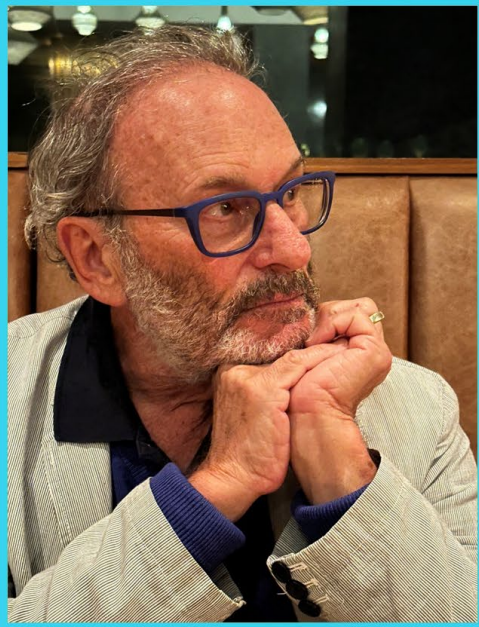


WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY



theoretical logic
neofunctionalism

cultural
sociology

civil sphere

iconicity

social performance

cultural trauma

Durkheim

strong program

reinterpreting the classics

SPEAKERS:

Nelson Arteaga Botello, Peter Beilharz, Paul Colomy,
Jean-François Côté, Mustafa Emirbayer, Ronald Jacobs,
Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, Anne Kane, Peter Kivisto, Agnes Ku,
Maria Luengo Cruz, Anna Lund, Jason Mast, Lisa McCormick,
Isaac Ariail Reed, Giuseppe Sciortino, Philip Smith, Lynette Spillman,
Anne Taylor, Carlo Tognato, Frédéric Vandenberghe, Celso Villegas,
Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Galen Watts, Eric Taylor Woods

Hosted by The Center for Cultural Sociology

October 25 & 26, 2024

Yale University – Humanities Quadrangle – Room 136

ARTWORK: MOREL ALEXANDER ~ ORIGINS-8

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER:
JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Friday, October 25, 2024
Humanities Quadrangle ~ Room 136

8:30 - 9:00 *Coffee/Tea*

9:00 - 9:15 [Philip Smith](#) ~ Yale University

Opening Remarks: Jeffrey Alexander by the Numbers

9:15 - 10:15 **Session I ~ The Big Picture : Continuities over the Decades**

Chair: [Dmitry Kurakin](#) ~ Yale University

[Celso Villegas](#) ~ Kenyon College

[Galen Watts](#) ~ University of Waterloo

**Reading Jeffrey Alexander:
Personality, Culture, and Structure in Two Parts**

[Anne Taylor](#) ~ Yale University

Towards a Sociology of Joy

10:15 - 10:45 *Coffee Break*

10:45 - 11:45 **Session II ~ Who is Jeffrey Alexander? Part One: The Student View**

Chair: [Shivani Choudhary](#) ~ Yale University

[Ronald Jacobs](#) ~ State University of New York at Albany

**On The Hermeneutics of Constructive Mentorship:
Some Reflections on the Alexander Style**

[Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky](#) ~ Masaryk University

**"Do you plan on being a professional sociologist?"
The evolution of professional boundary work through the Strong Program**

[Lisa McCormick](#) ~ University of Edinburgh

Intellectual Virtuosity Personified: The Performative Power of Jeff's Ideas

11:45 - 1:00 *Lunch*

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Friday, October 25, 2024

1:00 - 2:00 **Session III ~ Paradigms Manifest and Latent**

Chair: [Marcel Knochelmann](#) ~ Yale University

[Jason Mast](#) ~ University of Trento

Politics as performance: Evolution of a paradigm

[Isaac Ariail Reed](#) ~ University of Virginia

The Sign of Jeffrey C. Alexander

[Mustafa Emirbayer](#) ~ University of Wisconsin - Madison

Jeffrey Alexander and Psychoanalysis

2:00 - 2:30 *Coffee Break*

2:30 - 3:45 **Session IV ~ The Civil Sphere Part One: Towards a Global Project**

Chair: [Dorothy Wu](#) ~ Yale University

[Giuseppe Sciortino](#) ~ University of Trento

[Peter Kivisto](#) ~ Augustana College

**Probing the Boundaries of the Civil Sphere.
Mobility, Migration, and Membership**

[Carlo Tognato](#) ~ Center for Cultural Sociology Faculty Fellow

**Capturing civil degradation:
On Jeff Alexander and the quest to decenter civil sphere theory**

[Agnes Ku](#) ~ The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Globalizing Civil Sphere Theory and the "Strong Program" – An East Asian Perspective

3:45 **Session V – Tributes**

Chair: *Philip Smith*

Speakers: [Frederick Wherry](#) ~ Princeton University; [Julia Sonnevend](#) ~ The New School; [Michael Schudson](#) ~ Columbia University; [Mabel Berezin](#) ~ Cornell University; [Matthew Norton](#) ~ University of Oregon; [John Ahn](#) ~ Howard University; [Charles Musser](#) ~ Yale University.

5:00 - 8:00 *Reception ~ Humanities Quadrangle ~ Room 131*

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Session I ~ The Big Picture : Continuities over the Decades

Celso Villegas ~ Kenyon College

Galen Watts ~ University of Waterloo

Reading Jeffrey Alexander: Personality, Culture, and Structure in Two Parts

For nearly half a century Jeffrey Alexander has devoted himself to the sociological vocation – first as a general (“grand”) theorist, and then as the iconic leader of a set of global research programs – a life lived for sociology. We start the case for Alexander’s canonization as a classical theorist. To do so, we engage in a hermeneutic reading of Alexander’s life and work in two parts.

In Part 1, we situate Alexander’s oeuvre from Theoretical Logic to the Strong Program and beyond in biographical and historical context. We pay close attention to the transition from Alexander’s early to mid-career, focusing on the tensions arising from the success of his metatheoretical work and his own “anxiety of being misunderstood” as the Parsonian “Prince” of neofunctionalism. We highlight the groundwork for Alexander’s resolution to these tensions in the various environments and friendships that provided him the intellectual and emotional resources to make a break from the pressures of his reputation, and towards a new intellectual and expressive freedom in the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology, a biographical turn in his work on cultural trauma, and the moral and political clarity of *The Civil Sphere*. It is this later Alexander that the authors encounter in the flesh, “iconically” so to speak, as an exemplar and guide towards the possibilities of the life of the mind.

In Part 2, we offer a reconstruction of the theoretical core of Alexander’s sociology. We argue that despite the terrific depth and richness of Alexander’s oeuvre, the underlying vision that animates it has remained fairly stable over time. This vision comprises the following five commitments: (1) a commitment to structural voluntarism, and the moral dimension of human action; (2) a commitment to multidimensionality; (3) a commitment to the centrality of meaning in social life, and thus to culture’s autonomy; (4) a commitment to a postpositivist conception of social science; and (5) a commitment to democracy as a utopian ideal. We spend time elaborating the roots and branches of each of these five constitutive commitments, as well as their tensions, problems, and antinomies that attend them. These tensions and strains serve as a fecund source of generative thought and theoretical development – giving rise to new problems, as well as new attempts at resolution “after Alexander.”

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Anne Taylor ~ Yale University

Towards a Sociology of Joy

Across the many eras of Jeffrey Alexander's sociology, a clear through line stands out: a commitment to theorizing the paths societies take to repair and renew social bonds. This is a nuanced commitment worth digging into – for the contrasts it poses between both his influences and his opponents and for the possibilities it carves out, as well. This includes the possibility of moving beyond a focus on social problems towards a “sociology of joy.” Through a review of Alexander's cultural sociological project, I argue that the study of social joy is built on three theoretical requirements: a solidarity that affords space for human creativity, pleasure, and belonging, an ability to overcome obstacles—both structural and symbolic – that threaten solidarity, and a sensitivity to both meaning and contingencies of action necessary to understanding both solidarity and conflict. First, though Alexander's work shares the same theoretical roots with Parsonian Functionalism and its interest in stability, Alexander's understandings of solidarity incorporate the very real facts of societal conflict. Second, Alexander does not stop at the level of conflict, as many of his contemporaries do, and instead looks towards repair as means to explain how people overcome obstacles, like trauma or democratic upheaval. Third, while Alexander's empirical interests are notably secular his theoretical project does not accept the secularization thesis and thus rejects both rational and postmodern materialism. Trading the Weberian rational/irrational binary for the Durkheimian sacred/profane (or mundane), Alexander conceptually prioritizes the symbolic frameworks undergirding society to theorize a structural hermeneutics that is sensitive to the ways language forges understanding as well as the variances that forge innovation. Fourth, while he is fashioned as stubborn in his commitments, Alexander's work reflects serious consideration for even his harshest critics – most notably his cultural pragmatics project that theorizes the nexus where meaning and action and structure and agency merge. Alexander's four decade-long project of synthesizing what most of his peers accept as mutually exclusive theoretical foundations – solidarity/conflict, Weber/Durkheim, etc. – results in an innovative, sensitive and flexible conceptual apparatus that can account for both the solidarity of his earliest influences and the conflict that he observes around him. And it is this commitment to a “religious sociology” that affords a path to theorizing beyond stability, conflict, and repair – towards social joy, as well.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Session II ~ Who is Jeffrey Alexander? Part One: The Student View

Ronald Jacobs ~ State University of New York at Albany

On The Hermeneutics of Constructive Mentorship: Some Reflections on the Alexander Style

Drawing on more than thirty years of experience as a student and colleague of Jeff, and more than twenty years of experience working with my own graduate students, I explore what makes Jeff Alexander such a uniquely effective mentor. In order to understand the Alexander style, we need to distinguish between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith. While a hermeneutics of suspicion aligns more clearly with the dominant culture of intellectual engagement in academia, a hermeneutics of faith offers key advantages for drawing out as fully as possible the key messages and contributions from a text, in a manner that presents clear and obvious advantages for effective mentorship. While Jeff's form of intellectual engagement can be deeply critical and sometimes combative, his style of mentorship is one that consistently "reads with" his students, believing that they have something important to say and helping them to find a voice with which they can say it. I end with some reflections on how to adapt the Alexander style for those of us who have less charisma than Jeff, less iconic power, and fewer material resources at their disposal.

Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky ~ Masaryk University

"Do you plan on being a professional sociologist?" The evolution of professional boundary work through the Strong Program

When I first met Jeffrey C. Alexander, he asked me, "Do you plan on being a professional sociologist?" Puzzled by the question, I responded affirmatively and politely, rather than question the question. The boundary between us was very solid, hierarchical, despite my being much closer in age to him than the average graduate student. As our mentoring relationship evolved, the boundary started to blur; Jeff's interest in my personal well-being revealed a level of care I didn't believe was normally present in the advisor/advisee interaction. Eventually, I was able to cross that advisor/advisee boundary and become a professional colleague, indeed, a "professional sociologist." In this talk, I will argue that our shared enthusiasm for the premises of the Strong Program in cultural sociology has contributed, and continues to contribute, to shifting boundaries within our relationship. Today, nearly 20 years after meeting Jeff, the relative analytical autonomy of culture, thick description, and concrete causality are still the cornerstones of my work. Even as I have introduced symbolic boundary work as a fourth primary analytical tool, declaring, "it's all about the boundaries," and have recently sought to decolonize the cultural sociology of migration, the premises of the Strong Program continue to shine through. Culture, quite simply, is the thread that runs through the fabric of all social life, as Jeff put it, including the boundary work that takes place within professional relationships.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Lisa McCormick ~ University of Edinburgh

Intellectual Virtuosity Personified: The Performative Power of Jeff's Ideas

This presentation considers Jeffrey Alexander as a “dramatic intellectual”. Drawing on personal recollections of my time as Jeff’s student (2000-2008), I employ cultural pragmatics to analyze how Jeff’s situated intellectual performances have created meaning and community at the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS). I also explore how his ideas have made an impact beyond the CCS through the institutionalization, expansion, and globalization of the strong program in cultural sociology. I argue that Jeff is becoming an iconic intellectual, but that the process is not yet complete. It can only be completed by us, the core audience for Jeff’s ideas. Having shed some light on how Jeff’s intellectual performance has shaped the past and present of the strong program, I will challenge conference participants to consider our role in its future.

Session III ~ Paradigms Manifest and Latent

Jason Mast ~ University of Trento

Politics as performance: Evolution of a paradigm

In this talk, I examine the evolution of the Strong Program’s politics and performance paradigm, from Alexander’s investigations into the Watergate crisis through his and its contributors’ treatments of the Iran Contra hearings, the Clinton presidency, the invasion of Iraq, Obama’s two campaigns for office, and the rise and institutionalization of Trumpism in the American presidency. In addition to highlighting developments within Alexander’s work and contributions from CCS graduates, I draw attention to critical interventions from scholars who have demonstrated the framework’s capacity to illuminate struggles for power in alternative political contexts and across national cultures. In this section, I talk in depth about the Yale contingent’s interactions with the Konstanzer group and highlight some of the latter’s enduring contributions. In addition to specifying when and why contributors introduced new concepts, I illustrate how they identified and analyzed residual or under-investigated social arenas of significance. I explore themes such as creative conceptual interventions, prescient empirical observations, and missed opportunities and blind spots. Finally, in the talk’s fourteenth and final minute, I raise questions about what the paradigm portends of contemporary democracy’s future, and invite us to consider its potential for constructing a radical, new sociology of democracy.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Isaac Reed ~ University of Virginia

The Sign of Jeffrey C. Alexander

I consider in this paper Jeffrey Alexander's complex engagement with the concept of social structure and the multivocality of his articulation of culture. Sociology, as a large community of inquiry, is neither oblivious to, nor convinced by, semiology, and it is precisely this ambivalence towards the sign that has provided both an opening to, and a sharpening of, Alexander's contributions to social thought in the broadest sense.

Mustafa Emirbayer ~ University of Wisconsin - Madison

Jeffrey Alexander and Psychoanalysis

Freud and psychoanalysis are largely missing from Alexander's life's work. My paper reflects on the significance of this for Alexander's theorizing about culture, trauma, and the civil sphere.

Session IV ~ The Civil Sphere Part One: Towards a Global Project

Giuseppe Sciortino ~ University of Trento

Peter Kivisto ~ Augustana College

Probing the Boundaries of the Civil Sphere. Mobility, Migration, and Membership

This talk reflects on our decades-long involvement with CST, Civil Sphere Theory (and with cultural sociology, the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale, and, of course, Jeffrey C. Alexander). Why have two migration scholars - defined by very different locations, backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences - ended up collaborating so often and so closely? One factor is surely the remarkable power of CST as an intellectual site for lively exchange and as an antidote to the increasingly sluggish contemporary imagination. We believe our experiences highlight an important feature of most of Alexander's ideas: as the proverbial animals for totemism, they are good to think with. Over many years, participating in CST formal and informal venues, we have used CST to explore the civil consequences of the sustained levels of international migration (and mobility) that have defined the last decades. We have, however, also used our reflections on these empirical processes to point out the (many?) sides of CST that are undertheorized. CST is a theory predicated on the existence of a specific form of solidarity, broader than the ties created by physical co-presence, emotional attachment, repeated interaction, resource exchange, and political or religious homophily. CST also entails the claim that such a solidary sphere, an imagined community of sorts, sustained by a distinctive set of symbolic codes and embedded in specialized institutions, provides resources for civil repair in pluralist societies. According to CST, the struggles against subordinated statuses - sometimes won, often lost - are made possible, inter alia, by the possibility of invoking universalistic definitions of membership against particularistic realities. How are the symbolic codes of the civil sphere related to the boundaries between members and non-members? How are the internal possibilities of inclusion linked to boundary-making and external exclusion? How do the codes of the civil sphere work when faced with sizable numbers of noncitizens? These are the questions that originally brought us to CST and keep us there today.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Carlo Tognato ~ Center for Cultural Sociology Faculty Fellow

Capturing civil degradation: On Jeff Alexander and the quest to decenter civil sphere theory

In Fall 2015 Jeffrey Alexander and I came together to launch the first in a series of intellectual endeavors geared to (de)provincialize civil sphere theory. That first effort resulted into the publication in 2018 of *The Civil Sphere in Latin America*. Since then, the agenda of globalization of civil sphere theory has touched on a variety of geographical regions across the globe and has yielded a growing number of books. After almost a decade since sailing off on that intellectual journey, it is worth addressing whether the encounter of civil sphere theory with Latin America has indeed delivered on the promise of contributing to decenter the theory. Here, I will discuss what it has actually delivered, what is still pending, and how to fully realize that promise. Addressing this point will allow me to explain why civil sphere theory still lacks a theory of civil change that may capture processes of civil degradation and civil reconstruction and why such processes involve more than just the mere ebbs and flows of frontlash and backlash dynamics in civil life. Advancing on this front will allow scholars in this field to build on the sensibilities born out of the Latin American civil experience and may put them in a better position to recognize the vectors of civil degradation in the US and to reverse their effects on civil life in America.

Agnes Ku ~ The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Globalizing Civil Sphere Theory and the “Strong Program” – An East Asian Perspective

Alexander, an early advocate of cultural sociology since the 1990s, has endeavored to reinvigorate late-Durkheimian sociology and establish what he now calls the “Strong Program.” His theories emphasize the relative and analytic autonomy of culture and examine its variegated boundary relations with the other social spheres. The Civil Sphere theory (CST) is exemplary. CST was developed in the United States; yet its aspirations are universal. *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* engages CST with East Asian societies as part of a multivolume project that has also covered Latin America and Europe, with a view to broadening, deepening, and deprovincializing CST. While the experiences of East Asia demonstrate the universality of civil sphere processes, they are also deeply different. When applied to East Asia, CST is challenged with three sets of problems: (1) how the cultural codes of the civil sphere relate to long-standing traditional values and moral codes such as patrimonialism and neo-Confucianism, (2) the role of East Asian developmental states and authoritarian regimes vis-a-vis the civil sphere, and (3) the relationship between the civil sphere, associational civil society, and democratic transitions. Alexander’s intellectual interest in East Asian democracy began when he visited China in 1989. In the decade following, several students from East Asia worked with him at UCLA, completing their dissertations on civil society and protests in China, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The idea for the volume emerged from a conversation between Alexander and one of his former students in Seoul in 2015 and a conference was organized in Hong Kong in 2017. Extending from such globalizing/ deprovincializing efforts, a pioneering *Cultural Sociology East and West Conference* was organized at Yale University in 2024.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER:
JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Saturday, October 26, 2024
Humanities Quadrangle ~ Room 136

8:30 - 9:15 *Coffee/Tea*

9:15 - 10:15 **Session VI ~ The Civil Sphere Part Two:
The National, the Local and the Global**

Chair: [Nicolás Rudas](#) ~ Yale University

[Anna Lund](#) ~ Stockholm University

Civil sphere ethnography. Reflections on local solidarities between and within our bodies

[Jean-François Côté](#) ~ Université du Québec à Montréal

Alexander's Cultural Sociology: A Dialogue on the Americas

10:15 - 10:45 *Coffee Break*

10:45 - 11:45 **Session VII ~ Who is Jeffrey Alexander? Part Two: International Solidarities**

Chair: [Sena Sahin](#) ~ Yale University

[Maria Luengo Cruz](#) ~ Carlos III University of Madrid

'Getting the Job Done.'

Working with Alexander on the Civil Power of Journalism

[Nelson Arteaga Botello](#) ~ Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences-Mexico

From "Alexander" to "Jeff": two intertwined sign-facts

[Peter Beilharz](#) ~ Sichuan University

Riding With the King

11:45 - 1:00 *Lunch*

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Saturday, October 26, 2024

1:00 - 2:00 **Session VIII ~ The Early Work: Paths and Impacts**

Chair: [Carla Escobar Ortiz](#) ~ Yale University

[Paul Colomy](#) ~ University of Denver

**The New Theoretical Movement and Neofunctionalism:
The Early Period in Jeffrey C. Alexander's Sociology**

[Robin Wagner Pacifici](#) ~ The New School for Social Research

"Action and its Environments": Jeffrey Alexander's Mise en Abyme

[Frédéric Vandenberghe](#) ~ Federal University of Rio de Janeiro/ Hamburg
Institute for Advanced Study

Metatheory: Philosophy, Social Theory and Cultural Sociology

2:00 - 2:30 *Coffee Break*

2:30 - 3:30 **Session IX ~ The Culture Club and the Strong Program**

Chair: [Willa Sachs](#) ~ Yale University

[Anne Kane](#) ~ Center for Cultural Sociology Senior Fellow

**We Were Not a Cult: Finding Meaning, Structure and Autonomy in Cultural
Analysis with Jeff Alexander**

[Philip Smith](#) ~ Yale University

Making it Through the Great Filter: From Culture Club to Strong Program

[Lynette Spillman](#) ~ University of Notre Dame

Sustaining the Corroboree

3:30 **Session X ~ Tributes**

Chair: *Philip Smith*

Speakers: [Dmitry Kurakin](#) ~ Yale University; [Hizky Shoham](#) ~ Bar-Ilan
University; [Fuyuki Kurasawa](#) ~ York University; [Trygve Beyer Broch](#) ~ Inland
Norway University of Applied Sciences; [Mervyn Horgan](#) ~ University of
Guelph; [Lily Ivanova](#) ~ University of British Columbia.

6:30 - 10:00 *Banquet ~ The Study Hotel*

Session VI ~ The Civil Sphere Part Two: The National, the Local and the Global

Anna Lund ~ Stockholm University

Civil sphere ethnography. Reflections on local solidarities between and within our bodies

I have been an ethnographer in educational and theater contexts in the Nordic region for many years. I started by engaging with Pierre Bourdieu's oeuvre concerning the reproduction of capital forms and the rules of art. But the social world boiled over. Late modernity was not without belief systems—feelings for others, as Jeffrey C. Alexander reminds us, matter. Hopes for solidarity and building communities of a polyphony of voices and experiences were still around. So, as you understand, I found the crossroads between the sociology of culture and cultural sociology and turned to the latter, and more specifically to civil sphere theory, as it illuminated the multidimensionality of social life. Although civil sphere theory engages with the work of regulative and communicative institutions without much focus on interaction or direct observations of emotions, as an ethnographer, I have still not struggled with making civil sphere theory work on the ground. As an ethnographer, you are close to cultures and get an embodied sense of what is at stake and how civil codes matter. The civil sphere becomes an embodied tool to understand the problems in a context, the suggested solutions, and the solidarity that resides and can be awakened in our bodies. This text engages with the presence of local civil spheres from my viewpoint as an ethnographer utilizing a distinctive form of ethnography where I am open to finding processes of democracy of extended multiculturalism. But why is this important? One answer is that in times when democratic values are under threat, it is crucial to conduct ethnographic case studies of local civil spheres. Understanding how communities strengthen solidarities locally is essential for creating sociological knowledge from which other spheres and future societies can be inspired.

Jean-François Côté ~ Université du Québec à Montréal

Alexander's Cultural Sociology: A Dialogue on the Americas

Alexander's cultural sociology has been developed with major emphasis on the analysis of U.S. society. Yet more recently, and particularly through the internationalization of the Civil Sphere Theory (CST), cultural sociology has expanded its analyses to international contexts, and more specifically to other American societies, with reference to Latin America (Alexander, Tognato, 2018) and Canada (Alexander, Horgan, 2025). While Civil Sphere Theory has been a major achievement of Alexander's cultural sociology, one can question how CST applies to such contexts. How does international relations impact the civil sphere? And what to we do of the definitions of the various national cultures of American societies in such context? This paper addresses those questions, by underscoring the colonial situation of American societies that created transcultural dynamics within them. At the same time, the international dynamics that were at the beginning of America societies have found new ways of development, following the separation from European colonialism, and given the prominence of U.S. society at the continental level. These are the issues that are at stake for developing a new kind of analysis of the civil sphere in American societies, with respect to the conflicts of hermeneutical dispositions (structural, analogical, dialectical) at stake in this context.

Session VII ~ Who is Jeffrey Alexander? Part Two: International Solidarities

Maria Luengo Cruz ~ Carlos III University of Madrid

'Getting the Job Done.' Working with Alexander on the Civil Power of Journalism

Creativity and collaboration are not usually put together. And where they are it is often insincere, in most instances merely a case of perfunctorily thanking colleagues. To be truly creative is typically regarded as something to do with the essentially solitary scholar breaking through barriers, reorientating understanding, changing the subject and so on. Well Jeff certainly has been creative. But in the widest and best sense he has also been collaborative. And I have experienced this first hand. Jeff, Liz Breeze, and I collaborated on an edited book together on the contemporary crisis of journalism. Liz had just finished a doctorate and I was still an early career researcher whilst Jeff was an internationally renowned scholar of distinction. So, to be treated with genuine concern for what we thought, to be invited to critique what he thought, to engage in the creative assembling of a book was something very special. But I suspect not for Jeff. It was simply the way he worked. Open generous, critical, and friendly. Willing to listen to reformulate to adjust and to encourage – this is the spirit of collaboration. Working with Jeff was never a matter of status or standing but rather of getting the job done. During the course of constant revisions and discussions we found common ground and intellectual coherence around the issue of the civil power of journalism, its paradoxical role in sustaining (or not) democratic values, its contributory civil power to the binary symbols and structures of inclusion and exclusion and journalism's capacity for civil repair. This talk is the retrospective deconstruction of how we got the 'job done.' In other words, how 'looking back' we went about the processes of creativity and collaboration. The nature of the pursuit for common ground and for intellectual coherence. Bringing this alive is the task before me. One that I undertake through re-thinking our correspondence as editors. Over 200 journalism-related email conversation threads with Jeff which as I shall show below testifies to 'getting the job done'.

WORKING TOWARDS MEANING TOGETHER: JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

Nelson Arteaga Botello ~ Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences-Mexico

From "Alexander" to "Jeff": two intertwined sign-facts

I first met Alexander – the sociologist – and later Jeff – the person. In this text, I propose to mobilize from cultural sociology my self-reflexive experience with both as sign-facts. A sign-fact is composed of an invisible theoretical signifier and a visible empirical meaning (Alexander, 2011). To produce a fact-sign, it is necessary to bring together the theoretical concepts of cultural sociology in our imagination with events related to "Alexander" and "Jeff" in time and space. The first represents the neo-functionalist and cultural sociologist who helped me classify the sociological debates in my academic context and support the feeling that it was necessary to challenge the way of thinking about Latin American sociology. The second represents the person who, in work meetings, demands a high level of creativity to expand both the strong program of cultural sociology (SPCS) and the theory of the civil sphere (CST) and who, in informal meetings, gives invaluable advice and has an enormous capacity to generate bonds of inclusion and solidarity among those around him.

This text begins by examining how the sign-facts "Alexander" and "Jeff" emerge from meaning-making processes that are shaped by the cultural language of the SPCS. In this way, both sign-facts are defined in a specific time and space. In the following sections, I reconstruct what "Alexander" means to me over a long period: an innovative theorist who challenges the dominant perspectives, even dissatisfied with what he has built, capable of founding a sociology program with an enormous interpretative capacity. I apply the same procedure with "Jeff": I connect my informal meetings with him to shed light on his ability to promote dynamics of inclusion, listening, and solidarity between colleagues and students. The text closes with a reflection on how both fact-signs intertwine, giving shape to a sociology project that is not only composed of a powerful conceptual force but also of an emotional and significant horizon that allows the formation of a supportive and inclusive community.

Peter Beilharz ~ Sichuan University

Riding With the King

My relationship with Jeff starts relatively late, and this may have been my advantage. I was ready, and Jeff was open. I came in through two doors – the Big Four volumes; and that essay on the classics, as I came late to sociology via Politics and History; social theory. Then personal contact via the ASA, and Venice Beach. My memories of this beginning were sparked by Jeff's contribution to my own Festschrift in Thesis Eleven, #179, 2023. That journal has provided a shared platform for us, but there is also something simpler and more direct between us. My presentation will start here, wie es alles anfang, and follow through to the antipodean connection. The key early pivot here is the figure of Johann Arnason, together with the shadow figure of Durkheim. I will look to aligning my path with Jeff's – for he has of course always been ahead of me – and to connecting, in addition, to Jeff's sixties rock journalism and that early promise of cultural sociology. Riding With the King is the classic album by Eric Clapton and BB King (2000). I don't drive.

Session VIII ~ The Early Work: Paths and Impacts

Paul Colomy ~ University of Denver

The New Theoretical Movement and Neofunctionalism: The Early Period in Jeffrey C. Alexander's Sociology

This chapter describes working with Jeffrey C. Alexander in the early period of his academic career at UCLA. Even as a newly appointed Assistant Professor in the late-1970s, Alexander exerted a powerful influence on graduate students and several faculty colleagues. A charismatic intellectual, Jeff inspired and affirmed those who worked with him. In terms of scholarship, he advanced a postpositivist conception of social science and led the way in establishing neofunctionalism, the latter aiming to retain the worthwhile elements of Parsonian sociology while also responding to the legitimate criticisms of this tradition. Neofunctionalism's principal revisions included an insistence on the essential role of general theory and its vital connection to affiliated research programs; a variegated and historically grounded model of modern social orders as differentiated systems; an emphasis on conflict in building and sustaining differentiated institutions; and conceptualizing the role of agency in constructing and contesting a modern institutional order. This chapter will also address the continuities and discontinuities between Jeff's early work and his subsequent work in cultural sociology and on the civil sphere.

Robin Wager-Pacifici ~ The New School for Social Research

"Action and its Environments": Jeffrey Alexander's *Mise en Abyme*

My presentation focuses on Alexander's essay, "Action and its Environments," appearing in the edited volume *The Micro-Macro Link* (Co-edited by Alexander, Giesen, Munch and Smelser, University of California Press, 1987, 289-318). It will highlight the ways in which the essay contains within itself major themes appearing in the Alexander corpus. These include an analysis of the meanings of core issues of action, effort, and interpretation. Most importantly, the essay is situated self-consciously on multiple thresholds of paradigms of sociological analysis and in so doing is able to connect sociological worlds and approaches that have been conventionally counterposed and contrasted.

Frédéric Vandenberghe ~ Hamburg Institute of Advanced Study

Metatheory: Philosophy, Social Theory and Cultural sociology

Back in the days, Jeffrey Alexander opened up metatheory as a field of research that inspects the philosophical foundations and the theoretical logic of sociology. By now metatheory has disappeared and social theory is under duress. In my presentation, I will revisit the "scientific continuum", inspect the whole spectrum of presuppositions and reflect on the possibilities of integrating metatheory, social theory, sociological theory, cultural sociology and empirical research in a single framework.

Session IX ~ The Culture Club and the Strong Program

Anne Kane ~ Center for Cultural Sociology Senior Fellow

We Were Not a Cult:

Finding Meaning, Structure and Autonomy in Cultural Analysis with Jeff Alexander

At UCLA in 1984, Jeffrey Alexander invited a small group of graduate students who had shown genuine interest in cultural analysis to form a study group. While cultural sociology was becoming Jeff's primary research interest, most of the students were early in their graduate career and possessed a limited understanding of culture as a primary social force. Yet guided by Jeff's vision, over the next decade the "Culture Club" would build the foundations of the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology, and provide the rough model for the globally recognized Yale Center for Cultural Sociology. The scope of this paper is twofold. First, I discuss the process and dynamics of the collective's intellectual development and output (1984-94) that helped produce one of the prominent theoretical schools of cultural sociology. Second, I discuss my personal experience as a founding member of the UCLA culture club. I focus primarily on my theoretical conception of analytic and concrete autonomy of culture, and my empirically based work on the centrality of meaning construction in historical transformation. These are intertwined lines of discussion that demonstrate the productive nature of collaborative intellectual pursuit. And at the heart of both is Jeff Alexander – not only his theoretical brilliance, but his unending encouragement and enthusiasm for his students and their work.

Philip Smith ~ Yale University

Making it Through the Great Filter: From Culture Club to Strong Program

This paper covers the same epoch and set of issues as that of Anne Kane. It is endorsed by the odds of a Rashomon effect on the one hand, and the rewards of convergence in memory and interpretation on the other. So I can't lose. I offer an autoethnographic microhistory of the Culture Club, situating it in the milieu of the UCLA Department and the city of the 1980s. I stress the galvanizing role of Steve Sherwood, the intellectual precarity of the earliest days, the anchoring role of the first publications by members of the group, and the intellectual moves that saw a coherent and robust paradigm emerge by the mid-1990s.

Lynette Spillman ~ University of Notre Dame

Sustaining the Corroboree

Although celebrating Jeff Alexander's scholarship should be easy, its unmatched range itself constitutes a challenge. Here, I suggest that the significance of the record of scholarly accomplishments even seems to exceed theorization in terms of its paradigmatic contributions. I offer first some observations of the "backstage" of intellectual production, from my experience as a so-called "friendly critic." I build on these observations to consider how Alexandrian cultural theory helps understand the influence of his scholarship, and what it seems to take for granted in accounting for that influence. Reflecting twenty years later on my question "Is the Strong Program Strong Enough?" (Spillman 2005), the answer is clearly positive, but perhaps for reasons the theory underestimates. I ask whether there are criteria internal to the theory that could enable stronger connections with other approaches to analyzing culture.