Jeffrey C. Alexander

Performance and Power

PERFORMANCE AND POWER

To Bernhard Giesen

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book brings together my essayistic efforts to create cultural pragmatics. Some of them are more theoretical; others apply the new perspective to controversial empirical topics of the day. Between philosophically oriented metatheory and purely factual investigation is a productive place that Robert Merton called sociological theory in the middle range. That is the sweet spot towards which cultural pragmatics aims, even as it gestures to the philosophical and the factual environments on either of its sides.

This project has occupied me for much of the last decade. It developed in the course of graduate and undergraduate seminars at Yale; in weekly workshops of the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, which I direct with Ron Eyerman and Philip Smith; and in a series of Yale-Konstanz seminars organized with Bernhard Giesen, which culminated in the volume we edited with Jason Mast, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge 2006).

Graduate students and colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic have been significant for the development of cultural pragmatics, as responsive audiences, interpreting critics, fellow actors and co-writers of the emerging theoretical script. I owe a great deal to my collaboration with Bernhard Giesen, with whom I have been working for three decades in the creation of cultural-sociological theory. I am indebted also to Jason Mast, whose theoretical dissatisfaction provided a decisive early stimulus and whose insights and friendship provided energy all along the way. I would like also to thank John Thompson, a founder and publisher of Polity Press, for his encouragement, and Nadine Amalfi for her editorial assistance.

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Chapters 1, 2, and 8: Cambridge University Press for "Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice: the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action," "Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy," and "From the depths of despair: performance, counter performance and September 11" in Alexander, J. C., Giesen, B. and Mast, J. (eds.), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (2006).

Chapters 3 and 7: *Culture, Newsletter of the Sociology of Culture Section of the American Sociological Association* for "Performance and Power" and "Performance and Counter-Power (1 and 2): The Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Sphere" (Autumn 2005, Winter and Spring 2006).

Chapter 4: Oxford University Press for "Note on Concept and Method" in my book-length effort to apply cultural pragmatics to domestic power struggle in a democratic society, *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (2010).*

Chapter 5: *The Journal of Power* for "The Democratic Struggle for Power: The 2008 Presidential Campaign in the United States" (vol. 2(1), pp. 65–88; 2009).

Chapter 9: European University Institute for "Power and Performance: The War on Terror between the Sacred and the Profane," in *RSCAS Distinguished Lectures Working Paper Series* (vol. 1; 2007).

Chapter 10: Ashgate for "Public Intellectuals and Civil Society," in Fleck, C., Hess, A. and Stina Lyon, E. (eds.), *Intellectuals and their Publics: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (2009).

* For another book-length application of cultural pragmatics, this one to power struggles in a non-Western setting, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

Men cherish something that seems like the real thing as much as they do the real thing itself.

Machiavelli, *Discourses*

That which taken away the reputation of Sincerity, is the doing or saying of such things, as appear to be signes, that what they require other men to believe, is not believed by themselves.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*

A lot of this is theater. How do you communicate to 38 million people? You're not sitting down talking to them. So it's gesture, symbol, the narrative, the drama. Who's the protagonist? Who's the antagonist?

Jerry Brown, Governor of California

INTRODUCTION

Culture and power usually find themselves face to face at the far ends of social theory as well as in the black-and-white stereotypes of social life. Culture is internal, power external. Culture is about subjectivity, power about objectivity. Culture is will and enthusiasm, power coercion and force. Culture involves emotion; power is all calculation and choice.

In reality, culture and power are everywhere intertwined. Politicians win power by convincing voters to believe, becoming symbolic representations of the hopes and fears and dreams of collective life. After they take hold of the reins of power and gain control of administration in the state, the new rulers cannot just order people about, expecting them to obey or else. They need to make government meaningful, to align administration with the stories citizens tell each other about what they hope and what they do and where the best of society should be. So the powerful couch their commands as requests and frame their administration as the last, best hope of humankind. If they cannot, and end up just issuing commands, the people will not see government as a symbol of their values and, in a democracy, they will take the rulers' power away. Not in a dictatorship, but even an emperor wants to rule with the mandate of heaven. When authoritarian rulers lose the mandate, when they fail to make even the effort to embody culture and symbolize collective meanings, they need to employ more force and coercion. This is a lot less efficient and much more time consuming, and it arouses more resistance. Even for those who have authoritarian power the hatred of their subjects is a terrible thing.

We owe to Max Weber the conceptual separation of power from meaning and also, paradoxically, the first elusive step toward bringing

them together. For Weber, power is the ability to carry out one's wishes against the will of others. This structural definition is without recourse to voluntary compliance; in fact, it is dead set against it. Here we have the tradition of power politics, *realpolitik*, statism, naked force. No wonder Weber famously defines the modern state by its ability to monopolize the means of violence. Under the influence of this Weber, the Weber of domination (*Herrschaft*), political sociology emerges as the hard-headed study of how forceful imposition is distributed and whether it is visible or hidden in plain sight.

This is a dead end, not just hard but thick-headed. Weber's minimalist definition is too much. It does not allow us to understand what power really is and how it works, or not, in meaningful ways.

Weber implicitly acknowledges this inadequacy when he places on top of his working theory of power the concept of legitimacy. Power is usually exercised in reference to some belief, which transforms power into authority. Beyond this recognition, however, Weber does not have a lot to say. His ideal-types of legitimate authority – charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal – parse broad historical transformations of power but tell us precious little about how legitimacy actually works. Despite occasional charismatic eruptions, modern authority is seen as something that is generally rational-legal, as all about following procedures and fine print, about calculating and impersonal bureaucrats and responsible, goal-oriented politicians. But neither modern organizations nor politics works in this way. Power cannot legitimate itself simply by citing its rational-legal authority. The concept of rational-legal legitimacy is a straitjacket, a hindrance to creative thinking about how modern power is, and is not, meaningfully defined.

Weber's century-old typology makes historical sense, but it turns the process of making power meaningful into a black box from which there protrudes little intellectual light. It suffers from a crimped understanding of modernity as deracinated, as bound to mechanical causality and stripped of myth and telos. How can power be made meaningful if modernity itself is conceived as having shed the very idea of meaning along the way?

To get power closer to meaning we need a more cultural sociology. Strong programs in cultural sociology take off from the notion that between traditional and modern societies there is not a radical epistemological break. Moderns still have their myths and meanings; they are still sustained by narratives that move toward an idealized telos, that motivate rather than simply determine, that inspire and not only cause. In modern societies, culture structures remain strong

and binding. They are not subject to scientific scrutiny and discarded if they falsified in this way. Cultural truth is moral and aesthetic. In the world of meaning, as Robert Bellah long ago suggested, symbolic realism, not social reduction, reigns supreme.

We can move beyond Weber by linking power more directly with culture, but "culture" per se is too big, too structural, too inert. Power comes into being when social actors exercise their agency. It is subtle and complex, often of exquisite indirection, a process that is not all that different from how dramatic actors project the power of their characters in a play. In a theatrical performance, the script is set, the viewers have tickets and are in their seats, the scenery is designed and the lighting is cast. But everything, at least all the really most important things, still remain. It is up to the actors to play the scene, to convince those watching that they really are the characters they say they are, that the pretend life on stage is truthful, that, being a simulation, it is the real thing all right.

Culture structures are powerful, but they provide only the background representations for active social life. Real living people, whether as individuals or in groups, move about in practical situations of multiple possibility. Even in theatrical set pieces, when actors share the same culture structures and the same stage, it is difficult for audiences to be certain what the actors mean to say. It is that much more difficult for social actors. Because they must bring meaning to bear pragmatically, in situations of multiple possibility, they try to carve fluid, action-specific scripts from the background of broad cultural meanings. In modern and even more so in postmodern societies, scripts are not written in stone but continuously revised. And, while some members of the contemporary audience have tickets, some cannot afford them, others choose not to show up, and many mill around during the performance, refusing to take their seats. In contemporary societies, the props and stagings of action are always shifting, and it is difficult for actors and audiences to know where and when to put themselves into the scene. Critics – reviewers, journalists, intellectuals, and everyday wise guys – provide running evaluations of performances as they are unfolding, often thrusting vituperative and contentious interpretations into the *mise-en-scène*. The upshot is that the power to mount a play is often abruptly taken away.

The difference between tradition and modernity is not that meaning is there, in earlier societies, and not here today. It is rather that the context for making meaning has changed. It is not only that, with modernity, "the social, political, and cultural" must be distinguished but, as I argue in chapter 4, the "performative" must be separated

out, analytically and empirically, as well. When societies were small and compact and their collective identities sturdy and homogeneous, when social organization seemed closely to reflect metaphysical meanings rooted in the certainties of an other-worldly life, it was not nearly so hard to make oneself understood or one's power believed. Under these conditions, symbolic action was more often ritualized, more easily generating shared feelings and expectations, sustaining community, and frequently repeated in familiar ways. As societies become more complex, more divided vertically and more fragmented horizontally, and as they lose their metaphysical anchoring, the ability for performances to create fusion between actors, texts, and audiences breaks down. Authenticity becomes problematic and criticism becomes the order of the day. Political opponents strive to separate the other's actions from meaning, to make them seem artificial. Modernity not only invents the very idea of performance, but gives it a bad name. When the meaning of symbolic action is misapprehended, the actor seems awkward and wooden, as if she is putting on an act. Successful performance seems natural, not contrived, not a performance but an effortless expression, true to life.

The first and second chapters of this book elaborate a theory of cultural pragmatics. I separate out the elements that compose a social performance, define them, explain how they have become separated from one another in the face of historical complexity, and describe the implications of this transforming for meaning-making, especially in modern and postmodern social life. Power contributes to the construction of social performance, and as it becomes separated from other elements it initiates a new form of social performance.

When cultural-pragmatic theory is applied to the "challenge of power," I suggest in chapter 3, it bring light into the black box, illuminating the process of legitimacy in a deeper, post-Weberian way. If we are to understand how power is exercised, we need not only cultural theory from the late Durkheim, hermeneutics, semiotics and post-structuralism, but the tools of theater, film, television, and performance studies, of media research, of reception theory, and ideas about emotion and materiality.

Power is performative in every one of its hydra-headed forms. Wars are won not only on battlefields but in hearts and minds, on both the home and the enemy side. Staging and dramaturgy are critical, and when they fail – as I show in chapter 9, "War and performance: Afghanistan and Iraq" – counter-performances emerge that can undermine confidence and shatter legitimacy. Terrorism is the steel edge of the knife blade, seemingly pure coercion, but its exercise

is likewise enmeshed in binary coding and narration, and carefully choreographed, as chapter 8, "Performing terror on September 11," documents in a depressing way.

It would seem a whole lot easier – a theoretical slam dunk – to conceptualize the exercise of democratic power as symbolically meaningful and performatively enacted. That this has not been the case is not only the fault of Max Weber. It is also because of the "cynical reason" that so often masquerades as the common sense of modern life. Rather than seeing money as the mother's milk of politics, and strategy as the key to political organization, in chapter 5 – "Democratic power and political performance" – I demonstrate how symbol and staging, narrative and coding, performance and counter-performance defined the epochal power struggle between Barack Obama and John McCain in the American presidential contest of 2008. In winning that historic election, Barack Obama brought the de-fused elements of performance together in a masterful, apparently seamless way, but he has not been nearly as successful in his symbolic efforts since he has held the actual fundaments of state power in his hands. The often-told adage that one campaigns in poetry but governs in prose is wrong. Without poetry, governing cannot succeed, as Obama in power – at least for the first two years – has learned to his deep regret. Obama's failure to symbolize, and the consequences of his evacuation of the public stage, are the topic of chapter 6.

Even when the cultural character of mainstream politics is acknowledged, theorists and researchers are inclined to view mass protest movements as deliberative actions of rational resistance. In chapter 7, "Performing counter-power: The civil rights movement," I examine dramatic moments in the African-American freedom struggle and show that the performance of meaning was actually at the core of that great mid-century movement for civil rights.

In the final chapters of this book, I turn from political to cultural power. Even for those who, like Pierre Bourdieu, acknowledge the significance of power in the cultural domain, its exercise is conceived as structured by the distribution of material resources, its motivation as ingrained habit, and its reception pretty much as a sure thing. My understanding of cultural power could not be more different. As I suggest in chapter 10, "Intellectuals and public performance," intellectuals become important, not by virtue of their credentials and status, but because of how dramatically they attack the civil deficits of their national societies and inspire its civil repair. In chapter 11, I move from morality to aesthetics. The impact of even the most prestigious aesthetic objects is uneven and precarious. Such variation in

"iconic power" can be conceptualized as a matter of aesthetic performativity, which is mediated by the interpretive power of critics. Without attending to the fiercely independent judgment of critics, it is impossible to gauge the exercise of cultural power in modern social life.

Michel Foucault turned Weber's separation of power and meaning on its head. He knotted them into the couplet power/knowledge, treating each as if it were the *sine qua non*, the very condition for operation of the other side. If it were only that easy to make oneself understood, to assure that one's power were accepted and obeyed! Foucault describes persons inside systems of knowledge/power as occupying subject positions. But people are not subjects; they are actors. People anchor their actions in culture structures, but they continuously script their lines of actions in pragmatic and meaningfully distinctive ways. Sometimes these scripts are believed, and they give power legitimacy. Often, however, the justifications that power evocatively proffers are questioned. Its knowledge is not acknowledged, its supposed expertise fervently resisted, and sometimes counterperformances are mounted in its place. One does not simply speak truth to power. One must perform it as well.

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THE CULTURAL PRAGMATICS OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

with Jason Mast

The question of theory and practice permeates not only politics but culture, where the analogue for theory is the social-symbolic text, the bundle of everyday codes, narratives, and rhetorical configurings that are the objects of hermeneutic reconstruction. Emphasizing action over its theory, praxis theorists have blinded themselves to the deeply imbedded textuality of every social action (Bourdieu 1984; Swidler 1986; Turner 1969). But a no less distorting myopia has affected the vision from the other side. The pure hermeneut (e.g., Dilthey 1976; Ricoeur 1976) tends to ignore the material problem of instantiating ideals in the real world. The truth, as Marx (1972: 145) wrote in his Xth thesis on Feuerbach, is that, while theory and practice are different, they are always necessarily intertwined.

Theory and practice are interwoven in everyday life, not only in social theory and social science. In the following chapters, we will see that powerful social actors understand the conceptual issues of performance in an intuitive, ethnographic, and practical way. Individuals, organizations, and parties moved "instinctively" to hook their actions into the background culture in a lively and compelling manner, working to create an impression of sincerity and authenticity rather than one of calculation and artificiality, to achieve verisimilitude. Social movements' public demonstrations display a similar performative logic. Movement organizers, intensely aware of media organizations' control over the means of symbolic distribution, direct their participants to perform in ways that will communicate that they are worthy, committed, and determined to achieve acceptance and inclusion from the larger political community. Social actors, embedded in collective representations and working through symbolic and material means, implicitly orient towards others as if they were actors

on a stage seeking identification with their experiences and understandings from their audiences.

Towards a cultural pragmatics

Kenneth Burke (1957 [1941]) introduced the notion of symbolic action; Clifford Geertz (1973a) made it famous. These thinkers wanted to draw attention to the specifically cultural character of activities, the manner in which they are expressive rather than instrumental, irrational rather than rational, more like theatrical performance than economic exchange. Drawing also from Burke, Erving Goffman (1956) introduced his own dramaturgical theory at about the same time. Because of the one-sidedly pragmatic emphases of symbolic interactionism, however, the specifically cultural dimension of this Goffmanian approach (Alexander 1987a) to drama made hardly any dent on the sociological tradition, though it later entered into the emerging discipline of performance studies.

In the decades that have ensued since the enunciation of these seminal ideas, those who have taken the cultural turn have followed a different path. It has been meaning, not action, that has occupied central attention, and deservedly so. To show the importance of meaning, as compared to such traditional sociological ciphers as power, money, and status, it has been necessary to show that meaning is a structure, just as powerful as these others (Rambo and Chan 1999; Somers 1995). To take meaning seriously, not to dismiss it as an epiphenomenon, has been the challenge. Strong programs in contemporary cultural sociology (Alexander and Sherwood 2002; Alexander and Smith 1998, 2010; Edles 1998; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1996; Jacobs 1996; Kane 1997; Sewell 1985; Smith 1998; Somers 1995) have followed Ricoeur's philosophical demonstration that meaningful actions can be considered as texts, exploring codes and narratives, metaphors, metathemes, values, and rituals in such diverse institutional domains as religion, nation, class, race, family, gender, and sexuality. It has been vital to establish what makes meaning important, what makes some social facts meaningful at all.

In terms of Charles Morris's (1938) classic distinction, strong programs have focused on the syntactics and semantics of meaning, on the relations of signs to one another and to their referents. Ideas about symbolic action and dramaturgy gesture, by contrast, to the pragmatics of the cultural process, to the relations between cultural texts and the actors in everyday life. While the latter considerations

have by no means been entirely ignored by those who have sought to sustain a meaning-centered program in cultural sociology (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici 1986), they have largely been addressed either through relatively ad hoc empirical studies or in terms of the metatheoretical debate over structure and agency (Alexander 1988a, 2003a; Hays 1994; Kane 1991; Sahlins 1976; Sewell 1992). Metatheory is indispensable as an orienting device. It thinks out problems in a general manner and, in doing so, provides more specific, explanatory thinking with a direction to go. The challenge is to move downward on the scientific continuum, from the presuppositions of metatheory to the models and empirical generalizations upon which explanation depends. Metatheoretical thinking about structure and agency has provided hunches about how this should be done, and creative empirical studies show that it can be, but there remains a gaping hole between general concepts and empirical facts. Without providing systematic mediating concepts – a middle range theoretical model – even the most fruitful efforts to bridge semantics and pragmatics (e.g., Kane 1997; Sahlins 1981; Wagner-Pacifici 1986) have an ad hoc, "one off" character, and the more purely metatheoretical often produce awkward, even oxymoronic circumlocutions.[1] Cultural practices are not simply speech acts. Around the same time Goffman was developing a pragmatic dramaturgy in sociology, John Austin (1957) introduced ordinary language philosophy to the idea that language could have a performative function and not only a constative one. Speaking aims to get things done, Austin denoted, not merely to make assertions and provide descriptions. In contrast to simply describing, the performative speech act has the capacity to realize its semantic contents; it is capable of constituting a social reality through its utterance. On the other hand, it can fail. Because a performative may or may not work – it may or may not succeed in realizing its stated intention – Austin keenly observes, its appropriate evaluative standard is not truth and accuracy, but "felicitous" and "infelicitous."

When Austin turned to investigating felicity's conditions, however, like Goffman he stressed only the speech act's interactional context, and failed to account for the cultural context out of which particular signs are drawn forth by a speaker. This philosophical innovation could have marked a turn to the aesthetic and to considerations of what makes actions exemplary (Arendt 1958; Ferrara 2001); instead, it led to an increasing focus on the interactional, the situational, and the practical (e.g., Goffman 1956; Habermas 1984; Schegloff 1987; Searle 1961). Austin's innovation, like Goffman's

dramaturgy, had the effect of cutting off the practice of language from its texts.

Saussure would have agreed with Austin that *parole* (speech) must be studied independently of *langue* (language). However, he would have insisted on the "arbitrary nature of the sign" – that, to consider its effectiveness, spoken language must be considered in its totality, as both *langue* and *parole*. A sign's meaning is arbitrary, Saussure demonstrated, in that "it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (1985: 38), that is, the object it is understood to represent.[2] Its meaning is arbitrary in relation to its referent in the real world, but it is also arbitrary in the sense that it is not determined by the intention or will of any individual speaker or listener. Rather, a sign's meaning derives from its relations – metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic – to other signs in a system of sign relations, or language. The relations between signs in a cultural system are fixed by social convention; they are structures that social actors experience as natural, and unreflexively depend on to constitute their daily lives. Consequently, an accounting of felicity's conditions must attend to the cultural structures that render a performative intelligible, meaningful, and capable of being interpreted as felicitous or infelicitous, in addition to the mode and context in which the performative is enacted.

In this respect, Saussure's sometimes errant disciple, Jacques Derrida, was a faithful son, and it is in Derrida's (1982a [1972]) response to Austin's speech act theory that post-structuralism begins to demonstrate a deep affinity with contemporary cultural pragmatics. Derrida criticizes Austin for submerging the contribution of the cultural text to performative outcome. Austin "appears to consider solely the conventionality constituting the *circumstance* of the utterance (*énoncé*), its contextual surroundings," Derrida admonishes, "and not a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act (locution) itself, all that might be summarized rapidly under the problematic rubric of 'the arbitrary nature of the sign'" (1988: 15). In this way, Derrida sharply admonishes Austin for ignoring the "citational" quality of even the most pragmatic writing and speech. What he means is that all words cite the seemingly absent background cultural texts from which they derive their meanings. "Could a performative utterance succeed," Derrida asks, "if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" (1988: 18).

Because there can be no determinate, trans-contextual relation of signifier and referent, difference always involves *différance* (Derrida 1982b). Interpreting symbolic practice – culture in its "presence" – always entails a reference to culture in its "absence," that is, to an implied semiotic text. In other words, to be practical and effective in action – to have a successful performance – actors must be able to make the meanings of culture structures stick. Since meaning is the product of relations between signs in a discursive code or text, a dramaturgy that intends to take meaning seriously must account for the cultural codes and texts that structure the cognitive environments in which speech is given form.

Dramaturgy emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social action. Cultural pragmatics grows out of this confluence, maintaining that cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, even as it remains fundamentally interrelated with it. Cultural action puts texts into practice, but it cannot do so directly, without passing "go." A theory of practice must respect the relative autonomy of structures of meaning. Pragmatics and semantics are analytical, not concrete distinctions.

The real and the artificial

One of the challenges in theorizing contemporary cultural practice is the manner in which it seems to slide between artifice and authenticity. There is the deep pathos of Princess Diana's death and funeral, mediated, even in a certain sense generated by, highly constructed, commercially targeted televised productions, yet so genuine and compelling that the business of a great national collectivity came almost fully to rest. There are the Pentagon's faked anti-ballistic missile tests and its doctored action photographs of smart missiles during the Iraq war, both of which were taken as genuine in their respective times. There is the continuous and often nauseating flow of staged-for-camera pseudo-events, which Daniel Boorstin (1961) had already flushed out in the l960s. Right along beside them, there is the undeniable moral power generated by the equally "artificial" media events studied by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) – Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem, the Pope's first visit to Poland, and John F. Kennedy's funeral.

Plays, movies, and television shows are staged "as if" they occur in real life, and in real time. To seem as if they are "live," to seem

real, they are increasingly shot "on location." National armies intimidate one another by staging war games, completely artificial events whose intention – not to produce a "real" effect – is announced well before they occur, but which often alter real balances of power. Revolutionary guerrilla groups, such as the Zapatista rebels from Chiapas, Mexico, represent powerful grassroots movements that aim to displace vast material interests and often have the effect of getting real people killed. Yet the masses in such movements present their collective force via highly staged photo-marches, and their leaders, like subcommander Marcos, enter figuratively into the public sphere, as iconic representations of established cultural forms.

The effort at artificially creating the impression of liveness is not new. The Impressionist painters wanted to trump the artificiality of the French Academy by moving outside, to be closer to the nature they were representing, to paint "*en plein air*." The Lincoln–Douglas debates were highly staged, and their "real influence" would have been extremely narrow were it not for the hyperbolic expansiveness of the print media (Schudson 1998). The aristocracies and emerging middle classes of the Renaissance, the period marking the very birth of modernity, were highly style conscious, employing facial make-up and hair shaping on both sides of the gender divide, and engaging, more generally, in strenuous efforts at "self-fashioning" (Greenblatt 1980). It was the greatest writer of the Renaissance, after all, who introduced into Western literature the very notion that "the whole world's a stage, and we merely actors upon it."

Despite a history of reflexive awareness of artificiality and constructedness, such postmodern commentators as Baudrillard (1983) announce, and denounce, the contemporary interplaying of reality with fiction as demarcating a new age, one in which pragmatics has displaced semantics, social referents have disappeared, and only signifiers powered by the interests and powers of the day remain. Such arguments represent a temptation, fueled by a kind of nostalgia, to treat the distinction between the real and artificial in an essentialist way. Cultural pragmatics holds that this vision of simulated hypertextuality is not true, that the signified, no matter what its position in the manipulated field of cultural production, can never be separated from some set of signifiers (see also Sherwood 1994).

The relation between authenticity and modes of presentation are, after all, historically and culturally specific.[3] During the Renaissance, for instance, the theater, traditionally understood to be a house of spectacle, seduction, and idolatry, began to assume degrees of authenticity traditionally reserved for the dramatic text, which was

honored for its purity and incorruptibility. The relation between authenticity and the senses shifted during this time as well. Its close association with the aural eroding, authenticity became an attribute of the visual. The visual displaced the aural as the sense most closely associated with apprehending and discerning the authentic, the real, and the true. The aural, on the other hand, was increasingly presumed to "displace 'sense'" and language to "dissolve into pure sound and leave reason behind" (Peters 2000: 163).

It is difficult to imagine a starker example of authenticity's cultural specificity than Donald Frischmann's (1994) description of the Tzotzil people's reaction to a live theatrical performance staged in their village of San Juan Chamula, in Chiapas, Mexico in 1991. Frischmann describes how, during the reenactment of an occurrence of domestic violence, the audience was taken by "a physical wave of emotion [that] swept through the entire crowd," nearly knocking audience members "down onto the floor." During a scene in which a confession is flogged out of two accused murderers the line separating theatrical production and audience completely disintegrated: "By this point in the play, the stage itself was full of curious and excited onlookers – children and men, surrounding the actors in an attempt to get a closer look at the stage events, which so curiously resembled episodes of *real life* out in the central plaza" (Frischmann 1994: 223, italics in original).

For cultural pragmatics, authenticity is an interpretive category rather than an ontological state. The status of authenticity is arrived at, is contingent, and results from processes of social construction; its accomplishment is separated from any transcendental, ontological referent. If there is a normative repulsion to the fake or inauthentic, cultural pragmatics suggests this must be treated in an analytical way, as a structuring code in the symbolic fabric actors depend on to interpret their lived realities.

Yes, we are "condemned" to live out our lives in an age of artifice, a world of mirrored, manipulated, and mediated representation. But the constructed character of symbols does not make them less real. A talented anthropologist and a clinical psychologist published a lengthy empirical account (Marvin and Ingle 1999) describing the flag of the United States, the "stars and stripes," as a totem for the American nation, a tribe whose members periodically engage in blood sacrifice so that the totem may continue to thrive. Such a direct equation of contemporary sacrality with pre-literate tribal life has its dangers, as we are about to suggest, yet there is much in this account that rings powerfully true.

Nostalgia and counter-nostalgia: Sacrality then and now

For those who continue to insist on the centrality of meaning in contemporary societies, and who see these meanings as in some necessary manner refractions of culture structures, the challenge is to incorporate the distinctiveness of "modernity," an historical designation that now includes postmodernity as well. Why does it remain so difficult to conceptualize the cultural implications of the vast historical difference between earlier times and our own? One reason is that so much of contemporary theorizing about culture has seemed determined to elide it. The power–knowledge fusion that Foucault postulates at the center of the modern episteme is, in fact, much less characteristic of contemporary societies than it was of earlier, more traditional ones, where social structure and culture were relatively fused. The same is true for Bourdieu's habitus, a self that is mere nexus, the emotional residue of group position and social structure that much more clearly reflects the emotional situation of early societies than the autonomizing, reflexive, deeply ambivalent psychological processes of today.

Culture still remains powerful in an a priori manner, even in the most contemporary societies. Powers are still infused with sacralizing discourses, and modern and postmodern actors can strategize only by typifying in terms of institutionally segmented binary codes. Secularization does not mean the loss of cultural meaning, the emergence of completely free-floating institutions, or the creation of purely self-referential individual actors (see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998). There remains, in Ken Thompson's (1990) inimitable phrase, the "dialectic between sacralization and secularization." But action does not relate to culture in an unfolding sort of way. Secularization does mean differentiation rather than fusion, not only between culture, self, and social structure, but also within culture itself.

Mannheim (1971 [1927]) pointed out that it has been the unwillingness to accept the implications of such differentiation that characterizes conservative political theory, which from Burke (1987 [1790]) to Oakeshott (1981 [1962]) to contemporary communitarians has given short shrift to cultural diversity and individual autonomy. Such an unwillingness has also undermined the genuine and important insights of interpretively oriented cultural social science.

For the relatively small group of modern social thinkers who have maintained that, despite modernization, meaning still matters, the tools developed for analyzing meaning in traditional and simple societies have often seemed sufficient. For instance, late in his career Durkheim used descriptions of Australian aboriginal clans'