

A person wearing a yellow raincoat, goggles, and a face mask holds a yellow umbrella. They are standing in a city at night, with a construction crane and a tall building in the background. The scene is illuminated by city lights and the glow of the umbrella.

Jeffrey C. Alexander

The Drama
of Social Life

THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL LIFE

*For Richard Schechner
Friend and Founder*

THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL LIFE

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

polity

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In this volume, I bring together, and slightly revise, some recent contributions to cultural pragmatics. These studies of social performance cast a wide empirical net and advance a theoretical framework that is also being ably developed by others. I have been fortunate to receive stimulating feedback from early presentations of these chapters in various milieus. Students and colleagues at Yale were critical for their preparation. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Anne Marie Champagne and Denise Ho (Chapter 1), Mira Debs and Omar Mumallah (Chapter 2), Christine Slaughter and Alex de Branco (Chapter 4), and Christopher Grobe (Chapter 5). Nadine Amalfi, Administrator of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology, provided invaluable clerical assistance. I thank the following publishers for permission to reprint:

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“Sometimes you know the story. Sometimes you make it up as you go along and have no idea how it will come out. Everything changes as it moves. That is what makes the movements which make the story.”

Ernest Hemingway

INTRODUCTION: A NEW THEORY OF MODERNITY FROM RITUAL TO PERFORMANCE

Fictional and factual reports of critical episodes in modern life deploy the metaphor of drama. In his 1985 novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo described his melancholic hero's thoughts as he witnesses the evacuation of his town in the face of a poisonous chemical cloud: "It was still dark ... Before us lay a scene of panoramic disorder ... It was like the fall of a colonial capital to dedicated rebels. A great *surging drama* with elements of humiliation and guilt."¹ In 2016, the *New York Times* described how the lives of Khizr and Ghazala Khan had become an "an American moment":

For years, [they] had lived a rather quiet existence of common obscurity in Charlottesville, Va. And then the Khans stepped into a sports arena in Philadelphia and left as household names. In a passionate speech at the DNC [Democratic National Convention], the bespectacled Mr. Khan stingingly criticized Donald J. Trump and his stance on Muslim immigration ... Quickly enough, both Khans felt the verbal lashings of Mr. Trump ... And just like that, they found themselves a pivot point in the *twisting drama* that is American politics.²

Identifying an event as dramatic heightens tension and creates anticipation. It turns everyday events into performances, readers into audiences, and ordinary actors into characters, protagonists and antagonists whose struggles drive a churning plot through scene after scene. Everybody knows what drama is. It's what goes on in theaters, movies, and TV. But in order to create critical moments, this aesthetic manner of framing and heightening experience is moved from the world of artifice to social reality. Doing so creates the drama of social life.

Modernity has been critically perceived, from both the left and the right, as the triumph of mechanism over meaning, a process of social

and cultural rationalization that produces the disenchantment of the world, a movement from ritual to record. Modern rationalization is supposed to have made myth and ritual impossible, and it is alleged that in art, as well as in life, mechanical reproduction has destroyed the aura of authenticity that makes powerful emotional experience possible. In this discourse of suspicion, such European thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and Benjamin come especially to mind. But one can put a more American and optimistic spin on the same narrative: with modernity, we are all can-do pragmatists, not dreamers and believers.

Yes, it is sometimes acknowledged, symbol and rhetoric can break through into modern life, but the narrative of rationalization claims such extra-rational intrusions are deployed for spectacles whose drama is empty and whose aim is merely mystification. In the spectacle societies of modernity, everything is top-down; nothing comes from the bottom up. We occupy Foucaultian subject positions; we can never be active, drama-producing agents ourselves.

The Idea of a Cultural Sociology

It was to challenge such a desiccated view of modernity that I introduced the idea of a cultural sociology three decades ago, though the contemporary field is much broader than the “strong program” vein I have been mining with students and colleagues in the years since.³ The fundament of cultural sociology is that individuals and societies remain centrally concerned with meaning. Social dramas and theatrical forms remain at the heart of modern societies themselves. This theoretical effort has involved, in some important part, going back to the later writings of Emile Durkheim, the *fin de siècle* French sociologist who was one of sociology’s founding figures. Durkheim’s early and middle work, in the 1890s, promoted the standard of rationalized modernity, albeit in a markedly moralistic form. His late work, however, initiated a radical break with the standard view. The *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* conceptualized society as dependent on emotionally intense ritual, the division between sacred and profane symbols, and morally expansive solidaristic ties.⁴ The late work applied this suggestive new theory to Australia’s Aboriginal society, the earliest and most “primitive” form of human social organization ever recorded. Did Durkheim intend his new ideas to supply the basis for anthropology, regarded in that day as the social science of primitive societies? Or could *The Elementary Forms* be understood, instead, as

the first step in creating a new, alternative sociology of modernity? Was Durkheim challenging the standard view of modernity, or subtly reinforcing it?

My own interpretation of late Durkheim pointed to its wider ambition.⁵ Erving Goffman's interest in contemporary ritual performances emerges from the intellectual radicalism of late Durkheim.⁶ So does the thinking of more macro-oriented sociologists of contemporary ritual and civil religion, such as Edward Shils, Robert Bellah, and Randall Collins.⁷ Granting the scope of Durkheim's later intellectual ambition, however, points to another, equally significant question: is his ritual theory of society really modern enough? Can the notion of a society of rituals be reconciled with the pragmatics, conflicts, fragmentations, and competing institutional powers that mark contemporary social life? Can ritual process and experience be conceptually intertwined with such phenomena, or must they be deployed – as, all too often, they were so deployed, not only by Durkheim but also by his successors – to avoid coming to terms with them?

To think clearly about this problem, it is necessary to ask another fundamental question: what is the difference between ritual and performance? This was exactly the question posed by the neo-Durkheimian anthropologist Victor Turner when he met the avant-garde dramaturge Richard Schechner forty some years ago. From this encounter, Schechner moved to theorize social rituals as secular performances, and vice versa.⁸ Schechner's idea was that we could capture the worthwhile in late Durkheim, and avoid its pitfalls, by thinking of modern life as resting upon social performances rather than rituals per se.⁹ If this is so, then social theory needs to incorporate ideas from the practice and philosophy of drama. That Turner wholeheartedly agreed is reflected in the title of his last book, *From Ritual to Theatre*.¹⁰

The Cultural Pragmatics of Social Performance

These converging insights have been central to my efforts to theorize the cultural pragmatics of social performance, the fulcrum of which is the continuity and tension between ritual and performance.¹¹ I have argued that social theorists must use the tools of dramaturgy, drama theory, and theater criticism to develop a cultural sociology of social performance and, with it, a new sociology of modernity. I conceptualize ritual as a particular kind of social performance, a highly “successful” one in which actors, audience, and script become

fused. Those watching the performance don't see it as a performance; they identify with the protagonists and experience enmity toward the antagonists on stage; they lose their sense of being an audience, experiencing not artificiality but verisimilitude. The fourth wall of drama, which exists not only inside the theater but outside in society, breaks down, or is broken through.

Rituals become less frequent as societies become more modern. In the course of social and cultural evolution, such fused performances become more difficult to pull off. If we analytically differentiate the elements of social performance, then we can understand how they have slowly but ineluctably become defused over the course of time.¹² For the first 90,000 years of human history, social life was organized inside small face-to-face collectivities, like the bands and tribes of Durkheim's Australian Aborigines. In these simplified and intimate contexts, mounting symbolic performances was not particularly challenging. People understood their social world as anchored by truthful myth and amplified cosmos. Rituals dramatized such legends. The props and stages for such ceremonies were the stuff of everyday social life, and participants and audience members were interchangeable. With the Neolithic revolution some 10,000 years ago, and the movement away from hunting and gathering to domestic cultivation, class societies emerged. Centralized states formed to administer more complex social structures, acting on behalf of tiny elites sequestered from the working masses. In the post-primitive archaic societies of kings, pharaohs, czars, and emperors, collective rituals were not nearly so participatory and inclusive. They seemed more like performances, like spectacles contrived to project ideological meanings to an audience at one remove.

The invention of writing intensified this defusion of the elements of social performance.¹³ The narratives and classifications forming the basis for symbolic performance were transformed from primordial myth to humanly created scripts, like the Easter plays of medieval Europe or the Dionysian festivals of the ancient Greeks. The objectification of social meaning into written scripts, whether sacred or secular, separated the background representations that informed the social performances from both actors and audiences. Writing created a new category of specialists, keepers of sacred scrolls whose concern was to ensure correct symbolic interpretation. Were the social figures performing ceremonial scripts doing so in the correct way? Only specialists in textual interpretation had the credibility to say. Such mediation gave birth not only to conservative and dissenting theologians but also to intellectuals; both created heterodoxies and new symbolic forms.¹⁴

Theologians, religious dissenters, and intellectuals were the first critics.¹⁵ Consider Confucius and Machiavelli. Each emerges amidst the breakdown of fused rituals inside steeply hierarchical societies. Their writings addressed the question of how social authorities could sustain legitimacy in precarious times, not only with elites but with the masses. They advised emperors and princes and aristocrats about presenting themselves to others in order to gain performative effect, how to modulate social representations in such a manner that the rent seams of social order could be sewn back together again. Gentry and mass were audiences that elites made assiduous efforts to persuade. Thus were state ceremonies deployed with dramatic intent on occasions great and small.

The emergence of theaters gave to the growing “artificiality” of social drama an aesthetic form, crystallizing the defusion of the elements of performance. Theater is a conscious and pragmatic effort to create dramatic effect – via art. The metaphysical props of ancient ritual are kicked away, but the performative challenge remains. Theater aims to re-fuse the disparate elements of performance – to overcome the distance between actor and script, performance and audience. In the West, we locate the transition from ritual to theater in the transition from the Dionysian performances of Thespius to Greek drama in the fifth century BCE. Dionysian rituals were proto-performances. On the one hand, they evoked an unquestioned cosmic order; on the other, they acknowledged the contingency of its cosmological status, forming a traveling troupe whose specially formed purpose acted it out. Greek drama went one crucial step further; it was internally agonistic and overtly contrived, and its success was contingent and sharply contested, so much so that prizes were awarded for writing and acting. Greek dramas reference myth. While referencing myth, Greek dramas were not mythical themselves; by this time in Greek history, the elements of such performances had become too defused. Plato longed for re-fusion with archetypical forms, but Aristotle embraced differentiation. His *Poetics* offered a cookbook for creating dramatic effect, providing recipes for plot, for triggering cathartic connections between script and audience, for how playwrights could create sympathy for the suffering on stage.

When this movement toward social and cultural complexity moved backward to simpler and less developed social structure in medieval times, drama as theater disappeared. Cosmological, religious rituals became, once again, the only dramatic forms on offer. Western theater re-emerges in the Renaissance, with Shakespeare and Molière. As Richard McCoy explains, it was because of “the imperfect and

tenuous relationship of actor and audience” – performative defusion – that the extraordinary dramatic effect of Shakespeare’s plays depended not on religious but on secular, poetic faith.

Why do his plots seem so compelling, and how do his characters come to seem more real than the people sitting around us in the theater? ... Recent scholarship has tended to sidestep and confuse these questions by conflating religious and theatrical faith and focusing on the plays’ theological contexts [but] faith in Shakespeare [is] more theatrical and poetic than spiritual, about our belief in theater’s potent but manifest illusions rather than faith in God or miracles.¹⁶

The newly aesthetic approach to performance, which for the first time fully comprehended drama as theater, emerged during the same historical periods as new social possibilities for inserting collectively organized dramatic action into political life. Theater appears roughly at the same time as the political public sphere – the polis in ancient Greece, the city-state in the Renaissance. If theater contrives to dramatize compulsive emotional conflict, so do publicly organized political movements strive to dramatize urgent social conflicts, to publicly demand political and economic reform. Theater and political movements both project meaning toward distant audiences via more and less artfully constructed symbolic performance.

Such performances – the defused, conflicted, and fragmented social conditions that challenge them, the new forms of cultural and emotional identification they may inspire – are the topics of this book.

The first two chapters focus on social movements that have aimed at radical transformation. I argue that, no matter what the economic and social urgencies fueling their base, and no matter how lucid and rational their policy ambitions, such upheavals in the human spirit must first seize the stage. In the cut and thrust of everyday life, describing Mao Zedong and Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) as performers might well seem playful or provocative, merely metaphorical or downright insulting. However, in the framework of a cultural sociology that focuses on the meanings of social life and that theorizes modernity as the transition from ritual to drama, thinking of these massively significant leaders as performers, and the movements they organize as powerful dramas, is simply to assert a deeply relevant social fact (Chapter 1). If Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had not been able to dramatize economic exploitation in a manner that arrested and molded the attention of intellectuals and masses, there would have been no revolution in 1949. If MLK and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had not been able to

stage nonviolent protests that projected southern white violence to breathless northern audiences, American Apartheid would not have been legally undermined in the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965. The same can be said of the radical, insistent, and urgent movement led by Black Lives Matter today. Racial injustice creates enormous frustration and anger, but organized protests must be scripted, acted, directed, and performed vis-à-vis skeptical audiences if justice is to be won. Injustice must be dramatized, and so must the hope for civil repair. Social media certainly facilitated the waves of BLM protests against police killings, but they did not cause them. Internet technologies are a means of symbolic production, devices that allow for the rapid circulation of performance and drama, nothing less, but nothing more.

Similarly reductionist claims about the decisive role of Internet technology were advanced to explain the remarkable uprisings that constituted the Arab Spring. Yet, as I suggest in Chapter 2, in the Egypt of 2011 social media were a double-edged sword. Cell phones and Internet did allow immediate and direct communication among planners and protestors, and presented a platform for disenfranchised citizen-audiences to talk back to political authorities in protected ways. At the same time, repressive state officials possessed the technical power to shut down Internet and cell phone communication if they so chose, and for one critical period late in the seventeen days of protest, that's exactly what they did. But this repression couldn't be sustained. Strongly felt meanings about freedom and solidarity had flowed too freely, the revolutionary script and its performance absorbed too deeply. The elements of the performance that constituted the social drama of the "January 25th Revolution" had been sewn together in an artful manner that created a powerful sense of verisimilitude and authenticity, and the performance could continue without access to social media. The stage of Tahrir Square and messages on landlines and answering machines provided means of symbolic production enough. Mubarak had the means but not the message. His script of top-down modernization couldn't compete with the call for democracy, and he possessed neither the troupe of dedicated actors nor the feeling for the Egyptian citizen-audience that would have allowed him to carry it off.

Who should exercise control over the means of symbolic communication and over whether access was restricted to the wealthy and powerful were also issues in the American presidential contest in 2012 (Chapter 3). Yet, once again, understanding such access in a narrowly material manner misses the boat. In formal democracies,

if electoral outsiders mount strong performances, they can redirect discretionary spending among the middling classes, gaining funds sufficient to pay for organizational structure and commercial television time. Seeking re-election, President Obama certainly was not an outsider, but he did begin his campaign against Mitt Romney at a deficit, not only in funding but in legitimation. President Obama had spent the symbolic capital earned by candidate Obama in the historic election of 2008 and, pivoting to his re-election campaign, he was fresh out. Organizationally, the first-term president had gained an extraordinary health care reform, but symbolically he had run out of steam, robotically performing the role of the “last rational man” as newly reimagined Tea Party heroes pushed him harshly off the political stage.

How did Barack Obama pull out a smashing victory from what had appeared likely defeat? He fashioned a fresh narrative, casting himself as a civic-minded but newly sober hero and his Republican opponent as an anti-civil, elitist villain. As Obama proceeded to inhabit this new role with agility and grace, Romney appeared dull and flat-footed, going through the motions, and aloof. As the Democratic president’s performance gained momentum, the campaign attracted more than enough funds to meet the practical demands of the day, purchasing sufficient amounts of commercial air time to project the reinvigorated presidential performance far and wide. The wooden facsimile “Romney” came briefly to life during the first presidential debate, as the “Obama” character seemed distracted and stumbled. The presidential persona recovered in the second and third debates, and these later plays within the play saved the day.

In these first three chapters, I note, but do not elaborate on, the element of scripting. In Chapter 4, scripts are singled out for special attention, as I suggest a new way of thinking about intellectuals whose writings inspire mass mobilization and leave massive effects on the organization of social life. Intellectuals are great not because they provide new scientific theories, but because they provide answers for the most urgent and fecund questions of meaning and motivation. Why do we suffer? Why is society arranged in such an iniquitous way? What needs to be done to make social and personal life better again? The theories of Marx, Freud, Keynes, Sartre, Rand, and Fanon powerfully and elegantly address these existential-cum-political concerns. But what made these theories socially, not only intellectually, powerful is quite another thing. The social power of intellectuals depends on their acquisition of performative power. Esoteric theories have to be simplified into action-centered scripts; action plans have to

be drawn up, charismatic actors recruited, staff and followers organized and trained, detailed plans for reorganizing social life prepared, and powerful, publicly visible actions have to be put into the scene. Intellectual power is always performative, but the social power of ideas is another thing. It must be organized and displayed outside the academy, to audiences whose interests are less esoteric and more concerned with everyday life things.

In Chapter 5, I return to basic theory. Earlier I suggested that the defusion of the elements of social performances goes hand in hand with social differentiation and cultural complexity. The emergence of classes and distant states demands that performances of elite legitimacy be projected to newly distant others; the appearance of writing allows interpretive debate about the textual bases of performance. Such developments create conditions for the movement from ritual to performance. It is vitally important to recognize, however, that, even after the emergence of theater and the public sphere, the elements of performance continue to defuse. In their effort to create persuasive performances in the political public sphere, for example, US presidents hire speech writers, ministries have beives of press secretaries, electoral debates are tightly rehearsed, and expert consultants are hired to write the scripts and direct the political *mises-en-scène*.¹⁷

In this final chapter, I demonstrate that performance has been subject to continuous defusion in theater as well. Once Renaissance theater emerged from ritual, the challenge of performative fusion became the subject of highly reflexive aesthetic innovation. New genres and ways of writing theatrical texts were created and acclaimed; radically different acting techniques were developed and fervently promoted; prop and stage design flourished, becoming specialties; “directors” took over the organization of theatrical production, structuring and coaxing *mises-en-scène*. These and other dramatic innovations are what have preoccupied the theatrical avant-garde. The proverbial “fourth wall” of the theater, the invisible but very real barrier separating audience from performance, must be broken down, by any means necessary, no matter how radical and shocking such innovations first seem.

In art and life, the play’s the thing, and every shoulder is bent to the effort of making it succeed.

SEIZING THE STAGE: MAO, MLK, AND BLACK LIVES MATTER TODAY

Social protest should not be conceptualized instrumentally, as a process that depends only upon social networks and material resources. Such factors provide the boundary conditions for symbolic action, but they determine neither its content nor its outcomes. In order to seize power, one must first seize the social stage.¹

Seizing the stage, producing social dramas, and projecting them successfully to audiences – these are difficult and contingent cultural accomplishments, even for those who possess top-down, authoritarian control. For great power to be perceived as legitimate, equally great performances need be sustained. As producers and directors, dictators try to create ideologically saturated public performances. Massive show trials, such as those produced by Stalin in the 1930s, display orchestrated confessions, which are reported by journalists and distributed in recordings and films. Tightly choreographed, ritual-like, mythopoeic, hero-evoking convocations are aesthetically reconstructed as electrifying and projected by filmmakers to millions of potential audience members beyond the immediate event. The Nazis' 1933 Nuremberg rally, for example, with its tens of thousands of Nazi worshippers in attendance, was reconstructed and ramped up by Leni Riefenstahl in her *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

To the degree that political regimes, authoritarian or democratic, allow power to be more easily challenged, to that same degree does seizing the social stage become still more difficult. In more pluralistic social situations, the elements required for a social protest to project a powerful performance that connects with audiences become separated from one another.² To re-fuse these elements, protest performances must be artfully assembled from scratch, from the bottom up. Supplication and inspiration, authentic and heartfelt dramas of