

RISKING ENCHANTMENT: THEORY AND METHOD IN CULTURAL STUDIES

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Early in this century, in his masterwork *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim called for the creation of a "religious sociology" that would "open a new way to the science of man." Yet, as the century comes to an end, such a "religious" understanding of society does not exist. Nor has our discipline been able to create a new science of men and women. Two reasons suggest themselves. One is that Durkheim's secular readers were unable to understand what he had in mind. The other is that they were able to, and did not like it.

Durkheim's idea was to put meaning and culturally-mediated sentiment at the center of the social studies. While he never gave up on the idea of a social science, in his later work he increasingly wished to change it in a fundamental way. He wanted social science to give up on what we will call the "project of demystification."

Certainly disciplinary rationality must be maintained: our intellectual theories and methods allow a critical, decentered relationship to the world. Social science is rational, too, in the sense that its moral goal is rooted in the Enlightenment project of bringing to conscious attention the subjective and objective structures that lie outside the largely tacit understandings of everyday life.

Yet, the rationality of the social scientific method must not be conflated with the rationality of the society to which it applies. Our own work is guided, in fact, by the very opposite supposition. As we see it, society will never shed its mysteries—its irrationality, its "thickness," its transcendent beatitudes, its demonic black magic, its cathartic rituals, its fierce and incomprehensible emotionality, and its dense, sometimes splendid, often tortured solidarities.

These mysteries have generally been avoided by rational social science. Insofar as they have been addressed, moreover, our classics and our contemporaries have sought to explain such irrationalities by the method of reduction. Insisting that subjectivities are caused by objectivities, they have tried (and, we would argue, invariably failed) to demonstrate that these irrationalities are merely reflections of "real" structures, such as organizations, stratificational systems, and political groupings.

Sociologists pride themselves on such exercises in the "sociology of"—in this case, of culture—and in the demystification of the actor's world that is both premise and result. But this reduction is fundamentally mistaken. The world has an irremediably mystical dimension. To explore it, we must go beyond the "sociology of" culture to a cultural sociology, one that gets inside the mysteries of social life without reducing them or wishing them away, even while it interprets them in a

rational way that expands the realm of criticism, responsibility, and conscience.

The promise of a cultural sociology (Alexander 1993) is to do just that. For, as Clifford Geertz insisted some twenty years ago, "the study of symbolic action is no less a sociological discipline than the study of small groups, bureaucracies, or the changing role of the American woman; it is only a good deal less developed" (Geertz 1973). Since he wrote these words, cultural sociology has, in fact, become an independent field that is one of the discipline's most vibrant and dynamic places to work. We have come a long way in the exploration of the codes, narratives, and symbols that underlie, and underwrite, society. But we still have a long way to go.

C. Wright Mills once extolled the sociological imagination as the intersection of biography and history, defining the latter largely in objectivist terms. Today, we must open ourselves up to the excitement of the social imagination. We must study how people make their lives and their societies meaningful, the ways in which social actors invest their worlds with sentiment and significance. If we are to pursue this rich and elusive goal, we will have to make our theories and methods consistent with this animating spirit.

We begin by rejecting the proposition that methodologies for investigating society can be theory neutral. If scientific work is to be understood as meaningful, we must recognize that it, too, is informed by culture. The culture of science is theory. We insist, then, that objects deemed worthy of investigation are selected according to theoretically driven choices. Fundamental categories for understanding society—class, state, institution, self, even culture—are made available by scientific decisions that have little to do with the canons of positivist science. It is metatheoretical assumptions about the nature of action and order that shape methodology and inference in the empirical sciences, pushing social analysts either toward or away from "culture" and, indeed, determining just what kind of interpretation of culture will ultimately prevail.

In explicitly acknowledging that theory, method, and inference are inextricably intertwined, we differentiate ourselves (see Griswold 1992) from the increasingly popular poststructuralist approach to the study of culture. Contrary to the work of Michel Foucault (e.g., *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) and the sociological extrapolation Robert Wuthnow has made from it (Wuthnow 1987; Rambo & Chan 1990), we deny the very possibility of a genealogical method which can map the contours of discourse without first devising a scale. In this sense, we argue, contra Wuthnow, that

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there can be no methodological improvement without theoretical renewal. Indeed, we contend that it is primarily by developing improved theoretical insights into the nature of the cultural order that new tools for its analysis can be forged.

While arguing in this postpositivist vein, we do not deny the power or the facticity of the empirical "world." Through a process of "resistance" the social world demands the constant re-tuning of theory and what Durkheim called "social facts." Time and time again, our own data-intensive inquiries (Alexander 1988b; Smith 1991; Alexander *et al* forthcoming) have produced unexpected results that force not merely theoretical refinement but fundamental revision.

To illuminate this complex relationship between fact and theory in cultural studies, we turn towards a more concrete discussion of our theoretical approach and the empirical studies of culture it has induced.

To speak of "our" inquiries may perhaps seem rather peculiar in a disputation on cultural method. Yet, one important implication of a theory-driven perspective on cultural social science is its particularity. There is no universal method that produces social science as such; there are only investigations guided by the search for empirical typifications of particular world views, which can be understood as theoretical sign systems promising researchers they will find certain phenomenon "already there" in the empirical world. Because particularity can be communicated only culturally, in the lifeworld, theoretical meaning systems can be carried only by particular intellectual traditions, which have the power to organize lifeworlds of their own. In a sense, then, theory, like meaning, is the product of a collective conscience.

We will focus our own discussion of cultural methods on the "culture group" that has developed at UCLA, which might be thought of as constituting a kind of little tradition within the great tradition of Durkheimian thought. This focus has the advantage of illuminating cultural studies not only in principle but *in situ*.

In light of what we have said so far, it should come as no surprise that the work of this group rests broadly upon what has been called the late-Durkheimian tradition (Alexander 1988a), even while the specific studies undertaken by those associated with this group have taken a variety of forms, from linguistic and historical to neofunctionalist.

At the heart of our shared vision is a commitment to the "relative autonomy of culture" (Alexander 1990; Kane 1991). This general orienting position is specified by a model that insists that preoccupation with the sacred and profane continues to organize cultural life, a position that has been enriched by thinkers like Mircea Eliade, Edward Shils, Rogers Callois and, more recently, by the cultural economics of Viviana Zelizer. We emphasize as well the centrality of solidary sentiments and ritual process, and more broadly, following Parsons and Habermas, the importance of civil society and communication in contemporary social life. It is the openness of the civil sphere that allows communi-

cative processes to address metaphysics and morality, public sentiment and personal significance, and which allows cultural processes to become central features of contemporary political life.

Drawing upon Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of the hermeneutical method, our approach constructs the object of empirical investigations as the meaningful world of the "social text." Via the act of interpretation, we attempt to read this text for evidence of "culture structures," insisting that without the prior reconstruction of meaning any attempt at explanation is bound to fail. We do not maintain, of course, that explanation itself consists only of tracing the effects of cultural structures; while the latter have analytic autonomy, in any concrete historical situation they interact with other kinds of structures in an open-ended, multi-dimensional way. We would insist, however, that these "other structures"—whether they be economic, political, or even demographic—cannot themselves be viewed merely as external to the actors upon whom they exert their force. Attention must always be paid to the dimension of meaning.

If, *qua* cultural analysts, our core method is interpretive, our goal to recover meaning from the social text, it is important to keep the adjective *social* in mind. For our aim is to reconstruct the collective conscience from its documentary fragments and from the constraining structures it implies. In eliciting the structures that compose the *conscience collective*—which in French, we must recall, implies both cognitive "consciousness" and emotional and moral "conscience"—we bring to our interpretive effort an ecumenical sensibility that seeks insight from a variety of disciplines.

Our studies have drawn in fundamental ways, not only from the sociological writings of Durkheim, Max Weber, and Parsons, and from their elaboration in the work of such influential contemporaries as Bellah, Shils, and Eisenstadt, but also from the semiotics of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Marshall Sahlins; the post-structuralism of Foucault; the symbolic anthropology of Geertz, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas; the narrative theories of Northrup Frye and his literary followers like Hayden White and Fredric Jameson; and from the existential theology of Ricoeur. Within contemporary sociology, studies that we see as being informed by the same theoretical lifeworld and similar guiding particularities as our own include those of Zelizer, Steven Seidman, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Wendy Griswold, Eviatar Zerubavel, Barry Schwartz, Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan. Moreover, we find parallel concerns evidenced in the recent work of Craig Calhoun on civil society and social identity, and in that of Margaret Somers on narrative.

Insofar as our approach recognizes the "causal" authenticity and efficacy of collective sentiments and their symbolic patterning in the web of social life, our theoretical disagreements with neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, and ethnomethodological approaches to meaning entail methodological departures as well. Even in the best examples of these approaches, interpretation is seen as something that happens "behind the backs"

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of actors, who are described, in turn, as employing meaning strategically in order to gain their ends vis-a-vis other actors and overarching institutions. These approaches also bracket the analyst's own existential sentiments. Just as actors' emotional responses are created as residues of some strategic interest, so the analyst's emotions are viewed as a polluting category that threatens to contaminate the purity of rational scientific insight.

Neo-Marxists, for example, have always been uneasy with emotions, viewing them as vulnerable to capitalist manipulation, as exemplified in the Frankfurt School studies of the so-called "culture industry." This distrust has been compounded by the lingering self-conception of Marxism as a science of historical materialism. Such a theoretical commitment to the causal primacy of the material sphere makes the recovery of structured sentiment seem merely "formalist"—a redundant, regressive, activity vis-a-vis the progressively unfolding project of social explanation.

In Foucaultian post-structuralism, one finds a different theory and method but, from our cultural point of view, similar results. There is the effort to attain a dispassionate ironic gaze that objectifies without evaluating and maps without involvement. At the metatheoretical level, a commitment to the "will to power" as the causal motive of human action once again reduces sentiment to the category of a superfluous variable.

"Practice theories," in our view, are similarly debilitated. Despite his nods at *habitus* and his interest in the codes of art and fashion, Bourdieu relentlessly strategizes action, displacing experience from emotions to body and shifting theoretical attention from the power of collective symbols to their objective determinants. Giddens' "reflexivity" effectively reduces culture to situational rules, sentiments to interactional negotiation, and structures of meaning to the exigencies of time and space. Neo-institutional theory puts this practical emphasis on strategy, reflexivity and adaptation in the service of organizational control, promoting an instrumental view of symbolic legitimacy that gives the impression of thematizing myth and ritual while emptying them of any meaning-induced form.

With the possible exception of certain strands of symbolic interactionist work (e.g., Erving Goffman's *Asylum*), micro-sociological approaches have, for their part, also stressed cognition over morality and sentiment, and neglected meaning as a result. Moral and emotional involvement by the analyst is precluded by adherence to the principle of "ethnomethodological indifference," a skeptical American reformulation of Edmund Husserl's formalistic concept of the epoché. Faced with the taken-for-granted nature of the actor's relation to reality, Husserl argued that, in order to describe the actual procedures of intuitive cognition, the analyst must step outside of intuition altogether by the process of "phenomenological reduction."

But about the nature of the reality to which the lay actor's intuitive procedures provide access—the moral,

emotional, and cognitive structures that give to reality an internal organization of its own—Husserl and his latter day followers have little to say. What they tend to suggest, rather, is that such a reality emerges from the procedures themselves. Consider, for example, "conversation analysis," one of the vanguard parties of contemporary micro-sociology. Ethnomethodology's only surviving research program, conversation analysis (CA), offers a kind of pragmatic gignonicus, a method that, while powerfully illuminating the technique of verbal interaction, provides little insight into what speakers actually mean by what they say. Influenced by a narrow reading of Wittgenstein's ambiguous dictum "use = meaning," these studies in conversation often exhibit a mind-numbing positivism that is almost clinical in its detachment from the passion and fury of speakers in real life.

In contrast to such a dehumanizing gaze we recognize not only the existence but the causal efficacy of sentiment, belief, and emotion in social life. As interpreters we look upon our own emotional responses as a resource, not as a burden, as we encounter the social text. Examining contemporary events, we feel the intense passion and heat of human action that is too often lost in the cool rigor of scientific controls. For this is the crucial point: rituals, pollution, and purification can be understood only if the profound affects that make these primordial categories so compelling are openly acknowledged by the interpreter. Only by remaining engaged in the world can we have access to the emotions and metaphysics that alter social action; and only these can we interpret in a hermeneutically satisfying way.

We employ an approach that can be termed a "reflexive hermeneutics." Following the teachings of 18th and 19th century romantics such as Wordsworth and Goethe, and the meaning-oriented hermeneuticians like Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, we see our own emotional and moral reflexes as a basis for establishing intersubjectivity. Because our emphasis is not on objectification but on understanding, our own subjective responses provide the basis for a *Bildungsprozess*. At the same time, it is only because of the decentered nature of the theoretical tradition within which we work and think that we gain access to our emotions and allow for the possibility of moral and cognitive reflexivity. Because we work within a theoretical tradition, we can gain distance from our own experience and the experiences of others, even as we open ourselves to their emotions and ours, and make experience itself the basis of our interpretive turn.

Our studies of political life can be used to briefly exemplify this approach. In understanding the astonishing cultural shifts that brought about the end of the Cold War (Alexander & Sherwood forthcoming-b) we began to obtain insight by drawing upon our own experiences of euphoria and hope. Through casual conversations and our own exposure to global media, it became apparent that others around us shared these feelings—not only we, but many others seemed to like the Soviet leader Gorbachev. For the first time in years

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we found ourselves avidly reading articles about the fiendish complexities of Kremlin politics and for the first time we actually "took sides" in struggles for power within the Politburo. Clearly, something was going on here; not only in the Soviet Union, but also within America's national consciousness. As cultural sociologists, we responded by trying to understand these sentiments in the context of social and cultural theory. We began with Durkheim's religious sociology and Weber's charisma theory. However, as the data revealed the complexity and subtlety of the issue, we moved on, employing our theory of the binary codes of civil society as well as an evolving theory of social narrative. We discovered that we, and most Americans, had "fallen in love" with Gorbachev because he fit the cultural archetype and symbolic imagery of the democratic "American hero" (Sherwood 1993).

During times of profound international conflict, especially war (Smith 1993, 1991; Alexander & Sherwood forthcoming-a), we experienced emotions that ranged from disturbingly childish visceral excitement to unease and disgust. We also noticed behavioral changes, e.g., that we watched CNN late into the night and engaged in heated arguments with people with whom we were otherwise in agreement. Stepping out of the waters of the lifeworld we reflected on this as evidence of what Durkheim would call "collective effervescence." We looked in a more decentered way at the aspects of the fighting, the war coverage, the efforts at legitimation and dissent with which we approved and those with which we disapproved. Why, we asked, did we love, hate or admire George Bush, Margaret Thatcher or Saddam Hussein, feel pity for the victims of the Amiriya bunker bombing, the sinking of the *General Belgrano* or the massacres in Kurdistan, or feel horrified by the power of modern weaponry? It soon became apparent that there were continuities and patterns relating these feelings to the symbols that were being used to understand events both in the media and by friends and neighbors and by ourselves. Subsequent interpretations of the social text were disciplined not only by theoretical concerns (semiotic and narrative theory, mass media theory, Durkheimian theory, etc.), but by controlled comparisons between wars, opinion groupings and also between different periods of the same longitudinal event. The results showed that sacred and profane symbolics and their incorporation into narratives of events as heroic, tragic and apocalyptic had created these emotional responses.

Studies of Watergate and computer technology—the initiating investigations in this program of research and theory—began in similar ways. Emotional and moral involvement in collective processes prompted an inquiry into the patterning forces at work. If we felt ourselves revolted and purified during the upheavals that marked Watergate (Alexander 1988b; cf., Alexander & Sherwood 1991, and Alexander & Smith 1993), we wondered whether these feelings were shared outside of small and isolated groups. If we felt horrified by Reagan's "Star Wars" project, we wondered why many

Americans apparently felt exactly the opposite way. In each case, we set out to check whether "others" in our immediate experience, as well as those outside our intersubjective world, demonstrated similar or related reactions. If these checks confirmed our experiences of moral upheaval, we found that the mass media materials that documented the social reality of our own experiences could provide a concrete resource for the investigation of the supra-individual code and narrative frames that empowered these collective representations in turn. The inner world of emotion and meaning, clarified self-reflexively via social theory, told us where to begin to look in order to see the social imagination at work. Through this mediation between the personal and the impersonal, we could make the invisible parameters of the ideal visible and clear.

"Not a word of all that I have said or tried to indicate, came out of alien, cool, objective knowledge; it is all within me, I have been through it all." Speaking as a novelist in the German tradition, Thomas Mann was able to make this a legitimate methodological statement. As sociologists we cannot. Our scientific commitments require that we step out of the lifeworld before we write. It is necessary to compare data to theory, to test hypotheses and to consider evidence in an even-handed way.

Yet, by the same token, we would argue that it is a mistake to deny the reality of our own inner experiences of meaning, emotion and morality in illuminating the social imagination through which the world is remystified. We use the word "deny" advisedly, for how else, if not by such denial, can sociologists be committed to the objectivistic project and continue to exist as spiritual and sensible beings? Surely, it cannot be the case that more objectivising "cultural sociologists" feel themselves to be simply pushed willy-nilly by material forces, to be the dumb victims of a dominant theology, or the perpetrators of only selfish, strategic actions. To experience life in this way would be to have experience without meaning, and it would be an invitation to suicide. We conclude, therefore, that objectivising sociologists, too, live and love and experience the heat generated by the ardent symbols, emotions and relationships to be found in the social world.

This conclusion makes the question even more compelling. Why, do these analysts impose objectifying and degrading forms of explanation on others? They can impose this double-standard only because they deny the value of personal experience as a methodological resource. This denial results in an illegitimate squaring of the hermeneutical circle, a rupture that permits the objectification of meaning into the passionless categories, boxes and formulae of a "social science." We would prefer a *Geisteswissenschaft*, a science of the spirit.

We believe in the un-squaring of the hermeneutical circle. It is only through immersing the self in the sometimes fragrant, sometimes repulsive, but always febrile waters of the lifeworld, and by studying reflections in the clear pools of the soul, that a truly cultural sociology can be constructed: one that takes meaning

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to be the *fons et origo* of human communion and social life. In this way, we must ever be, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "risking enchantment." Thus, we argue that the coin of good sociology—at least, good cultural sociology—must bear the stamp of a method that cherishes both sense and sensibility.

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