

**Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason L. Mast, eds.**  
**Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual.**

Cambridge Cultural Social Studies

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This collection of papers proposes a theoretical framework in the form of a model and case studies of how it can be mobilized to promote systematic analysis of “the cultural” as an autonomous force in social processes and structures. The volume is intended as a contribution to “The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology” an approach outlined in a seminal article with that title by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Phillip Smith (and first published in *The Handbook of Sociological Theory*, edited by Jonathan Turner (New York: Kluwer, 2001).

Readers who have not followed the path of the prolific Jeffrey C. Alexander may welcome a bit of background about the strong program in sociology of culture and the ambitious research agenda of the Centre for Cultural Sociology at Yale University, host institution for the three co-editors at the time of publication. Alexander is co-director of the Centre, Giesen is a macrosociologist at the University of Konstanz (Germany) who was visiting professor, and Mast a visiting fellow. Alexander is also co-editor of the ambitious Cambridge University Press series that published the volume (with co-editor Steven Seidman). Since its inauguration in 2005 the Centre for Cultural Sociology at Yale University, under the leadership of co-directors Jeffrey C. Alexander and Ron Eyerman, has focused on meaning-making processes linking cultural hermeneutics to structuralist perspectives in innovative though at times controversial ways. The notion of “cultural sociology” rather than “sociology of culture” is central to this intellectual project and the term is used to signal an uncoupling of culture and structure in a perspective that no longer treats culture as a dependent variable but a constitutive element of both micro-level and macro-level empirical and theoretical scholarship. The linchpin of the approach is a commitment to the notion of cultural autonomy. There are methodological precepts too, including an insistence on an innovative melding of various approaches to meaning-making in connection with culture. The approach suggests new ways that techniques like Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” can serve to help us understand the codes of behavior or interpretation processes embedded in narratives, and networks of social meaning that come to be known as cultural. Part of the originality of the approach is Alexander’s contention that thick description is a stage in a methodological strategy that involves an initial elimination of broader social elements in order to focus on meaningful detail. After this exercise in “purification” a return to systematic analysis of these broader elements is necessary, with the goal of anchoring the findings about meaningful processes to the logistics of power and structure (which he calls “analytical bracketing”).

Alexander and Mast set the stage for the book in a rapid-fire introduction that connects their conception of cultural pragmatics in surprising ways to foundational notions of symbolic action, dramaturgy, semiology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism and more. Their pronouncements about the “history of reflexive awareness of artificiality and constructedness” (6) is tantalizing but so succinct and so self-confident about what they retain or reject that at times one wonders if their goal of authoritative theory-building is inciting them to rush to adopt the very type of generalizations that the strong program seeks to avoid. In fairness, all the authors return to questions raised in the introduction (in different ways), adding subtlety to what at first seems to be a somewhat narrow consideration of the history of scholarship concerned realism and artificiality, the sacred and the

profane, and the emergence of what they call “the performative turn” in contemporary cultural sociology (16).

The first chapter is destined to be another seminal (and contested) text in the field. In it Alexander presents a model of social performance and proposes guidelines for assessing its effectiveness. The model identifies several core constitutive elements: the *mise en scène* (the material organization of the performance as a means of symbolic production), social powers (productive, distributive and hermeneutical or critical powers), and the audience. Alexander proposes that political and social processes have led to a differentiation in various elements, and audiences have also become highly differentiated in post-ritualistic society. This diversity has occasioned a sort of disintegration of the bonds that *fused* constitutive elements of social performance. In his view success or failure of a performance can be assessed by the extent to which the constitutive elements are fused or re-fused. The very notion of evaluating the success or failure of a social performance in these terms is sure to rankle proponents of more relativistic perspectives that seek to contextualize and differentiate interpretations of performance as a form of communication.

An assemblage of case studies and theoretical texts follows. Unfortunately, the organizational logic of the chapters is unclear, making this book seem like an academic manifestation of an old Hollywood device in films featuring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, in which one of them exclaims “let’s put on a show.” Case studies are interspersed with reflections on theorizing, in a somewhat haphazard progression. Although this detracts from the overall coherence of the volume, the book still presents some very interesting research.

Chapters that are not primarily devoted to a single case study include Isaac Reed’s on conflict and complicity in social performance that draws on existing literature, Ron Eyerman’s reflections on social movements as moral and collective performance, David Apter’s chapter on theoretical aspects of politics as theatre, and Kay Junge’s work on the place of performance in theories of social order. Bernhard Giesen’s final chapter presents a Durkheimian perspective on “performing the sacred”, and a return to the grand theoretical mission outlined by Alexander in the opening chapter. It functions well as a conclusion, proposing promising tools for connecting core concepts presented throughout the book and connecting them to a broader theory of performances as constitutive rituals that are both events and iterations of events that enable people to share meanings through cultural practices.

Other chapters focus on specific case studies. In Chapter 2 Alexander applies his model of social performance in an analysis of the attack on the New York City World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and its aftermath. The chapter is unfortunately riddled with assumptions about the extent to which readers will know what happened or share the author’s interpretations of reactions to it. Alexander engages in a reflection on the nature of terrorism and debatable speculations about contradictions in performative practices between “East” and “West” that seemed so disappointingly remote from the sort of thick description I had been primed to expect that it made me put the book down for a few months. Jason Mast falls into a similar trap by jumping into an analysis of the progression of events known by some Americans as “Monicagate” involving the public discourse on sexual relations between U.S. President Bill Clinton and White House Aide Monica Lewinsky and the end of Clinton’s presidency in the late 1990s. This is a shame, since this could have been a classic text showing how cultural pragmatics can be used to study the performative aspects of emerging socio-cultural events and issues. Tanya Goodman’s examination of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Valentin Rauer’s analysis of a 1970 event in Warsaw involving German Chancellor Willie Brandt falling to his knees in an apparent act of contrition for German war crimes offer welcome exercises in applying the methods of the strong program to studies of non-

American events. Giesen's case study on performance art touches on some of the issues (though little of the literature) raised by this art form, but nonetheless provides a welcome example of another way of approaching theorizing about the cultural and performance.

Although the book clearly aspires to set a new agenda in social studies of culture internationally, it retains a distinctive American "flavour". What Gary Alan Fine has dubbed the "Alexandrian" strong program in cultural sociology is inspired by the strong program in sociology of scientific knowledge associated with David Bloor, Barry Barnes, Harry Collins, Donald A. MacKenzie and the University of Edinburgh. But it is deeply anchored in traditions and preoccupations in American sociology. The book makes a noticeable effort to engage with more international concerns with the interplay of work in performance studies, hermeneutics, and theories and research on structure, power, ritual, agency and meaning-making in contemporary life that will appeal to many Canadian scholars. However Canadian readers familiar with research on culture and society in French, Spanish, and Italian will find little mention of debates underway outside the English-speaking world. As well the more permeable boundaries between humanistic and social scientific research in the Latin world make this book's efforts to integrate work on performance and the social in the study of culture less remarkable than they are in the context of American sociological praxis. But they are indeed interesting. Alexander and his collaborators have produced some provocative texts that set the stage for a new round of reflection on why culture matters.

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Jan Marontate recently resigned from a Canada Research Chair in Technology and Culture at Acadia University to move to SFU as an Associate Professor. She completed a study of cultural policy and public administration in Nova Scotia that examined support for the arts and the four designated 'founding' cultures in that province (African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaq, Acadian, African Nova Scotian and Gaelic). Her current research concerns cultural policy, technological change and networks of collaboration in the visual and performing arts.

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