Interview

Jeffrey Alexander

Peter Beilharz conducted this interview with Jeffrey Alexander when he was in Australia for the ISA 2002 Congress.

PB: Jeff, welcome to Melbourne. Could you give us your views on the state of sociology in the United States and in the world?

JA: I would like to put in a plug for the diversity of American sociology. I think that there s perhaps still a tendency to think of American sociology as mainly highly statistical quantitative work, because of the fact that s one of the things that American sociology intensely pursued earlier than other sociologists in other nations. And it s also because the two main journals, and particularly the *American Sociological Review*, which is the journal of the Association, are dominated by quantitative work. In fact, however, this is more a dimension of American sociology which has perhaps temporary control over the Association s journal than it is a representation of the future of the discipline; nor does it represent by any means all or even most, of the best work today. American sociology is also deeply involved in qualitative and ethnographic studies, and these are highly recognized. For example: the Mitch Duneier book *Sidewalk*, which is an investigation in an ethnographic manner of homeless booksellers in New York City and won the best book of the year award a couple of years ago; or Elijah Anderson s continuing investigations of the familial, social and economic lifestyles of the racial underclass in American cities represent major works that are published and talked about in magazines and newspapers, and not only in professional journals. Andreas Glaeser is an assistant professor at the University of Chicago whose qualitative work on the East German police in transition after 89 is highly illuminating. One could cite many, many other kinds of efforts that are well known in book form and also find issue in their own specialized journals. There are other important non-quantitative parts of American sociology. For example, the field of comparative and historical sociology which was in a sense started by Barrington Moore and continued by Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly and is an extremely healthy and impressive field in the United States, and which took the cultural turn following American historiography about fifteen years ago. It is led today by younger people like Rogers Brubaker, George Steinmetz, Mabel Berezin, and Richard Biernacki and by senior figures like William Sewell Jr. all of these sociologists ar e doing exciting kinds of work mostly on ar eas outside the contemporary U.S.

PB: That s always been an interesting thing for me, thinking about the extent to which American sociology s European. Actually it s very difficult to distinguish. The idea that you could separate cleanly between the idea of a European sociology and an American sociology really won t work.

JA: Obviously there are national differences, but I ve been personally worried about and resistant to the idea of either the Americanizing of sociology or the claims by Europeans or others that they themselves have a distinctive sociology. And I disagree on philosophical grounds with the very idea that there are or should be indigenous national sociologies. Obviously cultures have different preoccupations and I know there are specific perspectives, which have emerged from the particular historical experiences of different countries. But these will be projected onto the world stage and hopefully they ll become part of to use your phrase, Peter the cultural traf fic which produces hybridity. As so much postmodern work e.g., Paul Gilr oy s on the African diaspora shows sets of cultural themes that we have taken to be essential and homogeneous turn out to be products of tremendous international, interregional, intercontinental hybridity. This is certainly the case with American sociology, which obviously comes from Europe and then is intermixed with indigenous American developments, and then goes back to Europe again.

Ever since the end of the Cold War I ve noticed a healthy tendency for the notion of a European sociology or a European theory to develop. It s a moment of Eur opeanization, also responding to the integration of Europe, the formation of this impressive supernational grouping. It s a healthy resistance to the hegemony of American popular culture and the pretensions which often delude many American social scientists into thinking that they are the best, that they know the best methods and so forth and so on. I am very impressed with journals like the European Journal of Social Theory, and I would put Thesis Eleven in the same kind of alternative channel. But at the same time I think it s dangerous to make claims for the superiority of any sociology, certainly American, but also European. And I think there isn t a European sociology as such. When you scratch the surface you see that Americans and Europeans are involved in all sorts of joint projects, that fields are international and interregional. At that time, of course, sociological theory is more highly developed in Europe than in the United States. Such figures as Bourdieu, Luhmann, and Giddens present some of the most creative, exciting, and productive figures in the entire field of sociology. As for the field of social theory, beyond sociological theory, there s a lot of excitement generated by figures in the critical, post-Marxist tradition, like Habermas, Castoriadis, and Bobbio. Yet, in the field of social theory, I think the United States has generated tremendous excitement in terms of Rawls and post-Rawls legal and political theory, and younger figures like Nancy Fraser, Iris Mariam Young, and others. One could cite here, in addition, the extraordinary renewal of

American pragmatism Richar d Rorty being only the most striking example. There s also significant developments in American feminism and American race theory. Post-colonialism is something shared all over the world. So I personally remain a universalist while appreciating the difference generated by the regions and nationalists.

PB: Tell us a little about what you re working on now, what s the big book?

JA: I m involved in one of these culminating phases that occasionally mark one s career, when years of work crystallizes and a number of publications come together, and then you can finally prepare for some other new period down the road. This coincides with a career move from me going from UCLA after 25 years to Yale where I m the chairman now after Ivan Szelenyi who spent some important time in Australia and brings his many Australian connections to Yale. We intend, by the way, to continue to try to recruit graduate students and faculty so beware, Australia! In fact two out of our eight new first year students are from Australia. At any rate I have two books that are now officially in press. One written with several other colleagues called *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, a product of work three years ago at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Denmark, Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. I worked with Bernhard Giesen in Germany, Ron Eyerman and Bjorn Wittrock from Sweden, Neil Smelser, who was the director at that time, and Piotr Sztompka from Poland. We think we developed a very useful model of how the culture and collective identity and sense of self of groups is formed in relationship to how they process cataclysmic events in the past, or what they interpret as such events. This model could be extended from the experience of colonialism or war, or the settling of Australia by convicts as a kind of traumatic experience, to the experience of Americans with Communism and McCarthyism. Something I m interested in particularly is the way in which a trauma from one group becomes the basis for expanding identification to another group, for example, non-Jews identifying with the Jewish trauma of the Holocaust. This study will be published in about a year by the University of California Press.

Ron Eyerman and I are developing a project to extend this cultural trauma idea to the movement about globalization today, looking at anti-colonial movements in the 20th century. We re looking at Gandhi, the Algerian campaign against French colonials and the protest against the Vietnam War, and the lack of concern during the Rwandan genocide, and then current anti-globalization campaigns within the context of the trauma theory we developed. Our argument is that the effort to get beyond the reality and the legacy of colonialism has always depended on establishing moral empathy between people in the first world with those who have been dominated by colonialism. We believe that one way of looking at all of these movements is to see them in a performative manner, looking at how such collective movements have generated a sense of empathy and solidarity. So we re trying to interleave a kind of psychology of emotions with morality and with politics, instead of thinking of these movements as instrumental. And we think that in the long run the possibilities of a global civil sphere and global political reform in such aspects as r edistributing wealth depends on the prior establishment of a sense of wider solidarity.

The other project I m pulling together are my essays on culture, starting from the mid-eighties through today, a book just about in press with Oxford. It will be called something like *A Strong Program for Cultural Sociology*. But what I m most excited about is the work that you and your colleagues discussed in the Thesis Eleven Centre Seminar, which is a book almost done but not yet in press, which I have promised to give to Oxford by the end of next summer. It s called *Possibilities of Justice*. I ve been working on this, on and off, for the last decade. It s an effort to develop a new way of looking at society by introducing a kind of moral sphere that also has teeth in it a new model for macr o sociological theory. I have a lot of hopes for the book, but my first hope is that it can be finished soon. I m looking forward to the discussion that I m sure it will generate and the critical responses to it. It s a kind of idiosyncratic and dialectical synthesis of T .H. Marshall, Durkheim, Habermas, Foucault, and Parsons, with one section on the American civil rights movement, one on the women s movement, another on the history of anti-Semitism.

PB: Could you venture us a closing impression of the situation here?

JA: My main access to Australian sociology before arriving on the fatal shores has been as a r eader and editorial member from afar of *Thesis Eleven*. Which I think has not only been an important force in critical theory but also it has come in a very welcome way to articulate the kind of efforts you call antipodean. It s a kind of crossroads for not simply German, French, English, and American work, but also evokes a notion of hybridity coming out of the location here in the southern hemisphere, connected to Asian and South Pacific countries, moving out to cultural geography and non-sociological disciplines. I m str uck by the vitality and by the importance of theory here in this part of the Australian geo-sphere, and by the healthy interdisciplinary of many Australian sociologists. Go forward and multiply.

Peter Beilharz
Thesis Eleven Centre for Critical Theory
La Trobe University
Transcribed by Bronwyn Bardsley

Sociologists Outside Academe

Michael Woolcock, Development Research Group, the World Bank

It is a sociological truism that we all have multiple roles and identities. In their professional lives, academic sociologists typically see themselves as scholars, teachers, members of a particular discipline, and then specialists in a particular field (criminology, demography, etc.). These roles are not synonymous, as I discovered when having to make a choice between them upon completing my PhD. For a variety of strategic and serendipitous reasons, I found myself having to choose between several attractive academic options and becoming the first sociologist to join the research department (the Development Research Group) at the World Bank. As I wrestled with this choice, the question of my primary professional identity loomed large: what role was most important to me? Did I care more about my capacity to make a direct research and policy contribution to the field of international development, or my standing as an academic sociologist? Did I prefer teaching extensive semester-long classes to undergraduate students, or intensive days-long short courses to senior practitioners? More starkly, was it better to be a token development person in an academic sociology department, or a token sociologist in a development policy research department?