Social Performance

This pathbreaking volume makes a powerful case for a new direction in cultural sociology and for social scientific analysis more generally. Taking a “cultural pragmatic” approach to meaning, the contributors suggest a new way of looking at the continuum that stretches between ritual and strategic action. They do so by developing, for the first time, a model of “social performance” that applies not only to micro- but to macro-sociology. This new model is relevant not only to contemporary analysis but to comparative and historical issues, and it is as sensitive to power as it is to cultural structures. The metaphor of performance has long been used by sociologists and humanists to explore not only the social world but literary texts, but this volume offers the first systematic and analytical framework that transforms the metaphor into a social theory and applies it to a series of fascinating large-scale social and cultural processes – from September 11 and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair, to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Willy Brandt’s famous “kneefall” before the Warsaw Memorial. Building on works by Austin and Derrida on the one side, and Durkheim, Goffman and Turner on the other, Social Performance offers a new perspective that will be of great interest to scholars and students alike in the social sciences, humanities, and theatre arts.

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and also Chair of the Sociology Department at Yale University. He is the author of The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology (2003), Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity (with Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka) (2004), and the editor (with Philip Smith) of The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim (2005).

Bernhard Giesen holds the chair for macro-sociology in the Department of History and Sociology at the University of Konstanz (Germany) and is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology at Yale University. Among the more than twenty books he has written and edited are The Intellectuals and the Nation: Collective Identity in a German
Axial Age (Cambridge 1998) and Triumph and Trauma (2004).

Jason L. Mast is a Doctoral Candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a Visiting Fellow at Yale University’s Department of Sociology and its Center for Cultural Sociology.
Cambridge Cultural Social Studies

Series editors: JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER, Department of Sociology, Yale University, and STEVEN SEIDMAN, Department of Sociology, University of Albany, State University of New York.

Titles in the series

ARNE JOHAN VETLESEN, Evil and Human Agency
ROGER FRIEDLAND AND JOHN MOHR, Matters of Culture
DAVINA COOPER, Challenging Diversity, Rethinking Equality and the Value of Difference
KRISHAN KUMAR, The Making of English National Identity
RON EYERMAN, Cultural Trauma
STEPHEN M. ENGEL, The Unfinished Revolution
MICHELE LAMONT AND LAURENT THEVENOT, Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology
RON LEMBO, Thinking through Television
ALI MIRSEPASSI, Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization
RONALD N. JACOBS, Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society
ROBIN WAGNER-PACIFICI, Theorizing the Standoff
KEVIN MCDONALD, Struggles for Subjectivity
S. N. EISENSTADT, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution
PIOTR SZTOMPKA, Trust
SIMON J. CHARLESWORTH, A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience
LUC BOLTANSKI, Translated by GRAHAM D. BURCHELL, Distant Suffering
MARIAM FRASER, Identity without Selfhood

(list continues at end of book)
Social Performance
Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual

EDITED BY
Jeffrey C. Alexander
Bernhard Giesen
Jason L. Mast

© Cambridge University Press  www.cambridge.org
Life itself is a dramatically enacted thing.

Erving Goffman
Contents

List of figures xi
List of tables xii
List of contributors xiii

Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice:
the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action 1
Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason L. Mast

1 Cultural pragmatics: social performance between
ritual and strategy 29
Jeffrey C. Alexander

2 From the depths of despair: performance, counterperformance,
and “September 11” 91
Jeffrey C. Alexander

3 The cultural pragmatics of event-ness: the Clinton / Lewinsky
affair 115
Jason L. Mast

4 Social dramas, shipwrecks, and cockfights: conflict and
complicity in social performance 146
Isaac Reed

5 Performing a “new” nation: the role of the TRC in
South Africa 169
Tanya Goodman

6 Performing opposition or, how social movements move
193
Ron Eyerman
7 Politics as theatre: an alternative view of the rationalities of power
   David E. Apter
   218

8 Symbols in action: Willy Brandt’s kneefall at the Warsaw Memorial
   Valentin Rauer
   257

9 The promise of performance and the problem of order
   Kay Junge
   283

10 Performance art
   Bernhard Giesen
   315

11 Performing the sacred: a Durkheimian perspective on the performative turn in the social sciences
   Bernhard Giesen
   325

Index
   368
**Figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Successful performance: re-fusion</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Performance failure: de-fusion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>The fused elements of performance inside simple social organization</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>The de-fused elements of performance inside complex social organization</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Fusion/de-fusion of background representation, script, and audience</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td><em>Mise-en-scène</em> interfacing with social powers</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Double fusion: text–actor–audience</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Audiences and performance</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>The historical conditions of social performance: structured variation</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Willy Brandt kneeling in front of the Ghetto Memorial</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Attributed meaning and frames concerning the kneefall (<em>n</em> = 203)</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 The structure of Eastern and Western narratives of salvation and damnation</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1 The history of the performance of a past-as-perpetrator in the West German public sphere</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contributors

JEFFREY ALEXANDER is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University, and was also Chair (to July, 2005) of the Sociology Department. With Ron Eyerman, he is Co-Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology. He works in the areas of theory, culture, and politics. An exponent of the “strong program” in cultural sociology, Alexander has investigated the cultural codes and narratives that inform diverse areas of social life. His most recent paper in this area is “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy,” Sociological Theory, 22. He is the author of The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology (Oxford, 2003), Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity (with Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka, University of California Press, 2004), and the editor (with Philip Smith) of The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim (2005). In the field of politics, Alexander is finishing a book called Possibilities of Justice: The Civil Sphere and Its Contradictions, which includes discussions of gender, race, and religion, as well as new theorizing about civil power, communication, and social movements.

DAVID E. APTE\'R is the Henry J. Heinz Professor Emeritus of Comparative Political and Social Development and Senior Research Scientist at Yale University. He has taught at Northwestern University, the University of Chicago (where he was the Executive Secretary of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations), the University of California (where he was Director of the Institute of International Studies), and Yale University where he holds a joint appointment in political science and sociology and served as Director of the Social Science Division, Chair of Sociology, and was a founding fellow of the Whitney Humanities Center. He has done field research on development, democratization, and political violence in Africa, Latin America, Japan, and China. His book, Choice and the Politics of Allocation (1971) received the
List of contributors

Woodrow Wilson award for the best book of the year in political science and international studies.

RON EYERMAN is Professor of Sociology and Co-Director (with Jeffrey Alexander) of the Center for Cultural Sociology as Yale University. He has published two books with Cambridge University Press, *Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2002) and *Music and Social Movements* (1998). His most recent research concerns the development of a “meaningful” sociology of the arts.

BERNHARD GIESEN holds the chair for macro-sociology in the Department of History and Sociology at the University of Konstanz (Germany) and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Yale University. He has held visiting positions at the Department of Sociology at the University of Los Angeles, the Committee for Social Thought (Chicago), the Department of Sociology at New York University, and the Center for Advanced Studies at Stanford University. Bernhard Giesen works in the areas of cultural and historical sociology and sociological theory and has extensively published on social evolution, postmodern culture, and collective identity and more recently on collective memory, collective trauma, intergenerational conflict, and collective rituals. Among the more than twenty books he has written and edited are *The Intellectuals and the Nation. Collective Identity in a German Axial Age* (Cambridge 1998) and *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder 2004).

TANYA GOODMAN recently completed her Ph.D. in Sociology at Yale University. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer at Yale Law School, teaching a research seminar on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She is also engaged in a project under a grant from the United States Institute of Peace, which uses multi-media technology to develop a set of teaching and research tools for scholars and practitioners interested in truth commissions. Her research interests lie in the fields of cultural sociology, social change, and the contexts of peace, war, and social conflict on both a global and local scale.

KAY JUNGE (1960) graduated from Bielefeld University (Germany) and got his doctoral degree from Justus-Liebig University in Giessen. In 1999 he became an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Sociology at the University of Konstanz. He has published mainly in the fields of historical and theoretical sociology and is currently working on a book on the sociology of law.

JASON L. MAST is a Doctoral Candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a visiting fellow at Yale University’s Department of Sociology and its Center for Cultural Sociology. Aided by a grant from
the Mellon Foundation for Writing Performance History, he is completing his dissertation on the social dramatic processes at play in the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair. He is also writing an ethnography of street performers, in which he examines how discourse shapes interactions between strangers in public spaces.

Valentin Rauer graduated at Humboldt University Berlin (Germany) and recently completed his dissertation in Sociology at Konstanz University (Germany). Since 2000 he has been Research Fellow in an interdisciplinary research group “Norms and Symbols” at the University of Konstanz (Germany) under a grant of the German Scientific Society (DFG). His fields of interests are cultural sociology, migration, the public sphere, and social performance. He has published in the fields of migration, (trans-)national identity, and collective memory. Future projects include papers on transnational rituals of reconciliation.

Isaac Reed is Doctoral Candidate in Sociology at Yale University. His dissertation concerns the theoretical logic of interpretive sociology, and aims to provide a new epistemological footing for qualitative, cultural, and historical work in the social sciences by developing an explanatory framework commensurate with the interpretive nature of sociological work. His fields of interest are social theory, cultural sociology, sex and gender, historical sociology, and the sociology of popular culture. Future projects include papers on gender and power at the Salem witch trials, and on the cultural sociology of sport, as well as continuing theoretical work on sociological interpretation and validity.