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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cultural sociology in a secular age

Jeffrey C. Alexander[1]

In a session devoted to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* on the tenth anniversary of its publication, I feel a bit out of place, neither a sociologist of religion nor a believer. I am, however, an interpreter of sociologists of religion, among them Durkheim, Weber, and my own teacher, Robert Bellah. I have also been a theorist deeply engaged in creating a more cultural sociology. My goal has been to redefine modernity by conceptualizing the continuing significance of such "traditional" phenomena as collective consciousness, symbols, sacred and profane codes, narratives, social performances and dramas, cultural traumas, and iconic consciousness.

I approach Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (SA) not directly, as a sociologist of religion, but obliquely, as a theorist who sees theological religion, not as the *sine qua non* of deep culture but rather as one among its powerful forms. I deeply appreciate the manner in which Taylor's rich re-interpretation of belief and unbelief provides a more nuanced understanding of how both may thrive in a secular age. What I question is Taylor's understanding of the "modern" society within which fragile belief and unbelief suffer and thrive. I want to tell a different story about modernity, from a cultural sociological point of view.

SA is a deeply revisionist inquiry into how the emergence of unbelief created a secular society. Humane, learned, associative in the best sense of the term, it provides a religious but also modernist alternative to mechanistic understandings of post-traditional society. No other social thinker has written about the death of God with such a complex mixture of regret, for what we have lost, and a resigned, deeply ambivalent, yet nonetheless subtly appreciative understanding for the sense of immanence we have gained. With equal parts humility and skepticism, Taylor characterizes the secular age as "mutual fragilization," adding welcome nuance to such over-arching concepts as differentiation and pluralism. SA is the book Max Weber might have written if he had been more religiously musical. It is the book that Robert Bellah should have written, but probably would not have, if he had lived to complete the second volume of *Religion and Human Evolution*.

✉ Jeffrey C. Alexander
jeffrey.alexander@yale.edu

[1] Dept. of Sociology, Yale University, PO Box 208625, 493 College Street, New Haven, CT 06520-8265, USA

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Taylor describes the emergence of mutual fragilization as a story of disenchantment. An immanent frame for social life emerges by disembedding individuals and groups from an ontological perspective on the transcendent, from a belief in the existence of God and the stories about his actions on earth. Once modernity happens, "the only thoughts, feelings, and spiritual elan is what we call minds," Taylor writes (30); "there can be no charged objects" in modern life and "the causal relations between things cannot in any way be dependent on meanings" (35). Inside an immanent frame, "our actions, goals, achievements … have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance" (307); "there is a deeper resonance which they lack, which we feel should be there" (307). Life inside modernity is "flat and empty," a world of control and regimentation, instrumental reason, rape of nature, euthanasia of imagination, bodily display and spectacle (50, 53). Rather than porous, the self in the secular age is bounded, a "cool, disengaged person" (9). In the immanent frame, time is mundane and ordinary, horizontal, and abstractly universal, in contrast with the "higher time" of the transcendent frame (209), which is vertical, sacred, and filled with warps and inconsistencies. The immanent frame is closed off rather than being open to "a power that goes beyond us." It produces an "exclusive humanism" (19) where there are "no goals beyond human flourishing" (82).

If this were all, the story Taylor tells would not be so subtle, complex, and—most arrestingly, for an unbeliever—so deeply ambivalent. Which it is. But Taylor also acknowledges that the "malaise of immanence" has been counteracted by "disalienation" processes, the sorts of efforts at re-enchantment that Weber (1946) conceptualized in "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions," his "Introduction" to *The Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*. Taylor believes that the Enlightenment not only disembedded reason but that "a certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power" (9), pointing to such quasi-transcendental phenomena as fierce moral argument, struggles for human rights, and heroic sacrifice for the common good. (Such sainted Enlightenment figures as Marx, Freud, Einstein, and Camus come to mind.) Disalienation can be aesthetic as well as moral. Here, Taylor points to the concerted cultivation of the sublime, citing the philosophical efforts of Shaftsbury, Burke, and Kant; the art of Mozart, Wordsworth, and Beethoven; and the cultivation of nature from the Romantics and Transcendentalists onward.

Yet, even as he acknowledges disalienating practices, he views them with skepticism. Why? Because their holistic experience is not wrapped up inside an ontology, the godly and teleological narrative that religion provides. His damning conclusion is that, while disalienating, such practices can be only "(putatively) transcendent" (518). Referencing Mozart's G Minor Quintet, Taylor regrets, "the story isn't there" (355). About Beethoven's string quartets, he complains, "but what is the object? Is there an object?" (ibid). Quoting Luc Ferry, Taylor wonders (308), what is "*le sens du sense*" (the sense of the sense)? Taylor's ambivalence toward psychoanalysis is emblematic. On the one hand, there is marked appreciation: "Unlike behavioral therapies, or those relying mainly on drugs, it involves a hermeneutic, an attempt to understand the meaning of our unease [that] delves into the unavoidable, deep psychic conflicts in our make-up" (621). Yet, once again, such a modern movement of disalienation comes up short: There "is no moral lesson for us: the guilt or remorse points to no real wrong … What [can] we spiritually or morally … learn

from our suffering[?] The answer is 'nothing'" (ibid). And then there is the culture of authenticity, which Taylor so brilliantly distilled from Romanticism twenty-five years ago; it is relegated to a merely "expressive individualism" that lacks any connection to higher meaning.

The major methodological injunction of SA is that social analysis should focus on lived experience rather than on intellection, on "our sense of things" not on "what people believe." This quasi-anthropological approach allows Taylor to create a robust and resonant account of religious evolution, but he abandons such hermeneutical scruple in his account of life inside the immanent frame, providing little insight into lived modern experience. Taylor's notion of "modern *imaginaries*" would seem to belie such criticism, for it draws from Wittgenstein and Heidegger and argues for the role of non-deliberative presuppositions. But Taylor derives the content of these imaginaries from political theory and philosophy, not from an interpretive and hermeneutic examination of the meanings of social life. It is no wonder, then, that he finds modern imaginaries to be atomistic and individualistic, consisting only of social contracts, market economies, elections, and legal rights. On the few occasions when he does address everyday social life, Taylor tends toward the disparaging, dismissing sports, fashion, and television as spectacle and carnival. Neither modern imaginaries nor bread and circuses can provide the experience of what Taylor describes as the "fullness" of life.

In the history of modern social thought, the most powerful challenge to the equations of modernity with disenchanted flatness is "late Durkheim." On the first page of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim announces his break with the binary of transcendent versus immanent: "My study of a very archaic religion will not be made for the sheer pleasure of recounting the bizarre and eccentric [but] because it seems better suited … to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity" (Durkheim 1995 [1911]: p. 1). Denying an epistemological break between primitive religion and modernity, Durkheim conceptualizes what might be called small "r" versus big "R" religion. For believers like Taylor, the Axial belief in an ontological deity (Bellah 2011) is the *sine qua non* of *R*eligion; for the Durkheimian sociologist, by contrast, it is only one version of *r*eligion, defined broadly as the worship of the sacred.

According to the late Durkheim, while modernity contains vastly different institutional arrangements and cultural beliefs—the former more differentiated, the latter more skeptical—the spirituality of social life, its fundamental religiosity, remains constant. Invisible symbols are pervasive, and "idealism," Durkheim insists, is the law of everyday social life. Moderns continue to protect the sacred and divide it from the profane. The social sacred still commands our awe, an orientation and sensibility Taylor confines to "ontic" religious life. Sacred meanings are still materialized in totemic objects, providing a ready supply of the "charged objects" that disappeared in Taylor's account. When totems are recharged by rituals, they create experiences of solidarity, of powerful moral and affective connections that belie the supposed flatness and emptiness of disenchanted life. The elementary forms of religious life still course through modern societies, via icons of aesthetic materiality, binaries that establish purity and danger, moral dramas that pit good against evil, and social narratives that create mythological connections between past, present, and future. These

structures of secular *r*eligion emerge in an *immanent* manner. They are produced sociologically via empirical processes. Naturalistic, not ontic, they create a powerful sense of transcendence nonetheless. They bind social life to social forces experienced as above mundane selves, sacred collective representations that possess mysterious and inexplicable power.

Neither the theoretical point nor the sensibility of Durkheim's last book was metabolized for most of the 20th century. Rather than providing a new understanding of modern life, it became a standard text for studying the anthropology of premodern people, exactly the opposite of what Durkheim had wished to achieve. Describing religious evolution, Bellah frequently evoked the phrase, "nothing is lost" (Bellah 2011), a sentiment that seems to get very close to Durkheim's point. But Bellah was so focused on *R*eligion that he ignored the secular symbolic, the *r*eligion of everyday life. Edward Shils more fully resonated with the late Durkheimian vision, theorizing modern societies as filled with sacred social centers. Great power, great wealth, great scientific, intellectual, and aesthetic achievement—all of these are sensed not only materially, or immanently, but also as sources of mystery that evoke awe and produce deference. The problem with Shils was the opposite of Bellah's; his nostalgic view of modernity conflated it entirely with the structure and culture of traditionalism (e.g., Shils and Young 1953).

All this changed with the eruption of cultural anthropology in the late middle of the 20th century and the emergence, in the 1980s, of American cultural sociology. Instructed not only by figures like Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, but by semiotics, literary theory, aesthetic philosophy, and performance studies, cultural sociology built out from late Durkheim to create a new sociological theory of modernity, examining collective symbols of transcendence and their accompanying practices within an immanent frame.

Consider love. In the golden age of ontic enchantment, Taylor tells us how and with whom one fell in love was a matter for Aphrodite, not something determined by the wills of human beings. Inside of the immanent frame, he rues, falling in love is regarded as "an 'internal' event" (36) triggered by mind and desire and no longer linked to the transcendent experience of the holy. But is this really how falling in love is experienced in modern life? Not according to popular songs, novels, television serials, and movies, or even the most casual perusal of the "Modern Love" section of the Sunday *New York Times*. Experiencing love remains a transformational and transcendental experience: *I fell for her, he knocked me over, I was struck by lightning, it was a conversion experience, she was the vision of an angel.* Modern love partakes of myth and ritual, remaining still an extraordinary wellspring of sacrality and transcendence. Taylor's description of love in the Religiously enchanted world rings true, as well, for the secular age: When love "is going well," it is like "being smiled on by Aphrodite," a "gift" from the goddess of love "keeping external dangers at bay" (ibid).

Or consider material representations of evil. In the enchanted world, Taylor explains, evil seemed like a real thing, a substance located inside black bile and witches. It was a cosmic force, symbolized by the weird extra-terrestrial objects of Hieronymus Bosch, not a moral depravity that arises from within society and lodged inside groups of living human beings (37). A cultural sociologist might say things

are not really all that different today. Yes, we know evil comes not from cosmic forces but from the actions of human beings, yet we continue to experience evil as something outside of us, something alien and menacing, as if humans had no role in creating it (Alexander 2003). Think of the icons, codes, and narratives that defined the evil of the "atomic age." Think of the social construction of the "Holocaust" symbol, an engorged evil that dripped and seeped onto individuals and movements construed as having committed genocidal crimes (Alexander 2004). We moderns are still enmeshed in legends of evility, fear-inspiring myths defined and sustained via the construction of such cultural traumas as "Vietnam," "Watergate," "white nationalism," and "Trump."

Or consider Taylor's conceptualization of public sphere as modern imaginary. In the secular age, he explains, the "public sphere is an association constituted by nothing outside of the common action we carry out in it" (192). Rather than a "framework which needs to be established in some action-transcendent dimension," it is "just our acting together" and the "exchange of ideas"—"this is what makes it radically secular" (ibid). The cultural sociology of public life paints a strikingly different picture, a civil sphere thick with powerful discourses about good and evil, sustained by social dramas, origin myths, and monuments to memory. Iconic myths about Washington and Lincoln shaped the collective spirit of the American nation in times of great peril (Schwartz 1987, 2000). After his assassination, John F. Kennedy became a mythical figure, his presidency Camelot, and his entourage King Arthur's court. For Taylor, the king's two bodies (Kantorowicz 1957)—"The body that can never die… not subject to time and change"—was a thing of the enchanted past. Cultural sociology takes issue. The modern president's human body is still constrained and enabled by his mythical one. The American president may grow into his office, but he can never possess it. Rooted in "the ancient constitution" of medieval times (Pocock 1957) and in earlier, martyred, and triumphant presidents, the sacral office of the presidency has sometimes ennobled and ofttimes turned against the mundane human who temporarily occupies it.

Taylor evokes Eliade's nostalgic description of the mythical "Great Time," a "sacred time" that is now "behind us" (57). In this brief note, I have pushed back against this myth of declension. Sacred time is still with us, even if it has been recalibrated to the tempo of modernity. There is cultural sociology in the secular age.

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Jeffrey Alexander has contributed to research programs in social performance, cultural trauma, civil sphere dynamics, and iconicity. Among his recent books are *The Drama of Social Life* (Polity 2017), *What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of Social Problems* (Polity 2019), *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (co-ed. with C. Tognato, Cambridge University Press 2018), *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (co-ed. with D. Palmer, S. Park, and A. Ku, Cambridge University Press 2019), *Breaching the Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere* (co-ed. with T. Stack and F. Khosrokhovar, Cambridge University Press 2019), and *The Nordic Civil Sphere* (co-ed. with A. Lund and A. Voyer, Polity 2019).