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Review Essay

The Cultural Transformation of The Public Sphere: Sociological Inquiry into a Category of American Society

Frédéric Vandenberghe

The Civil Sphere. By Jeffrey Alexander. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Failure to achieve a full or complete civil sphere should not be seen as an admission of utter failure. To the contrary, it is the contradictions generated by the tension between the ideal and the real that produce the potentially liberating dynamics of contemporary life.¹

These are dark times, and precisely when we think that things can hardly get worse, we desperately need glimmers of hope. In his long-awaited book on the civil sphere, Jeffrey Alexander resurrects an eighteenth-century idea of civil society. With disarming optimism, one of America's best, and best-known, social theorist defends the project of civil society and its utopia of democratic inclusion, not only as an ideal, but also as an idea, which is already partly institutionalized. Immanent in society, the coming of universal solidarity is also imminent in history. There are no metaphysical guarantees that the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion will ever end, but as long as the reference to common humanity retains its appeal, there is hope.

The concept of civil society was fashionable in the 1980s; with nostalgia, we remember the 'velvet revolutions' in Eastern Europe that spelled the end of the era of totalitarianism and the return of democracy on a global scale. Analyzing the unending process of 'civil repair,' Jeffrey Alexander also looks back, but from the future, as it were. His history of the twentieth century is clearly a redemptive one. It is not Walter Benjamin's 'hope of the hopeless,' however, that drives this grand American narrative, but the confidence in the strength of democratic institutions and their capacity to progressively include the excluded into the societal community, repairing injustices at the same time they redeem the promise of universal solidarity.

The Idea of Civil Society

In advance praise for the book, Victor Nee has already compared it to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. This reference is not entirely off the mark, but to properly understand the message of the book, I think we can better compare and contrast it with Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.² Indeed, at its most ambitious, Alexander proposes nothing less than a counter-project to *Strukturwandel*, and a concomitant reorientation of critical theory. Instead of focusing on power, capital and exclusion, critical theory should give more attention to civil discourse and the promise of inclusion. Unlike the German philosopher, the American sociologist does not want to present a *Verfallsgeschichte*, a story of the rise and the decline of the public sphere. His story is more upbeat and uplifting. Systematically foregrounding the role of culture, Alexander's *Kulturwandel* consistently

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emphasizes the causal power of ideas, ideals and other symbolic commitments. He does not deny the dark side of civil society, far from it, but backgrounding the privatizing power of capital, he stresses how the bourgeois ideals of civil society are progressively realized in history. Surely, the idea of civil society is a regulative ideal, a kind of horizon that recedes as society progresses towards further inclusion. But to the extent that it is already partly institutionalized in democratic nation-states, it is also constitutive of the ‘societal community’ as an inclusive, all encompassing ‘We.’

In response to Habermas’s colonization thesis, Alexander presents culture as the lynchpin of a counter-colonizing offensive in which the civil sphere invades, penetrates and civilizes the economy, the state and the other subsystems of society. This may be a counter-project to Habermas’s; it is not, however, or not necessarily, anti-Habermas. Alexander may share neither Habermas’s residual Marxism nor his rationalism, but he certainly subscribes to his universalism. Without hesitation, he accepts Habermas’s normative assumptions, but as a theoretical alternative to historical materialism and discourse ethics, he introduces his own brand of cultural sociology to analyze the discourse of civil society. This cultural displacement puts Marx back ‘on his head,’ and via a reformulation of Talcott Parsons’s concept of societal community, it also pushes critical theory in a more idealist direction.

In spite of the fact that Alexander dismisses the category of reason, this is a very Hegelian book. Whereas Habermas analyzed the public sphere from a Kantian perspective, Alexander approaches it through Hegelian lenses. The civil sphere is an Idea. It belongs to the sphere of the objective Spirit (*objektiver Geist*). As such, it initially only exists as a discourse that strives towards its own realization. This realization is not automatic, however. It does not come forth into the world “in a single pistol shot.” To be embodied in the communicative and regulative institutions of society, the Idea has to be released by public opinion and defended by social movements. Moreover, as the discourse of civil society is not without its counter-discourse, the incorporation of the Spirit in social institutions is dialectical. It necessarily involves conflict between different visions of the good society. However divisive such struggles may be, in democratic societies, they take place against a background of shared universal norms and values which are already partly institutionalized. As a result, social critique is always immanent critique – a critique that takes the ideals of the civil sphere at its word and critiques the extant society in its own name.³ In Alexander’s reconstruction of the civil struggles of the twentieth century, the struggle for recognition is presented as a struggle for inclusion that is waged as a struggle over representations in which good citizens are invariably pitted against uncivil enemies who are discriminated against, ‘polluted’ and excluded from full membership. What drives history forwards in this grand secular narrative is the never-ending process of inclusion that extends social solidarities and broadens participation, as enemies are ‘purified’ and redefined as citizens, allies and potential friends. This process may not be rational, but it nevertheless represents the unachieved project of modernity.

An “Exemplar” for Cultural Sociology

This book was long overdue. It took the author almost two decades to write it, and the result is a genuine masterpiece that will no doubt set the agenda for another decade or more. With more than 150 pages of footnotes, some of which are mini-essays in themselves, the book is monumentally erudite, yet elegantly written. It alternates pleasantly between theoretical exposé and detailed analysis of selected case studies. The ‘Alexander technique’ is typically two-pronged. On the one hand, it advances via a comprehensive, but critical overview of the existing literature. Sifting through the theories of civil society and social

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2 movements, it reconstructs the prevailing paradigm and offers a more cultural interpretation
3 as an alternative. On the other, it applies and illustrates new theory and new concepts with
4 a ‘thick’ re-description of historical episodes that is largely culled from media accounts.
5 Although the size and the style of this treatise is reminiscent of the four volumes that
6 signaled Alexander’s rise to prominence as America’s prime social theorist, this publication
7 is not intended, however, as a contribution to “grand theory.”⁴ More modestly, it presents
8 itself as an exercise in theorizing at the middle range that has marked Alexander’s work since
9 the late 1980s. Once he moved away from the multidimensional and neo-functionalist type of
10 social theory that was heavily indebted to Parsons, Alexander developed his own distinctive
11 ‘brand’ of cultural sociology.⁵ As a successful academic entrepreneur, he has established
12 his own Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale, and, in typical Durkheimian fashion, he’s
13 now building up a school and aggressively promoting his own approach as an alternative to
14 (British) cultural studies and (continental) critical theory. It is in this context of paradigm
15 formation that the *Civil Sphere* must be understood. With its insistence on binary codes,
16 narratives, social dramas, traumas and performances, it is above all meant as an ‘exemplar’
17 (in the Kuhnian sense) and, thus, as a showcase of the ‘strong program in cultural sociology.’

18 This is not the venue to present cultural sociology at length or to submit the general
19 presuppositions of cultural sociology to a metacritique that uses the social theory of the
20 young Alexander to criticize the cultural sociology of the mature thinker.⁶ I will therefore
21 limit this review to a discussion of *The Civil Sphere*, and only tangentially will I challenge
22 cultural sociology as such. In the spirit of the civil sphere, sharing Alexander’s normative
23 presuppositions, though not necessarily his theoretical assumptions, I propose a gentle dia-
24 logue with the author and offer some friendly amendments. Although I think that Alexander
25 seriously underestimates the threats of capitalism and its privatizing intrusions in the civil
26 sphere, I have decided not to argue with Habermas and the Marxists against this latest form
27 of idealism. Instead, I will try to present an immanent critique.

28
29 **The Societal Community**
30

31 The book is divided into four parts, the first two more theoretical in their focus, and the latter
32 two moving to the empirical realm. In the first and shortest section, devoted to social theory,
33 Alexander positions his version of the civil sphere vis-à-vis contending theories in political
34 philosophy and social theory. Against universalists, such as Rawls and Habermas, he advances
35 the Hegelian argument that abstract morality (Kant’s *Moralität*) presupposes a hermeneutic
36 grounding in common culture (Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*). Although this seems to lead the author
37 down a communitarian alley, he instead veers into a critique of Walzer and Rorty for their
38 provincialism. They take culture into account, he explains, but cannot envision its expansion
39 beyond particular communities. Universalism is thus brought back in, but paradoxically, it
40 is ‘universalism in one country.’ In spite of the fact that cutting-edge theories of civil society
41 have now taken a global turn, Alexander limits his analysis to the United States. Only on
42 the penultimate page of the book does he propose an extension “beyond the territory of the
43 nation-state” (552). Instead of openly adopting a cosmopolitan position, he argues against
44 the abstractions of normative imperativism and defends a more sociological position as the
45 middle ground between normative theorizing and empirical research.

46 At this juncture, Parsons is brought back, but *in pianissimo*, as if the author wanted to
47 mark his distance from his mentor. This is misleading and unnecessary, and it detracts from
48 Alexander’s main contribution – to put flesh on the abstract bones of Parsons’s core category
49 of the societal community, or according to the terms of the four function-paradigm (AGIL),

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the “integrative subsystem of society.”⁷ As a synthesis of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, the societal community is intended as a functional alternative to, and modern equivalent of, *Gemeinschaft* (Hegel’s corporations). It refers to the analytically independent, relatively autonomous and functionally differentiated social subsystem, based on influence and persuasion rather than money and power, which allows for inclusion on the basis of institutionalized values of universal rights. Politicized, radicalized and culturalized, the ghost of Parsons’s societal community now reappears in Alexander’s latest work under the guise of the civil sphere. Loosely defined as “a solidary sphere, in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced” (31), the civil sphere refers in fact to a cultural sphere of generalized normative commitments to inclusion that regulates society at large and interpenetrates the other subsystems of society.

Over and against broad conceptions of civil society, which include all social spheres with the exception of the state (Scottish moralists), and narrow conceptions, which reduce civil society to an epiphenomenon of the market (Marxists) or power (Weberians), Alexander revisits Hegel’s *Rechtsphilosophie*, but without saying so. Pushing and pulling the solidaristic strand in his work that runs from the family to the corporation and public opinion,⁸ Alexander understands the civil sphere as a kind of spiritual medium of communication that influences mass media, controls the political and legal institutions of civil society, and regulates the ‘noncivil’ spheres that surround it. It is not, however, simply a sphere among spheres. To the extent that it is autonomous and democratic, it is the “sphere of spheres” that “trumps” (34) all others.⁹ Acting as a kind of “sluice” (*Scheler*), the civil sphere subtly regulates the flow of ideal and real factors of society and directs their course, before it releases them into the current of history. As a metasphere that surrounds all the other spheres of society, the civil sphere directly compels its communicative and regulative institutions to orient themselves toward the Spirit of society. Indirectly, via the law, it forces the noncivil spheres (the state and the economy, for example) to become more inclusive and to open themselves to the demands of justice that emanate from the lifeworld.

Although the civil sphere refers ultimately to an ensemble of generalized discourses that drive and direct societies, it is not merely discursive. Mediated by public opinion, the Spirit of the world materializes and sediments itself in communicative institutions and regulative organizations that permeate and regulate the noncivil spheres of society. In other words, between the generalized symbolic structures and the concrete actions of everyday life, public opinion intervenes as a force of persuasion that influences social actions, which, in turn, provide leverage for controlling the allocation of power and money. Using the language of complexity theory, Alexander describes public opinion as the “sea within which every institution of civil society must swim” (4; 191) and from which, presumably, they emerge as islands of civility.

Reminiscent of Parsons’ distinction between authoritative and allocative control, Alexander distinguishes communicative and regulative institutions. The bulk of the second part of the book is a sequential analysis of communicative institutions (the public, mass media, polls, and civil associations that influence politics) and regulative ones (political parties, elections, offices and laws that regulate the state) suggesting that public opinion ‘rules.’ By bringing the state back into the fold of civil society (rather than the reverse, as is the case with Luhmann), it also suggests that it “governs” social life. In this sequential chain of influence and control, public opinion is progressively translated and transformed into “civil power” (110). As a transformative force that comes from the depths of the lifeworld, civil power becomes effective as law. The regulative institution of law may appear at the end of the analysis; as a

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membrane between the civil and the noncivil spheres of society, it occupies a central position in the civilizing and counter-colonizing offensive of the Spirit against the noncivil spheres that restrict the universal realization of a just society of free, equal and solidary citizens. Indeed, “the more differentiated and autonomous the civil society, the more clearly there emerges a more porous legal boundary vis-à-vis noncivil spheres, whose activities become subject to legal-cum-civil regulation” (154).

This idealist interpretation of the civil sphere as a generalized normative discourse that is progressively institutionalized in the integrative subsystem of society and that maintains relations of interchange with the other subsystems of society is in line with a cultural reading of Parsons’s conception of “interpenetration” along cybernetic lines.¹⁰ So far so good, but whereas Parsons clearly defined the subsystems and the media of interchange, Alexander’s approach is more impressionistic. The reader is left to figure out how many subsystems or spheres of society there actually are. The economy, the polity, the family and religion are consistently mentioned, while occasionally primordial communities and science are brought into the conversation, but inevitably in an *ad hoc* fashion – never systematically. For a work that purports to be systematic, this represents a serious gap.

The absence of any diagram that clearly outlines the institutions and organizations of the civil sphere, as well the boundary relations with adjacent noncivil spheres, is symptomatic of the analytical weaknesses of the strong program. The lack of analytical precision or specificity concerning its subsystems, coupled with the absence of any sort of mapping of the potential relations between civil and noncivil spheres, makes it impossible to gauge the actual power and influence of civil society. Alexander indicates that the civil sphere progressively penetrates, invades and conquers the noncivil spheres. The civil sphere introduces claims of justice into the noncivil spheres so that no sphere is exempt from its influence: “No social sphere, not even the economic, should be conceived in anti-normative terms” (33). Against Habermas’s thesis of the colonization of lifeworld by the subsystems of the state and the economy, Alexander thus advances not only a multiple, but also a counter-colonization thesis. This is suggestive and intriguing, but in the absence of a theory of subsystems and their modes and media of interchange, the thesis of a civilizational counter-offensive remains unnecessarily vague.

Cultural Agonism and The Drama of Democracy

The second part of the book investigates the ‘culture structures’ and the dynamics of the civil sphere. I have already presented an outline of the institutions of the civil sphere and its relations with noncivil spheres, but thus far, I have bracketed the ‘mythopoetical’ approach to civil society that characterizes Alexander’s cultural sociology. The application of cultural sociological concepts to the theory of civil society introduces a dramatic turn into the analysis. Moving the investigation from the normative to the aesthetic, Alexander analyzes politics as a dramatic performance that enacts the symbolic codes of democracy in such a way that civil society invariably becomes polarized into good/civil and evil/noncivil actors.

This passage from the ethico- to the aesthetico-political signifies not only a rupture with a more communicative and rational approach to civil society, but moving from the perspective of the participant to the one of the analyst, it also introduces a methodological disjuncture into the analysis – from hermeneutics to semiotics and from semiotics to performance studies:

It is, in fact, precisely because politics has a reference to a symbolic code that it can never be situational, for it will always have a generalized dimension as well. This generalized reference makes politics not only contingent and rational but stylized and prescribed.

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To understand it, we need to employ semiotic theories of binary codes, literary models of rhetoric and narrative, and anthropological concepts of performance and myth. The symbolic medium of politics is a language that political actors themselves do not fully understand. It is not only situationally motivated speech, but deep symbolic structure (48).

Knowing the actors better than they know themselves, the analyst uncovers the deep structures (codes, narratives, genres) that makes the actors move, but that are not necessarily accessible to them. The semiotic turn deactivates the validity claims that are built in language and studies speech acts as performative enactments of a linguistic code from the perspective of the third person. Following Durkheim's proto-structuralist analysis of religion and its partition of the universe into the sacred and the profane, Alexander suggests that democracy is a secular faith, driven by a binary code that fractures a community into positively defined insiders and negatively categorized outsiders. Against the idealizing presuppositions of philosophers, the sociologist insists that 'real civil societies' are always, necessarily and invariably, stuck in a binary opposition between friends and foes or – less polemically (Schmitt) and more agonistically (Mouffe) – between friends and adversaries of democracy.¹¹ The reason for this polarization of the community is, paradoxically, found in the discourse of civil society itself. According to Alexander, its internal logic is properly demonic. As the identification of good citizens necessarily implies the discrimination of bad ones, there can be no inclusion without exclusion, no democratization without demonization (or "demonstration," literally, monstration of the demon, to invoke Luhmann's contentious etymology).¹² Further, and even more disconcerting, if we may believe Alexander, it is inclusion itself that breeds and provokes exclusion.

From this demonological perspective, politics appears as a dirty language game in which players utilizes any means necessary to symbolically 'pollute' the party positions of the opponent as uncivil (irrational) and conversely, to 'purify' one's own as civil (rational). Although the symbolic politics of the binary is predisposed towards an agonizing and deadly polarization between friend and foes, Alexander avoids the ultra-politics of Carl Schmitt and, via a cultural-functionalist interpretation of conflict that uncovers the consensual basis of dissent, he eventually rejoins the "democratic agonism" of Chantal Mouffe.¹³ As long as they operate in the civil sphere and share a common medium of communication, political enemies should, in fact, be conceived of as adversaries and potential allies. In Hegelian fashion, Alexander notes, "Antagonism at one level can be interpreted as civility at another" (147).

Moving from the semiotic to the histrionic, he next offers a dramatic interpretation of the political game as a public performance.¹⁴ Political discourse is not rational and deliberative (as in Habermas), but manipulative and performative (as in Goffman). Whether one is rational or not does not matter, provided one appears rational. Presentation of self and civic decorum are everything. Rational deliberation and communication in the public sphere have apparently more to do with public relations and the mobilization of emotions than with the discursive testing of validity claims. Alexander's public sphere has become a public scene in which one histrionically projects oneself as an honest and reasonable actor at the same time as one tries to discredit one's opponent as an enemy of democracy. Quickly, the debate becomes heated and, reinforcing a cycle of mimetic rivalry, the positions become radicalized to the point that rational discussion becomes almost impossible.¹⁵ Populists and demagogues step in; militarists, racists, antisemites, misogynists and homophobes make their case; and through a mutual *reductio ad Hitlerum*, society is unnecessarily polarized into Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, fascists and antifascists.¹⁶ When *Öffentlichkeit* thus

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2 degenerates into partisanship and propaganda, one's rationality is perhaps best shown through
3 a demonstration of the irrationality of the other. "Actors in the civil sphere," Alexander asserts,
4 "must present their strategic interests in terms of an ethical discourse such that attribution,
5 e.g., of being 'Machiavellian,' pollutes them [their opponents] and prevents their strategic
6 interests from being realized" (586, fn. 63). In this Machiavellian view of politics, everybody
7 seems to be intent on manipulating the appearance of communication without caring too
8 much about the essence of communication as such. When communication is perlocutionary
9 and performative, performances become necessarily strategic.

10 I find this fusion of communication and strategy, staging and authenticity, truth and
11 performativity rather problematic. In the same way as Alexander dismissed Bourdieu's
12 concept of habitus for combining the unconscious and the strategic, I wonder if the underlying
13 concept of strategizing performances is not an oxymoron.¹⁷ Moreover, and more importantly,
14 I think that his combination of semiotics and performance theory is an unhappy marriage.
15 Whereas semiotics insists that the actors are moved by deep structures or hidden scripts that
16 may escape their consciousness, performance theory supposes that they consciously act out
17 a script. But how can they do so if the script is a hidden one? If the script is analytical and
18 not synthetic, the analyst is authorized to investigate politics 'ironically,' as a performance
19 of the same ilk as a Broadway show, a football game or a seminar, even if the actors are
20 not aware of their role and may in fact think that they are doing something else. If cultural
21 sociology is not to impose its own analytical categories of social action, it must be grounded
22 phenomenologically in the categories of the actors themselves. Finally, I believe Alexander's
23 semiotic-performative perspective unnecessarily leads to a manipulative vision of politics
24 that is in tension with the normative agenda of civil society. When the validity claims of
25 speech acts are dismissed, deliberation no longer plays a role. As a result, politics becomes
26 a mere theater where populists and demagogues steal the show.

27
28 **Social Movements as Civil Articulations**
29

30 Ideally, the civil sphere constitutes a single societal community with full membership for all.
31 In reality, however, the world of the 'We' becomes narrowed as the discourse of repression
32 is applied to categories which are disqualified on the basis of primordial characteristics.
33 Through 'primordialization,' diacritical markers of relative difference (religion, nation, lan-
34 guage, ethnicity, race, gender, etc.) are transformed and reified into essences that incapacitate
35 their bearers from participation in the civil sphere. Alexander distinguishes three essential-
36 izing restrictions on common humanity that 'pollute' and exclude groups of people from
37 the polity: time, space and function. Because of the vagaries of time (not belonging to the
38 mythical group that founded the nation *in illo tempore*), space (not being born to the land,
39 but setting foot on its soil as an immigrant or a refugee) and function (devoid of social
40 markers such as money, power or authority that carry status in the noncivil spheres – the
41 economy, the state, the family and so on), civil capacities are primordialized. The result is
42 that the capability to perform adequately in civil society is restricted to those who, by birth
43 or ascription, possess the particular (pure) qualities of the core groups. Because the civil
44 sphere in democratic societies always contains a universal reference and the promise of full
45 inclusion, exclusion can in principle, if not always in practice, be contested in the name of
46 the very ideals of the society itself.

47 This process of inclusion is depicted as the "long and winding road" of civil repair (235).
48 It is driven forward by social movements that demand that the universal becomes concrete.
49 Following Alain Touraine's conceptualization of new social movements as movements that

not only defend an identity (I) against an opponent (O), but that also raise the stakes to the level of totality (T) and struggle for the cultural direction of society, this theory of civil society conceives of social movements as struggles that contest the discrimination against certain categories in different subsystems within society by making their claims travel from the particular to the general, from the mundane to the civil, and back down the pike again.¹⁸ By virtue of their dual positioning – apparently outside of the civil sphere, but in fact, always already included in it – they look not only to their proximate opponent in a given subsystem, but also address their claims to the larger context of the civil sphere. Framing their particular grievances in the general and universalizing discourse of the civil sphere, they thereby transform a problem that emerges in a particular subsystem into a problem of society at large. This is a compelling idea and warrants further investigation; unfortunately, in the absence of a coherent theory of society and its subsystems, it will not hold muster as a comprehensive theory of contemporary social movements. Alexander refers to passing to workers, women, youth, consumers, medical patients, disabled persons, minorities, and even nature itself (232–233) as subjects that advance claims for inclusion. But as these movements are not systematically related to the multiple intrusions of noncivil spheres that distort and undermine the civil promises of justice, the role of social movements in social change remains a rough sketch that needs to have its contours brought to light.

Cultural sociology conceives of politics as a discursive struggle for the hearts and minds of the public in which collective actors frame their issues in the language of the civil sphere. Aiming for the moral high ground while trying to pollute and disqualify their opponents, actors invoke the ideals of society and use the discourse of civil society to make their claims. Presentation of self, disqualification of the opponent, and the ability to frame and reframe, phrase and rephrase, or translate one's demands into a democratic code – these are what social movements are all about. Fusing the European tradition of social movement theory (especially Touraine) with US perspectives (especially Snow), Alexander's revision suggests that social movements are engaged in an exercise of civil translation; they use the discourse of civil society and address themselves directly to the public in their attempts to redress injustices.

This insistence on the importance of discursive practices of representation and translation is reminiscent of the Gramscian struggle for hegemony. The similarities are noteworthy, but so are the differences. By emphasizing the difference between cultural sociology and cultural studies, I want to point to an alternative conception of identity politics that is more attentive to power and differences.¹⁹ The main difference between a neo-Parsonian and a neo-Gramscian conception of civil society lies in the way culture is related to power. Whereas cultural sociology maintains that culture is analytically independent and investigates it as an autonomous semiotic realm consisting of quasi-transcendental binary codes and semi-religious narratives, cultural studies assumes it is shot through with power and conceives of the latter as a continuum that goes from open repression via symbolic violence to full-blown hegemony.

Neo-Gramscian scholars, like Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, analyze culture as a heterogeneous field of struggle for hegemony in which different groups contest reigning representations, which are always multiple, and enter into shifting alliances to subvert the existing balance of power. Arguing against the neo-Gramscians, and contrasting his own approach to Nancy Frazer's and Geoff Eley's neo-Habermasian theory of counterpublics, Alexander repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of referring to universalist ideas and ideals of the civil sphere that transcends ideological opposition between adversaries. Conflict always presupposes consensus, shared norms and a common language. This cultural-functionalist

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2 analysis of conflict clearly presupposes that the society in question is democratic and that its
3 civil sphere is open enough for immanent critique to be possible, but, unfortunately, that is
4 not always the case.

5 Excluded groups may be included in principle; whereas in practice they may very well feel
6 that the civil sphere does not even exist for them and are thus understandably inclined toward
7 violence. Regrettably, and retrospectively, when the dust of the battle has settled, it may
8 appear that the activists were simply impatient. Timing is crucial here, but Alexander does
9 not take this into account. Normatively, he's right to insist on the principle of nonviolence;
10 sociologically, however, he may be underestimating the power of domination. Moreover, and
11 given that he seems wedded to the binary, he should also pay more careful attention to the
12 phenomenology of revolt. The Black Panthers of the 1970s, the anti-Apartheid struggles of the
13 1980s, the Intifadas of the 1990's and the Islamic fundamentalisms of today demonstrate that
14 the question of violence is a contentious one that is indicative of the feeling of hopelessness
15 and felt exclusion. But even if we set aside such thorny issues and assume that societies are
16 democratic and that social movements can in fact make claims for redress in an independent
17 civil sphere, we might still get some leverage from a neo-Gramscian approach to culture
18 and civil society. But it would require a perspective that theorizes social movements not in
19 terms of translation, but rather 'articulation.' The distinction is subtle, but it allows us to turn
20 around issues concerning the binary nature of the code, the multiplicity of discourses and
21 the interconnection of different struggles.²⁰

22 Unlike cultural sociology, which is essentially structuralist, cultural studies is post-
23 structuralist. It does not simply accept the binary between friends and enemies of democracy,
24 but rather seeks to systematically deconstruct it. Deconstruction problematizes the unity of
25 'We' and the otherness of the 'Other' by challenging the radical separation between them
26 that makes the opposition possible in the first place. Deconstruction does not destroy the
27 boundary between insiders and outsiders; instead, it dislocates it. Rather than analyzing how
28 boundaries are realized through discourse and put into action via codes, it explores the ways
29 in which they are continuously contested, as the binary is re-articulated, re-contextualized
30 and dislocated. The dislocation of the great divide that separates insiders and outsiders
31 complicates the binary and leads to a messy situation in which no master discourse can
32 prevail. Beneath the unity of the master binary code, criss-crossing discourses proliferate
33 that undermine any reference to essentialism.

34 In the presence of multiples discourses and fluid identities, shifting alliances between
35 social movements can be forged through counter-hegemonic practices of articulation, which
36 link the various struggles for recognition and/or inclusion that cut across different strata of
37 a society. Like translation, the discursive practices of articulation presuppose a universal
38 referent, but the universal is now conceived as an empty signifier that cannot be occupied
39 and monopolized by any one group. Posited against the background of a shared space
40 that makes the articulation of difference possible, particularities are recognized as concrete
41 manifestations of the universal; however, this does not lead to a closure of the narrative.
42 Unlike translation, which suggests that demands can be univocally transposed within the
43 discourse of the civil sphere, articulation points to the multiplicity of voices and discourses.
44 In turn, they draw upon the very discourse of the civil sphere that they contest, subvert and
45 reformulate. As they re-articulate their particular demands within the hegemonic discourse,
46 collectives form alliances that link and interconnect the different struggles for recognition
47 and inclusion.

48 In contrast to the more traditional approach of cultural sociology, which assumes that
49 history can be captured by a single narrative embedded within a binary code, I have been

insisting on the multiplicity of subversive discourses and the interconnection of struggles that drive forward the realization of the ideals of the civil sphere. According to Alexander, the binary can never be deconstructed; only the referents can change. “But if we cannot overcome binarism, we can fundamentally change its referents. There will always be two goalposts, but we shift them, even in the middle of the play” (551). The second half of Alexander’s book seeks to empirically substantiate precisely this claim, that the construction of any particular group can be shifted from the profane to the sacred, from the anticivil to the civil.

The Dialectics of Civic Incorporation

Alexander not only offers a new theory of civil society, but also applies its main concepts in two lengthy case studies – the civil rights movement (Part III) and American Jews (Part IV). Written in a pleasant, almost journalistic style, they analyze the cultural dialectics of civic incorporation of minorities into the core of American societal community. The first case study can be considered as a successful remake of one of Parsons’s best essays, the “Negro American.”²¹ It presents an in-depth analysis of the civil rights movement, roughly from the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. By elaborating how the leaders of the black civil movement progressively swayed public opinion within the predominantly white civil society of northern states, it forcefully illustrates the cascading effects of the power of the civil sphere. New cultural understandings led to changes in the communicative institutions of society, which, in turn, trigger changes in the regulative institutions. Repair of civil injustice requires the intervention of regulatory institutions of the state, but only when communicative mobilization in the civil sphere has already succeeded in challenging, transforming and inverting the exclusionary discourses that discriminate and pollute members of the black community, presenting them as inferior human beings. It is only when the hegemonic discourses are challenged that stereotypes can be overcome and face-to-face interactions modified to the point where incorporation is eventually achieved.

In accordance with the main tenets of cultural sociology, Alexander analyzes the tightening spiral of communication and regulation as a social drama that unfolds in successive episodes: the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955, the Birmingham Campaign of 1962, the Freedom Summer of 1964, the crisis of Selma of 1965, etc. These episodes lead to a climactic reversal whereby the roles of the protagonists are dialectically inverted. So-called friends of democracy are unmasked as racists, and thus, as enemies of democracy. And thanks to the exemplary leadership of Martin Luther King, African Americans are recognized for what they truly are – human beings, compatriots, fellow citizens. Although Alexander does not explicitly bring in the constructivist theory of cultural trauma that he has developed elsewhere, it is nevertheless presupposed in his dramaturgical account of political catharsis.²² Indeed, the assumption seems to be that if psychological identification with the dominated and symbolic extension of the societal community is to occur, the tension has to be ratcheted up to the point where political drama becomes a genuine cultural trauma that triggers rage and a seething desire for repair.

However, when this theory of cultural trauma is conjoined with the semiotic theory of the civil discourse and the histrionic theory of political performances, the entire morality play takes on a somewhat contrived character. ‘Outing’ the movement, Alexander even insinuates that the violent confrontations with the police in Birmingham and Selma were actually carefully planned and staged in order to artificially dramatize and polarize the situation. From this dramaturgical perspective, the principle of nonviolence appears as a cunning ploy to stimulate a violent response that depicts the police as brutal Nazis and their sympathizers

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as fascists, while the activists of the black movement are seen as the incarnation of civil virtues such as temperance and tolerance. As in a tragicomedy, emotions are violently stirred up and tensions are artificially dramatized, but in the final scene, the forces of a higher moral order prevail and the fragmentation of the societal community is overcome through collective catharsis. The problem with such a tragicomic interpretation of politics is not so much that it confuses the genres – after all, life does at times seem to imitate the theater. But by making performances strategic, it deactivates validity claims and interprets normative principles as tactical tools that can be opportunistically manipulated to enhance dramatic effect – as if it doesn't matter whether Martin Luther King was really motivated by higher moral principles or only pretended to be so.

In the final section of the book, Alexander analyzes the case of American Jewry to make some general points about identity politics. He identifies three modes of incorporation of minority groups into a societal community, namely assimilation, hyphenation and multiculturalism, which refer to three different modes of the symbolic recognition of diacritical differences. Assimilation does not challenge negative stereotypes, but allows persons from the minority groups to pass through a symbolic threshold provided they shed their primordial qualities. Unlike assimilation, which purifies people but not their qualities, hyphenation extends the qualities of the outside-group to the core group. In its search for some type of overlapping consensus, it blends the respective identities into a putatively higher culture that remains nonetheless deeply imprinted by the primordial values of the core community. Opening a new chapter in the history of the struggle for recognition, multicultural incorporation neutralizes the negative categorization of ascribed qualities and instead affirms particularity. Unlike assimilation and hyphenation, it does not simply tolerate difference, but celebrates it as a concrete realization of our common humanity. “In assimilation and hyphenation, the particular is universalized. In multiculturalism, the universal is particularized” (452).

Analyzing the ‘Jewish Question’ in pre- and post-war America, Alexander rejects assimilation as a viable option and defends, like Parsons, “full participation combined with preservation of identity.”²³ Assimilation is unstable: it can move forward, ultimately toward hyphenation and multicultural incorporation, but it can also regress toward anti-Semitism and mass murder. Alexander argues that the situation for Jews in the 1940s was not necessarily much better in the United States than it was in Europe. The only difference is that the US civil sphere did not break down: “It was the collapse of the civil sphere in Germany, not German anti-Semitism, that allowed the Holocaust to proceed” (503). After the war, the revelation of the Nazi concentration camps and the social construction of the mass murder of Jews as the crime of crimes triggered a seismic shift in the American public opinion.²⁴ Faced with the horror of Auschwitz and Dachau, Americans reformulated their anti-Hitlerism into “anti-anti-Semitism” (523). The bulk of the investigation is about the incorporative reversals of American Jews and culminates in a close analysis of Woody Allen. He is not simply a reincarnation of the ridiculous *schlemiel* of Hebrew literature; rather he exemplifies the civilized and sophisticated Jew who brings a provincial Gentile like Annie Hall into the realm of civil life.

After hundreds of pages of discourse analysis, one wonders, however: where are the black Jews? If representations of identity are always multiple, woven together from various traditions, then Alexander not only underestimates the heterogeneity of the social fabric that makes up the minority groups he analyzes, but he also ignores the politics of articulation that mark contemporary identity politics. This brings us back to post-structuralism and cultural studies. Was not the point of identity politics to overcome every trace of essentialism and to encourage the formation of rainbow coalitions among different progressive threads?

Moreover, it also ironic that Alexander defends multiculturalism at the very moment it is under siege. And this is not endemic to the United States – the trend seems to be spreading throughout Europe like a wildfire. In the Netherlands, for instance, the “drama of multiculturalism” refers not to the successful incorporation of minorities, but to their growing disenfranchisement. Xenophobes and Enlightenment fundamentalists worldwide claim that Islam is incompatible with Western values yet force immigrants to pay lip service to the idea of civil sphere. The fact that Alexander does not refer, even once, to the backlash against Muslims, suggests that the book was finished before 9/11.

Meanwhile, the *Weltgeist* has moved on, gone global, and taken a cosmopolitan turn. Globalization refers to the intensification of economic linkages and other interconnections that transcend the nation-states which make up the modern world system. Objectively, the world now forms a single network of transnational flows of capital, goods, people, communication, ideas, images, and so on; subjectively, societies become aware that they form overlapping communities of fate. The dialectics between globalization *an sich* and globalization *für uns* is not without implications for the discourse of the civil sphere. Civil societies were always interlinked, but it is only in the last decade that they have consciously gone global to become cosmopolitan. Activists of all stripes now operate beyond borders and routinely invoke human rights as a master frame to contest local injustices and build alliances between movements. The owl of Minerva has spread its wings once again, but by sticking to the twentieth century and fixing his gaze on the US, Alexander missed its flight.

NOTES

At the time of writing (November 2006) I was a visiting professor at Yale. For personal reasons, this article was difficult to write, but I'd like to thank Ron Eyerman, Bernd Giesen and above all Jeffrey Alexander for their comradeship, and for allowing me to perform a Socratic function at the CCS on a weekly basis. I trust they will not confound friendly critique with friendly fire. I am indebted to Nadya Jaworsky for comments, suggestions, and corrections.

1. Jeffrey Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 402. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

2. With thirteen references in the index, Habermas is the most widely quoted author; in contrast, Talcott Parsons is mentioned four times and Woody Allen, five times. The seeds of this counter-project were planted in Alexander's (1993) review of Cohen and Arato's (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory*.

3. Seyla Benhabib, (1986): *Critique, Norm and Utopia. A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

4. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982–1983).

5. For a reconstruction of Alexander's intellectual career, see my introduction to the French translation of Alexander's trenchant critique of Bourdieu in Frederic Vandenberghe, “Introduction à la logique théorique de Jeffrey C. Alexander,” in Jeffrey Alexander, *La réduction. Critique de Bourdieu*. Paris: Cerf, 2000), 9–18; cf. Alexander “The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu,” in *Fin de Siècle Social Theory*. (London: Verso, 1995), 128–217.

6. The research program is outlined in Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life: a Cultural Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003). For a largely favorable review of its main tenets, see the special issue of *Thesis 11 79* (2004): 1–86, esp. the contribution of Fuyuki Kurasawa. For a more pointed critique, see Georg McLennan “The ‘New American Cultural Sociology’: An Appraisal,” *Theory Culture Society* 22 (2005) :1–18; and Alexander's subsequent reply in the same issue.

7. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), 12. Meanwhile, Parsons's ultimate manuscript on the American societal community has been posthumously published in the Cultural Sociology Series at Paradigm Press (2007). Alexander acknowledges the strong influence of Parsons's approach to civil society in the last chapter of his farewell to neo-functionalism; see his “After Neofunctionalism: Action, Culture, and Civil Society”, in *Neofunctionalism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 221–228; for a brilliant dialectical critique of the concept of societal community that brings conflict

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2 and exclusion into structural functionalism, see Alexander, "Contradictions in the Societal Community:
3 The Promise and Disappointment of Parsons's Concept," in Fox, Lidz, and Bershady eds. *After Parsons. A*
4 *Theory of Social Action for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 93–110.

5 8. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 106–116.

6 9. I borrow the expression "sphere of spheres" from Ricoeur's review of Boltanski and Thévenot's
7 pluralist model of spheres, or cites; see Paul Ricoeur, 'La pluralité des instances de justice,' in *Le juste*.
8 (Paris: Editions Esprit, 1995), 121–142.

9 10. "We hold that the boundary between any pair of action systems involves a 'zone' of structured
10 components or patterns which must be treated theoretically as *common to both* systems." Parsons, *The*
11 *System of Modern Societies*, 6 (Parsons's emphasis).

12 11. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The Holocaust from Mass Murder
13 to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (1992): 5–86.

14 12. Luhmann *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), Vol. II: 851.

15 13. Chantal Mouffe "Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy," in Mouffe ed., *The*
16 *Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999), 38–53.

17 14. In the wake of "performance studies," Alexander has presented his own dramaturgical model
18 of "cultural pragmatics" in the lengthy and programmatic essay "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance
19 Between Ritual and Strategy" first published in *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004): 527–573. The main concepts
20 of that essay (fusion, background meanings, props, etc.) are, however, not applied in the book under review.

21 15. For a strong critique of the mimetism that marks the epidictic genre (shaming and praising), see
22 Pierre André Taguieff, *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Paris: La Découverte, 1988).

23 16. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 42.

24 17. (Alexander, "The Reality of Reduction," 152–157.

25 18. see, Alain Touraine, *La voix et le regard. Sociologie des mouvements sociaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1978),
26 103–133.

27 19. In the uropean tradition, cultural studies has nothing to do with postmodern pulp fiction, but
28 refers essentially to a neo-Gramscian approach of the superstructure. In the next paragraphs I argue with
29 Stuart Hall, Laclau & Mouffe against Alexander, but I could have made similar arguments with Foucault
30 and Bourdieu.

31 20. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Demo-*
32 *cratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

33 21. Parsons, "Full Citizenship for the Negro American? A Sociological Problem" in Parsons and
34 Clark eds., *The Negro American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 709–755.

35 22. For the his constructivist theory of cultural trauma, see Alexander, "Towards a Theory of Cultural
36 Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* ed. 1–30 in Alexander, et al (Berkeley: University of
37 California Press, 2004), 1–30.

38 23. Parsons, "Full Citizenship for the Negro American?"

39 24. Alexander has also intervned in the field of Holocaust Studies with a major analysis of the shifting
40 representations of the Holocaust – from a heinous atrocity to a crime against humanity that epitomizes radical
41 evil in "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals." The article has not been inserted in the book, but
42 will be republished in a forthcoming volume, *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*, with contributions by
43 Martin Jay, Nathan Glazer, David Hollinger, Michael Rothberg, and Bernhard Giesen.

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