The Alexander School of Cultural Sociology

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ABSTRACT I pursue three aims in this article: (1) a contextualization of Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology within the broader trajectory of his intellectual development; (2) a sketch of the key ideas of his approach to cultural analysis against the backdrop of contemporary debates regarding culture and social structure; and (3) an appreciation and critical assessment of Alexander's program.

KEYWORDS Alexander • culture • cultural sociology • social structure • theory

I

One can discern four distinct moments in Jeffrey Alexander's theoretical development, from his earliest publications in the late 1970s up to the present day. These moments mark not so much ruptures or sharp breaks in his thinking as they do shifts in analytical emphasis against a backdrop of overall theoretical continuity.

The first moment begins with Alexander's earliest publication, an article on Talcott Parsons in *American Sociological Review* (1978) – actually, even earlier, with his doctoral dissertation (under the supervision of Robert Bellah) at UC Berkeley – and culminates in his breakout work, the four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982–3). In this initial phase, Alexander is concerned with the struggle, sometimes only dimly apprehended as such by the classical theorists themselves, not to mention their followers and students, to attain to a perspective of 'multidimensionality' in their theoretical thinking at the level of presuppositional logic. Alexander defines this as a perspective in which 'action [is] conceived not as either instrumental or normative, but as both' and in which 'action [is] conceived as ordered both through internal and external structures' (Alexander, 1982: 123). In pursuing such a theme,

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he portrays his protagonists as striving, mightily but with great fallibility, to reach and to sustain this multidimensional pinnacle, only to 'retreat' from it in the longer run, to fall back from it to either side. There is to *Theoretical Logic* in this regard an unmistakable note of pathos, a dramatic – indeed, almost operatic – quality.

In his second moment, which partially overlaps with the first, Alexander continues his own quest for multidimensionality. We see him now grappling, from his early years at UCLA on through to the publication of his major work of the period, *Twenty Lectures* (1987a), with the presuppositional bases of the theoretical developments and discourses of the post-Parsonian era. Alexander is especially concerned with theories which he classifies as individualistic at the presuppositional level, such as the various so-called 'micro' theories to which he was exposed within the UCLA department, and their distance from – or, in recent years, shifts in the direction of – what he envisions as 'a truly multidimensional theory'. (In *Theoretical Logic*, by contrast, he had argued that 'one must . . . discount individualism as a viable option for a truly social theory' [Alexander, 1982: 123].) The broad outlines of such a theory he puts forward in his own important essays of this period, 'Action and Its Environments' (1987b) and 'The New Theoretical Movement' (1988a).

But already in these articles, we can see yet another emphasis emerging in Alexander's thought – and with it, a third important moment in his theoretical development. This phase is formally inaugurated by his edited collection, *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (1988b), which includes a significant essay on Watergate entitled 'Culture and Political Crisis' (1988c; see also 1988d), and it sees the appearance as well, over the next several years, of other noteworthy studies, such as 'The Promise of a Cultural Sociology' (1992a), 'Citizen and Enemy as Symbolic Classification' (1992b), and 'The Discourse of American Civil Society' (with Philip Smith, 1993), not to mention also his edited collections, *Culture and Society* (with Steven Seidman, 1990) and *The Meanings of Social Life* (2003).[1] This phase also features a more combative and polemical Alexander, as in his sharp critiques of British cultural studies in 'The British Are Coming . . . Again!' (with Steven Jay Sherwood and Philip Smith, 1993) or of Pierre Bourdieu in 'The Reality of Reduction' (1995a). In all of these studies, Alexander takes off from his earlier interpretation of Durkheim in *Theoretical Logic* and from his work on 'Action and Its Environments' to develop a theory of (and a research program for) what he terms the 'cultural environment of action'.

Finally, a fourth phase in Alexander's development, one that (again) overlaps with that which preceded it, begins around the early 1990s (in the aftermath of the events of 1989). Here we see an increasing involvement in debates regarding civil society, democracy, and modernity, and along with that, a shift in focus from 'sociological' to 'social' theory (Seidman, 1997). These changes commence with 'Bringing Democracy Back In' (1991) and with some of the other essays that I just mentioned on 'the discourse of civil

society'. They continue with efforts to integrate his cultural analyses with work on the institutions and social movements of contemporary civil society, as in essays on Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato in 'The Return to Civil Society' (1993) or on Alain Touraine in 'Collective Action, Culture, and Civil Society' (1996), or in his edited collection, *Real Civil Societies* (1997). We also see more of something else during this period: an attempt to reconstruct critical social theory itself, to bring it more in line with the demands and challenges of the present, through a sustained inquiry into philosophical questions of reason, relativism, and modernity, and through exploration of the idea of 'self-limiting, partial, and plural utopias'. *Fin de Siècle Social Theory* (1995b) captures some of this movement, as do Alexander's more recent essays on 'civil repair' (2001a, 2001b) and his (forthcoming) major study of civil society.

II

Here, I wish to focus upon the latter two of these four theoretical phases – and in particular, upon the cultural theory that they have in common.

First, some theoretical contextualization, to highlight the special place that Alexander's theory occupies within contemporary debates. In elaborating his ideas, Alexander speaks often of the inadequacies of the Parsonian approach to cultural analysis and stresses its unfortunate disinterest in the 'internal geography' – the internal logic or organization – of symbolic systems. His break with Parsons on this score represents, in fact, one of the few truly sharp discontinuities in his entire development (see Alexander, 1998). But in addition to Parsonian functionalism, Alexander engages critically with a whole host of other perspectives, many belonging to the two classes of reductionism that Margaret Archer (1988) terms 'upwards' and 'downwards' conflation: reductionisms to social structure and to culture, respectively. Some of the most influential perspectives, as it happens, are of the former variety, approaches that regard social structure as in one way or another determinative of culture. As I noted earlier, Alexander directs sustained critiques at what he deems to be the leading representatives of such a strategy: at British cultural studies or at Bourdieuian theory, for example, or at US 'production of culture' analyses, among others. He has less to say about the category of one-sidedly culturalist approaches, although these, too, occasionally bear the brunt of his critique. Without entering into these various debates, let me highlight one other conflationary variant with which Alexander does *not* engage, but which I think is quite important: that which Archer characterizes as 'central' conflation.

In this type of argument, as Archer explains it, 'there is no way of "untying" the constitutive elements. The intimacy of their interconnection denies even relative autonomy to the components involved' (Archer, 1988: 80l). Precisely such arguments have been put forward in recent years by

erstwhile structuralists (I think, for example, of Charles Tilly [1998] and Harrison White [1992]), who under the code phrase 'mutual constitution' acknowledge the importance of culture, but only on condition that it be denied analytical autonomy vis-à-vis social structure. In White's case, there may now be an evolution away from such a position, as he becomes increasingly engaged in the formal modeling of linguistic structures (see, e.g., White, 2000), but I think that, in general, this now stands as one of the leading alternatives in the cultural literature. One of its many problems, in my view, is that social structure often turns out to be the first among equals in any case, when one actually looks more closely at the causal arguments. But in addition, such a view prevents us from methodologically isolating cultural structures and from mapping out their inner logics; and it keeps us from examining their interplay with other kinds of structures or from seeing how these together constrain and enable interaction. All such moves are called for in Alexander's 'strong program' – and they are what make that program so very useful.

What are the intellectual progenitors of that program, and what are its key ideas? Alexander draws creatively upon a number of recent currents in fashioning his distinctive approach; among these are French poststructuralism; narrative and genre theory; and symbolic anthropology (especially, but by no means exclusively, the work of Clifford Geertz). But most important for him are two roughly contemporaneous figures of the late-19th and early-20th centuries: Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand de Saussure. Alexander speaks of a 'felicitous, but not altogether accidental, congruence' (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 24) between Durkheim and Saussure. This refers to their common concern to build up a structuralist theory of culture, one based upon a view of cultural formations as symbolic systems consisting in patterned relationships among symbols and a complementary but distinct conceptualization of culture as a set of practices. In Durkheim's case, we have symbolic classifications and ritual practices, while in Saussure's case, we have *langue* and *parole*. Alexander's concern with both ends of this dualism puts him squarely at the center of contemporary debates over how to reconcile the two visions – of culture as system and as practice – a discussion that has recently been joined by William Sewell, Jr. in an interesting essay (1999).

Now, in respect to culture as system, Alexander derives from Saussure the idea of an arbitrary relation between signs and their social referents; this helps him to establish the analytical autonomy of symbolic systems. And he gains from Durkheim the idea of a binary organization to such systems (in terms of sacred and profane elements) and the insight that these systems can be highly emotionally charged or 'hot', with a capacity to organize not only cognitive and moral, but also expressive or affectual contents. From here, it is only a short distance to arguments about the 'democratic' and 'anti-democratic' cultural codes at the heart of civil society, and so forth, as Alexander passes over from the third to the fourth phase of his theoretical

development. In respect to culture as practice, Alexander also draws upon Durkheim, specifically his theories of ritual and of solidarity (less so upon Saussure). Ritual practices, he points out, are organized by reference to 'focal points' and symbols of sacred purity, danger, and pollution, and they carry powerful emotions such as reverence, anxiety, fear, and hatred. Much of cultural life, whether mundane or momentous, can be interpreted in terms of such practices and in terms of the solidarities that they help to foster or to destroy.

III

I shall return in short order to the issue that I raised a moment ago, regarding the reconciling of these two understandings of culture as system and as practice. But before I do, I would like to make one further observation about Alexander's cultural sociology as a whole, one that is meant to remind us that theoretical development, however much it may be centered around the life-work of one particular thinker, is ultimately very much a social and collaborative process. My observation is that Alexander has succeeded to a remarkable degree in establishing his distinctive cultural theory and empirical research program as a collective enterprise; indeed, I have long felt that one can fairly speak of the existence of a UCLA School – or now an Alexander School – of cultural sociology. Many young sociologists have moved forward with Alexander-inspired work on symbolic classification and ritual; I am thinking of such talents as Anne Kane (1991, 1997, forthcoming), Philip Smith (1991, 2001), Laura Edles (1995, 1998), Ronald Jacobs (1996, 2000), Elaine Chan (1999), Eric Rambo (1995; see also Rambo and Chan, 1990), Agnes Ku (1998, 1999, 2001), and Steven Sherwood (1994), among many others. Alexander's influence has also reached well beyond UCLA; to take two further examples (again, among many possible), both Margaret Somers' (1995a, 1995b) work and my own (Emirbayer, 1992a, 1992b, 1996; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994) have drawn heavily upon his cultural sociology.

In light of this far-reaching impact, it is tempting to turn back upon Alexander himself his dictum, from *Theoretical Logic*, that 'members of a sociological school change the founder's thought as much as they faithfully articulate it, and that they change it, moreover, in a manner that can be systematically related to the analytic tensions in the original theoretical position' (1983: 277). This is a project, however, that must await another day, for it would require a presentation much longer and more involved than is possible here, plus I am not even sure that enough time has elapsed since the founding of this school for such dynamics fully to have played out. Nonetheless, I would like to take the opportunity to conclude this essay with a few of my own reflections upon Alexander's cultural sociology. In the background to my remarks is the conviction that his cultural perspective, which

avoids the reductionist pitfalls that I discussed earlier and which affirms the analytical autonomy of culture, proposes to map out its internal patterns, and then seeks to reconnect it with social structure and with historical process, has proven an extraordinarily valuable, important, and timely contribution to sociology. It certainly ranks among the most important contributions to cultural analysis in the post-Parsonian era.

I shall organize my comments in terms of Alexander and Smith's (2003) own three tenets for a 'strong program' in cultural sociology. First, in respect to the move to 'analytically uncouple' culture from social structure – the move toward analytical autonomy – let me register here a concern that this has been carried out perhaps in a way that includes a hidden tendency toward central conflation. I refer to the emphasis in Alexander's work upon emotions as a constitutive element in the cultural system, as so bound up with culture that it makes no sense to draw the two apart. To repeat Archer's observation, 'The intimacy of their interconnection denies even relative autonomy to the components involved' (1988: 80l). Now, Alexander does take on theoretical and empirical questions regarding emotional dynamics in his essay on the Holocaust as cultural trauma, 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universalism' (2001c). But here it seems to me especially unclear whether a culturalist model, no matter how sophisticated, can fully make sense of what are not merely symbolic, but *also* specifically collective emotional processes. In my own recent work (Emirbayer and Goldberg, forthcoming), I have tried to elaborate in response to such problems the idea of a third 'environment of action', to use Alexander's terminology, which accords to transpersonal emotional dynamics their own analytical autonomy and formal logic.[2] Such an approach, it seems to me, is necessary if we are ever to develop a more truly emotionally 'thick' and nuanced sociology.

In respect to the issue of culture's internal patterning, the question from earlier of reconciling culture as system and as practice now comes back into view. Alexander seems at moments to agree with the Sewell formulation that symbolic 'structures are at risk . . . in all of the social encounters that they shape' (Sewell, 1992: 19). As Sewell puts it, 'every act of symbolic attribution puts the symbols at risk, makes it possible that the meanings of the symbols will be inflected or transformed by the uncertain consequences of practice' (Sewell, 1999: 51).[3] Alexander, too, affirms that 'the classificatory system of collective symbols can sometimes be drastically changed through [ritual] experiences. . . . The end result [is] in no sense preordained' (Alexander, 1988c: 192, 201). However, there still remains, to my mind, a static quality to Alexander's cultural sociology and a lack of attention to how cultural formations themselves emerge in dynamic relation with other such configurations. Cultural codes always seem to end up unaltered in his empirical work, and they are also always presented as singular and self-standing. Here, I think that the basic cause of such difficulties is Saussurean structuralism itself,

with its notorious inability to reconcile statics and dynamics. Personally, this is why I happen to be far more attracted to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whom incorporate ideas of semiosis, dialogism, and addressivity into the very center of their thought.

Finally, in respect to the issue of causality and of the rejoining of culture with social structure and with 'proximate actors and agencies' (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 14), three quick observations. First, Alexander often characterizes culture as 'ideal', in contradistinction to a social structure that is somehow 'material'. But as Sharon Hays (1994) points out, this is a misleading formulation, for culture is itself by no means immaterial, either as artifact or as ritual practice. Second, Alexander identifies 'power' almost exclusively with extra-cultural and social-structural formations. But this, too, it seems to me, is a misconception and a curious holdover – as with the ideal/material distinction – from Marxist or materialist ways of thinking. Power inheres in the cultural no less than in the social-structural environment of action, in the manner and degree to which actors identify with or 'speak in the name of' highly valued or sacred elements within their symbolic systems. And last, Alexander raises the question of causality, as in relating cultural formations to actors and agencies, but does not always give us specific and well-delineated causal mechanisms that we can use. Two exceptions are his 'Watergate' essay (1988c), where he delineates a range of such mechanisms, such as sacralization, pollution, and purification, and 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universalism' (2001c), where he discusses such causal processes as symbolic extension and emotional identification; coding, weighting, and narrating; and metonymic and analogical association. But one wishes that he would do much more of this, so that we might have at our disposal an even fuller inventory of 'recurrent causal sequences of general scope' (Tilly, 1998: 7) to invoke in single case studies and comparative research alike.

I am sure that Jeffrey Alexander already has effective responses to these various challenges. I would not be surprised, in fact, to find him already pushing forward into new terrain, exploring new frontiers in his theoretical development. We all rush to keep up with him.

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Notes

1. Alexander informs me (personal communication) that his culturalist inquiries actually got under way much earlier than 1988 – he composed the first draft

of his Watergate essay in the mid-1970s – but that this line of analysis was subsequently suppressed, as he proceeded instead in a more Parsonian direction. (It should be noted, however, that his interpretation of Durkheim in *Theoretical Logic* does clearly adumbrate the more culturalist approach that was to follow.) It was only when Alexander carefully read Saussure in the early 1980s and connected Saussurean ideas with those of Durkheimian sociology that, as we shall see, he became fully ready to move in a decisive way beyond Parsons.

2. Alexander actually speaks of yet another environment as well: individual 'personality'.
3. Sewell sums it up this way: '[T]he presumption that a concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings is at odds with a concept of culture as practice seems to me perverse. System and practice are complementary concepts: each presupposes the other' (Sewell, 1999: 47).

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