



Civil Sphere Theory Meets Cultural Sociology: Close Encounters of the Symbolic Kind

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cus**Christopher M Thorpe** 

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Abstract

First published in 2006, Jeffrey C. Alexander's *The Civil Sphere* (TCS) quickly established itself as one of the classic works of post-classical sociology. In this interview, occasioned by the 20th anniversary of the publication of TCS, Christopher Thorpe, one of the current editors of *Cultural Sociology*, spoke with Jeffrey Alexander, author of TCS and driving force behind the Strong Program in cultural sociology. The ensuing discussion is wide-ranging, cleaving not only to the subject of TCS, its conception, reception, and influence, but to the relationship of Civil Sphere Theory to cultural sociology more broadly. Various misconceptions surrounding Alexander's work are addressed, as is the relationship of his intellectual legacy to Critical Theory and the limited and limiting conception of culture associated with several of its most influential proponents. In the closing stages of the discussion, Alexander reflects on what he believes mark out the most insightful forms of cultural-sociological studies.

Keywords

Civil sphere, cultural sociology, Jeffrey Alexander, Strong Program, symbolic meaning

**Christopher :
M. Thorpe
(CT)**

There is more than just a small degree of historical inevitability about this first question, Jeffrey. When did you write *The Civil Sphere*? What led you to write it?

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Jeffrey C. : Alexander (JCA) I wrote it over a period of about 17 years. It started in 1989, when I was teaching at UCLA. In April that year, I had taken the opportunity to spend a month in Tianjin City, about an hour's drive from Beijing. I was teaching a course on democracy, which was a new topic. I had never written or taught about democracy *per se*, and the students were literally hanging off the rafters. Not because of me, but because the course was about democracy. And for the course, I taught Weber and Parsons. Then, just as I was leaving Tianjin City, having been there for a month, the events that culminated in Tiananmen Square started. It was June 4th. It was transfixing because just around the time I left, many of my students had gone to Beijing.

When I got back to LA, I talked to an American-Israeli, Adam Seligman, who was a friend and colleague, and a former student of Shmuel Eisenstadt. I was explaining to him that I had just come back from China. This was at the same time that we were watching on television the events that played out in Tiananmen Square, which, of course, ended in tragedy. I remember remarking to Adam that I didn't know of anything in sociology that could explain the events that were taking place in China or, for that matter, the stuff that was happening in the late 1980s in Eastern Europe, the transitions from state communism that had begun with the Solidarity Movement in Poland (which had transfixed me). I mean, I knew how one might approach it in terms of cultural sociology, perhaps as a Victor Turner kind of "liminal episode," but thinking sociologically about it in terms of democracy, I couldn't think of anything.

At that point, Adam mentioned to me that over the last two or three years, there had been a revival of the old idea of "civil society" by thinkers like John Keane, who along with others were publishing books on this 18th- and 19th-century idea. So I bought John Keane's two books. One was an edited book, and the other was his own. Really, this was a kind of starting point, which I branched out from, sensing it was going to be a really exciting path. I translated the thrust of these writings into cultural sociology as I was developing it, in a kind of late Durkheimian way. At the time, I had been researching the nature of polarizing social conflict in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I had also been reading Bernard Bailyn's book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), the historiography of which I already knew quite a lot about because my wife, Ruth Bloch, was an early American history specialist at UCLA.

This mixture of scholarship combined with the personal experience of Tiananmen led me toward what became Civil Sphere Theory (CST). There was also an experience I had recently had during a visit to the Vanderbilt Television News Archive in Nashville, Tennessee. Exposed to nearly 100 hours of curated media discourse about Watergate, I had begun to reconstruct a "structure" of binary discourse about the qualities that supported and threatened democratic orders.

In the space of a few months, I had written a one-hundred-page theoretical essay on something I called the “civil sphere.” This early effort contained some of the core ideas that would come out in book form 17 years later. In the Fall of 1989, David Held was visiting in Political Science at UCLA. Having known each other from a previous visit, he and I went out for lunch, and, after sharing my excitement about my new idea of a civil sphere, David asked to look at the essay. A few days later, he said to me, “This is a new idea, Jeff, and Polity would be eager to publish it as it is – it could be an intervention.” I said to him, “I don’t know, I don’t think it is ready to be published. I need to work on it some more.” Whenever I made a remark like that, I came to understand it was my unconscious mind telling me, “you’re going to take a LONG time to work this out.” I remember doing the same thing when I received an offer to publish the forerunner of the four-volume book, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* – which at that time was a 900-page doctoral thesis. Grant Barnes, the sociology editor at University of California Press, called me at home and said he’d heard from “various sources” about the thesis, and that he’d like to see it. After he read it, he told me that UC Press would be interested in publishing the manuscript – as it was. I was really chuffed, of course, and I told Grant, “Okay, great, but I just need to write an introduction.” It took 12 months to write that “Introduction,” which became the first volume of *Theoretical Logic*, and four more years and thousands of pages to work out the implications of that first volume for my interpretations of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons, which took three more volumes to express.

So, I went on writing what would become *The Civil Sphere* (henceforth TCS) in the 1990s (Alexander, 2006). I vividly recall going to Hungary around 1991, at the invitation of my UCLA colleague Ivan Szelenyi, who 20 years earlier had been kicked out of the country for publishing *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (with George Konrad). As I was flying to Budapest, I remember looking at the paper that I was going to give and thinking, “this is going to be really boring to these Hungarian intellectuals because they know all of this already. I need to write a new paper right now, here on the plane.” In the three or four hours that remained of the flight, I conceived the institutional theory of Civil Sphere Theory, the communicative and regulative institutions, and the idea of the contradictions of space, time, and function. It was a pivotal moment for me. Another pivotal point in the development of the book was the time I spent with Alain Touraine’s group in Paris over the academic year 1993–1994. Touraine was an inspiring figure, at once a public intellectual, an ambitious and sophisticated theorist, and a committed political man. By that time in his career, Touraine had moved beyond his concern with post-industrial revolutionary upheavals to conceptualizing social movements and new democratic movements. I deeply engaged with Touraine’s thinking, developing a long essay on social movements and civil society that I contributed to a *Festschrift* for him, which in modified form became Chapter 8 of TCS. No doubt I had

become primed for this engagement from my long intellectual and personal friendship with Ron Eyerman, whose concept of “movement intellectuals” had made a big impression on me.

You get the idea. *The Civil Sphere* came together in fits and starts over a long period of historical time. To illustrate with another example: I spent several months in the early 2000s working on the chapter that deals with the law. This was very near the time when I was wrapping *TCS* up, and my initial idea was to write a few pages on the law. But then I had gathered all this material and quickly realized I needed to really think through the role that law played in the civil sphere in a much more elaborate way. This was part of a years-long period during which I sought to move away from a purely discursive understanding of the civil sphere to a perspective that emphasized the role of culturally informed institutions. In addition to law, I spent time laying out the role of elections, including the long struggle to expand the franchise, and I also devoted myself to exploring such other regulative institutions as “office” and political parties. On the communicative side, I reconceived the role of voluntary associations and introduced the idea that public opinion polls are key institutions as well. I also unpacked and conceptualized the role of fictional and factual media, paying particular attention to journalism, in which I had a lifelong interest. One of the first sociological articles I ever published, in 1980, was entitled “The Mass News Media in Comparative, Historical, and Systemic Perspective,” a piece that included some significant research on the ideological spectrum of French newspapers. My father and I had both been serious journalists during our university years, and one of my sons spent a decade as a professional journalist. It seemed to me a terrible oversight that those writing about civil society neglected the role of journalism.

You might say that the theoretical challenge in which I was engaged was to upgrade and sociologize the manner in which political theory had traditionally considered civil society. I wanted to think of it more as a “subsystem” (Parsons), “a sphere” (Habermas), or “field” (Bourdieu). I also wanted to get beyond the neo-Tocquevillian approach of Robert Putnam, which had built out from Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. What I wanted was a much more analytically and empirically differentiated approach to civil society, one that was more suited to understand the challenges that democracy faced in pluralistic industrial societies but that avoided, at the same time, the pessimistic and cynical reductionism of the Marxist approach. It was this polemical agenda that led to my formulation of civil society I, II, and III.

As I worked through these issues, chances to publish the results came up opportunistically, and early versions of many of the chapters appeared from 1991 on.

CT: Marx lamented that Hegel had been badly read by the young Hegelian philosophers. Bourdieu noted that ideas travel, but they don’t take their contexts with them. Do you feel that *TCS* has been well read? Have you

noticed any quirks or patterns in terms of particular readings that have arisen in response to it?

JCA: I suppose there are two problems with the way *TCS* has been metabolized. One is that it has been seen as a purely cultural approach to democracy. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is that it reflects how my own cultural sociology has been read, as if it were an idealistic form of deterministic structuralism, such that “codes are all.” That misreading started in the late 1980s and it went something like, “Well, Jeff’s box is discourse; Bourdieu’s is Field Theory; and the micro people look at interaction.” In other words, cultural sociology must be put in a box, and it is the box of idealism. I don’t see the Strong Program that way. Rather than culture as determinant, I am insisting on something quite different, namely that the internal patterning of culture allows it to become relatively autonomous. Strong Program work has been concerned with actions and institutions, not just discourse. For the last two decades, it has conceptualized the elements of social performance, the phases of cultural trauma, and the materiality and sensuous power of cultural icons – not to mention the institutions (law, office, public opinion polls, journalism and fiction) and social movements that dynamize civil spheres.

The second source of some interpretive frustration has been the idea that CST is simply an idealistic way of thinking about the “normative public,” but in a Durkheimian rather than Habermasian manner. As if CST is about democracy as either being one big happy family or a miserably atomized group, without Tolstoy’s important qualification about every difficult family being unhappy in its own way. Critics of CST point out that there is conflict, contention, and polarization, and take this as evidence that we don’t have a civil sphere. But this is absurd! The very point of the binary discourse of civil society and the chapters devoted to contradictions and social movements is to highlight the dialectic of solidarity and polarization.

CT: So in light of what you have just said, the view that the civil sphere has collapsed within American society, a view one hears more and more within particular intellectual circles and among members of the political commentariat, is not one to which you subscribe?

JCA: The argument that the civil sphere has collapsed in the USA is one I hear a lot lately, and from scholars whom I think very highly of. The claim is that because society is so polarized now, there is no shared discourse and no deference to shared institutions. It is hard for thinkers to live with the idea that there is a solidary community in tension with other societal dimensions – the market, the state, religion, the family, racial, ethnic groups – and that the very success of civil repair engenders sometimes severe and dangerous backlash movements. In a time of intense polarization, like we are in now, it is very tempting for people to say, “obviously there is no civil sphere because there is conflict.” But my idea in writing the civil sphere, right from the very beginning, was to say “yes, there is always conflict,”

but you can still have a civil sphere whose members remain connected to one another in non-conflictual ways.

There is a kind of idealizing view of the public sphere that thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Habermas drew from their understanding of the Greek tradition – the courteously conversational coffee house, the transcendentalizing political actor. I see this idea as going back to what I refer to in *TCS* as Civil Society I. The idea is that a democratic, good society is made up of wonderfully socialized and balanced human beings, who are beautifully educated, well-meaning and cooperative in their discourse and associations.

For my part, I propose a view of democracy as permeated by contentious performance and political drama, fueled by discourse that is always about contrast and othering. My argument, however, is that sharing a binary language connects people, allows them to understand one another, and gives them the sense that they are part of something much larger than themselves. This is not to say that the civil sphere cannot be destroyed – certainly it has been in the past and might be in the future. It is to say that until now, in the USA, it has not been destroyed. As Norberto Bobbio has forcefully argued, normal politics splits actors into left and right, allowing the articulation of different ideological versions of a civil sphere. One version emphasizes liberty and individualism more, the other emphasizes equality more. Yet alongside this ideological polarization it is possible, and indeed necessary if democracy is to survive, to maintain a sense of the broader solidary whole, which is why, for example, most Americans agree that we should all be governed by a shared constitution. Among the institutions that can sustain shared solidarity are professional journalism and office obligations, obedience to the results of free and fair voting, and being responsive to randomized opinion polling.

In the two decades since *TCS* appeared, I have been in a more or less continuous dialogue with my critics. Now it has often been the case that, soon after they write a big book, social theorists pass from the scene – literally by death or figuratively – in which case the conversation about their theory goes on without them. So far, I've managed to stay alive, both literally and figuratively, so I am involved in a lot of the discussion and argumentation about CST that might otherwise have been posthumous. I am grateful that I have had so many opportunities to reply to my critics, exchanges that have significantly contributed to advancing CST.

CT: I must say that this is a strange conversation to be having with you! I feel slightly unnerved having it.

JCA: Well, one begins to be very aware of the passing of time as one gets near to 80! On the bulletin board behind my desk, I have thumbtacked an index card with this quotation from Virgil: "But nevertheless it does pass; Time passes irrevocably by; It breathes upon us and then drifts by us while we stay put, held captive by successive passions."

CT: Your work operates with a very different conception of the public, or of people more generally, than that found in Critical Theory. Indeed, it was

Bruno Latour (1988: 170) who noted that Critical Theory tends to operate with a conception of people that can be captured by the line in the Bible, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." This is the view that people need to be saved as much from themselves as from those oppressing them. It strikes me that in *TCS* you take seriously the idea that people are always already endowed with moral autonomy, are capable of thinking critically, and that society already contains within it the capacity to sort itself out, as it were. How important are the people in *TCS*?

JCA:

Almost 50 years ago, Todd Gitlin (1978) published a perceptive polemic against this kind of critical theorizing in "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm," which he described as the "hypodermic view" of mass media and culture. In the neo-Marxist tradition from the Frankfurt School and Gramsci to Bourdieu, there is this overweening idea that elites, either for profit, power, or habitus, articulate ideas that are subsequently simply internalized by the masses. Think, for example, of Althusser's concept of "interpellation."

I don't agree with this. I think that people have developmental capacities, that they are socialized into having critical capacities of their own. And the people who produce news, or movies, or newspapers, know that. They are not projecting things into people, controlling their brains like they are robots. They create sophisticated and complex products because they know that the audience is evaluating them. Audiences won't necessarily fuse with the texts that actors project to them; they have capacities of their own, among them "irony," "comedy," and "critical appreciation." I've tried to build such a layered understanding into my theory of social performance. You don't just have an actor whose performance is organized and projected, but audiences that become increasingly independent of the performance. I think that is a fundamental presupposition of contemporary symbolic communication.

Indeed, the Performance Theory that I developed is not just a theory of symbolic communication *à la* Geertz, and it is radically different from the ritual theory that Durkheim developed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Yes, it is a theory of symbolic rather than instrumental action, but it is a model that emphasizes the growing autonomy of audiences – as well as the other "elements of performance" – vis-à-vis the sources of communication. I had been working on this "anti-ritualistic" model of performance from the late 1990s on, and it certainly informs my thinking in *TCS*. Civil Sphere Theory is trying to push sociological theories of power and capitalism away from determinism. It conceptualizes how citizens manifest their independence from the capitalist machinery, the culture industry, the state, and from religion – by exercising civil power via independent associations and social movements, which are mediated by communicative and regulative institutions whose *raison d'être* is to allow separation from vertical power. As compared to the top-down perspective that prevails, not only in Critical Theory but in so much of macro-sociology, CST provides a vision of a more voluntaristic, dynamic and thickly meaningful society.

CT: As you well know, my work is concerned with cultural representations, and the symbolic processes by which representations of other cultures are constructed and contested. As a sociologist who is British and lives and works in Britain, I sometimes sense from colleagues here that my work on “culture” is somehow less intellectually serious, let us say, than work that is more explicitly rooted in the study and analysis of class. After all, we are in Britain, and life in Britain is utterly shot through with the structuring effects of class. It is in the lifeworlds of the people who live here, and it permeates the lifeworld of professional sociologists working in the UK. This interests me because I know that one response to your work here in the UK is to say, “Well, this is cultural sociology, and I don’t do cultural sociology. I am a sociologist, and I study class, and if not explicitly then implicitly because class is the determining social fact.” In my experience, it can be difficult here in the UK to persuade colleagues to open themselves up to some of the central ideas of your work. What would you say to this? How should we understand the relationship of Strong Program cultural sociology to class and class-based forms of analysis?

JCA: Well, the first thing I would say is that this is not a legitimate comparison. You cannot say, “Class theory vs cultural sociology.” I mean, as I see it, there are two issues. The first is Critical Theory, as it has come to be understood, by which I mean, Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Said, Bourdieu. . . and that is one thing. You *can* legitimately compare Critical Theory with Strong Program cultural sociology, which is something you have written about so well in your theoretical criticisms of Said (Thorpe, 2025) and demonstrate by your comparative historical work on Britain and Italy (Thorpe, 2023). Is it presumptuous to suggest that, if culture is relatively autonomous – which is the foundation presupposition of The Strong Program – then a great deal of Critical Theory is simply wrong, that the world is just not made in that way? The market does not monopolize the effects, the patterning, and the control of meaning. The shaping of meaning is contingent. Many different groups try to shape it, and cultural traditions as such exert a force that “escapes” the determinate control of any group, no matter how powerful. Culture controls people as much as it is controlled by people.

You can see this in relation to specific events. So, for example, in your own work, you examined the role of Protestantism in relation to Catholicism for understanding Italy, and the shifting relationship between these traditions over five centuries. As you argue in the book (Thorpe, 2023), the changing social effects of these traditions demonstrate the relative autonomy of culture. As you have shown in your more recent work (Thorpe, 2025), the rise of Romanticism – embodied in the works of British poets and writers – had an enormous effect in shaping understandings of Italy, which in turn powerfully affected British foreign policy. Romanticism is a critique of modernity and capitalism, and it gave rise to markedly different understandings of Italy and of Catholicism than British ascetic Protestantism. And to great effect.

What I want to stress, however, is that saying you live in a highly classed society, or that you wish to focus empirically on the study of class, doesn't necessarily make you an adherent of Critical Theory. Yes, anyone who comes to Britain, whether they are from Germany, France, Italy, or the United States, realizes that the national discourse is laden with class. The inflections of speech, dress, the role of the public schools, the role of Oxbridge – these are all social facts that tell people they are living in a class society. Yet, the existence of this empirical phenomenon, far from refuting the Strong Program, might be seen, instead, as a wonderful topic for Strong Program study.

Empirical studies have suggested that social mobility in Britain isn't actually all that different from other post-industrial societies, such as the United States and Germany. But this isn't how the class structure is experienced in Britain. Not at all! Which is what would make it so interesting to study: how has the idea of an all-powerful class hierarchy been sustained? To understand this, I believe, we would need to study cultural order and its independent effects.

As for the specific question of class and the civil sphere, Celso Villegas (2023) published a fascinating and subtle study, "The Civil Sphere and Social Class" in the Special Issue that *Cultural Sociology* devoted to CST. Delving deeply into the footnoting of *TCS*, Celso suggested that, far from ignoring class, the book actually demonstrated quite a significant concern for it. The reason I decided to carry out this discussion of class in the footnotes rather than in the main text should, I hope, be pretty obvious. My aim in *TCS* was to conceptualize the forms of inequality that were challenged in the post-war period, which meant tracing the massive social movements that emerged around race, gender, and religion.

CT: I know the paper, of course. On a related note, I also know Phil Smith's (2023) brilliant article that treats class as a collective representation. I say brilliant because he manages to combine an incredibly fecund cultural sociological imagination with razor-sharp analytical acumen and a formidable command of the English language. But to return to your own work, class is a subject that you have always been highly mindful of – is that right?

JCA: I have been thinking about class my whole life. Remember, I was a Marxist in my late undergraduate years and my early post-graduate ones! I metabolized Mills, Dahrendorf, Goldthorpe and Lockwood, and Bottomore's exquisite book-length essays on classes and elites. I also spent some wonderfully challenging hours during my graduate training arguing with Eric Olin Wright about class position. But as I began to transition from Marxism to concerns for democracy, what struck me very forcefully was T.H. Marshall's argument that 20th-century democracy had allowed for the achievement of the "social" dimension of citizenship. Of course, class inequality remains a powerful force after the creation of the welfare state, but it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries that intense and vibrant class-focused social movements demanded the expansion of western civil spheres. Thinking about the empirical case studies I would investigate to

illustrate Civil Sphere Theory – which I laid out in Parts I and II of *TCS* – the challenge was to conceptualize the social movements of *our* time, which meant race, ethnicity, gender, and antisemitism. In fact, even as I was diving into these literatures, I thought on and off about going back and writing a chapter about working-class movements in the 19th century; for I was, and am, convinced that this would be a marvelous case study for civil sphere theorizing.

Only a year after *TCS* appeared, an Australian historical sociologist, Michael Davis (2007), wrote an essay using CST to look at mid-century English class struggle. I remember encouraging Davis to develop this research at book length. I don't believe he has, so I'm afraid this chapter of the civil sphere project remains to be written, and I hope it will be. Meanwhile, what we do have is the truly excellent theoretical-cum-empirical work of Celso Villegas, which, in addition to the *Cultural Sociology* article I mentioned earlier, includes the following: (Villegas, 2018) "*La clase media en positivo?* The civil and uncivil uses of 'the middle class' in Venezuela, 1958–2016"; (Villegas, 2019) "The middle class as a culture structure: Rethinking middle-class formation and democracy through the civil sphere"; (Villegas, 2021) "#Disente and Duterte: The cultural bases of antipopulism in the Philippines, 2001–2019"; and (Villegas, 2022) "Towards a new cultural sociology of the Latin American middle class: Ecuador's middle class revolution as a collective representation".

More broadly, social class was an important social fact to "think with" as I was moving towards a cultural sociology. I realized that the working-class struggle succeeded because it was able to connect class oppression and class liberation to broader, non-class social meanings about humanity, the sacred, and citizenship. I was very interested, for example, in the relationship between Chartism and Christianity, and in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which made a tremendous impression on me because of its emphasis on popular culture, the so-called natural rights of Englishmen, and religion. I also carefully studied the debate about Methodism and the British working class, which began with the brilliant writing of the great French liberal historian Elie Halevy (whose first work, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, was a vital theoretical reference for me in *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*). I was also deeply inspired by Reinhard Bendix's lengthy discussion of class in *Nation-Building and Citizenship* (1964), which demonstrated how the success of the early trade union movement depended upon the cultural, legal, and political "tools" provided by British citizenship. This was a particularly important text for me as I made the transition from cultural Marxism to a cultural Weber.

CT:

It is fascinating to hear you recall and retrace developments in your thought from cultural Marxism to a "cultural Weber" to cultural sociology. It brings into sharp relief the marked differences between the conception and significance of culture in your work and of other influential sociologists of culture, of whom Bourdieu is arguably the most well-known. I emphasize the

preposition “of” because I recall reading an article by Mike Savage and Elizabeth Silva published in *Cultural Sociology* in 2013, in which Bourdieu’s work was discussed under the rubric of cultural sociology (Savage and Silva, 2013). This was the first time I had seen Bourdieu and his work being described in this way. I remember being very perplexed by this.

JCA: It is certainly an irony that, for the last 20 years, everything sociological that is concerned with culture is identified as “cultural sociology.” Yet, I introduced that term with a polemical ambition, contrasting it with the “sociology of culture” in order to highlight how the Strong Program allowed an autonomy to culture that Bourdieu and other production of culture folks denied. Bourdieu is certainly the greatest sociologist of culture of our time. He was a brilliant thinker and writer; he had all the tools, but his theorizing about culture went off the rails because it was so sharply reductive. Not to mention its dark pessimism about the possibilities for emancipatory and inclusive social change. I see Bourdieu’s writing on culture as very much in the Veblen tradition, a satirical caricature of striving capitalism that is extremely provocative in a moral sense, but empirically was off base.

It is strange that the term I had introduced to thematize the distinctiveness of the Strong Program became a general term applied to even the most reductive approaches to culture. Why did this happen? Maybe because the concept I introduced consisted only of two words, a noun and an adjective, without the clumsy preposition “of”? And it was, therefore, easier and more felicitous to use as “culture” became an ubiquitous topic in contemporary sociology. But maybe there is more than language at issue. I do believe that the Strong Program had a lot of resonance in American sociology, even if it never became the dominant orientation. Here is another topic that merits cultural-sociological study!

CT: I find what you have just said to be incredibly illuminating. One reads any work at least partly through the lens of one’s own intellectual interests and research. As I read *TCS*, I did so as a study of contradictions. On one level, of course, the book is about justice – the word features twice in the opening sentence. But when read through the lens of my own research, through a focus on constructions of otherness, others both “internal” and “external” to society, and the contradictions that constructions of “otherness” give rise to and straddle, I see it very much as a work that highlights tensions and contradictions that cannot ever be resolved within human groups and societies in a “once-and-for-all” kind of way. I feel *TCS* is as much about contradictions as it is justice, not that the two are mutually exclusive.

JCA: Yes, I agree 100% with that. While solidarity is certainly at the core of CST, and Durkheim is one of its central inspirations, I have grown a bit tired of readers talking to me about solidarity, solidarity, solidarity or about Durkheim, Durkheim, Durkheim. . . I always say to them: Read Chapter 8, “Contradictions: Uncivilizing Pressures and Civil Repair” (Alexander, 2006). THAT is the hinge at the center of the theory. The explicit concern with the concept of justice reveals my long preoccupation with the writings of John Rawls. For a few years, in fact, the working title of my

manuscript was ‘A Sociological Theory of Justice’, but I realized that it wasn’t very communicative of the book’s main point, which was my effort to theorize a new social fact called the civil sphere.

The idea of contradiction, of course, is from Marx. As I mentioned earlier, I was a Marxist in my formative intellectual years.

CT:

Stop the press! Can I start this article with that line?!

JCA:

I was a *cultural* Marxist, to be sure, which during the 1960s and early 1970s was called New Left Marxism. It was being a New Left Marxist that made me an intellectual. We had our own study groups, trying to read the most advanced neo-Marxist (and Hegelian) thought, and we strongly believed that “consciousness,” not the economic base, needed to be put at the center of Marxist theory. It was because of our emphasis on consciousness that we spoke *as Marxists* about the “relative autonomy of culture.” While Marx and Engels had occasionally recognized this autonomy (see Engels’ famous “Letters to Bloch”), we believed culture (ideology) became a residual category because these founders did not possess the theoretical tools to conceptualize it.

At any rate, it was my early immersion in Marxism, in great neo-Marxist thinkers like Gramsci, Lukacs, Korsch, and Althusser that allowed me to understand the concept of contradiction, which was responsible for the dynamism in Marx’s social theory. Of course, Marx conceived contradiction in an economistic and materialistic manner – as the tension between the forces and relations of economic production – but I wanted to build that notion of contradiction into my more cultural-sociological theorizing about the dynamics of actually existing civil spheres. It has always been quite frustrating for me that very few people read *TCS* with the centrality of Chapter 8 in mind. I guess that is because it doesn’t seem to go very well with the Durkheimian tradition: How can one emphasize solidarity *à la* Durkheim and contradiction *à la* Marx at the same time? It is also difficult for CST enthusiasts, inspired by the case studies in the second half of the book, to come to terms with the sense of the tragic that Chapter 8 implies, that the civil sphere is not a thing but a project, that there will always exist “uncivilizing pressures” and push back against civil repair. Yes, it is a significant departure for *TCS* to conceptualize a progressive narrative for modernity, but alongside it, the book conceptualizes modernity’s dark and tragic story, as well. In Chapter 18, “The Jewish Question: Anti-Semitism and the Failure of Assimilation,” I argue that it was the Hitlerian destruction of Weimar’s civil sphere, not Germany’s antisemitic culture (which extended widely beyond Germany), that allowed the Holocaust. The discourse of civil society is binary, which means that the bright light projected by the discourse of liberty is always and everywhere shadowed by the darkness of the discourse of repression. Yes, CST allows us to understand the possibilities for progress, but as the history of the 20th century makes pretty obvious, things often go south. People strive for beauty, but history often gets very ugly. Which is why I put that quote from Camus’ *Resistance* notebooks as the epigraph for *Frontlash / Backlash* (Alexander, 2025).

- CT:** “We know that Man’s salvation may well be impossible but we say that this is no reason to stop trying. . .”
- JCA:** Exactly! I might well take this dogged statement of disappointed idealism as my own motto. Civil repair is a continuous *effort* in the existential sense. Sartre is another thinker who had a tremendous influence on me, his novels and plays, his great philosophical manifesto *Being and Nothingness*, and his failed effort to bring voluntarism into Marxist theory, so evident in his extraordinary treatise *Search for a Method*, the introduction to his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, published years before the volume it prefaced.
- CT:** In the course of this interview, you have taken issue with various facets of Critical Theory, and your work, like the work of Durkheim and Parsons, has been described as conservative because it is insufficiently radical. How might you respond to that with reference to *TCS*?
- JCA:** Is Civil Sphere Theory conservative? Yes, I suppose one is not a radical if one argues, as I have, that civil repair can happen inside of democratic capitalist societies, without the necessity of first overthrowing them. Yet the charge that I am conservative strikes me as absurd. In fact, what I have done with *TCS* is build criticism *into* a theory about the nature of democratic society. My ambition has been to demonstrate that a society that contains a relatively autonomous civil sphere is a critical society. To me, the civil sphere is what allows radical criticism to lead to dramatic social reconstruction. My view is that the civil sphere preserves, and to a partial degree institutionalizes, the utopian aspirations for liberty and equality that have been part of the DNA of western societies from the Greeks and Romans to the republics of the late Middle Ages and the extraordinary Italian city-states of Early Modern Europe, and onward to the democratic revolutions accomplished first in Britain, then America, and soon after in France. Certainly, these were all classed societies, but they also had aspirations of being a republic. With CST, I have tried to honor the long critical lineage, not of “modernity” but of democracy, in its republican and later liberal forms. In my view, it would be ridiculous to say the Greeks or the city-states of the late Middle Ages were modern. It is not ridiculous, however, to suggest that they institutionalized powerful elements of the republican tradition.

Criticism is baked into democratic societies because the civil sphere, insofar as it has some independence from non-civil spheres, can stand back and hold a mirror up to all sorts of social problems. To me, socialism, whether Marxist or not, wonderfully illustrates the immanent critique that civil spheres brought into industrializing capitalism in the 19th century. Socialism was a mass movement of civil repair, one that tried to end class inequality and create a community of equals. If that proved impossible, it remained a powerful ideal that allowed workers to exert tremendous civil power, creating Chartism, Fabianism, and the Labour Party in Britain, “solidarism” and communism in France, the enormous Social Democratic Party in Germany, and the massive working people’s movements in the USA (about which I wrote my Harvard undergraduate thesis, under the

supervision of Barrington Moore). I don't think of those movements as simply workers struggling for material wealth; the workers were fighting for the right to be more fully part of the civil sphere. They were saying, "you have made us these promises and we demand that you honor them, by giving us shorter working hours, higher wages, safer factories, the right to organize trade unions and eventually to put political parties representing labor into control of the state."

CT: It strikes me that because you dare to talk about "civil repair," which would suggest human social life is not without its redeeming if not positively inspiring features, that a kind of collective psychic defense mechanism kicks in among the majority of professional sociologists. This appears to involve a form of active misrecognition that means being incapable of acknowledging that not everything in the world is as bad, futile, or cause for despair as it is made out to be, typically by and among groups of professional sociologists. Of course, it behooves sociology to interrogate claims about things that are set up as being "good" and/or "true." But somewhere along the line, when sociology is being duly diligent and carrying out its (social) fact-checking, it mistakes being duly skeptical with being incapable of acknowledging that civil repair and progress of a sort has, and does, take place.

JCA: It is a kind of professional deformation, this need to be purely critical. On the one hand, you could say that sociologists are agents of social repair, yet the theoretical frameworks they deploy are distorted insofar as they fail to conceptualize the cultural and institutional resources that have systematically allowed for it.

It's not only contemporary sociologists who resist the idea that some good things have marked the recent history of US society – things like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo – but my non-academic friends in New Haven, who are doctors, lawyers, and business people. Even before Trump, but especially after and during him, left-leaning Americans feel hopeless, declaring that the country is a miserable failure. What they don't want to hear is that Trump represents a backlash against 75 years of successful social reform. In a sense, Trumpism is "what we get" for decade after decade of progressive social change. There is no free lunch in social life. You can't have your cake and eat it too. If the social pendulum swings to the left, it will inevitably have to eventually also swing to the right. The challenge for the civil sphere is to contain this swinging pendulum so that, when it swings back and forth, it will not get stuck on the edge of either side. It is difficult for us on the left to accept the reality that conservative movements are inevitable, that we have to accept rightward swings as a healthy sign of a pluralistic and democratic society, even as we dedicate ourselves to fighting against conservative policies. The challenge is to keep conservatism "civil." Trump is now stepping over the line.

It is true that, in some sense, societalizing civil repairs never fully achieve their aims. There is always backlash, and in an open society this reaction, along with organizational inertia, means progressive reforms

don't get everything they want. But at least they are allowed to try, to form associations, and to freely argue their case. There are no social movements in China and Russia! You need a relatively autonomous civil sphere to allow social movements to form. Just today in the *New York Times*, there was a front-page story about a woman, a rock and roll fashion designer in Russia, who, after her country's invasion of Ukraine, began putting anti-war slogans on the aisles of supermarkets wherever she shopped. She replaced the pricing labels with stickers demanding peace, and for that she has been sentenced to seven years in prison. She was released in a recent prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia. Reading that, I thought about how amazing it is that critical social movements are legitimately and systematically engendered in a democratic civil sphere.

These are the sorts of ideas I am trying to articulate in my two recent books, *Civil Repair* (2024) and *Frontlash / Backlash* (2025). In the former, I argue against the pessimistic despair that is so deeply structured in social theory. In the latter, I theorize the dark side in a different way. The dangerous social and political problems we are facing today have not emerged because there is a power elite or because there is inequality *per se*. Yes, those are problems that absolutely should be addressed, but they are not the cause of our present predicament. The unnerving movement toward reaction and authoritarianism is the dialectical other side of civil repair. Trumpism has not emerged because contemporary American society has been so bad; rather, it is because society was so (relatively) good; our civil sphere has been dramatically expanded, stigmatized and hated groups have been allowed inside, and tens of millions of immigrant "others" have been welcomed in.

CT: This is a very interesting and highly counter-intuitive argument.

JCA: Take the country that concerns your own work, namely Italy. The neo-fascist or post-fascist movement in Italy has turned out to be a relatively civil form of conservatism. . . At least so it seems today.

CT: You are referring to the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, the first female leader of the Brothers of Italy Party, a conservative and right-wing party. . .

JCA: Right! The Italian Prime Minister is not abolishing Italian democracy and leading a march on Rome. She turns out to have been in some way "civilized" by the Italian civil sphere, emerging as a pro-Europe, anti-Russian conservative leader. For me, this is deeply significant. And I predict the same thing will happen in France if the far right comes to power. The civil spheres in Italy and France will, I think, have proved resilient enough to assimilate these right-wing movements, such that their social and political pendulums will eventually be allowed to swing to the left side again. It is only if they were to be stuck on the far-right side that France and Italy would become Fascist states.

It fascinates me that the word 'Fascism' is on everybody's lips. There was a great burst of publicity when three professors left Yale for the University of Toronto right after Trump was elected, explaining 'we are

escaping fascism.’ Really?! I mean, OK, using fascism in this way is to employ it as a metaphor for evil, and it’s certainly a generative one. We are living in a period of great problems and real dangers. But Fascism in a literal sense? It is an insult to the Europeans who actually were compelled to live under Nazism and Fascism to describe current American conditions in this way. A few weeks ago, in early November, we had dozens of local elections, almost all of which were won by anti-Trump politicians. The most powerful mainstream journalistic media have been critical of virtually every move the Trump administration takes. Local and regional federal courts have consistently ruled against Trump’s most draconian initiatives. Millions of people have taken to the streets in mass performances of public resistance. Rather than being censured, public opinion polls have recorded the drip, drip, drip of Trump’s significantly declining popularity during the first year of his second Presidential term. All this seems a lot more like democracy than fascism to me.

CT: What is the relationship of Civil Sphere Theory to Strong Program cultural sociology? More concretely, is there something that binds a book like *The Meanings of Social Life* (Alexander, 2003), a book that has left a profound mark on me, and a book like *The Civil Sphere* (2006)? Should we see *TCS* as an extension of and nested within the broader program that is Strong Program cultural sociology, or do you always see one as more political than the other?

JCA: *The Meanings of Social Life* is a collection of essays that began to be written in the 1980s. The first pieces of Strong Program cultural sociology were formulated in the Spring of 1986, in my articles on the computer and Watergate, and with the publications of student members of the UCLA “Culture Club” it went on from there. *Meanings* comes out in 2003 and includes my work on cultural trauma, the Holocaust, intellectuals, and evil, and, of course, my articles with Phil Smith on structural hermeneutics and the discourse of American civil society. The Strong Program is what you might call a “social theory.” It is a broad set of orientational arguments about collective meaning and empirical studies inspired by theorizing in the hermeneutical tradition. *TCS* is nested inside that broad social theory, and I think of it as a politically oriented, macro-sociological theory of society that has been transformed into a Lakatosian research program.

CT: In that sense, would you say that *TCS* furnishes us with a total social ontology?

JCA: Yes, but it takes on the nature of social reality from a more sociological than philosophical point of view. It is an old-fashioned theory in that it sets out to create and elaborate a set of new social facts. But it is not only an abstract theory, for most of the book, really, is devoted to showing how the new model possesses verisimilitude, how the theory is revealed in the empirical. For me, this points to the challenge for effective theorizing, whether cultural or not. You have to write well enough to allow a reader to see and

experience the theory in a concrete and sensual way. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber did that brilliantly, and he was also able to powerfully evoke, if to a lesser degree, the theoretically relevant “feel” of the religions of China, India, and ancient Judaism. Durkheim was also able to turn this theoretical trick in his richly empirical account of Aboriginal religion. Among contemporary cultural sociologists, nobody was better at this than Clifford Geertz. On his good days, he did an extraordinary job of creating the feeling of his theories. I think this is what Roland Barthes was getting at with his distinction between the “author” (*auteur*) and the “Writer” (*écriture*), the former writing *about* things – reporting on them – the latter being able to communicate the meanings of social things via the formation of language itself. My ambition has been to be a writer, not only an author. I wrote literary fiction in high school, in college, and after, and I gave a good deal of thought to becoming a novelist. Good cultural sociology must have an aesthetic dimension, as you noted earlier in your praise of the work of Philip Smith, who was once my student before becoming my colleague and “boss” when he chaired Yale’s sociology department, and who now directs CCS (The Centre for Cultural Sociology) with Yagmur Karakaya, the Associate Director.

CT: I wonder if you ever worry about the issue of your legacy being carried on. Can anyone else do Strong Program cultural sociology as well as Jeffrey Alexander?

JCA: Certainly some people can, and will, and maybe even do it better. Your question goes back to an issue I concerned myself with in my 1980s essay, “*On the Centrality of the Classics*.” Classical must be considered in a functional rather than essentialist way. If one’s work becomes classical, it is because people return to it in order to experience what a certain perspective on society “feels” like, and capturing this feeling is what allows them to do their own work at a high level.

If there have been a handful of really great Weberians in the last one hundred years, it is because they have read *The Protestant Ethic*, which is an extraordinarily eloquent piece of writing that aesthetically evokes Weber’s cognitive-theoretical model for me. When cultural sociology is not felicitously written, then the argument for, and nature of, collective meanings cannot be effectively transmitted to the reader, who will, instead, have to take the fact that collective meanings exist “on faith.” Where this happens, the cultural sociological writing is more indexical than literary. It tells but doesn’t show. The prose says, “this is a meaning” but it can’t make the meaning come alive.

CT: That is the art, I guess. . .

JCA: Yes, that is the art.

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