



Fact-signs and cultural sociology: How meaning-making liberates the social imagination

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The urgency of sociology is to understand social reality, especially those morally reprehensible parts we fervently oppose and wish to change. Sociology is defined morally by the evils it opposes and exposes. The chosen weapon of sociology is realism. The discipline insists that our theories reflect reality, that they allow us to see things as they actually are, that the methods we employ are rational and reasonable.

While I share this moral outrage and the urgent need to change the world, I will propose in this brief address that ‘realism’ is a great danger to sociology. As method, as theory, and also as sensibility, realism makes it difficult for us to be realistic. To put it most provocatively, realism makes reality obscure.

Sociologists envy and imitate the extraordinary lucidity and realism of the hard sciences. Perhaps, if we work hard enough, we can match their ability to mirror the structure of the world. So in qualitative work we talk ‘observational’ methods, worry about converting impressions into field notes and generating grounded theory. In quantitative work, we diligently convert social qualities into countable things, to ensure our indicators have statistical validity and to separate spurious correlation from robust causality.

I would by no means gainsay such efforts, but I *would* challenge the world view of realism to which they are typically attached. An obsessive concern with observation, induction, and reflection makes us blind to the role that moral and intellectual

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imagination plays in generating important sociological findings. And not just in generating findings, but in feeling and believing them to be true.

I am pointing here to the independent role of theory, to how it comes before observation and interpretation. Strictly speaking, we do not observe actions, make records of events, or compile data about social structures. What we do is to make *interpretations* of actions, events, and structures in light of our theories, our presuppositions about how people act, what events are like, how social structures feel and which are most relevant.

If we say we are interpreting, then sociology is not a reflection of reality but a reconstruction of it – in light of theory. What we are actually doing as sociologists is making meaning. Observations provide us with ways to exemplify, specify, and revise general theoretical types. Empirical phenomena provide new notes that we play on familiar chords; sometimes they provide new chords we play in a familiar key; only on the rarest of occasions do they lead us to play in a different key.

Gender was not ‘discovered’ by sociologists until the late 60s and 70s, but it had always been there. It just had not yet been seen. Gender could not be observed until second wave feminist theory emerged, inspired by existential philosophy, black civil rights, and the new left. Only after the formation of feminist presuppositions could sociology see the meaning of patriarchy. Only after sociology went looking for gender could it be discovered.

Sociologists do not (only?) enlighten modern men and women by discovering objective facts about their world, but by offering people new theories. Social theories draw new binaries between pure and polluted; they define new heroes and villains; they create new narratives about the relation of the past to the present and how to get to the future. They sketch out a new arc of history so we can re-imagine the world and act in more energizing ways.

Social phenomena do have an independent reality, but they do not themselves speak. They must be made meaningful before they can be heard. It is through social theories that social meanings are made. Social facts are signifieds of the social signifiers we call theories.

This is a cultural understanding of the science of sociology. Theories are cultural structures. Even if realism ignores them, making them invisible, it is these theoretical culture structures that provide the background references that establish the meanings of social things. Visible social facts – the actions we see, the events we record, the data we compile – are not things but signs.

The fact-sign is composed of invisible theoretical signifier and visible empirical signified. To produce fact-signs is to bring together theoretical concepts in our imagination with events in time and space. Fact-signs seem objective and realistic, but they actually are built up from our imagination. Class is never seen as such, nor is race. Imagining class responds to real inputs from time and space – from the world outside us. But the fact-sign ‘class’ is elastic and imaginary, twisting and shifting in the history of sociology in response to what we theoretically imagine it to be.

Cultural sociology begins with the idea that everyday actors engage social reality in precisely the same way. If scientifically trained social scientists do meaning-making and not only observation – if the data of rational sociologists is not mirrored reflection but constructed fact-sign – then how can everyday social actors who are without benefit of scientific training engage reality in a purely ‘realistic’ and ‘rational’ way?

Wittgenstein paved the way for cultural sociology with his late linguistic turn. The meaning of a word cannot be derived from the reality of its reference, from what it really is. If I want to teach you the English word for pen, I will hold up my hand this way and say 'pen', thinking you will associate the material object I hold in my hand with the word coming from my lips. This, however, is a naturalistic illusion. It confuses an event in time and space – an event that is real – with its mental representation. How do you know just what I am referring to when I raise my arm with this thing in my hand in this way? Is it the arm, the motion, the hand, or the thing in my hand? To understand the referent you need already to know the *category* of which the referent is a part. You need already to understand about bodies, arms, hands, motions, and, yes, about pens. We cannot understand what 'it' *really* is – we can only place it inside the conventions of our language game. What we understand are the representations of things, not the things in themselves.

Cultural sociology reconstructs the sociological equivalents of language, and finds out how they work and change. What are gendered persons and how do they act? Can I find out simply by observing men and women, by recording data from these observations, and inductively concluding 'this is a woman' and 'this is a man'? Fifty years ago people did think about gender in this way. It would seem ludicrous to do so today. The meanings of gendered persons change. What we think today when we see the bodies of women and men was once un-seeable. Gendered bodies are signifieds of social signifiers. They are fact-signs, or culture structures. Feminism is a cultural system, a set of signs, a new way of drawing boundaries, of separating pure from impure, naming new villains and heroes, of telling new stories about the past and future. Feminism has been imagined by intellectuals with such creativity and skill, and performed by social movements with such persuasive force, that gendered people are now made meaningful in a different way. When contemporary sociologists describe gendered persons and how they act, our fact-signs will be different because our theories have changed.

To suggest that cultural representations have independence from the things they describe is to distinguish *langue* from *parole*, the distinction Saussure made between language as structure and action. When I *speak*, I refer to particular things, expressing my intentions and pointing to real objects in time and space. But my speaking can only be made sense of inside the invisible structure of language, and it is this broader structure which determines the meanings of most of what I am able to say.

In 1963, Martin Luther King led the 'March on Washington', demanding justice for black Americans. The civil rights movement called for radical legal and administrative change. These demands for justice were eloquent and powerful speech acts. Listeners made sense of them, however, only inside an encompassing language of citizenship that intertwines autonomy and solidarity in a sacred 'discourse of liberty'. The black movement for civil rights was a new improvisation on a venerable chord. It deployed the liberating binary of slavery-versus-freedom that had structured the discourse of the workers' movement a century earlier, of the American and French revolutions a century before that, of early modern Europe's republican city states, and of the English barons' struggle that forced King John to sign the Magna Carta centuries before.

If cultural meanings are not derived referentially, from the nature of things, but from the broader language that speakers bring to bear on them, then meanings are relational and intra-cultural. We don't know what 'a' is without comparing it to 'b'. Social meanings

are binary, composed of analogies and antipathies. Black and white, day and night, hot and cold, fast and slow, high and low, sharp and dull. Each term gains meaning only in relation to another that is inside the code.

Until recently, the social meanings of race were established by a rigid and utterly 'unrealistic' binary, one that collapsed infinitely varied skin pigmentation into two categorical colors, white and black, associating the former with the sacred and the latter with the profane. This binary made powerful meaning, intertwining with economic, political, religious, and sexual power to structure social relationships in horrendously restrictive ways.

Black and white, working class and bourgeoisie, male and female, straight and gay, thin and fat, able and disabled, smart and dumb – all of these binaries have formed extraordinarily powerful social languages of sacred and profane. Real societies are deeply structured by imagined binaries that organize difference and define the meaning, location, and stakes of social boundaries.

This imaginative structuring and its social effect are the topics of cultural sociology. Cultural sociology decenters realism, tearing away the gauze of comforting naturalness that social life wraps around social structure and ideological belief. Cultural sociology looks behind the visible. It searches out the invisible culture structures, the meaning references, the signifiers for which society produces a seemingly endless stream of realistic signifieds. Culture structures constitute the inner reality of society; they make possible the shaping power of things. Consider hierarchy. As sociologists, we pay extraordinary attention to the vertical. Our central traditions describe fields of conflict between higher and lower classes, genders, race, ethnicities, religions, rulers and subalterns of every different kind. Domination and subordination are held to constitute the distribution of real things, of money and power, of the material instrumentalities that hierarchy establishes and controls.

But, what if these vertical relationships are seen in relation to an imagined series of horizontal relationships that are egalitarian, moral, and reciprocal, which create not domination but solidarity? In the course of my own research and theorizing, I have come to believe this precisely to be the case. An empirical world of ideal solidarity exists in the collective consciousness, and in every local, national, regional, and global society it is an immensely powerful social fact.

I call this imagined yet powerfully real world the civil sphere. Inside every modern society, particularly those with some democratic aspiration, civil ideals and institutions continuously question the moral validity of vertical inequalities. Legitimacy depends on whether or not these so-called 'realities' of social stratification and domination can be construed in a civil way.

People on the top see themselves as civil and describe those below as decidedly less worthy. For the bourgeois, the proletarian is shiftless, untrustworthy, prone to passion and indolence. For the dominant racial group, non-whites are dependent and childlike, aggressive and wily. For the Christian core group, Jews were the conniving enemies of civilization, greedy, often murderous, dishonest, clandestine and secretive. Patriarchal men signified their wives, mothers, and daughters as weak not strong, dependent not autonomous, emotional not rational, hysterical not controlled, skillful in art but not up for the rigors of math or science. For political Islamicists, every dissenter to the faith is an uncivilized barbarian, an infidel.

Everywhere, vertical control is nested inside a binary language that creates boundaries between the civil pure and the uncivil profane, naturalizing hierarchy and legitimating domination. The civil sphere is not nearly as kindly and benevolent as the liberal tradition has often made it out to be. Its horizontal solidarity is limited to insiders. Outsiders do not possess civil qualities, and can be excluded as a result. Indeed, they must be excluded, for they cannot be trusted to behave in a democratic and civilized way. The discourse of civil society constructs motives, relations, and institutions in an either/or, pure and dirty, good and evil, deserving-of-salvation versus condemned-to-damnation, all or nothing way.

This intertwining of vertical society and binary culture seems like the kind of heads-I-win-tails-you-lose, self-perpetuating system imagined by Franz Kafka, Joseph Heller, or Pierre Bourdieu. It actually is nothing of the kind.

In the discourse of civil society, the meanings of sacred civility and profane barbarism are established by the internal structure of the cultural language game itself – not by the actual relations of social groups. We know what rational and irrational, selfish and altruistic, open and secretive, autonomous and independent mean. What we don't know is how they are socially applied in a particular society at a particular time. The long-standing culture structure of civility and barbarism has relative autonomy vis-à-vis the current occupants of social structure.

This is where social movements, intellectuals, artists, political leaders, and culture creators come in.

- (1) The working class movement arises and argues that they, not the propertied, are independent, rational, and possessed of a sense of moral right. They portray the *bourgeoisie* as immoral, secretive, lazy, and unworthy of their privilege. That polluted upper class must be taxed and sometimes their property expropriated; they must be demoted and disciplined by the democratic state.
- (2) The feminist movement challenges masculine virtue by calling it patriarchal: men are dominators, not providers, egotistical and power hungry. Their libidos are out of control and their rationality is limited. Women are the carriers of virtue and morality, and they deserve to hold power. We will all be better off if women can gain control of our economic and cultural institutions, and even our states.

Bringing critical culture structures to bear on social inequalities does not have to be done in such an agonistic way. Both sides, not one, can be made civil, and social solidarity extended in a reformist way. The American civil rights movement eschewed black power. Martin Luther King spoke of the beloved community, of making American society whole again, of being judged, as he declared in the March on Washington, not 'by the color of our skin but by the content of our character'. King evoked anti-civil pollution against southern white racists but not against the white citizens of the American north.

While Iran's insurgent 'Green Movement' condemns government leaders as frauds, torturers, and killers, and organizes massive street demonstrations against them, they call for their opponents to be legally prosecuted, not to be murdered, and for new elections, not violent overthrow of the state. On 15 June 2010, the opposition leader Mir Hussein Moussavi posted this message: 'The Green movement is a civil movement which rejects aggression in every area. This movement believes that the people will always be the

victims of aggression and holds that dialogue, peaceful resistance, and nonaggression are the only inviolable solutions.'

Reformist social movements enlarge the moral imaginations of our societies; they shift the relation between civil signifier and social signified; they create a new world of fact-signs that expands solidarity and diminishes social domination. *Time* magazine made Martin Luther King its 'Man of the Year'. Four years later, a southern white man assassinated King, but in the decades that followed northern whites constructed King as a great hero, the most powerful collective representation of American civil virtue in the 20th century. His birthday became a national holiday, the first since Abraham Lincoln's 150 years before. Forty years after his death, King's spiritual descendant, Barack Obama, became the most powerful person in the United States.

Symbolic inversion does not operate only inside the Lockean state. It can be projected globally and help repair the Hobbesian war of all against all. When national dictatorships are fierce, their repression can be challenged in the court of world opinion. Colonialism was a moral not only a material order. It justified harsh control in the name of the civilizing process, promising to transform barbarians so they could enter civil society. The struggle against colonialism was a moral movement that issued a civil challenge; it was not only a movement of arms. Mahatma Gandhi, a brilliant strategist, was also a great social dramatist who performed an awesomely inspired spiritual and humanitarian script. He led symbolic crusades and preached nonviolence and espoused the goodness of all human-kind. Colonizers found themselves on the short end of the moral stick. Passionately professing civil values, they were shamed, not only physically injured and bankrupted.

The world-wide movement that defeated apartheid in South Africa can be understood in the same way. Afrikaners held total material power inside their state, and their racist culture provided them with a vivid sense of civil superiority. But while they could lock Nelson Mandela up on Robben Island and throw away the key, the masters of apartheid could not control symbolic signification. Over three decades, the African National Congress, the world-wide council of churches, liberal, socialist and communist parties, white anti-racist liberals, and notably the Swedish social democratic state fought and won the battle for public opinion. Symbolic pollution materialized into economic boycott and eventually into the world-wide divestment movement, and the Afrikaner elite agreed to give way.

I began this talk by warning against the metaphysics of realism in sociology. I suggested that empirical phenomena are fact-signs, that they are imagined as much as they are observed, that they are the products of sociological meaning-making triggered by the cultural language of theory. If such a cultural perspective liberates the sociological imagination, so does it demonstrate the emancipating power of culture to dispute domination in the society at large. Cultural sociology shows that social reality is imagined and how it can be transformed in a utopian way.

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Biographical note

Jeffrey C. Alexander is Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and a Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University. He works in the areas of theory, culture and politics, developing a meaning-centered approach to the tensions and possibilities of modern social life. Recent publications include: *Understanding the Holocaust: A Debate* (2009); *A Contemporary Introduction to Sociology: Culture and Society in Transition* (with Kenneth Thompson) (2008); *Social Performances* (with Bernhard Giesen and Jason Mast) (2006); *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (with Eyerman, Giesen, Sztompka, and Smelser) (2004); and *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (2003). In his major work *The Civil Sphere* (2006), Alexander developed a new cultural-sociological theory of democracy, a perspective that provides the foundation for his recent volume, *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (2010). His book *Power and Performance* is forthcoming from Polity Press.