

Jeffrey Alexander
and Cultural Sociology

JEAN-FRANÇOIS CÔTÉ



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Preface

This book offers the first systematic and critical presentation of Jeffrey C. Alexander's cultural sociology. It was first published in French and was intended as an introduction to Alexander's sociological project, which remained little known in francophone sociology. This English version adds only small changes to the original French version. As Alexander's project in cultural sociology has now reached an international audience and is developing into a sociological movement that challenges the sociological discipline, it seemed timely to provide a systematic and critical overview of one of the most important sociologists of our time. Because Alexander's project in sociology aims at reforming the discipline, its scope and depth have to be understood both for how it internally developed and for what it proposes in terms of the analysis of contemporary society. As will be seen, these two traits converge in a reflexive commitment to promote the recognition and development of the *civil sphere*, a concept that Alexander patiently elaborated in order to highlight the possibilities of a democratic culture, deeply embedded in symbolic structures and practices. His sociological contribution is then accomplished by resituating the discipline within its active role in social life and is activated by a general interpretation that calls for hermeneutics in the reading of sociology and social life in general. There is little

equivalent of such an ambitious and stimulating undertaking in sociology today.

This book was first initiated by discussions with Frédéric Vandenberghe, whose acquaintance with Alexander's sociology dates back more than thirty years. The writing was stimulated by discussions with Jeffrey C. Alexander himself, through encounters at international conferences and through a visit at the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University in the fall of 2019. For both their invaluable intellectual support and warm friendship, I want to thank Frédéric and Jeffrey, for whom sociology is as much a discipline as an occasion for developing stronger human relations. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions, as well as Gordon Connell and Jeffrey Malecki for their help in making the text more readable in English.

Introduction

The renewal of sociology seems today perhaps even more urgent than ever. Whether it be the coherence of sociological analyses and theories from a strictly disciplinary point of view, the epistemological issues raised by the discipline with respect to its scientific claims, or even simply the relevance of sociological discourse to the great challenges of our time, questions about the status, value, and use of sociology are coming from all sides. Alain Caillé and Frédéric Vandenberghe have recently called for a refoundation of the discipline in the terms of a “new classical sociology,” which they propose to consider in the light of the challenges of our time, suspended between the original expectations of the sociological project and its possibilities of development – beyond, of course, the professional advances it allows (Caillé and Vandenberghe 2016). It is in a direct echo to this call that the developments of Jeffrey C. Alexander’s *cultural sociology* have long been situated, as he specifies himself. He has always been involved in an “anti-utilitarian” enterprise intended to refound a sociology resolutely centered on the analysis of culture (Alexander 2018b).

Cultural sociology has thus developed over the last twenty years in the United States and in the English-speaking world, with Alexander’s work providing many of its predominant developments. Established at the Center for Cultural

Sociology (CCS) at Yale University, Alexander's cultural sociology is presented as a project to renew sociology as a whole. Today, it is promulgated primarily by two specialized journals, the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* and *Cultural Sociology*, as well as a few more general edited works (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012; Hall et al. 2012; Inglis and Almila 2016), in addition to gathering a growing community of researchers around its project. Although it has not really crossed over into French, German, Italian, or Spanish sociology, mainly because of the lack of translations, cultural sociology undoubtedly appears as one of the most ambitious projects within the discipline at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This book intends to describe and analyze the project and achievements of cultural sociology by focusing on the contributions of its main theorist, Jeffrey C. Alexander.¹

Alexander is one of the most important authors of contemporary sociology in the United States. His oeuvre, which now includes more than twenty books (and twenty-six edited or co-edited books), as well as dozens of book chapters and scholarly articles, stands out as a major contribution to sociology of all orientations. His work began with the monumental doctoral dissertation he completed at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1978 (and which is now published in four volumes (Alexander 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b), initially a critique of the last great theorist of American sociology, Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Alexander's project was based on what he then called "neofunctionalism," but it changed in the middle of the 1980s as a result of a deeper reading of Durkheimian sociology, particularly *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 1963). Cultural sociology finds in this work many of its foundations and reference points, with the perspective of a new analysis of the question of *meaning* in sociology, relayed by a rereading of Weber, as well as a critique of Marx. However, Alexander marks this rereading of the classics with a concern for reflexivity – that is to say, a sociology that not only takes culture as an object, according to an "objective" analytical posture, but by means of analysis also actively participates in the constitution of culture itself.

The cultural sociology project was truly launched in 1998 with a programmatic article signed by Alexander and Philip Smith, his former student turned colleague at Yale University (Alexander and Smith 1998). This project presents a “strong program” in the sense given by the English sociologist of science David Bloor (1991): seeing science rooted in social influences and beliefs. Beyond this social constructionist perspective, there is also a question of ensuring that sociological theory not only includes axioms and concepts established in a rigorous manner, but that it is at all times supported by empirical studies capable of validating the theoretical framework that it proposes. Cultural sociology thus presents itself as a new way of considering sociology as a whole, even though its specific field of application is that of culture. Cultural sociology has since developed along lines that emphasize a pragmatics of meaning in terms of a semiology of dual oppositions, coupled with a “structural hermeneutics” applied to the study of cultural phenomena, which it considers mainly in terms of rituals, performances, and socio-political manifestations of the contemporary world, with an emphasis on their inscription in the *civil sphere*, an original concept that sums up much of its genuinely novel perspective (Alexander 2006).

Cultural sociology thus participates in the “cultural turn” that has taken place in sociology since the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall). But its own project, while endorsing the problematic of the relative autonomy of culture as presented by Cultural Studies, radically dissociates itself from this by attempting to exceed the critical perspective inherited from Marxism which defined the latter’s main orientation. The criticism of culture, in the eyes of cultural sociology, does not represent a sufficient method to develop a conclusive sociological analysis. It is in this context that Alexander also criticizes the sociology developed by Pierre Bourdieu, whom he reproaches for being unable to deal with the problem of domination (Alexander 1995: 128–202). Resolutely engaged in its efforts to contribute reflexively to the development of culture, cultural sociology intends to exceed the interpretations of the world and society that sociology has produced up to now.

By establishing itself as a new orientation of the sociological discipline, Alexander's cultural sociology raises several questions. Although it has produced innovative work in its treatment of cultural meaning – proposing to situate it in terms of ritualization processes, highlighting the performative dimension of social action, recontextualizing the civil sphere beyond its Habermasian definition, or more recently presenting a vision of social life intended to counter cynical views of the political world – it is confronted with analytical, theoretical, and epistemological issues. Indeed, how far can we extend the reflexive scope of the analyses by short-circuiting the criticism we can make of them from a Bourdieusian or Marxist point of view? In what way is the theory proposed by cultural sociology likely to be confronted with other avenues of contemporary sociology, such as historical sociology, pragmatist sociology, or systemic sociology? Finally, is the structural hermeneutic approach that it puts at the forefront of its program compatible with the terms of a reflexive interpretation of contemporary culture or with the dialectical requirements that accompany it? It is these and other questions that this book proposes to answer in a critical examination of Alexander's cultural sociology.

In wanting to distinguish itself from the sociology of culture through a reflexive orientation (Alexander 1996a), cultural sociology employs its own participation to link theory and empirical research to affirm the symbolic functioning of contemporary society. It considers that the performative manifestations of the political world are to be analyzed for what they reveal of the ins and outs of political life in which the representation marks the climax. It is a matter not of questioning the forms of politicians' performativity in a mere critique of ideology but, on the contrary, of attending to the fact that, through these performances, the political world is led, political mobilizations can take place, and ultimately its aesthetic characteristics manage to impose themselves on the world. The credibility of these performances depends on their capacity to arouse debates on crucial issues for mass democracies, whether related to the presidential elections in the United States during the Obama era (Alexander 2010a, 2011a; Alexander and Jaworski 2014), the Arab Spring (Alexander 2011b), or even to the Iraq War or climate change

(Smith 2005; Smith and Howe 2015). This vision of politics – which refuses to question solely from the perspective of criticism, irony, or cynicism the value of those public manifestations whereby power puts itself on stage – voluntarily gives credibility to this functioning of our systems of political representation, while acknowledging the debt to the ways in which societies are structured by the civil sphere (Alexander 2012b).

Yet, it is not only “official” political manifestations that are the object of cultural sociology’s analysis. The expressions of “minorities,” insofar as they are expressed by the requirements of political representation, also show at a glance characteristics which indicate that resistance to power deploys performances where the autonomy of culture affirms itself. Thus, in the claims of African Americans, feminists, or the *déclassés*, and more so in the modes of expression these different minority groups put forward, cultural identities are formed by claiming their specificities. From a perspective similar to contemporary critical theory (Axel Honneth) and French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski, Thévenot), cultural sociology puts forward an analysis of social and cultural trauma that bears witness to the ways in which stigmatization is reversed and then channeled into political expression (Alexander 2012a; Alexander et al. 2004). Unlike these competitors, however, cultural sociology focuses not so much on the critique of power as on the power expressed in that critique from the horizons of the different minorities in our societies.

In the wake of its “strong program,” cultural sociology has now extended its analytical reach to many phenomena, managing to gather a community of researchers inspired by its approach not only within the American Sociological Association in the United States and the British Sociological Association in England, which remain its main anchors, but throughout the English-speaking world and beyond (in Latin America in particular, as well as in Asia). From the arts to religion, from immigration to electoral campaigns, from the environment to the digital, the objects that attract its attention have multiplied in proportion to the interest it has aroused; from the problems of narration to those of semiotics and to those of interpretation, the epistemological,

theoretical, and analytical issues it raises never cease to feed it and its developments. So much so that one could almost speak of the “cultural sociology movement” in the same way that one speaks of the “psychoanalytical movement” at the beginning of the twentieth century. In all of this, cultural sociology finds in Jeffrey Alexander – and in the sources of inspiration that motivated his work, such as Clifford Geertz or Robert N. Bellah – an eminent representative whose influence continues to grow. This is what we will discover in the chapters that follow. However, let us first situate the general context of Alexander’s cultural sociology, as well as the view we can take of it.

The project of cultural sociology is one of “renovation,” and it responds in several respects quite directly to the call for a “new classical sociology.” It is by a direct rereading of the classics (in particular, Parsons and Durkheim, but also Marx and Weber) that Alexander proceeds first of all. He uses the advances of other disciplines (such as anthropology, with Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, and semiology, with Roland Barthes), as well as other specific areas of study (in particular, cultural and performance studies, with Richard Schechner), integrating them into a more general theoretical perspective. Alexander also makes an epistemological shift in the aims of sociological analysis, situating it in a moment of reflexivity that is at one with social life, thus wanting to position himself away from objectivist visions that claim to be external to any particular point of view. Similarly, he emphasizes that the foundations of social life are not anchored empirically in a fundamentally utilitarian economic materialism but, rather, appeal to mechanisms of symbolic exchange, where a political world defined above all by issues of democratic representation and social justice takes shape. The three main lenses that guide the project of cultural sociology are thus the epistemological, theoretical, and empirical issues of sociological analysis. This does not mean, however, that its enterprise responds definitively to these issues.

Alexander returns to the debate between natural and cultural sciences, underlining the fundamental difference that Dilthey (2010) had already identified by placing “meaning” (rather than “things”) at the heart of the analytical project

of cultural (rather than natural) sciences (Alexander 2019). Interpretation thus takes over from explanation, the discovery of “laws” gives way to the recognition of the possibilities of generalization, and objectivity is relegated behind the subjectivity inherent in human practices. But doesn’t this weaken the renewal of the sociological project from the start? Indeed, since Dilthey (as well as Weber, Rickert, Simmel, etc.), important milestones have been reached in the project of the sciences taking culture as an object; Ernst Cassirer’s work, in particular, marked a crucial step in the capacity to situate symbolic forms as a “universal law” inherent to human expression in general (Cassirer 2000). Objectivity is then just a mode of objectification proper to any symbolic form, and it is thus merely human subjectivity that can claim this kind of relation to the world, whose universality is only acquired through an experience always open to modification. We recognize here the fundamental principle of any scientific theory, which is capable of being criticized and surpassed by another theory of a higher order. This position thus brings the natural and cultural sciences onto the same level: that of a mode of objectivation with a symbolic character where its plasticity emerges, showing how scientific theories themselves are animated by a capacity of self-transformation through a dialectical process while preserving their distinction of object.

The problematic of meaning, then, relative to the analytical approach of the sciences of culture, holds in fact to the nature of symbolic forms. Alexander’s cultural sociology takes good note of this by orienting itself towards the seizure of cultural forms by the means of semiology, albeit according to the binary character of signification – a fundamental principle inherited from structuralism (associated with Saussurean linguistics, and even to Lévi-Strauss, as much as to Jakobson’s understanding of message codification and to the literary approach of Barthes, as Alexander (2003) reminds us). In doing so, cultural sociology counts on a certain stability in its hermeneutics – that is to say, a possibility of association between the manifested meanings and their deep historical references, in particular during moments of political confrontation, which it also arranges in the orb of a binary opposition inherited from religion – particularly between the sacred and the profane. But, in

doing so, does it not deprive itself of conceiving the *dialectical* character inherent in any symbolic form? Indeed, and especially from a historical point of view, it is striking to notice how the oppositions of former times are transformed to give birth to new oppositions; for example, if the category of “citizen,” associated with the right to vote, during the early modern period was applied exclusively to male property owners (excluding women and peasants), the transformations associated with the mass democracies of the last two hundred years have gradually extended the same category of “citizen” to any individual. This means that the modern opposition between citizen and non-citizen has not only become (with all that it entailed in terms of “bourgeois morality” and the legal categories it supported) obsolete today, but it has been absorbed, in a dialectical reversal, into a new category that has dissolved the old opposition. This easy-to-grasp example is suggestive of others, perhaps less obvious at first sight, but which nevertheless structure social life and the moral universe through their transformations: witness the reversal of the typically modern relationship of domination over nature in the contemporary ecological register, or the legal provisions and moral judgments towards homosexuality developed from the second half of the twentieth century. These dialectical reversals show a dynamic at work in the symbolic world that is difficult to reduce to stable binary oppositions. Thus, it is the whole vision of the evolution of the world that seems to be translated not by the establishment of a static codification, but more by the constant overtaking and rearrangement of the symbolic order of our societies – even if, of course, strong elements of the social order, such as the regime of capitalist accumulation or certain traditional religious forms, apparently always resist changes (but is this really the case?). It remains enough to wonder about the capacity of cultural sociology to analyze, by means of what I would call a *dialectical hermeneutic* rather than a structural hermeneutic, such transformations. Cultural sociology cannot be satisfied with reaffirming the prevalence of a static social order but must manage to record the transformations of this order in the very analytical movement it produces. We find there the definition of its own reflexivity when it acquiesces precisely to the dialectical process that

makes it sympathetic to symbolic forms and their intrinsic transformational movements.

Finally, this reflexivity, which obeys the socio-historical conditions of its time by adhering to a conception of science that it adapts to specific objects, corresponds to the cognitive, normative, and expressive place that cultural sociology takes today. But to do this, it must also recognize that its participation in the social and cultural order, resulting from the “relative autonomy” from which all symbolic expressions proceed, necessarily transforms the forms and structures of these symbolic expressions. In other words, cultural sociology – no more or less than all the other sciences – cannot be neutral, and it participates actively in the transformation of the social and cultural world, thereby finding a place within the contemporary political order. To what imperatives does this reflexivity within the sociological project respond? To what extent is it likely to lead to transformations beyond the analyses it produces? These questions remain on the current and future horizons of our societies. But this is definitely the challenge that Alexander takes up in the development of the project of cultural sociology – that is to say, the active contribution to shaping the contemporary symbolic world using analytical, theoretical, and epistemological methods. Let us therefore enter without further delay into the promising and exciting project that Alexander’s cultural sociology offers us.