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## WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCE MUST LEARN FROM THE HUMANITIES<sup>1</sup>

More than half a century ago, C. P. Snow (1961) issued his famous polemic about the dangers of “the two cultures.” He was speaking about the great divide between natural scientists and literary intellectuals, how regrettable it was that humanists knew so little about natural science, about the extraordinary advances in knowledge that had been made about the physical world. In the remarks I present today, I will address this same gulf, but from the other side. My concern is not with humanistic ignorance about science and the natural world, but the blindness of scientists to the humanities. And I will not be interested in natural scientists but with their social scientific counterparts. I use the term ‘counterparts’ advisedly, for in the last half century American social science has moved away from a humanistic orientation towards a self-conscious association with natural scientific goals and methods. Behaviorism, scientism, statistics, causality, and reduction – these preoccupations have tightened their grip on mainstream sociology and political science, the core disciplines of American social science, since the 1950s. The result has been an enormous gap between the social sciences and humanities. At about the time Snow made his argument, W. H. Auden warned the graduating class at Harvard not to “commit a social science.”<sup>2</sup> Today, most social scientists are deadly afraid of “committing a humanities.”

### DISCIPLINARY URBAN RENEWAL

In this paper, I would like to walk along the street dividing social sciences and humanities to think about why the city planners of our contemporary aca-

demic city – the French ‘*cit *’ is more expressive – put the street where they did, and I will propose some urban renewal to make this street run another way. If I may extend this metaphor, I will propose that we gentrify the social sciences; that we bring life into the grand spaces and mechanical dwellings of our often empty *cit *; that we curve its straight boulevards and bring in some coffee houses, book stores, and street vendors. Is it not time finally to construct our buildings from the blue prints that such figures as Dilthey, Weber, Durkheim and Clifford Geertz have so carefully drawn up? Has the time not come to remodel narrowly modernist social science in a hipper, richer, more elaborated, postmodern, and fundamentally humanistic way? Let’s take down some walls and raise high the roof beams, and let the light of signification in! Let’s sweep away the old dust of behaviorism and lay down the carpet of hermeneutics. Let’s remodel action theory along the sleek new lines of performativity. Let’s dress up the neighborhood of drab materiality with aesthetic ideas about the beautiful and sublime.

Of course, this remodeled, very much twenty-first century *cit * would involve changing some things from the humanities too. Humanities theories centered on meaning have often failed to explore the sociological contexts for signification. But over the last thirty years, with the rise of the new historicism in American humanities and the pervasive influence of Foucault and Bourdieu on the humanities everywhere, this has been much less the case. The relationship now is asymmetrical. While humanists have immersed themselves in the social sciences, sociologists and political scientists have shifted their gaze from the humanities to the natural sciences.

The core of contemporary social science is way too concerned with contexts and not enough with signification. It looks longingly to what it imagines as the explanatory perfections and achievements of the natural sciences. Refusing to accept that social discoveries will never have the explanatory scope, much less the universal reach, of physics, biology and chemistry, the social sciences seem always to be striving to catch up. I want to suggest that we abandon this effort – not that we surrender rationality and evidentiary methods but that we stop thinking of ourselves as in some queue for becoming a science in the English-language sense. Queuing to become a science obscures our own distinctive subjectivity – the artfulness, morality and imagination that go into social observation and theory. It also obscures the distinctive ontology of the world we are investigating. The social world is obdurate but subjective; its structures are fueled by interpretation; its so-called laws are actually norms re-instituted time and again, dramatized every moment of every day. The ‘realism’ of society and its investigation are achieved and performed; they are not naturally there. Thinking of ourselves as a would-be natural science deprives us of critical tools we need to be good students of the social. We need less statistics and more sign theory; less research design than methods for reading the social

text; fewer techniques for making observations than for estimating the effectiveness of performance.

### THE HUMAN SCIENCES

More than one hundred years ago, Wilhelm Dilthey brilliantly laid out the case for a human rather than a narrowly social science. 'Human sciences' represents the conventional translation of his *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally the sciences of the spirit. Dilthey (1996) called his philosophical position 'hermeneutics' (after Schleiermacher), and he emphasized, above all, the significance of interpretation as compared to observation. Interpretation must be central for the human sciences, Dilthey insisted, for there is an inner, invisible dimension of social life that fundamentally patterns social action and collective order. It is a concentration on the outer, visible shell of human actions, as compared to the inner invisible spirit, that leads us mistakenly to import into the human sciences concepts from the natural sciences – concepts such as objective force and efficient cause. Insofar as the inner life of society becomes our focus, we must eschew the project of predictive science and universal law, though we can still strive to create models that generalize beyond particulars to types and even beyond our own delimited historical time.

Dilthey's argument was extraordinarily controversial and remained very much a minoritarian view in modern social science, despite the valiant, if also ambivalent, efforts of some Weberians, Durkheimians, phenomenologists, pragmatists, critical theorists, Parsonians, Geertzians and Foucauldians to keep it alive. What developed, instead, was a split inside of the human studies, a split that has produced the grand canyon between the humanities and the social sciences across which we continue to peer today.

Only if we turn away from the methods of natural science, and refuse to make their ambition our own, can we gain access to the inner life of social action and social structure, opening up possibilities for developing a generalizing but resolutely subjective science of the spirit. When social science looks toward natural science, it makes meaning a dependent variable, explaining it as a reflection. When social science looks towards the humanities, it takes meaning as its object. It sees meaning not only as vital for understanding social structure but as a social structure itself. It sees action not simply as responding to external restraints and opportunities but as feeling, and as performing, vis-à-vis such restraint, in reference to patterned meanings of social scripts (Alexander, Giesen & Mast, 2006). For the human sciences, explanation is not something that avoids subjectivity, but an interpretive understanding that gives subjectivity central place. If culture structures are central, then explanations become interpretations, ways of locating meaningful patterns and broader traditions, of illuminating the frameworks that have shaped them, of evaluating the power of performances by easing them into their place and time and by

interpreting the reactions of the audiences who receive them and produce newly patterned messages in turn (Alexander, 2017).

### TEXTS, NOT THINGS

The standard objects of modern social science are social structures that seem objective, obdurate, and constraining to human will. According to Durkheim's famous, deeply ambiguous phrase (2017), "*les faits sociaux sont comme les choses*": Social facts are things, and meanings are supposedly formed in response. But we can see how this is precisely not the case if we cross to the other side of the street, to the humanities side. Yes, our objects remain social and structures, but they must now be seen as texts. Rather than following Durkheim's methodological stricture, we need to be responsive to Paul Ricoeur's (1973) declaration that "meaningful action must be considered as a text." We need to learn how to see organization, state, class, market, technology, commodity, ethnicity, race, gender, and urban space from this other side of the street. They are patterned meanings, and we must learn to read their texts. What are their cultural structures? How do they mean? How are these subjective meanings crystallized and projected outward as essentialized and seemingly obdurate social facts? How are these collective social text messages – the performances of cultural social structures – received? How is their power variable? What are the textual understandings that audiences form in response?

### BINARY CODES

Texts are composed of signs, not individual words; rather than practical and pragmatic speech acts, they are languages structured relationally as patterns of signifiers. We must get away from the side of the street that addresses social facts as things, for this is only what they often seem to be. What is visible, what appears to be natural and thing-like, is actually a carrier for invisible meanings – the signifiers which are *not* there to be seen. We learned this from Ferdinand Saussure (1966). His other, more specific semiotic insight, that the relation between signifiers is deeply binary in its form, was fully developed by his carpentering Russian disciple Roman Jakobson (1990) (the founder of the Prague School), and later refined by Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Marshall Sahlins. The meaning of a thing never stands alone; it can only exist in relation to other meanings. They are binary at their core. Social facts may be 'thing-like' in the sense of supra-individual, coming to individuals from without. But their collective status is textual, not material, and it rests on relational, typically binary codes.

For social science to become a human science, it must draw all this from the humanities, but it must not do so without remainder. The manner in which binaries are applied involves social weighting, good and evil – in late-Durkheimian terms, the sacred and profane. Binary categories are eminently social clas-

sifications. Morally and affectively weighted, they fuel scapegoating, oppression and exclusion, but can inspire inclusion and liberation too. Boundary making illuminates social closure, boundary-crossing shows how it can be overcome (Barth, 1998; Alexander, 2006; Zelizer, 2011; Lamont, 1992; Smith, 1998).

Think, for example, of technology, of the first steam-driven locomotives or computers in their early days as mainframe and laptop. Should we understand such technological objects only in the material sense? Only insofar as material means invented and produced to more efficiently make money, achieve power, or conduct surveillance? Should we measure their impact only in terms of speed and calculation, as sustaining economic modes of production or political regimes of violence? Certainly, as social scientists, we would not wish to ignore any of this, any more than any humanities scholar would deny the social context that prevents or allows this or that aesthetic genre to come fully to life. But technology is also a text, a material embodiment and referent of signifiers that have propelled it into being every bit as powerfully as the physics, chemistry, mathematics, and economics that have contributed to its invention. And this textuality has contributed even more than these objective sciences to technology's social effect.

I am thinking here of how the steam engine and computer signified the sacred and the profane. They were heralded as machines that embodied the hopes of modernity and would allow us to rise above the dreck and dirt of civilization. They were vehicles of salvation, promoted and capital-invested as much for their dreams as for their efficiencies. These new machines brought nightmares as well. They were feared as Frankenstein monsters whose advent would promote bloody industrial and postindustrial capitalism and new brutalities of war. They were condemned as iron horses and infernal new calculating machines. They would dehumanize the world, colonizing the lifeworld in their wake. The great technologies of Western modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth century modernity were texts. They were defined relationally, not only denoted but connoted. They were instantiated in binaries, not only dichotomous variables but agonistic signs. The textual status of these technologies was more than metaphorical. These semiotic machines figured prominently in the great epic novels, poetry and paintings of their times, and in the movies, television shows and virtual visions of our own times as well (Alexander, 1998).

### **SOCIAL NARRATIVES**

As my reference to salvation implies, exploring the textuality that makes social facts more than things also means going beyond the synchronic to the diachronic, from semiotic coding to narration. Signs not only dichotomize the meanings of their social referents but map their passage through time. Sacred and profane are plotted as protagonist and antagonist, and their conflicted

relationship is explained as coherent causal sequence stretching from beginning to middle and end. Aristotle created narrative theory in his *Poetics* and employed it to explain the difference between the tragic and comedic Greek plays. Northrop Frye (1971) updated this sturdy account of meaning in reference to Shakespearian drama, explaining how ascending romance brings readers closer to the actors and stokes fervent feelings, while descending comic plots deflate passion by pulling reader identification away. Contemporary literary theory has demonstrated how narrative forms can be applied socially. Paul Fussell (1975) shows how ironic narrative replaced romance after World War I, fueling the pessimism that had such disastrous consequences in the interwar period. Peter Brooks (1995) interprets the simplifying certainty of nineteenth-century melodrama as a response to the post-French Revolution destruction of religious faith, suggesting that such good guy/bad guy plots fueled the radical, all-or-nothing social conflicts of the day. Fredric Jameson (1980) wields his critical, so-called negative hermeneutics to illuminate how capitalism creates tensions among genres that only hopes for revolution can assuage. Inspired by such social possibilities for narrative shaping, Victor Turner (1974) created his ingenious and fertile, if rather vague and remarkably underspecified, idea of social drama.

Narrative molding shows that any conception of merely material conflict fails to illuminate the manner in which social groups construct plots that feature themselves as dramatic sacred protagonists and cast their opponents as evil antagonists, narrative constructions that weight their rational arguments with moral immanence, predicting salvation with victory and apocalypse with defeat. The explanatory resources provided by game theorizing and rational choice pale in comparison. Yet, while ideas of narrative show that social facts are not things, the manner in which plots structure society can be specified only when this humanities theorizing takes on social form. Weber (1964) developed a four-fold typology of salvation, contrasting this-worldly and other-worldly, and cross-cutting them with mystical versus ascetic forms. Whereas Weber restricted the reach of this implicitly narrative theory to pre-modern religion, Philip Smith (2005) has created a full-blown narrative theory of modern war which allows, for the first time, political legitimation to be explained in a dynamic, fully cultural way.

### **SOCIAL PERFORMANCES**

If humanities theories of coding and narrating provide critical resources for understanding social culture, performativity opens the way to a commensurate model of social action. Kenneth Burke (1957) developed influential early ideas about symbolic action as theatrical, drawing from the Cambridge ritual theorists and the new criticism as well. John Austin (1957) introduced the performative into contemporary language philosophy thirty years later, decisively contrast-

ing language as denotative reference with connotative communication that brings facts into being by the power of speaking itself. Situated between Austin and structuralism, Jacques Derrida (1978) opposed pragmatism by showing how performance draws upon background sign structures. After avantguard dramatist Richard Schechner (1977) met Victor Turner, he created the new field of performance studies, a blending of anthropology with theatre studies that set off new possibilities for modeling individual and collective action. Judith Butler (1990) brought these possibilities back into contact with philosophy, drawing upon Turner, Austin and Derrida to create her argument that gender identity is nothing other than its performance.

What all this ferment in twentieth-century philosophy and literary theory implies for social analysis was presaged by Erving Goffman (1967), who drew from Austin and Burke to create a startlingly dramaturgical approach to micro-sociology, and later by Geertz (1973), who built on Goffman and just about everybody else to develop notions about deep play and the theatre state in Bali. These sociological renditions, which captured performance ideas from the humanities, have only recently been developed into a full-blown, multidimensional model of social performance. Why do social performances succeed in persuading their audiences, or fail to impress? How and why does performative effectiveness usually fall somewhere in-between? These questions can be answered only by specifying the general idea of performance, filtering it through traditional sociological ideas about control over the means of symbolic production, institutional differentiation and demographic fragmentation, productive and distributive power, scripting, and the independence of critical interpretation.

### **MATERIAL ICONS**

If the kind of socially-oriented human studies I have elaborated here leads away from materialism, does it make an understanding of the power of things impossible? This would certainly be a serious problem were it so. Contemporary capitalist societies are filled to overflowing with magnetic commodities ranging from the beautiful to the grotesque, sensuous bodies, fashioned wrappings, music and muzac, addicting tastes and smells, and always the promises of even more, more, more. Can a culturally reconstructed social science explain such powers? Do we need to return to materialism to explain materiality? There is a wide swath of contemporary social science that says we must. Bruno Latour's (2005) 'actor network theory' (ANT) describes person-thing interactions as mechanical and behavioral; actors respond not to the meanings of things but to the information imbedded in them. The suggestion is that, with digitalization, we live in societies increasingly ruled not by humans but by animated machines. In postmodern political economy, ANT combines with extravagantly revisionist Marxian theories about commodification and branding. Once again, things are the saddle, this time in dangerously capitalist ways.

If we are to mount a sociological response to these provocative but, in my view, deeply regressive tendencies, we need to draw from the humanities once again, but this time from the plastic rather than the literary arts. Aesthetic writing about painting and architecture conceptualize densely mediated encounters between actors and their objects. Faced with objects, we sense surface stimulation through form, through the lightness, smoothness, and symmetry of beauty, through the rough and painful darkness of the sublime. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006) has suggested, we continuously convert materiality into aesthetic experience, rejecting materialism even as we resist discursive digression into cognition and away from feeling. While such contemporary aesthetic philosophers as Martin Seel (2005) and Bill Brown (2001) would actually substitute presence effects for meaning effects, and things for significations, Rom Harré (2002) is right to insist that objects are transformed into social stuff by their embedment in narratives. In empirical studies that follow up on such humanities insights, anthropologists like Daniel Miller (1987) and sociologists like Ian Woodward (2003) are bringing material things back in, but they are doing so in a cultural sociological way. As I have recently shown in my own work, materiality allows iconic consciousness, but iconic power is variable. It too must be understood in a performative way (Alexander, 2010).

### AGAINST THE GREAT DIVIDE

In this paper, I have tried to explain why the great divide between humanities and social science is a bad thing. Only by overcoming this gulf can we understand how it is that social facts are not things but texts. When symbolic binaries and narratives anchor their referents in society, they constitute cultural structures of a social kind. As such, they can possess a collective force that recalls the irresistible power of the physical world. What differentiates social from physical force is the signifying nature of its power, which comes from collective energy and authority but also from the hermeneutic character of action itself. We weave our own webs of meaning, even as we are entrapped, and inspired, by those that preceded us. Performance mediates between the strictures of individual and group motivation and the meanings that structure institutional life.

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**NOTES**

- 1 The talk which originated this paper was presented at Interdisciplinarity and Advancement in the Arts and Sciences: An International Colloquium, honoring Professor Ruth Katz. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, December 17, 2008.
- 2 Extracted from W. H. Auden's long poem, "Under Which Lyre," presented as the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard in 1946. [Editor's Note]

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### O QUE A CIÊNCIA SOCIAL DEVE APRENDER COM AS HUMANIDADES

#### Resumo

Identificando uma tendência para um afastamento crescente das ciências sociais praticadas nos Estados Unidos de uma orientação mais humanística desde a década de 1950, o autor pretende recuperar uma tradição intelectual das ciências sociais que coloca os significados culturais e as dimensões subjetivas das ações sociais no centro da análise. Portanto, contrário à “grande divisão” entre ciências sociais e humanidades, Alexander propõe, através de seu programa forte de uma sociologia cultural, uma concepção de sociologia que considere os fatos sociais não como “coisas”, mas como “textos”, isto é, que analise como os significados culturais se enraízam socialmente e estruturam a vida social.

#### Palavras-chave

Sociologia cultural;  
humanidades;  
ciências sociais;  
cultura;  
fatos sociais.

### WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCE MUST LEARN FROM THE HUMANITIES

#### Abstract

Identifying a shift away from a more humanistic approach in the sociology and political science practiced in the United States since the 1950s, Jeffrey Alexander seeks to recuperate an intellectual tradition of the social sciences that places the cultural meanings and subjective dimensions of social actions at the very centre of analysis, while simultaneously considering the structure nature of social life. Opposing the ‘great divide’ between social sciences and humanities, therefore, Alexander proposes, via his strong program of cultural sociology, a conception of sociology that considers social facts not as ‘things’ but as ‘texts,’ analysing how cultural meanings are socially rooted and structure social life.

#### Keywords

Cultural sociology;  
humanities;  
social sciences;  
culture;  
social facts.