

Towards a New Cultural Sociology

Review by Alexander Riley

Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason Mast (eds.), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 374 pp.

Ron Eyerman and Lisa McCormick (eds.), *Myth, Meaning, and Performance: Toward a New Cultural Sociology of the Arts*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006, 166 pp.

After the cultural turn in Durkheimian reinterpretation, should we now talk about a performative turn? These two collections of work by members of the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology would suggest an affirmative response.

Social Performance is arranged as a series of insightful chapters dealing with particular empirical cases (e.g., the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Willy Brandt's 1970 kneefall at the Warsaw Memorial to the Ghetto Uprising) sandwiched by introductory and concluding chapters that stand as major theoretical statements informing the other chapters. I will focus most of my attention on these two theoretical chapters, as they most thoroughly situate themselves with respect to Durkheimian concepts and terminology.

The introductory chapter, written by Alexander, constitutes an extensive effort towards the reconciliation of structural and pragmatist theories of culture. Alexander's proposition is that performance theory offers some tools for a fresh attempt at this integrative work. First, he delineates an historical framework for the construction of theoretical categories. Ritual and performance differ in that the former is most applicable to simple societies of relatively unsegmented and undifferentiated component parts, while the latter is a more appropriate conceptual tool for more complex, segmented and differentiated societies like those in which we in the West live today. He calls these fused and de-fused societies, respectively. Ritual works more or less flawlessly every time in primitive societies because those societies are already so tightly interconnected; their members are so to speak already on the same page before rituals, and the rituals work well at further invigorating their relationship because members share so much in the way of

cultural background, symbols, roles and understanding and acceptance of the cultural narratives that make up the mythic accompaniment of rituals. In (post-)modernity, we frequently disagree about the cultural background, our collections of roles are widely differentiated, and scripts that performances enact are commonly objects of conflict and disagreement. In order for social performances to be successful for us, they must re-fuse these separated elements (p. 32).

From primitive, fused societies, we find the initial movements of ritual towards drama and theatre in the Greek city-states, where Dionysian religious rites are incorporated over time into performed, acted drama. Later, the early Christian Church further pushes in the direction of de-fusion by separating most actors (those who are not in the Church hierarchy) from the means of symbolic production and isolating a group of elites who do most of the performance. In primitive society, virtually all members of the group actively took part in ritual performance; in the medieval Church, the distinction between Church officials and laity grew significantly (p. 45). By the time we get to (post-)modernity, de-fusion has augmented still further, aided by the increasing division of labour and cultural pluralization in most of the world's societies.

What do performances seek to do? Essentially what rituals do is: they attempt to create 'the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience' (p. 55). Successful performances make a given cultural script into a lived, experiential reality. This reality alludes to a fact that is mundane to the discipline of sociology: we are parts of a greater collectivity. But the performance of this fact, and its experience by audiences, is anything but mundane. Alexander here cites Nietzsche, who described the successful rite/performance as a 'bringing to life [of] ... the plastic world of myth [in making] ... moments of paroxysm that lift man beyond the confines of space, time, and individuation' (p. 55). The experience of successful performance is, in other words, literally *ecstatic* (from *εκ-στασις* 'to be outside oneself').

The elements of performance can be analytically distinguished. The broad context for all performances is provided by what Alexander, using explicitly Durkheimian language, calls systems of collective representations. These include not only the actual scripts for particular performances (e.g., a Presidential inauguration), but also the deeper and more complex sea of cultural symbolism within which all human populations float. Actors and audiences are obviously necessary, as is the specific, unique performance itself, the *mise-en-scène*. Social power exists in and among the actors and audiences and can drive meaning in particular directions; for example, control over vast segments of mass media production on the part of corporations might mean a skewing of the performances one is likely to witness

there. Finally, there are the means of symbolic production, by which Alexander simply means the tools necessary for the putting on of a performance.

Authenticity is crucial in bringing off performances, and it is manifested in the flow of the action and the seamlessness of the relationship between symbols and referents. Effective performances convince audiences that the script is not an artificial text acted by actors, but a smoothly emerging and natural happening (p. 56). But such success is difficult to achieve in our age, for challenges face the performance at every level of its constitution. Scripts fail to fit background representations, the *mise-en-scène* is ineffectual due to the lack of a proper performative space, means of symbolic production are insufficient for the effective production of the performance, or the actors are seen as inauthentic. Despite the barriers, however, social performance remains essential for us. Alexander closes this masterful essay with a profound point he has often made in his work over the years, but it is one that always bears repeating. He readily acknowledges the moral commitment we have to critical intervention when performances are mobilized to mask injustice or domination, yet he is unwavering in acknowledging that 'even the most democratic and individuated societies depend on the ability to sustain collective belief', and this relies on performance, which always exceeds simple fact and touches on the realm of myth (p. 80). Of course this is an important point in the Durkheimian position, and it is one of the core pieces of evidence that Alexander is one of the most consistent of Durkheim's disciples among today's thinkers.

The concluding chapter in *Social Performance*, by Bernhard Giesen, is one of the most eloquent, descriptive and careful analyses of the nature of the sacred and sacred experience that we have seen in a long time. The description of sacredness as it is manifested in secular contexts especially is remarkable here. Giesen borrows from a range of thinkers from Walter Benjamin to Nietzsche to show how their terminology can be made compatible with this fundamental Durkheimian concept. Victor Turner's anti-structure, Proust's immediacy of experience, Benjamin's profane revelation and Weber's charisma are all indicators of sacredness that are as readily observable in secular as in religious manifestations.

Giesen undertakes an historical reading of the development of ritual and performance that parallels Alexander's in some aspects. Three types of performance emerge in his account: constitutive rituals, theatrical performances and moral dramas. The first two rely on the historical movement from ritual to drama, and are distinguished in one important way by the fact that ritual requires the triumph of the pure sacred (in his language, cosmos), while the impure sacred (chaos) can prevail in drama. The third is a distinctly contemporary form in which 'the inner state of the actor', or at least readings of that state by other participants in the drama, takes on great importance (p. 350). The actor must be trustworthy and authentic to

be capable of carrying off the dramatic performance, whereas in ritual and drama, such questions were simply beside the point, or answered to by the simple fact of the external office of the actor.

Televised politics is the central site for much moral drama, and Giesen sets forth the basic elements of a Durkheimian cultural sociology of such performances that is echoed and expanded on in the chapters by David Apter and Valentin Rauer. These materials are useful for understanding a wide array of such events. One of central importance to American audiences, in the time since the publication of *Social Performance*, has to do with the rapid decline of support for the Bush administration beginning roughly mid-way through his second term. It can be argued and supported with the theoretical tools provided here that this fall from grace in the eyes of the public who had twice elected Bush was the moment at which doubts about his sincerity and trustworthiness began to arise in the minds of even some of his most ardent supporters. Ultimately, both the initial appeal of Bush to many voters and his subsequent plummeting in the last two years of his second term had to do with the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of particular moral dramas, such as the opposed performative outcomes of, on the one hand, Bush at the site of the destroyed Twin Towers in 2001, calling for justice, and, on the other, the accumulated collection of bumbled and ineffective performances that came afterward, for example the 'Mission Accomplished' debacle.

Giesen, like Alexander, closes his essay with a profound statement on the requirement for dissimulation in performance. We cannot be too explicitly aware that performances *are* performances and that the sacred we thereby worship is in fact not what it claims to be, for fascination and fusion disappear with too much critical attention to such facts. Again, this directly invokes the Durkheim of the *Elementary Forms* and places Giesen in the most sophisticated of theoretical company.

Of the remaining chapters in *Social Performance*, the strongest are Alexander's discussion of 9/11, Mast's brilliant interpretation of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal and Isaac Reed's deep re-reading of three foundational studies in social performance by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and Marshall Sahlins. Each elaborates some aspect of the theoretical framework set forth in Alexander's introductory essay with a concentrated reading of some specific performance(s). Reed recalls and reinvigorates the powerful notion of the liminoid that Turner introduced in his tragically little-known *From Ritual to Theatre*. Mast provides a detailed map of the broad cultural background on which the various performances that made up Monicagate were put into play. Alexander's decoding of 9/11 situates it firmly in the background of representations of East and West and their associated sacred/profane binaries and discourses. In sum, *Social Performance* is a volume of great significance that needs to be considered by all thinkers inter-

ested in the Durkheimian legacy in contemporary cultural sociology and theory.

Myth, Meaning, and Performance (*Myth* hereafter) has its suggestive moments, but ultimately treats its topic much less thoroughly and convincingly. In its limited elaboration of a theory of art as social performance, it departs from the Durkheimian sources that are at the core of *Social Performance*. There is nothing in the way of a theoretical statement here to compare to the Alexander or Giesen pieces; Eyerman's introduction, at a mere 21 pages, does not make a sustained argument on how to apply performance theory to the sociology of art. His basic point is that a properly cultural sociology of art must attend to 'the imaginative space ... from which to view the world' that is opened by art, instead of considering art as merely the product of social institutions and practices (p. 18). Howard Becker's well-known book, *Art Worlds*, comes under frequent fire in Eyerman's chapter and in the rest of the book. Becker's notion of the art world, Eyerman argues, gives us an artist fully determined in his or her ideas and actions by the terms set forth by the art world's conventions. By contrast, Eyerman wants 'more place to imagination and creativity' (p. 19). It is not entirely clear, though, what he means by these terms. He rejects 'a return to a mythological, romantic view of the artist', but is vague on how his approach will sociologically beef up the individualistic notion of artistic creativity. There is a reference to Adorno and his Yale colleague, Alexander, and a long footnote (which belongs in the main body of the text) suggesting Michel Maffesoli's idea of neo-tribes is useful for thinking about the aesthetic experience of art, but none of this is fully fleshed out. There is also an allusion to the importance of transgression in art, but the opportunity to invoke and utilize Durkheimian thought on this topic is passed over.

The remaining chapters in *Myth* are of mixed quality and generally intersect only infrequently with Durkheimian cultural sociology. The chapters by Robert Witkin and Julia Chi Zhang (which deal, respectively, with the 'two faces of modernism' in pop art and abstract expressionism, and the social evolution of the Chinese avant-garde) also touch briefly on the importance of transgression and sacred/profane binaries in artistic production, but in ways that are not sustained or informed by attention to Durkheimian materials. Lisa McCormick uses Durkheimian language to discuss the possibility that some sites of musical performances (e.g., Carnegie Hall, the Fillmont, CBGB) can become sacralized places set apart in the symbolic universe of performers and audiences. But here, too, those categories are only briefly engaged, and McCormick seems in her conclusion to lapse into a disappointingly individualist language. Like Eyerman, she calls for more attention to talent and creativity, but with still less in the way of a sociological justification of those terms. The production of culture perspective, she claims, denies talent and creativity in positing social processes as the core

of art worlds, but this is a questionable reading of at least some of that work. It is perhaps true that Becker has comparatively little to say about the production of meaning in art worlds, but what he does is not so much deny creativity and talent as change their definitions by rejecting their radically individualist pedigrees and placing them back in the deep sociality of the human world. Conventions are for Becker one of the crucial aids to talent and creativity, not their denial. An artist can only be considered properly creative or talented by showing an understanding of the conventions before bending or breaking with them in some manner that in fact requires the convention for the transgression to have meaning. Free jazz understood the conventions of 'inside' jazz perfectly well (and indeed the most noteworthy free jazz players, e.g., John Coltrane or Eric Dolphy, had established reputations as 'insiders' before moving outside) and flouted them in essentially predictable ways that stemmed from those very conventions.

The most interesting piece in *Myth* is Steve Sherwood's 'Seeker of the Sacred: A Late Durkheimian Theory of the Artist.' He is the only contributor to the volume who attempts to put some of the elements of Durkheimian cultural sociology to concentrated use. Artists are, at least and especially in the Western tradition, explicitly intertwined in narratives of sacrality and transgression. We conceive of them in cultural tropes that are directly derived from religious narratives; for example, they have a calling, they suffer and die for their art, they fall from grace. Sherwood also endeavours to situate the artwork in a Durkheimian framing, comparing it to the emblems of totemic groups as described in the *Elementary Forms* and much other Durkheimian work. But, even here, the treatment is ultimately fleeting and even superficial in comparison with the detailed elaboration of Durkheimian concepts to be found in the better chapters in *Social Performance*. By the final pages of the chapter, Sherwood has seemingly fallen into the same individualist trap that caught some of the other contributors to the volume. He argues that sociologists of art should focus more on 'modern society's great cultural achievement, which Durkheim referred to as "the cult of the individual"' (p. 100). But surely Durkheim, in noting what he saw as the sacred object that was emerging to replace the object of more traditional religious cults, was not insinuating that we should take seriously individualist theories of artistic creativity and genius that wish away the social and cultural structures that shape all individuals, even those who are most eager to proclaim their escape from structure. The very cult of the individual Durkheim observed has been an object of study, with sociological tools, for many of his disciples. Goffman, in his work on interaction rituals and their imperatives, is only one of the most well-known examples; we might also speak of Randall Collins's brilliant chapter in his *Interaction Ritual Chains* on the collective aspects of even the most seemingly solitary activities of intellectuals and artists.

Some of the problems to be found in *Myth* might have been effectively attended to by a more careful use of Durkheimian materials, and such appropriate sources include more than just the *Elementary Forms*. In his lengthy introduction to Stefan Czarnowski's study of Saint Patrick, Henri Hubert discussed the evolution of the hero cult in terms of various dramatic and literary forms, and thereby sketched out an historical sociology of at least some arts that could be treated with the same theoretical categories used to understand religious rites and myths. Marcel Mauss took up the question of the relationship between myth and art in some detail in the lengthy 1908 review he wrote of an instalment in Wilhelm Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*. The key point there is that both depend on systems of collective representations and belief for their meanings and cannot reasonably be detached from that background. He takes the psychologist Wundt sternly to task for desiring to leap over this fact and get to the individual, cognitive elements of artistic creation and interpretation. For even the most purportedly free artistic creativity, Mauss argued, originates in the same source: collective obligation and belief. And, as we know from Durkheim, however distant later forms of life might seem from the more elementary ones that gave them birth, the essential characteristics of those forms are not lost, though they may become obscured.

The upshot of these two volumes is that performance theory does indeed promise much for contemporary cultural sociology, but this is especially so, as Alexander and Giesen powerfully demonstrate, when it anchors itself in some of the basic insights of late Durkheimian cultural analysis.