

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER, *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, x + 296 p.

I want to compare parallels between cultural sociology and tetrasociology (Semashko, *Tetrasociology*, 2002 and 2003), two theories that have similarities and complement each other, while at the same time showing how new sociological theories in the United States and Russia emerge and intersect.

In the introduction of *The Meanings of Social Life* Alexander outlines principal meanings of cultural sociology. First, he demonstrates its necessity. He writes that men and women today are getting on with their lives without really knowing the causes, enveloped in the rhetoric of good and evil, friendship and enmity, God and country, civilization and chaos. These types of rhetorics are highly entrenched cultural structures (3-4). Second, he finds that what is essential for understanding cultural structures are relations between materialism and idealism, or material and ideal aspects (4). Third, psychoanalytic aspects are particularly relevant. Cultural structures are unconscious. In this respect, cultural sociology is a kind of psychoanalysis: its goal is to illuminate and render visible the social unconscious (4). Fourth, Alexander is aware of the dialectical meaning of cultural sociology and its context. (6). Saying that the biggest part of his scholarship has been devoted to a creation of “pure theory,” he stresses “this book is different. Its purpose is to lay out a research program for a cultural sociology and to show how this program can be concretely applied to some of principal concerns of contemporary life” (8).

In the first chapter, “The strong program in cultural sociology. Elements of a structural hermeneutics,” the author, together with Philip Smith, outlines the essential characteristics of this program. First of all, it attempts to separate cultural sociology, from the sociology of culture. Both approaches recognize the importance of culture for society; however, similarities are only superficial. At the structural level we find deep antinomies (12). What are these antinomies, in most general terms?

The weak program still dominates sociological studies of culture today; however, a tendency for cultural sociology, “strong program,” is budding within it. A hermeneutic project of “thick description” and cultural autonomy, championed in the work of Geertz (1964), Paul Ricoeur’s follower, is regarded as a first step along the way toward this program.

Alexander considers the recognition of autonomy of culture by cultural sociology as “the single most important quality of a strong program” (13). Alexander attempts to supplement the hermeneutics of particular with the hermeneutics of universal.

The strong program of cultural sociology can be characterized as pluralistic, allowing for autonomy of other social factors, and as interdisciplinary, synthetic, combining several scholarly approaches. Cultural sociology has a similarity with tetrasociology, although the former differs from the latter in that it focuses on autonomy of only one, cultural sphere, without taking into account the autonomousness of three other spheres of society (i.e. economic, political, and social). For this reason, cultural sociology does not tackle the issue of culture’s *measure* of autonomy in contrast with the *measures* of autonomy of other spheres. Tetrasociology posits *equal measures* (degrees) of autonomy of four social spheres, recognizing meanwhile that spheres’ *prioritization* (as fluctuations of *measures* of autonomy in one or another direction away from the point of equilibrium) *may vary* in different social conditions and periods. The scale of fluctuations of culture’s autonomy is neither larger nor smaller than the fluctuations of autonomy of other social spheres. Cultural sociology, limited by only one sphere, fails to reach the social ideal, whereas tetrasociology, which embraces all four spheres of society, sees the social ideal in social harmony between these spheres and classes of people employed in them.

The second chapter, “On the social construction of moral universals,” is devoted to the transformation of the Holocaust, “as the greatest evil of our time,” from a war crime, into a traumatic cultural drama. This is an excellent example of a finely accomplished cultural-sociological study.

The cultural construct of trauma is four-dimensional and has four elements: the material “base”—controlling the means of symbolic production; the coding of trauma as evil; weighting, “degrees of evil” because “normal evil and radical evil cannot be the same;” and narrating about the characteristics of evil, about what evil is, what the victims are, who is responsible for victims, what the consequences are, etc. The backbone of this construct is history, social time, filled with “the competition for symbolic control, and the structures of power and distribution of resources” (33). The essay’s conclusion is: “moral universalism rests on social processes that construct and channel cultural trauma” (84).

The elements of cultural construct have similarities with the structure of social resources in tetrasociology. Narrating is connected to the human resource, to people, their thoughts and emotions. Weighting is the informational resource in cultural context. Coding, as a classification, is akin to the organizational resource, organization of cultural meaning. The means of symbolical production, which form the material basis of cultural constructs, are akin to things, to technical means of the cultural sphere. The historical context of the cultural construct is social time as one of the fundamental dimensions of tetrasociology.

In the rest of the book, Alexander either elaborates on individual theoretical details of the cultural-sociological construct (chapter 3: “Cultural trauma and collective identity;” chapter 4: “A cultural sociology of evil”) or provides new examples of application of cultural sociology (chapter 5: “The discourse of American civil society;” chapter 6: “Watergate as democratic ritual;” chapter 7: “The sacred and profane information machine;” chapter 8: “Modern, anti, post, and neo: how intellectuals explain of ‘our time’”). Cultural sociology is first of all an American achievement, but it also has a global significance, because it provides a new approach to study of just one, but universal sphere of social life—culture. Our review touches on only a small part of the book’s rich theoretical and empirical content. On the whole, this book is a major attempt at a theoretical construction of the inner autonomous mechanism of culture as one of the four spheres of global reproduction.

Leo Semashko *Institute for Strategic Sphere (Tetrasociological) Studies, St. Petersburg, Russia*

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie