

Culture

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Reflections on Jeff Alexander's *The Meanings of Social Life*

Barry Glassner's "Message from the Chair" will return next issue, as an introduction to a forum he has organized about *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*. Please remember that the section's website (<http://www.ibiblio.org/culture/forum>) allows you to enter into dialogue with others about issues raised in the newsletter, or anything else. As always, please let me know your ideas for submissions!

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A STRONGER PROGRAM IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Mabel Berezin
Cornell University

The invitation to comment upon Jeffrey Alexander's *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* is a great honor. Jeffrey Alexander is acknowledged nationally and internationally as one of contemporary sociology's most insightful and distinguished social theorists. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* is Alexander's agenda-setting contribution to the sociological study of culture.

Alexander's book is a remarkably coherent collection of eight essays that address his vision of theory and culture as well as outlining a research orientation, "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology." *The Meanings of Social Life* is the culmination of more than fifteen years of work. The arguments that it develops and the research agenda that it advances have evolved institutionally as well as theoretically. Alexander be-

(continued, page 2)

IS THE "STRONG PROGRAM" STRONG ENOUGH?

Lyn Spillman
Notre Dame University

In *The Meanings of Social Life*, Jeff Alexander has given us a powerful programmatic call for cultural sociology— and for sociology more generally. The main point of the book is to explain, exemplify, and promote a "strong program in cultural sociology." The first chapter, written with Phil Smith, lays out the core claims of this program, later illustrated in a series of dramatic and sometimes virtuoso case studies. It's a real pleasure to think through the rich detail of the book, which will surely attract a lot of well-deserved attention, becoming an important signpost for cultural sociologists and a symbol of cultural sociology. Rather than examining the detailed arguments themselves, though, and because of the book's importance as a programmatic statement, I want to reflect here on the more immanent question of the extent to which this book succeeds in terms of its own goals. Is the "strong program" strong enough?

(continued, page 4)

Culture

NOT A BOOK FOR THE FAINT-OF-HEART

Robin Wagner-Pacifici
Swarthmore College

The Meanings of Social Life is a dark book, confounding expectations. Even the cover is dark, with a detail of a painting by David Park of students walking with heads lowered, eyes cast down. A book with the word "meaning" in its title seems necessarily to invoke positive and beneficent human values, norms and achievements. Instead, the book's meanings more often circle around collective trauma, social evil, political scandal, and all manners of reviled cultural objects and events. It is not a book for the faint-of-heart, partly for its cthonic dwelling and partly for its rather matter of fact attitude toward the work of its themes of social becomings and unbecomings. The Holocaust, for example, becomes the Holocaust. It was not born as such, the inexplicable horror we know it to be today, immutable and essential in its meaning.

(continued, page 3)

JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S TOO STRONG PROGRAM?

Neil Gross
Harvard University

The starting point for my engagement with the sociology of culture is the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. In an era still wedded to Cartesian dualism, Peirce's genius was to argue that every instance of cognition is an act of semiotic representation that serves the purpose of helping human beings cope, in better or worse ways, with the problems and difficulties they face in the course of life. Not only did this conceptualization provide a more solid basis for the philosophy of praxis than could be found in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*; it also pointed up the fictitious nature of the Cartesian *cogito*, for Peirce's triadic understanding of signs – that is, that signs stand for

(continued, page 6)

Jeff Alexander Responds.....p. 8

Books of Note.....p. 12

gan to develop the “strong program” with his graduate students, members of the Culture Club, at UCLA, and he has now moved the project to Yale. Alumni of his graduate seminars and the “Club” at UCLA occupy positions in major American universities and contribute regularly to scholarly journals. During Alexander’s tenure at UCLA, the sociology department became one of the leading graduate departments in the country in the field of Cultural Sociology.

The Meanings of Social Life has two logics: the first focuses upon meaning and morality and deals with evil and Alexander’s formulation of “cultural trauma;” the second involves a plea for a grounded cultural analysis exemplified in his case studies of the *Holocaust*, Watergate, and American Civil Society. I will briefly describe what is analytically salient in each of these two logics.

The “Problem of Meaning” is manifest in Chapter One where Alexander presents his vision of culture as: *Not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but a thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of, every conceivable social form.* Culture for Alexander is an assumption, not a proposition, so it cannot approach normal science as some sociologists of culture would have it. I will return to this methodological point when I address the second logic of the book—the “strong program.” But in short, cultural analysis can and should be rigorous even if it does not engage in hypothesis-testing. Alexander views culture as “thick” in the Geertzian sense, and focused description, not random impressionistic description, best captures this “thickness.”²

Alexander’s conception of meaning is not narrowly restricted to his definition of culture. He has a larger agenda which his discussion of evil reveals. Alexander exhorts us to examine the sociological role of evil. He labels this phenomenon “sacred evil”—a term that he borrows from Kant’s idea of *radical evil*. Alexander imbues the “sacred evil” with sociological significance by embedding it in specific historical contexts and events and looking to the institutions that supported those events. Particularly important in this respect is the final chapter of the book where Alexander analyzes the visions of the world that dominated mid-20th century social science. He begins with post-war functionalism and modernization theory and ends with contemporary neo-modernism—showing that intellectuals have had a key role in defining good and evil throughout the 20th century. Particularly clever here is his analysis of the changing valence accorded the terms—market, capitalism, nationalism, human rights.

The discussion of “sacred evil” puts the role of intellectuals and public life squarely on the sociological agenda and Alexander’s arguments resonate with the emerging emphasis upon *public sociology* within American sociology.³ Lastly, even though he shies away from saying it explicitly, Alexander’s emphasis upon evil, sacred/profane and cultural trauma recasts contemporary theory so as to valorize a social morality or ethic. In this respect Alexander’s 21st century project displays a kinship resemblance to the sociological projects that Emile Durkheim and Max Weber undertook as they confronted the problem of meaning in their world—19th and 20th century industrializing and nationalizing Europe.

Alexander’s “Strong Program,” the second logic of the book, is explicitly aimed at sociology as a discipline. While acknowledging the merit of recent contributions to sociology of culture, Alexander argues that these contributions are incomplete because they fail to capture the ontology of culture—or what is cultural about culture. Alexander describes the “strong program” as a blend of hermeneutics and structural analysis. The strong program focuses on contrasting social narratives that move in time and space or in terms that combine sociology and anthropology. I describe Alexander’s method as *comparative and historically embedded thick description*. The advantage of Alexander’s approach is that it takes whole conceptual units at one point in time and analyzes those units as they move through time and space.

Chapter 2, “The Social Construction of Moral Universals,” illustrates the strong program and is so well constructed that it stands almost as a monograph within a monograph. This chapter analyzes how the *Holocaust* was transformed from a description of what happened to the Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe at the hands of the Nazis to a “bridging metaphor” for generalized evil that has meaning beyond the specific time and space within which is historically embedded. In the immediate post-war period, *Holocaust* was not a term in public discourse. Nazi atrocities and death camps were discussed as what Alexander terms a “progress narrative” that identified the Allies, particularly Americans, liberating Jews from the camps. In the “progress narrative,” humanity, not inhumanity, triumphed. Gradually beginning in the 1960s, a “death narrative” began to emerge and Shoah, or *Holocaust* entered public discourse.

Alexander relies on a vast array of data from news media, television, education texts as well as popular films to make his case. His discussion of the *Holocaust* museum in Washington, D.C. is particularly compelling. Alexander makes the argument that over time the *Holocaust* became a term for “engorged” or “sacred evil” that any group that had experienced *collective cultural trauma* could appropriate. The *Holocaust* became a “bridging metaphor,” a general metaphor for societal evil that is recognized as such by a global public.

Alexander’s development of the concept of “bridging metaphor” underscores yet another dimension of the “strong program”—the incorporation of literary theory and method to analyze social phenomena. Alexander speaks of metonymy, metaphor and social drama and invokes Aristotle’s *Poetics* to highlight the sociological importance of *catharsis*. From an analytic perspective, the value added of turning to literary theory, particularly theories that focus upon drama and performance, is that it permits Alexander to include emotion within the study of culture. Emotion is central to analyzing the patterns of resonance and recognition that concern cultural sociologists.

The Meanings of Social Life is an extraordinarily rich contribution to cultural sociology and to sociology in general. It addresses large and important problems. A short commentary such as this does not do justice to the book’s breath and depth. I have no doubt that terms such as “cultural trauma,” “engorged evil” and “bridging metaphor” will become part of the sociological lexicon. I know that they will become part of my sociological lexicon.

The Meanings of Social Life is an intellectual *tour de force* that cements Jeffrey Alexander's reputation as a paradigmatic thinker in cultural as well as theoretical sociology. In short, Jeffrey Alexander voices a *stronger* program in cultural sociology.

ENDNOTES

¹ My contribution is based upon my remarks at an *Author Meets Critics* session at the Midwest Sociological Association Meetings, April 16, 2004, Kansas City, Kansas. I wish to Cultural trauma is linked to identity - the trauma is thus always

thank Eleanor M. Miller for inviting me to participate in that session and Jeffrey Alexander and Robert Antonio for their thought provoking comments.

² The discussion of Ann Swidler's *Talk of Love* in the Winter 2004 issue of this newsletter provides an interesting comparison on these points (*Culture* 18:2).

³ As many readers of this newsletter will know, Public Sociology was the theme of the 2004 American Sociological Association Meetings as well as the subject of Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici, continued

Meaning and meanings are, according to Jeff Alexander, socially constructed to their core and sociologists must track their emergence through institutions and social discourses.

Reinvigorating the ancient study of rhetoric and rhetorical frames as serious, meaning-making cultural structures, Jeff Alexander analyzes how we come to understand significant recent historical events, including the Holocaust and Watergate. But his larger aim is to connect cultural structures to social institutions and actions. Meaning matters in Jeff's vision of society - not just strategic, self-interest or rational processes of cause and effect, but meaning at deep, existential, visceral levels. Continuing also in the modern tradition of scholars such as political theorist Murray Edelman, literary critic Kenneth Burke, and sociologist Richard Harvey Brown, Jeff tracks the pathways of what he calls "socially constructed subjectivity." Collective meanings that we hold to be obvious and natural - from manifestations of evil to epitomes of goodness - only become obvious because they activate "moral textures and delicate emotional pathways by which individuals and groups come to be influenced by them." (p.5)

The basic building blocks for Jeff's analytical schema are binary oppositions, moral valences that are ultimately interconnected to form mythical cultural narratives of, for example, democracy and counter-democracy. Thus the methodology of these empirical studies is to identify the key binary oppositions that surface in the discourses that make the events make sense to their various constituencies and audiences. So, for example, in the chapter on the "Civil Discourse of American Civil Society", democracy and counter-democratic tendencies are tracked along pairs of opposed types of *actors* (active vs passive; reasonable vs hysterical) types of *social relationships* (open vs secret) and types of *social institutions* (rule regulated vs arbitrary). Binarism, as the structuralists taught us, is a powerful mechanism of cognition and feeling. And deployed, as it is in this book, to illuminate the discursive moves of such political scandals and crises as the Teapot Dome scandal and the Iran-Contra crisis, it reveals the attempt by actors and institutions to associate themselves with the democratic side of the polarities. But binarism also finds its methodological limits. There may be occasions and situations that elude even the agile maneuverings of such a metacode. Such an occasion was the Clinton/Lewinsky political scandal where no intuitive metacode managed to take hold and resolve the disjunc-

tive nature of the binary building blocks. Rather, the basic binarism actually seemed to be short-circuited by the many contradictory scenarios at play in the evolving event.¹ Jeff himself writes, in critiquing Foucault, that: (p.19)"There is little room for a synchronically arranged contingency that might encompass disjunctures between culture and institutions." More explicit focus in the book on these disjunctures might have pushed the methodology even further.

For my money, the best parts of the analysis in this book take on such disjunctures (for example, in the evolving narrative of "the Holocaust"). But perhaps too often, the focus in the book is on the more predictable workings of a mechanism of meaning-making, moving through and with the cultural material at hand. Something of the very "delicacy" (Jeff's word) and singularity of the moral textures and the emotional pathways gets lost in the process. So while Jeff is absolutely right to maintain that sociologists and other analysts of culture tend to be tone-deaf to norms and emotion, I would contend that Jeff is himself somewhat tone-deaf to the significance of the *singular*. He is appreciative of the cultural analyses of Clifford Geertz, who famously called upon anthropologists to "generalize within the case" but he distances himself from Geertz, asserting his own aim to recognize, "the autonomy and centrality of meaning but not develop a hermeneutics of the particular at the expense of a hermeneutics of the universal." What does a "hermeneutics of the universal" mean though? I think there is a real contradiction embedded in this formulation that reflects a basic conundrum of the book. Jeff Alexander is rightly renowned for his theoretical analyses and syntheses. His intellectual aim is high and he hews to a sociological principle of illuminating universal concepts. But hermeneutics must begin with the particular, the singular - certainly to move back and forth from it to the general principle or type it represents - but also to hold it up as a thing in itself, an object to be grasped from the inside and the outside. This means that the analyst's attention should be literally torn between the object and the world that made the object possible. A split loyalty, really, and I feel that Jeff's attention is still more on the world that conjures up the object than on the object itself; the analysis loses specificity as a result.

The "Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity" chapter shows the strengths of Jeff's commitment to the general in its brilliant and original theoretical advances in the theory of trauma.

Cultural trauma is linked to identity--the trauma is thus always about the threat to identity of a collectivity, regardless of the specificity of the event. Jeff traces cultural traumas through the institutional mediations of their "hauntings" (legal, scientific, aesthetic and so forth) as various institutions constitute and attempt to manage them. A keen sociological insight of this, and several of the chapters involves the variable epistemological trajectories of "similar" events and the work of social actors and institutions in this process. Of a number of tragic events Jeff asks: "Why have these horrendous phenomena of mass suffering not become compelling, publicly available narratives of collective suffering to their respective nations, let alone to the world at large?" His answer is that: "Carrier groups" have not emerged with the resources, authority or interpretive competence to powerfully disseminate these trauma claims." (106) Through a series of hypothetical alternative interpretations of the meanings of world historical events, Jeff demonstrates the persuasiveness of his social constructivist position and reminds us of the literally scores of dramatic, collective catastrophes that might have claimed our attention.

Which brings me to my final question and perhaps critique. As I noted earlier, Jeff aims high. In this book he dares to take on evil itself. Deconstructing different social renderings of evil, and with echoes of Durkheim, Jeff writes that: (119)

"Societies construct evil so that there can be punishment; for it is the construction of and the response to evil that defines and revivifies the good. One should not, then, confuse, the aesthetic imagining of evil, the vicarious experiencing of evil, much less the intellectual exploration of evil with the actual practice of evil itself." "The actual practice of evil itself" seems a phrase from a different world - a world outside of social constructivism and sociological analysis. It suggests something absolute, a value statement that does not rely on "carrier groups" for its ontological status. So the question I pose here is: how can we make room in our theories and our lives for both the absolute and the socially constructed? How do we adjudicate between them? How do we create a theoretical language whereby they can communicate with each other? I think Jeff may be up to the task if he decides to take this on.

ENDNOTE

1 For an analysis of these contradictory scenarios, see Magali Sarfatti Larson and Robin Wagner-Pacifici, "The Dubious Place of Virtue: Reflections on the Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton and the Death of the Political Event in America," *Theory and Society*, Volume 30, Issue 6, December 2001.

Lyn Spillman, continued

One outstanding strength of this work is the clarity with which it communicates the idea that meaning-making processes should be placed at the center of sociological understanding and analyzed on their own terms. Cultural sociologists believe that meaning-making shouldn't be bracketed or reduced; that meaning isn't transparent; that cultural structures must be analyzed for their independent effects in social processes. The "strong program" entails such a commitment to understanding culture as an autonomous field, specified here in terms of a rich hermeneutic reconstruction of the binary codes, narratives, and symbols which are essential to meaning-making. This is the real innovation and "value added" for sociology in cultural analysis, but it's difficult to fully communicate to broader sociological publics, who find cultural realism and theoretical imports from the humanities hard to swallow.¹ This book helps us make some of our assumptions and theoretical tools less opaque.

So, perhaps, we'll no longer hear sociologists assuming that it's just obvious and natural that people might think a particular way, that you can bracket out meaning-making processes and still understand social processes. For instance, I'm hoping it will no longer be possible to assume, without further explanation, that the demographic composition of a population is going to affect inequality of outcomes-- that small demographic minorities, of women in an organization, for instance, or African Americans in a county, will face more unequal outcomes than those in circumstances where they're a majority. The unexamined assumption here, of course, is that the relevant demographic minority is culturally polluted in some way (compare, for example, Texans, or people with small hands). Similarly, I'm hoping it will no longer be possible to

assume, without further explanation, that sheer number of contacts-- without attention to their ritual intensity-- measures intensity of network ties and influences outcomes like dependence, or cohesion. Despite cultural sociology's occasional and narcissistic conviction that the cultural turn is complete, these sorts of bracketings of meaning-making processes are common, even if fewer sociologists these days will say explicitly, with Tilly, that cultural explanation "evokes a dubious agent and fails to specify how that agent creates effects in social life."²

Theoretically, then, this book makes an important contribution by articulating what everyone should know about the core, "value-added" contribution of cultural sociology to the social sciences. That would be enough, but the case studies also help demonstrate what a "strong program" looks like. What's more, they treat compelling and somewhat neglected subjects-- the Holocaust, collective trauma, evil, political scandals, technology, even the deep mythical grounding of theory. This is hot, morally engaged, and critical sociology, and that won't do any harm in communicating the theoretical message either.

For instance, the close analysis of changes in the meaning of the Holocaust demonstrates that analyzing cultural structures offers empirical insight even beyond what we can read in the well-developed literature on collective memory. The detailed story of a change from progressive to tragic narrative interpretation, of shifting coding of Jews and anti-Semitism, of pollution by analogy, and, overall, of the ways symbolic extensions and emotional identifications are generated which eventually encourage universalization of the Holocaust as a symbol shows the explanatory power of cultural structures, and it's also an

excellent example of how analyzing cultural structures helps understand change. The other case studies also show, in various ways, how the “strong program” generates important empirical insights. The analysis of binary codes underlying American political discourse (co-authored with Smith) adds weight to the claim that we need to see cultural structures as analytically independent of social relations, by demonstrating how long-lasting some structured discursive fields can be. We also see very clearly that in order to have conflict, you need shared culture first— a neglected insight of Simmel’s which, I think, is an important reason for doing cultural sociology. And the final chapter of the book, on what Raymond Williams might have called “structures of feeling” grounding major movements in sociology like modernization theory, is a really interesting read that should get wide currency among sociologists. These illustrations and the others help us show what sociologists will miss without treating meaning-making processes on their own terms.

But is the “strong program” strong enough? Will the book succeed in its programmatic goals? Is this what we need to place meaning-making processes at the center of sociological understanding? I don’t think the program articulated here is as strong as it should be. A really strong program, I’d suggest, will engage and integrate the contributions of other positions— other ways of looking at culture, and other ways of doing sociology— more comprehensively and flexibly.

Methodologically, we need to note that the cases here are almost all intense, conflicted, and exceptional: even the analysis of the early meanings of computer technology is conducted in dramatic terms of sacred and profane— leaving aside, for instance, such tendentious cultural constructions as routine efficiency. This analytic focus leaves a lot of territory that sociologists cover uncharted. Some of our students and colleagues could come away from this book with the impression that cultural sociology was ceding all those social processes which are *not* ritualized or conflicted or morally fraught to more structural analysis. The program needs strengthening with test cases, not best cases.

People should study whatever engages them, of course, and dramatic cases do help communicate the core ideas. But this methodological selectivity also indicates a theoretical elision which a really strong program would need to address. What happens to culture in the mundane realm, in flat circumstances, in those social processes which take up the bulk of most sociologists’ attention?

Jeff is right to note (e.g. 77; 172-74) that routinization of effervescent moments doesn’t imply that meaning disappears, and that we need to add the category of “routine” to Durkheim’s categories of sacred and profane (186, 262 n.11). But we’re given few tools to understand mundane meaning-making processes. As a result, some readers might still assume that meaning is transparent in mundane social processes— assume simple rationality, for instance. This is the fundamental reason I’d argue that this “strong program” in cultural sociology isn’t yet strong enough.

To illustrate this limitation with an example from an arena I’ve been examining recently, think of the recent Enron scandal, and recall the photograph of Enron chief Kenneth Lay in handcuffs reproduced with relish across front pages and broadcast for days in July 2004. Many sociologists could formulate

a quick ideology critique, about how, for instance, highlighting a few deviant actors doesn’t address the *systematic* issue of geometrically increasing differences between the very wealthy and everyone else in the last twenty years. The “strong program” would rightly go beyond this, to analyze how the narrative and coding of this moral drama nevertheless makes it socially meaningful. These contrasting analyses are both important and true: but I’m arguing here that a strong program in cultural sociology should help more directly with a third sort of issue, how to understand the mundane mixes of categories, narratives, codes, and symbols which naturalize *routine* economic action, and how they play out (cf. 134, 144). Similarly, shifting the ground of the analysis of political discourse, or discourse about technology, from highly charged contexts to the realm of the mundane would require analytic tools beyond those offered in this book.

Mundane meaning-making differs from meaning-making in ritually heightened moments or morally charged discourses because unlike in the dramatic times, it typically mixes “culture structures” in messy multivocal ways. First, individuals and groups recognize, express, and act on a variety of sometimes contradictory sets of meanings. Second, discourses themselves may often be multivocal, mixing up different binary codes, different sorts of narratives. This mundane messiness can’t be bracketed for analytic purposes, because it raises the question of what meanings get mobilized when. Since, in this mundane world, the available options are *all* potentially meaningful, we have to look *beyond* discourse structure to understand why some things get said in a particular context and others don’t.

But to strengthen the program in this way, to apply better to mundane circumstances, we’d need to engage and include a lot of the contributions to cultural sociology that the “strong program” so far dismisses. “To make room for a genuinely cultural sociology,” we’re admonished, we need to “speak out against false idols, to avoid the mistake of confusing reductionist ... approaches with a genuine strong program” (26). But the supposedly opposing approaches the theory pollutes as “weak” offer many resources to extend the reach of cultural analyses and deepen their significance. Why not engage them in depth, and use what they offer?

Some important resources are offered, for instance, by those cultural sociologists who think through the ways institutionalized processes of cultural production shape the availability of discourses in particular contexts (conceptual resources more precise than the somewhat pro-forma references to “monopoly of the means of cultural production,” to “carrier groups” and to “institutional arenas” mentioned in *Meanings*, e.g. 93, 97-103, 159). Others are offered by those who theorize taken-for-granted, normative practices in interaction, shaping the availability of discourses in particular group contexts. Still more are offered by those working on culture and cognition, helping understand the ways institutional and group contexts are maintained through shared categorization when the emotional intensity of sacred and profane attachments is inactive. As I’ve suggested elsewhere, exploring meaning-making “in the text” does not exclude concurrent exploration of meaning-making “on the (interactional) ground” and “in the institutional field,” and many of us necessarily integrate these different levels of analysis in our work— as the author himself has recently done.³

ENDNOTES

¹. Mark D. Jacobs and Lyn Spillman, Forthcoming. "Cultural Sociology at the Crossroads of the Discipline," *Poetics* 33(1) Winter 2005.

². Charles Tilly, "How do Relations Store Histories?" *Annual Review of Sociology* 26(2000):722.

³. Jeffrey Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy," *Sociological Theory* 22(4) December 2004: 527-73. Clearly my comments here build on the widely known work of many cultural sociologists which word limits prevent me from specifying and elaborating.

This book is important for the clarity and liveliness with which it communicates the core ideas and real innovations cultural sociology offers the discipline, and I hope that it's widely read. Nevertheless, the "strong program" isn't strong enough, because of its methodological and theoretical selectivity. It's usually unfair to castigate authors for not doing something different, but in the interest of continuing to build a *really* strong program for culture, we need to recognize here that more careful synthesis of the rich theoretical resources now at our disposal will extend its range and depth.

Neil Gross, continued

something to someone – assumed that signs acquire their meanings within communities of sign users, and therefore that thinking is an inherently social enterprise. Using a different kind of argument – and despite his objections to pragmatism – Durkheim tried to show much the same thing in *The Elementary Forms*. But while it is true that Durkheim often trotted out language as the premier example of a social fact, and insisted that humans see the world through the lens of collective representations, only Peirce offered us the vision of an external environment for human action that presents itself to actors as constituted entirely of semiotic bits, as Eugene Halton and others have tried to show. Peirce did not descend into radical constructivism. But a clear implication of his argument is that processes of meaning-rendering, far from being restricted to particular domains of human affairs, like those of art or literature, are fundamental to all human thought and action, and depend to a significant extent on the content of particular semiotic systems. From this vantage point, culture – which I take to denote, among other things, meaning-rendering as it occurs within such systems – is a core dimension of all social action. By the same token, however, the fact that culture has a role to play in every social action everywhere, across the enormous range of situations that humans find themselves in and what Geertz called the "radical variousness" of different sociohistorical configurations, makes it extremely unlikely that any single sociological theory of culture is going to adequately explain all cultural dynamics. This does not mean we should stop trying to develop conceptual vocabularies and theoretical tools that have relevance beyond particular empirical cases or across empirical domains. But we should not imagine that any single theoretical system is going to capture all or even most of the complexity, especially across widely dissimilar contexts.

In my view, the great achievement of Jeffrey Alexander's *The Meanings of Social Life* is to insist, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, on the centrality of meaning-rendering in human affairs, and to argue passionately against approaches to the sociology of culture that seek either to treat culture *only* as an independent or dependent variable, or to reduce *all* cultural processes and dynamics to overarching mechanisms like those that work to reproduce social inequality. But in advancing a "strong program" for the field, Alexander is sometimes prone to forget the implications of the very Peircean insight that makes his case against reductionism so compelling:

namely, that given the ubiquity of culture, to insist on studying it from any one vantage point alone is folly. Pluralism and pragmatism have to be the preferred metatheoretical strategies.

The idea of culture's ubiquity is at the core of Alexander's project. His essay on the strong program, written with Philip Smith and reprinted to lead off the book, takes it as an article of faith that "to believe in the possibility of a cultural sociology is to subscribe to the idea that every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive, or coerced vis-à-vis its external environments... is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning" (12). From Alexander's perspective, the problem with what he calls "weak programs" in the sociology of culture – and here he includes the Birmingham School, Bourdieu, Foucault, American production of culture studies, and neo-institutionalism – is that, though regarding meaning as having a crucial role to play in a variety of social processes, they tend to grasp meaning in thin and unpersuasive ways, and fail to recognize that semiotic systems may contain their own internal structures that shape and constrain action, such that culture is not an infinitely malleable resource that social structures and institutions can manipulate at will. To point the way toward a more satisfactory approach, which he designates "cultural sociology," Alexander synthesizes a number of lines of inquiry. From Geertz and Ricoeur, he borrows the insight that cultural systems can be analyzed as texts. From Levi-Strauss comes the idea that such systems are often structured in terms of binary oppositions, and he follows Durkheim in regarding these as tied to notions of sacred and profane. Taking a cue from narrative theorists, he considers how specific types of narrative shape meaning, and drawing on the work of sociologists influenced by pragmatism's model of action, like Swidler and Emirbayer, he suggests that the relationship between actors and culture is one of active deployment rather than passive colonization. The empirical chapters that follow, most of which have also appeared elsewhere, use this synthetic framework to analyze a variety of cultural configurations, from the construction of the Holocaust as a universal signifier of evil to the discursive codes undergirding American civil society to shifting understandings among intellectuals since World War II of the trope of modernization.

A key theoretical construct for Alexander is the notion of culture's "analytic autonomy," which his former student Anne Kane has written about in a well-known *Sociological Theory*

article. Focusing her attention on problems in historical sociology, Kane distinguishes the analytic autonomy of culture from its concrete autonomy, viewing these as aspects of the sociohistorical situation that come into relief at different moments in an investigation. Grasping culture's analytic autonomy requires that the sociologist "artificially" separate out from any historical situation the operative cultural and (relatively) non-cultural elements in order to determine whether the former comprise a coherent system or structure, a significant meaning-complex. In the second analytic moment, the insights garnered from this procedure are then brought together with a consideration of relevant "material" factors in order to isolate the causal contribution of culture's own internal structuring for some particular historical outcome. This position is consistent with Alexander's own: "Only after having created the analytically autonomous culture object does it become possible to discover in what ways culture intersects with other social forces, such as power and instrumental reason in the concrete social world" (14). Seeking to illustrate the value of this approach, which Alexander regards as akin to Husserl's *epoche*, the empirical essays in the volume – while occasionally discussing "material" factors – remain for the most part at the level of analytic autonomy, charting cultural structures and deep meanings.

Herein can be found both the strength and weakness of the book. The idea that sociologists should devote some of their energies to understanding in a rich and nuanced way the meanings operative in particular domains of human life, especially domains that impinge upon large numbers of actors, is important indeed. This is a project mainstream sociology has become suspicious of in recent years, despite the flourishing of the sociology of culture. Today, it seems – Alexander is right about this – sociologists of culture are interested in meaning only to the extent that it is imbricated with other social processes, like those having to do with inequality or legitimation, and can be shown to have causal significance for various outcomes. Investigations that explore cultural meanings for their own sake, particularly those that are more attuned to cultural holes than to the distribution of meanings across social position, tend to be written off. The days of *The Lonely Crowd*, or even *Habits of the Heart* – books that sought to identify and critically assess the lines of meaning around which American culture coheres – are long past. But this leaves an enormous and consequential gap in our knowledge of the social world. At best as presently practiced, the sociology of culture offers us analyses of meaning within a wide variety of social milieu, but few sweeping visions of dominant cultural trends and tendencies. Many sociologists no doubt see this as a sign of the field's health rather than of its decay, but certainly the public at large takes great interest in the question of what are the distinctive features and moral implications of the cultural worlds they inhabit. Sociology *used* to serve as a critical resource for helping people acquire new and better perspectives on these orientations, but as the sociology of culture has moved in other, more mechanistic directions, non-academic readers are increasingly turning to tendentious pundits, like David Brooks, for thoughts in this regard, or sometimes to those working in the field of cultural studies, whose idiosyncratic theoretical and methodological commitments often result in books that are speculative and far-fetched. This is territory sociology

Culture

should recover. Indeed, European theorists like Giddens and Beck and Bauman have been trying to do so for years, though with mixed results, owing to their very limited use of empirical data. A few American sociologists of culture – one thinks of Robert Wuthnow or Barry Glassner – have been more successful. Alexander deserves great praise for arguing in such a prominent forum that it is an important project *in its own right* to tease out the central meanings and meaning-complexes at play at particular sociohistorical junctures, including the present; and for assuming that efforts to do so are more valuable to the extent they do not remain oblivious to human interests and values, and hence do not assume a strict separation between the normative and the empirical. This, it seems to me, is where sociologists of culture have the greatest potential to contribute to the project of "public sociology."

At the same time, it is not at all clear why this teasing out must, in the name of preserving culture's analytic autonomy, restrict itself to the *particular* set of concepts upon which Alexander has seized. Yes, in some cultural configurations the opposition between sacred and profane is of critical importance. But there are many others where the coding of core elements is far more ambiguous and multidimensional, and fails to follow the model of binary structuring, or where the sacred/profane dichotomy, though operative, is less important than other cultural constructions. For example, while the code of American civil society may treat democracy as sacred and its opposite profane, other key elements in the code, such as government and its functions, lie in a different register. While liberals may like government where conservatives tend to be suspicious of it, it is neither – except to a few extremists on either side – sacred to the former nor profane to the latter, but rather an institution seen, depending on the historical circumstances, as more or less necessary, efficient, authentic, legitimate, corrupt, helpful, threatening, massified, etc. It seems to me that a study is no less an example of cultural sociology if, in the interests of exploring meaning, it eschews the notions of sacred and profane where these are not relevant, or concerns itself less with narrative structures, say, than with the substantive content of particular cultural codes. But Alexander sometimes make it seem as though cultural sociology is an all or nothing affair: either you are with him in his neo-structuralism or against him. To be sure, he ends his essay on the strong program with an explicit call for pluralism, and acknowledges that "weak program" approaches may have their place. But this very phraseology, which of course harks back to foundational statements in the sociology of scientific knowledge, asserts the sacredness of Alexander's approach over against the profaneness of other approaches. This type of polemical rhetoric may be important for starting an intellectual school, but unless it is recognized that culture in its complexity will be more effectively analyzed the greater the number of competing schools, it could all too easily lead to the unjustifiable practice of ignoring or downplaying alternative approaches, rather than regarding them as forging conceptual and theoretical tools that, in certain circumstances, may well shed maximal light on some problem. And this is not simply a matter of "weak program" approaches making contributions to "fields from demography to stratification to economic and political life" (26), for "weak program" concepts may sometimes prove crucial to understanding meaning itself, as in the case of fashion, where the fashion-

able is always constructed in opposition to an unfashionable other representing a different class position. Understanding this construction may or may not require use of the concept of habitus, but here, as elsewhere, it makes little sense to completely bracket off cultural from material factors. Therefore, while I am deeply appreciative of Alexander's contributions to the sociology of culture, I like them more because they point

us toward a new set of analytic tools and concepts – and because they reorient us toward the study of meaning – than because they lay out *the* singular program the field must follow if it is to be successful. Given the nature of culture, it is better to be a distanced admirer of a variety of theoretical programs than an acolyte of any.

**CENTRAL PROBLEMS IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY:
A REPLY TO MY (FRIENDLY) CRITICS**
Jeffrey C. Alexander, Yale University

It is a pleasure to receive thoughtful criticism, especially when mixed with more than faint praise,¹ and in the following I will not resist the temptation to occasionally evoke this praise as ballast. My primary concern, however, is to address the criticisms of *Meanings*, which are also general concerns of cultural sociology.

(1) Theoretical generalization/empirical singularity

As I assert in the preface to *Meanings*, this book presents my developing theoretical program for cultural sociology in an empirical form. Having stripped from the original essays most of their explicitly theoretical integument, I have embedded abstract ideas in the concreteness of empirical cases, allowing them to become presuppositions rather than propositions, with the hope that, if my interpretive skills are sufficient, empirical reality will seem to speak their name.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici wonders whether I have succeeded. Does not such a dual ambition, to reference theoretical generality and embed empirical interpretation, represent a “basic conundrum,” in which abstraction is, in fact, pursued *at the expense of* hermeneutical sensitivity? Asking “what [can] a ‘hermeneutics of the universal’ [possibly] mean,” she argues that “hermeneutics must begin with the particular, the singular ... to hold it up as a thing in itself.”

Before addressing this rather stinging complaint – the phrase “somewhat tone-deaf to the significance of the singular” does not seem to imply unmusical merely in Weber's sense! — I would contrast it with Lyn Spillman's reference to “the rich detail of the book” as containing “a series of dramatic and sometimes virtuoso case studies,” and with Mabel Berezin's characterization of my method as “comparative and historically embedded thick description” that gives particular attention to “specific historical contexts” and the “changing valence” of abstract terms.

Robin raises big issues for an interpretively oriented cultural sociology. There is, indeed, a long-standing dichotomy in philosophy and social science theory between nomothetic and idiographic, between the generalizing and law-like, on the one hand, and the unique and case-specific, on the other. Yet, even as efforts to analyze cultural sociologically have so often foundered on the shoals of this dangerous divide, it has been energetically sustained by each side: uniqueness and “sensibility” by humanities (against the supposed hardness and

unmusicality of the natural sciences) and tough-minded generality by the sciences (against the relativism and “merely descriptive” qualities of interpretation).

Readers of *Culture* are only too well aware of how this binary has been transposed into a debate between cultural (“relativistic”) and institutional (“objective”) sociology. One of my central points in *Meanings* is to suggest that this dichotomy has also invaded, and deeply affected, the sociology of culture itself. The field is torn between interpretively oriented and more “scientific” models. Practitioners in the former, “interpretive” camp, which includes not only the specific “strong program” I advance in *Meanings*, but the work of many other cultural sociologists, including the writings of my friendly critics, are conspicuous for the unblushing manner in which they incorporate theories and methods from the humanities. By contrast, those who take an “objective” approach want to stamp out “Geertzian” relativism by employing natural-scientific methods and by inflecting the ephemerality of meaning with the reflection of what is supposed to be the visibilities and common senses of social structure, e.g., Ann Swidler's *Talk of Love*, the topic of this newsletter one year ago.

In the development of my cultural sociology, I have argued against understanding interpretive reconstruction as relativist, idiographic, idealistic, or unscientific.² Meaning is central to the construction and force of every social object; such meanings can be accessed only through interpretation; interpretation is a subjective action inspired and limited by the life experience of the observer. If Dilthey is right so far, this self-understanding of hermeneutics must be criticized as well. Experience is not purely personal and idiographic. Theoretical traditions represent a subset of extra-individual experience that always informs interpretive reconstructions. These universalizing inputs allow a certain anti-particularistic universalism to mediate the cultural-sociological efforts to explain/interpret the world. So do the rationalizing meta-methodological commitments of social science itself.³

The implications of this argument for cultural-sociological practice is that objects can never be looked at in their *own* terms, simply “in themselves.” Their meanings are reconstructed, moreover, not only in terms of our personal experience but in terms of our theories, which themselves specify the broad and barely visible presuppositional disagreements

that divide general sociology. So the conundrum is not necessarily a forced choice, and, at any rate, it certainly cannot be avoided. The tension between universal and particular characterizes every effort at cultural interpretation, whether it is self-consciously theoretical or not. Robin herself recognizes this, and implicitly critiques her own critique when she rightly notes that, in analyzing the particular object, it is “certainly” necessary “to move back and forth from it to the general principle or type it represents.” The question, then, is balance. Empirical validity, which in cultural sociology means something like interpretive force, cannot be deduced from theoretical presuppositions; it is a matter of convincing the scientific community that you have revealed something true about the object itself.

(2) Neo-Structuralism and Binarism

Neil Gross explicitly applies the term “neo-structuralism” to *Meanings*; Robin and Lyn do so implicitly. The charge is that I approach culture in terms of synchrony and stability at the expense of diachrony and change, and, further, that the strong program is overly preoccupied with the binary organization of culture and its valuation as sacred and profane. Now, if one includes in neo-structuralism everyone from Jakobson and Bakhtin to Ecco to Jameson, such an identification does not seem like a bad place to be. It points to the extraordinary range of thinkers who have been in serious dialogue with classical structuralism, systematically correcting its one-sidedness without denying the structuredness of culture itself.⁴ But to be identified with structuralism in a more literal sense, and with the specific charges listed above, is definitely not to be desired. Can the strong program be absolved from this stigmatizing charge? Let us see.

(a) *Methodology*. Classical structuralism, and semiotics, has understood itself as an objective, distanced, natural science method, which establishes universal laws, uses speech as mere data, and produces explanations rather than meaning interpretation. In describing the strong program as a “structural hermeneutics,” in the introduction to *Meanings*, Phil Smith and I explicitly have rejected this identification. My aim, more generally, has been to link these philosophical antagonists by developing an alternative, and to some degree synthetic, approach to social meanings. I welcome Mabel Berezin’s description of “Alexander’s method as comparative and historically embedded thick description.”

(b) *Binarism*. Units of language, and culture more generally, are organized relationally, by constructing relations of difference and similarity. They are not organized, in the first instance, by their “true” or “intrinsic” meaning, by their “referentiality,” that is, by their relation to objects or sets of relations outside the reach of socially constructed and historically specific meaning itself. That meaning is relationally constructed is widely accepted in linguistic and cultural theory, no matter how critical its attitude to classical structuralism.⁵ This explains the wide dispersion, throughout the human sciences, of certain fundamentally semiotic concepts: “Things,” whether social or material, function simultaneously as signs; signs are divided into signifiers and signified; signifiers are organized by patterns of difference and similarity. The referents of signifiers — the signifieds — cannot be separated from the *language* of signification.⁶

Culture

The notion of meaning by difference has most clearly been identified with Derrida, but this is merely his inflection on the semiotic traditions that spring from Saussure and Peirce. Basically the same understanding has informed cultural analysis from Weber (whose grid for religious meaning is based, not only on the narrative of salvation, but on the double binary this-worldly/other-worldly and mystic/ascetic) to Kenneth Burke (whose rhetoric of motives rests on permutations of contrasting categories) to, more obviously, Roman Jakobson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Mary Douglas, and Marshall Sahlins.

Thinkers in the latter group have insisted that relations of difference are significantly binary. What I have suggested, beyond this, is that such binary “codes” are also inflected with moral and affectual properties, which can metaphorically, evocatively, and to some degree empirically be described in terms of sacred and profane.⁷ This is, of course, to connect binary and relational theories to Durkheim’s profound claim to the continuing relevance of “primitive” religion to the “religious man of today.”⁸

(c) *Open and closed, determinism and difference*. The relations among signifiers is highly structured. It would not be a culture structure if it were not resistant to change; the same can be said for economic, political, and organizational forms. However, the relation between signifiers and signifieds is different. There is, in fact, no determinant relation; it is relatively open and contingent. This point was strongly emphasized in Jakobson’s powerful restatement of Saussure, from the 1920s onward, which was later radicalized by Derrida.⁹

Socialism and capitalism, for example, are meanings established relationally. Typically, though not always, this binary has also been valorized into sacred and profane. But, the relation between this signifying relation and the social understanding of any particular regime, institution, or party configuration has, for more than a century, been open-ended, a matter for bitter cultural and social dispute.

While symbols are not always classified in terms of sacred and profane, this is far more often the case than our secular society commonly believes. Is it really true, as Neil suggests, that government and its functions lie “in a different register” from cultural classification, such that, while liberals may “like” government and conservatives may “tend to be suspicious of it,” government itself is seen in binary terms only by “a few extremists on either side”? Eschewing cultural signification, Neil suggests that government should be regarded as an “institution” that is “more or less necessary.” I would respond that, yes, government is an institution, and on this level, qua social system, it has a functional existence that can be understood in pragmatic terms (subject to the conditions stated in note 7, above). However, government is also a sign, and its social meaning must be placed inside relations of difference as well. According to the conservative American version of the discourse of civil society, government has a decidedly negative, indeed polluted connotation. If this were not true, President George W. Bush would not have been allowed to take the Oath of Office for the second time.¹⁰

The indeterminate relation between signifier and signified is one major source of openness vis-à-vis a semiotic code. The other comes from within the structures of the code itself. That

meanings are relational and uneasily joined, that the meaning of one thing can only be defined in close opposition to another, points to a source of tension and slippage from within binarism itself. The construction of purity is only a “thin blue line” away from the attribution of pollution. It is one small step to transgression, and the fear of pollution is never far away. For stigmatized objects, this suggests that the possibilities for vindication are just on the other side, and that the light of morning can be glimpsed through the darkness of night.¹¹

Lyn and Robin suggest that representation can elude metacoding. While there is great distance between a collectivity’s most general codes/narratives and the representation of social agents and institutions – and, thus, the indeterminacy I have just discussed between metacode and particular event — events can “evade” one code only as they are caught up in the binaries/narratives of another. Neither is the space between metacode and actual event empty. It is filled with more mediate structures, e.g., Jacobson’s “shifters” and Bakhtin’s “speech genres.”¹² Metacodes are historical. They must be performed, and experienced as authenticated in pragmatic ways. Such intermediate structures as shifters and speech genres allow this flexibility to be maintained and metacodes themselves to change.

(d) *Weighting*. There has been an enduring conflict, since Saussure, between the structural analysis of culture and the analysis of its performance, whether via speech (as compared to “language”), artistic creativity, or social movements and action. The performative, contingently-oriented dimension of cultural life is sometimes called poetics. In linguistic theory, poetics refers to the metonymic, as compared to the analogic: the physical placement of words next to each other, the different accents of speech, tonalities, emphatics, pragmatics, rhyming, and phonetics. We all speak the same language, but it never sounds exactly the same. In *Meanings*, my most elaborately developed empirical investigations — “On the Social Construction of Moral Universalism: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama” and “Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How Intellectuals Explain ‘Our Time’” — greatly concern themselves with poetics, with cultural con/disjuncture and social change. They trace the variegated weightings of evil, how it becomes more and less polluted in the face of different kinds of institutional strain.

(e) *Narrating*. Diachrony is the classical alternative to the sin of synchrony, of which structuralism stands so often accused is. Narrativity is ur-diachrony. Throughout *Meanings*, I refer to “code AND narrative.” As Mabel observes, “the strong program focuses on contrasting social narratives that move in time and space”; my approach “takes whole conceptual units at one point in time and analyzes those units as they move through time and space.”¹³

Codes and narratives are interconnected, but they can be teased apart analytically and empirically. The protagonists and antagonists of narratives are constructed upon the structural dichotomies of codes, but they are not determined by them. Narratives can be understood as representing a nonbinary kind of structural logic, or they can be conceived more emergently, as shapes that give temporal form to cultural construction. My approach to narratives in *Meanings* is informed, in part, by my

understanding that Weber located a linear and apocalyptic salvatory narrative at the heart of Western religion. Iterations of this “progressive” and often triumphal master narrative can be found throughout contemporary secular life, but they are often in tension with tragic narrations that evoke pity and terror.¹⁴ I trace this narrative tension in arguments among world-historical intellectuals, in the development of the Holocaust, in ideologies of technology.

(f) *Actions, institutions, and disruptions*. Social scientists concerned with institutions and creative actions, whether individual or collective, are often reluctant analytically to reconstruct, and empirically to acknowledge, the relative independence of social discourse vis-à-vis adaptive and strategic exigencies and organization. They fear being idealist. Yet, to allow discursive structure a relative autonomy is actually to secure the basis for multidimensionality.¹⁵ The interaction of ideal and material factors is a primitive way to put this theoretical exigency, but it will do. I agree with Lyn’s assertion that “we have to look beyond discourse structure to understand why some things get said in a particular context and others don’t.” But we cannot look without it, either. Yes, “institutional processes of cultural production shape the availability of discourses in particular contexts,” but they do not create them.¹⁶

Meanings does concentrate, much more than most sociologies of culture, on the hermeneutic reconstruction of relatively independent culture structures, as Neil points out in his admirable discussion of analytic versus concrete autonomy in Anne Kane’s important early essay. But the studies in *Meanings* are often also filled to the brim with contextualizing analysis, with attention to ethnic, religious, racial, and economic conflicts, to the cataclysmic and unexpected social effects of military victory and defeat, to failed and successful social movements, vertical rankings, exclusions, corruptions, and disruptions of all kinds. So is my collective work on cultural traumas and social performances, to which I have referred above.

(3) The problem of the routine

Lyn raises the intriguing problem of the routine. Suggesting, in effect, that I have cherry picked the kind of “intense, conflicted, and exceptional” cases that would validate my strong program, she argues that the cultural understanding of *routine* social life requires “analytical tools beyond those offered in this book.” I am very willing to admit that we need more analytical tools than those I have presented in *Meanings*. But I wonder whether these would have specifically to with analysis of the mundane and routine? The social world, or at least vast times and places in it, can often appear be objectified and unmeaningful. Certainly, its meanings are taken for granted, and they cannot be accessed upon demand. It has always seemed to me, however, that, somehow, the meanings of even mundane social life are still there. One need only scratch the surface, and one can see them bubbling up. This the clear and enduring implication of Harold Garfinkel’s breaching experiments, which challenged the mundane order towards which actors adopt the “natural attitude,” exposing the highly normative order that lay just beneath. Victor Turner’s later studies of social drama demonstrated this for macrosociology — how “breaches” in social order expose the deep skein of sometimes fragmented, but always highly charged meanings upon which the routine operation of institutions depend.¹⁷

The argument here is that highly charged commitments are latent, even when they are not consciously perceived. What could be more routine and objectified than market life? Yet, can prices, market decisions, or even economic organization operate without continuously drawing upon meanings that, while consciously unmarked, are structured by deep divisions between the sacred and profane?¹⁸

(4) Strong Programs

It is not surprising that *Meanings'* critics look to other programs in cultural theory; what worries is their suggestion that programmatic efforts are suspect in themselves. Neil argues that "to insist on studying" culture "from any one vantage point alone is folly." To do so leads to "the unjustifiable practice of ignoring or downplaying alternative approaches ... that, in certain circumstances, may well shed maximal light on some problems." For this reason, "pluralism and pragmatism have to be the preferred metatheoretical strategies." Lynn suggests, in the same manner, that "a really strong program ... will engage and integrate the contributions of other positions."

Is this really how social science theory works? Do we have such independence from theoretical presuppositions? Can we choose when we will speak their language, and when not, depending on the pragmatic pay-off? Do we alter our theoretical frames in response to non-framed objects, or do we "test" theories in response to objects that are always already theoretically framed?

That such questions echo the disputes about cultural sociology in the preceding sections of this Reply is not accidental. Theory is to social scientist as culture is to social actor; metacode is to event as theoretical frame is to empirical object. Social science can no more get behind theory than social actors can evade codes. We do not pick and choose our theories according to the nature of the empirical object. If anything, our theories pick and choose objects for us. Does "organization" select right theory to analyze itself, or do competing organizational theories see different organizational things? Does the fact of cultural production necessitate "production of culture" theory? Does the existence of fashion in class society lead us to Bourdieu, to Hebdige, or Barthes? Are pluralism and pragmatism not theories themselves?

Sociological knowledge proceeds through the competition, adaptation, expansion and contraction of research programs, which rest on strong reality claims. Ignoring and downplaying is what theories do; it is the other side of paying attention and illuminating. It is only inside research programs that self-referencing and self-criticism can take place. Knowledge grows as research programs struggle to provide alternative explanations for every level of social reality that has been illuminated by its competitors.¹⁹

But if a purely pragmatic rationality is not possible, a cultural pragmatics is. This forum has focused on theoretical logic. *Meanings* seeks to contribute to the growth of knowledge in a more empirically-directed way. It is by this dialectic that the growth of our sociological understanding of culture will proceed.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a contrasting call and response, in which criticism of *Meanings*, and my cultural approach to sociology more generally, are leavened only with faint praise, see Gregor McLennan, *Culture*

"The 'New American Cultural Sociology': An Appraisal" and Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Why Cultural Sociology Is Not 'Idealist': A Reply to McLennan," both forthcoming in *Theory, Culture, and Society*. For another site of critical discussion of *Meanings*, see the contributions to *Thesis 11* (79) 2004: 1-86.

² See, e.g., "The Hermeneutic Challenge" and "Clifford Geertz's Rebellion Against Determinism" in Alexander, *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory Since World War II*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

³ See Alexander, "General Theory in the Postpositivist Mode: The 'Epistemological Dilemma' and the Search for Present Reason," pp. 90-127 in Alexander, *Fin-de-Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁴ That Bourdieu, in his headlong rush from cultural analysis to practice theory, ignored such wide-ranging neo-structuralism is one of my charges in "The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu," pp. 128-217 in *Fin-de-Siecle Social Theory* (loc. cit).

⁵ For example, in their influential "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life" (*Annual Review of Anthropology* 1990 [19]: 59-88), an actor-oriented attack on structuralist philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology, Richard Baumann and Charles Briggs criticize Austinian speech act theory for considering illocutionary force in referential rather than relational terms.

⁶ One can, of course, analyze social things without reference to their sign status, as non-or-anti-cultural sociologies do. But the worlds of actors and institutions can be only hypothetically objectified, that is, for heuristic purposes. Rather than actually being things, it is rather the case that their signification is so standardized and so invariant that it can, for purposes of analysis, be taken as a parameter. This is not the same thing, however, as saying that the signifying dimension of a social variable, its structured meaning, does not exist, or has no effect.

⁷ This connection of relational to binary and to sacred/profane is a distinctive but not an entirely controversial position. See, e.g., the focus on purity, danger, and boundary-making in the more empirical writings of such important contemporary cultural sociologists as Viviana Zelizer (e.g., *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, New York: Basic Books, 1985) and Michele Lamont (e.g., *The Dignity of the Working Man*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁸ The "religious man of today" is a phrase Durkheim evokes on the first page of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and he means to point here, of course, to religion in a post-metaphysical sense. In "The New Durkheim," with which Philip Smith and I introduce our forthcoming, *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (in April, 2005, Cambridge University Press), we argue that this seemingly iconoclastic claim, via the influ-

ence of poststructuralism and symbolic anthropology, has become increasingly influential in the social sciences and humanities.

⁹ Roman Jakobson, "Langue and Parole: Code and Message," pp. 80-109 in Jakobson, On Language (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Jacques Derrida, "Differance," pp. 59-80 in Peggy Kamuf, ed., A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ For a discussion in *Meanings* of this often invisible but far-reaching binary, see "The Discourse of American Civil Society" (with Philip Smith). See "Watergate as Democratic Ritual" for a discussion, also in *Meanings*, of how shifting political and social currents can connect a series of different, and often antagonistic, social actors to the same civil binary, and thus produce diametrically opposed, combustible social repercussions within a relatively delimited historical time.

¹¹ Jakobson (loc. cit) pointed out this second source of openness as well.

¹² Jakobson, "Shifters and Verbal Categories," pp. 386-392 in *ibid.* and M.M. Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹³ I have recently been pursuing this integration of synchrony and diachrony, structuralism and poetics, via a theory of performance, e.g., in Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy" (*Sociological Theory* 22 [4] 2004: 527-573) and Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason Mast, eds., Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press). See also, in this regard, Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity (University of California, 2004).

¹⁴ Ron Eyerman, Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Bernhard Giesen, Triumph and Trauma (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2004).

¹⁵ See Alexander, "Cultural Sociology Is Not 'Idealist': A Reply to McClennan," op. cit.

¹⁶ See Ron Eyerman, "Towards a Meaningful Sociology of the Arts" in Eyerman and Lisa McCormick, eds., New Directions in the Sociology of the Arts, Boulder: Paradigm Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Robin Wagner-Pacifici, The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and Laura Edles, Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Zelizer, op. cit., and Roger Friedland and Robert Alford, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions," in Paul Dimaggio and Woody Powell, eds., The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). For empirical demonstrations of how codes and narratives underlie and energize more routinized and apparently strategic conflicts, see Ronald Jacobs, Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Philip Smith, War Genres: The Cultural Politics of Suez, the Gulf War, and the War in Iraq (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press).

¹⁹ Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul A. Colomy, "Traditions and Competition: Preface to a Postpositivist Approach to Knowledge Accumulation," pp. 27-52 in George Ritzer, ed., Metatheorizing. London: Sage, 1992.

Books of Note

Richard A. Peterson, Vanderbilt University

Fine, Gary Alan. Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Based on years of observation and participation, Fine describes the workings of the art world that has grown up around self-taught outsiders the market describes as artists. They remain outsiders in Fine's analysis as he takes the perspective of the collectors, dealers, and critics who have constructed the field not around the quality of the art but around the biographies of its creators, and judgments are not made on the basis of aesthetic quality but on authenticity.

Swartz, David L. and Vera L. Zolberg, editors. After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration. Secaucus, NJ: Springer. Swartz and Zolberg present a mix of review essays and empirical studies inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Their wide range is a testament to the power and scope of Bourdieu's life work. Two chapters focus primarily on the personal and intel-

lectual development of the man. One chapter deals with religion, one with education, four with economics, one with the literary field, and three with social movements and politics.

Semmerling, Tim Jon. Israeli and Palestinian Postcards: Presentations of National Self. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. In this book Semmerling explores how Palestinians and Israelis use post cards and greeting cards to present images of the national self, to build national pride, reinforce nationalist ideologies, and gain international sympathy and support. He shows how these cards constitute an important arena of struggle to produce a new reality.

Brode, Douglas. From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. Pacifism, feminism, drug-trip imagery, racial integration, sexual revolution, multiculturalism, return to nature, the righteous out-

law, individual rights, and anti-authoritarian values. Timothy Leary? No, Brode argues they were all taught through Walt Disney's films of the Eisenhower era.

McCusker, Kristine and Diane Pecknold, editors. [A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music](#). Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi. Drawing case material ranging from the strict gender norms of the 1930s to the contemporary New Women's Movement in country music, authors show the gender wars that have raged in country music and the society it has reflected over the past seventy years.

Schwalbe, Michael. [Remembering Reet and Shine: Two Black Men, One Struggle](#). Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi. This is the story of two ordinary black men born into the South of segregation and thwarted ambition. Schwalbe describes how they coped with the conflicting demands of their families and white world, and he describes Reet and Shine, the fictional characters they created in the struggle to live authentic lives.

Cox, Christopher and Daniel Warner, editors. [Audio Culture: A Reader in Modern Music](#). New York: Continuum. The authors attempt to map the discursive map of vanguard musical culture today, focusing on forms that include minimalism, experimental music, avant-rock, dub reggae, ambient music, musique concrète, hip hop, and techno.

van Rijn, Guido. [The Truman and Eisenhower Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs, 1945-1960](#). New York: Continuum. The authors present an account of gospel and blues music in the immediate postwar period as it reflected segregation as well as events including the atom bomb, the Cold War, Korea, and the drift in the Eisenhower years on the eve of the civil rights movement.

Ross, Andrew. [No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs](#). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. Based on 18 months the author spent immersed in two Silicon Alley firms. Though maverick in their task structuring and permissive in their culture, there are still hidden costs to this industrialized Bohemia: 70-hour workweeks, lack of job protection, shouldering of corporate risk by employees, an illusory sense of power sharing, and chronic life stress.

Work, John W., Lewis Wade Jones, and Samuel C. Adams, Jr., (edited by Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov). [Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University - Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942](#). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. In 1941 the authors, all of Fisk University, joined Alan Lomax in musicological and sociological field work in a Mississippi delta county. Lomax's account won the National Book Critics Circle Award, though it was flawed in a number of historical inaccuracies. The manuscript by the three Fisk scholars had until now, been lost in a Washington archive. It includes, among other jewels, it contains the first recordings by the seminal blues genius, Muddy Waters.

Jordan-Lake, Joy. [Whitewashing Uncle Tom's Cabin: Nineteenth Century Women Novelists Respond to Stowe](#). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. As Jordan-Lake shows, female slavery apologists responded to Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#) with novels of their own. Though emulating Stowe's strategies of appealing to maternal sensibilities and offended motherhood, their most positive women characters proved to be mere pawns in the patriarchal game of white male domination.

Routledge

hooks, bell. [We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity](#). hooks explores the many ways that in an atmosphere of jealousy, envy, and hate, black men are rejected by white men, white women, black women, boys, girls and themselves.

Collins, Patricia Hill. [Black Sexual Politics](#). Collins explores how images of black sexuality have been used to maintain the color line and how they threaten to spread a new brand of racism around the world. Presented thematically, the selections address the history of hip-hop, identity politics of the hip-hop nation, debates of "street authenticity", gender, aesthetics, and technologies of production.

Forman, Murray and Mark Anthony Neal, editors. [That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader](#). The editors have assembled a collection of diverse articles written about the early development of hip-hop, contested authenticity, gender, politics and resistance, aesthetics, and the culture industry.

Willie, Sarah Susannah. [Acting Black: College Identity and the Performance of Race](#). Willie shows how black students negotiate multiple racial and non-racial identities in historically black colleges and predominantly white institutions.

Guglielmo, Jennifer and Salvatore Salerno, editors. [Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America](#). The authors explore how, when, and why Italian Americans began to identify themselves as white.

Zukin, Sharon. Point of Purchase: [How Shopping Changed American Culture](#). Zukin attests to the incredible impact shopping has had on American life, stretching from the mid-19th century to today's shopping trends, from the internet to Zagat guides. She presents shopping as the pursuit of the American dream, where low prices define our concept of democracy, brand names represent our search for a better life, and designer boutiques embody the promise of an ever-improving self.

Hall, John R., Mary Jo Neitz and Marshall Battani, [Sociology on Culture](#). The authors offer a wide-ranging overview of sociological approaches to culture, their major arguments, and their findings. Their examples range from Mediaeval theater to the Internet and their observations are informed from interpretative sociology to the Frankfurt school and Foucault.

St. John, Graham editor. [Rave Culture and Religion](#). Was the late 1980s wave of moral panic in Britain surrounding raving about religion then?

Hausman, Bernice L. Mother's Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in American Culture. Hausman examines breastfeeding in relation to advocacy discourses and the social constraints that make nursing a contested experience in contemporary culture. In close readings of medical, popular, and scholarly texts, she demonstrates that feminism has dropped the ball by ignoring breastfeeding as a topic for scholarly inquiry. She suggests as well that breastfeeding advocates should politicize their advocacy in feminist directions.

Sage

Rakow, Lana F. and Laura A. Wackwitz. Feminist Communication Theory: Selections in Context. This is a book "of" and "for" feminist communication theorists, providing the potential to help individuals understand the human condition, name personal experiences, engage these experiences through storytelling, and give useful strategies for achieving justice.

McRobbie, Angela. The Uses of Cultural Studies: A Textbook. The heart of McRobbie's book comprises a series of critical chapters on six of the foundational theorists of cultural studies, Hall, Bhabha, Butler, Gilroy, Bourdieu and Jameson. Also are included six shorter chapters that demonstrate one might actually do cultural studies using insights from these writers' work.

Wasko, Janet. How Hollywood Works. Wasko provides a clear view of the processes involved in making, distributing and exhibiting Hollywood films. Showing why it matters how the industry works, she shows ways to promote and protect the industry.

Turner, Graeme. Understanding Celebrity. In this text Turner examines the "celebrity industries" drawing examples from the full range of modern media from film to the web.

Jenks, Chris. Subculture: The Fragmentation of the Social. Jenks takes a cold look at "subculture," a term developed in the project of the Chicago school of deviant group sociologists and, ironically, elaborated by their modernist nemesis, Talcott Parsons, as well. Jenks finds that, with the co-optation of the term by cultural studies, the concept has run its course and lost its utility.

Keyton, Joann. Communication & Organizational Culture: A Key to Understanding Work Experiences. Keyton provides an introduction to the different approaches to the study of organizational culture and provides practical advice about managing, developing, and changing organizational culture.

Negus, Keith and Michael Pickering. Creativity, Communication, and Cultural Value. The authors understand creativity as integral to human communication. At the same time they show how the term "creativity" is routinely misused to put a respectable gloss on manipulative advertising, shady financial

accounting, and the manipulative management of employees. They call for reengaging creativity with the ideas of exceptionality and genius.

Oxford

Alexander, Jeffrey C. The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology. Judgments about the self and society are not based in rational necessity but in culturally constructed views of what is natural and right. Alexander argues for a cultural sociology that will bring the unconscious cultural structures into the broad light of day. Exposing our everyday myths and narratives in a series of essays on topics ranging from Watergate to the Holocaust, he shows how these unseen yet potent cultural structures translate into concrete actions and institutions.

Hohnen, Pernille. A Market Out of Place: Remaking Economic, Social, and Symbolic Boundaries in Post-Communist Lithuania. There is much talk now of the market being a cultural construct. Here Hohnen shows in exquisite detail the travails of Lithuanian entrepreneurs to create a market economy among people used to statist bureaucracy.

Rausing, Sigrid. History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia: The End of a Collective Farm. With the collapse of the Soviet state, Estonians of Swedish descent have worked hard to reestablish ties to the Swedish economy and identity.

Russell Sage Foundation

Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs and Arne Kalleberg, editors. Fighting for Time: Shifting Boundaries of Work and Social Life. The authors show that "time" is a fluid concept. They show how the number of work hours relates directly to social class, gender, and work organization, and how it effects workers health and family life.

Dobbin, Frank, editor. The Sociology of the Economy. The authors explore the social construction of markets and the many consequences that follow from seeing markets as cultural products rather as an autonomous economic sphere.

Guillen, Mauro E., Randall Collins, Paula England, and Marshall Meyer, editors. The New Economic Sociology: Developments in an Emerging Field. Drawing on a wide range of examples, the authors display the fruits of the new culturally-based definition of the economy.

Kasinitz, Philip, John H. Mollenkopf, and Mary C. Waters, editors. Becoming New Yorkers: Ethnographies of the Second Generation. Almost two-thirds of New Yorkers under 18 are the children of immigrants. The authors provide focused ethnographies of some of New York's largest ethnic populations including Dominicans, Koreans, Russian Jews, and Caribbeans from several islands to show the way that they are changing the fabric of American culture.

Blackwell

Jacobs, Mark D. and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, editors. The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture contains 28 original chapters organized into seven sections: Problems of Theory and Method; Cultural Systems; Everyday Life and the Construction of Meaning; Identity and Difference; Collective Memory and Cultural Amnesia; The Culture of Institutions; and The Culture of Citizenship—Local, National, Global. The contributors are all well-known to members of the Culture Section and of RC 37 of the International Sociological Association. The editors discern in these chapters a new approach to the problematics created by the cultural turn—a gathering reconceptualization of culture that starts to define a basis of solidarity in the very recognition of difference, as well as a new basis for evaluative judgment in the absence of prescriptive cultural authority. This newly emerging conception of culture is an aesthetic one, which offers possibilities for intensifying and re-imagining the experience of civic life.

McDowell, Linda. Redundant Masculinities? Employment Change and White Working-Class Youth. McDowell shows how their failure in school and the workplace, together with the view of them as thugs, creates a crisis for working-class men in Western societies.

Robertson, Jennifer, editor. Same-Sex Cultures and Sexualities: An Anthropological Reader. The authors illustrate the workings of ideas of sexuality in a diverse range of social contexts.

Wharton, Amy S. The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research. This text provides an accessible yet intellectually sophisticated approach to current gender theory and research.

Princeton

Baker, Wayne. America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception. Many politicians and religious leaders assert that the US has lost its traditional beliefs and is bitterly divided over values. But is this crisis of values real? Using World Value Survey data, Baker shows no sharp moral decline in the US, rather conditions here are not markedly different from those in the other 60 countries studied. He shows that Americans subscribe to the same core values such as family, religion, democracy, civility, education, and personal freedom. He finds however that the nation is sharply divided by arguments over the best policies for actualizing those values.

Kaminski, Marek M. Games Prisoners Play: The Tragicomic Worlds of Polish Prisons. Kaminski presents an unsparing account of the life inside a Polish prison. Life there, which at first seems to be an unending round of irrational violence, becomes understandable through game theory.

Collins, Randall. Interaction Ritual Chains. Collins probes the interaction rituals that underlie such activities as cigarette smoking, sex, and social stratification. Successful rituals create symbols of group membership that energize participants.

Individuals, he argue, move from situation to situation, drawn to those interactions where their cultural capital gives them the best emotional energy payoff.

Wuthnow, Robert. Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society. Wuthnow analyses the evidence on the results of the federal government's program to facilitate the social welfare programs of religious organizations. He shows that religion is helping needy families and fostering civil society. He argues, however, that religion alone cannot save America from its welfare problems.

Young, Alford A., Jr. The Minds of Marginalized Black Men. We hear much about the "culture of poverty" that keeps poor black men poor. Young, through interviews with 26 men, provides insights about how they view their prospects.

Medrona, Juan Diez. Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Medrona provides an insightful empirical analysis of the contrasting attitudes to European integration held in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Ford, Richard T. Racial Culture: A Critique. What is black culture? Does it have an essence? Ford explores what is gained and what is lost when the assumption is made that such an essence exists, resulting in the shaping of laws to fit this "reality." He questions the common presumption of political multiculturalism that social categories such as race, sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity are constrained by inherent cultural differences.

Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. Barbershops, Bibles and BET. Based on ethnographic research, Harris-Lockwell shifts the focus from the influence of black elites in shaping political beliefs to local elites and people in daily interaction with each other, focusing on the influence of barbershops, religious congregations and Black Entertainment Television.

Altamira Press and Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

Ellis, Carolyn. The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography. Using her own personal stories, interactions with students and imaginings, Ellis illuminates the methodology of autoethnography as taught in a fictional graduate seminar.

Gajjala, Radhika. Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women. Gajjala studies women in the South Asian diaspora to learn about their building community through on-line communities.

Landres, J. Shawn and Michael Berenbaum, editors. After the Passion Is Gone: American Religious Consequences. Leading scholars of religion and theology ask what the Mel Gibson film and the resulting controversy reveal about Christians, Jews, and the possibility of interreligious dialogue in the U.S. The authors ask why the controversy focused on the violence, the anti-Semitism, and distortion of Scripture rather than on other issues.

Bettig, Ronald V. and Jeanne Lynn Hall. Big Media, Big Money: Cultural Texts and Political Economics. The authors show how the concentrated ownership of the mass media of communication influences the political economy and cultural politics. It also outlines a language of critique and a discourse for collective struggle.

Boggs, Carl and Thomas Pollard. A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema. The authors deploy critical social theory to account for the evolving Postmodern character of American film, especially the emergence of the anti-political film.

University of Minnesota Press

Rosciogno, Vincent J. and William P. Danaher. The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934. The authors chronicle the experience of southern textile workers and provides a unique perspective on the role of the music they listened to and sang during the great 1934 textile workers strike.

Schmidt, Ronald J. Jr. This Is the City: Making Model Citizens in Los Angeles. Schmidt traces the effort to script Los Angeles social life through democratic pedagogy and popular media so that residents emulate models of virtue and to coerce them to exercise passive behavior.

Pred, Allan. The Past Is Not Dead: Fact, Fictions, and Enduring Racial Stereotypes. Pred shows how attitudes toward eigh-

teenth-century Afro-Caribbean slave, Badin, given to the Swedish royal court, still reverberate in Swedish society today.

Chisholm, Dianne. Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City. Chisholm considers experimental queer writing in conjunction with Benjamin's writing showing how a queer perspective on inner-city reality exposes contradictions obscured by narratives of progress.

Ashgate

Bennett, Andy, editor. Remembering Woodstock. Each chapter explores a specific aspect of the festival and its influence on popular music, the music industry, the rock festival tradition, and sixties nostalgia as seen primarily from the United Kingdom.

Whiteley, Sheila, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins. Music, Space, and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity. Using examples from rasta, Bulgaria, Madonna, and rap styles around the world, the authors illustrate the influence of the space and place where these processes are shaped both by specific musical practices and by the pressures of political and economic circumstances.

Hyder, Rehan. Brimful of Asia: Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene. In the past decade a number of bands composed of ethnic Asians have become important in the pop music world of the United Kingdom. Hyder shows how their backgrounds affect their music and their place in the tumultuous UK pop music business.
