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Jessica Hollis
University of Kentucky

Natalia Ruiz-Junco
University of Kentucky

Brett Smith
University of Kentucky

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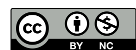

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Jessica Hollis, Natalia Ruiz-Junco, and Brett Smith

Discourse and Civil Repair:
disClosure interviews Jeffrey C. Alexander (3 December 2002)

Jeffrey C. Alexander is professor and Chair of the Sociology Department at Yale University. He has written extensively in social theory. His books *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-83), *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory Since World War Two* (1987), *Action and Its Environments: Towards a New Synthesis* (1988), and *Fin de siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (1995) are essential to understanding contemporary theoretical debates within sociology. Alexander's cultural sociology has had a great impact. His call for the autonomous status of culture in sociological analysis has been quite influential, as sociologists are theorizing culture in new and necessary ways. In his new book, Alexander develops a theory of the civil sphere emphasizing the role of culture in shaping the structures of our political life.

Alexander was invited as the 2002 Fall Distinguished Author in Social Theory by the Committee on Social Theory at the University of Kentucky. During his visit, Alexander delivered two talks entitled "Theorizing the Possibilities of Justice: The Split Life of the Civil Sphere" and "Civil Society and the American Civil Rights Movement." Afterwards, *disClosure* had the opportunity to discuss these talks and his new manuscript with him.

disClosure: You are just now completing a book on civil society. Could you discuss the origins of this project and situate your argument within recent studies of civil society?

Jeffrey Alexander: This book comes out of the experiences I had in the 1980's. Having come back from China in 1989, I realized there was a small body of literature that was developing about civil society and that there had been a transformation of Marxism into a kind of radical democratic theory. It coincided with my own interests in civil

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Committee on Social Theory, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

society that went back to the 1970's, which were stimulated by my interest in the Watergate crisis, by my interest in Durkheim, Gramsci, and by Parsons's concept of the societal community. All of these interests and backgrounds came together, and I began working on this project.

dC: You mentioned an intellectual movement on the Left from Marxism to more radical democratic approaches to social and political theory. I wonder if you could comment on how this has played out at the level of local and national politics in the United States. Criticisms of the recent elections and the failure of the Democrats to retain power in the house, focus on the inability of the Democrats to develop a specific, or distinctive, agenda or platform that would appeal to a number of voters. According to these arguments, we *do not* have the kinds of options that individuals really want. There seems to be, on the part of many citizens, a call for another option as far as political parties and leaders go, but we are not being provided one. This seems to indicate a lack of parallelism between theory and practice. How might we account for this?

JA: I think that the crisis of liberal or leftist ideologies creates various results. One is the movement towards democracy as the normative framework for a lot of political theory: there has been a revival of democratic theory in the last ten or fifteen years—even moving away from distributive issues as they were articulated in Rawls's work.

Another result is that the critique of capitalism by socialism no longer carries substantial weight, because the alternative of socialism in a strong sense, which is a non-market, state-directed organization of production and distribution, is basically not thought of as viable now. So, that has presented the Left with this giant crisis of social democracy. Leninism and Maoism have virtually disappeared. This creates a real challenge for the European and the American Left, which is how to work out a critical alternative to conservatism. The problem is that the leaders want to embrace the market, but they do not want to be conservative. So, they develop what's called the "new labor" in England, new forms of social democracy in China and even in France. Even in Spain, they are all very market-oriented socialists. I think this is a big problem. The Democratic Party has problems, but I think that the move from critical theory towards radical democracy is a good move that could inspire a new kind of liberalism in the United States because radical democracy is more part of the republican tradition in the United States; radical democracy does not come from as far outside of this tradition.

dC: I wonder if this disaffection with the Democratic Party will create or strengthen in any way some part of the civil sphere? Will the civil sphere be strengthened, if our regulatory institution or the State isn't performing as we think it should?

JA: I do not work with—and necessarily I do not accept—the distinction of State and civil society. I have written a criticism of that as a continuation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political theory. I have called it Civil Society I in my new manuscript. This is a perspective that has been embraced by various proponents of civil society from the mid-1970s, when the concept began to be revived in Poland by Leszek Kolakowski and Adam Michnik. But I think this notion

suggests that all associations that are not state-directed are civil society associations. Viìctor Peìrez-Diìaz embraces that and articulates that in Spain, and his work has been very influential.

I see that this framework is useful in struggles against totalitarian or authoritarian societies because those societies try to repress autonomous associations. This perspective of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theory has been reproduced and brought back to contemporary consciousness because of the movements against communism and authoritarianism. But once you have the transition, I personally do not believe that this perspective is a very helpful understanding of civil society or the civil sphere. Today, this could be called a neo-Tocquevillean approach to civil society, and it has been brought to its highest level in American social science by Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone* and in his first book on democracy.

This approach is not very helpful because it does not have a strong normative traction, and it does not have a strong empirical traction. In the spheres outside of the state, there are so many different kinds of groups, systems, fields, spheres of justice, that it seems unproductive to lump them together in the concept of a civil society. This approach would put together under the same rubric a capitalist corporation and a crusading social movement against capitalism, both being civil society organizations. I do not find that very helpful, though I agree that the distinction between state and non-state is an important one. I am more interested in developing a theory of the civil sphere that is tied to more differentiated and specific moral criteria and cultural and political processes which would lead to a kind of Habermasian idea. But I have a lot of criticisms of the Habermasian position.

dC: In your new manuscript, you propose three categories of Civil Society—Civil Society I, II, and III. It seems Civil Society III is a dialectical result of aspects of both Civil Society I and Civil Society II. Civil Society III is a category that retains elements from both Civil Society I and Civil Society II, namely the positive aspects of both: the moral and ethical endowment of Civil Society I and the differentiation of Civil Society II resisting the identification of society with the market—

JA: And the negative aspects. Marx and Marxism identified civil society with selfishness, bourgeois society, individualism, and private property: I call that Civil Society II. The idea, then, was to abolish civil society. That had many ramifications. It seemed very hard to establish a democratic theory that we would find acceptable today, if you had the idea that civil society would be abolished because that partly suggested the abolition of the distinction of private and public; it suggested a Rousseauean General Will; it suggested that property should be controlled by the public and perhaps by the State.

But I do not think that the response to the problems of this kind of classical Marxist view should be to go back to a traditionally liberal theory of Civil Society I, which *is* very popular ideologically today in the United States. President Clinton gave a commencement address at UCLA a few years ago (20 May 1994) in which he discussed what he called the "discourse of civil society." There is such a strong argument that the market and democracy always go together and there is no ten-

sion between them. But there is a tension between the market and the civil sphere, as I have defined it. So, I think what is important is that if you look at Marx in a different way, he had in mind a utopian vision of a solidaristic community that did not give enough attention to autonomy. I would say it gave exaggerated emphasis on community. But he was aware of the problems of capitalism, and I think that the tension between capitalism and the civil sphere is an endemic one which will be ongoing.

I have this three-part notion of the three kinds of boundary relations between the civil and non-civil spheres, which can be conceptualized as facilitating input. Let's take the economy and the civil sphere. You can argue that markets and private property help to produce the freedom of the civil sphere because they underpin notions of autonomy: they encourage senses of responsibility, etc. They can also be thought of as providing material goods that allow self-expression—there are many arguments that proceed in this manner. I would not wish to deny that there are, but a conservative position would emphasize exclusively the facilitating inputs from the private economy to the civil sphere. I would want to say that there are also destructive intrusions, such that the relations of the private market undermine to certain degrees and in certain ways the promise of respectful and reciprocal relationships of the civil sphere. They do so not by really producing inequality, but by allowing inequality to be transferred into differential respect and power in public and civil life. So, that is why I am trying to think of the third civil society as different from the first two, but it is as you say a kind of dialectical synthesis of some aspects of that.

dC: In your manuscript you say that the civil society concept has been "secularized." Secularization is usually understood as the process by which what was once sacred loses this quality. What are the theoretical implications of saying that the civil society concept is now entering the secularized realm of social theory?

JA: What I meant by "secularization" was really in the context of the idea of the relation of social movements to social science. I wanted to say that most of the important concepts in social science, which are treated today in a mundane way in the sense that they are treated as objects of analysis, conceptualization, and empirical and theoretical research, were once highly contested sacred things in social life. They still are to some degree. You can think of it as routinization if you want, rather than movement from religious to secular: it is a metaphor. So, class does not arouse a great many social movements today, but it is an interesting concept in social science. The same with race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, poverty. We have to realize that these concepts that moved into social science did so for political and moral reasons. Then they became secularized in the metaphorical sense of becoming less emotionally laden for many people, though the normative references of these concepts are still there, and people, I think, care about them in a moral and political sense, and that is why we study them.

But you raise an interesting point, which I worried about when I wrote that phrase and when I re-read that phrase last year when I was editing the book. I do not want to suggest that civil society is not a sacred concept. The way I understand it, civil society is part of the discourse of the sacred and the profane: it still inspires

intense symbolic behavior in contemporary societies. But for the sociologist or the social scientist, we need always to step back as far as we can and have a more detached relationship to the concepts we use. So, what I am recommending is that the time has come to create a complex, sociological theory of civil society; to create such a theory has been difficult because the concept has been so highly contested, and that it still is difficult but possible to begin to subject civil society to this kind of analysis.

And I do think that in real life, civil society still is an object of sacrality as subject to ritualization. I use late Durkheimian theory in my new book, as I have been developing it over the years, especially in terms of the discourse of the sacred and profane. To me, it is very important to attach Durkheim to semiotics to develop the sense in which the binary oppositions of civil society provide a basis for stigma and shame, and that sets up a framework of exclusion—to legitimate forms of exclusion. One of the core arguments of my book is that exclusions are generally legitimate with the core group and that the members of a core group are not excluding people only on the basis of their power to exclude people. They also exclude people because insofar as they are engaged in a project of modernization or democracy, they exclude because they feel endangered by the pollution of categories of people whom they have constructed as dangerous to the project of civil society. So that to come back into, or to come into, the civil sphere requires a symbolic purification on the part of dominated groups, both in terms of their own self-image at times but, more importantly, in terms of their framing by core groups.

dC: So, it is the responsibility of the dominated group, the marginalized, to make the core group see them in a different light?

JA: I would not say that it is their responsibility in a moral sense. If we talk about a moral responsibility, then I would say it is the responsibility of the core group to include the outer group. Sociologically, social movements that are launched by marginalized groups do not only try to gain power but they also try to gain legitimacy. And one way that they do so—and the most important way—is by re-framing their identities. A lot of political conflict in a quasi-democratic society is a process of influence and persuasion. It is *not* a matter of force. In that sense, my theory is related to deliberative theories of democratic discourse. I am kind of translating the notion that there is a discourse ethics and that democracy is based on discourse into cultural, sociological idiom. I want to argue that I agree that political conflicts have a strongly discursive character. From the perspective of cultural sociology that I have developed, I am more pessimistic about the concept of rationality. I see reasonableness as a cultural category that has structural status rather than an immanent quality of discourse itself. That suggests a different attitude. In order to be effective, the dissident movement has to be very clever in a performative sense about framing its own demands and indeed its own identities as legitimate in terms of the discourse of civil society.

dC: I want to push this deliberative model a little bit further. In your talk earlier today, you claimed that social movements seek persuasion and not merely power. They want to acquire persuasion communicatively to give rise to a moral outrage

in civil society: you talked about Birmingham trying to elicit moral outrage from northern civil society. That moral outrage, in turn, sets in motion regulatory intervention, culminating in civil repair. This process mirrors in many relevant respects Habermas's two-track model of deliberative politics developed and elaborated in *Between Facts and Norms*. There, Habermas refers to the "constitutionally legitimate circulation of power" where people in civil society attempt to influence the agenda of parliament or congress. What this ultimately gives rise to is rational law, which seems to be what is going on in at least this instantiation of the process of civil repair. If your model is that similar to Habermas's, where is the distinction between his model and yours? You mentioned earlier that you have criticisms of Habermas? How is your model superior to, or at least better than, Habermas's?

JA: I have a kind of hero worshipping attitude towards Habermas, and that makes him one of the living people for whom I still have a kind of boyish admiration and enthusiasm, both in his private life and as a philosopher. I am very enthusiastic about Habermas. At the same time, my work has been inspired by Habermas in many respects, and I have always been in a kind of productive dialogue with him from my point of view, as many people have been, of course. I have had a lot of problems with Habermas's rationalism, and I have articulated this in various ways.

The first problem: What is speech and what is language? This goes back to his emphasis on speech in terms of pragmatics, and my feeling is that—and I said this in my article "Habermas and Critical Theory: Beyond the Marxian Dilemma?" which was reproduced in the Honneth and Joas edition on Habermas back in 1991—this pragmatics of the speech act are insufficiently sensitive to the taken-for-granted cultural presuppositions of language. This goes back to Saussure's distinction between speech and language. I am very interested in the language itself. For me, Habermas has tried to develop the notion that the reciprocity and the norms of deliberation—in terms of transparency and respect—and the commitment to seeking the truth come out of the speech situation itself. I mean that is one of his several moves, a kind of post-Kantian move; whereas in my work I have tried to argue that the standards of reasonableness *precede* the speech act and are embodied in discourses.

My understanding of discourses comes from semiotics and poststructuralism, which Habermas is very critical of and is critical of for a number of reasons that seem to be both good and bad. This has been articulated in his critique of French thinkers. He connects an emphasis on the structuredness of discourses, the pre-linguistic structuring of discourses, to Heidegger, to the conservative Romantic traditions, to Gadamer, and to the notion of tradition itself. And so for Habermas it has been very difficult to accept the given constraints on speech. He is turning to pragmatics and has turned away from the German and the French in some degree towards an American and pragmatist understanding, even though he's still obviously in the German tradition of this. I don't think that is sociologically productive.

Now, in his work on the weak and strong publics—in fact in *Facts and Norms*—he does have a very interesting sociological theory that is in many respects quite complementary or consistent with mine. I was surprised to read that, even though

I had seen signs of it coming, like in the Postscript to *Habermas and The Public Sphere*, his references to public opinion, to culture. I have seen this gigantic transformation of Habermas from the 1960s work on the transformation of the public sphere, where public opinion is sharply criticized as manipulated by capitalism, to a later understanding that public opinion is a positive resource often and is a way of working through issues in deliberation. My only real criticism of that part of his work is that the concept of meaning and culture should be brought into that more strongly, that the understanding of how movements and intellectuals and others stimulate and criticize opinion in the weak publics has to be more elaborated in the way that I have described. And I don't necessarily think, at least in a country like the United States, that the Parliament is the strong public. Maybe more on the Continent and in places with a strong party, like in Germany or maybe in England, I can see privileging the Parliament. I would simply say the Parliament is a more regulated institution in that it articulates law, which is a different, very fundamental dimension of the civil sphere. I think that the communicative institutions that he is increasingly interested in are equally important; I do not think that they are weak, they are just not regulatory. They are much more plastic, of course.

dC: I would like to ask you about another intellectual whose work you have discussed previously, Pierre Bourdieu. In your book *Fin de Siècle Social Theory*, you seem to argue that there is a problematic relationship between structure and agency in Bourdieu's work. What is your opinion of the Bourdieuian concept of *habitus* in relation with this problematic relationship between structure and agency? Is the dichotomy of structure and agency still useful in social science? In other words, can social scientists do without this dichotomy?

JA: Well, I have written a lot about this. To recapitulate what I have written, I think that for Bourdieu, *habitus* is the equivalent of the self. He develops the idea of *habitus* as an internalization of social structure, so that the person is able to act as a carrier of status and class and some structures. That is an interesting idea because it allows him to put a great deal of emphasis on the actor and not simply objective structures coercing people. He sees that the *habitus* is a central element in the sense of social structure, but that it also has a subjective status.

My problem with that is precisely his insistence on the isomorphism or the parallelism between self and social structure, which means that he does not see the self in a modern society as having independence, or autonomy, *vis-à-vis* social structure. I would say, following a sociological tradition of Weber and Durkheim and Parsons, but also somebody like G. H. Mead, or even modern-day developmental psychology, like Piaget, or Freudian psychoanalytic psychology, that one of the most distinctive qualities of modern life is that the self—while a social product—has developed the capacity for detachment and criticism, so that a fully socialized person is usually a person who is self-critical and critical of society. Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* suggests an overly socialized actor who reproduces social structure without knowing it. Of course, reproduction is common and is an important dimension, but I think that there is much more going on with the self than he thinks.

dC: And the dichotomy between structure and agency is still useful for social theory? Is it still necessary to try to dismantle or criticize this dichotomy?

JA: As long as there is going to be social theory, there are always going to be conflicts over emphasis on structures and the emphasis on actors. It is a prominent philosophical preoccupation, and it is part of modern and democratic social structures that is a reflection of the emphasis on trying to provide legal guarantees for freedom of expression as against social pressures. But I do not think that it is properly conceptualized. I never have. I have always written against the dichotomy of structure and agency. I have tried to work out various alternative formulations. I think that the last time I did this at length was in the last chapter of a 1998 book called *Neofunctionalism and After* and also in my essay "The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu" (Chapter 4) in *Fin de Siècle Social Theory*.

The problem is that an actor is not the same as an agent, that actors have agency, they have freedom. There is free will; actors have autonomy. But the real capacity for freedom comes from the socialized capacity to exercise self-control and to develop a moral standard. So, if we are looking for the resources for critical responses to social structure, whether it is a patriarchy or a class structure or religious structure, I am not convinced that we need to turn to theories of radical agency that are anti-structural. What we need to understand, rather, is how the personalities, or the selves of actors, are produced culturally and socially in ways that give people a sense of their cultural capacities for criticism. That is very important from the contemporary point of view. So, an actor who is fully apart from social structure is exercising agency in the sense of freedom and criticism.

dC: I was interested in what you said earlier today in your talk about the ideas of performance and melodrama as they relate to the civil rights movement. In that example it seems that the media, journalists, played a particular role in bringing that drama to an audience. The media was necessary for the uptake of civil rights activists' performance as the weak, oppressed victim confronting the uncivil, dominant oppressor. That was forty years ago. Now we want to think about that occurring on a global level. How, given the changes public media has undergone in the four decades, would it be possible for the media to play that kind of role—especially in the US, where the media that we are so often confronted with is corporate media? Even though we have alternative news sources—independent and politically radical web sources, for instance—these are not as visually pervasive and accessible as say something like CNN.

JA: Yes, that is something that I am concerned about. The thing I want to stress is that the media was just as corporate then as now. The mass media can have different economic bases; it could be a nonprofit but government agency like the BBC; it could be a profit-making company like the New York Times. In either case, it can also be looked on as a communicative institution of civil society. An institution can be in different domains at the same time. So, just because a news outlet, or even people who run Saturday night sitcoms, need to and want to make a profit, it doesn't mean that they only serve themselves or the needs of capital. Although there are conflicts between profit making and the public interest in various ways, what we see in newspapers and in television news are two factors which allow them to also function as institutions of the civil sphere.

One is journalism as profession, and in the last fifty to seventy-five years there's been an increasing professionalization of the journalist's role. This has been widely written about, so that if you go back a hundred years or a hundred and fifty years, you would see no distinction between editorial and news, for example, in newspapers. You would barely see distinctions between advertising and news reporting. Even though I have written about and believed that news itself is a form of narration—it's not an objective recounting of events—nonetheless, there's a lot of sense of the autonomy of the journalist and there are continuous tensions, therefore, between journalism and management in terms of the pressures. So, whenever there's a buying out of a newspaper or efforts to bring together media and TV in a single outlet, there are a lot of protests and a lot of conflicts about whether that would undermine the integrity and the autonomy of the journalist. What is journalism and news reporting? It is an interpretation of an event from the point of view of public opinion. The public opinion is not homogeneous; it is fragmented, and sometimes it is polarized. It is certainly different if it is liberal, conservative, and there are other divisions that sometimes are relevant. But, that to me is the primary framing element, *not* the profit-making nature of the company that the journalist works for, except in certain issues.

So, today, if we are thinking about news reporting, I think the corporate nature of the news is a constant; I do not think it is varied. I mean, there are larger companies, and if I am thinking of CNN and how it reports news, I think its main source of bias is that it is an American company, not a capitalist one. It is a sad thing that in the world that the only worldwide source of news in most of the countries of the world is an American news company. And it is very strange indeed.

I think that there is a growing conservatism among journalists today, and the news media reflects an ideological turn towards at least the center and the Right in the society. For the first time in the US, we have Fox news, which is an overtly conservative network, and we have a weakness of critical liberalism as an ideology. This is reflected in the ability of Bush to seduce journalists to accept his point of view. But that seduction is structured in the very differentiation of society. To the degree that the civil sphere is autonomous, to that degree every person who holds power would try to seduce it. A liberal or a leftist has to seduce the news media and so does a rightist. Kennedy, Roosevelt, they were all famously seductive towards the media, and they tried to control the independence of the public sphere, and make it their own.

I think one way to seduce, to most effectively win, the media is to mount an effective performance to the American public and to the people who stand for the public, which are the journalists and the editors of the media. It is not a matter of corporate money controlling the interpretation of journalists and audiences. Rather, it is a matter of conservative dramaturgy seeming convincing and persuasive in a competitive field to, if not journalists, then large sections of audiences. So, the reason why performance is critical is because of the differentiation and distance of citizens from political actors, which is a product of a complex society.

There is no way that any of us will ever closely observe a politician, I have never seen them personally. I am sure most people have not. Everything is mediated through media of mass communication. Therefore, it is inevitable that the actions of those who want to be persuasive to a public will have a performative quality. It does not mean that that is an inauthentic or deceptive action in a moral sense. This is a pretty complicated question, the relationship between authenticity, performance, honesty, and integrity.

dC: What you have just said is relevant to the distinction that you make in your recent work between cognitive and expressive media. This distinction seems somewhat arbitrary, especially if we take into account the expressive aspects of cognitive media contents. Do you think we could question the distinction between cognitive and expressive media?

JA: Yes, we can. I wanted to imply the distinction mainly to distinguish between media that presents itself as merely factual and concentrated in information, and the media that explicitly presents itself as non-informational, as in the little paragraph at the end of movies saying, any relationship between the characters and events in this movie and real life are purely coincidental. Whereas in news reporting, they say that they are referring to real events. But, my point in the book, and in other things I have written about the media, is that news reporting is causal representation and is guided by narrative and semiotic considerations. Most good stories tell a narrative, in fact, they are called stories; they are not just reports. They have protagonists; they have antagonists; they have a sense of what the dangers are. And they identify and help to crystallize powerful symbols. So, I agree with you that cognitive media have strong expressive aspects. At the same time, expressive media have strong moral implications. I wanted to draw on some work in the humanities to talk about the moral contents of fiction. I think it is very important that societies work through a lot of their political concerns in terms of simple dramas that are broadcasted in movies and television or in pulp fiction of various kinds.

dC: You made a claim yesterday that theorizing justice suffers from trying to keep the universal and the particular separate, I guess too separate. And you want to see universalism more concretely, and I think that the vehicle for that is the discourse of civil society, which is structured in binary oppositions at three levels between persons, interactions, and institutions. Could you elaborate the discourse of civil society itself in the context of how this is going to concretize universalism?

JA: If you read Rawls, Habermas, Dworkin, or the more classical philosophers before them, you see a continuous reference to the word "reason," to the term "rationality," and to the concept of "universals." And these references are themselves offered sometimes as evaluative criterion to judge action and moral judgment, or sometimes simply operationalized in terms of different kinds of procedures which will allow people to judge rationality or universalism. The way I see cultural sociology is not to say that people are irrational in the sense that they don't pursue necessarily universalistic ideals. I think people do try to be universalistic in their judgments and that they do try to be rational. But what I wanted to emphasize is that rationality is carried by concrete symbols and by concrete languages. So, in the case of the discourse of civil society people are caught inside of the language game, in which there are fairly rigid sets of dichotomies, like independent/dependent, open/close, honest/dishonest, rational/irrational. That is what I meant by more concrete. It is a set of words that actually occur in everyday speech. You can see it at all levels of the society. I conclude from this that it is a very accessible and intuitively understood set of concepts that have their own internal organization that are used. That is what I mean by more concrete, and not abstract. I do not think people strive to be rational actors. They want to see themselves symbolically in terms of values. They want to avoid pollution and stigmatization, and they want to have a sense of purity and charismatic power. I am still speaking here strictly in terms of the codes of civil society. These terms—sacred and profane—are articulated in terms of this semiotic structure of discourse. But further than that, these words themselves are often understood in terms of images and stories, which in Habermas's sense are part of the lifeworld and the ethical sphere. By trying to live up to, or live out, or make your life parallel with an admired social narrative, that is how people would act democratically, not because they have the capacity for rational action in the sense that Habermas describes it. I told this to Habermas, and he said, you are not making a *philosophical* argument, and that he was not making a *sociological* argument. I said, that is true. So, I am not sure how these really relate to each other, but I see these as the alternatives. It could be considered a sociological translation of the concerns of discourse ethics, or it could be considered an alternative sociology to a discourse ethics.

dC: To your mind, Habermas, and maybe even Rawls, privileges reason too much such that it is disconnected from culture. You maintain that what is rational action is itself coded by a given culture, usually the culture that is dominant. *We* act this way, so this is always going to be on the positive side of the binary divide, and anyone who is not like *us* is going to be ostracized and rendered impure. Are not Habermas, Rawls, and other philosophers trying to preserve rationality and reasonableness so that it doesn't get that cultural tinge because such an admixture creates a lot of problems?

JA: I would say that you have to find some ground between, on the one hand, a purely relativistic position that would say, sociologically, anything can be under the guise of rationality or reason and, on the other hand, a purely philosophically grounded argument for the universality of reasonableness. I think that within the Habermasian tradition there is a reaching toward discursive practices and deliberation as generating, in an imminent sense, the commitments and standards of rational action.

There are probably two sources of the discourse of civil society. First, not all societies are committed to rationality. That is a relatively modern, relatively Western kind of conception. It involves associated ideas about autonomy and individuality. It is not an ideal of many other civilizations in history. So, that is relatively recent, and relatively specific, although it is spread out all over the world. One source of the concern with rationality is certain cultural-political traditions that date back to Western traditions: Greece, Judaism, Christianity, Roman law, medieval constitutionalism and parliamentarism, civic republicanism, socialism, scientific revolution. All these movements have made commitments to certain ideals of autonomy

and rationality in their own ways. They have made deposits in the bank of Western culture, as it were. I believe that in non-Western cultures there are also equivalents of these. I think Islam has it in its renaissance times, and Hinduism and Buddhism also have parallel conceptions, but I am not competent to make observations about those societies.

But the other thing, and this is more of a Habermasian move, is that if you set up a thought experiment and you say, "what are the requirements of self-governing collectivity?" and "what would be the kinds of people that would have to occupy that so that they would not be subjugated to power or coercion?" I think you would come up with a lot of the positive sides of the discourse of civil society. People need to be honest; they need to be autonomous; they need to be cooperative. Because if they were not that, then why would we want to protect freedom of speech, why give people so much autonomy? We would want to have surveillance over them and to control them, which is what we do when we put people in jail. We have young children who cannot control themselves and are closely supervised. In that sense, I think that a lot of these polities grow out of some kind of implicit thinking about what the requirements of self-regulation are. I suppose that is parallel to Habermas's notions of the ethics that are immanent to discourse. But they are not exactly the same.

dC: I just want to be clear; earlier you said that this discourse of civil society or this democratic language is often seen as images. Are you referring to these groups seeing themselves symbolically in terms of these values?

JA: Yes, in a performative sense. So, let us say we are trying to think about Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton—even more clearly—makes certain comments or gives a speech. The speech is reproduced in the newspapers and in the media, and people talk about it. Are these people employing purely rational evaluative standards? The people ask: "Is Al Sharpton a democratic leader or is he a demagogue?"; "Is he going to help the cause of democratization or is he a racist who is undermining it?" It is hard to make those evaluations without the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. The image in the collective memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., what he embodies in a symbolic sense, is a regulating device to control and to guide our evaluations of Al Sharpton's speech. And that's the way the culture—as it is processed—works to propel ethical evaluations in public discourse.

dC: You just mentioned collective memory. Could you comment on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory?

JA: I think Halbwachs made a brilliant connection from late Durkheimian sociology to a notion of memory and institutionalizing memory, monuments, and manuscripts. He introduced a notion that has become very much an object of study and theory in the humanities and social sciences.

dC: So, could this concept be used for doing cultural analysis?

JA: Yes, of course, but there has been a lot of work that has referenced Halbwachs, a number of works in collective memory that are also Durkheimian, like something in Paul Connerton's book on memory. I think there are two issues. One is the relation of collective memory to psychoanalysis. That is a big issue in

the humanities. Many people use psychoanalytic theories relating to trauma and memory, but I would be reluctant to use psychoanalysis for that. I would want to link it more to social and cultural processes. The other issue is the relation of the whole Durkheimian tradition to ideas. There is a separateness between Weber and Durkheim. Durkheim is interested in the social processes of religion. He was not interested in the history of ideas. Weber was interested in the history of ideas, and he wasn't that interested in developing an abstract theory of religion as Durkheim was. In terms of collective memory, we need to have a theory of ideas as well as processes. So, we need to have a theory of semiotics and discourses and performance.

dC: To follow up on the issue of collective memory, in your talk earlier today, I was disconcerted by a distinction I thought was being made between what was going on in the South in terms of race relations and what was going on in the North. At least it appeared that in your talk the North was being privileged in a way as a more civil place for black Americans as opposed to the South. For me that characterization reinscribes the whole notion that we—as a society with a collective memory—have of what race relations is and was, which by and large is still centered on what happened in the South in the 1960s. So, it is those images of Bull Connor and the water hoses that largely determine our perception of race relations, of what racial oppression is. I wondered if you could comment on that. This focus on the South seems to ignore all the race riots in the North and other movements not centered on Martin Luther King, Jr.

JA: I was aware of that as I was writing this. And, of course, one of the most notable and disconcerting and tragic aspects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life is that when he did move to the North in 1965 and until his death in 1968, he was overwhelmed by the structures of racial domination and focused especially on the construction of the racial underclass in the inner cities of the United States, the *northern* United States. He found these much more impenetrable and difficult to develop guilt over as compared to those structures of Jim Crow in the South. So, what to do with that?

My focus was on how Jim Crow structures were overcome. In that sense the North did not have Jim Crow. They had a different kind of racial structure. There were definitely strong racial feelings, and it's possible that some of the successes of the civil rights movements were because of northerners. The civil rights movement was *compatible* with racial feelings towards blacks. Most northerners did not have and don't have day-to-day experiences with black people that southerners did and often do today. So, it was possible that there was even an anti-southern antagonism that fueled northerners' identification with the black civil rights movements, and it is their willingness at some point eventually to come down against the white power structure in the South. That itself was probably facilitated by stereotypes about southern whites in the sense of the difference of northern whites, which was probably oversimplified.

We are aware today that the racial relations in the South are *not* different from the North and vice-versa and some people make the argument that they are better in some southern cities than in northern cities. There are so many challenges of ra-

cial relationships today; these problems of racialized perceptions and of the underclass have remained and have posed problems and challenges that are continuing. Society has dealt with racism in interesting ways in the last fifty years: progressive people talked about multiculturalism and tried to find ways of embracing racial difference rather than homogenizing the races. Even someone like Martin Luther King Jr. was looking towards a colorblind society. What's interesting is that difference is more important, more accepted, today as a normative guideline to racial relationships than colorblindness.

Yet, the problem with the racial underclass has not been effectively addressed. And one of the implications of my treatment would be that before any political- or economic- or state-centered solutions to the underclass would develop there would have to be a social movement from the black population that would generate identification with the suffering and degradation of blacks in the underclass. And that identification would have to be established between whites *and* blacks. Otherwise what we have today is the sense that the people in the underclass are polluted, that they don't deserve public attention, that the underclass is a place in which there is crime and drugs, that people bring this on themselves. This is reinforced by a number of developments like the internal stratification and residential mobility of working-, middle-, and upper-class blacks out of the underclass. So, I do think that this suggests ways of dealing with those problems but it does not articulate them once and for all.

dC: I am wondering if the collective memory of the civil rights movement is somehow preventing the current underclass or representatives of the underclass to imagine performances that would have some kind of efficacy.

JA: Some people would say that black leaders have not found a successful new ideology to cover this problem. They would further say that the notion of the African American as purely a victim, which is sometimes promoted by would-be leaders of lower-class African Americans, is no longer as effective because there have been forty years of affirmative action and there is a great deal of mobility and success at many levels of the class structure for African Americans.

There are no black social movements today; the only real movements are still in the realm of Black Nationalism or the Nation of Islam. There no longer seems to be any of the social forces that existed in the black community for such a long time. Eventually there will be, and I'm curious to see what kind of movements there will be.

dC: In the first chapter of your book you say that "only by understanding the boundary relations between civil and uncivil spheres can we convert civil society from a normative into a real concept that can be studied." And then you make the further claim that "only by understanding civil society in this realistic manner can we develop a critical normative theory about the incompleteness of civil society." I think this is an interesting juxtaposition of passages, one leaving the work ambiguous as to whether it is normative or descriptive or if it is both. Where would you put the emphasis? What would you like the reader to take from the book in terms of its emphasis on normativity or descriptive signs?

JA: I do not think that any social science is simply descriptive. Nor is it simply explanatory. All my work from the early 1980s on has developed a post-positivist theoretical position that shows that.

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