

Brief Introduction to Jeffrey Alexander

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Translation by Frank Hanson

It is more than simply making a conventional statement to say that Jeffrey Alexander needs no introduction. His articles about “The centrality of the classics” (1999) and “The new theoretical movement” (1988), as well as the four volumes of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-3), provide an indispensable reference-point for the Brazilian reader, in courses on social theory and more general discussions on the history of sociology and its built-in dilemmas. Although recognized as one of the leading figures in contemporary sociology, for a number of reasons, our attention remains on the works he produced in the 1980s. As a result, we are losing sight of his most recent works which have not only redefined his own theoretical agenda and empirical investigations but have also raised a series of challenging questions about the current scene, both in analytical and normative terms.

We had an opportunity to discuss some of these issues with Prof. Alexander on 22nd November last year, when he made a trip to Rio de Janeiro. Far from seeking (in this very brief introduction) to provide a detailed representation of the most significant areas of his work since the beginning of this century, when Alexander called for a “strong program” in cultural sociology, our aim here is only to make the reader aware of the main problems he has been confronting in the last ten to fifteen years.

Even though the “strong program” in cultural sociology marks a break with the neofunctionalist “investments”, which characterized the previous phase of Alexander’s work, it also acts as a sharp criticism of all kinds of theoretical “investment” that are inclined to conceive culture as a “dependent variable”, (to employ the term coined by the adherents of Positivism). Thus it would be wrong to state that this rupture had simply sprung from the mind of the author like a bolt from the blue. The different stages that characterized the forming of the “strong program” involved shifting positions that were pervaded by a degree of conceptual uncertainty, until the notion of the “relative autonomy of culture” came to be shaped more clearly and decisively and took on certain irreversible features that characterize the way a program is formed.

It is possible to find an echo of these shifting positions in the words of Alexander himself, when he commented on this period of transition (in an interview granted to Carballo et al and entirely devoted to the issue of cultural sociology):

“In 1993 I went to Paris for the academic year where I visited Alain Touraine’s group. That year I decided that I could not continue working simultaneously on neofunctionalism and the cultural program. [...] I realized the time had come to publicly develop my misgivings in a coherent manner. I did this in the book *Neofunctionalism and After*, (1998), where I put together my neofunctionalism essays and wrote an introduction and conclusion which explained my reasons for not working to develop that program anymore. One of the reasons was the *cultural* [...]” (In: CARBALLO et al, published in the *European Journal of Social Theory* [vol.11, num. 4, 2008, pp 523, my italics).

Thus for a better understanding of this “cultural turn” (which forms the origins of the “strong program”), within the limited scope of this brief introduction, an attempt has been made here (by way of a short digression) to examine the concept of culture as outlined by Jeffrey Alexander, especially after his rupture with neofunctionalism. This means that if in one way or another, sociology traditionally tended to deal with phenomena which, for better or worse, could be described as cultural, it as a result of the singularity of this “cultural” approach that the “strong program” unlocks its potential in this apparently shaky ground. For this reason, in the view of Alexander, turning to the cultural (or even culture itself) does not mean seeking a phenomenal dimension in order to report it to something exterior, which would then have the prerogative to explain how culture itself functions.

Rather than look for the explanatory principles of culture in a dimension outside culture itself, the author suggests that “the cultural” should be treated as structured sets of meaning that can be adapted to the emotional and significant horizon where it materializes in concrete action. In other words, it entails an affirmation and recognition of the relative autonomy of culture in the face of other dimensions such as structure, class, power etc.

However, in this first axiom – that is, the relative autonomy of culture – the “strong program in cultural sociology”, leads on to two further postulates. Thus if “the idea of cultural sociology revolves around a perception that culture operates as an independent variable that can be adapted to action and institutions” [*Note – replace my translation with Alexander’s exact words](ALEXANDER, 2003, p.12) before this perception can be put into effect in a program, it has been found that two ancillary or operational procedures are needed.

The first of these involves replacing the superficial descriptions that reduce the cultural analysis to a collation of often abstract data, such as values, ideologies or fetishism. Instead, Alexander proposes hermeneutic reconstruction of social writings that is carried out in a meaningful and persuasive way. The “strong program” stresses the need for a “thick” description of the kind associated with the American anthropologist Geertz, with codes, narratives and symbols that constitute webs of significance.

The second postulate reveals the commitment of the “strong program” to empirical research and raises the whole question of criticizing the concept of causality which operates within the programs that are based on abstract logical system (such as structuralism, for example). Even if it is argued that, while partly constraining action, culture at the same time makes it possible by allowing its structure to be reproduced and transformed, at no time does the “strong program” yield to the temptation to reify culture in terms of a system endowed with an abstract rationale. Before this, “it tries to anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens” (ALEXANDER, 2003).

Hence this is the cornerstone that supports the “strong program in cultural sociology”. The general theory surrounding the relative autonomy of culture is expressed by the author with two other postulates – that is, the postulate of “thick” description and the postulate of being “anchored to causality in proximate actors and agencies”. This underlies the program but one or two words need to be said with regard to the relationship between culture and structure within the “strong program”. Although Alexander refuses to accept that the social structure determines the way culture functions, this does not mean that the stress on significance has completely distracted the analyst from issues arising from wider contexts. In the end, “these contexts are treated, [within the strong program] however, not as forces unto themselves that ultimately determine the content

and significance of cultural texts; rather they are seen as institutions and processes that refract cultural texts in a meaningful way. They are arenas in which cultural forces combine or clash with material conditions and rational interests to produce particular outcomes.” (ALEXANDER, 2003, p. 26, tradução minha)

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This way of dealing with social phenomena — so that ultimately cultural sociology is more a kind of approach than a particular issue — is reflected in the most recent works of the author. Hence, the theory of trauma, outlined in *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), is nothing other than an approach to the problem of collective trauma that sets out from the theoretical and conceptual “arsenal” supplied by cultural sociology. What interests Alexander is not strictly the traumatic event experienced by an individual, which has been fully explored by psychoanalysis, so much as the recent studies of the Theory of Recognition. What seems to represent the focal point of Jeffrey Alexander’s analysis lies strictly in the way trauma is formed collectively, especially as a symbolic construction. Alexander rejects materialistic and pragmatic approaches (though without disregarding the material and pragmatic dimension of trauma) and seeks to explore the ways in which these material forces, as well as the strategic calculations they entail, “are crucially mediated by symbolic representations of social suffering”. In this way, rather than a realistic approach to traumatic experience, what interests Alexander is strictly the cultural and collective construction of the trauma. Thus by relegating the dimension of individual suffering caused by trauma to the domain of ethics and psychology, Alexander is able to concentrate on understanding the mechanisms through which a group expresses its suffering as a trauma. In this way, the analysis is detached from the principles of the “practical relation-to-self” and the features of certain psychoanalytical approaches and is concerned with rituals, discourses, plays, films and so on, which can serve as symbolic constructions that are suited to turning individual suffering into a collective trauma.

Although the cultural turn of Alexander put the relationship between culture and social structure on a new footing, its other theoretical “turnaround” made it possible to think again about the place of symbolic action. I am referring to his studies on the notion of performance, which were first organized in a systematic way in the article “Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy”, published in *Social performance: symbolic action, cultural pragmatics and ritual* (2006). In this work, Alexander attempts to carry out an analysis of the kind of performance that is appropriate for a modern social order which is characterized by considerable social complexity and contingency in action. The challenge that he faces is to break away from the usual studies on performance which lay emphasis on the ritualized activities of simple societies and to set out a theory that allows a greater space for contingency between the collective representations, staged plays, actors, *mise-en-scène* and audiences involved in performances. Instead of the relative “fusion” of these different elements of symbolic performance that are familiar to people in societies based on ritualized activities, Alexander points out that with advances made in social differentiation, there will be an increasing need for further mediations to ensure performative success, which means it is becoming more unlikely.

For this reason, the central features of the cultural structures have not wiped out the creative and unstable character of social life — quite the contrary. The power of the cultural codes will to a great extent, rely on the ways that they are “performed” by the actors, who may, or may not, be able to successfully grip the attention and feelings of the audience. This separation between actors and audiences (that is, between those who act and those who watch the play) expresses the conflicting perspectives and interests that are inherent in complex societies. The audience which may be sceptical or remote from

the actors (whether because they have a different life-style or for reasons of ethnic or regional divisions or even on account of relationships of exploitation and domination) have the opportunity to criticize each aspect of the performance.

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Nonetheless, the fact that performances in the modern world are unlikely to be successful, does not mean that this is impossible. Moreover, the focal point of Alexander's empirical analysis is to examine *ritual-like* situations, in which the actors manage to project their social dramas to a wide range of audiences with a relative degree of success. The author's attention has been drawn to social movements, electoral campaigns and the deployment of troops in war (ALEXANDER, 2000, 2006, 2010 e 2014), not only because they involve powerful material interests but also because they need a considerable amount of sociodramatic work without which they could not persuade their audiences of the "authenticity" and "verisimilitude" of their cultural narratives. By staging scripts that concern the narratives of salvation in the civil sphere – we, the "citizens", against the "enemies" of democracy and freedom, (a common plot in the anti-terror wars for example) (Idem, 2011) –, the actors can be successful, hold the attention and control the feelings of the audience, energize social life and open up a space for change.

Hence what is new in the political sociology that Alexander has built following his cultural turn and introduction of the notion of performance, is that he takes very seriously the empowerment of the audience (or as more usually expressed in social and political theories – "citizenship"). Even the most powerful social actors are constantly being challenged to exert their power and "perform". However, this can never be guaranteed in itself – it is impossible to predict precisely how audiences will react. They might identify with the actors, react violently against them or simply ignore the narrative being staged. In addition, in complex societies, "rejection" will be able to last indefinitely or be applicable to a range of audiences, given the plurality of the different views of the world and social interests. In the opinion of Alexander, the existence of a counter-performances and putative audiences is an incontrovertible fact of modern social life which instils into it a powerful instability, contingency and dynamism. In this scenario, the critic of performances is omnipresent and represents a considerable force for the democratization of social relationships, in all realms and social spheres including the groups in power (Idem, 2011).

Finally, we should not fail to mention that the sociology of Alexander has also been of crucial importance in including the notion of a civil sphere in the theoretical agenda of sociology. Civil sphere is characterized by horizontal ties of solidarity and endowed with its own institutional and cultural resources. The way that the author conceives the relationship of the civil sphere with other social spheres – economic, political, religious, etc. – opens up a critical dialogue with other important theoretical constructions in sociology. On the one hand, instead of emphasising the differentiation of spheres in the modern world, each with its own rationale, (as is the case with authors as disparate as Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann) – Alexander's interest is concentrated on the relations that are always tense and contingent between these spheres and the universalist and democratizing character of the civil sphere (Idem, 1995). On the other hand, the kind of universalization made possible by the civil sphere cannot be seen in terms of an abstract rationality, such as the neo-Kantian formulations of Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls (Idem, 2006). Its force results from deep cultural structures where the symbolic organization in terms of a binary opposition between "citizen" and "enemy" can lead to both the inclusion of new groups in civil solidarity and the legitimacy of their exclusion. In other terms, the civil code can only exist in the light of its counter-

code (Idem, 2003), so that inclusion and exclusion are closely intertwined. The symbolic definition of the “citizen” presupposes the simultaneous construction of the “enemy”, that is of the groups that put the sacred values of the civil sphere at risk – and thus a fully inclusive solidarity is not possible. As a result, the risks to democracy do not only arise from the “colonization” of the “civil sphere” through the systemic logic of the non-civil spheres of the market and politics but there may also be the reverse possibility: the “colonization” of economic practices or forms of political domination through the binarism of the “citizen” and “enemy”, which constitutes the civil discourse. The relations between the civil and non-civil spheres can thus not be inferred beforehand but only investigated in detail in the particular course of history.

In this way, Alexander also has an “inside-out view” of the societal community concept of Talcott Parsons, a central theoretical resource for his formulation of the civil sphere. Instead of an evolutionary teleology – and the accompanying expectations of a full civil inclusion and harmonious relationship between solidarity, authority and the market –, Alexander rightly explores the tensions and contradictions between different spheres of modern society from a critical perspective (Idem, 2013). In his analytical scheme, these relations can be either destructive or offer support or even offer civil repair and make an advance in the spiral of “universalization”. There will no longer be a univocal meaning in the changes of modern society that is equally capable of releasing a huge amount of emancipatory energy and unleashing more terrible forms of oppression (Idem, 2006).

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