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Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason L. Mast

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Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice: the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason L. Mast

The question of theory and practice permeates not only politics but culture, where the analogue for theory is the social-symbolic text, the bundle of everyday codes, narratives, and rhetorical configurings that are the objects of hermeneutic reconstruction. Emphasizing action over its theory, praxis theorists have blinded themselves to the deeply embedded textuality of every social action (Bourdieu 1984; Swidler 1986; Turner 2002). But a no less distorting myopia has affected the vision from the other side. The pure hermeneut (e.g., Dilthey 1976; Ricoeur 1976) tends to ignore the material problem of instantiating ideals in the real world. The truth, as Marx (1972: 145) wrote in his tenth thesis on Feuerbach, is that, while theory and practice are different, they are always necessarily intertwined.

Theory and practice are interwoven in everyday life, not only in social theory and social science. In the following chapters, we will see that powerful social actors understand the conceptual issues presented in this introduction in an intuitive, ethnographic, and practical way. In the intense and fateful efforts to impeach and to defend President Clinton (Mast, ch. 3), for instance, individuals, organizations, and parties moved “instinctively” to hook their actions into the background culture in a lively and compelling manner, working to create an impression of sincerity and authenticity rather than one of calculation and artificiality, to achieve verisimilitude. Social movements’ public demonstrations (Eyerman, ch. 6) display a similar performative logic. Movement organizers, intensely aware of media organizations’ control over the means of symbolic distribution, direct their participants to perform in ways that will communicate that they are worthy, committed, and determined to achieve acceptance and inclusion from the larger political community. And during South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy (Goodman, ch. 5), perpetrators’ confessions and victims’ agonistic retellings of disappeared relatives, displacement, and torture

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before a Truth and Reconciliation Commission stimulated interest and identification amongst local and global audiences, and initiated a pervasive sense of national catharsis. These examples, and the others that follow, show how social actors, embedded in collective representations and working through symbolic and material means, implicitly orient towards others as if they were actors on a stage seeking identification with their experiences and understandings from their audiences.

Towards a cultural pragmatics

Kenneth Burke (1957 [1941]) introduced the notion of symbolic action. Clifford Geertz (1973a) made it famous. These thinkers wanted to draw attention to the specifically cultural character of activities, the manner in which they are expressive rather than instrumental, irrational rather than rational, more like theatrical performance than economic exchange. Drawing also from Burke, Erving Goffman (1956) introduced his own dramaturgical theory at about the same time. Because of the one-sidedly pragmatic emphases of symbolic interactionism, however, the specifically cultural dimension of this Goffmanian approach (Alexander 1987) to drama made hardly any dent on the sociological tradition, though it later entered into the emerging discipline of performance studies.

In the decades that have ensued since the enunciation of these seminal ideas, those who have taken the cultural turn have followed a different path. It has been meaning, not action, that has occupied central attention, and deservedly so. To show the importance of meaning, as compared to such traditional sociological ciphers as power, money, and status, it has been necessary to show that meaning is a structure, just as powerful as these others (Rambo and Chan 1990; Somers 1995). To take meaning seriously, not to dismiss it as an epiphenomenon, has been the challenge. The strong programs in contemporary cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith 1998; Alexander and Sherwood 2002; Smith 1998; Edles 1998; Jacobs 1996; Kane 1997; Somers 1995; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1996; Sewell 1985) have followed Ricoeur's philosophical demonstration that meaningful actions can be considered as texts, exploring codes and narratives, metaphors, metathemes, values, and rituals in such diverse institutional domains as religion, nation, class, race, family, gender, and sexuality. It has been vital to establish what makes meaning important, what makes some social facts meaningful at all.

In terms of Charles Morris's (1938) classic distinction, strong programs have focused on the syntactics and semantics of meaning, on the relations of signs to one another and to their referents. Ideas about symbolic action and dramaturgy gesture, by contrast, to the pragmatics of the cultural process, to the relations between cultural texts and the actors in everyday life. While the

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latter considerations have by no means been entirely ignored by those who have sought to sustain a meaning-centered program in cultural sociology, they have largely been addressed either through relatively ad hoc empirical studies (Wagner-Pacifici 1986) or in terms of the metatheoretical debate over structure and agency (Sewell 1992; Kane 1991; Hays 1994; Alexander 1988, 2003a; Sahlins 1976). Metatheory is indispensable as an orienting device. It thinks out problems in a general manner and, in doing so, provides more specific, explanatory thinking with a direction to go. The challenge is to move downward on the scientific continuum, from the presuppositions of metatheory to the models and empirical generalizations upon which explanation depends. Metatheoretical thinking about structure and agency has provided hunches about how this should be done, and creative empirical studies show that it can be, but there remains a gaping hole between general concepts and empirical facts. Without providing systematic mediating concepts, even the most fruitful empirical efforts to bridge semantics and pragmatics (e.g., Sahlins 1981; Wagner-Pacifici 1986; Kane 1997) have an ad hoc character, and the more purely metatheoretical often produce awkward, even oxymoronic circumlocutions.¹

Cultural practices are not simply speech acts. Around the same time Goffman was developing a pragmatic dramaturgy in sociology, John Austin (1975) introduced ordinary language philosophy to the idea that language could have a performative function and not only a constative one. Speaking aims to get things done, Austin denoted, not merely to make assertions and provide descriptions. In contrast to simply describing, the performative speech act has the capacity to realize its semantic contents; it is capable of constituting a social reality through its utterance. On the other hand it can fail. Given that a performative may or may not work, that it may or may not succeed in realizing its stated intention, Austin keenly observed, its appropriate evaluative standard is not truth and accuracy, but “felicitous” and “unfelicitous.”

When Austin turned to investigating felicity’s conditions, however, like Goffman he stressed only the speech act’s interactional context, and failed to account for the cultural context out of which particular signs are drawn forth by a speaker. This philosophical innovation could have marked a turn to the aesthetic and to considerations of what makes actions exemplary (Arendt 1958; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Ferrara 2001); instead, it led to an increasing focus on the interactional, the situational, and the practical (e.g., Goffman 1956; Searle 1961; Habermas 1984; Schegloff 1987). Austin’s innovation, like Goffman’s dramaturgy, had the effect of cutting off the practice of language from its texts.

Saussure would have agreed with Austin that *parole* (speech) must be studied independently of *langue* (language). However, he would have insisted on the “arbitrary nature of the sign,” that, to consider its effectiveness, spoken language must be considered in its totality, as both *langue* and *parole*. A sign’s meaning is

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arbitrary, Saussure demonstrated,² in that “it actually has no natural connection with the signified” (1985: 38), i.e., the object it is understood to represent. Its meaning is arbitrary in relation to its referent in the real world, but it is also arbitrary in the sense that it is not determined by the intention or will of any individual speaker or listener. Rather, a sign’s meaning derives from its relations – metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic – to other signs in a system of sign relations, or language. The relations between signs in a cultural system are fixed by social convention; they are structures that social actors experience as natural, and unreflexively depend on to constitute their daily lives. Consequently, an accounting of felicity’s conditions must attend to the cultural structures that render a performative intelligible, meaningful, and capable of being interpreted as felicitous or infelicitous, in addition to the mode and context in which the performative is enacted.

In this respect, Saussure’s sometimes errant disciple, Jacques Derrida, has been a faithful son, and it is in Derrida’s (1982a [1971]) response to Austin’s speech act theory that post-structuralism begins to demonstrate a deep affinity with contemporary cultural pragmatics. Derrida criticized Austin for submerging the contribution of the cultural text to performative outcome. Austin “appears to consider solely the conventionality constituting the *circumstance* of the utterance [*énoncé*], its contextual surroundings,” Derrida admonished, “and not a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act [locution] itself, all that might be summarized rapidly under the problematic rubric of ‘the arbitrary nature of the sign’” (1988: 15). In this way, Derrida sharply criticized Austin for ignoring the “citational” quality of even the most pragmatic writing and speech; that words used in talk cite the seemingly absent background cultural texts from which they derive their meanings. “Could a performative utterance succeed,” Derrida asked, “if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’?” (1988: 18)

Because there can be no determinate, trans-contextual relation of signifier and referent, difference always involves *différance* (Derrida 1982b). Interpreting symbolic practice – culture in its “presence” – always entails a reference to culture in its “absence,” that is, to an implied semiotic text. In other words, to be practical and effective in action – to have a successful performance – actors must be able to make the meanings of culture structures stick. Since meaning is the product of relations between signs in a discursive code or text, a dramaturgy that intends to take meaning seriously must account for the cultural codes and texts that structure the cognitive environments in which speech is given form.

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Dramaturgy in the new century emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social action. Cultural pragmatics grows out of this confluence, maintaining that cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, while, at the same time, remaining fundamentally interrelated with it. Cultural action puts texts into practice, but it cannot do so directly, without "passing go." A theory of practice must respect the relative autonomy of structures of meaning. Pragmatics and semantics are analytical, not concrete distinctions.

The real and the artificial

One of the challenges in theorizing contemporary cultural practice is the manner in which it seems to slide between artifice and authenticity. There is the deep pathos of Princess Diana's death and funeral, mediated, even in a certain sense generated by, highly constructed, commercially targeted televised productions, yet so genuine and compelling that the business of a great national collectivity came almost fully to rest. There are the Pentagon's faked anti-ballistic missile tests and its doctored action photographs of smart missiles during the Iraq war, both of which were taken as genuine in their respective times. There is the continuous and often nauseating flow of the staged-for-camera pseudo-event, which Daniel Boorstin (1962 [1961]) flushed out already in the 1960s. Right along beside them, there is the undeniable moral power generated by the equally "artificial" media event studied by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) – Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem, the Pope's first visit to Poland, and John F. Kennedy's funeral.

Plays, movies, and television shows are staged "as if" they occur in real life, and in real time. To seem as if they are "live," to seem real, they are increasingly shot "on location." National armies intimidate one another by staging war games, completely artificial events whose intention not to produce a "real" effect is announced well before they occur but which often alter real balances of power. Revolutionary guerrilla groups, like the Zapatista rebels from Chiapas, Mexico, represent powerful grassroots movements that aim to displace vast material interests and often have the effect of getting real people killed. Yet the masses in such movements present their collective force via highly staged photo-marches, and their leaders, like subcommander Marcos, enter figuratively into the public sphere, as iconic representations of established cultural forms.

The effort at artificially creating the impression of liveness is not in any sense new. The Impressionist painters wanted to trump the artificiality of the French Academy by moving outside, to be closer to the nature they were representing, to paint *en plein air*. The Lincoln–Douglas debates were highly staged, and their "real influence" would have been extremely narrow were it not for the

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hyperbolic expansiveness of the print media (Schudson 1998). The aristocracies and emerging middle classes of the Renaissance, the period marking the very birth of modernity, were highly style-conscious, employing facial make-up and hair shaping on both sides of the gender divide, and engaging, more generally, in strenuous efforts at “self-fashioning” (Greenblatt 1980). It was the greatest writer of the Renaissance, after all, who introduced into Western literature the very notion that “the whole world’s a stage, and we merely actors upon it.”

Despite a history of reflexive awareness of artificiality and constructedness, such postmodern commentators as Baudrillard (1983) announce, and denounce, the contemporary interplaying of reality with fiction as demarcating a new age, one in which pragmatics has displaced semantics, social referents have disappeared, and only signifiers powered by the interests and powers of the day remain. Such arguments represent a temptation, fueled by a kind of nostalgia, to treat the distinction between the real and artificial in an essentialist way. Cultural pragmatics holds that this vision of simulated hyper-textuality is not true, that the signified, no matter what its position in the manipulated field of cultural production, can never be separated from some set of signifiers (cf. Sherwood 1994).

The relation between authenticity and modes of presentation is, after all, historically and culturally specific.³ During the Renaissance, for instance, the theatre, traditionally understood to be a house of spectacle, seduction, and idolatry, began to assume degrees of authenticity that had traditionally been reserved for the dramatic text, which was honored for its purity and incorruptibility. The relation between authenticity and the senses shifted during this time as well. With its close association with the aural eroding, authenticity became an attribute of the visual. The visual displaced the aural as the sense most closely associated with apprehending and discerning the authentic, the real, and the true. The aural, on the other hand, was increasingly presumed to “displace ‘sense,’” and language to “dissolve into pure sound and leave reason behind” (Peters 2000: 163).

It is difficult to imagine a starker example of authenticity’s cultural specificity than Donald Frischmann’s (1994) description of the Tzotzil people’s reaction to a live theatrical performance staged in their village of San Juan Chamula, in Chiapas, Mexico in 1991. Frischmann describes how, during the reenactment of an occurrence of domestic violence, the audience was taken by “a physical wave of emotion [that] swept through the entire crowd” nearly knocking audience members “down onto the floor.” During a scene in which a confession is flogged out of two accused murderers the line separating theatrical production and audience completely disintegrated: “By this point in the play, the stage itself was full of curious and excited onlookers – children and men, surrounding the

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actors in an attempt to get a closer look at the stage events, which so curiously resembled episodes of *real life* out in the central plaza” (1994: 223, italics in original).

Cultural pragmatics emphasizes that authenticity is an interpretive category rather than an ontological state. The status of authenticity is arrived at, is contingent, and results from processes of social construction; it is not inseparable from a transcendental, ontological referent. If there is a normative repulsion to the fake or inauthentic, cultural pragmatics asserts that it must be treated in an analytical way, as a structuring code in the symbolic fabric actors depend on to interpret their lived realities.

Yes, we are “condemned” to live out our lives in an age of artifice, a world of mirrored, manipulated, and mediated representation. But the constructed character of symbols does not make them less real. A talented anthropologist and a clinical psychologist recently published a lengthy empirical account (Marvin and Ingle 1999) describing the flag of the United States, the “stars and stripes,” as a totem for the American nation, a tribe whose members periodically engage in blood sacrifice so that the totem may continue to thrive. Such a direct equation of contemporary sacrality with pre-literate tribal life has its dangers, as we are about to suggest below, yet there is much in this account that rings powerfully true.

Nostalgia and counter-nostalgia: sacrality then and now

For those who continue to insist on the centrality of meaning in contemporary societies, and who see these meanings as in some necessary manner refractions of culture structures, the challenge is the same today as it has always been: How to deal with “modernity,” an historical designation that now includes postmodernity as well? Why does it remain so difficult to conceptualize the cultural implications of the vast historical difference between earlier times and our own? One reason is that so much of contemporary theorizing about culture has seemed determined to elide it. The power-knowledge fusion that Foucault postulates at the center of the modern episteme is, in fact, much less characteristic of contemporary societies than it was of earlier, more traditional ones, where social structure and culture were relatively fused. The same is true for Bourdieu’s habitus, a self that is mere nexus, the emotional residue of group position and social structure that much more clearly reflects the emotional situation of early societies than the autonomizing, reflexive, deeply ambivalent psychological processes of today.

Culture still remains powerful in an a priori manner, even in the most contemporary societies. Powers are still infused with sacralizing discourses, and modern and postmodern actors can strategize only by typifying in terms of

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institutionally segmented binary codes. Secularization does not mean the loss of cultural meaning, the emergence of completely free-floating institutions, or the creation of purely self-referential individual actors (cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998). There remains, in Kenneth Thompson's (1990) inimitable phrase, the "dialectic between sacralization and secularization." But action does not relate to culture in an unfolding sort of way. Secularization does mean differentiation rather than fusion, not only between culture, self, and social structure, but within culture itself.

Mannheim (1971 [1927]) pointed out that it has been the unwillingness to accept the implications of such differentiation that has always characterized conservative political theory, which from Burke (1790) to Oakeshott (1981 [1962]) to contemporary communitarians has given short shrift to cultural diversity and individual autonomy. What is perhaps less well understood is that such unwillingness has also undermined the genuine and important insights of interpretively oriented cultural social science.

For our modern predecessors who maintained that, despite modernization, meaning still matters, the tools developed for analyzing meaning in traditional and simple societies seemed often to be enough. For instance, late in his career Durkheim used descriptions of Australian aboriginal clans' ceremonial rites to theorize that rituals and "dramatic performances" embed and reproduce the cultural system in collective and individual actions (1995: 378). The Warramunga's ceremonial rites that honor a common ancestor, Durkheim argued, "serve no purpose other than to make the clan's mythical past present in people's minds" and thus to "revitalize the most essential elements of the collective consciousness" (1995: 379). Similarly, almost a decade after the close of World War Two, Shils and Young (1953) argued that Queen Elizabeth II's coronation signified nothing less than "an act of national communion," and W. Lloyd Warner (1959) argued that Memorial Day represented an annual ritual that reaffirmed collective sentiments and permitted organizations in conflict to "subordinate their ordinary opposition and cooperate in collectively expressing the larger unity of the total community" (279).

These arguments demonstrate a stunning symmetry with Durkheim's descriptions of the ritual process's effects on comparatively simple and homogeneous aboriginal clans. These thinkers jumped, each in his own creative way, directly from the late Durkheim to late modernity without making the necessary conceptual adjustments along the way. The effect was to treat the characteristics that distinguished modern from traditional societies as residual categories. It was in reaction to such insistence on social-cum-cultural integration that conflict theory made claims, long before postmodern constructivism, that public cultural performances were not affective but merely cognitive (Lukes 1975), that they sprang not from cultural texts but from artificial

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scripts, that they were less rituals in which audiences voluntarily if vicariously participated than symbolic effects controlled and manipulated by elites (Birnbaum 1955).

The old-fashioned Durkheimians, like political conservatives, were motivated in some part by nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and more cohesive age. Yet their critics have been moved by feelings of a not altogether different kind, by an anti-nostalgia that barely conceals their own deep yearning for the sacred life. In confronting the fragmentations of modern and postmodern life, political radicals have often been motivated by cultural conservatism. From Marx and Weber to the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), from Arendt's (1951) mass society theory to Selznick's (1951, 1952), from Jameson (1991) to Baudrillard, left cultural critics have lodged the nostalgic claim that nothing can ever be the same again, that capitalism or industrial society or mass society or postmodernity has destroyed the possibility for meaning. The result has been that cultural history has been understood allegorically (cf. Clifford 1986, 1988). It is narrated as a process of disenchantment, as a fall from Eden, as declension from a once golden age of wholeness and holiness (Sherwood 1994). The assertion is that once representation is encased in some artificial substance, whether it is substantively or only formally rational, it becomes mechanical and unmeaningful.

The classical theoretical statement of this allegory remains Walter Benjamin's (1968 [1936]) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," veneration (!) for which has only grown among postmodern critics of the artificiality of the present age. Benjamin held that the auratic quality of art, the aura that surrounded it and gave it a sacred and holy social status, was inherently diminished by art's reproducibility. Sacred aura is a function of distance. It cannot be maintained once mechanical reproduction allows contact to become intimate, frequent, and, as a result, mundane. Baudrillard's simulacrum marks merely one more installment in the theoretical allegory of disenchantment. A more recent postmodern theorist, Peggy Phelan (1993: 146), has applied this allegory in suggesting that, because the "only life" of performance is "in the present," it "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations." Once performance is mechanically mediated, its meaningfulness is depleted. The argument here is pessimistic and Heideggerian. If ontology is defined in terms of *Dasein*, as "being there," then any artificial mediation will wipe it away. "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction," Phelan predictably writes, "it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology."

We can escape from such Heideggerianism only by developing a more complex sociological theory of performance. It was Burke (1957, 1965) who first proposed to transform the straightforward action theory of Weber and Parsons,

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the schema of means–ends–norms–conditions, which simultaneously mimicked and critiqued economic man. This meant taking “act” in a theatrical rather than a nominalist and mundane manner. It meant transforming “conditions” into the notion of a “scene” upon which an act could be displayed. With analytical transformations such as these, cultural traditions could be viewed not merely as regulating actions but as informing dramas, the performance of which could display exemplary motives, inspire catharsis, and allow working through (Burke 1959).

The implications of this extraordinary innovation were limited by Burke’s purely literary ambitions and by the fact that he, too, betrayed nostalgia for a simpler society. Burke suggested (1965: 449, *italics added*), on the one hand, that “a drama is a mode of symbolic action so designed that an audience *might* be induced to ‘act symbolically’ in sympathy with it.” On the other hand, he insisted that, “insofar as the drama *serves* this function it may be studied as a ‘perfect mechanism’ composed of parts moving in mutual adjustment to one another like clockwork.” The idea is that, if audience sympathy is gained, then society really has functioned as a dramatic text, with true synchrony among its various parts. In other words, this theory of dramaturgy functions, not only as an analytical device, but also as an allegory for re-enchantment. The implication is that, if the theory is properly deployed, it will demonstrate for contemporaries how sacrality can be recaptured, that perhaps it has never disappeared, that the center will hold.

Such nostalgia for re-enchantment affected the most significant line of dramaturgical thinking to follow out from Burke. More than any other thinker, it was Victor Turner who demonstrated the most profound interest in modernizing ritual theory, with notions of ritual process, social dramas, liminality, and *communitas*, being the most famous results (Turner 1969; cf. Edles 1998). When he turned to dramaturgy, Turner (1974a, 1982) was able to carry this interest forward in a profoundly innovative manner, creating a theory of social dramas that deeply marked the social science of his day (Abrahams 1995; Wagner-Pacifici 1986). At the same time, however, Turner’s intellectual evolution revealed a deep personal yearning for the more sacred life, which was demonstrated most forcefully in his descriptions of how ritual participants experience liminal moments and *communitas* (1969).

Turner used these terms to describe social relations and forms of symbolic action that are unique to the ritual process. Derived from the term *limen*, which is Latin for “threshold,” Turner defines liminality as representing “the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions” (1974a: 237). All rituals include liminal phases, Turner argued, in which traditional status distinctions dissolve, normative social constraints abate, and a unique form of solidarity, or *communitas*, takes hold: