

Jean-François Côté, *Jeffrey Alexander and Cultural Sociology*. Polity Press, 2023

The book under review is a relatively short but comprehensive account of a long and distinguished career, that of Jeffrey C. Alexander, Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University and founder and co-director of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology. In just over 150 pages Jean-François Côté tracks Alexander's work in and around social theory from the early 1980s to the present: from Parsons's structural-functionalism and the objections to Marxist theory and Bourdieu to Alexander's subsequent turn away from Parsons and the development of his own neofunctionalism, to his later work on a Strong Program in cultural sociology, new theories of civil society, social performance, social trauma and crisis, and the role of the dramatic and the iconic in social life. As this list suggests, even summarizing Alexander's oeuvre in a volume that fits comfortably in a standard coat pocket is a feat. It is Côté's accomplishment that he also covers the theoretical foundations and the evolution of Alexander's work, albeit in a way that might be most fruitful, I imagine, for those of us who have had the good fortune to follow this work at close range.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I am a Faculty Fellow at the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale. So is Jean-François Côté. As such, I very much have what is described on the Center's website as "a sympathetic orientation towards the Strong Program." I have also been involved in the collaborative work spawned by Alexander's theory of civil society, or "the civil sphere" (Alexander 2006; Enroth 2021; Enroth and Henriksson 2019). This review is not, then, a hatchet job. But nor, I should declare, is it a put-up job. While I think Côté's book is a useful introduction to Alexander's work, and while I think Alexander's work is useful for anyone with a serious interest in how culture functions and dysfunctions in social and political life, there are aspects of both Alexander's cultural sociology and Côté's treatment of it that deserve more – and partly different – scrutiny than they get. There are also some disturbances in Côté's book that occasionally detract from its merits.

To get those disturbances out of the way, there are digressions that may not be entirely germane; there is a penchant for the word "dialectic," without explication of what the concept means in this context; the prose is sometimes less than straightforward. For an example of all three, take the following sentence from a passage on the Kantian and Hegelian roots of modern thinking about subjectivity: "The dialectical virtuality of this mediation means that individual subjectivity undergoes the test of a dual signification, which it is not entirely able to do (since it is inherent to the symbolic mediation embodying meaning itself in a dialectical fashion), but with regard to which it is always situated" (Côté 2023:27). Lest anyone think this is a botched translation from the French, in which the book was first published, the original is no more accessible (Côté 2021:34).

For this reader, one of the foremost merits of the book is that it allows us to discern the continuity in and the trajectory of Alexander's work. Though wide-ranging and changing over time both in terms of ontological and epistemological commitments

and in terms of empirical objects of inquiry, there is a clear logic in the development of Alexander's thinking about social life: internal and external critique of existing theories and traditions leads to new positions, which in turn engender new critical objections and subsequent adjustments. This is how theory development in general works, and Côté deftly demonstrates its various stages in the evolution of Alexander's cultural sociology. So deftly, in fact, that the whole thing almost looks preordained. Perhaps due to the dialectical way of thinking to which he seems beholden, Côté writes as if the concept of the civil sphere were the synthesis toward which Alexander's work has always inexorably moved. Concepts used for other purposes in Alexander's theorizing – notably performance, drama, and iconicity – are inscribed within the framework of civil sphere theory. Côté is thus able to declare that the contribution of iconicity to cultural sociology lies in “this relationship between the aesthetic dimension proper to icons in their material surface and the symbolic depth of a moral order within the civil sphere to which they are attached” (Côté 2023:112). There is in fact no mention of the civil sphere in Alexander's original publications on iconicity, social performance, and the dramatic (Alexander 2010; Alexander 2014; Alexander and Mast 2009). This is not to say that there can be no such connections, or that Alexander himself would object to the effort to establish them. But the connections have not been made in the work discussed by Côté, nor does Côté himself make the connections; he simply proceeds as if they have been made.

I would think of most of Alexander's recent ventures – civil sphere theory, performance theory, his work on drama, the concept of iconicity – as distinct albeit homogeneous pursuits, homogeneous in the original sense of being of the same extraction: at least in part, these are all offspring of the Strong Program in cultural sociology but they do not necessarily constitute the building blocks of a grand unified theory of social meaning under the aegis of the civil sphere.¹ Surely there are structures of meaning and processes of meaning-making out there that are not related to the cultural underpinnings of solidarity and democracy – the purview of civil sphere theory? Still, Côté's casual subsumption of all this under the concept of the civil sphere has made me think again about whether and how the various filaments in Alexander's work can be woven together into a whole cloth – a mixed-pattern, multicolored quilt, perhaps. To my mind, ambitious, wide-ranging theoretical work not necessarily leading, in the end, to one unified theory is not a bad thing. There are strong arguments – both empirical and theoretical, many of them to be found in Alexander's work – against the idea of such a unified theory of social meaning. But, as they say, to each their own.

That said, there is an area of overlap between Alexander's work on social performance, the dramatic, and the civil sphere that has not, I think, received the scrutiny it deserves: the interest in social integration. Common to these distinct approaches to different subjects is the notion that symbolic frameworks and social performances must, in order to be successful, reintegrate “fragmented meanings, actions and institu-

1 Alexander's work on what he calls “societalization” is a different case, in which there are clear and explicit points of contact with civil sphere theory. See Alexander (2018).

tions,” so as to provide “a new horizon of meaning for social actors who, having lost the sense of social and cultural circumstance, experience emotional anxiety and existential stress” (Alexander 2017:107; Côté 2023:115). This is a familiar notion: integration in response to the kind of disintegration which generations of social scientists and intellectuals have worried about, and associated with the dark side of modernity (Alexander 2013). The interest in what unites us as opposed to what drives us apart is, I suggest, the indivisible structural-functionalist remainder in Alexander’s work; this is what cannot be abandoned in Parsons after Parsons has been abandoned (cf. Côté 2023:100).

To be clear, this is not an objection. Not only is social integration an interest I share and a topic to which I have devoted a perhaps inordinate amount of time and energy (Enroth 2022). This is also a topic to which the social sciences and the humanities in general need to devote their attention at this time, a time when the center – whatever it was – no longer seems to hold and particularism and hyperpolarization run rampant. In relation to both Alexander and Côté, I would add two things. First, that we get a more nuanced picture of the dynamic – the dialectic, if you will – of integration and disintegration in civil sphere theory than we do in Alexander’s work on social performance and the dramatic, where the emphasis falls strongly and, it seems, more one-sidedly on integration. The strength of civil sphere theory is not least its forceful demonstration that social performances and symbols that disrupt existing visions of social integration and reveal the blind spots in those visions are just as essential to modern democratic societies as are performances of integration. Second, on this point, it may prove instructive to compare and contrast Alexander’s cultural sociology not only with familiar landmarks along the road he has himself traveled and that Côté has now faithfully retraced – Parsons, Durkheim, Bellah, Eisenstadt, and other sociological luminaries – but also with those parts of the tradition of critical theory on which both Alexander and Côté have little to say, especially the work of Adorno (cf. Enroth, forthcoming). For better and worse, Côté takes Alexander’s trajectory more or less as given, not exposing him to the thinkers, theories, and traditions he has himself deselected along the way. That may be both a strength and a weakness.

Henrik Enroth

Associate professor,
Linnaeus University

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2006) *The civil sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Alexander, J. C. (2010) “Iconic consciousness: The material feeling of meaning,” *Thesis Eleven* 103(1): 10–25.
 Alexander, J. C. (2013) *The dark side of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 Alexander, J. C. (2014) “The fate of the dramatic in modern society: Social theory and the theatrical avant-garde,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31(1): 3–24.

- Alexander, J. C. (2017) *The drama of social life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (2018) "The societalization of social problems: Church pedophilia, phone hacking, and the financial crisis," *American Sociological Review* 83(6): 1049–1078.
- Alexander, J. C., & Mast, J. L. (2009) "Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice: the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action," in J. C. Alexander, and J. L. Mast, eds. *Social performance: symbolic action, cultural pragmatics, and ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Côté, J-F. (2021) *La sociologie culturelle de Jeffrey C. Alexander*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Côté, J-F. (2023) *Jeffrey Alexander and cultural sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Enroth, H. (2021) "Populism and the particularization of solidarity: On the Sweden Democrats," in J. C. Alexander, P. Kivisto, G. Sciortino, eds. *Populism in the civil sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Enroth, H. (2022) *Political science and the problem of social order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Enroth, H. (forthcoming) *The crisis of liberal democracy: Toward an aesthetic theory of political life*.
- Enroth, H., & Henriksson, M. (2019) "The civil sphere and the welfare state," in J. C. Alexander, A. Lund, A. Voyer, eds. *The nordic civil sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.