

Special Feature: Political Cultures: Comparison, Contingency and History

*Four essays from a Sociology of Culture Invited Session
at the 2013 ASA Meetings*

“Legitimation Crisis: Recovering the Performance of Power”

Jeffrey C. Alexander (Yale University)

In this essay, I sketch a brief history of power in its sociological form. My animus will be anti-cultural theories, my premise that progress in power studies depends on taking distance from Weber, not only from his sociology of domination but from his understanding of legitimation. Moving to late-Durkheim and theories of cultural texts can help overcome this legitimation deficit, but they alone are not enough. Only a performative turn to cultural pragmatics will allow a new and better political sociology to arise.

Power as Coercion

Sociologists of power believe they approach the topic empirically, but their work is informed by a theoretical logic that understands action instrumentally and order externally, as an outside force. It is because of such presuppositions that power studies are enmeshed in the semiotic code of power:culture, a hugely misleading binary homologous with such other simplifications as objective:subjective and constraint:freedom. These radical dichotomies articulate the vast distance between contemporary sociologies of power and culture, between political and cultural sociology. Open any recent handbook or textbook in political sociology; you will find almost nothing about the meanings of social life.

There are, to be sure, historical reasons for this conceptual debilitation. As culture became “Axialized” (Alexander 2013a), its transcendental and abstracted character allowed the separation of meaning from earthly structures of political power. Tension emerged between intellectual and religious centers, on the one hand, and political centers, on the other. Intellectual and religious critiques claimed that earthly power had no cultural connection, and thus was morally impugned. As this millennia long process became concentrated in the absolutist states of early modern Europe, *raison d'état* theories of political power emerged. Hobbes and Machiavelli broke from the classical tradition by theorizing political power as amoral, though hardly as merely instrumental (Vierira 2011). Made cynical by the horrors of industrial capitalism and the violence of European states, elite theorists and Marxists translated *raison d'état* into a model of political power as conspiracy. Revising and synthesizing both traditions, Weber created political sociology. Defining power as the ability to carry out one's wishes against the will of others, Weber insisted that the modern state's success depended primarily upon the monopolization of violence.

Revered as the master theorist of the modern discipline, Weber developed a devastatingly reductionist political sociology that centered on *Herrschaft*. This sociology of “domination” conceptualized power as dependent on access to material resources – administrative, economic, and military. Structural shifts in the distribution of these resources determine the ability to exercise political domination and violence. *Economy and Society* details the difficulties of achieving bureaucratic domination, the kind of state control that depends upon the monopolization of violence and allows dependable tax collection for a centralized state. Until the modern west, states were weakened by the dialectic of patrimonialism and feudalization, which could prevent neither tax farming nor violent challenges to imperial states.

Under the aegis of Weber's domination theory, modern political sociology developed into the hard-headed study of forceful imposition that we know today. Elaborated by Otto Hintze and Robert Michels, crystallized in neo-Marxist form by C. Wright Mills, this political sociology was elaborated by “conflict theory” in the 1960s and 1970s and by the anti-cultural political sociologies of Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Michael Mann up until to today.

The Movement to Legitimation

Paradoxically, Weber himself recognized the inadequacies of such an approach, placing on top of his *Herrschaft* theory the idea of “legitimacy.” Referring not to coercion but belief, legitimation demands a conceptual move from power to authority. That legitimacy has been still born in political sociology can be blamed on Weber's structural bias,

but there is also a problem inside the theory itself. Legitimacy is conceived, not analytically but ideal-typically, not as process but as static structure -- as three forms of authority, the traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.

Developed for historical and comparative purposes, this heuristic works well for comparing frenzied *fürher* movements with established kingships, the latter with modern bureaucracies, and plebiscitarian populism with constitutional states. But the model tells us little about how power actually works inside collectivities already rational-legal, whether states, organizations, social movements, or campaigns. In none of these settings does power do much justifying, explaining, or illuminating by pointing to legality or rationality. True, procedural rightness is achieved by conformity to impersonal, judge-administered rules. The status of legal rationality, however, is the beginning, not the end, of modern power. The core of power legitimation has to do with meaning-making.

Weber's approach to power is a straightjacket, a hindrance to realistic thinking about how modern power is made. Weber's theory of legitimation is a black box from which there protrudes little intelligible light.

From Weber to Durkheim

If we step back from the details of Weber's power theory, we can see that it relies on his overarching claim about modernity being rationalized -- deracinated, instrumental, industrialized, bureaucratized and secularized. If we believe, to the contrary, that modernity remains filled up with myth, magic, and collective meanings -- with what Durkheim called collective consciousness -- then the inadequacy of Weber's power theory is easy to see. The emperor and his children have no clothes.

Now an alternative to Weberian reduction begins to take shape. We can overcome Weber's power theory by turning to the late Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the master who conceived modernity in a radically different way. Concerned with "the religious man of today," late-Durkheim made a cultural turn. In Kenneth Thompson's inimitable phrase, Durkheim recognized the dialectic between secularization and sacralization. Symbols continue to reign, fears and passions about the sacred/profane and purity/pollution remain deeply ingrained, collective consciousness and solidarity have not dissipated, rituals continue to create emotional effervescence.

The problem in bringing late-Durkheimian theory to bear on power is that Durkheim himself was scarcely interested in institutional structure and wrote little about political power, in either its traditional or modern forms. So, Durkheim's religious sociology must be combined with Weber's political sociology, and also with cultural theory as it was elaborated in linguistic, literary, and anthropological thinking during the 20th century, from Wittgenstein to Austin; from Saussure to Jakobson, Levi-Strauss, and Barthes; from Douglas, Turner, and Geertz to Foucault and Derrida.

A Performative Approach to Power

Yet, while these intellectually massive developments provide the basis for a new theory of legitimation, "culture" by itself is too inert and structural. Power becomes authority when actors exercise their agency vis-a-vis one another. Structural and hegemony approaches to culture cannot deconstruct this open-ended struggle. Legitimate power is subtle and complex, often exquisitely indirect, and highly contingent in its success. The process is not all that different from how dramatic actors project the power of their characters in a play. The script is already established, the footlights on, the stage set, and audiences in their seats. But the most critical theatrical challenge remains: How to make the script walk and talk. What's at stake is overcoming the "fourth wall" between stage and seats, emotionally and discursively fusing performers with audiences (Alexander 2013b). To the degree there is fusion, to that degree performances achieve verisimilitude, a sense of truthfulness and authenticity.

Thinking about how drama works can be applied to the performance of power (Alexander 2011). Cultural structures are powerful, but they can supply only background representations. In modern, differentiated, and fragmented societies, political actors and citizen-audiences have become vastly separated, and critics -- not in this case theater reviewers but journalists and intellectuals -- incessantly mediate and mess things up in between.

Political actors need be agile. They and their production teams must revise scripts in response to shifting audience reaction and mediating critical interpretation. Of course, performative agility has always been required, even for power in traditional societies. We need look no further than Hillary Mantel's rendering of Henry VIII and his trusted political consultant Thomas Cromwell in her Booker prize-winning historical novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. Performative fusion is much more difficult to achieve, however, in modern and especially democratic societies. When audiences get legal rights and the franchise, their interpretive power becomes not just cultural but political and legal.

I am suggesting that any theory of modern power must become a theory of the cultural performance of power. How can material and ideal resources be creatively employed to mount and sustain effective symbolic action, such that the yawning gap between political actors and citizen-audiences can be temporally overcome?

In contemporary sociology, we have had some powerful exemplars of such performative approaches to power. Almost thirty years ago, Wagner-Pacific (1986) was already figuring out ways to apply Turner's liminal theory to the

drama of political terrorism. Berezin (1997) theorized the theatricality of Mussolini and Italian Fascism, and more broadly the relation between aesthetics, power, and emotion. Ringmar's first book (1996) demonstrated how narratives of collective identity allowed Sweden's victory in the thirty years war, and his most recent one (2013) explains French and British devastation of the Emperor's summer palace in Beijing as the political performance of abjection and sublimity. Steinmetz (2007) interprets Western imperialism as an effort to embrace and displace orientalist ideas about the otherness of the sublime. Smith explains the legitimation of war (2005) and punishment (2008) as grandiose but perpetually faltering efforts to perform the morality of military and administrative power. Mast (2012) reveals how President Clinton managed to script and perform authority despite scandals, Republican power, and impeachment. Separating performance from discursive power, Reed (2013a) offers a deeply revisionist account of charismatic authority (cf., Griswold and Bhadmus 2013; Essary and Ferny 2013; and Reed 2013b).

These new studies decenter Weberian domination theory. They ride the cultural turn, drawing on theories of textuality, narrative, code, and symbol and connecting them with performance studies. In so doing so, they move in quite a different direction from another reaction to the weakness of Weberian theory. Rather than trying to make more substantial Weber's analytical separation of power and meaning, such thinkers as Foucault and Bourdieu moved to eliminate the space between them, claiming theoretically they are almost always empirically intertwined.

What I am suggesting here is that political sociology move in a different direction. Cultural pragmatics recognizes the precariousness of power in modern democratic societies, how it always faces an imminent legitimacy crisis. Theorizing about cultural performance must be brought into the center of political sociology today.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C.

2011 *Performance and Power*. Cambridge UK and Malden MA: Polity Press

2013a "The Promise and Contradictions of Axiality." *Sociologica*: 1.

2013b "The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde," forthcoming in *Theory, Culture, and Society*

Berezin, Mabel

1997 *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Essary, Elizabeth Helen and Christian Ferny

2013 "Pomp and Power, Performers and Politicians: The California Theatre State." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1 (1): 96-124.

Griswold, Wendy and Muhammed Bhadmus

2013 "The Kano Durbar: Political Aesthetics in the Bowel of the Elephant." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1 (1): 125-151.

Mast, Jason

2012 *The Performative Presidency: Crisis and Resurrection in the Clinton Years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Reed, Isaac Ariail

2013a "Charismatic Performance: A Cultural Theory of Bacon's Rebellion." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1 (2): 254-287.

2013b "Power: Relational, Discursive, and Performative Dimensions." *Sociological Theory* 31 (3): 193-218.

Ringmar, Erik

1996 *Identity, Interest, and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

2013 *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China*. New York: Palgrave.

Smith, Philip

2005 *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

2008 *Punishment and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Steinmetz, George

2007 *The Devil's Own Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwestern Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vieira, Monica Brito

2011 *The Elements of Representation in Hobbes: Aesthetics, Theatre, Law and Theology in the Construction of Hobbes' Theory of the State*. London: Brill.

Wagner-Pacific, Robin

1986 *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.