

# Ritual and Myth in the International Corona-Drama

A Conversation with Jeffrey Alexander<sup>1</sup>

Interviewed by Javier Pérez-Jara  
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## Javier Pérez-Jara (JPJ)

*First of all, thank you so much for accepting to participate in this interview, Prof. Alexander. It is really an honor to have the opportunity to interview you! Let's start talking about the cultural perception of the pandemic in the United States.*

### *American social wounds and fractures in the current COVID-19 pandemic*

*One of the main ideas of your cultural trauma theory consists in that there is a more-than-often “divorce” between the intrinsic impact of a catastrophe and its cultural perception. A successful trauma process requires complex cultural processes of narration and signification. This fact clearly distinguishes cultural traumas from biological and psychological traumas. Often, those cultural processes of trauma construction take years, or even decades, to be successful. What would you say that have been the factors that explain the fast construction of the culturally-traumatic (often even apocalyptic) perception of the COVID-19 both within and outside the United States? The “coronadrama” has been incredibly successful even in places with a very low death toll, such as Taiwan.*

## Jeffrey Alexander (JA)

There is no set time frame for the cultural construction of collective trauma. A trauma process can be very rapid, but it can also be a spiral – in fact it usually is – that plays out over a very extended period of time, with the key elements of the trauma narrative being retold differently depending on new circumstances, new values, newly empowered actors.

You can see this clearly in the storm clouds currently gathering in your own nation over the Spanish civil war. During the enormously consequential transition to democracy that began 45 years ago, the overwhelming source of cultural trauma was experienced as Franco's oppressive, anti-democratic rule. In this context, traumatic individual and sub-group memories of the civil war were bracketed,

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as one of my first cultural sociology Ph.D.'s, Laura Desfor Edles, demonstrated in *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain. The Transition to Democracy after Franco* (Cambridge University Press 1998).

Now that Spanish democracy has stabilized, anger and partisanship can be tolerated, and calls for a TRC-style reckoning with those horrific years are ringing out (Baer, Alejandro and Natan Sznajder. 2015. "Ghosts of the Holocaust in Franco's Mass Graves. Cosmopolitan Memories and the Politics of Never Again." *Memory Studies* 5[2]: 328-344). In other words, the collective trauma of the Spanish civil war is a cultural construction that waxes and wanes relative to the circumstances at hand.

Trauma process involves social performance, which is constructed from a number of relatively independent elements. Who is the perpetrator? Who are the victims? What happened to create the problem? What can be done to prevent the trauma from ever happening again (i.e. "never again")? COVID-19 didn't, and hasn't, triggered trauma in every nation state. In Sweden, for better and for worse, it was presented to the public as a serious public health problem, but not as a nightmarish collective drama that demanded radical reconstructions of Swedish social life and collective identity. Because Sweden was not prepared for a pandemic, this "no trauma" reaction led to one of the highest per capita COVID death rates in the world.

Taiwan makes an instructive contrast. Taiwan, too, framed COVID as a public health crisis, but its elites and institutions were far more prepared than Sweden's, or any other nation's, for that matter. The reason? As Ming-Cheng Lo and Hsin-yui Hsieh show in "The 'Societalization' of Pandemic Unpreparedness: How Taiwan Learned its Lessons" -- their contribution to the special "Covid and Cultural Sociology" issue of the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* (volume 8, issue 3, December 2020), Taiwan had already gone through a traumatizing national experience fifteen years before, when it had failed to face the SARS virus in 2003. In response to that experience of fear and national humiliation, Taiwan underwent an extended and profound process of "societalization," marked by conspicuous anti-partisan consensus about the need to reconstruct public health and governmental structures. This years-long process of civil repair provided Taiwan's democratic government with the resources to respond to COVID with alacrity, resulting in the lowest per capita rates of infection and death in the entire world.

In most nations, however, the viral pandemic has triggered ontological anxiety about the very existence of society – deep anxiety over the collective identity and solidarity that constitute the imagined center of national life. In the U.S., this collective anxiety has taken the form of deeply questioning the national narrative about "greatness." From its very earliest days as a settler colony in Massachusetts, Americans have considered themselves to be a special, uniquely gifted nation. Stories about "American exceptionalism" have been at the center of American historiography, political life, novels, poetry, and myth for four hundred years.

Deep crises like economic depressions and wars have been interrupted as challenges to this special status as an "elect" or "chosen" nation, and the COVID crisis is this kind of extremely stressful such occasion. On most indices, the U.S. scores at the bottom among developed nations. Such low "scoring" is not merely an objective fact but something deeply meaningful, a situation Americans experience as degrading. It is as if the nation's collective consciousness has been humiliated.

The American nation thought of itself as exceptional long before it was an economic, political, cultural, and military power, but this self-conception was reinforced by the hegemonic global position America assumed in the post-World Two world. America's losing the Vietnam war seemed to undermine this status, and Japan's economic challenge in the 1970s and 80s greatly increased such tremors. Japan's challenge faltered, but China's rise over the last two decades has underscored and intensified the challenge to American collective identity.

Under the incompetent and polarizing leadership of President Trump, America's failed response to COVID has supercharged such worries, triggering a trauma over who we are as a nation. Trump's 2016 electoral campaign promised to "Make America Great Again," an implicit recognition that it no longer was. As the President organized his campaign for reelection, he intended to rewrite the slogan, making it "Keep American Great." Even as COVID has posed increasing danger to this self-congratulatory narrative, in which Trump plays the role of heroic protagonist, the President has strenuously endeavored to preserve it, initially by denial, then by serial deceits featuring declarations of victory. In the final months of the presidential campaign, the U.S. finds itself in the midst of a brutal symbolic battle about who will have the power to structure the COVID-trauma drama in the years ahead.

**JPJ**

*The Covid crisis in the United States, as a national "coronadrama", has escalated the cultural wars between liberals and conservatives. In the middle of such cultural struggles, the heinous murder of George Floyd happened. This has generated what you have called, following Anthony Fauci, a "double whammy trauma". Could you explain this idea a little?*

**JA**

A big part of American exceptionalism has been the belief that the nation is truly democratic, offering not only political freedom but equality of opportunity and cultural pluralism. These beliefs have, of course, been belied by a whole series of "facts," from the fact that the nation's wealth was built, in part, on the backs of slaves to the intense nativism that eventually put an abrupt halt to 300 years of free immigration in the 1920s. Such facts have not displaced the narrative of American democracy, though they have certainly triggered bouts of intensive national introspection.

In the midst of the ontological anxiety triggered by the trauma of COVID, the vicious police murder of George Floyd intensified arguments about American greatness. When Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin – little more than a state-authorized thug – ground his knee into George Floyd's neck – for more than eight minutes – he became a collective representation of the racism that still persists inside much of white America. The protest that erupted set off the largest and longest street protest in American history and initiated a trauma process that is far from being resolved.

Who is the perpetrator? Who is the victim? What is the injury, and what can be done? For the left and center, structural racism is the injury, Black Americans are the victims, racist white Americans are the perpetrators, and nothing short of a radical reconstruction of national social structure and culture will prevent such judicial murder from happening time and time again.

Inside of this double whammy, indignant left and center Americans have established a semiotic analogy: COVID is to all Americans as racism is to Black Americans. Just as COVID has its knee on "our" neck, so racism has its knee on the neck of all Black people. *Covid:all American::racism:Blacks*. Right-wing Americans, with the help of Fox News, conservative websites, and the ever-present performative populist Donald Trump, are narrating the double-whammy trauma in the opposite way, with white policemen as victims, Black Americans and white liberals as the perpetrators, crime and anarchy as the trauma, and four more years of an extreme right wing presidency as the solution.

This agonistic trauma process has, of course, now become a prominent part of the performance of power during the nation's presidential campaign. If the Democratic Party can persuasively represent Trump as co-perpetrator of the COVID trauma, then the president can be culturally constructed as responsible for both sides of the double-whammy. It follows that removing Trump from office is the

solution to the national trauma, for only with a different national government could the biological and racial danger be overcome and moral health and solidarity reestablished.

**JPJ**

*During the Covid crisis, new rituals and social performances have emerged. In Spain, for instance, during the lockdown (which was very severe during many weeks), every day at 20:00, an incredible number of people applauded from their balconies to the heroic sacrifices of the health personnel that were fighting against the evil disease. Many psychologists have explained this ritual as a social mechanism for stress relief. But of course this kind of rituals (or dramaturgical performances in a broader sense), always linked to specific symbolic codes and narratives, deserve a cultural analysis. Have you observed the emergence of new rituals in the United States during this crisis?*

**JA**

Similar ritual observances unfolded to honor and celebrate “health care heroes” in urban areas throughout the U.S. I understand this in a cultural-sociological rather than psychological way, as less to provide stress relief than to construct and celebrate newly heroic totems of strength, moral courage, and sacrifice, and, in this way, to strengthen solidarity in a civil rather than particularistic, divisive, and fragmented way.

As a *contemporary* cultural sociologist, however, I am actually less interested in such traditional rituals – which Durkheim focused on in *Les Formes elementaries de la vie religieuse* – than in “social performances,” which I conceptualize as the more contingent and reflexive form of symbolic action that permeate complex modern societies.

Under the right conditions, a skillful and felicitous cultural performance can fuse with distant audiences and create powerful ritual-like experiences that sustain political authority and social solidarity. It is because President Trump utterly failed to mount such successful performances that effective responses to COVID at the national level were impossible. The president could generate no consensual cultural authority.

By contrast, there were some spectacularly successful symbolic performances by political authorities at the state and city level. In “‘We Work On This Every Single Day’: Press Conferences as Mediatized Sanctuary in Ohio,” his contribution to the “COVID and Cultural Sociology” special issue of *AJCS*, Celso Villegas has skillfully reconstructed the daily performances of Ohio governor Mike DeWine, and how his well-earned “ritual” authority allowed the state to organize an effective response to the virus.

Facing harsh criticism from President Trump, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo also successfully performed symbolic authority via daily press conferences. These nationally televised two-hour performances mesmerized audiences who were inspired by the governor’s democratic straightforward authenticity. Like Governor DeWine’s, Cuomo’s felicitous performance also won over critical journalists, becoming ritual occasions that won for him the political authority to fight the tremendous viral onslaught New York faced.

**JPJ**

*In multiple occasions, collective identities seem to be attached to ideological packages or menus. In such packages, many narratives are gathered despite their often lack of internal logical connection between them. For instance, in Spain, Spanish nationalists are very often supporters of Catholicism, a centralized government, economic libertarianism, bullfighting, Israel over Palestine, nuclear*

*energy, skepticism or denial of climate change, anti-abortion, and the conception of the political left as the embodiment of evil. Similarly, a significant part of the Spanish political left shares a common ideological package of secularism, socialism, federalism, environmentalism, pro-abortion, defense of Palestine over Israel, and the notion of the political right as a homogeneous polluting force of evil.*

*These ideological packages or menus seem to change depending on different cultural landscapes. For instance, several former communist countries promoted ideological packages in which abortion, homosexuality and sex outside the wedlock was presented as polluting deviations that threatened the purity of the nation and society. Or, to have a current example: today, in the United States, conservatives usually critique the federal government's political centralism as a polluting force, which is the opposite of what we can find in the Spanish conservative ideological landscape.*

*Thanks to the formation of these ideological packages, it seems that there is a degree of predictability of the ideological nebula of a person just by attending to one or a couple of isolated ideological items. For instance, if an American citizen is against gun control, it is very likely that he or she is also against abortion, the power of the federal government, secularism, policies against climate change, and so on, despite the lack of a logical connection between guns, abortion and global warming.*

*From this point of view, how do you see the development of ideological packages in the United States during the pandemic? Could for instance Donald Trump's and Mike Pence's usual attempt of avoiding the use of masks in public be interpreted as a calculated dramaturgical performance to incorporate a new simplistic binary into the conservative ideological package or menu?*

**JA**

Certainly, there are “ideological packages” linking together distinctive themes, but I don't think it's particularly useful, from a cultural-sociological perspective, to wonder whether or not such diverse issues have a “logical” connection. Outside the realm of Kantian philosophy and Habermasian pragmatics, logical rationality has little effect on the meanings of social life. Modernity, despite its extraordinary scientific and technological achievements, is more meaningful than logical.

This does not mean that social actors do not try to strategize about their performances; they certainly do. They strategize, however, within a coded and narrated world whose patterning is beyond actors' reflexive understanding. Social performers make every effort to persuade others of the sincerity and authenticity of their actions, knowing that, if audiences can be so convinced, then they will attribute truthfulness to the actors' scripts. Trump and Pence strategize that not wearing masks will allow them to fuse with their fervently right-wing base, and their performative intuitions have proved to be correct. But it might well be that such strategizing, mediated by the partisan culture that surrounds the administration, has been misguided. Do the President and Vice-President understand that their anti-mask performances are making it impossible for centrist Americans to experience their leadership as authentic?

## **Cultural gears of sorrow during the Spanish COVID-19 pandemic**

**JPJ**

*Now, I would like to focus on the specific case of Spain. Before the pandemic started to devastate Spain, Spanish media coded and represented the virus in China in a very dark light; the new and mysterious virus affecting Wuhan was very often coded and narrated as a terrific deadly plague, product of an opaque and polluting dictatorship with serious problems of hygiene. Something that,*

*therefore, could not severely affect the democratic first world. Would you like to offer a reflection on these double standards and their social impact in the cultural representation of the COVID-19?*

**JA**

Yes, it has been quite a shock to Western self-consciousness that, after China's early reckless and self-destructive actions, this authoritarian Eastern potentate effectively controlled the virus and succeeded in restoring so much of "normal" social life today. Beyond the "new Cold War," however, it's important to understand that the binary East/West has been central to meaning-making in the West for many centuries, all the way back to the ancient Greeks. It shaped – and simplified -- Western understanding long before the early modern imperialism that Edward Said saw as explaining orientalism, though imperialism certainly reinforced it.

The binary has sacralized the West even as it has culturally polluted China, and this warped meaning-making was exemplified in the more demonizing shades of the withering criticism leveled by Western nations against Wuhan. At the same time, I believe, it's vital to see that the centuries-long pollution of the "non-West" has also been fueled by democratic commitments in republican political theory. As Quentin Skinner and his colleagues stunningly documented almost 50 years ago, while such republican ideas started with the ancient Greeks, it re-emerged forcefully one thousand years ago inside European city states as they fought for independence and self-government vis-à-vis imperial secular and religious sovereigns.

In other words, contemporary China has been polluted not only because of orientalism but because of its repressive and anti-democratic governance. Because the party-state fits perfectly inside the long-standing, highly polluted category of authoritarian sovereign, China "must" be narrated as a threat to the republican ideology that legitimates democratic governance. It is vital to see, in this regard, that in the contemporary world, the binary democracy/dictatorship has broken free from the orientalism of East/West. How can Westerners equate "East" with authoritarianism when so many vital East Asian nations have become powerfully democratic nations? This is one of the principal takeaways of *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (edited by myself with David Palmer, Sunwoong Park, and Agnes Ku, Cambridge University Press, 2019). If the CORONA virus had started in Taiwan or South Korea or Japan, it would have been much more difficult for Western apologists to evoke the East/West binary to camouflage Western failures.

**JPJ**

*Against radical social constructionism and relativism, you have defended that, although reality cannot disprove cultural constructions, it can at least make them seem less plausible. Let's call the imposition of reality on imaginative or contradictory narratives, "reality's muzzle". Up to what extent we can expect that reality's muzzle will challenge and even discredit the most fantastical narratives on the COVID-19, even when they are often supported on social and psychological mechanisms that seem to immunize individuals against objective reality? To give an extreme example: in Spain, for instance, a significant number of people have been receptive to narratives that point out at the Chinese Communist Party, George Soros, or Bill Gates as the identifiable perpetrators (the "bad ones") of the global pandemic, despite the fact that these narratives have not been disseminated by the main means of cultural production.*

**JA**

I put very little faith in the ability of reality-as-unfiltered-perception – to muzzle symbolic process. Reality is a reference for symbolic signification, and it can be attached to deeply contrasting signifiers.

What can challenge absurd, surreal, and fantastical conspiracy fantasies is not reality but, rather, powerful cultural performances that code science and calm reasoning, as sacred rather than profane.

Progressive social movements often engage in such performances, but moderate conservatives also have powerfully performed the same kind of balanced rationality. The ideals of the Enlightenment, the culture structures that carry justice, liberty, and equality -- these are not energized by reality but by felicitous social performances that make them *seem* real, and by magnetic iconic personifications, of such cosmopolitan figures as Kant, Marx, Freud, and Einstein.

### **The cultural role of the unconscious, the non-rational, and the sacred in our understanding of the current pandemic**

**JPJ**

*Now, I would like to move away from the specific cases of the United States and Spain and focus our attention on a more global scale. Against naive conceptions of culture and society, you have defended that, contrary to what common sense might suggest, in society there is no photographic truth and there is very little ability for objective truth. Could you give us an example of this thesis related to the pandemic? What do you think are the main consequences of the falsehood of naive realism to understand this global crisis?*

**JA**

Journalists and critical intellectuals and academics have tended to interpret failures to effectively address the COVID crisis as the failure to be rational and scientific, decrying our purportedly our new, post-factual world. The problem with this naïve epistemological realism is that it allows people on one side to critique the other as irrational and deceitful, while portraying themselves as the opposite. When social science works this binary, it becomes captured by events and disputatious ideologies rather than providing a platform for explaining and interpreting them. One needs a cultural sociology – and especially its Strong Program version – in order to analyze society from a platform that provides reflexivity.

**JPJ**

*From Antiquity's ancient mythologies to the present, diverse societies have developed multiple utopian and apocalyptic narratives about humankind. Often both visions have coexisted (or coexist) at the same time. Good current examples of this are the very divergent visions of the present and the future defended by public figures such as Bruno Latour, Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker, Byung-Chul Han, Sam Harris or Greta Thunberg. Nevertheless, and despite the plurality of cultural perceptions of the same or similar events, all of them seem to share common cultural structures (such as binary codes, narratives on the pure and the polluting, etc.). My question is: how do you think that the current (and still evolving) narratives on the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the most famous Western utopian and apocalyptic narratives?*

**JA**

This question is much too grand to address in the space of this interview. As a place from which an answer might begin, I'd want to suggest that apocalyptic narratives about the end of the world are deeply entrenched structures in our cultural imagination, and have been for millennia. In *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), my colleague

and former student Philip Smith brings Northrup Frye's archetypal narratives into cultural sociology, demonstrating how comedy and irony inform civil dissent, romance inspires reform, and tragic and utopian narratives fuel all out wars and revolutions.

Cultural sociology allows us to see that the sense of imminent apocalypse, and the fears that it generates, is a meaning structure that social actors have imposed on a biological danger that poses enormous challenges to public health. The COVID crisis is also being narrated in romantic ways, viz. our health care heroes; and it has been dismissed as comic and mundane, by far left and far right alike. Rather than evaluating the truthfulness or ideological leanings of such genre choices, cultural sociology observes the meaning and energy they confer on those who perform them and their productive symbolic effects.

### **Civil fractures and civil repair in the current crisis**

**JPJ**

*Influenced by a long tradition of cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and semioticians, you have highlighted the key and structural role of binary oppositions in culture. It appears that, in our social life, our cognitive apparatus cannot get rid of them. But we can, nonetheless, criticize and move away from extremely simplistic binary codes, such as the ones held by the most Manichean religious or political ideologies.*

*The problem seems to be that radical binaries work as a powerful collective glue. Despite common collective representations and real ties of empathy and solidarity, actual civil spheres are fragmented through binary oppositions, for instance between the north and the south, the east and the west, the countryside and the big cities, diverse social classes, gender expectations, ethnic groups, religious or political collective representations, and so on. Regardless of the empirical case we choose, it is not possible a civil sphere without binaries on civil behavior and values vs uncivil behavior and values. Although obviously in different degrees, this tension seems a structural property of every civil sphere. How have you seen this tension recently?*

**JA**

I can answer this question quite simply: In my view, justice and a good society are achieved, not by eliminating the civil/anti-civil binary that allows meaning to be made about social conflicts, but, rather, by reconfiguring the signifieds of these ineluctable signifiers. The more justice – let's say in the Rawlsian sense – the more expansive civil signification becomes, extending to more classes, genders, races, regions, and religions, and the more narrow the application of the signifier "anti-civil." Perhaps someday our passion for polluting and excluding binaries will be limited to recreational and aesthetic spheres, to "enemy" football teams and "ugly" iconic surfaces.

**JPJ**

*Aside of this structural tension within every actual civil sphere, civil spheres are also structurally in conflict with other spheres of society, such as the political sphere, the economic sphere, or the family sphere. That conflict can be stronger or weaker, but it is always there. Against Parsons's downplaying of the exclusive sides of every society, you have often emphasized that there is always a simultaneous inclusive/exclusive tension in every society. Thus, you explain conflict from, let's say, a non-conflict theory. What would you say that are the main advantages of cultural sociology over current "conflict theories" in order to explain contemporary civil cracks and fractures, from the protests generated by*

*the murder of George Floyd to the (updated by the Covid pandemic) cultural wars between liberals and conservatives?*

**JA**

Conflict versus order theory seems a dated way of understanding divisions within contemporary sociological theorizing. But since conflict theory was typically directed against cultural explanations of any kind – associating them with normative functionalism – the spirit of conflict theory lives still in the wide range of quasi-materialist, instrumental, and reductionist sociological theorizing of the present day.

Most theories of political power remain mechanistic, unable to reference the systems of signification within which power becomes authority via the process of legitimation. I am thinking here of the approaches of such thinkers as Michael Mann and Charles Tilly, against which some of my former students, like Jason Mast (*The Performative Presidency*, Cambridge 2012) and Isaac Reed (*Power in Modernity*, University of Chicago 2020), have launched stinging cultural-sociological retorts and counter-models.

It is, paradoxically, because mechanistic approaches to conflict are unable to recognize the relative autonomy of culture that they have failed to develop persuasive explanations of social conflict. Conflicts over power are struggles for control over symbolic representation, for performative power is the royal road to material power.

**JPJ**

*Finally, how do you think that the lack of existence of a global civil sphere has affected the Covid pandemic and its diverse national and cultural responses?*

**JA**

The pandemic is global, but the effective organization that mobilizes social responses to it are national. This is a tremendous disadvantage, for it promotes competition over scarce resources instead of a coordinated distribution of them and it allows centrifugal national policies that often contradict and undermine one another.

Even the global health agencies that do exist are undermined by nationalistic great power politics. The failure to have created an effective global civil sphere with a shared discourse mediated by independent regulatory and communicative institutions is a humiliation for humankind. From the League of Nations onward, there has been a trail of false hopes and broken promises. Without a truly global civil sphere, the moral possibilities of national civil spheres are beset by inevitable contradictions, creating real fears of material annihilation in international relations.

**JPJ**

Thank you very much, Prof. Alexander!