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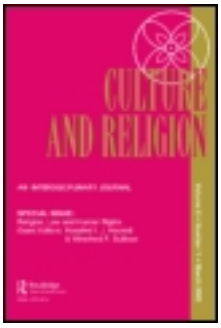

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The sociology of the sacred: A conversation with Jeffrey Alexander

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The sociology of the sacred: A conversation with Jeffrey Alexander

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Over the past 20 years, Jeffrey C. Alexander has been a leading social theorist and a pioneer of the 'strong program' in cultural sociology, which emphasises the significance of cultural structures of meaning for social life. Following an introductory overview of his work, this article records a public conversation with Alexander about the role and significance of the concept of the sacred in his sociological work. Issues addressed in this conversation include situating Alexander's interest in the sacred in his intellectual biography (including his significant intellectual influences), the mistrust of the concept of the sacred within the wider sociological community, the universality of cultural structures of sacred meaning, the limitations of sociological analysis focused on sacred meaning and methodological approaches to the study of the sacred.

Keywords: sacred; cultural sociology; Alexander; profane; Durkheim; Bellah

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Introduction

For over two decades, Jeffrey C. Alexander has been the pioneer of an increasingly influential sociological approach – the 'strong program' of cultural sociology – which has become primarily associated with the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University of which Alexander was the founding director. With this theoretical agenda, Alexander and colleagues have sought to transform the focus of what they perceive as the overly positivistic and materialist tradition of North American sociology (Alexander 1995; Smith 1998). A central tenet of this meaning-centred approach to social analysis is that 'culture', as the symbolic stratum of the social, should be understood as a variable which shapes the nature and structure of social life (Alexander and Smith 2001; Lynch 2012). As such, the 'strong program' aims not merely at the development of a sub-discipline within sociology but rather constitutes an attempt to highlight the significance of cultural meanings for all areas of sociological analysis, moving from the idea of 'culture' as an object of study using established sociological theories and methods to a cultural approach to sociology.

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Alexander's work, more generally, has considerable relevance for the social and cultural study of religion, offering both broad theoretical understandings of the role of cultural meaning in relation to structure and agency (Alexander 2003), as well as specific concepts – such as the notion of 'cultural trauma' (Alexander et al. 2004) – which can have analytical value in interpreting the significance of religious discourse and action at moments of significant social crisis. Alexander's greatest potential contribution to the social and cultural study of religion lies in the central emphasis that he places on the significance of the cultural construction of the sacred and profane for social life. Over the past 20 years, Alexander has produced a substantial body of work – including both theoretical statements and theoretically informed case studies – which argue that the symbolic representation of the sacred and profane shapes both public institutions and the civic sphere of public communication. The significance of the sacred and profane, from this perspective, moves far beyond the realm of traditional, institutional religion to shape political life and civil society more generally. The study of the sacred thus becomes the preserve not simply of scholars interested in the specific sub-field of 'religion', but also a central task for the sociological analysis of society more generally. Despite the importance, and international recognition, of Alexander's work in reclaiming the importance of the study of the sacred within sociology, it has received relatively little attention among scholars working in the sociological or cultural study of religion. This article, therefore, represents part of a wider process of serious engagement with the 'strong program' of cultural sociology from within the study of religion. In this context, it can be understood as part of a wider project of establishing how Alexander's sociological approach might inform the renewed interest among religious scholars in rigorous approaches to the study of the sacred beyond the widely critiqued work of Otto and Eliade.

Alexander's focus on culture has evolved with and against a distinctively North American sociological lineage, taking in Western Marxism's focus on the relative independence of cultural superstructures, Parsons' emphasis on values and Edward Shils' work on social integration (Lynch 2012). As a student of Robert Bellah, Alexander's interest in sacrality emerged initially out of a conversation with Bellah's (1967) conception of civil religion. Drawing on Durkheim's later work, Alexander has been centrally concerned to argue against Weberian, Marxist and Post-modernist theories of modernity, which describe contemporary, late capitalist societies as nihilistic, instrumentalist or disenchanted. For Alexander, contemporary life continues to be infused with the 'sacred'; symbolic meaning, morality and affective 'ritual-like' practices (Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006). While recognising that the contemporary context is historically distinctive, particularly in relation to heightened processes of differentiation and fragmentation, Alexander's cultural sociology focuses our attention on the continued power of collective morality in contemporary social life.

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In their empirical work, 'strong program' scholars draw on the hermeneutic tools of the humanities to reconstruct the social formation of meaning (Alexander 2008), combining this with social scientific analysis of cultures' generative, causal role in socio-historical contexts (Kane 1991). Strongly influenced by Saussurian semiotics, Alexander has emphasised that culture is structured and patterned through binary codes, within which the sacred/profane binary is of central importance. More recently, with the development of a theoretical approach called 'cultural pragmatics' (Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006), Alexander and colleagues have explicitly developed a theory of symbolic action, incorporating dramaturgical theories concerned with the aesthetic and affective dimensions of culture. Developing a model of social drama, cultural pragmatics theorises the practical instantiation of collective representations for social audiences, and suggests that, in complex contemporary societies, the success of each integrative, symbolic performance is contingent and a subject for empirical investigation. This interest in lived expressions of the sacred and the profane is also being developed through new work on the significance of cultural meaning in relation to visual and material culture (Alexander et al. 2012).

Alexander's consistent although, at times, implicit interest in tracing socio-historical manifestations of the sacred/profane is intrinsically related to the normative dimension of his work. In one of his most influential contributions, *The Civil Sphere* (2006), Alexander theorised the sacred/profane binary as intrinsic to social construction of the 'public', drawing on this framework empirically to map historical processes of inclusion and exclusion within American political history. Remaining firmly a neo-Durkheimian, Alexander insists that these morally infused cultural structures are integral to all collective life and rational analysis will not supersede them. However, by foregrounding the symbolic structures of identification and othering, Alexander combines sociological analysis with a therapeutic project which seeks to provoke reflexive questioning of specific, problematic cultural myths (2003). In doing so, he emphasises a commitment to forms of civil society which validate solidarity and individuality (Cordero, Carballo and Ossandon 2008); values to which Alexander is ideologically committed and which underpin all his theoretical and empirical projects.

In the following public conversation, Alexander gives a detailed account of the roots of his cultural sociological understanding of the sacred, its significance within the wider field of contemporary sociology and assesses both its value and limitations. The conversation itself took place between Gordon Lynch and Jeffrey Alexander at a seminar held in London in October 2011, in the wake of both the UK phone-hacking scandal and civil disorder in several cities across the UK which provoked widespread moral comment. We are grateful to both the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent and the Birkbeck Institute for Social Research for co-sponsoring this event.

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Gordon Lynch: You've said before that sociologists often do not like to think about the sacred because it feels unscientific or anti-modern to them. So what was it that led you, as a sociologist, to get interested in this idea?

Jeffrey Alexander: I am not sure exactly. I was a New Left Marxist for about five years and I suppose my interest in the sacred intellectually comes out of the whole upheaval of the 1960s, which was about trying to re-sacralise what we thought of as mundane, everyday life. So people were taking hallucinogenic drugs to have a greater sense of the texture and meaning of life, they were dropping out, they were starting communes, they thought that if you could overthrow capitalism, you would have a 'permanent' marijuana experience. That is kind of what socialism was supposed as being. So it was a sense of seeking an alternative life, which I think is part of Romanticism. I think that since around 1800 in the West, Romanticism has been a continuous effort to appreciate the sacrality of both everyday existence as well as moments of the sublime that exceed everyday existence. So the New Left was a Romantic movement in that sense. And as a leftist, I was also concerned with the question of why I couldn't convince the working class to do what I wanted them to do. Because of this question, and also because of my experiences with 1960s culture, I became more and more fascinated by the non-rational character of social life, and why the beliefs of everyday people didn't seem to respond to rationality. As I became more of an intellectual, I realised that the whole project of Western Marxism made consciousness an object to explore, assuming that it operated separately from intellect, from social position and structural position. I became very curious about how you could understand this kind of social consciousness and I remember reading Durkheim and writing all over his text because I was fascinated by it, for it touched on similar issues to the work of Gramsci in which I was also very interested at that point. To me Durkheim explained the way 'average' people (I was not including myself in this at that time) divided the world into dichotomies of what was to them sacred and profane. In this way, Durkheim was the one who opened up for me the idea of structures of meaning.

GL: So initially these ideas were something that you used to interpret other people's social realities, but you later came to understand your own experience of social life in terms of the sacred and profane as well. Was there a moment that crystallised that?

JA: Yes, there was. I remember this was about a year after I had left radical Marxism behind. The Watergate crisis in the United States began to unfold, and I was absolutely fascinated by it. America had just re-elected Richard Nixon as President by a gigantic margin over George McGovern who was a pretty leftist candidate. So we were all very depressed about it and it seemed like a hopeless situation. Then the news media started reporting that Nixon, or at least the people working for Nixon, had received some secret money, which was immediately talked about as 'dirty' money. The Watergate crisis unfolded over two years. During the first year there were all of these leaks and these denials on the part of the Nixon White House – 'No we didn't do that; no, we didn't do that; yes, they

did this'. What I was fascinated by was that this person who had been incredibly popular was now becoming polluted (I was reading Durkheim, and Mary Douglas as well, at the time) and had to deny any association with this polluted, dirty stuff. Then in 1973, in the summer, there was an event called the Senate Watergate Hearings, a little bit like your parliamentary hearings into the media . . .

GL: Yours were a bit more exciting . . .

JA: Ours were more exciting in the sense that they were very concentrated and they featured very, very important people; they were Senators and key White House staff and the hearings were televised against the will of the White House. When I watched the hearings, I was just terribly excited because it seemed to me a ritual, a secular ritual, with the august, silver-haired Senators defending the sacrality of the constitution. They used the word 'sacred': 'this is a sacred document', 'you, sir, have poured dirt over this great thing', 'this is rooted in the heart of our democratic society'. It was theatre but it was also sincere and arresting, and by the end of that summer the entire Nixon machine was destroyed such that a year later he had to resign. I found this a real life lesson in the power of the sacred as something underpinning institutions, as well as the ways in which the influence of these sacred and profane meanings can fluctuate and be transient. The two years of Watergate showed how even the most powerful institutional figures are never entirely in control of the sacred. They can be placed in a positive relationship to it, but this can be challenged or inverted by events, social movements or performances of various kinds. This was a striking example that was a core epiphany for the development of my intellectual and personal understanding of the sacred.

GL: Now you've mentioned obviously Durkheim's influence on your work but I was wondering if you could just say a little bit more about another influence that would have been around for you at that time, because you were a doctoral student of Robert Bellah. You have written before about Bellah really being a pioneer of cultural sociology; and back in 1967, Bellah had published that seminal article which began to talk about American civil religion in these kinds of Durkheimian terms. What did you take from Bellah's influence and what did you not take from Robert Bellah?

JA: Before getting to Bellah, I'd like to mention another major influence on my intellectual development. Before coming to Berkeley for my PhD, when I was in college at Harvard, I was a social theory major in what we called 'Social Studies', but the courses I liked even more were literature and theatre courses. With the exception of one semester freshmen and sophomore courses in economics, development and American political science, I didn't take social science until I was accepted into graduate school during the winter of my fourth year. At that point, I thought I really should take my first course in sociology (with Talcott Parsons). Until that time, I took political theory, moral and political philosophy, literature and drama, so without knowing it, I was laying the foundations of my interest in a cultural sociology which makes use of theory and methods from the humanities to study society.

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Anyway, when I did get to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, Bellah was very important to me. First of all, Bellah was a great Durkheim scholar and he was editing a book at the time on Durkheim. Bellah also had written that incredibly significant essay to which you refer, 'Civil Religion in America'. He was committed to the idea that there was a sacred or a religious dimension of society which wasn't necessarily related to 'capital R' (i.e. institutional) Religion. He was very close friends with Clifford Geertz; they were the same age, I think, but Geertz was perhaps the intellectual leader of the two. During my time at Berkeley, Geertz made a gigantic effort to bring Bellah to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton as a permanent professor. The idea was to establish a Social Science school promoting a cultural approach. But there was a big scandal because the physicists and historians opposed the 'softness' of Bellah's work and also couldn't stomach his scholarly (and personal) commitment to religion. The scandal made the front page of the *New York Times*, with the public conflict over 'how can somebody who believes in religion be a professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies?' This negative impression of Bellah was also theoretically linked with opposition to the concept he'd developed of symbolic realism in which he claimed that symbols are real; of course, he never actually meant that they are ontologically real but that they are independent and powerful social phenomena. Influenced by Bellah's interest in symbolism, his Durkheim scholarship, and also his deep orientation to Weber, I also developed a post-Marxist interest in Hegel's idea of the Spirit as something that sociologists should study. While I am not myself a religious person, the idea of the Geist made perfect sense to me as something which I recognised in the sensibility of human beings – that people have this other dimension and that societies have a collective consciousness. That is the way that Durkheim puts it, that there is always this throbbing, emergent and powerful reality both across society and within specific groups. In American social science, nobody except Bellah and Geertz were exploring such an idea.

GL: Were there ways in which you also over time defined your work in a way that was different to Bellah?

JA: Bellah and I are still very collegial and, as you know, he has just published an imposing new book on religion, about which I am scheduled to write a commentary. For his part, he is contributing to a book of critiques of my book, *The Civil Sphere*, which I am anxiously looking forward to reading. On two issues, however, we grew apart. When I started my intellectual career as a Durkheimian, I was very much thinking about civil religion, and thought of my own research and theorising as working within it. I moved away from it partly because I came to feel that Bellah's civil religion idea had limited the Durkheimian, collective consciousness to, if not institutionalised religion, then at least theological thinking in a broad sense. If you look at 'Civil Religion in America', it is about a Christian symbolism in the otherwise secular thought of the United States. Bellah called it, of course, not Christian but Judeo-Christian. Now, this Christian emphasis is definitely there in the United States, and

obviously there are a lot of Christian aspects to American culture and society. Still, I felt that Bellah's explorations limited the radical nature of the Durkheimian project. The Durkheimian sacred was so much larger than Judeo-Christian symbolism: it could go to collective traumas, for example, and allow one to interpret a wider array of forms of collective identity and practice. As I developed my ideas from the late 1980s about what I called 'the civil sphere', and especially the discourse of civil society, I became convinced that the dominant sacred and profane classification of all democratic societies is separate, and independent from Christian or Judaic (or for that matter Islamic) forms of symbolisation. Each country has its own way of concretising the discourse of civil society and has its own historical origins for it. This perspective made me more critical of Bellah's idea of civil religion. In our correspondence, he made it clear that he has similar reservations, from his side, about my idea of the discourse of civil society. He felt, at least at the time, that I don't appreciate the role of religion (capital R) in the formation of American civil society; I feel, to the contrary, that he overestimates it! The other increasing difference between us was political. Simply put, Bellah became much more radical than I. During my graduate school period, we were kind of crossing. I had been a revolutionary Marxist and was now moving, ideologically, towards the left-centre. He was moving from the left-centre to becoming more of a social critic. For Bellah, being a social critic meant arguing, as he did over the course of 20 years from *Habits of the Heart* on, that contemporary capitalist society was an egocentric society without moral structure; that you had communitarian republicanism, on the one side, and egoism on the other. I felt strongly that this bifurcation was inaccurate. Even capitalist societies are filled with republicanism. What Bellah was doing in his critique, I felt, was less an empirical description of American society than a reproduction of the binary discourse of republicanism, which consistently portrays the opposition between an egoistic self and a republican community. But this isn't an adequate empirical description. Even the conservative sections of the United States are built upon strong moral communities of various kinds. Some are really awful in a normative sense but that doesn't mean you should go ahead and describe the society as utilitarian and egoistic. Critical theory seems intent on describing contemporary society as egoistic and without morality. To me that is totally implausible. Even if we don't like them from a liberal or left perspective, we must acknowledge that contemporary societies are filled with morality and the sacred, which may often take the form of moralities we despise.

GL: So going back to what we were talking about before about sociologists not getting it. You've written before in your work about how, I think it was in a lunch queue when you were working at UCLA, you talked to colleagues about the idea of a cultural sociology and they just laughed at the idea. Clearly the idea of a cultural sociology has become much more widely accepted now and yet this is probably the most extended public discussion you have had about the concept of the sacred with a broader sociological audience. So what is it about the concept of

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the sacred that people working in sociology find difficult or don't want to engage with?

JA: I think that there is a strong and quite constraining sense of modernity as being a rational construction. The idea of modernity as a normative order, governed by self-consciousness, science and self-control, is a powerful ideal of modern societies. Think, for example, of 'Where id was ego shall be' – Freud's famous statement – Habermas' idea of a deliberative democracy, or John Rawls' theory of justice. Now, cultural sociology suggests that, while such an ideal of modernity may be normatively admirable, empirically it is an inaccurate account of how modern societies actually operate. There is a resistance on the part of liberal-thinking social scientists (and most sociologists are pretty liberal in the American sense of being on the political left) towards acknowledging that societies are organised by non-rational collective consciousness. For example, if you look at the history of liberal thinking about social movements, it is widely thought that only right-wing movements have an aesthetic character; that only right-wing movements are led by demagogues, who are tricking people and posing as earthly gods, working on the basis of massive mobilisation of sentiment. By contrast, it is widely believed that the democratic left sees people as exercising their reason as individuals or in a collective group. Such a collectivity is, after all, what leftist societies try to establish; they emphasise science, education, privacy rights – all of these things that all of us want – in contrast to conservative societies that emphasise mystery, demagoguery, tradition, subordination to authority and so on. Take a look, for example, at the interesting work on the role of imagery, fantasy, fiction in aesthetics in the twentieth century and you'll discover it's produced by people studying fascism. There is hardly anything interesting written about the role of such phenomena in left-wing movements or in social democratic or liberal societies. These ideological associations explain why there is a moral resistance to thinking in terms of a strong cultural sociology. The idea of the sacred 'must' be associated with tradition and religion, which, of course, are resisted even by many cultural sociologists. So the sacred has to be put in quotes for sociologists to accept it; otherwise it would be associated with conservative, backward looking currents. People are willing to talk about 'good and bad', which I use a lot to describe this dichotomy, and they are willing to talk about 'pure and impure'; as for 'sacred and profane', there is a lot more resistance to that idea.

GL: Is the binary of the sacred/profane a structure which is repeated across societies through all periods of history, or are there aspects of a cultural structure of the sacred, which vary across time?

JA: I would think that both are true. I don't see the possibility of organising collective thought, emotion or moral identity without having these sacred/profane boundaries. Michèle Lamont has talked in a different way about the same thing, drawing mainly on Mary Douglas. I don't see how it would be possible to maintain a moral structure without comparing the sacred, or the idealisation of the group's beliefs, to something considered to be their opposite. Since all

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meaning is relational, how could we establish meaning without comparing good meaning to bad meaning? Now one critique of such an idea is to accuse it of Manicheanism, suggesting moral binarism as limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and implying that other even 'advanced' religions don't have the same binaries. Another criticism of moral binarism is that it is a masculinism, that feminism has shown that there is not that good and bad division. I don't buy those critiques. I think that it is true that there are particular, extreme forms of simplified belief. It is also true that, as sophisticated people, we try to embrace ambiguity, we try to be open to ambivalence and we pride ourselves on not being simple-minded idiots dividing cleanly the good and the bad. But I still think in the end that simplifications are inevitable in these giant, vague collective consciousnesses, even at the level of a family, let alone in complex, modern societies. So, I think such binarism is universal. I certainly never studied a society or a group that wasn't organised around binaries. Of course, it is sociologically relativising to tell the Egyptian revolutionaries that they are dividing the world between sacred and profane rather than simply pursuing the truth. This information may well be taken by them as insulting. They resist that idea because they feel that their ideas are rational, that they are just about truth. But, according to the sociological gaze, there is no totally rational social truth. As a sociologist studying others, you have to be relativistic; your aim is to understand how 'truth' is established.

That said, I would agree with your second suggestion that the form the sacred and profane takes is remarkably plastic and shifts over the course of human history. It is for this reason that comparative religion, the history of religion and ideas about the self versus community are major things that we should be studying. This issue of permanence and change in the sacred/profane dichotomy points to the distinction between Weber and Durkheim. To my mind, there are two basic approaches in sociology. The Weberian approach is relentlessly historical and comparative, the Durkheimian much less so, typically focusing on single case studies. I believe, however, that one needs both, and that one can do both at the same time. A lot of Weberian comparative work eliminates a sense of the sacred when it studies contemporary society. Weber's work is so damaged by his Nietzschean, romantic critique of modernity. It did a terrible disservice to contemporary social science. Weber's entire sociology of secular society, with a few exceptions, is relentlessly instrumentalised, portraying a picture of thoroughly rationalised bureaucracy, status conflicts and stratification. And because Weber is the great genius at the heart of twentieth century political and social science, it has been very hard to recover the Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms*. How can you work with that legacy when you have this dominant, rationalising Weberian theory of contemporary society?

GL: You have previously criticised any suggestion that Durkheim's theory of the sacred and profane could be taken to be a general theory of society. You have said, in a sense, Durkheim overemphasised the role of the sacred and profane, that he saw this as too great a force of social integration and tried to explain too much

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with this. Instead, you have referred to the sacred rather as referring to specified kinds of empirical process. Now, if we think that attending to the sacred and the profane really just helps us to explain certain things or to interpret some things in social life and not others, what are the things about society that your interest in the sacred and profane doesn't explain or doesn't help us to understand?

JA: I suppose that, today, I would prefer to take back part of that earlier statement. One thing I would still say this is that Durkheim doesn't have a comprehensive theory of society. His early book, *The Division of Labour in Society*, is a relatively broad account of some aspects of modernity, as is *Suicide*, and for me he becomes most interesting only in his later work, when he creates a sociology of the sacred. What Durkheim became interested in, in his later work, is the religious dimension, or the sacred dimension of organisations. But he doesn't have a real theory of the state. He doesn't have a theory of stratification or of the economy. What he has is valuable theorising about the symbolic dimensions of these things. But you can't be a modern sociologist if you just want to be Durkheimian. That is what I would defend from that earlier statement. What I think is misleading about that statement would be if it is interpreted as suggesting that a lot of areas of life don't involve the sacred. I think what I understood then, but perhaps I didn't say it, was very influenced by Roger Caillois. Callois was a third generation Durkheim student associated with the Collège de Sociologie in the 1930s, an institution that had very ambiguous moral ties but a lot of very interesting empirical and theoretical things to say. Callois said we can only understand Durkheim's legacy if we differentiate between the sacred, profane and mundane, and that made a lot of sense to me. My sense – and I know that Gordon agrees – is that a lot of our life is lived consciously in routines, the kinds of things that ethnomethodology studies and that would be called the mundane. I would see something like the Watergate scandal or the eruption of Arab protest as breaking the envelope of the mundane, but not as creating something entirely new. When there are periods of significant social tension and conflict, deeper structures come into play and people draw upon them to experience and transform fundamental meanings of social life. So we can see that underlying sacred structures weave in and out of mundane life. The interesting sociological question then becomes why do some things touch off explosions of the sacred? Why do some occurrences come to seem like threats to the sacred, thus turning into 'events' that focus deeply charged moral emotions?

GL: One of the interesting differences about your book on Barack Obama's successful Presidential campaign in 2008 (Alexander 2011a), compared to some of your previous work, was that you did a lot of original fieldwork, both in terms of interviewing political journalists working in the United States and doing some ethnography with some people on the Obama campaign. Now one of the things that I think is really interesting about your approach to the 'strong program' is that it tends often to work with what we could call naturally occurring data. You have worked often with media representations, meanings that are already there in the public domain, where, as a researcher, you don't have to do anything to

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generate this data. Now that arguably has certain advantages to it. But what do you think the role of methodological approaches like ethnography to the study of the sacred in a 'strong program' sense?

JA: In social research about meanings and values, the media has not usually been thought of as a valid source. When I was talking about my Egypt book (Alexander 2011b) at an event last week, people made a big deal out of the fact that I was using newspapers. Usually in qualitative research, people want to get to the truth, to what 'really' happened; by contrast, as a cultural sociologist I am not interested in what was really the truth but what people *think* was the truth. I am interested in finding naturally occurring collective representations of truthfulness, and it seems to me the media is one of the best places to find this. I don't think of news reporting as descriptive and accurate, or as irrational and ideological by contrast. I think of it as generating representations of society by people who are independent to some degree of the events they are reporting on, but who consider themselves to be average men and women making interpretations. I look at media as collective representations that circulate very rapidly. These collective representations inform people as to what is going on. Because we don't see 99.9% of anything that happens in our society at first-hand, yet we must present ourselves as if we are fully versed on everything. This is fascinating. We have little first-hand experience, all we have are representations that we think are true and give us a sense of social reality. How do we, as social analysts, find these representations? Ethnographic research is fine and can be very productive. The drawback to ethnography is the difficulty it often has in capturing collective representations. In the tradition of the Chicago School of ethnography and in a lot of social anthropology, you hardly ever find people's statements. Instead you get the ethnographer describing structures – 'this is how this group or organisation was structured', and so on. Not all ethnography is like that, Evans-Pritchard being a good counter-example. I work with students doing ethnography and it was fascinating to do some ethnography for my Obama book, and it was a brief but powerfully illuminating experience for me. Of course, an ethnographer faces the same theoretical choices as any other social scientist in terms of whether they think that representations are important. Can they reconstruct the cultural sacred and profane of the group? You have to reconstruct your data dialectically between what you bring to it, theoretically, and what you are observing.

GL: If we were to come back here in 10 or 20 years' time, what would you most like to see in terms of happening as a key development in the study of the cultural sociology of the sacred?

JA: I think that it would be great to see people reconstruct the reality of modernity in a rich and textured sense that reveals the deep meanings of modern institutions. That's not to say that they are the same as Durkheim's totemic groups, but there are similarities and differences that need to be clarified. I would like to see a more developed reconstruction of the meanings and symbolic classifications of modernity – including different forms of the sacred and the

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profane – that would help us understand the conflicts and crises of modernity in terms of a cultural sociology.

Question from seminar participant: Thank you for your conversation, which I found really interesting. I have a comment and then a question. You were critical of Weber's notion of the iron cage at the end of the *Protestant Ethic*, that idea of disenchantment. So my comment is that the concept is also somewhat there in the *Division of Labour* and in *Suicide* in Durkheim's idea of anomie and his attempt to pathologise certain currents of modernity. My question would be: when it comes to looking at moral structures, what tools would Durkheim provide a cultural sociologist for taking a normative or critical approach?

JA: Well, first of all, the third book of *The Division of Labour* is concerned with the pathological division of labour or the forced division of labour, and *Suicide* discusses egoism and anomie as pathological structures. In those two works of 1893 and 1897, then, there are, indeed, concepts that help to explain pathological elements of modernity and I think you can work with those. They have had real explanatory and interpretive purchase. The idea of the forced division of labour can be reformulated into a strong sense of the frustrations of blocked opportunity in a society that promises you position by merit but where you do not get it because of your class position. I am not as happy with anomie or egoism because I think that those suggest that a good society is a stable society that can be organically structured and rooted. I also do not like the concept of egoism because it suggests that some people live in the modern world without any connection to values, and I think that is incorrect. In fact, these parts of Durkheim's work suggest that individualism is very dangerous, whereas there are other parts of his work that view individualism as an ethic or even a sacred value which can hold society together. But I agree with what is perhaps the implication of your question that the later Durkheimian sociology, which I think is the most useful for cultural sociology, doesn't supply a critical theory of society. One of the problems of cultural analysis is that it has, in fact, often been promoted by intellectuals who overlook the dark side of modernity and believe that, by emphasising culture, they can identify the congruencies between the contemporary and the traditional world. I am thinking of Edward Shils, for example, or even to some degree of Parsons. Both of these mid-century 'cultural sociologists' suggested 'things are not as bad as you think', insisting, vis-a-vis more critical thinkers, that we do have institutionalised moral regulation; we do have values, solidarity and cooperation. Conversely, the problem with most critical theory, as I mentioned earlier when speaking about Bellah's critical stage, is that it arrives at critique by saying that capitalism or the liquefaction of modernity or post-modernity has eliminated *all* values and structures, in other words that 'cultural meanings' have been driven out by our currently corrupted or oppressive society. So I think there is a problem here. We need to disassociate a commitment to cultural analysis from a positive or utopian – or indeed dystopian – view of contemporary society. In my own work I have been very concerned with making clear that the sacred and profane binaries of culture are NOT

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isomorphic with actually existing boundaries of citizenship and exclusion. So my work in *The Civil Sphere*, for example, has been about the contradictions in the culture of democracy, which has so often turned the neat trick of being able to have a good conscience about all the different sorts and classes of people who have never been included because it sees them as dangerous to the sacred upon which society is built. I believe that, in this sense, my cultural theory does provide a position of critique. I have tried to politicise or maybe radicalise this Durkheimian idea of sacred and profane, to make it clear how useful it is to reveal the hypocrisies of civil exclusion. We have to understand that exclusion and domination are fundamentally connected, not just to the distribution of resources and social closure, but also to applications of ideas about moral pollution. We have to have a cultural understanding of this and get away from the idea that domination is based in simply instrumental self-interest. We have to understand the ways in which the moral processes of society are implicated in othering and domination. This is where I would see Durkheimian sociology as having a very important political and critical perspective. For example, if I read Marx's work on class, I do not see his understanding that the moral pollution of the working classes and the corresponding movement for its moral purification are central. In my own theory, to the contrary, symbolic and moral work on class is fundamental to the struggle for equality over the last 150 years. I would say the same thing for gender, for religion and for ethnicity. This concentration on othering and exclusion, and social movements to overcome them, doesn't come from Durkheimian theory *per se*, but the way I understand them does. These new, extra-Durkheimian foci come from the influence of the new social movements from the 1960s onwards. While some theorists have negatively identified these as identity politics, I believe, to the contrary, that they have actually allowed us to be much more sensitive to the emotional and moral dimensions of exclusion and inclusion, and have opened the way for a more cultural sociological understanding of these issues.

Question from seminar participant: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the law? As an abstract concept, it seems like a very sacred concept, very much on each side of the debate, the other side will be seen as polluting. We see this at the moment with people going through the court systems, the rioters. But then again, it is something that is very everyday, you might have the hero in a film as a lawyer who finds a loophole. So it seems like something that you can misuse and still keep a kind of moral purity. I just wanted you to talk a bit more about that.

JA: I think that is a good question. The law is a good example of a social institution that, like so many others, operates at different levels at the same time. It has a mundane and routine quality to it, such that it can be something that you play as a game. In that sense it is a purely technical set of normative prescriptions. In Habermas' work on law for example, as in other works of what is called 'positive legal philosophy', the law is thought of as a very narrowly normative order, which allows predictive calculations in a rational way. For Habermas, it is

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the very mundanity that makes law important and unique. I agree this is a significant element of the legal order, which makes it different from a religious order or an order of love, passion or even politics. But I think the legal order at its core remains a binary classification of sacred and profane, and I've argued that a democratic legal order is organised very much around the discourse of the civil sphere, which centres on the sacredness of the individual, idealising her as a fully conscious, rational and autonomous self. For example, if you are arrested or punished for something, you might quite understandably say 'well I didn't really know I was doing that, I certainly didn't mean to do it, it just happened'. But the law says it doesn't accept you as you 'really are' empirically, in everyday life; it has an idealised view of you as a fully rational, enlightenment person. The law is about separating the pure from the impure and protecting this society of supposedly rational, well-meaning, cooperative and truthful people from 'bad' people. A 'riot', for example, is a highly charged cultural understanding, a polluting form of classification that places the motives and relations of people engaged in aggressive street movements outside the civil sphere, suggesting 'they are passionate, they are impulsive, they are irrational, they have no ideals, they are more like animals than thoughtful deliberative human beings'. Calling something a 'riot' is a pretty dangerous thing, from the democratic point of view, because it suggests amorality which deserves punishment. Rioters 'must' be put away because you can't allow people like that to come into a civil society: we have to protect ourselves. That is a very common boundary making process that governments continually engage in.

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