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The Meaningful Construction of Inequality and the Struggles Against It: A 'Strong Program' Approach to How Social Boundaries Change

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to issues of equality and redistribution, sociologists are particularly prone to think in anti-cultural terms. External, objective, and material forces are conceived as determining unequal distributions without reference to the wills of actors – via hegemony, domination, subordination. But if inequality is imposed by material and coercive force, then it can be remedied only by accumulating power and counter-force, and by exercising them in an instrumental and potentially coercive way. What is missing from this account is meaning, the recognition of its relative autonomy. The imposition of inequality, and struggles over justice, inclusion, and distribution, are mediated by cultural structures. Inequalities are nested inside the discourse of civil society, and so are demands for equality. Vis-à-vis the binary codes of civil society, protest movements pollute hegemonic forces and purify subordinate groups in its name.

KEY WORDS

civil society / culture / cultural sociology / inequalities / strong program / symbolic boundaries

Introduction

Sociologists typically speak about inclusion and justice as matters of equality and redistribution.[1] In *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer (1984) develops a powerful normative criticism of this approach in its philosophical form. He accuses it of considering only *abstract* equality and of thinking about justice materialistically. Justice is much more, he argues, than recalibrating the

distribution of quantifiable commodities. What is central to justice is meaning. It is impossible to calibrate appropriate distributions abstractly. Valuation is cultural. People have different ideas about how to distribute love, beauty, money, power, and access to the good life.

There is a deep parallel between Walzer's normative arguments and the 'strong program' in cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003). Weak programs conceptualize meaning as a dependent variable, responding to the objective nature of 'real' causes, to social structural forces of a material type. This sociology *of* culture approach makes the interpretive reconstruction of meaning marginal to sociology. *Cultural* sociology, by contrast, gives to meaning reconstruction central pride of place. Culture has relative autonomy from the social structural forces that surround it. Via structural hermeneutics we can reconstruct the meanings that are central to social life (Alexander and Smith, 2003; Reed and Alexander, 2006). Only after such reconstruction can we analyze the relationship between 'culture structures' and social power in its more political and economic forms.

Reductionism and Verticality

There is, in fact, a long-standing, taken-for-granted culture structure that informs the emphasis on abstract equality. In philosophical terms, we might call this the language of Thrasymachus and Machiavelli. Thrasymachus is the cynic whom Plato made the foil for Socrates in *The Republic*. Machiavelli is, of course, the first modern political thinker who articulated mendacious strategies for his Prince. In the sociological tradition, the heirs of Thrasymachus and Machiavelli are Marx, Weber (in his political and organizational writings), and Michels.

According to this conceptual language, social action is assumed to be instrumental and social order external and objective. Whether this is in spite or because of the theorist's personal commitment to moral justice and social ideals is an interesting question that will not be pursued here. We are concerned rather with theoretical logic (Alexander, 1982–83) and with how this logic can be understood also as a culture structure. When the tradition of Thrasymachus asks why there is inequality, the answer focuses on external, objective, and material forces. These forces are said to have determined unequal distribution without reference to the wills of actors. Unequal distributions are created by independent forces – of hegemony, domination, subordination. If inequality is created in this manner, it can be fought only by accumulating massive external, instrumental, and material power in turn.

This philosophical and sociological language is not historically specific, but it assumes different specific forms and nuances at different times, and it is called by different names. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, it went by the particular name of Marxism and the more general idea of 'Conflict Theory.' In the last two decades, these earlier versions of the abstracted power tradition have been displaced by Foucauldian and Bourdieuian versions. This has occurred not only

because of the fate of state socialism but also because of the cultural turn. There is, as a result, a more complex sense of what is at stake in the different fields of domination and subjugation than in that earlier time: not just power but knowledge, not just money but distinction, gender, sex, and race.

Yet, while it has been 2500 years since Plato conceived Thrasymachus, almost 500 years since Machiavelli advised the Prince, and a good generation since Marxism and Conflict Theory ruled the day, these new and improved models of domination and hegemony do not break free from the reductionism of its fundamental presuppositions. Rather, they amplify it, and reinforce its corollary about justice. If inequality is imposed by material and coercive force alone, it can only be remedied by accumulating power and counter-force, and by exercising it in an instrumental and potentially coercive way. If this seems rather Leninist, it is not an accident. In normative terms, the tradition of Thrasymachus, and all its subsequent heirs, is potentially anti-democratic. Our concern here, however, is theoretical in the empirical sense.

What is missing from this long-standing tradition is meaning, the recognition of its relative autonomy. The imposition of inequality, and struggles over justice, inclusion, and distribution, are culturally mediated. Both the creation and maintenance of inequality and the struggle against it are fundamentally involved in meaning-construction, for both good and for ill. This means they are oriented to 'boundaries' of a symbolic kind (cf. Lamont, 2000).

The role of meaning construction and contestation should be central, and unavoidable, for studies of relatively democratic societies. In such societies, there is an opportunity partially to institutionalize the counter-hegemonic ideals of the civil sphere. But the centrality of meaning construction and contestation is not unavoidable to exponents of the Thrasymachus tradition, even when they are studying their own, relatively democratic societies. Concentrating only on the vertical, they see only domination and submission, and insist that knowledge is always tied to power. In this manner, they evade the challenge of cultural sociology, at least in its strong program form. If meaning has relative autonomy from structures of political and economic force, then culture structures can contest their dominating power (Alexander, 2005, 2006b, 2006c).

The Symbolic and the Horizontal

Symbolic boundaries are not isomorphic with political and economic boundaries. The civil sphere is neither the product, nor much less the simple reflection, of purely vertical economic, political, religious, racial, or patriarchal force. What it represents, rather, is an ideal of a horizontal relationship, of a broad and universalizing solidarity. It is a meaning-construction whose symbolic boundaries can be used to pollute and condemn restrictive and particularistic forms of social closure.

It is the relative autonomy of the civil sphere's meaning structures that makes every form of domination fundamentally unstable and every unequal distribution

contestable. The aspirations and ideals that are immanent to the discourse of civil society cannot be obliterated by any form of dominating power. Of course, their strength increases to the degree that these ideals become embodied in organizational form. The more they are institutionalized in a relatively independent civil sphere, the more effectively civil meanings destabilize and decentre power.

The ideals of a civil society point towards a fully inclusive community of putatively rational, independent, trusting, respectful, honest, and cooperative individuals. In relation to such an idealized community, actually existing social divisions, inequalities, rigid boundaries, and divisions are presumptively illegitimate. But if the ideals of civil society are always latent, they become socially powerful only to the degree that public opinion can be dynamic and open-ended, and continuously represented by public polling; only if fictional and factual representations of civil ideals can be amplified and circulated by independent mass media; and only if civil associations and social movements can challenge the seemingly natural isomorphism of social and cultural boundaries.

The ideals of civil society can sustain civil power, moreover, only to the degree that such communicative processes and institutions are linked to institutions of a more regulative kind, to institutions that have the capacity to insert civil opinion into the state, to control the distribution of violence, money, and material force. The regulatory institution of the franchise – 'free and fair elections' – allows the symbolic representatives of civil society to become, at least in principle, directors of the bureaucratic state. The regulatory institution of 'office' controls, or tries to control, the exercise of power by demanding impersonal, more civil responsibility. The regulatory institution of democratic law creates the lynchpin of civil power. To the degree it is independent, the state's monopoly of violence can be directed against uncivil hierarchies and for the solidarities of civil life.

The civil sphere that can be sustained by these communicative and regulatory institutions is an idealized, even counter-factual world, a solidary community of autonomous individuals, of brothers and sisters. In this civil sphere, every person is treated simply as a human being, receiving the recognition that this sacred status demands. This is a civil community because it is a universalizing one, a community that transcends primordial ties of family, ethnicity, and race, hierarchies of class and divisions of religion, a community that sustains collective obligations and individual autonomy at the same time.

There are two different ways to think of the origins of this civil-community ideal. One is speculative and philosophical. What kind of community would be necessary, and what kinds of human qualities must be presupposed, if there were to be justice and democracy? One can reason that it would have to be a universalizing community of precisely the kind I have just described. The members of such a democratic and universalizing community would have to manifest certain distinctive qualities if this community were to possess the capacity for self-regulation and could dispense with hierarchy and power. These qualities, such as rationality, autonomy, and honesty, form a kind of 'civil language' about which I will speak more below.

One can also think of the origins and sustenance of this civil-community ideal in empirical and historical terms. It has been just such an ideal that has inspired social, religious, political, and cultural movements ever since the formation of the polis in ancient Greece. As first Weber and then Eisenstadt have suggested, if we bracket metaphysical commitments we can see that this kind of community has been at the core of each of the religions of the Axial age. It has also informed the movement of independent parliaments of medieval Europe; the collegial and aristocratic movements against kingship; the republican city-states of early modern Europe; the democratic and, to some significant degree, the national revolutions of early modern and modern times; and the movements for socialism and economic justice that have permeated capitalist societies for the last two centuries.

But, if the civil sphere ideal is fuelled by positivity and inclusion, the *discourse* of civil society is not. It is a binary discourse, establishing not only the sacred but also the profane, not only the pure but the polluted. The discourse of civil society reminds us that, insofar as the civil sphere becomes institutionalized in time and space, it becomes a closed community and not, at its boundaries, an open one. Those who are lucky enough to become members of civil society, whether they are located at its very core or are more distant from the centre, are continuously, even fervently, concerned with justifying why others cannot be included. They are likely to believe that only they, themselves, are honest, truthful, calm, and cooperative, and to suspect that others are irrational, emotional, out of control, unreasonable, dependent and childlike, factional and disputatious, prone to conspiracy, and domineering. It is because outsiders are devoutly believed to be constructed of such polluted qualities that they are seen as incapable of being included in civil society. In order to protect the civil sphere, they must be excluded, repressed, and possibly even eliminated in a physical way.

Empirical studies have suggested the wide geographical and historical dispersion of this binary discourse of civil society. I believe, in fact, that this categorical system is well-nigh universal, in the sense that it is inherent to any effort to create communities of an egalitarian, civil, and self-regulating kind. The binary language can be found in the works of the highest philosophers, from Plato to Kant to Rawls; in the everyday language of the daily newspaper; and the down-and-dirty language of the man (and woman) in the street.

Every fundamental form of social inequality has been justified by the binary discourse of civil society. For the inventors of democracy, the ancient Greeks, almost everybody except the relatively small number of native, property holding males were constructed as uncivil, not only slaves, women, and immigrant 'barbarians' who did so much of the domestic and manual labor, but the so-called 'Persians' against whom war was relentlessly waged, a war that seems to be continuing up to this day. These contaminations likewise sustained the elites that dominated the republics of the great early modern city-states. Anti-democratic aristocracies and kingships were justified in a similar way. It was widely believed that common people were too irrational, passionate, and dependent to regulate themselves.

What is much more troubling, and more scandalous to the self-righteous moral consciousness of Euro-American modernity, is that in the 350 years since the first formally democratic national polities emerged, the inequality and fragmentation of their civil spheres has been justified in the same way. The very discourse that inspired democratic revolutions and civil society has justified the exclusion and exploitation of working persons, whether bourgeois or proletarian; the subordination of women; the enslavement of nonwhites; the murder of non-Christians.

If such a categorical system of symbolic boundaries has been essential to the construction and legitimation of such inequalities, then it follows that the cultural contestation of such boundaries has been essential to every effort to overcome them. It is my central contention that the language of civil society, the content and the structure of its binary discourse, is relatively unchanging. The signifiers of civil society do not shift. What changes is the signifieds, the social entities conceived as embodying the pure and impure symbolic representations. To put this in a slightly enigmatic manner, what we have here is 'stable signi*fiers*, shifting signi*fieds*.'

It is for this reason that I have insisted that symbolic and social boundaries are never the same. The binary language of civil society has no particular or inherent social referents. At its most flagrant, this 'arbitrary' plasticity suggests an extraordinary relativism of the signifier–signified relation, and this can seem highly dubious to normative theory. In the history of modernity, indeed in the course of the short 20th century, critical terms of categorical pollution – emotionalism, dishonesty, factionalism, conspiracy – have been applied not only to the working but to the upper classes, in each case justifying violence and repression. They have been applied by whites to darker-skinned persons, but also, and sometimes with equally terrifying effect, by white Euro-Americans to other white Euro-Americans, and by blacks and non-Euro-Americans to whites. The categorical system has justified the mass murder of Jews, but also the partial exclusion of non-Jewish Arabs from the Israeli Jewish state.

But my point here is not to underscore the moral relativism that attaches to the civil sphere because of the arbitrariness of its construction. What I wish to emphasize, rather, is the continuous and omnipresent possibility for its reconstruction. In so doing, I want to highlight subjectivity against objectivity, symbolic against material force, and agency versus structure. If I am correct that the symbolic boundaries to which subjugated groups orient themselves cannot be changed, it is emphatically the case that their position on the sacred or profane side of the civil/anticivil boundary certainly can. The challenge for any progressive social movement, or for any more incremental gesture, is to convince core group members of one's civil capacities, to dispute polluting constructions, to demonstrate the qualities of fellowship, of civil depth and reliability, and, sometimes, of democratic heroism itself.

Such demonstrations cannot be made abstractly; they must be lodged inside the idioms that concretize the discourse of civil society in a particular time and place. They must partake, in other words, of French republicanism, American liberalism, British common sense, and Afrikaner discipline and restriction. Equally concrete but less specifically national narratives also abound. For civil translation

to be successful, metaphorical and metonymical links must be made between justice and the most intimate and the most transcendental references of everyday life. What's fair in sports, what's fair in God's eyes – these are imagined worlds that almost everybody can understand. They build symbolic bridges to the discourse of civil society, providing a cultural vernacular that makes proximity to civil sacrality seem merely a matter of everybody's normal and rightful place.

Every immigrant and subordinated person knows this truth. Civil capacities must be demonstrated in the primordial colorings established by core groups. British workers had to prove they were good Englishmen, loyal and patriotic, and upstanding Christians to boot. In America, Martin Luther King became a hero, perhaps the greatest American of the 20th century, because he could speak and write the music of the old and new testaments, and the American constitution and Declaration of Independence, in 100 new and convincing keys.

So hegemony remains, and core groups do constrain, but never in terms of domination alone. Even if we give the encrusted traditions of the centre their due, however, we can see that the positive and negative idealizations of civil society are neither exhausted nor controlled by hegemony. The social instantiations of civil discourse are always subject to repositioning, within the historical sedimentations of limits of time, place, and institution.

Conclusion

My focus has been on the manner in which civil-symbolic boundaries give meaning to group subordination, simultaneously reinforcing and contradicting social closure. The application and reapplication of these civil-symbolic boundaries, however, is relevant not only to struggles over such deep structures of inequality. It informs also the everyday dynamics of democratic life. Whenever a social 'occurrence' is transformed into a civil society 'event' – to employ Jason Mast's (2006) performance-theoretical distinction – it involves placement and replacement inside the binaries of civil life. In our increasingly mass-mediated and legally-regulated society, discursive constructions and reconstructions of civil status are continuous. They are the stuff of newspapers and talk shows, of the blogosphere, of the fictional kaleidoscopes produced by television, film, and books.

The struggle for better placement inside the symbolic boundaries of civil society is constant, not episodic. Civil centrality, in its turn, must be continuously defended and defined. This is the invisible structuration of civil life.

Notes

1   An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2006 meetings of the American Sociological Association in Montreal. I am grateful to Paul DiMaggio for the invitation to make that presentation. While I am drawing throughout this article on theoretical and empirical arguments in *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander, 2006a), the thematic focus here is new.

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