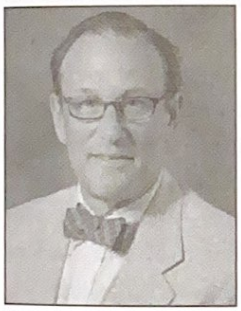
CHAPTER 13

Civil Society and Democracy

Jeffrey C. Alexander



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The Big Picture: Solidarity

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Parsons's functionalism came under attack. Historically, the sixties was a time of social upheaval that affected a good part of the modern world. The Cold War was heating up, the civil rights movement reached its peak, the war in Vietnam was escalating along with the antiwar movement, and student uprisings and urban riots regularly made headlines. Many sociologists felt that Parsons's theory didn't offer a good explanation of conflict and social change. Parsons actually did have a theory of social change and revolution, but his clearest explanation of that theory didn't come out until 1966, perhaps too late to stem the tide of rejection.

There was a shift, then, away from understanding society as a functional system and toward conflict theory. Inspired principally by the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber, this perspective seemed more appropriate for the times. There was also a shift away from culture in mainstream, American sociology. The problems of the sixties appeared to be better understood as structural rather than cultural issues. Culture was also downplayed because of its association with Parsons and social consensus, the idea that everyone in a collective functionally needs to share a single culture.

During this same period of time, another shift occurred in social theory and philosophy. This shift is often characterized as the "linguistic turn." The term itself simply means a move to language, and it implies an approach to understanding human beings that emphasizes language above everything else. Beginning perhaps in the 1980s, this shift has had profound effects on the social disciplines: The linguistic turn brought culture back to center stage in the social disciplines, and has made it possible to think about culture structurally. We saw part of this effect in Foucault's poststructuralist theory (Chapter 9); and we'll see more issues revolving around text, language, and discourse in the remaining chapters.

Jeffrey Alexander positions his theoretical work at the junction of these two shifts. First, Alexander argues that the shift away from functionalism was ill-advised. In critiquing the idea of social equilibrium, theorists have missed the benefits that functionalist analysis brings. According to Alexander (1985), functionalism, or more accurately *neo-functionalism*, "indicates nothing so precise as a set of concepts, a method, a model, or an ideology. It indicates, rather, a tradition" (p. 9). This tradition is a distinct perspective or way of looking at society. Specifically, the parts of any system are related and influence one another; personality, culture, and social systems are distinct yet embedded; and the tension among those systems along with pressures for differentiation are major forces for social change. Alexander's early work thus set out an agenda for a new kind of functional analysis, one based on the work of Parsons that downplays the idea of system equilibrium, focuses more clearly on the structure and independent effects of culture, and maintains analytical separation among socially embedded processes.

Alexander's later work adds a critical note to his cultural, neo-functionalist approach. While blending conflict and functional theories is rare, Alexander is not the first to suggest such a move. The best known and most influential of such theorists in the United States was Lewis Coser. Coser's approach is based on the insight that since conflict is normal and universal, it must have functional effects: It must work to integrate society. Coser (1956) argued that conflict internal to the group could serve to release pent-up hostilities, create norms regulating conflict, and develop clear lines of authority and jurisdiction. Further, conflict that is directed at the group from an external source can create stronger group boundaries, higher social solidarity, and more efficient use of power and authority. Alexander's blending is somewhat different and seems to draw more from critical than conflict theories. Like many from the Durkheim–Parsons school, Alexander argues that society is held together by broad cultural ideas and values. Yet Alexander also recognizes that the collective culture in contemporary society is a sphere of conflict where the constant tension between universal and particular interests makes solidarity and democratic justice tenuous.

Alexander's main concerns are social integration and solidarity. The problem of integration has been a focus since the dawn of modernity. One of the most important

defining characteristics of modern society is structural diversity. Previously, everything that a social group needed was provided through just a handful of organizational principles. For example, the way work used to be organized was usually around the home and family. In feudalism, the manor was the economic and political center as well as the family home. Craftwork in towns also revolved around the home and family, with the place of business either in the same building as the home or close to it. In comparison, modern society is structurally diversified, with various social institutions working to take care of different social needs and wants. These different institutions create a number of status positions, roles, norms, and values, and generally speaking, these don't overlap. Such differentiation creates a distinctly modern problem of integration—these differences lay in back of such typologies as Tönnies' *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* and Durkheim's organic and mechanical solidarity. However, most theories of modernization simply assume that culture becomes more generalized and thus provides the basis for solidarity and integration, without explaining precisely how it happens. It is this issue that Alexander (2006) wants to open up for inquiry: "I have insisted . . . that the construction of a wider and more inclusive sphere of solidarity must be studied in itself" (p. 193). He draws on critical and functionalist approaches to show us a cultural field in process, one filled with representations of both the collective and the individual, one where beliefs in universal morals are in tension with group-specific claims, a space where solidarity and integration are constant achievements and civil society is a project. Alexander shows us the kind of solidarity and integration necessary in a diversified, democratic society.

THEORIST'S DIGEST

Brief Biography

Jeffrey C. Alexander received his PhD in 1978 from University of California, Berkeley. He was professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1976–2001, where he is now professor emeritus. In 2001, Alexander took a professorship at Yale University and is currently the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology there, as well as codirector of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology. Alexander has also held numerous visiting appointments, including at the University of London, the London School of Economics, Konstanz University in Germany, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Among his more important works are *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory Since World War Two, Action and Its Environments: Towards a New Synthesis, Structure and Meaning: Relinking Classical Sociology, Neofunctionalism and After, The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology,* and *The Civil Sphere.*

Central Sociological Questions

Alexander is focused on two related questions. The first is purely theoretical: What effect does culture have on society? This issue is a classic one in sociology and concerns the independent

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effects of culture. Many, if not most, sociologists see social structures as determining or strongly influencing human action. This structural approach usually sees culture as simply reinforcing structures and having very little impact on human action or social change. Alexander argues differently: Culture itself is a structure that is used by people to decide how to act, and that creates the power to bring about social change intentionally through such decisions. The structure of culture itself prompts and guides action. Alexander's second question is more substantial: How can complex and diverse societies hold together and act in concert? More specifically, how do civil society and power work in contemporary society?

Simply Stated

Civil society is a cultural sphere that creates the solidarity necessary for democracy. Solidarity exists in our feelings toward people—how those feelings are created, defined, and extended toward others marks the limit of society's actual democracy and the good life. Solidarity and thus civil society are created out of the tension that exists between universalism and particularism. The universal values of the civil sphere are transcendent and represent a secular faith, the ideals toward which we strive. Non-civil spheres, such as race, gender, class, and religion, generate particularistic interests that result in hierarchical differences. Civil society exists when these two segments clash, most notably through social movements.

In the sense just described, civil society itself doesn't exist in any concrete way. It's a symbolic, cultural world that emerges out of the tensions between the universals of the civil sphere and the particular interests generated by non-civil spheres. However, the civil sphere is bounded by communicative and regulative institutions that give civil society a concrete base. Communicative institutions work through influence and persuasion to impact public opinion. Regulative institutions, on the other hand, give concrete expression to the civil sphere through actual power, exercised through voting and party competition, office, and law.

Key Ideas

Civil sphere, civil society, non-civil spheres, justice solidarity, democracy, tradition of Thrasymachus, particularism–universalism, discourse, binary codes, communicative institutions, regulative institutions, social and civil power, essentialism, civil repair, time, space, function, social movements, pathways to incorporation, neo-functionalism, strong program in cultural sociology

Concepts and Theory: The New Civil Sphere

As I asserted in the beginning of this section of the book, civil society was from its inception considered a necessary ingredient for democracy, with democracy being the modern political form par excellence. Civil society was first seen as voluntary associations that were guaranteed by certain constitutional rights, such as freedom

of assembly. Civil society also included a number of institutions outside the state, such as the "capitalist market and its institutions . . . voluntary religion . . . and virtually every form of cooperative social relationship that created bonds of trust" (Alexander, 2006, p. 24). Capitalism in particular was seen to be the source of self-discipline and social responsibility—attitudes important for democracy—and a decisive move away from the self-righteous elitism of aristocracy. Alexander calls this eighteenth century model *Civil Society I*. It lasted only until Marx began publishing.

Marx called attention to the underbelly of this modern economic system. As capitalism grew and became more powerful, the instrumental and exploitive aspects became clear. The robber barons ruled, and the workers were manipulated and subjected to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions that often equated to little more than indentured servitude. Further, capitalism became known for creating market egoism and commodity fetishism. Workers weren't simply exploited and alienated; the very consciousness needed for democratic participation was soiled by capitalism. As a result of the critiques of Marx and others, the fate of democracy was inextricably bound up with capitalism. For those on the political left, capitalism became the institution from which all wrong flowed. Nothing good could come out of capitalism, and only by capitalism's destruction, or at least control, could civil society again flourish. Capitalism also became the central issue for democracy by those on the political right. Defining human nature as intrinsically selfish, free market capitalism was seen as the path to the greatest social good—selfishness creates competition, which in turn supercharges humanity's progress. In addition, for those on the right, capitalism was believed to naturally lead to democracy. Introducing capitalism into a social system would invariably lead to democratic government. These discourses from the second age of civil society (*Civil Society II*) continue to inform contemporary debates, as do the ideals of the first.

In recent decades, renewed theoretical and political concerns for civil society have surfaced. Alexander argues, however, that this new thrust has so far only attempted to revive previous concepts of civil society. There is, however, a problem with these attempts at revival. The ideas of the Enlightenment that initially informed civil society can only hold for the type of social system that existed at that time, at the beginning of modernity and democracy. As Durkheim, Parsons, and others have shown us, societies in general tend to change as a result of structural differentiation, segmentation, and specialization, and these tendencies are exaggerated in the modernity of the twenty-first century. Thus, modern societies are much more complex, and the people more diverse and fragmented than during the first age of civil society. We need, then, a different understanding of civil society, one that is more dynamic and complex than the dominant ideas of early modernity.

Alexander (2006) is also clear that capitalism is no longer determinative, if it ever was: "To identify civil society with capitalism . . . is to degrade its universalizing moral implications and the capacity for criticism and repair" (p. 33). Capitalism is just one of many institutional spheres that may contribute one way or another to the workings of civil society. No social sphere, Alexander tells us, "not even the economic, should be conceived in anti-normative terms, as governed only by interest and egoism" (p. 33). The boundaries between civil and non-civil spheres aren't clear or stable enough to make such a claim. As we'll see, Alexander argues that civil

society isn't an obdurate entity; it's a project, not a thing that can be destroyed as such. Further, the issues raised by Marx and others—class conflict, hierarchy, efficiency, egoism, and the rest—are occasions for civil society to express itself. They aren't random; "they are systematic to every society that opens up a civil sphere, and they make justice a possibility" (p. 34).

Defining the Civil Sphere

Alexander uses both the phrases "civil society" and "civil sphere." Although it's not quite this clear, we can think of civil society as an effect of the civil sphere. The word *society* implies social networks of people or systems of structures. While culture is part of this, it isn't given the central place that Alexander wants. As he says, "we need a theory . . . that is less myopically centered on social structure and power distribution, and more responsive to the ideas that people have in their heads and to what Tocqueville called the habits of the heart" (Alexander, 2006, p. 43). The *civil sphere*, then, is "a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time" (p. 4). The civil sphere is defined by a specific type of culture that overlaps and includes some portion of those social structures, as well as organizations, networks of people, and interactions.

This cultural field of meanings and collective feelings form a "secular faith," and thus a moral or ethical sphere. The strongest feeling in the public sphere is *social solidarity*. In Durkheim's use of the concept, there are three elements: the subjective sense of individuals that they are part of the whole, the actual constraint of individual desires for the good of the collective, and the coordination of individuals and social units. These three elements can vary independently, which creates higher or lower social solidarity in a group. Alexander focuses on one specific aspect of solidarity: the feeling of connectedness to other members in a community. Yet the solidarity of the civil sphere isn't like that of particularized groups. For example, a woman may feel very connected to members of her sorority, but that isn't the solidarity of democracy. The feeling of connectedness that Alexander (2006) is referring to "transcends particular commitments, narrow loyalties, and sectional interests" (p. 43), such as sororities, teams, family, and even race and gender. The sense of connectedness in back of social solidarity is a *universal commitment to diversity*, based not so much on group identity as it is on mutual identification with a set of democratic ethics, which in turn bring democratic integration. Thus, democracy demands faith. It's a belief system that transcends individuals and particularized groups. Justice demands that there be a higher standard that pulls us upward. Without this faith, and the solidarity it brings, civil society and democracy are impossible.

Yet, look at the definition of civil sphere that Alexander gives in the quote above. Notice that Alexander not only talks about integration, but in the same breath he says that the civil sphere creates the capacity for *social criticism*. Contemporary democracy is explicitly based on tensions that were only implicit in the beginning of civil society, such as "all men are created equal." In other words, most people, back when those words were written, probably didn't experience tension; most thought they were doing a good job of treating all men equal. However, the tension

existed within the structure of the statement itself, and those cultural tensions in the long run created inconsistencies in cultural values and produced a sense of alienation among those excluded. Notice that the culture itself is influencing the types of tensions we experience, the discussions we engage in, and thus the progress that democracy makes. This is the structural element of culture.

Alexander argues that the democratic culture of the civil sphere is formed through *binary structures of purity and impurity*. These structures form and pattern the ideas, values, and discourses that democracy holds dear. Binary structures are found on three levels: motives, social relations, and institutions, which are then used to define pure and impure, in- and out-group members, and civil and uncivil people. For example, the civil sphere includes people who are active and autonomous (purity) and excludes those who are passive and dependent (impurity). The kinds of relationships between people in the civil sphere are open (purity) rather than secretive (impurity), trusting and not suspicious, critical rather than deferential, and truthful instead of deceitful. Finally, civil institutions are rule regulated (purity), while anti-civil institutions are arbitrary (impurity); civil institutions are built upon law, while anti-civil upon power; and civil institutions are equal, while anti-civil are hierarchical. Notice that these pairs (binary) are the values upon which an open democracy is founded. I've listed the binary codes in Table 13.1.

Most of us today are used to hearing about binary codes in reference to computers. Computer languages are based on binary codes of on–off (1/0). These binaries then form character streams, like 11001011. However, the idea of binary codes is also found in various disciplines that study culture and language. Here, the idea is that any single idea is actually a binary. For example, the idea of "good" doesn't exist, nor can

Table 13.1 Binary Codes of the Civil Sphere

Motives		*Relationships*		*Institutions*	
Civil	*Anti-civil*	*Civil*	*Anti-civil*	*Civil*	*Anti-civil*
Active	Passive	Open	Secretive	Rule-regulated	Arbitrary
Autonomous	Dependent	Trusting	Suspicious	Law	Power
Rational	Irrational	Critical	Deferential	Equality	Hierarchy
Reasonable	Hysterical	Honorable	Self-interested	Inclusive	Exclusive
Calm	Excitable	Altruistic	Greedy	Impersonal	Personal
Self-controlled	Wild/ passionate	Truthful	Deceitful	Contracts	Bonds of loyalty
Realistic	Distorted	Straightforward	Calculating	Groups	Factions
Sane	Mad	Deliberative	Conspiratorial	Office	Personality

it ever be understood, apart from bad. These binaries are set in tension with one another, to the point that they are often mutually exclusive. Durkheim's binary of sacred and profane is an example. They can't coexist; one always destroys the other. We can see an example of this in the Bible. The children of Israel were moving the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets of stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments. The Ark was moved by placing two wooden poles on either side so no one would have to touch it. At one point, the people carrying the Ark lost their balance. In order to prevent the Ark from hitting the ground, one of the priests reached up and righted it. God struck him dead. The profane had to be removed so the Ark could remain sacred.

The binary codes of the civil sphere work in a similar manner: They are mutually exclusive. This implies two things. First, tension is inherent in the codes. Anytime sociologists theorize about social change, they are confronted with the problem of causal force: What pushes for or creates change? Here, the tension inherent in the code provides energy for change. In an analogous way, this is like Marx's dialecticism. Marx argued that there are structural elements in capitalism that push for change, eventually destroying the economic system. In Alexander's theory, it's the binary oppositions that give structure to the democratic discourses that push for change. For example, inclusion always brings exclusion: "The discourse of repression is inherent in the discourse of liberty" (Alexander, 2006, p. 67). Laws that grant certain civil rights, like the right to marry, simultaneously deny them to others. Laws of citizenship do the same thing: Some people are included while others are excluded. The codes of democracy are inherently conflictual, and that continually pushes for change.

The second thing the binary nature of the codes implies is *essentialism*. Because of the binary, social things that are categorized using the system seem essential. If something is deemed good, we see it as *essentially* good, in and of itself. For us to say anything is good, that it exists as good, we blind ourselves to the fact that we are constructing it as good. It appears as if it is *the essence of the thing itself* that makes it good, not our categorization of it. Acknowledging that good and bad are socially constructed "would relativize reality, creating an uncertainty that could undermine not only the cultural core but also the institutional boundaries and solidarity of civil society itself" (Alexander, 2006, p. 63).

These binary codes are used to create discourses of democracy. A **discourse** is a way of talking about something, but it is much more. Discourses set the boundaries of what is possible and impossible. Remember Foucault's (Chapter 9) example of the Chinese encyclopedia of animals. What struck him was the limitation of his own thinking: "the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. xv). Discourses also set hierarchical, subjectivizing positions. For example, the current discourse of nations tends to categorize them as developed, developing, and underdeveloped. This discourse is based on industrial capitalist standards and evaluates nations according to that value system. Being "underdeveloped" is stigmatizing in this discourse.

More specific to civil society, the American *anti-civil* discourse of race creates a hierarchy based on skin color and heritage. At its worst, the anti-civil discourse

essentialized blacks as less than human: The first work of this discourse was to reduce the slave to "'chattel' in the eye of the law—placed beyond the circle of human brotherhood—cut off from his kind" (Douglass, 1850/2009a, p. 216). This denigration of human nature in the discourse of race continues to have subjective effects. According to Cornel West (2001), "black existential *angst* derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs" (p. 27). The *civil* discourse of race is also framed in universal, essentializing terms. In constructing the first civil discourse of race in the United States, Frederick Douglass (1857/2009b) proclaimed that equality is guaranteed to blacks because the Declaration of Independence is about "'We, the people'—not we, the white people—not we, the citizens . . . not we, the privileged class, and excluding all other classes . . . but we the people—the men and women, the *human* inhabitants of the United States" (p. 257, emphasis added).

There's an important implication here: Solidarity is both transcendent and particularist, connecting us to others by creating structured feelings of "being part of something larger than ourselves," while at the same time it respects "our individual personalities" (Alexander, 2006, p. 13). It is a "socially established consciousness" (p. 54) that "combines collective with individual obligations" (p. 38). The binary codes that produce solidarity create discourses that essentialize both in- and out-group members *simultaneously*: "The discourse of repression is inherent in the discourse of liberty" (p. 67). Thus, solidarity and all that comes with it—civil society, justice, democracy—isn't something that can objectively exist: It's an ongoing achievement. However, it isn't the limitations of human nature nor is it the particularistic egoism produced by non-civil spheres that prevents us from achieving full democracy and social justice. The things that we have perhaps seen as failures—the existence of groups excluded from full justice—are, in fact, the result of "processes internal to the social system itself" (p. 411). The binary codes upon which solidarity is based are irresolvable and available to civil and non-civil groups alike. The outrage we feel at injustice is the cost of democracy: "We would not be so indignant about these contradictions if we were not so fiercely committed to the ideal of a broadly solidaristic humanity, to brotherhood and sisterhood. These contradictions, in other words, are the price of civil society" (p. 9).

Concepts and Theory: Civil Institutions

As we're beginning to see, civil society does not exist *as such*. It's a project that is better understood as sets of practices and boundary relations. One of the better insights that functionalism gives us concerns system boundaries. In order for anything to exist, there must be a point at which it begins and everything else stops. A handy example is your body. The skin of the body forms a boundary that marks the place where you begin and everything else ends. The insight that functional analysis gives us is that the boundary is permeable, and it negotiates relations between internal and external systems. Your skin, for example, senses external temperature and objects, and then communicates this information to internal

systems. Your body also has other boundary-negotiating structures, like your mouth and nose, which maintain a functional relationship between your biological system and everything else. There's a way in which everything that exists does so only because of its boundaries. This is particularly the case for the civil sphere.

The civil sphere is bounded by civil institutions. These institutions form boundary relations with all non-civil spheres, such as family, religion, and the economy, all of which create particularized interests. Civil institutions, then, are those that promote universalistic values and are most closely associated with promoting democracy. They create norms, goals, rewards, and sanctions; they also make exchanges, create demands, and so forth. Civil institutions express and implement the symbolic, binary codes found in the structure of democratic culture by persuasion and enforcement, specifically through communicative (persuasion) and regulative (enforcement) institutions.

Communicative Institutions

If asked, many people today would probably define *democracy* as a set of institutions and laws that guarantee people the right to vote. Wikipedia, for example, defines democracy as "an egalitarian form of government in which all the citizens of a nation together determine public policy." Merriam-Webster (2002) similarly defines democracy as "a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly." This way of understanding democracy doesn't just appear in popular culture. Charles Tilly (2007), a well-known contemporary sociologist, defines democracy as "a certain class of relations between states and citizens" (p. 12).

However, there is a danger in restricting our definition of democracy to specific institutions and laws. This is not to say that the structures guaranteeing voting rights and curtailing egoistic pursuits aren't important; they are vitally so. But when our understanding of democracy is focused simply on these formal arrangements, then it is "the distribution of power and force, the balance of material resources, that is important" (Alexander, 2006, p. 39). Here, Alexander argues, we are left with the tradition of Thrasymachus, a character in Plato's *Republic*. In a discussion about justice, Thrasymachus posited that "justice" is always defined by those in power and has no reference to any higher system of values. Alexander is arguing that if we only see democracy as a set of institutions and laws, then democracy is in danger because the elite class can usually gain control of those social structures. Thrasymachus's view of justice then becomes reality—might makes right. Alexander asserts that there *must be something more to democracy* than legal safeguards and institutions. Democracies need "social structures that allow egoism to be pursued but that make the aggregation of egoism impossible" (p. 42), but democracies also need more than this. Drawing on John Dewey, Alexander tells us that democracy is more than laws, institutions, and organizations. It is "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 37). It's a consciousness, a way of existing in the world that specifically seeks out social and cultural diversity, and diversity of "stimulation . . . means challenge to thought" (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 71). Democracy is as much based on

"solidarity and commonality" as it is on difference and power struggles (p. 43). It is in the communicative institutions where we find sources for solidarity.

Communicative institutions are made up of organizations and associations that create and circulate cultural meanings, as well as influence our thoughts and feelings about the civil sphere. These institutions obviously communicate, but they particularly translate the abstract ideals found in the binary codes through specific events and people. The mass media—including television, movies, books, news services, and so on—and public opinion polls are two particularly significant parts of communicative institutions. According to Alexander (2006), the mass media presents two kinds of narratives: fictional and factual. The importance of fictional mass media is that it has greater cathartic impact. Fictional media can weave stories of heroism, sacrifice, and valor using the binary codes of democratic culture, and we respond with tears, laughter, pride, heart-felt concern, and belief. We're lifted up and energized by these stories. We are also energized against stories or characters that exemplify the impure side of the binary. Fictional media in particular structure our feelings around social justice issues; they create the "intuitive criteria . . . that shape behavior in more organized and formal domains" (p. 70).

Factual media are more immediately influential, as they report such things as the news and, most importantly, public opinion. The reporting is presented as if it were factual. Every news story has an "ontology of realism" about it—the "news presents itself as homologous with the real world" (Alexander, 2006, p. 80). Factual media frequently draw on the binary codes to impute motives, define relationships, and explain the institutions of the "real world." They thus create the chronic tensions between the universal values of the civil sphere and the powers and authorities outside. What we see when we watch the morning news, read a newspaper, or listen to public radio is a collage, a constructed picture of *everything that matters* in the world we confront. It's not only the news we perceive; the news itself orders our world. Something matters precisely because it *appears as news*. The way in which something matters, or the value we give it, is also strongly informed by factual media as they draw on the binary codes. A significant part of this picture making is the reporting of public opinion polls.

The current notion of public opinion is based on a kind of imagined community. During the initial stage of civil society, it would have been more accurate to speak of a concrete, rather than imaginary, public. The existence of this real public is one of the reasons why public assembly is constitutionally guaranteed. In the early phases of modern democracy, people gathered in voluntary associations and public houses to share information and argue about ideas. These face-to-face encounters strongly informed the dominant ideas. A clear example from that time is Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), one of our first sociologists. James Collier (1904) tells us that Spencer "at no time received systematic instruction in any branch of science. What is more surprising, it may be doubted if he ever read a book on science from end to end" (p. 206). Where, then, did Spencer get his ideas and facts? According to Collier,

> He *picked up* most of his facts. Spending a good part of every afternoon at the Athenaeum Club he ran through most of the periodicals . . . [and] he

> habitually met with all the leading savants, many of whom were his intimates. From these, by a happy mixture of suggestion and questioning, he extracted all that they knew. (pp. 208–209)

Today, however, the "public" doesn't exist in any concrete way; it isn't based on face-to-face communion between people: "It now assumes a symbolic rather than concrete form" (Alexander, 2006, p. 72). Yet the significance of the public in the lives of citizens isn't lessened because of its symbolic nature. Public opinion polls matter; they not only matter in terms of affecting politicians' actions, but they also matter to us personally. We see ourselves in the public: It's an imagined community in which we exist. It's the place where the public is seen and heard, and we are part of that public. It is this public that different conflict groups want to influence, because it is through the public that their agendas, formed around binary cultural structures, are given voice. Moreover, because it is an opinion, it concerns how the public feels about a given topic. Public opinion, then, inserts itself "into social subjectivity as a structure of feeling. . . . Public opinion is the sea within which we swim, the structure that gives us the feeling of democratic life" (Alexander, 2006, pp. 72, 75).

Many critical commentators, Habermas among them, have argued that the commodification of media has reduced them to trivialized images designed solely to gather an audience rather than inform a public. Alexander sees this critique as another example of the ideological rejection of all things capitalist. First, the commercialization of media actually encouraged diversity. Once the media was released from patronage, and could thus maintain their own existence, they were freed from ideological pressures from the elite and could respond to the diverse demands of a pluralistic public. Second, whether or not the media produces homogeneous, commodified images devoid of any democratic content depends on some rather common social factors, principally the differentiation of mass media organizations. This differentiation depends on the existence of impersonal markets and professionalization. We can think of media markets varying along a continuum from impersonal, negotiated exchanges between buyers and sellers to markets dominated by personal and client relationships. The more the market is driven by rational exchanges rather than patronage, the greater the diversity and ideological control. In addition, professionalized ethics and self-regulation "allow producers, writers, directors, and reporters more freedom to offer flexible interpretations responsive to shifting events . . . rather than on more dogmatic interpretations that merely authenticate loyalties to particular groups" (Alexander, 2006, p. 83).

There is one other element of communicative institutions: *civil associations*. Alexander is quick to make the distinction between the voluntary associations that are generally associated with civil society and these civil associations. Voluntary associations, of the type Tocqueville is usually associated with, are groups that are organized on a voluntary basis to achieve some collective end. A group organized to raise money for the local library is a good example. The democratic value in voluntary organizations is that they give people practice at working together, negotiating conflicts and interests, and coming to collective consensus. Civil associations, on the other hand, come together to influence public opinion about a specific issue they intend to communicate. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) is a good example. Such groups are part of the communicative institutions that border and give life to civil society because they can make their case only to the degree that they use the universals found in the binary code.

Regulative Institutions

Where communicative institutions work to persuade people toward democracy and social justice, regulative institutions guard democratic processes through power. *Regulative institutions* are made up of two broad arenas: civil power and law. Generally speaking, power in society is linked to having control over collecting taxes, creating and controlling army and police forces, and building the administrative structure of society. In times past, aristocrats controlled this state power. Aristocratic power was direct in the sense that nothing stood between individuals and governmental control. The king's word was law, pure and simple. Modern, democratic society, however, is founded on belief in natural rights, which are then constitutionally guaranteed. These rights stand between individuals and governmental control. In a very real way, it's the existence of these rights that created civil society.

The control of civil society is constantly at stake in contemporary, highly diversified societies. To talk about this issue, Alexander (2006) makes the distinction between social and civil power. *Social power* is power that is determined by particularized interests generated in non-civil spheres, such as class and religion. To the degree that the elite from any particularized group control society, "democracy doesn't exist" (p. 109). In a democracy, control of society needs to be based more in civil rather than social power. *Civil power* exists when the people "speak" through both communicative and regulative institutions. Civil power thus negatively varies by the degree of elite control and positively varies by the level of differentiated inclusion in the political process. In other words, the greater the level of elite institutional control (social power), the less will be the level of democratic civil society. On the other hand, the greater the inclusion of diverse groups (like race, gender, religion, and so forth), the greater will be the level of democratic society. The primary function of regulative institutions is thus to restrict elite control and to guarantee inclusion. There are four specific ways these institutions work: voting, political parties, office, and law.

The most basic way civil power is promoted is through the *right to vote*. The more diverse the voting population, the more democratic will be civil society and the more likely it is to promote social justice. Of course, the battles over the kinds of people who are given the right to vote have defined a good deal of the history of democracy: The fight for universal suffrage was defined by the universals found in binary codes and thus depended upon communicative institutions. But the right to vote itself only opens up the possibility of civil power. The purpose of voting is to break up the direct "translation of social into political power" (Alexander, 2006, p. 114). Elites, however, attempt to control that translation. One of the regulatory safeguards against such control is party politics.

While we each vote for an individual, a political party backs each candidate. *Political party* platforms are constructed through debate and, more importantly, must be presented to the public in terms defined by the binary codes. Political campaigns are characterized by essentialist claims of purity and impurity; thus, the

other party and candidates are characterized as polluting. Many people think that this type of partisan politics is detrimental to civil society; accordingly, the ideal is to get rid of us/them political discourses. Like Habermas, such people argue that democratic discourse ought to be characterized by reason, rational deliberation, and pragmatic consensus. There are two problems with this understanding. First, the history of civil society doesn't live up to this model of consensus building: "Boundary relations with noncivil spheres have always been unsettled, civil discourse has always been deeply dichotomized" (Alexander, 2006, p. 125). Thus, when the idea of "rational deliberation" does appear, it has symbolic rather than actual value. In other words, to sway others, politicians and parties claim that their motives are reasonable and rational (see Table 13.1). Contrary to Habermas, Alexander sees these claims as *performative acts* rather than actual speech acts.

The second problem with this idea of getting rid of polarized conflict is that meaning is created through the basic process of inclusion and exclusion. That's how all categories work; one thing can only have meaning if it's not the other. A simple example is the guitar. The meaning of "guitar" requires exclusionary work: A guitar is not a violin, not a cello, not a tuba, and so on. To define something, to give it meaning, we draw boundaries or lines around it: "[I]t is their boundaries that allow us to perceive 'things' at all" (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 2). This is all the more true when we are constructing moralistic meanings, which is what democracy is based upon. Meanings that are important require the categories to be binary and the exclusions to be essentialized. Thus, "ideological polarization is normal; it emerges from the basic meaning-making structures of civil life" (Alexander, 2006, p. 129).

However, this essentialized antagonism must be balanced with common appeals to the universal elements of democratic solidarity. Each party, winners and losers both, must in the end express support of the other. Losers promise to support the winners' now democratically legitimated power, and winners give thanks and pledge to work with the other party in the democratic process. This, again, is one of those points where the balance between "social criticism and democratic integration" must be maintained. Legitimate criticism and party politics can only take place within democratic solidarity. "Antagonism at one level, in other words, can be interpreted as civility at another" (Alexander, 2006, p. 130).

Once an election is won, the politician obtains power, but even here civil society works to limit and direct that power. Party politics still has influence, as do communicative institutions. More directly, political power is circumscribed by the regulation of office. *Office* is a feature of bureaucratic management and as such carries universal understandings of how organizational authority ought to be managed and implemented. Look again at Table 13.1, and you'll see a number of elements consistent with Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy. The most obvious binary code here is "office vs. personality." Authority in a bureaucracy adheres to the office, not the person. The office of state governor (or professor), for instance, has clearly delineated authority no matter who holds the office. Other elements of the binary codes are clearly part of office as well. Actions of an officer are to be guided by written rules and not arbitrary personal likes and dislikes. All people are to be treated equally without preference to social group. Office, then, "institutionalizes a universalistic understanding of organizational authority" (Alexander, 2006, p. 133). Thus, not only

are there explicit rules and regulations, but office also imposes moral or normative obligations on the incumbent to use power in specific ways. When civil society is strong, these expectations are expressed ritually, as in taking the oath of office. When the civil sphere has autonomy from the state, communicative institutions exercise surveillance of office and have at their disposal the binary codes of impurity.

The final regulative sphere is law. *Law* is multifaceted and has various functions in society, such as regulating dangerous behaviors and interorganizational relations. Law also has democratic functions. Unlike voting, party, and office, the civil sphere function of law is more clearly regulative than communicative, generally because law can impose legitimate sanctions (punishment). Yet even here there is communicative value for solidarity. In general, law translates the binary codes of the civil sphere and connects them in a real way with particularist and individual actions. The motives (why we do things) in the civil sphere are to be rational (purity), not irrational (impurity), and the relationships and institutions deliberative, not conspiratorial; rule regulated, not arbitrary; and impersonal, not personal. Thus, law isn't simply an external control that forces people to conform, but rather, it is seen as "an expression of their innate rationality, mediating between truth and mundane events" (Alexander, 2006, p. 60). Law, then, has moral qualities and effects.

Following Durkheim, Alexander (2006) argues that in "complex and differentiated societies, civil solidarity is sustained by legal rules that abstract away from particular endowments, traditions, and circumstances" (p. 172). Law is perhaps the clearest, most powerful civil space for creating social solidarity in contemporary society. Law not only expresses the moral, ethical foundation of society, but law also puts that foundation into practice in ritualized settings, such as "the arrest" and "the courtroom." The public is brought into this democratic drama through daily news reports. The news stories provide the public with continual opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to and belief in the moral code. At the same time, law is the clearest expression and guarantee of individuality. The most basic assumption of all forms of law is that the modern individual can be held responsible for his or her actions because it's assumed "that actors are in full possession of such civil faculties as rationality, sanity, and self-control" (p. 179). In no other arena is the reasoning power and free agency of the individual given such affirmation and freedom.

The basis of all democratic law is constitutional law. Constitutions are laws about laws; they determine the parameters within which law must operate in order to maintain solidarity. Constitutions are specifically concerned with restricting arbitrary actions by the state and instituting due process. As such, constitutional law is "particularly concerned with articulating the suspicions about others that mark the dark side of civil discourse" (Alexander, 2006, p. 165). Contract law is usually understood in purely instrumental-rational terms, with little if any relationship to civil society. Yet contract law, like constitutional law, enforces due process and defines such civil attributes as fairness, justice, negotiation, and reciprocity. Contracts thus are a significant mechanism for inserting the civil into the economic sphere.

Law also has an antidemocratic side that has two faces. The most blatant face is shown when the elite use money, power, and other resources to evade or bend the law to their own ends. This is a case where social power trumps civil power. The second face is less obvious and more insidious. This side evades civil society

by internal attribution. As we've seen time and again, social and political systems assume a certain kind of person—these systems always make internal attributions. This antidemocratic face of the law "sees subjects of regulation as less than fully human" (p. 186), thus excluding them from civil society. Clear examples are Western colonialism, American racism, and patriarchy. Oppression of women and people of color was—and in some cases still is—legitimated by visualizing them as incapable of reason.

Underneath this oppression is something more basic, something that continues to threaten the civil sphere. Alexander argues that in back of denying full humanity to another is lack of empathy. Merriam-Webster defines *empathy* (n.d.) as the "projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it." To empathize, then, is to see another's personal experiences as the same as your own. It is to say, "You and I share the same experiences, ideas, and emotions. I see me in you." The *lack* of empathy in the absolute sense is the basis of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. This is what Kai Erikson (1996) calls *social speciation:* "the process by which one people manages to neutralize the humanity of another" (p. 55). However, the problem of empathy for civil society doesn't end with social speciation. Both law making and law interpreting—the work of legislators and judges—are based on empathy, not only in the absolute sense, as with speciation, but also in the mundane sense of creating and interpreting civil law. If judges and legislators come from elite classes, then "their ability to apply principles of reciprocity may be undermined by their inability to experience solidarity with members of the lower class" (Alexander, 2006, p. 187). When this inability becomes typical, then for subjugated groups "there is no civil society . . . and the legal code seems to represent merely the external, coercive power of class, caste, or state" (p. 189).

Concepts and Theory: Civil Society Outcomes

One of the most important insights Alexander gives us about civil society is that it is based on contradictions and conflicts. It's actually the contradictions that open up the possibility of social justice. As we've seen, the foundation of democracy and the civil sphere is the binary codes. These codes don't simply imply conflict; they create conflict and contradiction by the manner in which they exist. Good is intrinsically and forever tied up with bad. Something can be rational only if it's possible to be irrational; equality can only be understood in terms of the leveling of hierarchy. To include is to simultaneously exclude. An identifiable group can only exist if it sets up boundaries that exclude others. To some of us, this may sound counterintuitive: Democracy accepts all people, no matter what their race, religion, gender, and so on. In thinking this way, we are right in so far as it pertains to the universal democratic principles and our belief in them. It's that belief that creates the solidarity necessary to achieve social justice. However, belief and democratic solidarity are only part of the process; they specifically belong to civil repair. Civil repair occurs after civil conflict, as we saw earlier with political parties.

Civil Repair and Social Movements

Besides the binary codes and the universal-particularist duality, there are three other sources of contradiction in civil society: space, time, and function. The discourse of modern democracy is always understood as relative to a territorial *space.* While there are imagined communities and virtual relationships, all actual societies exist in a place—it's the place that actualizes or makes concrete the idea we have of ourselves as a people, as a society. Place is fundamental to the process of inclusion and exclusion, the exercise of law, and the communication of culture. There are identifiable borders that mark where the law of France ends and the law of Spain begins. The rights that accrue to American citizens are clearly marked by territory. Nations, democratic and otherwise, exist in a place. This attachment to place creates *uncivilizing pressures.* Place becomes essentialized and the focus of ritual sacrifice: "This explains why, throughout the history of civil societies, war has been a sacred obligation; to wage war against members of other territories has been simultaneously a national and a civilizing task" (Alexander, 2006, p. 197).

Time works to essentialize civil society as well. Central to every democracy is a founding myth. We see this succinctly captured for the United States in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The founding myths become the focus of public ritual (like Independence Day) and convey a sense of essential differences in both the founding of a nation and its founders. Citizens tend to see something special, something transcendent, about the founders. They have come to represent pure categories of civil society—representative characters in our secular faith. The myths are employed to legitimate political stances in primordial ways, much like the practices of the early Christians in the Church. They convey a sense of "from the beginning it was thus." Because of their power to legitimate, the historical narratives are "natural" sites of civil strife.

Functional spheres within a social system also provide uncivilizing pressures. One of the defining characteristics of modern society is structural differentiation. Prior to modernity, social needs were met through a handful of institutions that overlapped with one another. Institutional overlap meant that status positions, norms, and values tended to be homogeneous and widespread in traditional society. On the other hand, modern social organization is characterized by intentional and functional differentiation. Differentiated structures mean that status positions, roles, norms, and values are institutionally distinct and not shared in common. These different arrays of social features compete with the solidarity of the civil sphere, and, as Alexander (2006) says, "These goods themselves possess a distinctive charisma" (p. 204). The values and goods of the noncivil spheres—such as money (economy), power (polity), and grace (religion)—are attractive. Further, they insert themselves into the very discourse of civil society: Money can be seen as representing moral goodness, while poverty may be viewed as the result of laziness, a decidedly anti-civil trait.

Alexander's point is that uncivilizing pressures are natural to civil society. These are, in fact, potential points of articulation, where the anti-civil inequalities provide the motivations and necessary culture and people to move democracy and social

justice forward. To the degree that "the civil sphere exercises an independent force," people can be seen as having "dual memberships" (Alexander, 2006, p. 207), one foot in an anti-civil hierarchy and the other in the "universalizing solidarity that civil society implies" (p. 208). This is the only way that something like poverty becomes a "social" issue rather than an economic one. Appeals are made by or on behalf of those groups of individuals who fall on the lower end of one of these hierarchies, whether religious, economic, family, and so on. Appeals are based on the binary codes and expressed through communicative institutions; civil associations are created, and social movements are born. These social movements are movements of civil repair, times when democracy is infused with a sense of solidarity, an orientation "not only to the here and now but to the ideal, to the transcendent, to what [people] hope will be everlasting" (p. 3). Many social movements fail, but enough have succeeded that civil society has become institutionalized in varying degrees. Yet there is a danger for these groups and civil society at large. Groups will reference the binary codes and essentialize the democratic universals found there. They, like political parties, also essentialize their opponents. The danger is that in doing so, they may define the other as intrinsically poisonous to civil society. Examples include Marxian socialists who see capitalism and civil society as synonymous and some feminists who have "argued that civil societies are inherently patriarchal" (p. 209). In such cases, many have chosen to "exit [civil society] rather than to exercise voice" (p. 209).

The contradictions between the universal values of the civil sphere and the essential exclusions produced by time, space, and function are what drive social movements. Alexander's theory argues that modern social movements have always been related to the cultural structure in back of democracy. One of the main reasons the cultural component is important is that democratic states rest on and work through legitimated authority. Democratic citizens must believe their government is just and doing right. Social movements, then, attack that belief, arguing that society has failed to live up to its democratic universal ideals. In that way, social movements are translations "between the discourse of civil society and the institution-specific processes" that produce hierarchical inequities (Alexander, 2006, p. 233). Politics, especially in postindustrial societies, is a struggle over meaning and representation. The conflicts that social movements express aren't simply about the unequal distribution of scarce resources. "They are about *who will be what*, and for how long" (p. 233, emphasis added). It is always about the right to be fully human.

The success of social movements depends on a certain level of the institutionalization of civil society. The right to gather privately must be protected; the regulative institutions of voting, parties, voluntary organizations, and law must be assured; and the communicative institutions must be free of elite control and must have created symbolic values around such civil attitudes as trust, autonomy, cooperation, and so on. Social movements must use the mass media to persuade others to the universal legitimacy of their cause. In doing so, they assume and develop a wider sense of community. They must claim to represent this wider community and its universal values, and they must speak directly to this societal community on behalf of particular interests. Social movements must also work to create and enforce law, "which could enforce universalistic civil against oligarchic power" (Alexander, 2006, p. 229).

Justice and Incorporating the Other

The intent of democracy, solidarity, and social movements is justice. *Justice*, like every element in contemporary democratic society, isn't a specified object; it isn't a goal that can be achieved once and for all. Justice is a process that exists between the abstract idea of universal brotherhood and the concrete lived reality of particularized otherhood. There are dangers at either extreme. The problem of restricting justice to the high realm of morality is that it discounts or ignores the everyday world of meaningful existence, which depends on discrimination, and discussions of justice need to be based on truly democratic morals that include identity and meaning. In other words, the abstract ideals of solidarity only become meaningful and relevant in relation to particular groups and individuals in particular times and places—all of which, as we've seen, are intrinsically uncivilizing. Thus, adhering to radical universalism is a view from nowhere that in the end disables the civil sphere.

The other extreme—identifying justice with group-specific goals (dogmatic particularism)—is also crippling to civil society. The first problem is that this degree of specificity is in effect an expression of social, not civil, power. Some of these practices can be very obvious, such as a previously disenfranchised group (like women or blacks) that wants to exclude other particular groups (such as gays and lesbians) from equal civil rights. Some of what happens at this extreme is less obvious. For example, most public universities and businesses have diversity policies, and many have task forces charged with promoting diversity. These diversity issues are of course mandated by and accountable to law. Because rational-legal authority is supreme in contemporary society, accountability to the law is usually expressed in numbers. The broader the definition of diversity, the more difficult or complex will be the accounting. As a result, most diversity policies are particularistic, including only gender and racial minorities.

Real justice—democratic justice—will always include possibilities of inclusion and exclusion, emancipation and oppression. "The tension between the transcendent and the particular cannot be avoided" (Alexander, 2006, p. 22). It's imperative that we understand the restless and partial nature of justice. To believe that justice has been achieved is no more than accepting and making real the dogmatic beliefs that are actually imposed by the powerful in society, those who are already the recipients and holders of justice. To believe only in the lofty ideals of universal brotherhood is to fail to engage in the messy business of particularized interests and the creation of meaningful lives. It simply isn't realistic to "accept everybody" on general grounds, as any honest look at our world and history will reveal. There are vested interests and questions of practice that will inevitably be addressed. In addition, the binary nature of the codes themselves prevents absolute fulfillment.

This implies that the project of democracy is perpetually unfinished; yet a living democracy makes continual steps toward universal inclusion. According to Alexander, this movement toward universal inclusion has thus far gone through three phases: assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism. The process of *assimilation* is what is meant when America is characterized as a melting pot. All the important differences in identity are assimilated in one general identity. *Hyphenation* is a way of creating cultural identities that brings two or more types

of identity together, like Mexican-American. *Multiculturalism* is unique in that this belief system doesn't attempt to form single identities out of many; multiculturalism values different and distinct identities simply because of their diversity.

Note that all these modes can exist together, but which is most prominent is historically specific. The most important difference lies between assimilation and hyphenation on one hand and multiculturalism on the other. In both assimilation and hyphenation, differences between in- and out-groups are seen as primordial or essential. In other words, people are seen as different because it's believed that they actually *are* different. These inherent differences are hierarchical. Under assimilation and hyphenation, it is still better to be white than black, male than female, and heterosexual rather than homosexual. In both assimilation and hyphenation, inclusion into the main group occurs as the essential qualities of difference are shed and the person in one way or another becomes more like the dominant group. In these inclusion movements, the dominant group's nature is seen as more civilized, and better in some real way.

Multiculturalism is distinct because difference itself becomes valued. Rather than differences being rejected automatically, in- and out-group members struggle to "resignify and experience" the differences (Alexander, 2006, p. 451). Thus, differences aren't automatically valued hierarchically. It isn't necessarily better to be white than black, or heterosexual than homosexual, for example. There is still struggle, however. Some groups or group characteristics may be seen as too different and thus stigmatized, which, of course, sets up another binary issue of exclusion. In multiculturalism, the universal value of human nature is seen as diverse, rather than being defined by the main group's identity. In multiculturalism, incorporation and social solidarity are achievements of diversity rather than inclusion. The differences between groups of people "become reinterpreted as representing variations on the sacred quality of civility" (Alexander, 2006, p. 452). Rather than the recognition of difference leading to denigration and inhibition, as with assimilation and hyphenation, multiculturalism leads to a culture of authenticity that expands and shares cultural identities.

Summary

- Generally speaking, civil society is a sphere that was generated by the idea of natural rights and constitutional law. This sphere is the political arena that negotiates the relationship between citizens and the state in democratic societies. The way civil society works is specific to different kinds of structural arrangements and diversity. In structurally differentiated, socially diverse societies, civil society becomes an open-ended project that is energized by the contradictions between cultural universals and particularist interests. Civil society is held together by democratic solidarity, a transcendent sense of being part of something larger and more important than the group itself, while at the same time honoring the individuality that makes each person unique.
- The core of civil society is made up of binary codes delineating civil/non-civil motives, relationships, and institutions. People and groups in a democratic society are categorized as pure and impure, included and excluded, based on the codes. The binary nature of the codes creates cultural tensions and provides motivational energy for activity in the civil sphere.
- Communicative and regulative institutions bound the civil sphere. Communicative institutions in particular express the binary codes through mass media, public opinion, and civil associations. Thus, communicative institutions actualize the codes and create the structures of feeling, solidarity, that unites a diverse society. Regulative institutions also bound the civil sphere, specifically voting, political parties, office, and law. Where communicative institutions persuade, regulative institutions use power to assure and create civil, democratic processes.
- Civil society also remains a project due to the essentializing influences of time, space, and function. The universals of the civil sphere must be actualized in real, concrete situations: in a specific place, at a specific time. Yet time and space inherently produce uncivilizing pressures: nationalistic identities and narratives that demand defense at any cost. The differentiation of function also creates uncivilizing pressures. The hierarchies of class, politics, religion, family, and so on are attractive. As people are drawn to money, power, and belief, they create particularized interests that struggle with the universal beliefs undergirding modern democracy.
- The tensions created by the binary codes and time, space, and function create opportunities for social movements. Because modern states work through legitimacy, social movements must wage a cultural war. Thus, at their core, all social movements express the universal beliefs found in the binary codes.

TAKING THE PERSPECTIVE: A STRONG PROGRAM IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Alexander is a founder and director at Yale University's Center for Cultural Sociology. The Center and its work are generally guided by Alexander's *strong program in cultural sociology*. There are three elements to it. First, *culture needs to be understood meaningfully*. More than any other species on the planet, humans are oriented toward meaning. This meaning is never fixed or determined; it must be interpreted. If something is determined, interpretation isn't needed. You don't need to interpret an object falling on your head; it's determined by the law of gravity. In contrast, the "American flag" has to be interpreted because its meaning varies. Cultural sociology thus places importance on interpretation. Alexander argues that for "most of its history, sociology . . . has suffered from a numbness toward meaning" (Alexander & Smith, 2001, p. 138). While Parsons emphasized culture, his theory did not incorporate meaning, in this sense of the word. In order to give meaning its proper place, Alexander advocates the use of what's called thick descriptions. *Thick descriptions* are minute descriptions of a social phenomenon—they provide the tiniest details of human interaction.

The second element in a strong program is that the relationships that culture has to other social factors need to be *analytically bracketed*. When we bracket something analytically, we

(Continued)