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Afterword: The Strong Program and the Iconic Turn

(doi: 10.2383/80398)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

Ente di afferenza:

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Afterword: The Strong Program and the Iconic Turn

by Jeffrey C. Alexander

doi: 10.2383/80398

While the articles in this issue differ from one another in details, and sometimes in marked degree, they share an animating thrust, which is to push forward the iconic turn in cultural sociology. In this Afterword, I will contextualize the strong program in cultural sociology and explain why there has been an iconic turn inside it.

Classical sociology railed against the dark side of modernity, fearing it would become meaning-less. Marx predicted all that was holy would become profane, Weber that rationalization would de-magicalize the world, Durkheim that egoism and anomie would disorder the new day. Mid-Twentieth century functionalism pushed against these misleading depictions of modernity, but it did not succeed. Parsons stressed values and solidarity, fighting against a narrow sense of secularization. Claiming legitimacy from Weber's sociology of this-worldly asceticism and Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity, functionalists developed cultural models of power and organization, family, polity, and economy. The Achilles heel of ambitious body of work was its determination to link culture with social stability. Certainly there were ambiguities and openings, but the fundamental idea of functionalist theory was to insist that, if culture was powerful, social equilibrium would follow.

This fateful elision doomed the functionalist effort to create a meaning-centered sociology. Conflict theory challenged its conflation of culture and empirical stability. In its polemical claim, conflict theory was in the right. Tying social stability and culture together was a dreadful mistake. If modern societies are fragmented and conflictual, this hardly suggests that symbolic meanings have disappeared? In its positive

claim, however, conflict theory certainly was wrong. To explain conflict one theory does not need to be materialist. Without reference to battles over interpretation, modern conflict cannot be understood. Conflict theory put blinders on macrosociology for a generation.

Yet, even as conflict theory became triumphant, a new, post-functionalist way of thinking about culture exploded on the intellectual scene. It laid the groundwork for overthrowing conflict theory, and for establishing a truly cultural sociology. The challenge was to overcome the binary culture/conflict. The existence and social power of collectively structured meaning had to be separated from the existence of social conflict and consensus. Sociology needed to find a way to think the *analytical autonomy* of culture.

This was exactly what the semiotic revolution and the eruption of symbolic anthropology allowed sociology to do. Saussurian structural linguistics created a theory of signs, describing the latter as signifier and signified combined. Signifiers are general meanings, which are obdurately structured at any particular place and time. Culture works like a language. Individuals, organizations, and whole societies are like fish swimming in a vast ocean of meanings – they have no idea, most of the time, that culture is all around them. Culture is the dark matter of the social universe.

How such largely invisible, generalized meanings come to be applied in everyday life, however, is another matter, more contingent, more open to reflection. According to semiotics, this is the problem, not of language, but of speech. There is a great distance between the signifiers of social language and the signifieds of everyday social life. Actors may share the same set of signifiers, but how these signifiers get applied can be a matter of intense disagreement. Does the widely shared value of freedom, for example, imply a belief in private property or democratic socialism and radically dissenting speech?

Here, then, is the alternative to functionalist conflation. Culture and conjuncture can exist at the same time. Levi-Strauss worked out a way to apply the ideas of semiotics to social primitive social life, and Barthes developed striking semiotic interpretations of postwar modernity. Derrida and Foucault built on these structuralist foundations, maintaining the relative autonomy of discourse while emphasizing more contingent interpretation and social power. Austin made the same intervention *vis-à-vis* Wittgenstein, pushing the linguistic turn in philosophy toward pragmatic performance. Geertz, Douglas, and Turner brought the semiotic breakthrough and the linguistic turn into contemporary anthropology, reaching out to incorporate aesthetic theorizing as well.

All this triggered a cultural turn in the social sciences. Influenced by Geertz in the U.S. and structuralism in Europe, historians and even political theorists began

to conceptualize how cultural structures had shaped the modern world. These developments entered sociology only after Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915] was (re)interpreted as, not simply a study of Aboriginal religion, but as a theory of the symbolic foundations of modern life [Alexander 1982.] As "late Durkheim" became classical, displacing the more materialist, middle period works, contemporary sociological practice seemed in need of equally profound change. If modern society also involved signs, rituals, purity, and danger, new theories and methods would have to be invented.

From the mid-1980s, there emerged a discipline that had once seemed oxymoronic – "cultural sociology." There were different strands of this new beast. Some were more Marxist, like Bourdieu; others more neo-institutional, like Meyer; some more pragmatic and instrumental, like Swidler. Yet even these approaches shared the need to situate themselves *vis-à-vis* the issues that semiotics and post-structuralism raised. What distinguished the "Strong Program" in sociology [Alexander and Smith 2003] from others was its more full-throated acclamation of the cultural turn. Theories and methods were developed for bringing textual analysis into the center of cultural sociology, for making codes, myths, narratives, and symbols into tools to think modern societies [e.g. Jacobs 2000; Smith 2005.] Following Ricoeur's admonition to consider meaningful action as a text, the cultural turn was translated into sociology.

But this was not enough. Over the last 15 years, with the help of immensely talented students and colleagues, I have tried to open up what I came to think of as the first phase of the strong program, to push the analysis of social texts towards action, on the one hand, and towards the materiality, on the other. The first effort reached out to Austin and performance studies, conceptualizing the cultural pragmatics of contingency, creativity, reception, staging, power, and interpretative mediation – without ignoring the powerful effect of backgrounded social texts [e.g. Mast 2013.] The second effort aimed to connect the experience of cultural texts, not with creative action, but with structures of aesthetic sensibility.

Textual experiences of meanings, no matter how saturated with emotion and morality, lack a fundamental element of aesthetic experience: the sensual-material experience of form. In *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil insists that "the healing power of thought seems to be the same faculty that diminishes the personal sense of experience." Illustrating an alternative to this diminution, Musil explains why "a casual reference to a hair on a nose weights more than the most important concept," pointing to "that dumb but deep, exciting sensation, touching immediately on the self, [when] one sniff's one's own skin."

Can there be a cultural sociology that explores exciting sensations that are dumb but deep? Answering yes, I have begun to develop a sociological theory of iconic

consciousness [Alexander 2008a.] Over the last couple of decades and from various quarters of our intellectual universe, there has emerged a wide-ranging reaction against textuality. In philosophy, literature, and social theory, a material turn has been pushing against the cultural one. Such critiques of discourse-centered thinking, however, typically take the form of calls for aesthetic redemption. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht [2006], for example, condemns “meaning effects” as ratiocinative and merely conceptual, theorizing aesthetic presence over linguistic absence. I argue, to the contrary, that both sensual and textual are always already part of social experience. Burke and Kant were right to link the beautiful and sublime to moral qualities, even if they often did so in morally circumscribed, essentialist ways.

Icons are symbolic condensations that root broad social meaning in specific material form. Icons allow the abstraction of morality to be subsumed, to be made visible, by aesthetic shape. Meaning is made iconically visible as something beautiful, sublime, ugly, even as the banal appearance of mundane material life. With icons, the signifier (the idea) is made material (a thing.) We experience iconic consciousness when we encounter aesthetically shaped materialities that signify social value. Contact with this aesthetic surface, whether by sight, smell, taste, touch, or smell, provides a sensual experience that transmits social meaning. The iconic is about experience, but also communication. To be iconically conscious is to understand without knowing, or at least without knowing that one is knowing. It is to understand by feeling, by contact, by the evidence of the senses rather than the mind.

Foundational to iconic theory is this intertwining of surface and depth; its research program studies the social processes of their mutual incorporation. There are more specific propositions as well:

(1) Iconic social action involves a continuous process of subjectification (internalization) and materialization (externalization), a dynamic that resembles the dialectic Hegel called objectification.

(2) Iconic social order involves a dialectic of generic and unique. The painter employs a “model” but the model is a singular person in time and space. Each year, new styles of automobiles are rolled out, but each is a particular version of a genre type. Beauty salons cut our hair into social styles, but when we stand in front of the mirror each of us brushes our own hair in our own way. We dress in standardized fashions, but we are self-fashioning every time we put on our own clothes. The unique and contingent allow each actor to become a more authentic collective representations. We are all Levi-Strauss’s bricoleur.

(3) Social icons are performative. Actors and organizations try every which way to create material surfaces that compellingly communicate moral depth. But the success of these efforts is highly variable. From icon to audience reception is a long way.

Social power tries to ensure and control audience reaction, critical interpretations make every effort to steer it, but aesthetic effectiveness remains unpredictable in the extreme [Alexander 2012.]

The idea of iconic consciousness opens up new perspectives for sociological analysis [Woodward 2007]. It contributes to the decades long effort [Campbell 1987; Miller 1987] to rescue consumption from the black box of commodity fetishism. Material meanings are rooted in iconic powers outside the marketplace. Only by seizing upon such newly compelling forms can capitalism commoditize. The theory of iconic consciousness also introduces new topics. The trivial things imbedded in everyday life, like cigarettes [Klein 1993], now become worthy objects of cultural-sociological study. Clothing and furniture and fashions of all kinds become foci as well, not only as means for vertical distinction but as meanings in themselves [Bartmanski and Woodward 2015.] Celebrities can be studied as symbolic totems rather than as culture industry products [Alexander 2010; Breese 2010], nature becomes cultural [Pyne 1998; Gibson 2009], and high art becomes important in a new way [Alexander 2008b.]

The theory of iconic consciousness challenges the Marxian theory of fetishism, the idea that commodities can communicate only false and superficial meanings, which Benjamin extended aesthetically with his argument that mechanical reproduction eliminates aura. At the same time, however, a new way of doing critique in relation to material forms is opened up. Perhaps the real danger is not losing iconicity but having too much of it, not of undermining the authenticity of material meanings but making meanings seem rooted in some historically specific material forms when they certainly are not. The trick of iconic consciousness is that it makes meaning seem natural, as if it grows out of appearance, as if the meaning can only be that appearance. Iconicity seems essentialist, conservative in a primordial way. It leads to an inability to separate moral imagination from its particular rootedness in this time and this place. Phenotypical qualities of race, sex, gender, religion, class, and ethnicity – how these qualities are aesthetically presented to the senses at any given historical time – are taken as indications of the social qualities themselves. George Orwell was firmly convinced the working class smelled, believing, despite his socialist creed, that this quality recalled moral pollution and constituted a physical barrier to their social integration [Miller 1997, 235-255.] In fact, of course, surface and depth combine arbitrarily; the aesthetic valuation of surface forms and the moral meanings to which they are connected are continuously changing. But this arbitrariness is not consciously comprehended in the course of everyday social life, anymore than the sound “tree” is thought of as an arbitrary sound. The conflation of surface and depth is much more dangerous than the commercialization of meaning can ever be.

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