Theory

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Last Call from Brazil

This is the last issue of Theory before the World Conference of the ISA in Gothenborg. The *Newsletter* contains 8 contributions and an announcement from our presidents about the new board of the Research Committee on Sociological Theory. While the first four contributions (Chernilo, Heinich, Friese, Boatcă & Costa) are quite regular, the last 3 are slightly different. As outgoing editors, we asked Neil Gross, the new editor of *Sociological Theory*, for some personal reflections on his gate keeping and agenda setting functions. The last two pieces are about Jeffrey Alexander, our 'founding father'. Neil Smelser pays a tribute to his

supervisee, while Alexander offers a preview of his forthcoming book on Obama.

For the last 4 years, the Newsletter was produced at the University Research Institute of Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ) which, not unlike contemporary capitalism, is facing a rather serious crisis (please sign our Open Letter online http://www.iuperj.br). We cannot close our shop without thanking Claudia Boccia, our dedicated secretary who dutifully chose the color of the *Newsletter* and made it fit for printing. Although we are convinced that Rio is more beautiful than Sydney, we wish the new editors from down under, Craig Browne and Paul Bones, good luck. See you in Sweden!

Frédéric Vandenberghe
José Maurício Domingues

On the Relationships between Social Theory and Natural Law

The book I am currently writing, provisionally entitled *Natural Law and the Normative Foundations of Modern Social Theory*, seeks to explore the relationships between modern social theory and natural law theory. Social theory is conventionally understood as the intellectual outlook that, from the early nineteenth century, sought to found an increasingly autonomous science of the social with which to explicate the rise of modernity. Natural law, for its part, has been conceived of as a long-standing normative perspective that is devoted to the determination of absolute moral standards with which to correct the normative imperfections of all kinds of socio-juridical arrangements (d'Entrèves 1970).

Indeed, social theory's interest in socio-historical and normative variation does not seem to be easily connected with natural law's concerns with supra-historical moral standards – and I am not of the view that in natural law we are going to find the master key with which to solve all of social theory's present problems. But I am equally convinced that a reassessment of the relationship between the two traditions can help us rethink the always problematic relationships between social theory's descriptive and normative registers.

If we look back to the origins of modern social theory, however, it is arguably the case its classics did engage with natural law, although they were confident that they had succeeded in breaking with it. This is how Marx explored natural law in the form of a critique of Hegel and Adam Smith, whereas Durkheim did likewise via a revision of Rousseau and Montesquieu. Either way, the underlying presupposition was that as social theory emerged as the critical heir of the Enlightenment, its roots into natural law were already definitively severed by the end of the eighteenth century – and thence their mutual interconnections could remain largely unexplored.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that by the mid-twentieth century two mutually conflicting views came to dominate this field of enquiry. On the one hand, and from the outside of social theory, the argument was made that its (lack of) intellectual worth depended mostly upon its (dis)continuity with the tradition of natural law (Löwith 1964, Strauss 1974 – and Chernilo 2010 for further discussion). On the other side, from within sociology, a view started to emerged for which the rise of social theory could be explicated almost no reference to natural law (Aron 1965, Giddens 1971). Both views are equally untenable because whereas for the former social theory is just natural law writ-large, for the latter social theory is explicated thanks to a rather mythical view of 'Enlightenment creationism'. I shall try to offer an alternative account of the rise and main features of modern social theory that takes into account its debt to natural law without, in the same move, dissolving social theory into old metaphysics.

There are two main claims to be pursued throughout the book. The first *methodological* proposition offers a different way to study the relationships between the two traditions. Rather than the mutually conflicting arguments of the radical opposition and unproblematic continuity between natural law and social theory, I advance the claim that their interconnections can be best described under the figure of the *Aufhebung*: the conservation and carrying forward of natural law themes and concerns into modern social theory. The latter explicitly tries to overcome, but in so doing also constantly reintroduces issues and preoccupations that have been central to the former. The sec-

ond argument is more *substantive* and suggests that, insofar as it remains interested in understanding all the socio-cultural variation to be empirically found in modernity, social theory is bound to find always more sophisticated justifications for the universalistic presuppositions on the *ultimate unity of the human species* and the *fundamental equality of all human beings*. And these are precisely the kind of presuppositions that are central to, and have been inherited from, the tradition of natural law.

One key task that social theory can perform in contemporary society lies in its ability to translate traditional concerns of the natural-law tradition on justice, sociability, reason and rights into formats that are acceptable to modern social life: what is it that makes social life social, do our actions have ulterior yet immanent meaning, are we still able to discern one society as more just than another and what, at the end, constitutes the core of our common humanity.

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Daniel Chernilo

About "Social Construction"

Hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. So is intellectual hell. As proof, the destiny of "social construction", two words that were once illuminating, but are blinding today.

Long ago Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published in the U.S. *The Social Construction of Reality*. That was in 1966 (the book would be translated into French only twenty years later). Publication after publication, today's scholars are still discovering that reality is not confined to the alternative between a transcendent nature, all-powerful and a little frightening, and an individual subjectivity that tries to overcome its own impotence. Yes indeed, in between, there are institutions, collectives, norms, categories, cultures, all these things laden with historicity and contextuality that remained largely invisible because they cannot be detected through speculation but only through empirical descriptions, investigations, fieldwork.

Exactly one year later, a young French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, asserted in *De la grammatologie* (translated into English in 1976) that there exists something between the world and its representation, something one can call "sign" (be it verb or letter, speech or writing), which possesses its own force. Once it comes to the fore of our experience, it will allow us to "deconstruct" what we know, what we believe, by introducing more and more mediation – text, text, text ! – between us and the world, between us and the texts.

Thickness of the social, opacity of the sign; thus were born the twin approaches that would revolutionize academia in the next generation: sociological "constructivism" and Derridean "deconstruction". The latter will find its turf in literature departments of American campuses and in cultural studies and come to its head in the so-called "postmodern" movement, which remains fashionable across the Atlantic (while our "structuralism" is now largely *dépassé* in France). As for "social construction", it flourishes in our departments of sociology, whose numbers have dramatically risen in a generation under the combined effect of political activism and administrative regulations. In short, today, everything is "deconstructed" on American campuses, whereas in our faculties of sociology everything is "socially constructed" – from science to camembert, from politics to football, from gender to sexuality.

The first problem with "social construction" is that it has become much more than a mere conception: an ideological flag, a slogan, aimed primarily at rallying supporters in the struggle between clans that organizes the intellectual world (which is also, I guess, "socially constructed"). Say "socially constructed", and you'll be part of the in crowd.

The second problem is that as it became more radical, it also became more stupid. The pretention that everything is socially constructed (a generation ago, everything used to be "political") reduces experience to a single dimension. Instead of a resource, social construction should become a topic. We should investigate the degree to which it may appear to the actors as more or less "natural" or "social", describe the resources on which they rely upon in order to support this perception, and study the uses they make of it.

The third problem, finally, is that this conception, which pretends to be anti-naturalistic, is, in fact, profoundly naturalistic, since it is underpinned by a critique of artificialism: the world is "only" built, which means unnecessary, hence changeable. Such a view arises from a naturalism in reverse, confusing "natural" with necessity and "social" with contingency – a confusion that demonstrates a high degree of sociological blindness. The age-old tendency of the human mind to naturalize things as they are and to transform them into what they should be, shows forth today in this idea, apparently opposed to such a spontaneous naturalism but, in fact, akin to it, implying that what is not socially constructed is necessary, because natural. Again and again it is suggested that human necessity is grounded in a natural and not in a social reason. A serious mistake indeed.

In short: the propensity to proclaim that something is "socially constructed" is consistent with its disqualification and acts as a prelude to its amendment: what has been built should be deconstructable. That may be true at the scale of multi-generational and supra-individual institutions, but most likely it exceeds the capacity of short-term action, even of very determined and organized collective movements. And, above all, what has been built was probably built for some properly human reasons, which should be investigated before pretending they are unnecessary because unnatural. Misery of criticism...

Once again, here is a vulgate pretending to be original because it goes against common sense, but which, in so doing, simply reinforces it,

thus becoming the common sense of today's social sciences.

Nathalie Heinich

Migration and Social Theory

Whether or not it is possible to define our age 'the age of migration' as Castles and Miller (2003) suggest, it is a matter of fact that migration posits fundamental challenges to social theory.[1] Two major fields of – theoretical and empirical – engagement have emerged and have enriched the theoretical debate: There is an increasing interest in transnational *mobility*. And *borders* became a significant issue too.

'Nowadays we are all on the move' Zygmunt Bauman states (1998:77) and mobility as a correlative of the (alleged) stationary character of social life is – after the groundbreaking work of Georg Simmel (1908) and Robert Park (1925) – at the center of attention. Whereas some strands of mainstream sociological and political thought privileged the fabrication of homogeneous and stable social unities, be it a delimited society, a nation or a community as the basic units of analysis, the focus of attention has been shifted. Accordingly, the 'methodological nationalism' of the social thought and the familiar congruence of society, culture and national territory have been revised by a reasoning emphasizing a multiplicity of transfers, entanglements and '*histoires croisées*' (Werner, Zimmermann, 2004) that are crossing national borders.

Increased mobility and its analysis transformed social thought. It led to less bounded, fixed approaches and highly mobile research methods such a 'multi-sited' fieldwork (Marcus, 1998). It is not a coincidence that anthropology has contributed to a great extent, to stimulating co-present participant research that follows research partners, as well as commodities, cultural forms and social *imaginaires* on their journeys around the globe. Additionally, theo-

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[1] Cf. the forthcoming special issue on *Transborders. Migration and Social Theory (European Journal of Social Theory)*, edited by Heidrun Friese and Sandro Mezzadra, featuring contributions by E. Balibar, M. Cvajner and G. Sciortino, N. de Genova, N. Fraser, N. Papastergiadis, V. Tsianos and S. Karakayali.

retical reasoning has been reformulated by diasporic perspectives of exile, displacement, advocating uncertain, hybrid 'contact zones', 'traveling cultures' and 'routes' instead of 'roots' (Clifford, 1997), enabling more transformative, flexible perspectives and approaches to social theorizing. Instead of freezing flux and movement in solid architectures of social structures, the engagement is with complex – and sometimes transgressive – relations of dwelling and traveling, immobility and mobility, de-territorialization and re-spacing. Concepts such as 'transnationalism' (Glick Schiller, Basch, Szanton Blanc, 1992) engage with political relocations and social bonding. At the same time, they point to the crisis of the modern nation-state as a 'container' of bounded societies, fixed cultural identities and the respective socio-political spheres. These perspectives aim at undermining essentialist versions of the community-territory equalization and envision political mobilization, contest and emerging forms of agency and subjectivities.

Accordingly, recent *border studies* deal with the ambivalences of borders both as a means of exclusion and division *and* as zones of contact, encounter and commerce (be it "legal" or "illegal"). The border is seen as being unstable. Constantly negotiated, it is a site of porosity allowing for multiple transfers, translation and various *Grenzgänger*. These thresholds are being considered along with contemporary perspectives on (de/re)-territorialized communities, various transborder practices and border crossings. In this sense, border zones are not marginal to the constitution of the political and the social arena but rather, are at its very center and 'borderlands' have shaped conceptual parameters and urged for a redrawing of conceptual frameworks such as identity, community, or cultural area. Analysis of transnational migration, diasporas and more fluid, transnational citizenships are 'central to critiques of the bounded and static categories of nation, ethnicity, community and state present in much social science' and (political) theory, as John Urry (2007:35) remarked.

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Heidrun Friese

A Case for Postcolonial Sociology

Ever since the institutionalization of sociology in 19th century Europe, the self-definition of sociology as the study of "modern societies" explicitly excluded the non-European, "peripheral", or "exotic" regions from its research focus. The widespread disregard for colonial and peripheral realities in the process of sociological theory-building and research has, in time, produced colonial blind spots that amounted to a structural deficit of the discipline with respect to the non-European world, widely criticized in the past several decades as Eurocentrism, Occidentalism, and methodological nationalism.

In our view, the postcolonial approach, emerged and developed primarily in the fields of cultural studies, literature, and history, represents a condition of possibility for correcting such deficits from within sociology, too. As we point out in a programmatic article just published in the book *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*

(Ashgate, 2010, edited by E. Gutíerrez Rodríguez, M. Boatcă and S. Costa), the faults that postcolonial criticism finds with sociology are not irreparable and inevitable deficiencies of an academic discipline, but rather consequences of a particular institutionalization process. Both sociology's focus on the nation-state and its "colonial gaze" on non-Western societies derive from this institutional history. In the approximation between sociology and postcolonial studies, we see a chance at completing and expanding sociology at precisely those turning points where it appears to reach its epistemological limits. Above all, we find the epistemological interests of sociology on the one hand and postcolonial studies on the other to be overlapping in a decisive aspect: in their claim of being able to situate social relations and societal structures within complex analytical matrices. At the same time, reflexivity, openness, self-criticism and the capacity for changes in perspective are also part of the self-understanding of sociology, they are constitutive elements of its raison d'être. Recognizing the need to react to the narrowing of its own critical perspective should therefore be part of the dynamics of sociology. We therefore make a case for postcolonial sociology as a global sociology of colonial, neocolonial and post-colonial contexts that have hitherto been relegated to anthropology or area studies.

Although no unified field of postcolonial sociological approaches exists to date, a historically sensitive, comparatively oriented sociology of power relations and global entanglements has been gradually emerging in each one of the relevant levels of sociological analysis: the macro, the meso and the micro. The collective endeavor, we claim, is already here. What is lacking, is its programmatic systematization, which we attempt to sketch below.

At the macrosociological level, the results of postcolonial analysis lead to an overcoming of the conventional history of linear evolution of modern societies, without falling into the particularism of infinitely multiplied modernities. To this effect, the postcolonial concept of entangled modernity (S. Randeria) as well as the concept of shared and connected histories (S. Subrahmanyan) point to the entanglements but also to the ruptures and asymmetries in the constitution of the modern and (post-)colonial world.

On the mesoanalytical level, postcolonial studies shed light on the interpenetrations between actors and historically constructed power structures tied to contexts of action on different levels (local, regional, transnational, and trans-regional), thereby contributing a considerable epistemological potential. These heuristic possibilities are neither accessible to conventional political sociology, which concentrates on the national space and on established political actors, nor to the field of international relations, which has largely turned blind to power relations.

At the microsociological level, the contribution of postcolonial studies lies, above all, in an expanded and more dynamic sociological concept of culture. Accordingly, the relevant constituting pieces of social interactions are not cultural repertoires originating in hermetically closed cultures bound to a determined geographic space, but spontaneously articulated cultural differences. Unlike in the post-modern interpretation of post-structuralism, however, the articulation of differences in the postcolonial reading has nothing to do with the exercise of a hyper-liberal freedom of identity. Postcolonial studies treat differences in the context of societal structures, understood as structures of power and thus contain a clear sociological scope.

In this context, postcolonial sociology would be the equivalent of a context-specific, history sensitive sociology of power, the subject matter of which is not the Western world, or a host of modernities endlessly pluralized in postmodern fashion, but the "entangled modernity" (S. Randeria) that emerged at the intersection of military power, capital expansion and transculturality; not the North Atlantic civilization, but the transmodernity of the 21st century (E. Dussel) that resulted from the North's interactions with the Black Atlantic as well as with other diasporic and minority experiences of the "majority world" (R. Connell).

Manuela Boatcă
Sérgio Costa

Individuality, Relationality, and the Collective

Peer to peer (P2P) dynamics are based on the permissionless self-aggregation of individuals, enabled by the new horizontal communication infrastructures. How does this new form of peer to peer sociality change and adapt to both individualism and collectivist modes of human organization?

The individualist articulation of modernity, based on an autonomous self in a society that he himself creates through the social contract, has been changing in postmodernity. Simondon, a French philosopher of technology with an important posthumous following in the French-speaking world, has argued that what was typical for modernity was to 'extract the individual dimension' of every aspect of reality, of things/processes that are also always-already related.[2] And what is needed to renew thought, he argued, was not to go back to pre-modern wholism, but to systematically build on the proposition that 'everything is related', while retaining the achievements of modern thought, i.e. the equally important centrality of individuality. Individuality thus comes to be seen as constituted by relations, from relations.

This proposition, namely that the individual is now seen as always-already part of various social fields, as a singular composite being, no longer in need of socialization, but rather in need of individuation, seems to be one of the main achievements of what could be called 'postmodern thought'. Atomistic individualism is rejected in favor of the view of a relational self, a new balance between individual agency and collective communion. I would argue that, whereas postmodernity achieves this in thinking, peer to peer technology achieves it in real sociality, and that the networks we are building are "extracting the relational dimension from every dimension of reality'. But as we achieve relationality in practice, we need to make a new step in thought, to prepare the next emergence.

In my opinion, as a necessary complement and advance to postmodern thought, it is necessary to take a third step, i.e. not to be content with both a recognition of individuality, and its foundation in relationality, but to also recognize the level of the collective, i.e. the field in which the relationships occur.

If we only see relationships, we forget about the whole, which is society itself (and its sub-fields). Society is more than just the sum of its "related parts? Society sets up a 'protocol', in which these relationships can occur, it forms the agents in their subjectivity, and consists of norms which enable or disable certain type of relationships. Thus we have agents, relationships, and fields. Finally, if we want to integrate the subjective element of human intentionality, it is necessary to introduce a fourth element: the object of the sociality.

Indeed, human agents never just 'relate' in the abstract; they always relate around an object, in a concrete fashion. Swarming insects do not seem to have such an object, they just follow instructions and signals, without a view of the whole, but mammals do. For example, bands of wolves congregate around the object of the prey. It is the object that energizes the relationships and mobilizes the action. Humans can have more abstract objects that are located in a temporal future, as an object of desire. We perform the object in our minds, and activate ourselves to realize them individually or collectively. P2P projects organize themselves around such common project, and my own Peer to Peer theory is an attempt to create an object that can inspire social and political change.

In summary, for a comprehensive view of the collective, it is now customary to distinguish 1) the totality of relations; 2) the field in which these relations operate, up to the macro-field of society itself, which establishes the 'protocol' of what is possible and not; 3) the object of the relationship ("object-oriented sociality"), i.e. the pre-formed ideal which inspires the common action. That sociality is 'object-oriented' is an important antidote to any 'flatland', i.e. 'merely objective' network theory, on which many failed social networking experiments are based. This idea that the field of relations is the only important dimension of reality, while

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[2] Simondon, G.: *The Individual and its Physico-biological Genesis,* unpublished translation, downloaded from http://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2007/10/03/translation-simondon-and-the-physico-biological-genesis-of-the-individual/

forgetting human intentionality. What we need is a subjective-objective approach to networks.

In conclusion, this turn to the collective that the emergence of peer to peer represent does not in any way present a loss of individuality, even of individualism. Rather it 'transcends and includes' individualism and collectivism in a new unity, which I would like to call 'cooperative individualism'. The cooperativity is not necessarily intentional (i.e. the result of conscious altruism), but constitutive of our being, and the best applications of P2P, are based on this idea.

Michel Bauwens

Editing *Sociological Theory*

I was very happy to accept the invitation from the editors to write something about *Sociological Theory* for the RC 16 newsletter. As many of you know, I took over the editorship of *ST* last summer after its successful run at Yale under the direction of Julia Adams, Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, and Phil Gorski. *ST* has long published high quality theoretical work, but I think none of the previous editors, including Jonathan Turner and Craig Calhoun, would take offense at the observation that the papers published under the Yale team's watch were particularly dynamic. Much of this has to do with two structural transformations in sociological theory of which Julia and her colleagues – as well as the rest of us – were and are lucky beneficiaries. The first is theory's continuing internationalization. Long an enterprise that brought scholars from different countries into conversation with one another, theory has nevertheless unfolded, as Donald Levine and others have reminded us, within distinctive national traditions. In the 1980s and 1990s, though there were many individual exceptions, the American variant of theory – especially among sociological as opposed to social theorists – was perhaps not as open as it should have been to ideas emanating from abroad. This has since changed, for a variety of reasons, and the result is a growing willingness on the part of American reviewers (on whom *ST* still leans heavily) to green light papers that speak to concerns of theorists everywhere, but in nationally-specific conceptual tones. The second transformation was signaled by Michèle Lamont in her 2004 discussion of the rise of "theory satellite" fields: substantive areas of the discipline, such as the sociology of culture, political sociology, the sociology of sex and gender, and historical/comparative sociology where empirical researchers are heavy users of theory but also aim to give back to theory, principally through conceptual elaboration and extension, via their empirical inquiries. Lamont observed that some of the most innovative theoretical work was being done in theory satellite fields, and papers in this genre have been among the most exciting to appear recently in the pages of *ST*. Although these transformations would have occurred no matter who was at the helm of the journal, Julia and her colleagues deserve credit for recognizing and, to the extent possible, abetting them: for encouraging international submissions and being enthusiastic about papers that are simultaneously theoretical and empirical.

As editor, I intend to follow in the Yale team's footsteps, and can think of no better way to maintain or increase the flow of international submissions than by appealing to the members of RC 16. Please send me your best work! Whether you labor in formal theory development or the history of theory, whether you produce theoretical syntheses or elaborations of existing approaches, whether your work is purely theoretical or empirically engaged, your papers will get a fair hearing. Because of space constraints, I'm only able to publish about one out of every ten papers submitted, but truly outstanding and original contributions have a way of rising to the top regardless of the odds.

With that having been said, there is one important piece of advice I would give to that subset of international authors wishing to submit to *ST* and working in intellectual traditions that have not yet captured the imagination of most American sociologists, such as semiotics or practice-theory or Luhmann-inspired systems theory. That advice is to do the work necessary, typically at the front end of your manuscripts, to patiently explain to reviewers (and potential readers) how that tradition relates to more conventional American strains of theory – and hopefully improves upon them. I give this advice for both

strategic and intellectual reasons. In terms of strategy, though there is indeed increased openness to a variety of voices, I've found that no matter what their own intellectual competencies, reviewers still tend to evaluate papers with an eye toward how they will be received by other readers of the journal. When authors build bridges across national and paradigmatic divides, reviewers come away with more confidence that (seemingly) unorthodox papers will be received successfully, which often results in more positive evaluations. On the intellectual side of things, while theoretical diversification is all to the good inasmuch as it increases the number of theoretical tools sociology has at its disposal, diversity can just as easily lead to balkanization and fragmentation. In theory – as in social life more generally – it is important when we enter particularistic public spaces to engage across the boundaries of difference and explain ourselves to local audiences. Thus does dialogue become possible.

In my one year on the job I've been most impressed with the overall quality of submissions. I look forward to reading even more manuscripts from RC 16 members in the future.

Neil Gross

Laudatio for Jeffrey C. Alexander

Jeffrey C. Alexander is a most deserving recipient for the Mattei Dogan Prize for lifetime accomplishment in sociology.

During his extraordinarily productive career, he has established himself as one of the world's leading social theorists, and has contributed substantively to political sociology, race relations, cultural sociology, and the study of civil society. His theoretical work has been consistently innovative. His first major publication, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, is a magisterial synthesis of the major traditions of sociological theory, the most important work in this genre since Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*. His edited volume on *The Classical Tradition in Sociological Theory* (with R. Boudon and M. Cherkaoui) is the most definitive source on the history of sociology to have appeared in decades.

Alexander was the creator and leading spokesman for the theoretical development known as neo-functionalist, a notable synthesis of key elements of sociological functionalism and the ideas of its critics, particularly those who charged that school with failing with respect to the analysis of social conflict and social change. In the past fifteen years, with a torrent of books and articles, he has emerged as a leader and spokesman in cultural sociology and the theory of civil society; his statement in *The Civil Sphere* in 2006 was noticed immediately and excited extensive critical attention and controversy. This last line of work continues to the present, and includes a most impressive analysis of the political language and ritual in the historic 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. All these lines of work have been outstanding with respect to originality, sensibility, and intellectual force.

Alexander's leadership has been institutional as well as intellectual. During his more than two decades at the University of California, Los Angeles, especially during his chairmanship, he led the way in bringing the Department of Sociology of that University into the high ranks of American universities. During his more recent tenure at Yale, leading in 2004 to his appointment as Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology, he has been the leader in bringing that university into the forefront of cultural sociology.

In keeping with the spirit of the Dogan Prize, it should be noted that Alexander's involvements in international sociology have been notable. His innovative work with Piotr Sztompka created and solidified the place of sociological theory in the International Sociological Association in the form of the Research Committee on Sociological Theory. He has also held office in the ISA's Research Committee on the History of Sociology. He has entered into spirited conversations and controversies with several leading European theorists. His reputation is truly international, as reflected in the translations of his works into many languages, in his wide name – and reputation-recognition on several continents, in numerous honorary invitations to lecture in European and

Asian intellectual centers, and in professional collaborations, mainly with European scholars.

It has been my honor to have been associated closely with the work of Alexander over the course of many decades. He was student in my class on sociological theory in his first year as a graduate student in sociology in the University of California, Berkeley in the early 1970s. Later he requested me to serve as member of his dissertation committee, an experience which I still regard as a special privilege in my career. Subsequently, on his invitation, I contributed essays to works that he and others assembled on neo-functionalism. An in the late 1990s, when I was Director of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford), I persuaded Alexander to undertake the leadership of a Center project on "Common Values, Social Diversity, and Cultural Conflict". The project produced several major publications, and I was especially pleased to be included in the group of American and European scholars that produced the important work, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2002). In all these interactions Jeff has proved to be a most stimulating, responsible, and intellectually engaged colleague. His mind and imagination are forever active, and one never ceases to learn from him. Granting him the Mattei Dogan prize is surely an apt recognition of this remarkable scholar and professional colleague.

Neil J. Smelser

The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power

In my forthcoming book *The Performance of Power[3],* I examine the strategies and statements of those who planned, directed, and fought the 2008 Presidential campaign. While I pay close attention to the broader contexts that defined its social backdrop, I also enmesh myself in the day to day reports of print, television, and digital media, not simply to find out factual details but to gain access to the symbolic flows that are the actual determinants of victory and

defeat. Meaningful texture dictates political power. What decides campaigns are the cultural frameworks that candidates lay down and work through and that journalists not only referee but help create. I investigate this textually mediated back and forth between Barack Obama and John McCain from June to November of 2008.

My argument is that the democratic struggle for power is not much determined by demography or even substantive issues, and that it's not very rational either. Political struggle is about the meanings of social life (Alexander, 2003). It's moral and emotional. Political struggle makes meaning in the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006), symbolically constructing candidates so they appear to be on the sunny, rather than the shadowy, side of the street. When they run for office, politicians are less public debaters, public servants, or policy wonks than they are performers (Alexander, Giesen and Mast, 2006). They and their production teams work on their image, and political struggle is about projecting these cultural constructs to voters. Political journalism mediates these projections of image in extraordinarily powerful way.

Obama and McCain struggled mightily to become symbols of American democracy, each in his own way. Obama often succeeded. People saw him as real and authentic, if sometimes too earnest. McCain couldn't seem to make his political performances fly. He was such a bad actor that voters often felt he seemed to be acting, following a script rather than being himself. But there was another reason for McCain's difficulty to symbolize effectively. In 2008, concerns about terrorism were fading. McCain could be narrated as a hero pretty easily in a time of military crisis, but not so easily on the domestic scene. Obama was inexperienced in foreign affairs and had nothing to do with the military, but he could fill out the hero role in civil society, having formed his political identity and rhetoric in wake of the titanic black struggles for civil rights.

The moral and emotional framework that inspires American democracy has little room for ambiguity. For better and for worse, it is organized in simple, deeply believed in dichotomies that evaluate actions and paint motives in starkly contrasting shades of black

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[3] It will be published by Oxford University Press this September. This short preview of the book is published simultaneously in the *Theory* ASA Newsletter.

and white. When candidates symbolize, they struggle to align themselves with the sacred side of these binaries and their opponents with the profane. Even in a democratic public sphere – so often idealized as rational and respectful – politics is about "working the binaries." It is also about connecting these anchoring moral dichotomies to issues that are not really about governing at all, to gender and family values, to whether you are god-fearing and faithful, to whether you are of a respectable ethnicity and racial stripe. This is what I call "walking the boundaries." The 2008 campaign featured the first major non-white candidate, two female super-stars, rumors about Islamic affiliations, and continually returned to concerns about virility and strength. Binaries were worked and boundaries were walked in strenuous, disconcerting, and sometimes alarming ways.

Performance, heroes, ground games, binaries, and boundaries were nested in the backward and forward flows of momentum in summer and fall of 2008. There were three critical periods of flux for Obama and opportunity for McCain, crises whose outcome determined victory and defeat.

Obama's triumphal overseas trip in late July set off anxieties he was overreaching and arrogant. This opened the door for Republican image makers to sculpt him as a superficial, out-of-touch celebrity. This crisis of "Celebrity Metaphor" lasted five long weeks, during which Obama's fortunes fell and McCain's rose substantially. It subsided only with the ritual power of the Democratic convention in Denver, where Obama delivered a stem-winding, thoughtful, and hard-hitting speech to an enormous "all-American" crowd.

Yet, immediately after Obama's revitalizing speech, at the end of August, Sarah Palin exploded as a symbol on the political scene. The Alaskan governor presented herself not only as devoted mother but as a feisty and scrappy political reformer, and to many she seemed genuine, a new American hero on the domestic scene. Within a week, "Palin Effect" allowed Republicans once again to take the lead. Palin symbol deflated as quickly as it had inflated, however, as investigative journalists made discoveries that seemed to place her on the shadowy side of the street.

Just as Obama regained the lead in mid-September, the nation's financial institutions melted down. Analysts of the 2008 campaign typically describe the "Financial Crisis" as a kind of automatic game changer. Because Republicans presided over deregulation and the bubble economy, they reason, economic failure led voters to decide that they should not put a Republican back in the presidency. This reasoning is false. It assumes voters act in terms of rational interest and that image and symbolic performance are not central to campaigns. I demonstrate that there was actually a lot of wiggle room during the first two weeks of Financial Crisis. McCain seemed awkward, impulsive, and bumbling; Obama presented himself as poised, calm, and rational. It was these sharply contrasting performances that sealed the campaign. Within two weeks, Obama gained a statistical advantage for the first time, and never gave up his lead.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford, 2003.

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Jeffrey C. Alexander

Letter from the Chairs

We are proposing the board below to run RC 16 in the period 2010-2014. The people listed have been contacted and have agreed to serve in the designated offices. There will be a formal vote taken in the RC's business meeting at the World Congress in Sweden. This will be on the evening of Monday 12th July.

In putting together a suggested board a number of factors come into play. The first and most important is a track record of involvement with RC16 that includes regular attendance at World Congresses and our smaller interim conferences, as well as contributions to the newsletter (*Theory*) or the organization of thematic sessions. Simply being a renowned theorist is not enough. The willingness to participate and to do hard organizational and bureaucratic

work is equally important. Secondly, there needs to be a balance between retaining old hands and renewing the board's composition. Established board members have an institutional memory of how to get things done. However, new members bring fresh perspectives. Thirdly, issues of regional representation and diversity need to be considered. The proposed board, for example, recognizes the growing contribution of East Asia to RC16s recent activities.

The Reserve Board is a more informal grouping. Members can be elected to the Reserve Board at the World Congress or the interim meetings. In essence it deals with the structural problem that the formal board becomes unwieldy once there are more than 16 or so members. Yet as a very large RC16 the number of enthusiastic members we have far outstrips this capacity. The Reserve Board contains former board members who wish to remain actively involved in RC16 and to have their ongoing contribution recognized. It also serves as a recruiting and socialization tool for those who have shown up at several meetings and who would like to become more involved in our RC. We envision enthusiastic RC16 members cycling from the Reserve Board up to the formal Board and then back. If you are interested in election to the Reserve Board or becoming more involved with RC16 contact the Chairs at or before the business meeting in Sweden.

We look forward to catching up with you in Gothenburg.

Fuyuki Kurasawa
Philip Smith
Co-Chairs RC16

RC16 Proposed Board 2010-2014

Co-Chairs
Ronald N. Jacobs (USA)
Giuseppe Sciortino (Italy)

Secretary
Agnes Ku (Hong Kong)

Newsletter
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Paul Jones (Australia)

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Patrick Baert (UK)
Gianpaolo Baiocchi (USA)
Mabel Berezin (USA)
Seung Kuk Kim (South Korea)
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Ari Sitas (South Africa)
Philip Smith (USA ex officio)
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Gilles Verpraet (France)
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Reserve Board

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Marcel Fournier (Canada)
Eduardo de la Fuente (Australia)
Sang-Jin Hang (Korea)
Elisa Reis (Brazil)
Ken Thompson (UK)
Brad West (Australia)
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