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I N T E R V I E W

Performing Cultural Sociology
A Conversation with Jeffrey Alexander

Interviewed by Rodrigo Cordero, Francisco Carballo, and José Ossandón

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Introduction

Traditionally, sociologists have referred to the study of culture that concerns their discipline as 'sociology of culture'. Since the mid-1980s Jeffrey Alexander has been turning the discipline on its feet, coining a new term: 'cultural sociology'. The purpose of this upheaval is to redefine the sociological understanding of meaning in relation to social action as well as to rework both meaning and social action as categories for social research in general (see Alexander, 2007). Alexander's work seeks to construct above and beyond Parsons' theoretical edifice. This implies that, for Alexander, culture is a structure analytically different and autonomous from society, which is, in turn, understood as the internal environment of action. Consequently, Alexander regards culture as an 'independent variable' for socio-logical analysis (Alexander and Smith, 2003). His rethinking of culture stresses the need for a new sub-discipline within sociology, while reinvigorating other fields such as politics, economics or law due to its emphasis on the creative and performative character of meaning. In this sense, Alexander's 'strong program' in cultural sociology, is also a strong bet for the social sciences.

In the last two decades *cultural sociology* has become an increasingly institu-tionalized field within American sociology. Alexander has played a major role in advancing his own theoretical paradigm while shaping generations of graduate students under its workings. It is no wonder that the 'strong program in cultural sociology' is an unvarying reference among different schools of cultural analysis (Kurasawa, 2004). Alexander's work has been the object of several critical reviews generating as much adhesion as rejection (i.e. Collins, 1985; Colomy and Turner 1998; Emirbayer, 2004; Fuhrman, 1986; Inglis et al., 2006; Joas, 2005; Kurasawa, 2004; McLennan, 2004, 2005; Mouzelis, 1999; Poggi, 1983; Wallace, 1984).

In the present interview Jeffrey Alexander discusses the intellectual evolution of his work, from early attempts in rethinking the theoretical logic of sociology to his latest pragmatic turn in terms of a theory of social performance. Moreover, he contextualizes his cultural sociology and explains the points of agreement and

disagreement with competing approaches for cultural analysis, such as neo-institutionalist sociology in America, traditional and more recent post-structuralist influenced cultural studies in Britain, and current developments in French social theory. Finally, Alexander addresses his position on the pertinence of the notion of 'the social' for contemporary sociology.

The Autonomy of Meaning: Toward the 'Strong Program' in Cultural Sociology

Q1   From 'Theoretical Logic' (1982–3), the concept of synthesis has played a central role in your theoretical work as a pathway to overcoming, as you say, the main polarities that have divided classical and contemporary socio-logical thought (i.e. normative/instrumental action, positivism/relativism, individual/society, etc). In which way is it possible to understand your early attempts to develop a multidimensional theoretical approach as the base for the development of your 'strong program in Cultural Sociology'?

JA   Part of the *Theoretical Logic* project was finding a way to situate meaning. In order to establish multidimensionality, my main interest there was to find a way of critiquing materialism, even though the premise of the argument philosophically and theoretically was that idealism was also an error. I criti-cized Durkheim's later work from that perspective, and I also criticized Parsons for making an idealist reduction not in any one period of his work but in a dimension that permeated his entire work. Those critiques I found easy to make. I think it is easy for any sociologist to make a critique of idealism. The critique that I found difficult to make, and that was my animus from my early days as a cultural Marxist, is the critique of materialism.

   In *Theoretical Logic* I was particularly interested in Parsons' notion that in any concrete entity empirically there is an ideal and a material element, and that the common sense idea that empirical entities are material is an illusion and that it hides the *a priori* or the analytic, in Parsons' sense, which is the invisible cultural element that is what is always at play in relationship to external elements.

   When I wrote this four volume book, which was from the early 1970s until 1980, I thought Parsons had made the best macrotheoretical argument for the interpenetration of these two elements, but I gradually changed my mind in the course of the 1980s. I had already decided in the book on Parsons (Alexander, 1983) that he did not have a strong enough sense of the material world and of the contradictions created by tensions between spheres, a tension I have elaborated, for example, in my book *The Civil Sphere* (2006). But to my surprise I realized, in the course of the 1980s, that there was a lot of work that I had not paid much attention in semi-otics and anthropology. In the 1970s, I had read closely Cliffort Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, Emile Durkheim's late work, *Elementary Forms of*

Religious Life, Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, and Victor Turner, but I realized that I had simply not taken them seriously enough. I do not think that I really understood the repercussions of these ideas were until I started seriously reading and teaching semiotics in the early to mid-1980s: Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins, and others.

By the time I went to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton in the fall of 1985, I had become acutely dissatisfied with the work of Weber, the early Durkheim, and particularly Parsons' theoretical multi-dimensionality. In a sense I had been too satisfied with notions of values, or what Parsons had called 'the cultural system'. I realized that I needed to create my own sense of a sociological understanding of culture, a 'stronger' cultural program. I had to put aside the task of a multidimensional general theory because I had to go back behind Parsons, which meant giving up for a time the ambition to create an elegant, beautiful, and complex model of the society as a whole. I had to go back to the foundation, to the building blocks, and concentrate on what meaning might be and how it was created and composed in a social context. For me that meant going back to recovering semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, all in the spirit, if not the letter, of the late Durkheim.

I had made an interpretation of the late Durkheim in *Theoretical Logic* (Alexander, 1982, Vol. 2). I argued, in a rather elaborate way, that, while few of his later interpreters had understood it, Durkheim had really decided to start his sociology all over again. This happened in the late 1890s, with his discovery of religion. Durkheim had turned against modernism, not as an ethical system but as an epistemological idea. I still think it is a good interpretation of Durkheim and I have repeated it and rewritten it in various ways since then. At that early time in my own intellectual development, however, I had yet not understood the implications of my interpreting Durkheim in this manner.

I understood the implications of my own Durkheim interpretation only after I had read through and understood more symbolic and linguistic theory. I now understood what Mary Douglas, Cliffort Geertz, and Victor Turner were talking about. I tried to combine the late Durkheim with these symbolic anthropologists, semiotics and a bit of Foucault, and I started laying out a strong program in cultural sociology. The uncomfortable thing about that is that I started doing that in the mid-1980s, even as I continued to develop neofunctionalism. So I was doing two somewhat contradictory things at the same time. I felt that neofunctionalism could be the platform for a satisfactory macrosociology. It allowed one to pay attention to different social levels, to bring together interests, carrier groups, institutions, uneven development and differentiation, multidimensionality, the psychic level and the cultural level. It also allowed me to make a critique of what we might today call neoliberalism as an ideology. See, for example, the collectively edited books *Differentiation Theory and Social Change* (1990) and *The Micro–Macro Link* (1987).

In 1993 I went to Paris for the academic year where I visited Alain Touraine's group. That year I decided that I could not continue working simultaneously on neofunctionalism and the cultural program. That was a bit of a crisis for me because, by then, I had been developing neofunctionalism for ten years. I realized the time had come to publicly develop my misgivings in a coherent manner. I did this in the book *Neofunctionalism and After* (1998), where I put together my neofunctionalism essays and wrote an introduction and a conclusion which explained my reasons for not working to develop that program anymore. One of these reasons was the cultural, which I have explained; the other reasons concerned problems of agency and social contradiction.

One of the things that I became very aware of from 1976 on was that Parsons did not have a strong theory of action. I began to see this as a result of my close connection with the ethnometodology and symbolic interactionist groups at UCLA. So I developed a serious critique of Parsons on that score as well – a critique that was not at all part of *Theoretical Logic*. Because Parsons said he was an action theorist, as had Weber before him, I had not seen that, for both theorists, action was a black box. It was Harold Garfinkel, whom I was quite close to, who helped me figure that out. I elaborated this microcritique of Parsons in *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War Two* (1987a), and most systematically in the essay 'Action and its Environments' (1987b).

From this Paris period, and for about a decade after, I gave up on the project of publishing general theory. My writing for publication was more focused on cultural sociology. Throughout this period, however, I was conceiving and writing *The Civil Sphere*. I had started this project in the spring of 1989, after returning from the democracy crisis in China; revised it in Paris; and continued to elaborate this culture-centered macrosociological theory until its book length publication in 2006.

Q2   In this transition toward a program in Cultural Sociology, how and when did the idea of the 'relative autonomy of culture' become a central notion?

JA   I don't know precisely when I started to talk about that. But Steve Seidman and I edited a book called *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (1990); I wrote a long introduction to that book where I talked a lot about the relative autonomy of culture. What I realized from my encounters in the mid-1980s was that culture structure had to be given an internal design and that we needed a time-out from socio-structural analysis – and from issues of causation in a normal sense – so that we could investigate these internal patterns of meaning. We needed to find a way of saying we should not be so rushed. As sociologists, of course, we want to change social structure and make it better and more just. To understand meaning, however, one has recourse to a different kind of reference. To talk about the relative autonomy of culture we need to have the time to go inside of meaning, find it, and then come back to the question of social structure and social

change. This is what I worked out programmatically into my introduction to *Culture and Society*. Of course, the notion of 'relative autonomy' is from Marxism. When I was a Marxist, I was deeply committed to the idea of the relative autonomy of culture, reading closely what Perry Anderson later derisively called Western Marxism. I first drew this idea into my thinking in *Theoretical Logic*, when I made reference to Engels' *Letters to Bloch* where he said the superstructure has a relative autonomy from the economic base, though not, he hastened to add, in the last instance.

Q3   Drawing from what you have just said, it seems to us that your Cultural Sociology, following the best Durkheimian tradition, addresses, in both a theoretical and empirical manner, the problem represented by 'structures of meaning'. What exactly do you understand by these structures?

JA   Durkheim's central interest, of course, was in the non-individual, collective representations, which far removed him from concern for representational process on the individual level. In my own movement toward cultural sociology, I have not made this Durkheimian choice, but have felt free to draw upon the phenomenological tradition, especially from Schutz on, that conceptualized individual representation processes, for example, the notion of typification. My understanding of individual process has also been informed by psychoanalytic theory, especially ideas about mechanisms of defense, e.g. splitting, projection, repression, neutralization, and so forth. These references and homologies are explicitly made in the 'Action and Its Environments' essay, and later as well.

   As for the idea of cultural structures themselves, it obviously reaches back to the tradition of structuralism. It was the structuralists, from Saussure on, who developed the compelling argument that cultural beliefs, supra-individual and trans-situational, can be seen as structures. The prototypical statement was Saussure's contrast between *langue* and *parole*. In the intro-duction to *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (1988), I made the case that this Saussurian idea actually has Durkheimian roots, for there is strong evidence that Saussure attended Durkheim's lectures at the Sorbonne and drew directly upon some of these core ideas.

   I would wish to point out, however, that in contrast with the structural-ist tradition narrowly conceived, I have emphasized, always, that cultural structures do not determine but rather inform action. There are layers of other kinds of structuring, and also layers of contingencies. Here I would point to the entire history of sociological thinking about social structures and contingent action, and to the very productive dialogue that Roman Jacobson initiated with Saussure, which led to the Prague school and eventually to the synthesis of structuralism with pragmatism.

Q4   You compare cultural sociology to psychoanalysis. 'Where Id was, Ego shall be'. This implies an understanding of a social unconscious, of a deep symbolic reality of which we are not precisely aware. And you said that 'to

reveal to men and women the myths that think them (the agency of myths) so that they can make new myths in turn'. How do you think this myth creation process is going to work once people are aware of previous myths? It seems that in this idea you are coming closer to democratic theory than to purely descriptive sociology?

JA   I agree that my work has a normative element, not only a descriptive one, that in it is also written a certain kind of ideology. The contents of my ideology are revealed, no doubt, in my empirical insistence that civil society combines individuality and solidarity. In terms of the normative elements of my work, I would point to my skepticism about the moral validity of certain myth constructions. For example, in *The Civil Sphere*, I critique myths based on primordial ideas about the uniqueness or superiority of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nation, or class. Such myths are based on attributions of otherness that are polluting and stigmatizing. On the one hand, I continue to embrace myth as a necessary and often inspiring cultural dimension of society: I reject the kind of ideology-critique that, for example, Barthes projects in 'Mythology Today'. On the other hand, I reject a whole set of myths on normative grounds even as I elaborate the reasons for their empirical existence. This dual ambition is at the heart of my understanding of how binarism works in social meanings. As compared with, for example, Jacobson's writings on binarism, mine have a clearly normative quality, not only an empirical one.

One should note that the phrase you ask me about, which I offered in the introduction of *The Meanings of Social Life* (2003), has a rhetorical quality, partly because it mimics the 'legislative' ambitions derived from Enlightenment (Bauman) that informed the interpretative standpoints of figures like Freud and Marx. We cannot replace myth with reason; I do not think that is possible, at least as reason was conceived by the Enlightenment and articulated not only by classical figures but also by Habermas and Rawls. In my work, I have repeatedly tried to develop a different, non-rationalistic understanding of reason. I talk a lot about reason in *Fin de Siécle Social Theory* (1995). In *Civil Society*, I ask, how can we understand reason in a more cultural manner, without giving up the notion of universality and criticism? This is a major challenge. Generally in the philosophical tradition and specifically in the logical positivist tradition, we find a thin notion of reason as a culturally neutral, purely analytical language. That is not how reason operates.

Although we cannot replace myth with reason, we can use reason to criticize particular myths. As intellectuals and social theorists we see that there is no social fact or rhetorical statement that has an ontological status; in society, and for the sake of social analysis, nothing is true in itself, regardless of its validity in a scientific sense. Once we understand how social processes create appearances of truth, however, we will grasp that we, as analysts, can have the effect of helping groups and actors separate themselves from an unthinking fusion with social performances. At the same

time, we also know that the process of separation usually happens only when people are already committed to something else. So, you do not just sit there as an isolated intellectual without any pre-commitments or presuppositions. You are applying reason but in a non-rational manner. Or, as the great American rock 'n roller Bruce Springsteen once sang, 'Show a little faith, there's magic in the night'.

Q5   Sociology is prone to look to the outside, to external environments, and in that sense to map the ways of instrumental rationality is more than natural. The strong program in Cultural Sociology looks, instead, for internal environments and in that sense culture becomes a dimension on its own. Is it possible for your sociological approach to develop an explanation of social imagination, or of social creativeness?

JA   I do not like the notion of 'the imaginary' insofar as it seems to suggest that cultural imagination or creativity is tied to a normatively utopian reference, to an alternative reality, and that the rest represents something without imagination, i.e. the dead weight of reality. To the contrary, the imaginary is everywhere; there is no dead weight of material reality. What we do have is an institutionalization of meanings that become routinized and get sanctions attached to them, so that we *feel* as if we were in a dead world of materiality. Actually, the supposedly dead routines and institutions of others are very much involved with their own kinds of imaginaries; we may not respect those imaginaries and they might not be utopian in a normative sense. But we should not, for this reason, judge the people who hold them as bad or stupid, or suggest that they act without any relation to the imaginary. I do not think they themselves feel that way. To consider a stark example: We say 'the people who worked in the concentration camps were instrumentally rational'. But this is nonsense; they were thinking and feeling people, many of whom wanted to kill Jews. They had big imaginaries, anti-Semitic, anticommunist, folkish. I do not think it was just banality, they had imagination too.

   My point is that sociology and more generally social sciences do not pay enough attention to the internal environment of action. There is a humanistic, ethical, and moral implication of doing so: cultural sociology reminds us that we are alive, for a fundamental aspect of being alive is to be interpretative, to have an imagination. In a footnote in *Capital*, Marx asks what is the difference between bumblebees and human beings, and he answers that when humans build houses we have the idea in our minds. Marx is one of my favorite antagonists because he had such a well developed idea, up until 1844–5, of the internal environment of action, after which he seems to become convinced that capitalism has eliminated everything, that we live in an objectified world and that only some day after the socialist revolution will we be able to recover our subjectivity.

Q6   Regarding your recent theoretical work on social action as a performance, you have mentioned that 'the challenge for social performance is to make

its component parts invisible (actor, collective representations, means of symbolic production, *mis-en-scène*, social power, audience.) If they are not invisible, action will seem performed, and thus, unbelievable'. In contemporary aesthetics, conversely, the call for verisimilitude is constantly challenged. The process of creation seems to be more important than creation itself. As if the artist wants to show the seams of her own work. If we dwell on this kind of aesthetic we can say that the public is probably judging a performance less for its capacity to communicate meaning than for the way in which it was crafted. It can be argued that the public is more interested in the mediation of the process rather than allowing themselves to be seduced by the artists' communication of meaning, which apparently occurs without mediation. Do you think that this aesthetic approach challenges in a way your vision of meaning and performance?

JA   No, I do not think so. In the introduction that Jason Mast and I wrote to *Social Performance* (2006) we looked closely at Bernhard Giesen's contribution to that book, which concerned the turn toward the performative in contemporary art. Contemporary art is, indeed, interested in showing the process of creation, not only the result, in looking at assemblage, at something that is created once and once only, in looking at the seams and seeing through seamlessness. As I see it, rather than refuting my cultural pragmatic theory, this dimension of contemporary art represents an artistic equivalent to it. There is today, inside aesthetic, political, and intellectual life, a broad self-consciousness about the performative and its elements. Both in cultural pragmatics and contemporary art we find a growing awareness and recognition of the artificiality of performance. My work, too, aims to allow people to become aware of the seams and of the elements of performance, in intellectual rather than aesthetic terms. Can I still maintain that the success of a performance depends on making the elements invisible? Is that a contradiction? Has contemporary art's reflexivity about art falsified my argument? I do not think so. First, I would insist that much of the power of high art, and most of the power of popular art, depends on making the elements that compose it invisible. There remain significant contemporary traditions in painting, sculpture, film, and photography, which do not deconstruct the performative process. Though deconstruction is undoubtedly the most distinctive element of contemporary art, especially in the avant-garde, it is not its only element. Second, the deconstructive process may not, in fact, even be able to explain the experience of these avant-garde objects/events themselves. Aesthetic experience, it seems to me, continues to depend in some significant manner on losing oneself in the object and on being unaware of the fact that it is produced in a particular place, at a particular time, and by a particular social actor. In other words, I think it is too simple to say that we have a distanced attitude even towards the performative domains of contemporary art.

Q7   Let me translate the question into politics, taking as example Bill Clinton or Tony Blair. People probably admire more the craft of their speeches

than the meaning that they create. On the other hand, you have George W. Bush, who tries to construct meaning all the time but people are really disappointed with his abilities to transmit it and to connect with the audience. So, in a way probably audiences are becoming much more aware of this.

JA   Once again, this both is and is not the case. We may be more aware of the artificiality of political action, but the point of my cultural pragmatics is that without moments of re-fusion there is neither narrative nor belief, nor even a sense of reality. I think effective leadership, whether it is on the left or on the right, depends on the audience taking up as true and faithful the performances of authority, whether that authority is represented by a group, a book, a manifesto, or an individual speech. This is apparent in the last months of commentary on Tony Blair. For example, in late June 2007, there was an article in the Saturday magazine of *The Guardian* by Martin Amis on Tony Blair. Amis had been traveling with him. On the one hand, what he sees makes Amis completely cynical, or let's say sophisticated, and he makes note of the complete constructiveness of the entire Blair thing. On the other hand, what Amis ends up concluding is that Blair is Blair, that at the bottom there is simply the human being who is who he is – that nobody is pulling the strings. This is the kind of acceptance of authenticity that links the left-democratic faithful in America to Bill Clinton, despite his mendacity, and the communist faithful in Cuba to Fidel Castro, whatever his dictatorial power of manipulation might be. One is aware of the performative quality, yet there is also a sense that on the bottom there is a set of ethical commitments and good faith. So, I think a critic can be aware of the complexity of the elements of performance and still believe in the person or in the cause, believe in the values or ethics motivating an official. The mind of a modern, or perhaps especially a postmodern person, is complex; it has a doubleness of vision where you see the constructiveness and at the same time you want to find ways of attributing to the other person good faith. In the beginning of a period of leadership, the group that has just elected a person attributes to her authenticity, whether from the left or the right, while, at the same moment, the opposition group is convinced of complete de-fusion, constructiveness, and artificiality. In this utterly fascinating situation – which flourishes in democracies – there are two simultaneous movements. On one side, this is a good person, a good movement, and a good set of values that now we are going to try to institutionalize; on the other side, an almost equally powerful group of intellectuals and media are saying this is complete bullshit, that the new display of leadership is the opposite of authentic, that it's actually a dangerous puppet show. This agonistic performative structure unfolds whether the left or the right comes to power.

Q8   You make a very important distinction between speech and language, a distinction that enables you to have a much more complex understanding of power than most of the people that took the language turn seriously and

saw in power a ubiquitous tool. For Cultural Sociology power is performative and in many ways constantly checked and balanced by skeptical audiences, by critical publics, and potentially by counter-performative publics. If this understanding can enrich both theoretical and empirical discussions on civil society and life-world it seems to me that it leaves, however, an important problem of power in language untouched. Who sets the rules of the linguistic game; how are these rules decided or even imposed? Speech is ultimately rooted in language and the words and its meanings are limited and probably a bit constricting. How can Cultural Sociology escape the foundational political problem of language?

JA I think the implication of combining social complexity and performance theory – an intertwining that is at the heart of my cultural pragmatics – is that no single actor or force consistently or exclusively sets the rules. Rather, there are multiple speech communities and multiple projects. Believing that they are set by a single force is what seems rather dangerous about a notion such as Bourdieu's, which insists on the overwhelming capital possessed by the possessor of language/power. In the good old Marxist or power elite tradition, there is a desire to think of power as an invisible and centralized source in the society, whether state or economic or even cultural-critical power, and that is just not true. I think, in this regard, we should all go back and '*relire*' Raymon Aron's wondrous critiques of elite and class power theories. The critics who write within these traditions say that the problem with modern societies is that we are blocked – social repair, change, and justice are impeded – because there is one central power setting the rules. Aron says that the problem actually is quite the opposite: that the problem of modern societies is fragmentation and the blockages that come from the fierce animosities among different groups. These fragmented groups, he believes, often neutralize one another to such a degree that 'society' can't get anything done. I too wish to bring our attention to the plurality of powers that marks many contemporary societies, though I would not do so in precisely the manner of Aaron. With my theory of civil society I want to explain the discursive and institutional structures that sustain the democratic sphere among others, as distinctive and potentially independent of the religious, the familial, the political, the economic, and scientific worlds. Only by looking at the civil sphere, as one among a plurality of relatively independent spheres, can we do justice to the role of social criticism. We do a great disservice to modern society by underestimating the social role of criticism, and I mean this in a very wide sense of any interpretative source that is outside of the speaker, such as newspapers, news media, and the sacred and secular-intellectual worlds, for these are all sources of interpretation that are not controlled by a speaker, by a single power over others.

To insist that one force doesn't 'set the rules,' of course, does not at all suggest that there is pluralism in the liberal sense. As I have emphasized time and again in *Civil Sphere* – see the sections in race, religion, and

gender – there are always asymmetrical relations between spheres, and between the groups that compose civil society itself.

Cultural Sociology and its Others

Q9 In *Fin de Siécle Social Theory* (1995) you point out that 'social theory is a mental reconstruction of its time, not a reflexion but a self-reflexion', embedded in cultural structures of understanding and historical conditions. Since Cultural Sociology would not be an exception to this rule, what would you say are the cultural roots and structures in which your Cultural Sociology is embedded?

JA I could, of course, propose the postmodern explanation of Stuart Hall and the British Cultural Studies group that we live in a world of hyper-symbolic processes, a postindustrial, information-based, and gigantically mass-mediated society. So knowledge workers, including sociologists of culture, move from an economy of things to an economy of signs. I think that undoubtedly provides a good deal of social explanation for the cultural turn, as Kenneth Thompson and I document in *A Contemporary Intro-duction to Sociology: Culture and Society in Transition* (2008). Since we do live in an intensely, symbolically saturated world of media and culture industry, it would be very strange indeed if our theories remained wedded to materialism and rational choice. On the other hand, the intellectual and philosophical origins of the cultural turn long preceded the emergence of postindustrial society. There was the later Durkheim, Saussure, Wittgenstein, and semiotics. So there can be no one-to-one correspondence of cultural sociology and social change, which is, after all, why I speak of self-reflection rather than reflection. I do not accept the notion that is the mirror image of postmodern or postindustrial theory, namely that before 1920 or 1950, or even in the nineteenth century, we somehow inhabited a world of materiality. I think that world too was vastly symbolically mediated, though, obviously, people talked in those days about religion not about mass media. There were a lot of social things for a culturally inclined sociologist to work on. Weber and Durkheim were influenced by the religiosity of their ancestors and by their immediate cultural milieux, Tocqueville by his sense for *les meurs*.

Q10 But how has the American context specifically provided the cultural conditions for the emergence of your Cultural Sociology?

JA I think good intellectual history does not move just from 'society' or 'macro'; you need to pay attention to the mediation of intellectual groups and how they shift the *Weltenschung* over time. If I were doing a history of American elite intellectual life from the 1950s until now, I would need to pay a lot of attention to just these 'micro' shifts between intellectual groups. One shift concerns the role of cultural Marxism for the 1960s generation.

As a result of the influence of New Left Marxism, both its atmospherics and its social theory, many if not most of my intellectual generation, even when they ceased being Marxist, maintained a sensitivity to consciousness, subjectivity, and performance. I wrote about this in 'The Sixties and Me: From Cultural Revolution to Cultural Sociology' (2005a). Among my generation, for example, there is a strong sense of antagonism to the positivism of American sociology as expressed in the two main journals, the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) and the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS). Today, of course, this often rather banal empiricism represents a minor and diminishing segment of the sociological discipline, even in the United States.

I should also like to emphasize that this generational sensibility is hardly confined to the United States. Despite my American roots, throughout my career I have been very influenced by French and German thinking, so much so that I resisted for a long time the influence of pragmatism. Only with my work in performance in the last five years have I found a way of coming to terms with it. I had felt an antagonism to the pragmatic part of the American character in terms of the materialism and consumerism of American society; the individualism of pragmatism bothered me as well. So I did not feel happy with that.

Q11   Now we would like to ask you about the 'performative' character that the 'strong program' itself has. The program you have developed resembles the operation done by the American 'new economic sociology' in the 1980s. Specially, I am thinking in the solution given by Granovetter, when he pointed out that any 'market exchange' is embedded in social forces (in his case interpersonal networks), so, to fully understand the evolution of markets a sociologist is needed. But at the same time a sub-discipline with its own 'conferences', 'journals', 'handbooks' was being created. Do you think the 'strong program' can be seen as an analogous operation, but one step further, where instead of claiming that 'any market exchange has a social side' any 'social phenomena has a cultural dimension'? Therefore a cultural sociologist is needed to understand them? In terms of academics politics, do you think the future of cultural sociology is similar to the new economic sociology, in the sense of creating almost a new discipline, with own methods, journals, handbooks, PhDs, etc.?

JA   Any kind of new intellectual argument must be accompanied by some institutionalization process. In the United States it is a bit harder to create and control institutions of intellectual production, much more so, I believe, than, for example, in France and Germany. I do not have my 'own' department, or a PhD program in cultural sociology. My colleagues and I have been able to organize a Center of Cultural Sociology (CCS), but we do not control any material resources to speak of. We could not, for example, possibly afford to start a journal or to financially sponsor visiting fellowships. Insofar as there is an institutional dimension of the strong program in sociology, it occurs through CCS, which involves supervising our PhD

students, holding conferences, publishing volumes and articles, maintaining a website, and welcoming the steady flow of foreign visiting fellows, who pay their own way. We also have the Yale Cultural Sociology Series with Paradigm Publishers, where there are now a dozen volumes published or forthcoming.

When I started doing cultural sociology in the mid-1980s, I admit to feeling quite isolated, not only outside of the main currents of American sociology but of British cultural studies and continental critical interpretative work. I think that over the last 20 years, somewhat surprisingly to me, this situation has changed in a dramatic fashion. Today, cultural sociology is either considered part of the (new) mainstream or, certainly, one of the major new sociological voices, and not only in the United States. One recent affirmation of this transformation is the appearance of the BSA sponsored journal, *Cultural Sociology*, which has a very strong interest in the strong program in the United States. I must admit the emergence of this journal was a complete surprise to me, but a pleasant one.

Over the last two decades in the United States, I have thought of my own perspective as enmeshed in a struggle against more purely pragmatic understandings of culture, more instrumental, more symbolic interactionist – what I call 'sociology *of* culture'. For example, if one studies how cultural meanings are imbedded in networks, institutions, and weak or strong ties, this is not, for me, a cultural-sociological argument, though it might well reveal something important about this or that cultural item. This sociology of culture approach, in fact, is quite consistent with the American tradition of institutional economics going back to John R. Commons, who started something called Institutional Economics, a school of critical thought of which Thorstein Veblen is probably the best known member today. Replaced by marginal utility theory in economics, the institutionalist tradition migrated into the social sciences, paving the way for such perspectives as Granovetter's. Certainly, this has been an immensely successful research program, which articulated with neo-institutionalism in organizational sociology.

Q12   Is cultural sociology then a kind of specialty within sociology?

JA   Yes it is, but it is also a broad perspective and framework applied to every speciality. My own ambition for cultural sociology is that, rather than a speciality, it will change the manner in which sociology is carried out. What is emerging today, I think, is a culturally oriented political sociology, economic sociology, gender and sexual sociology, and so forth. (See, e.g. how Viviana Zelizer's cultural version of economic sociology has challenged, and to some significant extent displaced, the 'new' economic sociology of Granovetter.) One indication of this new range is that Oxford University Press invited me to prepare their *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. With Philip Smith and Ron Jacobs, we have brought together 25 contributors who will write about a very wide range of different fields and specialities. Our goal

is to demonstrate than a meaning-centered sociology is not only possible but has actually emerged over a wide front.

Q13   As you know, Cultural Sociology is not the only current approach to understand meaning and culture. For instance, our impression is that current British Social Science is quite 'culturalist', but in a way that is neither 'sociology of culture' nor 'cultural sociology'; not about the way cultural reflects society nor about taking 'culture' as something different that has to be understood in a separate way. We would say it is rather about the way multiple elements interact. For example, we are thinking of current 'cultural economy'; or people like Nigel Thrift, John Urry, or Scott Lash. Celia Lury's (2004) book on *brands* is a very good example. Her point is to understand what a brand is: and she shows how a brand is 'symbol' but is also 'sign', affect, information, and money; and another example can be found in Lash and Lury's new book on *Global Culture Industry* (2007) and their insistence in how meaning is created in a vast array of relations that are embodied in the ubiquitous cultural objects of our age. Do you think of this kind of approach as challenging to cultural sociology? You don't think that the trend here is not to create new 'sub-disciplines' but to increasing multidisciplinarity (and in this sense in an opposite way with the American differentiation)? (multidimensional/multidiscipline).

JA   For me the most original development of British sociology is the creation of a sociological postmodernism, which I see that as a kind of social structural analysis of why material objects have achieved a symbolic character (see my discussion of postindustrialism, above). You could read this achievement as about information or symbolism; you can also connect it with the new British discussions of the body, of governmentality, of economy, of science and brands. I welcome these developments and I have learned from them. I would add to the list of British sociologists you have mentioned Zygmunt Bauman, who for me is a giant figure for macrosociological theory, although I cannot say I agree with much of his work.

What I often find frustrating in what you call the new 'cultural economy' is, rather precisely, what you find to be so positive. There is, first, a kind of eclectic multidimensionality, which amounts to a kind of theorizing-as-aggregation: This matters and that matters, and this matters and that matters too. 'Of course things are symbolic, but they are also material, so this is a material symbol.' There is throughout this work a deep reluctance to investigate the internal patterning of cultural structures and to allow such structures to have some forceful causal role. There seems to be a guilt toward materialism. For example, in Actor-Network Theory, the ontology is relentlessly material, there is no symbolic imagining to speak of, and a powerful if implicit resistance to hermeneutics. To me, it seems like sleight-of-hand to assert that, e.g. a marriage ceremony is a 'socio-technical arrangement'. I do not think so; what it is technical about it? Why is it a form of materiality? With such formulations, we are, sadly,

far away from John Austin's marriage ceremony, which is performatively sustained as an institution, a symbolic or cultural convention. I think, in other words, that there is a great fear of idealism in these traditions of British sociology, and this fear is misplaced, because cultural sociology is not idealistic (see my debate with Gregor McClennan in Alexander, 2005b).

There is an extraordinary interest in capitalism and the economic, and this overriding interest has produced important new insights into postmodern capitalism. By contrast, you can't learn much about the current historical face of capitalism from reading American economic sociology, because it aims to create models for capitalism as such. When, after all, are markets not 'imbedded'? The British are much more sensitive to historical stages and periods. Perhaps the British are so aware of historicity because they have experienced such a recent movement from an imperial dominant society to a society without imperial power, moving from the center of industrial capitalism to an important but still second-tier service economy in a very dramatic fashion.

Yet, while I find the new British sociology of capitalism challenging and often compelling, I am disappointed by its reluctance to embrace the relative autonomy of meaning, to allow there to be meaning 'for meaning's sake'. What if a brand is a material symbolization of styles of being masculine or feminine, rather than the masculine or feminine brand being formulated simply as a way to sell goods? Might postindustrial capitalism not be a way of materializing cultural processes, rather than the other way around? I think Celia Lury might well respond that, 'of course it is', and that Scott Lash would as well. Yet, while there is quite a different emphasis to the new cultural economy, I believe that Lash's recent writing on 'intensive culture', which moves forcibly to embrace Durkhiem's later cultural sociology, will have the effect of reducing the intellectual distance between the two approaches.

Q14 In this sense, would you say that this kind of British sociology is complementary with your strong program rather than challenging it?

JA You could read it in different ways. I see it as both complementary and antagonistic. On the one hand, the new cultural economy explains why symbolic processes are central to contemporary economic life, and it draws our attention to the permeation of market societies by symbolic processes. On the other hand, as I have suggested earlier, there is not nearly enough attention to this relative autonomy of meanings inside these processes. I would like to ask, moreover, what is outside of economic sociology? Is there a civil society? Is there a religious sphere? As far as I can make out, most of the truly creative British sociologists have been concentrating on capitalism in one form or another, especially if we broaden the production of power to include govermentality. But there are significant parts of contemporary society that are not about capitalism or whose primary tension is not with the economic.

Q15 Your later work can be understood as a 'pragmatic' turn, in the sense that it is not just about the role of culture, but it is also a theory and method to understand the way 'the culture is made flesh' (performance). In this path, one of the main break points is with more rigid sociologies such as the one done by Bourdieu, specially his last works. It seems that French sociology has also broken with him, developing its own 'pragmatic turn', where action, performance, justification, are central. Do you think your work can be seen as complementary with French new trends, specifically 'Conventions' (Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot) or 'Actor-Network Theory' (Bruno Latour and Michel Callon)?

JA May I turn the tables a bit? Do you actually consider the sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot as complementary to actor network theory? OK, both have an element of pragmatism and both break with Bourdieu, but I think the resemblance stops there.

   Whereas I have never found ANT to offer much to cultural sociology, much less civil sphere theory, I have been following Boltanski and Thévenot's work since I lived in Paris in the early 1990s. I find there significant parallels with what the strong program is up to. I have learned a lot from them and I remain fascinated by various dimensions of their thought. Still, I have significant criticisms and reservations.

   What I like is that it poses actors interpretatively. It looks at the relation of macro to micro as rules that inform macrospheres, and that these are translated into action problems; I also am impressed with the manner in which they deploy multiple spheres which have relative autonomy from each other, and how they describe actors as having problems of finding out what sphere actions and things belong normatively to. And how, in doing so, actors engage not only in struggles but compromises and arguments. So I think we have a similar understanding of the world. The differences are that they posit spheres as stable and given – at least in their classic statement, from 1991, these worlds have more or less always been there. For me, by contrast, I think of the spheres more as built up from social, mental, intellectual, and cultural histories. They also are, again at least in the work *De la Justificiation* (1991), more interested in developing a kind of logic of argumentation explaining how inter-sphere discussions and decisions are made. I do understand why the Boltanski and Thévenot group moved away from Bourdieu, and I share their reservations. Thevenot and I spoke a lot about this in the early 1990s, and realized we were moving in the same direction.

   Regarding ANT, I also understand, of course, that they have always been in a critical relationship with Bourdieu. From the beginnings of my writings in the 1980s I developed an appreciation of the traditions of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism within which ANT works. I also explained, in those early theoretical works of mine, what I called 'the individualist dilemma' that haunts these traditions, and

which, for me, vitiates their criticisms of Durkheim and their championing of Tarde. It is not that I agree with Durkheim that individual action is not important. The importance of contingent effort is something I have tried to incorporate from 'Action and Its Environments' (1987b) – which drew on microsociological, more individually-centered traditions – to my performance theory in the present day. I have always tried to pay attention to what I call the concrete individual, not just the analytic, to the person in time and space, to the group in an actual situation. It is such concreteness that fascinates and preoccupies ANT, which emerges out of phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Yet, I have a big problem with such an overweening focus on concrete individuals and objects. It is too one-sidedly pragmatic, concerned with problem solving, practical action, inventiveness, observation, and experience in the immediate sense. That ignores the collective representations which to me are there. I believe there is much more of a dialectical and simultaneous relation between background representations and the embeddedness of action in a set of practical problems. This marks the difference between my performance approach and their own. They have notions of text as materiality, such that pragmatics is about practice, as truly practical action. For me, by contrast, pragmatics must be put into a relation with the 'cultural'. It is not wise to cut ourselves off from the tradition of the late Durkheim, which developed into structuralism, semiotics, and post-structuralism. I do see performance as a grounding concept that has the potential to combine a non-instrumental understanding of action and an interest and appreciation of constraining environments and interactional processes. I also have become deeply interested in objects and am developing a theory of what I call 'iconic consciousness' (Alexander, 2008a, 2008b).

Cultural Sociology and the End of the Social

Q16 Cultural Sociology is necessarily based on a strong sense of the social. Nevertheless, the relevance and value of this concept for current social sciences has been put into question. In this context, how has your Cultural Sociology rethought the notion of the social?

JA In terms of my own intellectual biography, my experience with this argument for 'the end of the social' has been my decade and a half 'love/hate' relationship with the ideas of Alain Touraine and his group, throughout which time we have remained personally on very friendly terms. I benefited greatly from Touraine's redirection of social movement theory and his emphasis on the cultural framing of industrial and post-industrial societies, and also, as well, from his insistence that there should be a political connection to sociological theorizing. At the same time, I have always resisted, and in fact been deeply perplexed by, Touraine's insistence

that 'society' has ceased to exist. What can this mean, exactly? Certainly, for Touraine, it is clear most recently that it means there has been an extra-ordinary enlargement for the scope of individual formation. But would one say that the expansion, much less the formation, of the self can be under-stood without reference to cultural texts, or to a broader and more tolerant and diverse civil sphere? The bottom line in all this is that social actors themselves continually make reference to 'society'. They believe that society exists, and that is good enough for me. As a cultural sociologist, it is my job to find out what they mean.

Acknowledgement

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