

## Interview with Jeffrey Alexander

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**Cristina Buarque**

So in the first place, thank you so much for receiving us today. It is an honor to have the opportunity to interview you.

**Jeffrey Alexander**

It is my privilege.

**Alexandre Werneck**

The first question I'd like to ask has to do with the huge cliché: the "classical" dichotomy between empiricism and theory. On the one side, we've been watching an already high and intensely growing level of "specialization" of the Social Sciences — one can see that just by looking at the ISA convention workgroups. Despite of that, sociologists such as you or Hans Joas (and our friend Frédéric [Vandenberghe]) have been undertaking a true crusade in defense of theory — yours and Joas' "20 lectures" books are good examples of that crusade. Let us repeat one more time the importance of speaking of "theory" today? Is there a way to escape from that dichotomy?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

There are different ways of doing theory, of course. Well, the short answer is that there is no way to escape from that dichotomy in the sense that it is inscribed in the common sense of the Social Sciences, which see themselves as split between theory and empiricism. In fact, of course, analytically speaking, everybody does theory and I suppose everybody does empirical. It's kind of a continuum with philosophical presuppositions on one side and the factual world of sense on the other side. Everything is stretched between that and touches in a way it looks both ways at the same time. Empiricism, even the most positivistic or quantitative or the most ethnographic, still is informed by theoretical ideas. They are just not reflexive about that. And most theorists are always reaching out and making observations and giving evidence for the abstract thoughts with observations from everyday lives or from politics. So, that's one way to answer that question. On the other hand, another way is that sociologists at least and most people become sociologists because they are problem-oriented, they're concerned with poverty, inequality, gender, corruption, and so they become empiricists partly because they are so well motivated, they want to help society, they want to directly study the problem and find solutions to these problems, so they feel that they can... they just want to get to the problem and find out what's really the problem and solve the problem or explain why it has come into being. So they feel that theory gets on the way of that, that it's a diversion from pragmatic, practical, often political and real interests and in some ways theory is not directly problem-oriented, it doesn't immediately solve problems. Theory is the way of thinking about thinking problems. But then there's different kinds of theories, there's a meta-theory which is theory about theory, which I've often..., I did earlier in my own life,

in the four volumes and in a book called 20 Lectures in the late eighties and then maybe, for the last time, was a critique of Bourdieu I wrote called... that was published in French, in the 1990s, called *La Reduction*.

381

So there's a meta, there's meta-theory, which is a theory about theories, or theory about theory, and that's really important I think, but it is quite far removed from empirical reality, from addressing empirical problems. But, meta-theory is extremely significant because it condenses into a few general elements, all sorts of conversation that people have and it's a way of talking about reality but in abstractions and in ways that you have to already have read the theories that the meta-theory is talking about. So if I wrote a book critiquing Bourdieu, you already needed Bourdieu, it would help if you knew some of what I had written before, but then that can be a conversation about, an indirect conversation about what is a social class, what is social action, and what is the self. But instead of studying social classes, the self or action, we're talking about Bourdieu. But I myself have moved away from meta-theory towards what I might call positive theory or maybe theory about society or maybe it may be called middle level theory, Robert Merton, about what was once a very well-known essay "On [Sociological] Theory of the Middle Range". Or you could say models in a way, general models... and I've been interested more in creating theories of things in society that then can be used for research and more on the level of... in a way like Bourdieu did. He did meta-theory, but he was also interested in writing about real things.

### **Alexandre Werneck**

Despite the fact that morality has always been present in the main classical sociological models, a sociology of morality was never as clear as a field of our science as until very recently. In the last years we watched not only the emergence of very successful morality-based approaches – such as Boltanski and Thévenot's "économies de la grandeur" or Axel Honneth's "struggle for recognition" models – but also the emergence of new empirical problems (such as human rights, humanitarian issues, care etc), demanding of us good analytical answers. And your work has been very successful in undertaking a sociology or morality as well. In your opinion, what justifies the consolidation of morality as a "field" today and what is the balance between the normative and the "comprehensive" (in the Weberian sense) approach?

### **Jeffrey Alexander**

Well, I don't think of what I am doing as the Sociology of Morality, but as Cultural Sociology. And I don't think of it as moral sociology although I like, I certainly think what Fred [Frédéric Vandenberghe] is doing... I think there is a new field of morality emerging in Sociology in the US too. And it is a way of understanding Boltanski and Thevenot as a Sociology of Morality... and Honneth. Well, Honneth is not a sociologist, he's a philosopher. So I mean it's a different way. I am interested in meanings of things, in culture, morality is part of the world of meaning and culture, but it's not the only element of it. Ok. I think sociology is driven by moral and political concerns, it always has been. I mean there's never been a time when moral issues haven't been at the center of Sociology. American sociology was born from social problems in the 1890s through the 1930s, I think the main thing is – to answer your question positively – morality is always a dimension of Sociology, moral commitments are always an element of every sociological work, you can call them ideological commitments if you want. Or political convictions. Therefore, Sociology can't think of itself as a natural science. This is, I think, what Fred [Frédéric Vandenbergue] and others who talk about Sociology as a moral science are getting at. That [Sociology as natural science] it's a bad

idea, its misleading, it's a form of false consciousness for sociologists to think of themselves as natural scientists of society. At the same time, I think we have to be careful because we're still trying to find objective truth, about moral things, even though we know that we can't be objective in the way that a natural scientist is and I don't know... in Brazil, in Portuguese would you say a natural scientist?

382

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

Yes, we do.

**Jeffrey Alexander**

We don't want to be objective in that way but we need to... we want to be fair, balanced, we don't want to impose our morality on the things we are studying, we want to find out what their morality is. That doesn't mean we can refrain from judging their morality in terms of ours, we need to do that and it's inevitable. But we have to have a distance from our subjects, and we have to be as reflexive as we can be about our own moral commitments, so that we can temporarily try to take the role of the third party, I would say. I have to be able to separate myself from myself and from the people I am studying in a way to be hermeneutical enough to arrive at an understanding. So... I don't think I've answered your question, but I am sure I have said enough.

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

In the book *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*, you develop a meta-historical analysis of the de-fusion of the elements of performance as social complexity increases. Fusion, or better, re-fusion of these elements, although not impossible, is much more difficult in modern conditions. Fragmented audiences, conflicting interpretations of sacred texts, destructive intrusions of social power, bad acting skills of the performers, all these factors turn performance success an improbability, or performance failure a very common situation in modern society. Can you see here some parallels with Luhmann's arguments of the improbability of communication, for example, his notion that this improbability is even greater with the emergence of writing, of printing press, of functional differentiation? On the other hand – and this is a very interesting point – “the failure of performance is not a failure of social process or even a failure of socialization. Performance failure is entirely social, but agents see the ‘artificial’ construction, the naked aspects of power, and so forth”.

Could you comment on some of these aspects, or on my reading of your own work?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Is there a question in there? So tell me what you are really interested in. What do you want me to respond to aside from Luhmann? I mean I would answer your question “yes” about Luhmann, but I am personally not... I don't know that much about Luhmann, so, you know, I understand vaguely, I understand social differentiation and distance, social complexity. I mean, my theory of performance is, I suppose, an effort to find a way of connecting the utter artificiality of Luhmann and other complexity thinkers with a more hopeful possibility of communication and solidarity of the Durkheimian tradition or even symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. So what I've tried to do is stretch the Durkheimian of ritual and solidarity and communication towards complexity. What I wanted to, meaning that... that understanding remains very possible and that being

thought of as an authentic person, a sincere actor, as individuals or as groups still remains fundamental. And... if a communication or a symbolic action is successful, then it can bridge the gap between a speaker and an audience and come to create a community of mutual understanding, but then, as you say — because your summary of what I say — [laughter] it's more difficult, but then, to me, that's what society is all about. Modern social life is about continuous performances by various actors and it's kind of like an accordion that goes back and forth, back and forth, with partially successful, often unsuccessful, in a sense simultaneously, for example, what's really fascinating is you have a speaker who connects with some part of an audience while alienating other parts of the audience, and then other speaker's come and move, to try to take advantage of that, try to connect with that part of the audience, then the audience becomes very accepting and becomes an actor. I wanted to modernize, let's say, the Durkheimian tradition by acknowledging, by laying out the social and cultural factors that make rituals much less likely to happen and to do it by using theater theory. The way I see Sociology is mostly of what we need to do is use theories from the humanities, from the arts, theater and the interpretation of novels, we have to bring that theory into the traditional front of Sociology, which is power, stratification etc, etc and so in this part of my work I've used a lot of theater theory and I think that works.

383

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

And in your text about avant-garde theater and social performance you have mentioned a Brazilian author, Augusto Boal. How do you connect this Brazilian contribution to performance studies?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

I think he felt there was a possibility of theater and that... I think I compared him with the Brechtian... I think he has something in common with Brecht but he is quite different because Brecht's radicalism was an attempt to create an estrangement with the audience to make the audience not connect with the actors, so that they would be able to reflect on the ideology of bourgeois society as it was manifested in the drama that Brecht wrote, whereas there's another tradition of radical theater which is quite exactly the opposite, which is to break through the fourth wall of theater and in a way energize the audience and empower them and I would say that's what your radical playwright is doing and to me this is really where sociologists can learn from dramatists because a social movement, a political party or any leader or any group trying to make a social change in a way is trying to write a play, a play that is very successful that can charge an audience with conviction, passion and help them see the future, so I think that... what I've tried to point out in my work is that avant-garde theater has tended to have a kind of sociological mission I would say... and that is very similar to what Durkheim was trying to say in the *Elementary Forms* which is the role of symbols, the role of effervescence and how it can create solidarity through rituals.

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

Another question about performance. It's very interesting because in your discussion with theater authors you really incorporate these discussions in sociological theorizing. For instance, other sociologists, like Charles Tilly, that also used the notion of social performance, I think he uses it much more as a metaphor than as a field of exploration for theoretical efforts. So can you comment on how the notion of performance contributes and operates in Sociology?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

384

I think that a lot of people use performance simply as another word for action and they don't put into the dramaturgical tradition in any way... in a way, even the performativity theory in the actor-network theory, there's a economic branch of that, which also doesn't have any relation to dramatic theorizing, it's simply a way of doing kind of the practice of... it's an ethnomethodological argument that they use... the only person who has who did use it was Erving Goffman and he was a very important thinker. His books starting in the mid-50s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he used a number of things from theater, and he went back to Kenneth Burke, who was actually a drama critic, participated in drama and so... the problem more broadly is that in every day life in our societies and in Sociology, when we use the term performance it is usually a critical way of saying that someday is insincere — you say "that was just a performance" as if to say that wasn't real. So performance has become a form of saying somebody... it's an attribution insincerity I would say.

I'm trying to... which is also a problem for Goffman, while he uses drama theory to some degree, he sees social actors as deeply cynical and strategic. People are strategic but not necessarily cynical. So I am trying to push against that and to argue that we really, we can learn a lot about society by thinking about theater and we can even devote a new conceptual vocabulary by drawing elements from theater into social theory and also by seeing the differences and that the development of theater corresponds to the development of society. Theater only comes about at certain times in history, that's at the same time when social theory and public life emerge. They are quite interwoven I think.

**Marcelo de Oliveira**

I would like to ask a question on the subject of domination inside the strong program of cultural sociology. In a text that you co-written with Philip Smith, "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology," you criticize both the position of Pierre Bourdieu as those of Birmingham School for remaining in the interior of a weak program, doing much more sociology of culture than cultural sociology. According to the criticism formulated by you, the common point between these two positions would be, in addition to treating culture as a dependent variable, the link established by them between cultural formations and social structure.

However, wouldn't it be exactly this link that enabled the sociological theory to reflect on the culture based on the problem of power and domination — either through theories of hegemony or the theories of symbolic power? Otherwise, how is it possible to develop a theory that is sensitive to the problem of domination based on the relative autonomy of culture, that is, working within the strong program of cultural sociology?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

I think the problem is that Bourdieu and the Frankfurt School understand dominant power as controlling culture and so... let's say there are three positions. The first one is a simple theory of domination, without culture. That might be Marx's — and not Marxist — theory. He writes nothing about culture, only a few lines here and there. Or even in Weber's *Economy and Society* there's nothing about meaning. But then when you move to Marxism and Neo-Marxism, such as the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School or Bourdieu, or even Foucault, who is certainly not in that tradition but in a way the master of power, you have a different position, which is an acknowledgment of the centrality of culture in domination in that they see that pure domination, it doesn't interest them. So they have made a big move beyond traditional conflict theory, materialism or orthodox Marxism to

thinking about that. So the first thing I'd say is that Bourdieu and the Birmingham School, Frankfurt School are all of them products of the cultural turn of the twentieth century. They follow from structuralism in Linguistics, from Saussure, the semiotic revolution and from Roland Barthes, and the various influences from Wittgenstein, in a sense they are relying on powerful innovations of cultural theory I would say. But the way that they have sociologized that is by claiming that people who have the most resources use culture in a strategic manner – that they make culture work for them and they impose a lead culture on people who don't have power. So its done in a complex manner in Bourdieu, in results from education the way that people are socialized at home, the way that schools relate culture to class, but the main thing is that people who are in the elites monopolize cultural sensibilities and in this sense deprive people in the bottom from those abilities, or for in the Frankfurt school there's a culture industry that is controlled by capitalism. So the question really is, is that the way culture works? Can culture really be controlled by elites? I don't think so. That would be my answer. I think that elites try to control culture and sometimes they try to make culture work to legitimate what they do, because power needs to be legitimate power to gain submission, to make submission easy. That's Max Weber's great insight. That legitimate power, that power that is seen as legitimate is much more effective than bare power, let's say, brutal power, violence. On the other hand, I believe that meanings are relatively autonomous from social structure and therefore from power itself. Culture is kind of like the dark matter of the universe. You know this new theory in physics that says that there is unseen dark matter that accounts for 99% of all the physical pat of the world, but that we don't see it. So I feel that the meanings of social life are all around us, they are invisible, but are significant. And social action is an effort to crystallize some of those meanings in an explicit form through speech, through writing, through performativity. So power does that too, power will develop an ideology and... "this is how we do things here", "this is what it means to be an American, or Brazilian", or a good citizen, a neo-liberal, or whatever. But then the question is the narratives and the codes, even the principles of culture, are more general than any crystallization of them in time and space. This means that the pragmatic use of meaning can always be critiqued in terms of the more general principles from which it is derived. So I can always say to somebody "you aren't a real liberal", "you aren't a real socialist", "you aren't a real man", "you're not a real lover", "you're not a real Christian, not a good Christian", "you're not a good Muslin". So, in other words, there is always a remainder, nothing in time and space can measure up to the Platonic image or sort of iconic images of purity of culture. And I think this means for me that people who are subject to power and domination are always engaged in some form of criticism of it and have a strong sense of the precarious legitimacy of power. And I think that's always been true but it's more true in modern society because our culture is different, our principles are much different, there's much less sense of caste of the superiority of an aristocracy by birth. I'd say that in more traditional societies there are some principles that are more easy to be monopolized by groups, I would say. So, can there be a Sociology of domination? Yes, within a strong program, yes. My book *The Civil Sphere* is an effort to describe how power really operates in a modern society that has elements of democracy. It may not be a democratic society, but it has some relationship to democracy and what I wanted to show in that book is that power is continuously contested and domination is always forced to confront that the argument that it is not living up to the ideal of the civil sphere. So my image of modern society is very very different from Bourdieu's because he gives us this sense of a vertical society with very successful maintenance of power, and same of the Frankfurt, whereas my idea is that the society has, that there's a strong horizontal world of an implicit and

explicit civil sphere and that vertical power is in tension with the civil sphere, so this is very, this is a tremendous strain. Our societies are filled with conflict as vertical power is continuously challenged as a false performance. I think that power theories like Bourdieu and Frankfurt school don't really understand our society very well. They are more like, they are engaged in the contestation of power through their theories, and they want to make... what they don't see is how conflictual our societies are, how democratic they are, how filled with demands for justification, let's say, in Habermas's sense. So Brazil is filled with challenges to every form of power. It doesn't mean that they are successful, it doesn't mean there isn't power, but it means that there are constant challenges to things. We had patriarchal power, which has been challenged by feminism for 50- 60 years, it doesn't mean that women are equal to men but that is a continuous domain of life, there is the challenge to the racial caste system, there is challenge to the class system, challenges to political leaders, challenges to authority in professions. So a theory of domination is possible, I think, inside of a Culture Sociology, but it would look more like my civil sphere than it would look like Bourdieu. That's a long answer... but it's a big question.

386

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

In your analysis of civil rights movements in the United States you propose a dynamic approach of the performative aspects of social movements. Performance success being always contingent, gives room to unpredictable counterperformances, that may subvert the narration of the social drama created by these social movements. In this approach, the macro dimensions of social analysis are important, like structures of social inequality, the power of social institutions and so forth. But also some micro aspects are important, like, for instance, the presence of northern journalists in the civil rights movements in the deep south, the use of innovative practices like the sit-ins, the power of images, like the photos of the repression in Birmingham. How does the notion of performance connect with the civil sphere argument in this context of the social movements studies can work as a mediation of micro and macro aspects of social analysis?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

The focus on social movements itself is a way of mediating micro and macro, don't you think? Because... I think... and that's so lacking in theories of domination. I mean in Bourdieu's work you don't see social movements because social movements are evidence that power is being challenged and the whole field of social movements which has come about really not until the late 1960s is... a pretty interesting development in Sociology. So, of course, social movement theories are divided into philosophical camps according to different kinds of presuppositions and the theoretical issue I'm concerned with is whether meaning-making is central to social movements or if movements are primarily defined by their access to material resources. There has been a very strong tendency in social movement thinking in North America, but also in parts of Europe, which use movement theory that is not that widely talked about to think of social movements as kind of machines or simply organizations that are efforts to gather material resources and as they gather the resource, like money or membership, they then build an organization that then throws itself against authority in a material way, in a struggle for power. And that's a tradition I've argued that goes back to Marx in the sense of class struggle and an alternative is to think of movements as a contest over meanings, that movements are efforts to performativity or to convince others that you're right and somebody else is wrong. That means that you have to put legitimacy in the center of a theory of conflict and power,

because why would you bother to try to convince a public sphere that you are right and that the people in power are wrong if all that matters is domination anyway? So, because perhaps I was a political activist when I was young and I understood New Left Marxism and what is called Western Marxism and I was especially influenced by Gramsci who made a very strong critique of traditional Marxism by saying that the working class or the communist movement was a struggle for hegemony which was a struggle in the civil society, a struggle for authority and that a communist movement or a working-class movement in the West, not in Russia or China, what they had to do was first gain authority morally through a contest of ideas before they could gain state power and he argued you should never try to seize the state before you've won the struggle in the field of ideas. And my own experience as a political organizer was that it was very difficult, that we were always trying to engage in communicative action with the masses of people. So this is a long way of justifying my own approach by saying that if you have a civil sphere then you have the possibility of social movements. China today doesn't have a civil sphere in an open way so you can't have social movements — but you can still have communication on the web and various things like that. There's extremes, but to the degree you have some civil sphere and a sense of culture that is independent of the state, of the market and of religion, then you have the ability to... you have to in a way engage in symbolic action. So, I think we should think of movements not as struggles for power in the immediate sense, but as struggles for a position in the structure of meaning, whether it's feminism, anti-racism and even socialism. I think socialism in the nineteenth and twentieth century was a struggle for moral authority, a struggle to redeem the status of the worker to change the understanding of work, to expand a world of social actors to include people at different levels of society. In terms of performance, I think that social movements actually — those that are successful — have an intuitive understanding that they are theatrical. Sometimes that can be very self conscious and very reflexive. So the people who are in control of the movement are kind of like producers of films, or directors. The masses of the movement and the people may not understand that they are part of the production, but they are. Usually you need to be very aware of media and journalism and you have to think how will this be interpreted, how will this be televised, etc etc. And you try to play this out in terms of action, reaction, how do you think about this and that. My argument about the civil rights movement, which I studied in detail, is that they were very aware that in order to... their actions as performances. And one of the things that I said that was very controversial and drew some angry replies from some sociologists, of social movements, was that they wanted to be beaten, that one of the primary things that the civil rights movements wanted was to be attacked by the Southern whites and by the police and to be hurt, that this of course was the strategy that came from Gandhi and was called, I think it was called militant non-violence. So non-violence was not passive but very aggressive. And the reason that they wanted to be beaten is that they wanted to assume to have exposed the domination, dramaturgically, of the South, they wanted to expose the racial domination symbolically, in a way to write a play where the Southern police powers would be unwittingly exposing their own viciousness for the audience of Northerners and whites who are watching on television and they largely succeeded. So, what happened is the Northern white audience stopped liking or identifying with Southern whites and they started hating the Southern white police, the mayors and the governors. The whites identified with the blacks, not with the whites in the south, and Martin Luther King became a great hero for whites and he became the greatest American of the twentieth century, most people would agree. So, that was an extremely successful social movement and it relied on performativity.

**Marcelo de Oliveira**

388

I will shift to trauma. In your latest book you say that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to horrendous events that leave indelible marks upon their collective consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. For this cultural trauma to be repaired you state that it is necessary that this hostile experience is constituted as a shared trauma which can only be achieved through a collective process of cultural interpretation. Could you talk a little more about this gap that seems to exist between this feeling of being subject to a terrible event and the formulation of the same event while construction of a shared cultural trauma? Could you talk some more about the conditions for the kind of cultural interpretation that may well happen leading to a process of civil repair?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

The effort there was to... I'm trying to, in my trauma theory, get away from any naturalistic understanding of trauma, which also means any individualistic or psychological understanding. So, trauma has become an important concept that people write about historically, sociologically, they talk about trauma as a social fact, but they don't in a way that is sociological or cultural. They use psychoanalytic categories too... what I want to get at is that when trauma... bad bad things happen when people suffer, but they suffer as individuals. The question is how is this... can the things that make an individual suffer be reimagined in a collective and sociological way in such a manner that the groups who didn't experience the trauma... what I mean is that there are two levels... so there's the groups who experienced the trauma thinks itself as a group not just as individuals, certainly that's one level of social construction. And the broader level is: can people who aren't immediately affected feel connected to the people who are suffering and put themselves in their place and feel solidarity and then redress a broader grievance in the society? I am particularly interested in that second level, an expansion of the community of suffering. Because I think that's how social morality actually works. I think we can understand it sociologically. So, for example, in the example I was talking about with the civil rights movement, the critical thing was to have white people experience the suffering of black people in the south. The white people in the South who were benefitting from domination, they didn't identify with the victims at all because they felt they were subhuman and that the whites were superior because of racism and they had their own trauma, the whites – which is that they had lost the civil war in the 1860s and that the beautiful society that they had was gone. All groups in a way seem to have their own traumatic issues. But what the civil rights movements did was it enlarged the circle of suffering and eventually many many white people in the North felt that they were suffering from racism. They could understand the pain of black people in the south and they were hurt when those people were hurt. And that created... then they demanded that the laws of the United States had to be changed at that the Northern armies had to occupy the South again and force the South to change its social structure which is what happened in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a very complex cultural process, I would say, with whites narrating what happened in a certain way in the south with novels and movies and television shows and a whole generation of black poets and novelists and actors then became object of identification and became very popular. You had the emergence of... for the first time black music was played in white radio stations, so black music became very fashionable and things like that. So that is a trauma process. I think that the history of working class struggle is another kind of example of a trauma being... let's say when

working class people left the farm and became factory workers in the nineteenth century they had traumatic experiences because factories were terrible, you can document that, there are many factual things. But how would they come to feel that they were part of the working class, not just individuals who were striving for themselves. That was in a way a cultural trauma construction by middle class intellectuals and moral thinkers and ideologists and Marx always had this distinction of class in itself and class for itself and that in a sense referred to this reimagining of suffering from individual to collective. And that had to be part of a broader narrative of construction. So I think that the trauma process regarding the lower classes during the industrialization was a very dynamic process that took a hundred years, a hundred fifty years really, and is not complete. Well I've worked a lot on the Holocaust and I've argued that making the Holocaust not just a Jewish tragedy but a Western tragedy was essential to stop the anti-Semitism in the West... it was the process of identification. So I believe that all, I suppose this gets back to the earlier discussion about domination too because why would any of this be significant if the relation of culture to domination was very tight? It wouldn't really matter, but it does matter because there's a relative autonomy of culture, so that it's very fluid and dynamic and meanings can be and are being restructured all the time, not without relation to power but not determined by power and, as meanings are performed and renarrated, it gives groups, it can give groups, more power and can create social change. Rather than seeing power as always reproducing itself, I think it's actually continuously challenged and changed. We've lived through in the last fifty years the age of identity politics with gender, and race and sex. These are the forms of social suffering and division that have been the politics of the last fifty years, at least in western society, whereas the industrial class, economic related suffering was much more dominant for a hundred years before that. But trauma, yes, is a giant continuous social process, it's always going on. I think for example of global warming... one of the problems of global warming is that it hasn't been able to be traumatized properly. It's been difficult to write a narrative and to perform global warming. It's very slow and not that many people have died. There are not that many dramatic events, so people try to dramatize it, like if there's bad weather, a hurricane or a flood or some terrible event, people will say that's because of global warming. They will say the ocean... they will talk about polar bear, polar bears are dying, a polar bear is dying on a piece of ice afloat in the ocean. It's kind of a trauma story. But people don't identify that strongly with polar bears. It's not going to be very compelling. So a colleague of mine, Philip Smith just finished a book about exactly this, about global warming and the problem of dramatization.

389

**Cristina Buarque**

Does this dramatization have anything to do with the construction of public discourse, like in Boltanski's [work]?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Yes, I think so. Boltanski has made a very strong effort to put justification and discourse into the center of social conflicts and to move away from a Bourdieu, Weber or Marx verticality. So that there's fields, but they are fields of discourse, of justification, not just of power only. So I think we are talking about... we are involved in the same kind of theoretical effort, but they are... they are similar, but not as engaged in a dynamic model of social hermeneutics. They already know what the rules are in their domains before they start their analysis usually, although sometimes people in their traditions find new

domains, new forms of justification. But in Cultural Sociology, the way that I do it, we often go into things we don't understand and try to find out what's going on, what are the structures and narratives that exist. And also Boltanski's work tends to think of people in a Habermasian way I would say in that they offer arguments to each other, justification, there are rules and logics of compromise. My image is more dramaturgical, there's a lot of narrativity, performance and emotions that circulate and are quite explosive, dynamic, affective... therefore theater rather than discursive argumentation so there's differences in the way that we understand and that maybe have to do with those lines.

390

### **Cristina Buarque**

I still have another question on trauma. If I understand your argument correctly, the creation of a narrative of suffering which transforms individual and fragmented sufferings into collective sufferings depends on cultural interpretation processes. Along with interpretation, I may assume that suffering narratives imply degrees of positive and negative normativity. That is, suffering narratives may imply, on the one side, counter-normative assumptions of the kind "future must not repeat the past". And, on the other side, statements such as "future should be a time when humanity is recognized in every individual". How do you evaluate the role of human rights social discourse in the post-Holocaust representation of trauma?

### **Jeffrey Alexander**

I see human rights as... it is a trauma discourse, it is an argument for expansive identification and for the... it's an argument that we have a solidary relationship with all human beings and that we can't distance ourselves from the suffering of other people. It's a very dramatic and powerful discursive element which is always working to expand trauma. So in a way people use human rights discourse as a way of saying "look at the suffering that is happening here – look at this famine", using examples of brutality in different ways. I think that it goes back to World War II, it goes back to the Holocaust, it goes back to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which was written after the discoveries of the death camps and which were very dramatic, the beginning of the broadening of trauma, and also began with the struggles of colonialism, modern colonialism, and struggles against anti-Semitism, anti-racism. It became part of a broad trauma discourse in the post-war world. The problem is that human rights is thought of too discursively and too legally. It's not thought of performatively or sociologically. So people say this violates human rights but of course it doesn't because, otherwise, how could it happen? When people say this violates universal... the human rights of this tribe, or this class, or this nation it's more in the Austinian [John Austin, linguist and philosopher] sense of a performative utterance when you hope that by saying it you will make it true. Because, if people believe you, if they believe this thing that happens violates human rights, then they will identify with the victims and they will be themselves traumatized by their suffering, but usually people aren't. And human rights activists who are in a way carrier groups for trauma discourse, and try to create a trauma process. They try to do it, but often it is too legalistic in understanding, it's not just a discourse, it doesn't happen just through speaking and it certainly doesn't happen through legal mechanisms like the United Nations, but I think through dramaturgical constructions of great power. So human rights have to be part of a trauma process. They are a key resource for dramatizing it, but it is not often thought of, it's often thought of simply as a descriptive discourse. People say "I am describing what happened" but they are not, they are using the discourse to dramatize and it's a very effective discourse because it already assumes a wide

community. So we need to think of it sociologically in this way, as a dramatizing vehicle for creating a trauma process. So, let's say, all this publicity inside and outside India in the last two years about rapes, how giant it is. Now the activists say this is a violation of universal human rights, but of course in India, at least until recently, women weren't thought of as having universal human rights. So raping them wasn't a violation of human rights, it was... I don't know, part of patriarchal authority, it was sad, it had to do with the humiliating condition of being a woman, I don't know how it was understood, but I know it was not understood as violating someone who had universal human rights. I am looking at this process in India with a great deal of interest, sociologically, in terms of trauma theory because it's a very dramatic effort to re-conceptualize, re-symbolize a situation which has up to now been thought of in one way. I think it has succeeded to some degree, in a very dramatic manner.

391

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

So, finally, as you know, we are in the last weekend of a very intense electoral campaign in Brazil and in your work the lens of power, and more specifically presidential power, since the Watergate analysis to your last book, *Obama Power*, presidential power is a very important empirical issue for you. How can a sociologist explain a presidential campaign in another way that a typical political scientist would explain this process? How can we analyze in a sociological manner, a presidential campaign? This is a very interesting issue in your work and it is very exciting for us that you are experiencing the last week of a very intense campaign.

**Jeffrey Alexander**

I wish I could experience it, but I can't because I can't read Portuguese. This is too bad because I would love to be able to watch the debate. But I do — one of the reasons why I've written these books on Obama, of course, is because I've always been interested in politics, going back to the Watergate, its because politics is something where the argument about domination and instrumentalization of power is a great field to study that. One of the worst things that happened for... I mean to me its fairly ironic that Sociology... the founder of Political Sociology is Max Weber, who said that the modern power is legitimated in very thin thin ways, simply as rational and legal authority, that charisma and tradition are very minor things, that have to do with earlier forms of legitimation and that gives us basically nothing. We can't really understand the thickness of the cultural, the symbolic, the existential elements of moderns struggles for political power with the tools of the greatest political sociologist ever: Max Weber. It's interesting that sociologists... most of us are on the left. So our main interest in power is to demonize the right so it's hard for us to get outside of our own ideologies to understand how people, how conservative politicians could appeal to people. What most of political sociology is saying is that it is about fooling people, how can people fool other people to believe that things that aren't true? How can they use the money that they have to buy advertising? How do they like Hitler as character, a charismatic figure who fooled every body? But one of the most interesting thing about politics is that people almost always vote or act against their own material interests. One third of British working class workers have always voted for conservatives for the last two hundred years and in the United States many upper class voters vote for the left, as they probably do too here. So the first thing we need to get away from is a demographic, or material understanding of politics, at least as the only way of understanding it. Politics is an incredible domain of symbols and performativity. There is so much to peel back and to understand and it's... at the same time politics operates on a

very deep mythological level but it's subject to the most extraordinary instrumentalization at the same time. It's like an advertising campaign. Each party brings in the greatest experts they can in the manipulation of symbols, employing advertisers and product designers and artists and everything to make this person into a compelling symbol, yet often this is a failure, it doesn't work. You need a very talented actor, a politician who is immensely talented at projecting a character, a meaning, aware they are playing a role in a narrative, and then the opposition – intellectuals or newspapers – are always introducing facts that say he or she isn't the person they say they are, therefore you can't believe them – they're fake. So each side tries to prove the other isn't an authentic protagonist or hero, but is a fake hero and is trying to fool everybody, so each side is trying to deflate the performance of the other side, every hour, every day. And then the polls are always going on trying to judge how the citizens are reacting to all this. I call this the citizen audience because they're watching this play. And then of course there are blogs that circulate from outside of journalism that are making interpretations. In our last presidential campaign, during the debates, people were on social media through the whole debate. So that when the debate was done there was already a crystallized public opinion and interpretation. Before social media what happened is that there'd be a debate and then the journalists would watch, either in person or in a room with big screens and then what would happen was that the spin masters of each campaign – dozens and dozens of them – would go into the room and argue with them about the interpretation of the debate after it was done. They would say "this wasn't like this, it was like this". And then the journalist would say "I'm going to play it like this" and the [people from the campaign] would say "no you didn't understand" or come in say "oh, did you see how well he did?" Because how the media judges the performance and how blogs judge it is so significant, but, unlike an actual play, this process of interpretation lasts three or four days. It starts right in the middle of the performance then goes on, and, in your case, until the election on Sunday. So there's a real struggle over interpretation. And you do need material resources, they cost tremendous amounts of money, which is why I suppose only massive parties can really enter into the struggle very effectively. On the other hand, there's a great opportunity to raise money from effective performance rather than effective performance come from having money. In a way, is a great example, you can study the example of how his career, how his power as a political performer allowed him gradually to create a party, to amass material resources not for himself but for his performance and eventually come to a position of great power. So, somebody with no resources, but an incredible ability to articulate principles and tell stories, put himself as a hero rising up from nothing. Whenever you ask a Brazilian, they'll say "he came from nothing", "he started work when he was six, he had no education, but he's brilliant". He's a person who created a myth and put himself very effectively. And then the power of his story and his communicative ability in a way that created material power and eventually allowed him to control the State. I think we have to understand how can there be an opposition, how can an opposition come to power, how was it that labour parties could come to control State? Of course that didn't eliminate the class structure, it was still a bourgeoisie. And they have power of their own too.

392

**Cristina Buarque**

Do we still have time for another question?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Of course, as many as you like...

**Cristina Buarque**

393

Thank you. So, along with the so called third wave of democratization, in late seventies and early eighties, we could observe the emergence of the concept of truth in the vocabulary of politics. It seems to be a key-element in the building of social trauma narratives, mobilized not only by civil society agents, but also by official agents of the then new democracies. From that time on, truth policies have considerably spread out the world. It's most emblematic forms are truth commissions, international criminal courts and public apologies. They all imply the seek of truth and its public recognition. The background assumption is that knowledge of past prevents the repetition of evil.

I have two related questions considering this truth topic. The first one is: in your view, what role, if any, does truth potentially play in the post-Holocaust morality. The second question is: considering that your approach to the civil repair issue is not only analytical, but also intended to be normative, how do you evaluate truth policies? Can they be envisaged as cultural creators?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Yes. [full stop] [laughter] Because the thing is... one of the ideas I have, or the insights that I had in terms of what I call the discourse of civil society, which is at the heart of the civil sphere, the cultural part of the civil sphere, is that truth is a discourse, truth is a sacred value and it's also... and it goes back to the origins of modernity, the Greeks and is probably caught up in religion too, but it's a key thing. So truth versus falsehood is a binary, it's also part of a sense of authenticity in many social performances too. But truth isn't thought of as a discursive construction, it's thought of as a form of transparency that is more like a photographic truth, more like a microscopic truth or a scientific truth, objective truth. That makes it... but in society there is no photographic truth and there is very little ability for objective truth. In fact, societies operate more on... about the social construction of truthfulness. I never heard it as you've just described it "the emergence of truth" politics. What did you call it ...?

**Cristina Buarque**

Yes, exactly, I called it the emergence of truth politics. Would you agree with this description?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Yes, it's very interesting. I've never thought of that. The idea of truth and reconciliation, TRC is a giant phenomenon. It's a giant phenomenon that starts most of all with the apartheid in South Africa, although I think it occurred once before, there was one more before...

**Cristina Buarque**

Yes, the South African case is the most emblematic Truth Commission case, but there were a few ones before...

**Jeffrey Alexander**

Where were they?

**Cristina Buarque**

Mostly in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

**Jeffrey Alexander**

394

A student of mine wrote a book about South African TRCs, he's looking at it as a performative process, his name is Tony Goodman... These TRCs are giant stages, in my terms, giant performative stages that focus public attention and are meant to demarcate a new narrative. The idea is that they constitute a temporal break and say that is the old society, this is the beginning of a new society. We're telling a new story, the story of a birth, the birth of a new nation. The "New South Africa", for example, Bishop Tutu. Probably that's happened to some degree in South America and Latin America too in terms of TRCs, but of course here's more difficult because it's not as a complete a break because the militaries are still here with objective power, let's say, so I am not sure if the break is as... I think it's more challenging in societies like the South American ones, even more than in South Africa. There's so much of the old society... you know in Chile they couldn't arrest and put in jail a lot of the military who were in the Pinochet regime. They also couldn't make them say they were sorry, right? So, in some way, the confessional aspect of TRCs is contingent and variable. How much will the perpetrators say "I was the perpetrator and I was wrong and I am sorry!"? A lot of time they won't play, they won't agree to play that role. Anyway, what this process does is it creates a new kind of truth. The trauma that happened before the transition was justified ideologically by the idea that there were anarchists, radicals, terrorists, communists, so there's a whole discourse of order, law and authority which provided the ideological justification for persecuting and killing during dictatorships. I don't know how widely that was shared and it was mixed with brutal applications of power. In South Africa, obviously, apartheid was justified by very powerful sense of the inferiority and subhuman quality of blacks. So that was considered truthful. People who understood it in that way would have said that is the truth of the situation. These are radicals, we have to kill them because they're bad and they're going to destroy our society, they're hateful, filled with hate and so on. Then, through a very complex process, there's this transition and the truth and reconciliation commission establishes a different moral framework that is finding truth, but also establishing a new truth through a performance that will re-identify victims and perpetrators and give them a new way, a new path forward and lay out a much wider expansion of solidarity than existed before. It seems it's been quite successful in these South American countries, it's just taken much much longer and in a way not as dramatic as South Africa. Now it's fascinating that the TRC process is such a routinized formula and it's so... the idea that there are seats for transitional justice, that are set up in universities and administrations as formulas to help people create TRCs, it's a fascinating and still it is very much there available so. I think even in the Hong Kong protest people were saying "will you establish commission to investigate?". But it can't be, won't be a real TRC because the communist party is in control of everything.

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

I have a complementary question because in Civil Sphere the communicative institutions of the civil sphere are not only a factual but also fictional medium, and Cristina talked about the politics of truth, but fiction and media in your argument are also crucial to expandsolidarity and expand in some sense democratic feelings. How do you see the power of art in this democratic struggle and process, on the one hand, and, on the other, is there a specific sphere of artistic practice and how is the relationship between this artistic sphere and the civil sphere?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

395

Well, each sphere has its own modes of justification; these spheres are different and each sphere has its own truthfulness. So aesthetic truth is not the same as factual truth, but it still has the ring of authenticity, so people will say “this was a very truthful portrait” or this “this story rings of truth”. Or they’ll say that an artist, even something completely abstract or a piece of music or a work, a fiction... its aesthetic power is somehow related to an esthetic truth which isn’t a factual truth or even a moral truth, it has some kind of power to it. But there’s an overlap between the civil sphere and the aesthetic sphere where some works of aesthetics are concerned with the relation among groups in a society, with representation of social conflict, with inequality, with gender relations. They all have implications, but some are more directly involved in that so in that sense they are both works of the aesthetics sphere and they play a role in the communicative institutions of the civil sphere so I think television is a very important way of aesthetically presenting civil realities and changing one. Because television is very superficial and I think that is very good, it’s very trashy and there’s stuff going on all the time. Like soap operas during the day and things at night. Things for TV are written very rapidly and shows go off the air all the time, so, in a way, it’s society reflecting on itself continuously and in an ever changing way. I think TV is the closest artistic recreation or mirroring of what goes on in a fictional way. The media is more about purporting to present facts but is really narrating them in relationship to, I believe, the codes of the civil sphere. So it’s not telling the truth in a scientific way, it’s talking about the moral truth that journalism is an engine of moral evaluations of information. But television, movies, novels and then social media are often aesthetic recreations.

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

So, in this way, we can transcend the pessimistic vision of Adorno, for example about the culture industry because its not only concerned with oppression, but also there’s a possibility of civil repair in this kind of...

**Jeffrey Alexander**

The thing about Adorno and the culture industry to me is a terrible idea. It is superficially correct because it is an industry but there’s this kind of hypodermic needle idea that the group at the top controls culture and then [injection sound] puts it into the minds of people. But I guess what it ignores... it ignores the relative autonomy of culture but what industries do is that they seize on culture as it is changing, they try to... they commodify culture. But the only way to succeed in commodifying culture is to have it speak to current issues, so it will be sexist one day and feminist another, it could be racist or anti-racist, it could be pro-colonial, anti-colonial, militaristic, anti-militaristic. I don’t think that... they need to make money, I agree. But how do they make money? By telling stories. By having talented writers find ways of narrating life as the way it is today or how people hope it would become, so that people can feel inspired, feel truthful about things that they experience and that will make them money. That’s a more hopeful idea than the hypodermic needle for sure. The thing is that there’s a hypodermic needle top-down understanding of journalism like Pierre Bourdieu’s idea. But both these theories ignore the role of writers, the significance of the power of the people who are able to tell stories, and how that is an ability to crystalize themes that are falling through society. That has an independence. That’s what makes the money, the ability to tell a certain kind of story. If you can do it, you can sell the soap too. But, if you can’t, you are not going to sell anything.

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

396

Perhaps the real point of politics... the power of culture permits in some sense to transcend the domination of powerful social groups, the role of the intellectual is dependent on the power of culture. How can we explain the role of the intellectual and how do we react to the movement in the United States concerning a public sociology? How would you connect the power of culture and the relative autonomy of culture, on the one hand, and the role of the intellectual, the role of sociology in a public debate?

**Jeffrey Alexander**

The power of intellectuals demonstrates the autonomy of culture, doesn't it? Intellectuals are cultural... culture creators, culture crystallizers, they are experts in performativity. The public, they also tell stories, they also create binaries and principles, they apply underlying cultural codes into contemporary situations. In social theory, I think intellectuals used to be the main ways people thought about culture. So there's a small sociology of intellectuals over the years. In terms of public sociology... but for me intellectuals need to be put inside of a performative, a broader performative theory of social performance. They are one of many different kinds of performers, a kind of performance that has, is closely connected to factual truth and to moral denunciation, which is a lot different than other kinds of fictional, or even journalistic, or political or religious. I guess you can have several different tonics of public performances and intellectual are one kind going back to the times of Socrates. I've written an essay on, it is in the Power and Performance book, from 2011, on the Socratic tradition... understanding intellectuals in terms of what Plato described in Socrates. Public sociology... I mean I'm in favor of public sociology and I think it's great, but I feel the need to defend professional Sociology and social theory. If you look at Burawoy's essay there are four kinds of Sociology and owning what he calls public sociology speaks directly to the public sphere and in a way that's quite close to the old idea of the intellectual which is the relation you are making. But I think even sociologists who don't have the opportunity or the desire or the ability to become public intellectuals play a role in public life. I think it's extremely important that... I mean Sociology is inspired by the civil sphere, by moral good, by an expansive, inclusive, idea of civil society, of course it's not always historically defined, so what's considered a good society at some point isn't the same as what's considered a good society at another point. Even when we stay inside the university, we write our books, we still have a big role in pushing issues onto the public agenda and in terms of providing not just data but modes of thinking that can often be very decisive in public opinion. For example, feminist sociologists invented the term the social construction of gender, I think in the 1960s or 1970s, and these were not public sociologists, these were just academics, but eventually that term was now very broadly used throughout society and it helped to de-essentialize many qualities, many ways of thinking that were thought to be natural, so we talk of the social construction of gender, of sexuality, race, of class, etc. And that's a great contribution of Sociology. It didn't have to do with people wanting to be public sociologists. They were concerned of course with equality but in a professional or theoretical manner. I think very few sociologists have the ability to successfully become performers in the public sphere. If we all wanted to be public sociologists we'd be failures, that we have to allow people with the talent for the politics to take up issues that we write about in a way that is going to be much better than we can ever do that. There's a Burawoy's idea that sociologist provide factual information and so public sociologists provide some kind of authoritative, an outside, a critical opinion on things. But critical information isn't that important in social life. It's

social dramatization of moral positions is what is really important, even in changing the law. It's true, though, that information that we can provide is significant in terms of public commissions, in terms of making laws and some times in terms of judicial decision, but a good newspaper columnist is much more important than a public sociologist. But I assume they read what we write. There's levels of mediation, there's theorists, there's empirical research. How does this get into the public sphere? It does, but in a mediated way, much more often than a public sociologist going forward and when a sociologist does that it often doesn't have any impact. And it's hard to get a forum. So I think often times journalists who have been in universities, let's say, they read the stuff, they keep in touch, and then there's the world of intellectual magazines and journals which are not for academics but for educated members of the public, they also write reviews of things that are going on, they're informed, then these get picked up by other people and so there is a filtering process, of course, it's a circle, it goes each way back and forth. I don't think the universities are cut off from the public at all, there's constant flow but it needs to be studied in an unpolemical manner. We need to understand much more carefully how this stuff goes back and forth.

397

**Antonio Brasil Jr.**

And so this possibility of communication of translation between the different spheres and the possibility of this is the existence of a civil sphere, because it connects horizontally these different spheres. It's not one more sphere but a field that connects other fields.

**Jeffrey Alexander**

It permits... it has its own interesting radical and democratic equality and there's a lot of other kinds of interests and values for example that are not mediated by the civil sphere, I would say, the civil sphere has the potential to intervene in anything, but it doesn't usually, it's episodic and mercurial and triggered by unexpected convulsions or by successful public performances by intellectuals or religious leaders... but most of us live in many spheres and we don't want the civil sphere to get in the way of, let's say, sex or of art or, some of us, of religion, or, of course, in business. A communist idea would be that civil sphere would displace or control all these other spheres for fairness, and that's certainly an idea of Rousseau or Marx that the whole social system in a way would be civil, but I don't think that people really want that... but it's certainly not going to happen anyway. I think there's a lot of differentiation, and there's a kind of resistance, there's internal world that foster virtue in the sense of that sphere, and then there's a lot of circulation of those ideas specifically in society too. The idea of competitive, business ideas, or out there in the public competing with civil sphere ideas. There is a lot of different... in a way it's little like Boltanski, but not exactly. But the civil sphere is powerful and people with interest in it or people with ideal convictions they often challenge things. Like the whole idea of neo-liberalism is to me very interesting. Businessmen don't use the term neo-liberal, right? Neo-liberalism is a stigmatizing device on behalf of the ideals of the civil sphere and it pollutes a certain way of thinking about the relationship between markets and states. That's an idea of filtering through the civil sphere. On the other hand, there are people in the civil sphere who champion neo-liberals but they don't call it that because they feel it reestablishes a balance toward the individual and away from the state so there's different construction of how the ideals of the civil sphere should be institutionalized. One wants a bigger State, one wants a smaller State.

**Cristina Buarque**

Thank you so much again for the interview.

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398

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