards, and that they must act through, if only to subvert the script's normative power (Roach 1996; Taylor 1995). Such arguments show that even performances of resistance depend on and redeploy dominant, hegemonic codes.

Citationality is foregrounded when these empirical investigations hermeneutically reconstruct how past performances, performers, and imagined cultural identities manifest themselves in, or "ghost," performances in the present (Taylor 1995; Roach 1996, 2000; Carlson 2001). Alterity takes place within, not simply against, historically produced cultural contexts (Taylor 1995; Roach 1996). Performers in the present innovate, create, and struggle for social change through small but significant revisions of familiar scripts which are themselves carved from deeply rooted cultural texts – as actors in a production of *Macbeth* (Carlson 2001: 9), mourning musicians and pallbearers in a New Orleans jazz funeral (Roach 2000), or protesting mothers of Argentina's "disappeared" children (Taylor 1995). In these studies, the imagined past weighs heavily on the present, but actors are shown to be capable of lacing the coded past with significant, at times profoundly dramatic revisions.<sup>6</sup>



In a persuasive analysis of Argentina's "Dirty War," for instance, Diane Taylor concludes that rather than simply a repertoire of practices, culture must be understood as a relatively autonomous system of "*pretexts*" (1995: 300, original italics) from which scripts for practice emerge. Once embodied in actors, she argues, scripts become objects of cognition that are open to circumscribed, coded revisions. To protest the military junta's "disappearing" of the nation's young men, and the sexual violence it visited upon women, Argentine "mothers of the disappeared" – "Los Madres" – staged dramatic performances of resistance in the Plaza de Mayo, the political, financial, and symbolic center of Buenos Aires (Taylor 1995: 286). In their performances, the women of Los Madres enacted a script of Motherhood. Taylor views such self-casting as "highly problematic," suggesting it obscured differences among women and "limited the [Resistance's] arena of confrontation" (1995: 300). Why did the Madres make the "conscious political choice" to assume the Motherhood role, she asks? Why did they perform according to a script that relegated them to "the subordinate position of mediators between fathers and sons," when they could have "performed as women, wives, sisters, or human rights activists"? Her answer rejects the epistemology of pragmatic choice, liminality as existential freedom, and cognitive performativity:

I have to conclude that the military and the Madres reenacted a collective fantasy [in which their] positions were, in a sense, already there as pretext or script. Their participation in the national tragedy depended little on their individual position as subjects. On the contrary: their very subjectivity was a product of their position in the drama. (Taylor 1995: 301, original italics)

#### The performative turn in sociology today

Since the late 1980s, the "strong program in cultural sociology" (Alexander 1996; Alexander and Smith 1993, 1998; Edles 1998; Jacobs 1996, 2000; Kane 1991, 1997; Magnuson 1997; Rambo and Chan 1990; Sherwood 1994; Smith 1991, 1996, 1998) has been demonstrating culture's determinative power and its relative autonomy from the social structure. These studies have corrected tendencies to treat culture as epiphenomenal or as a "tool kit" metaphor (Swidler 1986), as materialist and pragmatic writings suggest. At the turn of the century, cultural sociology takes a performative turn. Born of colloquia at the University of Konstanz in 2002/4, and at Yale University in 2003, the theory of cultural pragmatics (Alexander, ch. 1) interweaves meaning and action in a non-reductive way, allowing for culture structures while recognizing that it is only through the actions of concrete social actors that meaning's influence is realized. The essays comprising this volume represent the efforts of cultural sociologists to further develop cultural pragmatics by examining the theatrical

dimensions of social life. They examine the instantiation of culture, even while they resist subsuming meaning to practical pragmatics, on the one hand, or to interactional context, on the other.

In the first chapter, Alexander describes the historical and theoretical shifts that have precipitated the move to performance. The challenges facing turn-of-the-century social order, Alexander argues, stem from the problems of defusion and re-fusion. Ritual has performed the work of solidifying collective identity and embedding the cultural system in individual actions. As social forms of organization have grown more complex and cultural systems more differentiated, however, interaction- and collective-rituals have grown more contingent. The range of potential understandings that govern how social actors relate to ritual processes has dramatically expanded. Ritual producers and leaders no longer are, in a totalizing and ontological sense, the unproblematic, authoritative disseminators of meaning and order that they were in the past. The social actors who play ritual leaders have become defused from their roles, and audiences have become defused from ritual productions. Participation in, and acceptance of, ritual messages are more a matter of choice than obligation. The process by which culture gets embedded in action, in fact, more closely resembles the dynamics of theatrical production, criticism, and appreciation than it resembles old fashioned rituals. After establishing the rationale for this epistemological turn, Alexander outlines a theory of cultural pragmatics, and analyzes how the elements in his conceptual model – collective representations, actors, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, power, and audiences – interact to perform contemporary social realities.

The chapters that follow converse with this historical, theoretical, and conceptual formulation, and each raises and addresses questions of performativity in postmodern social life in a different way. The essay that concludes this volume, Bernhard Giesen's "Performing the sacred: A Durkheimian perspective on the performative turn in the social sciences," provides a major theoretical statement to be placed alongside Alexander's. We have placed these theoretical treatments at the beginning and end of the book in order not to obscure their subtle differences, and to allow their consequential nuances to drift to the fore. Functioning as theoretical bookends to this move to performance, Alexander's formulation of, and theoretical response to, the "problem of fusion" opens the volume, and Giesen's identification of the modes through which the sacred is performed in postmodern life closes it. The chapters between these bookends draw variously from both. We are confident that the conceptual affinities between them, and their differences: will be apparent in subtle ways.

Alexander's and Giesen's theories share fundamental presuppositions: meaning is central to social life; meaning systems demonstrate relative autonomy from the more material social realm; the mechanism that most powerfully

structures meaning is the binary opposition that distinguishes the sacred from the profane. Yet Alexander and Giesen approach the performativity of order from different directions. Starting from the "problem of fusion," Alexander brings the sacred's constructedness to the fore, and his theory of cultural pragmatics encourages us to investigate how the sacred gets contested and reconstituted through symbolically combative, social dramatic processes (see Alexander, ch. 2, this volume). Giesen accepts that social conditions have become defused: he emphasizes, however, that, despite the sacred's arbitrary nature in theory, it continues to exist in some particular form in each socio-historical moment, articulated via a particular set of values. We know this, Giesen argues, because we *feel the sacred* when we come into contact with it. Giesen offers an index of the modes that cultural performances take in contemporary social life, and provides a phenomenology of how the sacred is experienced in each.

The chapters between these bookends demonstrate, extend, and even contest elements of Alexander's and Giesen's theories. In his essay, "From the depths of despair: performance, counterperformance, and 'September 11,'" Alexander demonstrates how the cultural pragmatic model allows new insight into the socio-historical dynamics that have given rise to contemporary manifestations of the centuries-long conflict pitting the "Arab-Islamic world" against the "West." Understanding terrorism requires that we contextualize its gruesomely violent means and narrow, tactical instrumentality within the cultural frameworks that make such actions seem sensible, even holy, to its practitioners, on the one hand, and alien and barbaric to its victims, on the other. Doing so enables us to examine terrorist acts as meaning-laden symbolic performances enacted with particular goals and audiences in mind. The interpretations of such performances remain contingent and subject to "misreading," despite their directors' efforts, the tightness of scripts, and the quality of execution. The idea that even the most serious-minded action can create an unintended counterperformance highlights this interpretive contingency and its immensely realistic consequences.

In "The cultural pragmatics of event-ness: the Clinton / Lewinsky affair," Jason Mast shows how the cultural pragmatic framework helps explain how a beleaguered American president, adrift in waves of scandal, garnered historically enviable job approval ratings and widespread popular support, even while being investigated by the Office of Independent Council and impeached by the House of Representatives. President Clinton's impeachment in December 1998, Mast explains, was the melodramatic conclusion to a lengthy, emotionally charged, yet highly contingent social dramatic struggle. Clinton's first six years of tenure had been marked by a series of quasi-scandalous yet minor political occurrences that failed to rise to the level of crisis or generalization (Alexander 2003b [1988]). Mast shows how popular culture structures shaped and infused

the strategies through which motivated parties dramatized these occurrences into "Monicagate," a political event writ large.

In his chapter, "Social dramas, shipwrecks, and cockfights: conflict and complicity in social performance," Isaac Reed argues that three classic anthropological works, which have been read as paradigmatic statements delimiting how culture should be analytically situated vis-à-vis action, can more fruitfully be read, in light of the cultural pragmatic turn, as representing ideal types of social performance. Reed offers a detailed rereading of Turner's (1974b) social drama of Thomas Becket, Sahlins's Captain Cook shipwreck (1981), and Geertz's (1973b) Balinese cockfight essays. He then shows how, in each of these events, the cultural pragmatic elements that Alexander identifies (ch. 1) interacted in context-specific ways, structuring the principals' dramatic strategies and the kinds of social action audiences were expecting to witness. Reed explains how each particular constellation of cultural pragmatic elements established conflict or complicity, thus demonstrating how the cultural pragmatic approach enlarges our ability to theorize the many ways culture-infuses social action and society.

We have framed cultural pragmatics as representing, in part, a theoretical response to the challenges that cultural and social differentiation pose to ritual theory. Tanya Goodman's chapter, "Performing a 'new' nation: the role of the TRC in South Africa," shows that emotionally charged, broadly inclusive rituals remain potent forms of social performance even at the turn of the twenty-first century. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was created by South Africa's embattled political parties, it was charged with producing two seemingly contradictory performatives. It needed to symbolically produce a deep chasm that could separate the nation's racist past from an idealized democratic future. Yet the TRC also needed to unify, or bridge, the deeply divided social relations institutionalized under Apartheid. Goodman examines the dramaturgy that allowed the TRC to accomplish both tasks – the way it cast each hearing's performance, selected staging and props, and oriented to multiple audiences and their potential reactions. The TRC's felicitous use of dramatic elements, Goodman argues, transformed what could have been highly contentious, if not openly violent, proceedings into substantively charged, cathartic rituals of reconciliation, which unfolded against the background of the universalist principles that had been embedded in the Commission's founding legislation.

In his chapter, "Performing opposition or, how social movements move," Ron Eyerman shows how performance theory and cultural pragmatics illuminate a series of issues that contemporary social movements literature overlooks, such as how and what social movements actually *represent*. The lens of performance, Eyerman argues, brings into focus the challenges social movements face in coupling their strategic goals with compelling expressive means. It also provides analytical tools for examining the interplay between movements' general

ethics and their specific choreographic practices. Striking a felicitous symmetry between goals, practices: and broad dramatic themes, Eyerman concludes, can move people emotionally, cognitively, morally, and physically; it can facilitate cathexis between movement participants and their causes, and stir empathy and identification in movement audiences.

In "Politics as theatre: an alternative view of the rationalities of power," David Apter sets out to answer two questions: how does the theatricality of politics shape consciousness, and how do politically dramatized meanings shape interpretive action? Apter's answers to these questions place him firmly in the theoretical terrain that Alexander and Giesen travel in their contributions to this volume. Apter's theory, however, represents a more explicitly critical approach to dissecting political theatricality; it is a dramaturgy of suspicion designed to reveal the dramatic techniques employed by those who would take, keep, and exercise power. Apter identifies the dramatic strategies that political "actor-agents" use to integrate and unify individuals into coherent audiences, and the devices they employ to magnify audience loyalties by simultaneously constructing outsiders as morally undeserving of inclusion. Actor-agents contrive heroic pasts, articulate glorious futures, and manipulate genres of intrigue to clarify, concentrate, and intensify public opinion. Apter's argument is bolstered by rich illustrations drawn from fieldwork conducted at different global sites, and from his deep familiarity with literary, theatrical, and political theory.

Valentin Rauer's essay, "Symbols in action: Willy Brandt's kneefall at the Warsaw Memorial," is the clearest representation of how Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics and Giesen's theory of performing the sacred can inform and enhance one another. In the winter of 1970, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt triggered a decisive shift in German collective identity by falling to his knees before Poland's Warsaw Memorial, a dramatic gesture witnessed by European political leaders and international journalists. Drawing on Giesen's work, Rauer explains how Brandt, embedded in a particularly sacred time and space, actually performed and momentarily embodied the sacred in this single epiphanic gesture. Alexander's complex model of cultural pragmatics, Rauer goes on to show, helps us understand how this single gesture could lead to profound symbolic shifts in German understandings of the nation's past, present, and future.

Contemporary explorations into the theatrical dimensions of social life typically reference Austin's (1975 [1962]) critique of modern language philosophy and Goffman's (1956) drama-based conceptual architecture. In "The promise of performance and the problem of order," by contrast, Kay Junge returns to Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, and Spencer. Junge queries their work from the perspective of performativity, how they were sensitive to the fragility of social order, the ambiguity of actors' promises, and the tensions between the social

interests of groups and their moral identities. In the latter part of his essay, Junge offers a radically different understanding of contract theory. He shows how Hobbes turned to the theatre for metaphors to explain how humanity has escaped chaos and managed to keep the state of nature at bay. Whereas Eyerman (ch. 6, this volume) explores the aesthetics of opposition and dissension! Junge shows that order and consent are matters of performativity as well. Junge concludes by arguing that retooling the contractarian tradition with a cultural pragmatic sensibility can lead to fresh understandings of how political authority is gained and legitimated.

In "Performance art," Giesen systematically reconstructs our understanding of this new artistic fashion. He constructs subgenres of performance art, identifying their productive strategies and representation elements, and comparing these dimensions to earlier movements in art history. According to Giesen, contemporary performance art can be conceived as an intentionally orchestrated, aesthetically stylized action that resists classification, crosses or blurs traditional boundaries, destroys conventions, and exists only momentarily before vanishing. Quintessentially postmodern, performance art is in part about aesthetic alienation. It aims to estrange and subvert the structures of meaning that bind a community and constitute its identity. In the process, however, performance art renders deeply felt cultural orientations visible and hints at their theoretical arbitrariness, thus suggesting that things could be otherwise. Through his analysis, Giesen identifies an aesthetic movement whose tentative and elusive identity is rooted in its practitioners' very rejection of the strategies of identification and classification. In a dialectic of identification and transcendence, performance artists compel the aesthetic sphere (and the political and moral) if not forward, then at least into ceaseless motion. By continually shifting their means of artistic production, and the boundaries between art, artist, and audiences, performance artists alter both the art world's and their audiences' orientations to deeply held meaning structures. By continually reflecting on, and creatively conversing with, the art world's grand narratives, the actions of Performance artists parallel, in an expressive medium, the move that the contributors to this volume are making in the intellectual medium. Our message is that traditional, organic understandings of social performances, whether rituals or strategies, must give way to a denaturalized, analytically differentiated, and much more self-conscious understanding that allows us to see every dimension of performance as a possibly independent part.

Cultural pragmatics is a social scientific response to the conditions of a post-metaphysical world, in which institutional and cultural differentiation makes successful symbolic performance difficult to achieve. To develop a theory of cultural practice, we must take these historical limitations seriously. The chapters

that follow acknowledge that cultural life has radically shifted, both internally and in its relation to action and social structure. They also demonstrate that, despite these changes, culture can still be powerfully meaningful; it can possess and display coherence, and it can exert immense social effect. To understand how culture can be meaningful, but may not be, we must accept history but reject radical historicism. Life is different but not completely so. Rather than sweeping allegorical theory, we need allegorical deconstruction and analytic precision. We need to break the "whole" of symbolic action down into its component parts. Once we do so, we will see that cultural performance covers the same ground that it always has, but in a radically different way.

### Notes

1. See, for instance, Sewell's (1992) theory of structure and agency. We do not in any way disagree with the metatheoretical formulation that text, situation, and agency all play a role in shaping social life. We believe, however, that arguments about this interplay must be much more specific and nuanced, and show how these elements actually interact. We also suggest that the generality of Sewell's formulation disguises the tension between the different formulations of structure and agency he brings together. Any framework that "combines" Giddens with Bourdieu, and the two with Sahlins and Geertz, without providing a new model, has great difficulties. Emirbayer's (1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998) metatheoretical discussions are more coherent, and much more closely approximate the direction we take cultural pragmatics here; but Emirbayer performs a much more thoroughgoing critique of culturalism than he does of pragmatics. His failure to develop such a correspondingly forceful criticism of pragmatism – from the perspective of culture structure and citational meaning-making – makes his model vulnerable to the reinsertion of the structure–agency dualism.
2. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* is a reconstruction of lectures he delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. First published in book form in 1913, the lectures appeared in an English translation in 1959.
3. The attribution of inauthenticity to a performance in public discourse often demonstrates a particular logic: that which is accused of being inauthentic and fake is represented as either threatening a just social order, on the one hand, or as (seductively) trapping people in an unjust one, on the other.
4. "Textocentric" academics (Conquergood 2002: 151), who practice a Geertzian approach to studying social life, are included in the group of ignorant members of the dominant culture.
5. "[Judith] Butler turns to Turner – *with a twist* . . . [She] twists Turner's theory of ritual into a theory of normative performance," McKenzie criticizes (in Phelan 1993: 222–3).
6. Where in her earlier and most influential contributions to performance theory. Judith Butler (1990) presented resistance to gender stereotyping in an exaggeratedly agent-centered manner. She has tried to escape from such an exclusively agent-centered understanding of "resistance" in her later essays (e.g. Butler 1993), emphasizing the kind of citational qualities of performance we are pointing to here.

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## Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy

Jeffrey C. Alexander

From its very beginnings, the social study of culture has been polarized between structuralist theories that treat meaning as a text and investigate the patterning that provides relative autonomy and **pragmatist** theories that treat meaning as emerging from the contingencies of individual and collective action – so-called practices – and that analyze cultural patterns as reflections of power and material interest. In this chapter, I present a theory of cultural pragmatics that transcends this division, bringing meaning structures, contingency, power, and materiality together in a new way. My argument is that the materiality of practices should be replaced by the more multidimensional concept of performances. Drawing on the new field of performance studies, cultural pragmatics demonstrates how social performances, whether individual or collective, can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones. After defining the elements of social performance, I suggest that these elements have become "de-fused" as societies have become more complex. Performances are successful only insofar as they can "re-fuse" these increasingly disentangled elements. In a fused performance, audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective *mise-en-scène*. Performances fail when this relinking process is incomplete: the elements of performance remain apart, and social action seems inauthentic and artificial, failing to persuade. Re-fusion, by contrast, allows actors to communicate the meanings of their actions successfully and thus to pursue their interests effectively.

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect. Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other,