Introduction: Toward an Understanding of a Cultural Sociology

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In the preface of The Meanings of Social Life (2003), Jeffrey C. Alexander relates a brief but charged discussion he had with some colleagues in the field of sociology. The discussion takes place in a cafeteria line at the University of California. It is the mid-1980s. An assistant professor is coming up for tenure. While waiting for their food, the colleagues argue that the applicant’s research cannot be called sociology. Alexander asks to hear their arguments. He is told that the candidate is too concerned with the subjective framework of life. He is interested in how social structures should be interpreted. Consequently, he disregards their given nature. This precludes the most decisive elements of sociology, which are its socio-material explanations. According to the colleagues’ judgment, he who has abandoned the discipline is not eligible for the position. Alexander tests an argument: The applicant’s research is certainly different, but even so, isn’t it still distinctly sociological? Perhaps the assistant professor’s research could be considered an expression of a kind of “cultural sociology?” Alexander’s argument was not well received. Culture and sociology cannot be combined, his colleagues asserted. They are self-contradictory entities. Consequently, the suggestion was an intellectual absurdity. A sociology of culture – i.e., one that can explain culture – is clearly possible. But cultural sociology, on the other hand, is a joke. Alexander was laughed down in the cafeteria line. He had, the colleagues thought, made a fool of himself.
Purpose, outline, and hopes

In this anthology, texts by Jeffrey Alexander are presented in Swedish for the first time. The purpose is to introduce the cultural sociology that Alexander’s colleagues in the cafeteria line neither wanted to nor were able to understand. Naturally, it is our hope that this sociology will be read, discussed, and used in the Scandinavian context. The anthology begins with a manifesto written by Alexander and his colleague Philip Smith. Both sociologists co-founded the Center of Cultural Sociology with their colleague, Ron Eyerman, at Yale University. Under the heading, ”The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics,” they formulate a line of argumentation for a ”cultural sociology”. The manifesto is followed by five texts written by Alexander. These provide examples of the kind of work that such a sociology can do within contemporary areas of inquiry. In this introduction, we summarize the main features of Alexander’s cultural sociology. We also introduce the subsequent selection of texts that follow the manifesto. Our hope is to provide the reader with an instructive, preliminary understanding.

A cultural sociology

The starting point of cultural sociology is that social institutions and social actions – both decisive factors in sociological analysis – are always embedded in structures of meaning and in feelings. Institutions have ideological foundations that deeply mark how they organize, think, feel, create, change, and legitimate their activities. Regardless of the degree to which material circumstances and instrumental pursuits impose limitations on institutions and their actions, actors’ behaviors are always
guided by meanings and feelings.\textsuperscript{1} Meaning is, as it were, ubiquitous. It is present as a symbolic structure in our external environment. As individuals or groups, we can hardly avoid its presence. As we try to understand and deal with meaning, we are marked by it – even emotionally. However, institutions, too, must operate in relation to external symbolic structures. For instance, when, during a financial crisis, a bank has to deal with itself as an institution, it must simultaneously manage an external and broader symbolic structure. It has to relate to others’ opinions on giving bonuses to management. The bank must also relate to the public debate on the legitimacy of using welfare state funds to ensure a bank’s survival. Perhaps it must also have a response for people who feel the bank cares nothing for the common customer. But meanings and feelings also exist in the form of an internal environment. A bank has its own internal symbolic structures. This implies that actors understand and treat themselves as well as others in relation to both external and internal symbolic and socio-material conditions. How are bank employees to understand and relate to meaning-making and emotional expressions at the workplace, in relation to the opinions of the citizenry, in the broader sphere of civil society, and as the parents of children who wonder what is going on? There is, as noted, no world for people to live in where symbolic structures of meaning and feelings are not already present and active. This active presence permeates our understanding of all imaginable phenomena that surround our lives. As humans, we cannot see or think of anything – e.g., a place, a building, a piece of furniture, a work of art, a football player, an opera singer, an advertising sign, a neighbor, a politician, a dog, a work-life, or notions of love or justice – without already being embedded in meaning structures and feelings to which we must relate. And these structures and feelings are varyingly reflected on and understood resources that both limit and enable us. They may be based on
reproduced conventions. They may also constitute perquisites for changing how individuals’ and social groups’ social conditions are understood and represented. Ultimately, these conditions may change as well. ”If the world is itself based on collective understandings,” Alexander writes in an analysis of intellectuals, “then changing the world always involves, in some large part, changing these understandings in turn.” This insight can easily be transferred with its analytical understanding intact. A group of teachers will only accept a new curriculum if their understanding of the school conforms with that of the politicians, school bureaucrats, and pedagogues who have drawn up the new scheme. No rationality exists that is void of meanings and feelings that can serve as a vehicle for change. We can easily see parallels here, e.g., relations between an employer and employees, a coach and football players, a director and actors, a professor and graduate students, or intimate partners.

Philip Roth’s portrayal of a young man’s adolescence in a specific, contemporary setting in the novel *American Pastoral* (1997) illustrates the vision of cultural sociology in its lived form.

“Mr. Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college-educated Jewish sons: a father for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between, a father whose compound of ambitions, biases, and beliefs is so unruffled by careful thinking that he isn’t as easy to escape from as he seems. Limited men with limitless energy; men quick to be friendly and quick to be fed up; men for whom the most serious thing in life is to *keep going despite everything*. And we were their sons. It was our job to love them.”
Roth helps us see that conditions such as our personal economy, social position, education and human relationships are always embedded in meaning- and emotion-bearing symbolic structures. If a condition such as one’s personal economy were always unambiguously decisive in itself, all people in the same economic situation would live the same life with the same outcome. This cannot possibly be the case.

The explanation of Jewish sons’ upward mobility, referred to in the above quotation, cannot be reduced to a question of given, objective conditions. It must be sought through an understanding of the specifically functioning symbolic structure of normative expectations in which they had to live their lives. This does not mean that we should disregard material and social conditions. We must rather be concerned with the way in which such conditions are activated through the meaning-bearing symbolic structures and feelings in which they are embedded. As emphasized above, in addition to our understanding of this external environment, we must also pursue an understanding of the internal environment that caused the sons, more or less willingly, to internalize the expectations of the symbolic structures they experienced during their childhoods and adolescences. Explanation through understanding thus requires a twofold analytical insight. On the one hand, it requires an understanding of the unavoidable presence of an external symbolic structure, and on the other, an understanding of how this structure becomes (or does not become) an activating meaning structure and set of feelings in those actors whose lives are embedded in it.

We can further imagine that, in their adult lives, the Jewish sons were able to make use of such resources of meaning and feeling, such that these resources enabled them to look back and understand, even become reconciled with, how they once came into being. Perhaps they came to be attracted to Roth’s novels,iv which enabled the ‘aha’
experience of recognition. Novels, too, can be interpreted as structures of meaning and feelings. As such, they offer approaches to the symbolic structures that embed socio-material conditions, patterns of human relationships, and individuals’ and groups’ different forms of self-understanding. Consequently, a reader’s understanding of a novel may become a rationally and emotionally informed resource of possibilities for self-insight and change. Cultural sociology teaches us that both explanations of the socio-material world and processes of change must be mediated by an understanding of meaning and feelings, something that Roth’s text illustrates very clearly to the appreciative reader. The Jewish sons were not “only” poor and placed in subordinate social positions. They also lived in, and let themselves be influenced by, a culture that we can theoretically comprehend as an activating structure of meaning and feelings. It was precisely this insight that Alexander’s colleagues in the cafeteria line were neither willing nor able to understand. Tragically, they regarded themselves as lacking in meaning – that is, as being meaningless. However, their laughter gave them away. It is not possible to laugh together without being caught in the same web of meanings and feelings.

It is presumably often the case that we live our lives without really knowing why. We are guided by our gut feeling, but we do not necessarily understand the strong presence of symbolic structures in our lives. This is precisely why it is the basic task of cultural sociology to attempt to elucidate the influence of these frequently unconscious cultural dimensions. Claiming that people feel, think and act without any deeper knowledge of the workings of the decisive forces in life is obviously nothing new. If anything, this is precisely what a sociologist seeks to know. On the contrary, what fascinates Alexander is that these forces are not unilaterally forced
upon us from the outside. We often respond to them with enthusiasm. Doing so just feels right. Nevertheless, we cannot really explain why. The answer is, as observed, that the symbolic structures have a lived interior in which they become meaningful. This is a matter of a meaningfulness to which we willingly respond. It is what causes people in totalitarian movements to march or fanatical soccer fans to want to hurt those who support the wrong team. Energies that link external symbolic structures and meaning-making interiors in this way are frightening. But the same sort of energies may also cause a person to, in the name of justice and solidarity, willingly affiliate with civil rights movements such as that of Martin Luther King Jr., or participate in the struggle to challenge restricted notions of women’s rights and capabilities. It became the task of the Jewish sons to love their limited fathers with unlimited energy. And, in this way, they were set in social motion. They became what their fathers were not. At the same time, they remained Jewish sons with a specific, symbolically structured life course and history. The relation between external symbolic structures and internal meaningfulness can undoubtedly have many significations. There is no given content, and similarly no given outcomes. Not even phenomena such as evil and trauma have given meanings. They come into existence as activating meaning structures and feelings. “We do not mourn mass murder,” Alexander wrote in the preface of *The Meanings of Social Life*, ”unless we have already identified with the victims […].”

We are now in a position to formulate the most fundamental task of cultural sociology: to elucidate symbolic structures and their interiors – lived meaningfulness – as an explanatory force. This sociology is, according to Alexander, a kind of ”social psychoanalysis.” It is guided by the ambition to elucidate the socio-
culturally unconscious. However – and this is a decisive insight – we cannot escape from the symbolic structures’ web of meanings. There is no position to take up beyond meaning and feelings, because if everything carries meanings, then the very act of elucidation does as well. By exposing the symbolic structures through which we live, we are in a better position to deal with questions concerning who we are, how we came into existence, what we want, and why. Such questions can be given meaningful and insightful answers. Maybe we can and want to reconcile ourselves with what we have become and what we are. On the other hand, it may become clear that change is also necessary. Even our understanding of what is defendable as good is charged with meaning and feelings. And this also applies to what we perceive as limiting and enabling in our social lives. Thus, an understanding of symbolic structures and their causal force cannot undo the presence of such structures. It can only help us better understand their strong presence in our lives. Perhaps we may find good reasons to defend them. Alternatively, we may become mobilized through our legitimate longing for change. But again, it is impossible to deconstruct symbolic structures in the belief that we could lead a rational life beyond them, i.e., one free of meaning and feelings. It is the conviction of cultural sociology that it is meaning-making that defines humans and makes society possible. Therefore, an understanding of humankind and society must inevitably include the significance of a culture that supports meaning. Consequently, a cultural sociology worthy of its name cannot analyze any social phenomenon without being interested in an omnipresent, man-made, and activating culture. We need culture to transcend the banalities of material life. Symbolic structures can thus be part of what is good. Alexander is not afraid of such expressions. We cannot dispense with meaningful narratives if we are to improve ourselves and our society. We also need them to endure misfortunes and
tragedies. “We need,” writes Alexander, “to divide the sacred from the profane if we are to pursue the good and protect ourselves from evil.” It is part of a democratic and pluralistic society to understand this insight and manage it well. When Martin Luther King Jr. had his dream, it was precisely this idea he understood and served in an insightful, justifiable, and successful manner. The success of the Civil Rights Movement was based on the fact that he brought together Afro-Americans’ struggle and the democratic battle for the equal worth of all people. Through the staging of a cultural and common yearning, emotional identification emerged between different social groups and members of society. King managed to touch on the things that touched him and others. Thus, in cultural sociology, critical theoretical understanding and empirical analysis can be combined with defending the normatively desirable. As we shall see, Alexander has also formulated a culture-sociological theory for understanding what is required of successful action.

The basic tenets of cultural sociology (unavoidable meaningfulness) and its task (to elucidate through [new] meaning-making the symbolic and socio-material structures that shape our lives) presuppose recognition of what Alexander and Smith call “the autonomy of culture.” This autonomy has two related significations. First, symbolic structures have an intrinsic analytic value in the sense that each culture-sociological analysis must begin by describing and exploring meaning-bearing symbolic structures. Thus, an analysis of the Civil Rights Movement does not begin with Martin Luther King Jr.’s social position or income. It begins with the meanings and feelings mobilized by Dr. King, his co-workers, and supporters. Second, this means that the intrinsic value of culture constitutes a causal force that acts through an understanding of the interior environment and management of those meanings and
feelings. Accordingly, they become explanatory when we understand culture as an activating structure of meaning and feelings. It is these two significations in combination that determine the culture’s autonomy in a cultural-sociological analysis of society.

Now, we wonder if we don’t hear some readers raising objections. What happened to the effective force of the material in our social lives? Isn’t Alexander ultimately an idealist? Alexander’s answer would be that the material aspect is clearly important. But again, the material is always embedded in a symbolic structure that activates meaning and feelings. If we, in the name of justice, wish to do something about economic inequality, this inequality must be made meaningful in a way that enables a justice-promoting policy. The material aspect per se does not raise questions about inequality or justice. The same applies to conditions such as social positions, education, and relationships. Social position cannot be understood without considering the meaning that is enabled by a symbolic structure. Any understanding must contain the meaning and feeling lived by the individual who holds a given position. Moreover, education cannot be understood without an appreciation of the – limiting or enabling – meaning and feeling that determine the significance of education for different actors. This, of course, also applies to relationships. The impact of relationships always interacts with the significations supplied to them by the relation between symbolic structures and interior environments.

Alexander and Smith’s program thus amounts to an argument for what culture sociology should signify when understood as "cultural sociology." This line of argumentation is not neutral. It is openly critical and normative. It relates to classical
social theory and to contemporary positions on the field of culture theory. It recognizes the influence of the classics in sociology, especially the late Emile Durkheim and his sociology of religion, and in anthropology, not the least Clifford Geertz’s concept of culture as an activating system of meaning and his understanding of "thick description." It shows a deep gratitude to Wilhelm Dilthey’s insight that social structures, if they are explanatory, have an inner significance to the actors themselves. It is deeply aware of the complex and contradictory nature of social and cultural life, not least of the binary character of symbolic structures. If there are people in favor of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, then there are also those who are against it. Informed by Ferdinand de Saussure, Alexander and Smith claim in their manifesto that binary opposition is "a prerequisite of the discourse rather than merely a description of its historically specific form." Consequently, Alexander does not only write about the possibility of good. He has also formulated a cultural sociology of evil. A cultural appreciation of evil, he emphasizes, is at least as important as attempts to understand good. The argument for a cultural sociology is also chiseled out partly in opposition to the British school of cultural studies, Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology, and Michel Foucault’s work and research on the production and reception of culture. These alternatives, rhetorically summarized as a "sociology of culture," are considered to be too lacking in a multi-dimensional understanding of the autonomy of culture. Too quickly and unequivocally, they reduce our understanding of culture as a lived system of meaning to instrumental reason, thus becoming one-dimensional expressions of capitalism, class reproduction, control technology, and culture production without any interest in the significance of meaning- and feeling-bearing subjects. “People use culture,” write Alexander and Smith, “but they do not seem to really care”. However, the purpose of the strong
program is not to discredit other ways of analyzing culture. Sociology, Alexander and Smith maintain, must permit theoretical pluralism and a lively debate. The program should therefore be read as an argument for the importance of creating a discursive space for a cultural sociology. Naturally, such a position does not rule out a continuing discussion of what culture sociology can and should be now and in the future.

The information machine, multiculturalism and successful action

As noted, the text on the strong program of culture sociology is followed by five other, strategically selected texts. These texts demonstrate how cultural sociology can contribute – theoretically, empirically, and normatively – to an analysis of various areas of inquiry that are decisive for social life. "The Sacred and Profane Information Machine" is the stage-setting par excellence of cultural sociology’s task. Just as the manifesto, it was taken from The Meanings of Social Life (2003). The danger of modern technology is not, as Alexander puts it, "the flattening out of human-consciousness" or "its enslavement to economic or political reality." "To the contrary," he goes on to say, its dangers are made real “because technology is lodged in the fantasy of salvation and apocalypse." Thus, in trying to understand a modern, technological society we cannot reduce it to something completely rational and technical. To be sure, it is an empirical fact that our society depends on the computer. But our frequently contradictory understanding of the computer remains to be interpreted and explained. In this respect, neither the classical attempts of social theory nor the representations of popular culture are good enough. According to Alexander’s analysis, neither is sufficiently aware of the interlaced meanings and
feelings, or rather fantasies, they produce with strong tendencies towards either the entirely fabulous or the dreadfully appalling. It is, thus, up to cultural sociology to show that technology and technical awareness are inevitably embedded in and activated by the meaning and feeling production of symbolic structures. Given such an insight, we are in a position to better understand and deal with technology as a material form.

The analysis of the sacred and profane information machine is followed by three texts dealing with how we should understand social integration in our multicultural society. These texts are consecutive chapters in Alexander’s seminal work *The Civil Sphere* (2006). His analysis of the multicultural thus constitutes an important part of understanding civil society. To Alexander, civil society is not primarily a number of associations in which citizens in a democratic society are active during their leisure time. Nor is Alexander primarily concerned with how civil society can be differentiated from the state, the market, and the family’s sphere of intimacy. In cultural sociological terms, civil society is construed as a civil sphere, i.e., as an activating symbolic structure of meaning and feelings. The following quotation from the introduction to *The Civil Sphere* provides a preliminary understanding.

“We need a new concept of civil society as a civil sphere, a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time. Such a sphere relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle, not experience, because of our putative commitment to a common secular faith.”

In “Integration between Difference and Solidarity,” Alexander formulates a point of departure for understanding the multicultural society. He does this by listening to and
challenging both conservative and radical critics. Conservative critics see the multicultural society as a manifestation of the decline of the universal. They hold that there are no longer any aspirations for society as a whole, e.g., an American identity. For the representatives of radical identity politics, multiculturalism can only mean that each ethnic group advocates policies built on that group’s way of life, identity pursuits, and special interests. It is identity politics such as these, the conservatives claim, that destroy all our chances to build a community. To the radical critics, on the other hand, yearning for community cannot be anything other than a clear manifestation of the oppressive majority’s prescriptive normality. Paradoxically enough, the protagonists also have things in common. They blame each other for the developments. Neither of them believes in the feasibility of a large-scale, shared social solidarity. Alexander chooses to challenge both positions. The conservatives, he maintains, refuse to see that the world is unfair. At the same time, he respects the importance of searching for some commonality. The radicals, on the other hand, are unwilling to recognize that a number of positive changes are underway, such as ethnic integration in schools and on the labor market, social mobility, and an increasing proportion of mixed marriages. Just like the conservatives, they shut their eyes to ongoing efforts to promote community. In addition, both parties are unable to see the weaknesses in their own argumentation. Nor can they see their opponents’ fundamental arguments. They are even less able to imagine that something held in common can be integrated with something that is different and autonomous. The world is not fair, but this, according to Alexander, does not preclude the existence of justifiable, joint pursuits. It is in this dynamic field – between ideals and reality – that the civil sphere can develop and reconstitute itself. This is the solution formulated by Alexander in the two texts following "Integration
between Difference and Solidarity.” The understanding of the civil sphere, then, rests on a valid, theoretical and normative foundation. On the empirical level, however, there is a considerable amount of uncertainty. No unambiguous outcomes are to be found there. The civil sphere’s activating symbolic structure tends neither to imply total failure nor to imply complete success. “Civil society is not and has never been integrated, cohesive, and fully solidary”. At best, autonomous and efficacious individuals will develop who have a sense of solidarity with other members of society. It is the importance of this kind of Utopian endeavor that Alexander wants to bring to our attention.

In ”Encounters with the Other,” Alexander endeavors to change our understanding of the relation between ethnic groups’ right to be different and efforts to achieve community. He is convinced that we need a better theoretical understanding of social integration. Integration must be normatively justifiable and able to capture the complexities and possibilities of real life. With this as his starting point, Alexander introduces the concept of ”incorporation,” which deals with stigmatized out-groups’ relation to the core group of the majority society. We can easily imagine, at least as analytic categories, examples such as Afro-Americans in the US or Muslims in Sweden. The question arises, how can the Utopian promise of equality, solidarity, and respect between different members of society be realized?

In the third and final text on the multicultural society – ”The three Pathways to Incorporation” – Alexander formulates a theory of social integration. He does this by defining and problematizing three forms of incorporation, namely ”assimilation”, ”hyphenation,” and ”multicultural incorporation.” Once again, it is crucial to
understand and deal with these three forms of incorporation theoretically, empirically, and normatively. Theoretically, these forms should be considered ideal types. They constitute deliberately simplified analytic tools with which we can distinguish, study, and relate to different forms of – precisely – incorporation. In practice – considered as empirical processes – they are naturally not as pure. In their lived forms, they may be mixed. As we shall see, tendencies toward assimilation are found in hyphenations. A certain development of hyphenation may come close to multicultural incorporation. In addition, an individual may be involved in several forms of incorporation at the same time. This implies that these forms of incorporation, more or less mixed up and with different degrees of success, may work in parallel – in individual lives and groups, on different arenas, and in society at large. Thus, the three forms of incorporation do not refer to a given evolutionary order beginning with assimilation, passing through hyphenation and finally transitioning into multicultural incorporation. As already noted, however, the absence of such a predetermined order does not prevent one form of incorporation from contributing to movement toward another. But such a direction of movement is not given in advance. For example, the emergence of multicultural incorporation may appear so threatening that it regresses to strivings for assimilation and hyphenation. The roads to incorporation, therefore, must be considered ongoing processes in time and space. They concern constant struggles taking place in the civil sphere. They are meaning structures and feelings that activate different practices working both for and against assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism. Theoretically defining and studying these forms of incorporation are tasks for cultural sociology. According to Alexander, their analytical usefulness applies to all national experiences. Importantly, however, the forms in question are also embedded
in and guided by a normative assessment. As we shall see, multicultural incorporation is qualitatively different from assimilation and hyphenation. This means, as will be clarified below, that Alexander finds multicultural incorporation to be superior to the other two forms of incorporation. But this does not mean that assimilation and hyphenation are to be understood as unequivocally indefensible. For all their shortcomings, they are roads toward incorporation as well.

Assimilation is the most common form of incorporation. It means that a core group permits, or even encourages, an out-group to take part in society’s public life. Participation, however, is subject to two conditions. When participating in areas such as school and work, members of the out-group must leave their own identity in the private sphere. If the out-group consists of Jews or Muslims, to use religion as an example, their children may go to the same schools as the core group’s children, but they must leave all signs of their own religious affiliation at home. Consequently, there is an additional condition for assimilation. The out-group is being subjected to a civic education provided by the core group’s institutions. The purpose is to turn the members of the out-group into citizens whose ways of life and fundamental values correspond to those of the core group. However, in striving to create a national identity, assimilation counteracts the realization of a more profound democratic promise, namely to recognize the right to be different, even in the public eye. The original attributes of the out-group are not visible, sought-after, useful, or acknowledged. Consequently, differences cannot be absorbed and acknowledged in a new, wider and more diverse community. There is, thus, a great risk that the out-group’s original attributes will remain stigmatized. According to Alexander, this is why assimilation is a form of incorporation that offers a normatively unsatisfactory
solution. However, our understanding of assimilation must not be reduced to a question of downright exclusion, institutional dominance, and repression. After all, the division between the public and the private enables out-groups to participate in social life. We cannot rule out the possibility that encounters with core group members may serve to challenge and change negative representations of one’s own out-group. Children of the core group can learn to appreciate children from out-groups, because, through means of identification as children, they seem "like us." In addition, out-group members may develop successful ways of representing their own, otherwise stigmatizing ethnicity. If such things do come about, assimilation may open the door to the theoretical model’s second form of incorporation: hyphenation.

As a concept, hyphenation is closely related to the meaning of the term “melting-pot,” a process in which individuals from different nations and ethnic groups are integrated into a new and more coherent identity category. Such a process implies that attributes of the out-groups receive a certain amount of acknowledgment from the core group. Naturally, this requires that out-groups are allowed to bring their identity out of the private sphere and into the public one. It also requires the emergence of mutual exchanges of understanding between the core group and the out-group. Core group members may then come to interpret the members of the out-group as more similar to themselves than they once thought. Only then do they have a real chance of realizing that there are positive attributes to be embraced. The process can be reversed as well. Out-groups with a recognized place in the public sphere may also be attracted to what the core group’s way of life has to offer. In this way, for instance, the American dream can be intertwined with aspects of
immigrants’ ways of life, attributes, and identities. A symbolic solidarity emerges that enables, say, Irish-Americans to celebrate both their Irishness and American Independence Day. Film stars, to use yet another example from Alexander, no longer need to change their original first names to American-sounding stage names. Thus, hyphenation implies that the out-group’s original identity is modified so that it merges with the core group’s identity, which, in turn, changes somewhat as well.

Although Alexander finds hyphenation more normatively attractive than assimilation, he is still critical. The hierarchical relation between the core group and the out-group tends to remain, even if incorporation takes place in the form of hyphenation. This form of incorporation, too, is based on asymmetrical relations. Because as the majority, the core group shares more values and has more power, it is this group that judges and may reappraise the attributes of the out-group in question. An artist can keep his/her original name only if it merges well into the structure of meaning and feelings that activates the core group audience. It is for precisely this reason, maintains Alexander, that hyphenation often remains too similar to the logic of assimilation. On the other hand, if the identity and attributes of the out-groups receive recognition to the extent that they are accepted at face value and in their own right, then the process of hyphenation has come very close to what is meant by multicultural incorporation. This can happen. But we can also imagine that such a process could frighten the core group or, perhaps more commonly, subgroups within it. Multicultural incorporation could then be pushed back, and society becomes increasingly closed off. As we have suggested, struggles in the civil sphere are dynamic and complex, and their outcomes always remain contingent. The process can move in more or less normatively desirable directions, however, at the same
time, it is not difficult to recall historical situations in which assimilation has been rejected, only to be replaced by pure repression manifested in symbolic, material, or even physical violence.

As the reader may have already realized, the definition of multicultural incorporation starts from the limitations of assimilation and hyphenation. Multicultural incorporation makes room for out-groups’ identities and attributes, so that they can be evaluated in their own right. Such identities and attributes should not be hidden, denied, transformed, or eliminated. On the contrary, they should be put forward as something desirable. One of Alexander’s examples concerns the Afro-American identity, or ”blackness,” as a recognized and sought-after beauty ideal in the fashion world. Multicultural incorporation is, thus, no longer a question of inclusion. It is a realization of diversity. It is a matter of providing out-group members a real opportunity to openly and reassuringly introduce themselves to and live with others who understand, tolerate, and publicly acknowledge them. In this way, a mutual integration of difference is made possible. “In assimilation and hyphenation,” writes Alexander in “The three Pathways to Incorporation”, ”the particular is universalized. In multiculturalism, the universal is particularized”. Multicultural incorporation thus rests on the right to be different and integrated. According to Alexander, the right to be valued on the basis of difference does not imply a weakening of the common obligations of the civil sphere. It is a matter of sharing with others one’s conviction about the right to be different. Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, etc., live side by side in their shared conviction about the importance of acknowledging each other’s different qualities. To be sure, the individual’s right to autonomy has always been uncertain though fundamentally intertwined with a
feeling that all individuals belong to the same humanity, a humanity carried by
shared feelings of solidarity for our differences as well as our commonalities.\textsuperscript{xxv}

Multiculturalism is thus a Utopia full of hope – not of despair.

Theoretically defined and normatively sought-after in this way, the question is where
multicultural incorporation as an empirical process is going. It will hardly solidify as
a lived condition of shared respect for an unchanging difference. Instead, this
mutually respected and recognized difference may become the germ of
identifications that transgress the group. It is in this “seemingly paradoxical manner,”
writes Alexander, that ”common experiences are created that transcend the discrete
communities composing civil society”.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Fixed boundaries between the core group
and out-groups can, thus, be demolished. Notions of the particular and the universal
can then be intertwined. ”Symmetrical hybridity” may be the possible and desirable
solution of the time. Multicultural incorporation is, as mentioned, a theoretical
formulation, an ideal type based on a normative ideal, an ethical preference with
real-life hopes. In ”Encounters with the Other”, Alexander formulates the intertwined
solidarity and autonomy of the common identity:

“Only when subjective ties are thickly and deeply transformed can collective identity be altered and
social solidarity expanded in a powerful way. Only such authentic recognition of a common humanity
can produce the intertwining of solidarity and autonomy that marks developed civil societies, and only
it can lay the basis for the democratic political organizations that depend on this civil solidarity”.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

And, thus, we are back where we started. The theoretical, empirical and normative
understanding of multicultural incorporation combines the best and replaces the
worst of the conservative and the identity politics positions. This incorporation
requires twofold compliance. While the core group’s dominance structure opens the
door to recognition of and dialogue with the out-groups’ differences, these groups,
too, must develop their own internal civil structures, if they have not already done so.
Furthermore, an open dialog is required in which both parties can learn from and
respectfully challenge each other. But not even this is enough. Both the core group
and each out-group must be able to challenge itself in the light of the other. Mutually
obliging attitudes are necessary. New representations of the groups and their
relations are needed. There may also be a need for social movements, support from
the media, good examples, reforms, support in the law, and new social institutions.
The outcome of the civil sphere as a symbolic structure is, as previously emphasized,
ever completely settled. It is a relentless process of threats and possibilities.

In the conclusive and most extensive contribution to this anthology – “Cultural
Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy” – Alexander
formulates a theory of what makes successful individual and collective actions
possible. This work is taken from the anthology Social Performance (2006).
“Cultural Pragmatics” is the name of a culture-sociological theory of performance
based on similarities between performances in society and on the stage. In this
theory of action, Alexander not only transcends the division between structure and
action, he also provides us with an understanding of the importance of symbolic
structures for the chance to bring about integration and social change. He does this,
as noted above, by elucidating what successful performances require. In so doing, he
is able to show that the rational trends of contemporary society have in no way
exhausted the need for symbolic forms of expression and communication. Such
forms still leave their mark on how we encounter, understand, and represent our own
lives and the lives of others. Consequently, our contemporary society is imbued with ritualistic activities and behaviors. “Ritual effectiveness”, writes Alexander, “energizes the participants and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connections of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant ‘community’ at large”.xxix However, one decisive starting point of the theory of cultural pragmatics is that successful symbolic communication has been made more difficult. In simpler forms of social organization, people’s ways of living, believing, and working are very similar. The components required for successful performance are then, to use Alexander’s term, ”fused”. This means that symbolic references, the contents of performance, actors, the audience, symbolic means of production, stage-setting, and power relations interact and confirm one another more or less unconsciously. In such circumstances, it is easier to perform successfully. The rituals are taken for granted, and they hold us up. They are part and parcel of the participants’ common way of life. In increasingly segmented and differentiated societies, the constituent elements of social performance become more and more defused. Thus, what one approach to life might reject maybe favored by those holding another approach. Performing successfully becomes increasingly difficult if one wishes to reach out to people other than those whose lives, conditions, and values conform to one’s own. In an increasingly complex society, successful performance must symbolically re-fuse what has been defused. The theory of cultural pragmatics thus defines successful performances in obviously segmented and differentiated societies in terms of re-fusing what has been defused. Such successful performances that re-fuse lived differences are like rituals. Thus, in Alexander’s own words, the theory attempts to ”explain how the integration of particular groups and
sometimes even whole collectivities can be achieved through symbolic communications, while continuing to account for cultural complexity and contradictions, for institutional differentiation, contending social power, and segmentation”. In our view, if there is a basic interest that guides Alexander’s cultural sociology, it is precisely this: to reconcile the right to acknowledged difference with the need for mutual respect and the pursuit of community. It is no coincidence that, as we are finishing this introduction, Alexander is publishing a book on Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign.

**Back in the cafeteria line**

We have learned from the bassist and composer Dave Holland that the essence of a jazz group is celebration of the group’s collective soul, spirit, and force. This requires, he points out, musicians with their own distinctive styles, ideas, and concepts. Thus, it is encountering the other’s difference that makes a coherent form of musical expression possible. In jazz, shared intentions *and* individual distinctive character are fused into a polyphonic, swinging whole. We can hear this musicality in Alexander’s clear-cut voice and in his project for meaning making, justice, and solidarity. We hear it in his analysis of the information machine, in his understanding of the multicultural society and in his theory of cultural pragmatics. At the same time, the sociology community is segmented and differentiated. We are back in the cafeteria line. A quarter of a century has passed, and sociology appears to be tired. It needs to be revitalized. When we put our ears to the ground, we seem to hear a cultural sociology that is increasingly swinging in unison with the emerging spirit of our time. Remember that cultural sociology, too, is a symbolic structure for meaning-
making possibilities. As such, it challenges each reader through the way it relates to what makes a justifiable society possible. As Joyce Carol Oates brashly writes in her *Journal*: "There is nothing inherently better about writing against instead of for, and it is even more sophisticated to be for since that is difficult and will not seem, to shallow people, sophisticated at all."xxxiii

**Literature**


Trondman, Mats, "Disowning Knowledge: To be or not to be 'the Immigrant' in Sweden", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies Volume 29 No. 3*, London: Routledge, 2006.


For an empirical application of this understanding, see Lund, 2008.


Roth, 2005, p. 12.

In The Civil Sphere, Alexander himself writes about Philip Roth: "By its own construction at least, the literary career and real life of Philip Roth present a mirror of the changing Jewish position in American society, both in the sense of reflecting it and providing an opportunity for reflection upon it" (2006, p. 533).

Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 12.


Alexander, 2003, p. 4.

Alexander, 2003, p. 4.

The reader who is interested in Alexander’s theory of successful action as formulated in the theory of "cultural pragmatics,” should also read his analysis of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in The Civil Sphere, 2006, pp. 265-391. In the same monograph, he carries out similar analyses of the Women’s Liberation Movement (pp. 235-264) and the Reform Jewish Movement (pp. 459-547).

For a deeper understanding, see Alexander’s theory of "cultural trauma”, 2004, pp. 1-31.


For a more comprehensive introduction to understanding the civil sphere, see Alexander 2006, pp. 13-55. See also Trondman, 2009a. For attempts to apply these thoughts empirically, see Trondman, 2009b, 2010.

Alexander, 2006, p. 4.

For a more convincing empirical proof of this, see Alexander & Smelser, 1999, pp. 3-18.


Alexander, 2006b, p. 452.

Readers interested in achieving a deeper understanding of this line of argumentation are referred to Alexander’s article “Three Models of Culture and Society Relations: Toward an Analysis of Watergate” in Action and Its Environment, 1988, pp. 153-174.

xxviii For an empirical application of this theory, see Mast, 2006, pp. 115-145.
xxix Alexander, 2006a, p. 29-30.
xxx Alexander, 2006a, p. 31.
xxxi The title of the book is The Performance of Politics: Obama’s Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power.
xxxii See the cover of Dave Holland Big Band’s CD "What Goes Around,” ECM Records, 2002.