

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER ON THE THEATRICALITY OF SOCIAL LIFE: DEEPENING THE HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

The prominence of the work of Jeffrey C. Alexander in contemporary sociology, given its abundance, interest and scope, makes attempting to grasp its significance for the contemporary evolution of the discipline a simultaneously unavoidable and difficult task for anyone¹. It is only through careful attention to the works themselves that their full impact on sociological thought can be appreciated, together with what they contribute to our capacity to analyze contemporary society in its most recent forms and transformations. It is with this consideration in mind that I shall focus here, more specifically, on Alexander's recent book *The Drama of Social Life* (Alexander, 2017). One of the reasons for concentrating on this book is that it exposes not only the full problematics that Alexander has developed in his works over the last decade on performance in politics, but also his wider project in cultural sociology, if not his entire endeavor to reform functionalist sociology, and sociology at large, in the global interpretation of modernity and contemporary society. Another good reason is to explore the specific position of Alexander's analytical perspective in relation to earlier attempts to describe and analyze social life in terms of its inherent theatricality – from Goffman to Raymond Williams, and beyond.² It seems logical to have these authors in mind when seeking to determine his analytical position with respect to them, since they all address the bigger context of analyzing social life in terms of theatricality, even though there is still more to say about the relation between theatre and sociology in their (at least) im-

PLICIT deeper relations. This is what will occupy our attention here, while I shall also show how theatricality is even more profoundly involved in sociology than usually thought, and how theatre provides some fundamental insights for sociological analysis. In the process, I also wish to highlight some limitations in the hermeneutics provided by cultural sociology, as a way of gaining a better understanding of the movement involved in the transformations of *meaning* in/of contemporary social life. This will bring us closer to the interpretation of the cultural shifts that form part of our postmodern world. Avant-garde theatre, which is criticized to a certain extent – albeit one-sidedly – by Alexander, will be our starting point for considering what looms in the societal and historical transformations that we witness today in social theatricality.

THE THEATRICAL AVANT-GARDE AND SOCIOHISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOCIETY: PROBLEMS FOR SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Alexander's views concerning the theatricality of social life are closely linked to his desire to show how *meaning* has to be performed along the lines of ritualization in order to be considered as a structuring element of social organization – and here I use the term 'theatricality' within a broad spectrum of analysis that can refer to both theatre and social life, the inherent 'visual' dimension of the latter being the inspiration for the more specialized version of the former, based not only on metaphoric transformations, but on the very relation established therein (Burns, 1972; Davis & Postlewait, 2003; Weber, 2004). Setting out from his Durkheimian assumptions concerning ritualistic forms of sociality, which conflate primitive and traditional societies on the basis of the effervescence of their collective performative activities related to the sacred dimension of their social organization, Alexander seeks to retrieve the possibility of 'fusion' characteristic of such manifestations of transcendence, given that this is precisely what is being problematized with political societies once their trust in the 'sacred' is put into question. As Alexander writes:

Rituals become less frequent as societies become more modern. In the course of social and cultural evolution, such fused performances become more difficult to pull off. If we analytically differentiate the elements of social performance, then we can understand how they have slowly but ineluctably become defused over the course of time. [...] The emergence of theatre gave to the growing "artificiality" of social drama an aesthetic form, crystallizing the defusion of the elements of performance. Theatre is a conscious and pragmatic effort to create dramatic effect – via art. The metaphysical props of ancient ritual are kicked away, but the performance challenge remains. Theatre aims to re-fuse the disparate elements of performance – to overcome the distance between actor and script, performance and audience. [...] If theatre contrives to dramatize compulsive emotional conflict, so do publicly organized political movements strive to dramatize urgent social conflicts, to publicly demand political and economic reform. Theatre and political movements both project meaning toward distant audiences via more and less artfully constructed symbolic performance. [...]

Such performances – the defused, conflicted, and fragmented social conditions that challenge them, the new forms of cultural and emotional identification they may inspire – are the topics of this book. (Alexander, 2017: 4, 5, 6)

The implications of these views concerning the relations between theatre and society in terms of their contribution to performances and social drama are numerous and enormous, and we shall get back to them soon. For now, though, I wish to focus on how this idea can shed light on Alexander's analysis of the role of theatre in the theatricality of contemporary social life. In a chapter devoted to "Social Theory and Theatrical Avant-Garde," his analysis of the contemporary relationship between theatre and society relies on the critique of the views expressed by Hans-Thies Lehmann (Lehmann, 2002) on the 'post-dramatic' character of contemporary avant-garde theatre: in Lehmann's analysis, contemporary theatre appears to lose its grip on the mimetic dimension of theatre (the 'representation of action') and to delve instead into the infinite possibilities that arise from questioning all aspects of theatrical representations – from acting to *mise en scène*, or from props to locations and themes, including theatre's relations to the 'text' and to the public. For Alexander, such views overplay the critical aspect that some avant-garde theatre, such as Bertolt Brecht's for example, has advanced in its attempt to deconstruct the Western definition of theatre, cutting off the possibility of cathartic recognition by imposing the 'distanciation effect' as a new goal for an emancipatory theatrical practice (Alexander, 2017: 126-127). Alexander then evokes the opposite position, also part of the theatrical avant-garde of the twentieth century, developed by Antonin Artaud in his *Théâtre de la cruauté*, with its aim of reaching, on the contrary, the complete fusion of theatre and life, proposing their visceral communion through a reinstatement of ritualistic theatrical practices (Alexander, 2017: 127-128).

However, playing Artaud's position against Brecht's, as Alexander proposes, does not do justice to either of these revolutionary theatrical practitioners and theoreticians: Artaud's theatre of cruelty was just as critical as Brecht's when it came to the theatrical practices of his own times (in fact, Artaud rejected them violently and *en bloc*) and he was just as interested in destroying bourgeois theatrical conventions. Indeed his endeavors were equal to Brecht's own efforts to undermine the Aristotelian definition of tragedy by reinventing a theatrical practice that would totally fit the requirements of reinvigorating contemporary theatre, while heavily involving the spectator's reactions. In other words, both Artaud and Brecht, even though they worked from opposite standpoints with respect to theatre, equally wanted to achieve an active transformation of theatrical practices, and, in each case, the result was a clash with existent theatrical practices and with the social order of their times.³ The questioning of theatrical conventions, and even more the staging of this questioning through the theatrical performances themselves, form part of the avant-

garde's ideas, and are well-exemplified by the respective theatrical experimentations of Brecht and Artaud. They were both, in fact, actively at work in digging into the definitions of the symbolic structures of theatre, so as to be able to dialectically reinvent their main components (Artaud, 1978; Brecht, 1972). Moreover, their respective experimentations did provide us with new theatrical categories: for Artaud, the *skènè* (or 'scene') became the body, or vice-versa, while for Brecht, *drama* (or 'action') became the critical reflection on action. These epistemic transformations of theatrical categories were thus not so much opposed to each other as they were complimentary. They formed part of a general movement that saw avant-garde experimentations propose new ways of envisioning theatre, breaking in the process with the modern bourgeois order of representation within the context of mass society. In this endeavor they were also joined by Gertrude Stein's theatrical revolution, which in her most experimental plays put on stage only anonymous voices, reflecting her redefinition of the *persona* (or 'character'), which became 'everybody' in general and at the same time 'nobody' in particular – thus establishing a de-individualized personal subject, typical of the general anonymity of mass society (Stein, 1995, 1993). In my view, it is only by taking into account these fundamental epistemic transformations of theatrical categories and symbolic structures that the real revolutionary efforts of avant-garde theatrical experimentations can be understood in their contribution to the transformation of the *meaning* of theatre, and by extension of the theatricality of contemporary social life (Côté, 2011).

It is also interesting to note that in adopting this approach, avant-garde theatre was paralleling efforts by sociologists to reinvent new forms of sociological analysis, categories and representations. The relations between Artaud and the Collège de Sociologie (especially Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris), Brecht and the Frankfurt School (mostly through Walter Benjamin's friendship and intellectual exchanges), or Stein and the Chicago School of Sociology (through the more remote influence of pragmatism) only serve to indicate the proximity of the research on the possibilities for new forms of theatricality offered by postmodern mass society, appealing for new forms of representations for both theatre and sociology between the 1910s and the early 1950s (Côté, 2011). That these parallels continue to be played out in the resurgence of indigenous (Native American) theatre from the 1980s on, through the influence that Artaud, Stein and Brecht respectively had on the dramaturgies and theatrical performances of Ondinnok, Monique Mojica and Drew Hayden Taylor, as we shall see below, only points to the fertility of those cross-references in the expression of a theatricality that is finely in tune – albeit in a critical manner – with the most acute political debates of our time, and with the sociological analytical possibilities that they offer (Côté, 2017). Although Alexander wants to share his analytical perspective with some of the theatrical avant-garde practitioners, but refrain from doing so with others, this seems to indicate

potential limitations to his own sociological analysis when confronting the problem of analyzing contemporary society from the perspective of a cultural sociology that provides only a partial reach to the symbolic structures that determine our social life.⁴ In the next section, we shall see how this also impacts his views on performances and politics.

This said, it needs to be acknowledged that Alexander's overall analyses are outstanding. On one hand, his analytical developments allow performances, and especially political performances, to be placed at the center of attention for an interpretation of their theatricality – that is to say, their capacity to embody a meaningful relationship to the social order that goes beyond the mere rationalization of practices accompanying the development of social life and sociology alike – to the point of exhausting the meaningful existence in modernity (found in both Max Weber's pessimistic diagnosis concerning the fate of contemporary society, or Critical Theory's incapacity to go beyond the Marxist views of general alienation as an inescapable condition of social life). On the other hand, Alexander's analyses provide sociology with the renewed task of adding reflexively to this meaningful existence by participating in an interpretation of social life that does not stay aloof from its object, and recognizes its own active role in the cultural development produced by sociological analysis itself, adding thereby to the meaning or meaningfulness of social practices.

These two dimensions of Alexander's project are indeed crucial for understanding his contribution to the discipline of sociology. They represent the core of the 'strong program' of cultural sociology that has been developed in the last twenty years or so, and are being sustained through the massive contribution that Alexander has made to the sociological literature of our times. While I shall comment on those two dimensions in the next sections below, I wish to close the present section by returning to the place of theatricality in social life, as expressed by Alexander, in order to examine the originality of his perspective.

In *The Drama of Social Life*, Alexander offers a broad vision of the possibility of developing an analysis of social life in terms of its theatricality, distancing himself from many previous efforts in this domain. While Goffman limited his views to a micro-level analysis of the presentation of self, developing a theatrical metaphor that did not go beyond a simple insight into the symbolic depth of immediate experience (notwithstanding Goffman's remarks about the new sacrality of the person that motivates this kind of ritual – we shall get back to this), Alexander leads us towards a more profound level of apprehending the social order in its fully historical dimension, focusing on politics as the central institution for referring to society as a totality. For him, contemporary society needs to acknowledge its own entrenchment in symbolic practices that confirm their meaningfulness for social actors, the latter being considered through their involvement in civil society and the political life of the nation (and of nation states in general). Alexander's cultural sociology shifts the analysis of theatrical-

ity beyond the limits of the simple interactive ritual settings that came to define the Goffmanian tradition (Edgley, 2013) and amplifies the significance of theatricality in the process. It is not because theatre appears 'artificial' compared to social life that it cannot be taken seriously. Quite the opposite, it is because meaning must be performed in a 'spectacular' manner that it entails the adoption of representational features that bring it closer to theatre, meaning that social life has the dramatic character of theatricality, particularly with respect to national political institutions. Echoing Raymond Williams, who suggested that theatre, despite its apparent decline as an art form, has become the generic mode through which the media world now operates (Williams, 1991), Alexander argues that we need to recognize the diffusion of theatricality through all areas of performed meaning where social power is at stake. His perspective thus opens up sociological analysis to apprehending some of the fundamental determinant aspects of political life as theatre – in short, theatricality as a constant requirement for performing meaning in a symbolic register that covers the whole of society via its central stage.⁵ National and international politics, from the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements in the United States to the Chinese cultural revolution, or from Obama's re-election to the Arab Spring, can be grasped through this kind of analysis (Alexander, 2017), in which theatricality is seen as an intrinsic element of mass democracies around the world in the wake of a renewed interpretation of modernity (a larger, and more disputable, issue to which we shall come back in the final section of article).

By placing trust in the theatricality of social and political life, Alexander therefore wants to steer away from skepticism, suspicion and irony in the sociological analysis of contemporary life – at the risk, though, of perhaps losing the critical edge that marks the specificity of the sociological viewpoint when it steps back from the immediate trust in the meaning of social practices. This trust certainly has to face the historical situation of theatricality as a changing form that accommodates itself with the *transformations* of theatrical conventions (Burns, 1972), as well as with our contemporary acceptance of theatre as a medium that produces illusion *at the same time* that it produces reality (Weber, 2004). We have to keep in mind these two dialectical dynamics at work in the theatricality of social and political life if we are to venture further into the hermeneutics proposed by cultural sociology. This is what we shall examine in the next section, without losing sight of the originality of the perspective cultural sociology proposes in order to redevelop both the relevance and the specificity of sociology as a discipline by remedying its own analytical production of meaning.

THE PROJECT OF CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY: DURKHEIMIAN RITUALS, CONFLICTS AND POLITICS IN THE ERA OF GENERAL MEDIA DIFFUSION

We can assess the originality of Alexander's analytical perspective within sociology as a whole by comparing it to earlier views of theatricality in moder-

nity's development. One case in point is the view expressed by Richard Sennett (2017) in his *The Fall of Public Man*. In this work, which attracted much attention when it was first published in 1977, and arguably remains a 'classic' of sociology today, Sennett proposes that the development of modernity, especially from the mid-1800s on, showed a steady decline of politics and public performances, matched by an increased tendency of political actors to present their personal, and even intimate, world. For Sennett, the decline of politics as a true theatrical spectacle is linked to the inescapable fate of capitalist society, where only private interests based on *personality* count – as opposed to the Ancien Régime and the Enlightenment period where public interest was placed in the foreground and public image was based on conscious self-representation of the general will through the self, seen as an *actor*.⁶ There could not be a more frontal confrontation with Alexander's analysis of contemporary society. Refusing the vision of a strictly instrumental definition of politics and its reduction to mere strategic issues, particularly as such views relegate the function of culture to the backstage and even subsume its possibilities to a dominant social or economic order, Alexander argues that:

Neither form of social determination can conceptualize empirical processes central to the struggle for power in democratic societies. Inside the civil sphere, these conflicts revolve around persuasion, producing performances before idealized audiences of putatively rational, responsive, and solitary citizens. Gaining power depends on the success of symbolic representation. Meaning determines political fate. It only seems paradoxical that, in order to understand power, we must give relative autonomy to culture. Without a strong theory, we will not be able to understand how democratic politicians gain power in the state. (Alexander, 2010: 296)

Alexander's perspective, based on the relative autonomy of culture, develops the idea that contemporary societies have their own type of rituals, and that they privilege, like any other society, their symbolic representations through the performance of the sacred dimension of their moral life.⁷ Compared to primitive or traditional societies, however, the 'fusion' that these symbolic performances achieve in contemporary societies through politics encounters a number of obstacles. The possibilities of 'de-fusion' appear as typical characteristics of the cultural model developed by contemporary societies (although this already started in Ancient Greece with the rise of theatre in the *polis*) and especially through the role that communications media have come to play:

Decades ago, there was no such thing as a press secretary; today, there are several in every campaign. Speeches were once delivered without armies of spinners descending upon journalists to mediate their interpretation; today, spinning and the media's discussion of spinning are public matters. Once, it was the candidate's friends who served as advisers. Today, the candidate hires professional teams of strategists, pollsters, advertisers, media buyers, and public relations experts, not to mention hairstylists and makeup artists, lighting specialists, and sometimes even wardrobe managers.

Such performative de-fusion makes it more difficult for those struggling for power to make their image seem natural and their messages real, and journalists have become centrally interested in explaining why. Everywhere there are media reporting about narrative, performance and spinning, about stagings and settings, about scripted speeches and teleprompter reading, about focus groups and audience reception. Yet, even as the media expose political efforts at managing the image, the hope and reality of political authenticity remains. As in drama, so in politics. There remains the possibility that the citizen audience will engage in what Coleridge called the willing suspension of disbelief (Alexander, 2010: 290-291).

Here we have a characterization of political performance that is both extremely acute, and perhaps also a little blunt in terms of its capacity to detect some of the more nuanced problems inherent to the political life of mass democratic societies. Although Alexander's characterization contradicts Sennett's argument concerning the 'authenticity' required to appeal in contemporary politics, without losing sight though of the relevance of the 'artificial' work done for its appearance, Alexander's perspective assumes that the media only follow the trend of this imperative that we cannot point to any origin other than the political search for power through the reaffirmation of its capacity to 'fuse.' Though not downplayed in Alexander's analysis, the active role performed by the media, as part of the theatricality of contemporary politics, is perhaps not considered in terms of its crucial determinant factors, which are numerous and enormous, and are at work in transforming the historical conventions of representation. The first, of course, is the 'sacredness' or 'sacrality' invoked in this context, which interferes with the definition of the political as a symbolic disposition of its own. The second is the immense lability that the mass media makes possible in its diffusion of politics to the apparent detriment of the diffusion of the political condition of the person. The third is the mythical dimension at stake in such theorization, as a symbolic disposition within a political context. And finally there is the relative concealment of the dialectics found at the root of any symbolic expression and that has to be taken into account as the fundamental capacity of its movement in social life. It is worth examining what each of these determinant factors involves.

The sacrality or sacredness of practices certainly come under pressure in a secular society driven by politics. While Durkheim's redefinition of the 'sacred' and the 'transcendent' in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* devolves their respective meanings to social organization and its effervescence in ritual practices, and thus completely socializes their content, this could (or should) be the occasion for a radical break with the usual views on religion – even civil religion. Alexander, however, interprets this in a different direction. For him, the 'sacred' becomes an analytical tenet that, through its opposition to the 'profane,' allows the reaffirmation of an apparent religious content, linked to the moral life. In his re-reading of Durkheim, Alexander anchors his own

perspective in the post-Parsonian works of Clifford Geertz, Edward Shils and Robert Bellah so as to emphasize the possibility of redefining the religious dimension and, in turn, “develop a more symbolic kind of discourse about secular life” (Alexander, 1988: 7). This leads him to envision a ‘civil religion’ that has the quality of uniting social life around fundamental meanings.⁸ The problem with this standpoint, though, or so it seems to me, is that it does not allow sociological analysis to locate the transformations affecting those fundamental symbolic structures of social life. This becomes apparent in Alexander’s early analysis of the Watergate crisis, where he points out that the protestant ethic (if not the puritan esthetic) helps explain why the ‘pollution’ of the Nixon’s presidency became ‘purified’ through the ritualization of the televised Senate Select Committee hearings (Alexander, 1988: 187-224). Once its desecration (the break-in at the Watergate Hotel) had been exposed and its desecrator (Nixon) expelled, the sacredness of the institution of the presidency could be redeemed through the regeneration of the political morale prevailing in US society. While the value of this analysis compares with the best hermeneutics of the meanings attached to social practices through the religious tradition in the United States, showing how assent is obtained in Protestant ritualistic forms (Bercovitch, 1993, 1975), the problem it leaves unexplored is the capacity of such events to highlight transformations in this political morale. Indeed, and even though it lies at the center of Alexander’s analysis, the crucial role of the media in the Watergate crisis is treated as though it had no fundamental impact on the political morale at stake and merely helped to regenerate it. My own theoretical viewpoint on this is that, quite the opposite, the media at the time really did appear as the ‘fourth power’ through its capacity not only to curb Nixon’s political hubris (after all, the Watergate crisis began as a journalistic investigation, with television simply adding to the diffusion of the Senate Select Committee hearings to a wider public), signaling an event without precedent in the history of the US presidency as an institution, but also to assign the citizens their role as mere spectators of the political drama that was displayed mainly in newspapers and on television. This seems to connect with Sennett’s argument, but does not do so completely, since there is more to spectatorship than passivity. Of course, public opinion did appear as a final ‘court of appeal’ in this context, as Alexander’s analysis shows with references to the evolution of the polling results that finally condemned Nixon. But its leaders were also information professionals – a significant shift that Walter Lippman (1922, 1925) already envisioned in the 1920s, with the rise of the ‘phantom public’ (Robbins, 1993). This is a factor that has to be taken into account when thinking about the political morale of mass democracies. The latter, as opposed to primitive or traditional societies, or even modern bourgeois democracies, have developed mass public opinion and the mass media as mediators of political participation, which means that their role is deeply, and even structurally, symbolic, in that

it allows both fusion and de-fusion simultaneously, through a dialectical process that is so deeply entrenched in citizenship that every person embodies the political dispositions that come with it (from apathy to hysteria, and across the whole range of feelings that stand in-between these two extremes, as responses to the media representation of politics).⁹ In other words, skepticism, or even cynicism, can also be part of the picture, and as legitimate a position as patriotism or trustfulness, in the face of such dramatic representations of political power as those expressed during the crisis that erupted in the 1970s – only to confirm that the mass media had become so powerful that it also shared in the political power distributed throughout mass democracy's structures. The mass media operates strongly in the political game, then, and its power can turn both *against* and *for* an active citizenship (as the more recent developments of social media show). As a result, politicians quickly understood how to navigate these new seas, as shown from Roosevelt's staging of his famous 'fireside chats' with the aid of Orson Wells in the 1930s, to McCarthy's fabrication of pseudo-events in politics in the 1950s, and up to Trump's tweets. But people too, as citizens, came of age with the new era of mass media in mass politics.

This brings us to the second determinant factor, the immense lability of the mass media that accompanied the development of mass democracies. Alexander is willing to acknowledge the multi-level implications of this fact, as we have seen above, but his theoretical model still sees the discourse of civil society (associated with the 'civil sphere,' as he prefers to call it: Alexander, 2006) to be driven by the moral categories of 'good' and 'evil' as the basis and final outcome of judgment, whereas both the morality and the esthetics of the mass media have proven to be involved in much more elaborate dispositions, geared to social and symbolic transformations of greater and deeper scales. This converges with the preceding observation concerning the inherent dialectics defining the political condition and the dispositions of citizen towards politics and the media – as opposed to a binary or dual alternative between 'good' and 'evil.' Perhaps here we can concur with Christopher Lasch's view that "the rise of mass media makes the categories of truth and falsehood irrelevant to an evaluation of their influence" (Lasch, 1978: 74), up to the point that we can envisage that the personal relationship to the media involves the possibility of a high media personalization, as a reverse effect of media empowerment on the side of individuals. While Lasch's argument, developed in the wake of Sennett's critique of contemporary politics, clearly shows how the mass media multiplies the possibilities of self-representation, this unfortunately only leads him to analyze the perversion of such twists in personalization, veering into complete narcissism. This far from exhausts the topic, though, since just as much 'de-personalization' is involved in these kinds of experiences – as Warhol experimented with in his extensive personal use of the media from the 1960s on (Côté, 2003), or as Paul Ricoeur argued in his reconsideration of the way in

which self-representation is always founded on alterity (Ricoeur, 1990). In situating the 'person' as a central category of the political order, contemporary citizenship involves the individual subject in an array of possibilities for self-representation. Even in the case of political figures of power, it does not relegate any individual irrevocably to mere invisibility, since each and every individual is an institutional bearer of the legitimacy of the political order. In other words, any *person* is a highly political symbol and can become, from this perspective, the incarnation of the political order (or be betrayed by the latter and thus positioned to challenge its legitimacy of misrepresentation – as was already clear with the first feminist claims in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first in the position of Mary Wollstonecraft, followed by the Suffragette movement, and perhaps is even clearer today with the general claim for equality made by all minorities). Here again, a hermeneutics of this symbolic category of the 'person' involves a deeper inquiry into a historical category that proves highly instructive – and particularly relevant since it comes from a transfer of signification from Roman theatre (the Latin *persona* means 'mask') to Roman law, later taken throughout Christianity and modernity as a central category of social life (Mauss, 1989).¹⁰ However, its reactualization in terms of the theatricality it offers for contemporary society is even more rewarding for an understanding of its meaningfulness. It was Gertrude Stein who first promoted the theatrical expression of the *persona* of mass democracy in her experimental plays questioning the singularity of characters, based on a cubist version of theatre that she developed between 1908 and 1946: in these plays, it is a 'nobody' and/or an 'anybody' who speaks (Stein, 1995, 1993, 1935). The voices (that is, the 'parts' in the plays) are *anonymous* – quite like the person as a legal category, or like citizenship as a political status, which should apply to 'nobody' in particular, but to 'everybody' in general in the regime of mass democracies, somewhat like the social discourse that manifests itself throughout this specific context (both *inside* and *outside* the individual subject).¹¹ For Stein, though, such a fundamental definition of the person allowed her to give voice to unheard characters, anonymous people who did not get their fair share of social theatricality. Applied to women, in particular, as Stein's feminism implied (particularly in her praise for the suffragette Susan B. Anthony in her play *The Mother of Us All* from 1946: Stein, 1995: 52-88), such characters become the incarnation of a social movement. A voice for everyone, or better, a political capacity for self-representation, could well be Stein's motto, as she makes clear in *Everybody's Autobiography*, originally published in 1937 (Stein, 1971). That Monique Mojica, the Rappahannock-Guna playwright, can follow Stein in this vein, and address the place of Indigenous women in social representations and political history in the late twentieth century, as she did in her radio play aired in 1991, *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: A Story of Sacajawea* (Mojica, 2009), only shows the potential of this fundamental political disposition when taken seri-

ously. As a first instance of political diffusion, since this category applies to all individuals, the *person becomes the media* (in a Parsonian sense of a normative symbolic means of exchange) in mass democracies. We cannot just say here like Goffman: “One’s face, then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is therefore a ritual one” (Goffman, 1967: 19). Rather, it is only as a symbolic structure defining the political order of mass democracy that the person can appear as such.¹² The lability of the mass media (as we understand it today) only follows this logic of citizenship mediated by the person, and in an increasingly personal fashion, because it is fueled by this norm of formal equality between voices. Tocqueville was probably the first to notice this phenomenon in the 1830s, remarking that, in this movement, “*chaque citoyen est un peuple*.”¹³ But it is at the level of the general theatricality of social life generated by such historical transformations, from the first third of the nineteenth century on, that this logic of the media in mass democracies expanded to its fullest scale. In this context, it becomes even harder to understand how Richard Sennett could argue that the theatricality of politics waned to its eventual state of total eclipse, at the very same time that *theatricality* became a general term to describe social life itself with the advent of mass democracy (and mass media). In fact, political diffusion reached a kind of maximum intensity and the world of politics became what each person, in his/her own body as the embodiment of the institution, could enact.¹⁴ However, this pronounced bias in Sennett’s perception can only be explained by his inability to discern the new kind of theatricality that took center stage with mass democracy, leaving behind the codes and symbolic structures of modern bourgeois democracy on which Sennett remained focused. Theatricality only expanded with the mass media, as Raymond Williams argued (Williams, 1991; Morissette, 2015), not specifically at the expense of theatre (although the latter had to reinvent its own forms in response), but with a more dialectical relationship between the two and a definite political horizon delineated by its universal diffusion to the point of blurring, although the person (or the citizen) remains its basic foundation. When we understand the implications of this phenomenon, as Alexander does, at least partially through his views on theatrical avant-garde, it becomes easier to assimilate Brecht’s attempts to play with this political de-fusion. For him, this was the precondition for a political reaction from the public capable of changing the state of things, advancing beyond the modern bourgeois theatrical representations that exposed how problematic the latter could be – and how it could appear outdated in front of a mass audience that had to invent its own cultural codes in order to act and react according to its new double status of spectator/actor, playing on the shifting dispositions between passivity and activity that had developed since the mid-nineteenth century (Cmiel, 1990). Here again, the ironic and sarcastic vision that the indigenous contemporary dramaturgy of Drew Hayden Taylor places on stage, depicting the al-

ienation of all claims for ‘cultural identity’ that tear apart our social relations and communities – in the case of Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous peoples *alike* – mirrors the direction taken by Brecht’s own radical questioning of social norms that possess dire political consequences when they penetrate contemporary political debates that affect everyone’s condition (Taylor, 2000; Côté, 2017).

The third determinant factor in Alexander’s theorization is the mythical dimension at stake, as a symbolic disposition, in any political context. This is certainly a crucial issue and one that has mobilized tremendous political energies in the brief history of mass democracies. The best, and without doubt most brutal, theoretical (and most disastrous practical) example we have of this, of course, is the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, which was entirely based on the potential to mobilize mythic representations surrounding their archaic vision of the Aryan origins and fate of the German people (Cassirer, 1946). This example alone shows the extent of the possible strength of mythic images in mobilizing the masses at the very heart of contemporary democracies, and of course the use (and abuse) of the media in doing so, to the extreme of annihilating the potential distance between the person and the political regime at a time of crisis. If we take this as the epitome of the political ‘fusion’ of a single actor and the public, we can instantly apprehend the scale of the disaster that it produced. The annihilation of the distance of political dispositions shows the fundamental importance of the symbolic structures that otherwise guarantee them. Without these symbolic structures, and the political dispositions that they provide to the person, any form of totalitarianism can substitute itself for the horrific vision of unity that is thereby promoted (Arendt, 1973).¹⁵ Alexander (2003; 2013) reflects on this with an acute analysis of exclusion in social life and the movement of evil in such political conjunctures. His analysis rests on the coding of social discourses according to their reference to the sacred values and ideas of the good life – although, following Bataille, he explores the place of evil in transgression (Alexander, 2013: 120-122). But once again we need to go further in interrogating the deep symbolic structures at stake in these political situations. In a political context based on the dialectics of meaning, myths cannot become the safeguards of politics. As ‘stories’ (*muthos*) they have to face the confrontation with history and, even more so, the possible historical transformations that affect them and alter their meaning and structures, to the point of disintegrating their formative meaningfulness (in the process erasing their ‘sacredness,’ which can only belong to the socio-historical context coinciding with the symbolic structures of social life that sustain them). Narratives, or how stories and histories are told, here become the litmus test for confirming or rejecting their validity. Earlier I referred to the plays of Monique Mojica and Drew Hayden Taylor, with their Native American content that throws into question the meanings and structures of the stories and histories of the Americas by reinscribing them in a counter-vision capable of addressing the postcolonial

issues of our present. The same can be said about the plays of Ondinnok, the Montreal-based native theatre company, which have reframed the narratives of the Americas along the lines of stories that reconstruct the historical views we are usually told.¹⁶ In the theatricality displayed in their productions over the last 35 years, Ondinnok has dug deep into the many aspects of colonization and its aftermath, putting on stage the suffering of the Indigenous body/soul, searching for healing and catharsis. In so doing, Ondinnok has come as close as possible to Artaud's theatrical innovations. In many ways, Artaud's theatricality aimed to achieve a mythic dimension that was actual, primarily in order to expose the deep effects of symbols on sensibility, especially through conflictual dramas that cause trauma to the soul inhabiting the flesh.¹⁷ *Le théâtre de la cruauté* was deemed immensely powerful in its capacity to expose the 'nerves' by turning inside-out and wide-open the flesh, which became traumatized, making the nerves literally visible through their exposure on the surface of the body – mirroring the way in which the unconscious erupts through somatic symptoms and spreads like the 'plague,' as Artaud thought it should. For Artaud, as for Ondinnok, it is only through the ex-positioning of traumas, therefore, that catharsis can occur and the soul become healed (both for the actors and the audience). It is also no coincidence that Artaud intended for the first play of his *théâtre de la cruauté* to be *La Conquête du Mexique* (a project left unrealized in 1936, prior to his departure for Mexico). In this work, the central theme is the superiority of Aztec spirituality over the vanity of the Spanish conquerors. Ondinnok's own version of *La Conquête de Mexico*, staged in 1991, displayed a similar reflection (Sioui Durand, 2001; Coté, 2017). This shows that theatre, in its avant-garde inspirations, can act in a ritualistic fashion by producing a *counter-narrative* to the usual historical stories told about the origins of the Americas, proposing to ritually re-assemble the latter in a counter-mythic theatrical proposition as an aesthetic experimentation of a new worldview, achieved through a cathartic healing of the wounds that affect the communities containing these dividing lines within their internal structures. Dramas can be 'counter-dramas,' or 'meta-dramas,' or again involve the critique, or reversal, of the myths put on stage, their deconstruction and reconstruction, deliberately revealing the mechanics of how they function instead of merely repeating them.

All these developments in theatre can be situated in terms of their highly significant contribution to the resurgence of Indigenous identity in Canada and the Americas in general, and their participation in the expansion of theatricality in social movements that has taken place in recent decades, such as *Idle no More*, or institutional actions, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including the theoretical reflection developed in this context (Coulthard, 2014). Indeed, this movement can be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of the cultural sociology of trauma, as developed by Alexander and his colleagues, especially when this analysis challenges the constitution of cultural

identity in the midst of questioning the historical development of modernity (Alexander, 2013; Alexander, 2012; Alexander et al., 2004), as we shall see in the next section.¹⁸ The difference made by adding theatrical practices to this kind of analysis is that the latter can then take into account the deeper symbolic structures that the art of theatre is capable of making explicit with remarkable salience, since theatre – especially in its avant-garde experimentations – concentrates the contradictions sustained by these symbolic structures through their historical evolution, forcing them to come to a crisis and require transformation in specific historical contexts (Côté, 2017).

This leads us to the fourth determinant factor of Alexander's analytical principle, one that appears to conceal, to a certain extent, the dialectical transformations at stake in the evolution of social life and which sociology has to examine for what they are. The hermeneutical efforts proposed by cultural sociology cannot, or so it seems to me, merely reiterate the meaningfulness of social life: they need to dig deeper into its symbolic structures to be able to locate the historical transformations that mark, sometimes in a definite fashion, the way in which these structures display fundamental problems that demand crucial and radical shifts in social meanings. Indeed, I think it is not enough to show how meaning is deeply embedded in social life. Given the symbolic constitution of meaning, its dialectical nature must also always be in play – especially since such dialectical transformations are inevitably reflected in the *form* of social performances (Burns, 1972; Weber, 2004). Symbols must be considered for what they are: mediations that *simultaneously* combine and separate things, *simultaneously* unite and divide (Cassirer, 2000). However, without losing sight of this inherently dual character of symbolic forms, their *reconstruction* – in the way George Herbert Mead's pragmatism envisaged them, for instance – also allows for their reassemblage into new structures corresponding to, and required by, new social conditions (Côté, 2015). This applies to myths, politics and the media, as well as to avant-garde theatre and the theatricality of social life in general. How can such dialectics be integrated into sociological analysis? It is by returning to cultural sociology and its overall project of reforming the discipline that we can provide an answer, as the next section will show. The still open project of cultural sociology invites us to question these issues.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE IN MODERNITY AND BEYOND: STRUCTURAL OR DIALECTICAL HERMENEUTICS?

Cultural sociology is built on one hand as a project to reform sociology generally, and on the other as a strong program that aims to pursue its analyses along the lines of set principles, one of which is structural hermeneutics. From its Saussurian origins, structural hermeneutics defines the oppositions between the elements that constitute language, and thus the binaries in social life of the kind constituted by good versus evil, or sacred versus profane, rejecting

them as ontological values, but insisting rather on their formal oppositional values determined by their respective place within a structure of meaning. This structural hermeneutics resides at the very foundation of the project of cultural sociology (Alexander & Smith, 1998, 2003, 2012) and is central to its continuing development. Yet in terms of apprehending language, the structural linguistics inaugurated by Saussure has been heavily criticized (from Bakhtin to Benveniste and beyond) for its 'static' nature. Saussure himself saw that language was different from discourse, which is more 'dynamic' and involves constant shifts in meaning (from minor to major). Nevertheless, he remained attached to language as the prime object of reflection for linguistics. To remedy this static character of the structural model, cultural sociology couples it to a pragmatist model, focusing on speech or performative acts and practical action resulting from overt meanings.¹⁹ This approach allows analysis to categorize performed acts of meaning still in accordance with the binaries that compose the fundamental reference points encoded in the matrix of cultural existence. But the problem remains: how do categories change? How do they transform themselves? If we understand symbolic structures to be built around rituals, and reenacted because of their investment in deep meanings for social life, do they ever become problematic, or contradictory to the evolution of social life, or even flatly contradicted by opposing practices? How are they not only constructed but eventually confronted, deconstructed, and (most importantly, at least from a pragmatist perspective) *reconstructed*?

Perhaps, then, cultural sociology's reliance on structural linguistics, which remains as a guideline to understanding the categorization of meaning in dual oppositions, appears paradoxical if its object of analysis is to be the dynamic forms of discourses, performances, and the like, when we see them through their transformations. However that be, and as we have seen above, it seems that such a structural hermeneutics prevents cultural sociology from locating the deeper symbolic structures of social life, especially when it comes to determining their possible transformations, or re-structurations. If so, then an alternative would be to move towards a more *dialectical* hermeneutics, in order to be able to grasp the historical movements that mobilize the symbolic structures in their transformations. All the elements invoked by cultural sociology are there for an active *dialectical* hermeneutics: the de-fused experience of contemporary rituals and cultures, the political condition that plays on oppositions capable of transforming social life through debates about its directions and issues, and even the perspective that involves a reflexively-engaged analysis in the recognition of this. But the epistemological argument raised in this context by cultural sociology remains consistent with the reaffirmation, made through the interpretation of social life, that deep symbolic structures are not contradicted in any way (either by social actors or by cultural sociologists) but appear rather as the result of the hermeneutic process, without locating the conflicts or contradictions they may contain (Reed & Alexander, 2012).²⁰

In contradistinction to this position, I think that the transformations that affected contemporary theatricality speak for themselves in terms of what they have to offer sociological analysis. The kind of avant-garde experimentations in theatre cited earlier have produced new categories by opposing and rejecting former theatrical symbolic structures that apparently failed to match the requirements of mass democracies. Moreover, a close reading of these experiments, in terms of both their artistic components and their political significance, persuasively suggests that they achieved a deep correspondence with broader social transformations in social life, political subjects (*persona*), the locations of performance, affects as dispositions of personal bodies (*skênê*), and the reflection on narrated action (*drama*), enabling them to be considered as the new terms of social theatricality. I also believe that all these transformations place us in a very different context to that of modernity, specifically in terms of the symbolic structures involved. Ours is no longer a theatre of *Reason*, elaborated from the Renaissance onward and leading to the formation of the modern bourgeois political subject (Legendre, 1998; Nevile, 2008), but rather a theatre of *Communication* elaborated in the course of postmodern mass democracy from the early nineteenth century on, to which we still belong today.²¹

Through his extremely interesting theory of social and cultural trauma, Alexander helps us understand how this historical shift is reflected in contemporary postmodern phenomena like the Holocaust, globalization or the multitude of political issues that affect contemporary societies, both endangering the existence of their symbolic structures and enabling their renewal, thus assuring the sustainability of modernity's principles beyond the latter's sociohistorical experience (Alexander, 2012; Alexander et al., 2004). By presenting trauma as the significance assumed by specific events within political communities, potentially becoming their identificatory symbol, Alexander (2012: 17-25) reveals a "New Master Narrative". Showing how suffering is at stake within this new political order, he argues that the general political condition of citizens is affected by the emergence of new normative orientations that, without completely losing sight of the modern principle of *liberty*, couples the latter with the more postmodern principle of *equality* – or such would be my own interpretation of one of the biggest shifts happening in the passage from modernity to postmodernity.²²

Avant-garde theatre has been part of this socio-historical movement that puts at stake modernity's principles (with its bourgeois order of representation). Although not fully acknowledging this fact, Alexander does, I think, recognize the *posterity* of modernity (this being, I would argue, at the center of *postmodernity*) in the very dialectics that is involved in social sciences today, caught "between progress and apocalypse" (Alexander, 2013: 5-28). His insistence on developing the project of cultural sociology appears as the way in which this project can reform the discipline of sociology as a whole – a project undertaken in his monumental doctoral dissertation, which soon became the four-volume *Theo-*

retical *Logic in Sociology*, published in 1982, a major attempt at critically reading the entire tradition of sociology, from its early founders (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, etc.) to Parsons and beyond, first through what he called neofunctionalism, and later, with the inflexion towards Durkheimian studies, through a cultural sociology properly speaking. This project of cultural sociology is now firmly established in the discipline.²³ As it happens, the present article has been more concerned with exploring some of the internal problems that inhabit this project and its realizations, rather than contesting its overall validity. Yet these are some of the issues for the discipline of sociology that need to be debated in order to determine the epistemological, theoretical and methodological orientations that should drive our analyses. This is what has been effected here. I shall conclude with a brief remark of what motivates this dialogue.

CONCLUSION

I think that we have to take the project of cultural sociology for what it has become: a major inflexion in the contemporary discipline of sociology. By its abundance, interest and scope, as I set out in the introduction, Alexander's works provide the principal point of reference for this project of cultural sociology. In its application to the analysis of the theatricality of contemporary social life, and of performance in politics, I argue that Alexander's analysis needs to include a more accurate appraisal of what theatre, and particularly avant-garde theatre, has brought to our attention – namely, the restructuration of fundamental categories of representation. This involves a deepening of the hermeneutics used by cultural sociology, and even opting for a dialectical hermeneutics that enables us to locate the transformations to the symbolic structures involved in representations in general. Alexander has done immense work in rehabilitating the importance of the symbolic dimension of social life, devoting tremendous efforts to arguing for a discipline of sociology that is able to give its expression a dramatic character. While we can and should be enthralled and enthused by his works, we also have to remain actively responsive to them.

Received on 10/7/2018 | Approved on 30/10/2018

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NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Frédéric Vandenberghe and Antonio Brasil for their invitation to participate in this special issue of *Sociologia & Antropologia* focusing on the works of Jeffrey C. Alexander.
- 2 One can think in this sense of the contributions included in *The Drama of Social Life. A Dramaturgical Handbook*, edited by Charles Edgley (2013). Although there is no reference in Alexander's book in Edgley (and some minor references to Williams and Goffman), they provide the wider context for the interest in using the 'theatrical metaphor' in sociological analysis.
- 3 It is worth remembering that Brecht fled the Nazi regime and lived in exile from 1933 to 1949, and that Artaud was in different asylums from 1937 to 1946. The biographical circumstances of their respective experiences make them very different characters, and go with the very different and highly contrasted conceptions they had of theatre, while nevertheless situating both of them on the margins of the cultural life of their times.
- 4 To this should be added that Alexander (2013: 147-157) does see avant-garde practices making some positive contributions, and even some solutions, to modernity's problems – as he makes clear in the chapter "The Frictions of Modernity and their Possible Repair" in his book *The Dark Side of Modernity*. In this work, he positions avant-garde art as a possible remedy for the culture industry. Here, though, I think that we have to take into account that this movement of avant-garde arts really began in the mid-nineteenth century with the radicalization of romanticism, and hence has to be considered retrospectively, up to the mid-twentieth century when this movement of avant-garde arts was institutionalized and became an integral part of our contemporary life, losing perhaps, in the process, its revolutionary character, but gaining in return its full legitimacy (Côté, 2003). This is what we have to take into account when we return to the analysis of what the avant-garde arts produced in terms of their transformation of the arts and of aesthetics in general (including all the categories mobilized in such experiences and experimentations).

- 5 This can be seen in his evaluation of Obama's political performance, once the electoral test had been successfully passed in 2008 and he retreated behind the doors of the Oval Office and withdrew from his public performance, leaving the impression that he was no longer acting significantly in his presidential role, allegedly leading to the Democrat's defeat in the 2010 mid-term elections (Alexander, 2011: 137-146).
- 6 Sennett (2017: 243) writes: "When personality entered the public realm, the identity of the public man split in two. A few people continued to express themselves actively in public, continued the imagery of man-as-actor which oriented the *ancient regime*. These active few had by the mid-19th Century become professionals at it, though: they were skilled performers. Another identity grew up alongside this one; it was that of the spectator. And this spectator did not participate in public life so much as he steeled himself to observe it".
- 7 In his own words: "Instead of such a reductionist sociology of culture, I have argued for a *cultural sociology*. Just as we need to respect the independence of the political vis-à-vis the social, we must also give the independent structuring power of culture its due. Modernity has eliminated neither the deep meaning nor encrusted tradition; it has, rather, changed the content of meaning and multiplied its forms. Modern culture still provides anchoring codes and narratives even if they often evoke rationality, hierarchy, stasis, and metaphysical belief. As far as the role of meaning goes, according to Durkheim, no irrevocably great divide exists between the aboriginals who believed in totemic gods and 'the religious man of today.' Modern people still engage in emotional and ritual action, energizing symbols that can become powerful collective representations, dividing the sacred from the profane" (Alexander, 2010: 282, original italics).
- 8 Following Robert Bellah's definition of civil religions in secular societies, Alexander (1988: 7) writes: "These are symbolic systems that relate national political structures and events to a transcendent, supra-political framework that defines some 'ultimate' social meaning. Bellah calls this framework religious not because it must refer to God,

but rather in order to emphasize the sacredness of its symbols and the ritual power it commands. In these terms, even atheistic, communist nations possess civil religions. Not ontological properties but historically determined social conditions determine the effect of a civil religion on society”.

- 9 This point was made very clearly by Jürgen Habermas (1991), but Habermas failed to adequately accompany the transformations seen subsequently in the nineteenth century, blinded as by his Marxist perspective that emphasized the commercial press as the betrayal of the modern bourgeois opinion press. This transition missed by Habermas, which represents a major epistemic transformation of the public sphere, also encompasses the emergence of the notion of *information*, which came to substitute the modern bourgeois category of *öffentlichkeit* (publicity) and most certainly somewhat undermines his critique of the historical movement that marked the nineteenth century and beyond.
- 10 Unfortunately for our present purposes, Mauss’s highly instructive description of the historical explanation of the notion of the ‘person’ stops short at the precise moment where it most directly interests us – that is, at the turn of the nineteenth century – whereas, of course, all the developments of the person in mass democracies are posterior to this period.
- 11 Stein’s plays are referred to as ‘landscapes’ (Palatini Bowers, 1991), which can be traced back to William James’s notion of “stream of consciousness” (Stein studied with James at Radcliffe College, Harvard University in the 1890s) expressed in discourse as a free flow of words. We can also link her ideas concerning this kind of redefined consciousness to George Herbert Mead’s conception of internal conversation being drawn from social conversation.
- 12 I add this caveat since Goffman, for his part, abetted by the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ of his time, fails to credit a symbolic order of a specific kind when analyzing the rituals of interchange, despite insisting on the symbolic nature of the ritual as such, as when he writes: “The sequence of acts set in motion by an acknowledged threat to face, and terminating in the re-establishment of ritual equilibrium, I shall call an *interchange*. (...) The interchange

seems to be a basic concrete unit of social activity and provides one natural empirical way to study interaction of all kinds. Face-saving practices can be usefully classified according to their position in the natural sequence of moves that comprise this unit” (Goffman, 1967: 19-20, original italics). It is readily evident that this “unit of social activity” only belongs to a society where *equality* (between persons) is a formal normative requirement, not exactly a ‘natural’ situation at a historical level.

- 13 It is worth quoting Tocqueville at length on this point: “Dans les siècles aristocratiques, chaque peuple, comme chaque individu, est enclin à se tenir immobile et séparé de tous les autres. Dans les siècles démocratiques, l’extrême mobilité des hommes et leurs impatients désirs font qu’ils changent sans cesse de place, et que les habitants des différents pays se mêlent, se voient, s’écoutent et s’empruntent. Ce ne sont donc pas seulement les membres d’une même nation qui deviennent semblables: les nations elles-mêmes s’assimilent, et toutes ensemble ne forment plus à l’œil du spectateur qu’une vaste démocratie dont chaque citoyen est un peuple. Cela met pour la première fois au grand jour la *figure du genre humain*. Tout ce qui se rapporte à l’existence, du genre humain pris en entier, à ses vicissitudes, à son avenir, *devient une mine très féconde pour la poésie*” (Tocqueville, 1986, vol. 2: 108, my italics).

- 14 In French and English, the term ‘theatricality’ first appears in the 1830s-40s (Tsamadou-Jacoberger, 2015: 28-29; Davis & Postlewait, 2003: 1-39).
- 15 In arguing for human rights beyond the context of a single political community, Arendt (1973: 296) writes: “The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinion significant and action effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice, or when one is placed in a situation where, unless he commits a crime, his treatment by others does not depend on what he does or does not do. This extrem-

ity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. Privileges in some case, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them according to accident and without any relation whatsoever to what they do, did, or may do”.

16 See the website of the company at <www.ondinnok.org>.

17 As for psychoanalysis, Artaud’s definition of the ‘soul’ or of the ‘unconscious’ is strictly bound to the body’s sensitivity (that is, to the ‘nervous system’ and the flesh) in its relation to the symbolic environment. His insistence on the capacity of theatre to mobilize all the subject’s senses by all physical means (signs, sounds, light, etc.) resonates with his views on the ‘physicality’ (or one could say physiology) of the theatrical experience, and of the actor’s capacity to physically embody the meanings that have to be conveyed through the body, as the first scene upon which theatre is enacted.

18 These aspects of the traumatic experience of contemporary society have been the subject of remarkable analyses showing how feelings are mobilized in the political arena to create identification with forms. Unfortunately, this area of Alexander’s analyses is beyond the scope of the present article.

19 Defining this crucial aspect of the strong program of cultural sociology, and criticizing further outcomes of post-structuralist thought, Alexander and Smith (2003: 23-24) write: “Responses to the question of transmission mechanisms have been decisively shaped, in a positive direction, by the American pragmatist and empirical traditions. The influence of structural linguistics on European scholarship sanctioned a kind of cultural theory that paid little attention to the relationship between culture and action (unless tempered by the dangerously ‘humanist’ discourses of existentialism or phenomenology). Simultaneously, the philosophical formation of writers like Althusser and Foucault permitted a dense and tortured kind of writing, where issues of causality and autonomy could be circled around in endless, elusive spirals of words. By contrast, American pragmatism has provided

the seedbed for a discourse where clarity is rewarded; where it is believed that complex language games can be reduced to simpler statements; where it is argued that actors have to play some role in translating cultural structures into concrete actions and institutions [...] where efforts are made to relate culture to action without recourse to the materialistic reductionism of Bourdieu's praxis theory".

20 In explaining the epistemological standpoint of cultural sociology, by contrast to critical realism and Marxism, Isaac Reed and Jeffrey C. Alexander write: "Note the direct inversion of the precepts of critical realism. That philosophy of science insists that the social scientist *begins* with the hermeneutic operation of knowing 'actors' meanings and moves from there to the underlying, real 'structures' via the conversion of proto-scientific into scientific concepts. Our position, by contrast, places hermeneutics at the endpoint, as much as at the beginning, of the operation of sociological explanation. Social science can be understood as a dialectic that tacks back and forth between weak and strong hermeneutics. The operations of weak hermeneutics are the recording of observations; the familiarization of strange sayings, doings, and assumings; the organization of qualitative and quantitative data. The operations of strong hermeneutics, by contrast, explicitly posit the existence of meaning structures, whose scope and rigidity must be argued with reference to theoretical concepts and recorded evidence. Bhaskar, with Marx by his side, is ultimately wedded to the contradiction of surface concepts by deep realities, which explain not only empirical data but also its misinterpretation by social actors (i.e. ideology). With Clifford Geertz and the early Michel Foucault, we are skeptical about the so-called 'discovery' of such deep structures. Our suggestion is that they are less discoveries than interpretations, meaning structures that emerge in the interplay between the obdurateness of social reality; its (weakly) hermeneutic reconstruction as data; the culture structures of social theory; and the structures of feeling of investigators themselves. Instead of a logic of scientific discovery, social scientists are continually involved in a sort of epistemological deep play, putting our inner meanings at risk

in attempting to grasp the inner meanings of other people and things whose reality is outside ourselves” (Reed & Alexander, 2012 : 31).

- 21 I use Communication with a capital C, in order to mark its symbolic significance for our postmodern world in comparison with Reason in its modern context; the onto-epistemological shift that philosophy registered in the nineteenth century, which entails as much a critique of Reason as a completely new way of envisaging the definition of all beings (from animals to humans, and beyond, in cosmology, physics, etc.) seems to be linked to this new general symbolic condition, based in good part on the philosophy of language that ran through the last century and a half (with thinkers like Peirce, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, Mead, Dewey, etc., notwithstanding their radical differences and stark oppositions).
- 22 This is symptomatic of a socio-historical moment in which the victims of modernity’s ‘progress’ claim their due, having become the political symbols of the betrayal of this order of supposed *freedom* that has been the hallmark of modernity. Hence the huge effort at “brushing history against the grain,” to use Benjamin’s expression, in order to re-establish a historical evolution that is more respectful of an *equality* that applies to everyone – in a word, an equality that becomes a universal symbolic principle of the social order.
- 23 The two massive handbooks that have recently been published (Hall, Grindstaff & Lo, 2010; Alexander, Jacobs & Smith, 2012) testify to this place in the discipline attained by cultural sociology. In their introduction to the latter, and commenting on the first handbook published, following the rise of the cultural turn in sociology and of the sociology of culture, the authors write: “What is missing from all these important contributions is the attempt to define, name, or stake out a specific mode of inquiry called ‘cultural sociology,’ and to demonstrate the centrality of this theoretical orientation in the contemporary sociological field. Instead, the goal seems to have been to make generic sociology more aware of the cultural turn. To be sure, this was an important move to make, and it has been largely successful. Culture is now a legitimate,

well-established object of sociological inquiry, in a way that it was not twenty years ago. For a cultural sociology to continue to flourish, however, it must focus on more than disciplinary infiltration and legitimation. Our concern is that growth and innovation in cultural sociology will be constrained if the best we can do is to mount a broad petition to the wider discipline for a place at the table. A more ambitious agenda is required, one that reflects how an emerging cultural sociology provides a new way of seeing when it comes to explaining social action and social order” (Alexander, Jacobs & Smith, 2012: 4).

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JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER SOBRE A TEATRALIDADE DA VIDA SOCIAL: APROFUNDANDO A HERMENÊUTICA DA SOCIOLOGIA CULTURAL

Resumo

Este artigo analisa criticamente a sociologia cultural desenvolvida por Jeffrey C. Alexander, concentrando-se em sua visão sobre a teatralidade da vida social. Argumenta que se, de um lado, a perspectiva de Alexander de fato se articula com uma avaliação substantiva da dimensão performativa da vida social e política – o que vai ao encontro do programa forte em sociologia cultural –, fortalecendo uma virada reflexiva na produção cultural em geral, de outro, sua visão sobre o teatro e a política continua de certo modo limitada às tentativas de identificar as estruturas simbólicas que lhe são constitutivas. Ao mobilizar uma hermenêutica estrutural para definir o núcleo analítico de sua metodologia, Alexander perde de vista uma hermenêutica mais dialética capaz de lidar com as importantes transformações que afetam essas estruturas simbólicas, expressas tanto pelo teatro de vanguarda quanto pelos meios de comunicação associados à política democrática de massa.

Palavras-chave

Jeffrey C. Alexander;
sociologia cultural;
teatralidade;
vanguarda;
hermenêutica dialética.

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER ON THE THEATRICALITY OF SOCIAL LIFE: DEEPENING THE HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Abstract

This article provides a critical examination of the cultural sociology developed by Jeffrey C. Alexander, focusing on his view of the theatricality of social life. The argument is that, while Alexander's perspective do engage in a highly significant valuation of the performative dimension of social and political life that matches his strong program in cultural sociology to add a reflexive turn to cultural production in general, his views on theatre and politics remain somehow limited in their efforts at reaching the symbolic structures that are constitutive of these domains. In using a structural hermeneutics to define the analytical core of his methodology, Alexander loses sight of a more dialectical hermeneutics able to tackle the significant transformations affecting those symbolic structures, and exhibited by both avant-garde theatre and media infused mass democratic politics.

Keywords

Jeffrey C. Alexander;
cultural sociology;
theatricality;
avant-garde;
dialectical hermeneutics.