Tamara Petrović Trifunović

Between the Critical and the Engaged:
On the Importance of Studying Symbolic Aspects of the Reproduction of Social Order

Abstract   Late 20th century developments in social sciences and humanities have placed particular focus on the symbolic aspects of reproduction of social order, stressing the importance of discursive work in the process. It has become widely accepted that discourse is profoundly embedded in society and culture, and hence, closely related also to all forms of power and social inequality. Therefore, it rightfully assumes a central position among the research objects of contemporary social sciences. The aim of this article is to critically examine the impact of the interpretive turn on the study of culture and symbolic registers of society. The analysis focuses on three approaches to the study of discourse, culture and society: critical discourse analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture and Jeffrey Alexander's strong program in cultural sociology. These approaches are further analyzed according to their position within Burawoy's division of sociological labor, particularly between critical and public (engaged) sociology. Finally, the author suggests that engagement in detailed reconstructions of discursive manifestations of power, symbolic struggles and/or discursive codes in a society can provide valuable insight that could open up space for social engagement. However, in order to fully grasp the importance of symbolic aspects for the everyday reproduction of social order, the focus of analysis must also be placed on the role cultural traits and practices (understood as a discursive resources like any other) play in constructing stratificational categories, identities and distinctions, masking the very roots of inequalities that created the perceived cultural differences in the first place.

Keywords: discourse, culture, symbolic order, interpretive turn, critical sociology, public sociology

It has become common to speak of various 'turns' that have shaped contemporary paradigms in social sciences and humanities. In significant parts of these intellectual fields, the late 20th century developments have placed particular focus on the symbolic aspects of (re)production of social order, stressing the importance of discursive work in the process. Discourse has become frequently recognized as closely related to power and viewed as a site of meaningful social differences, of conflicts and struggles that result in numerous social-structural effects, and the symbolic sphere of society has been understood as a key to approaching social reality in many disciplines (Blommaert 2005, van Dijk 2007). In short, "the critical examination of the discursive realms of human existence has become a central matter of interest in the contemporary social sciences" (Susen 2015: 65).

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More broadly, while 'culture' (here viewed as the matter of all things symbolic) provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction and shapes social actors' understanding of reality; it can also be understood as a source of domination, enabling the mechanisms of support in establishing and maintaining social hierarchies and social order itself (Swartz 1997). In line with the body of work on social classifications and symbolic boundaries (most notably: Bourdieu 1984, Lamont 1992), I am suggesting that the same 'culture', both in terms of a specific discursive code (the language of cultural evaluation and exclusion) and as discursive treatment of actual cultural practices (such as cultural consumption, symbolic affiliation, taste, or engagement with the so-called high culture) should be the object of rigorous investigation in critical social science.

The aim of this article is to critically examine the impact of the interpretive turn on the study of reproduction of social order in its symbolic register and in the cultural field. The analysis will focus on the three approaches[1] to the study of discourse, culture and society: critical discourse analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture and Jeffrey Alexander's strong program in cultural sociology. Additionally, I claim that all three approaches assume certain positions in the field of scientific endeavors between the critical and the engaged; therefore the second goal of this paper is to examine how each approach addresses the notions of social critique and public engagement according to their theoretical frameworks and research agendas.

The question that remains amongst the crucial ones of 21st century sociology is the one that asks all involved in the discipline whether they believe sociology should keep far away from the interest-laden and ideological fiber of the 'ordinary world' beyond the ivory tower; or is it, on the contrary, the duty of sociologists (already inscribed in the roots of the discipline) to become publicly involved and offer their unique specialist knowledge to all members of society, thus contributing to the betterment of society and abolishing of social injustice (Spasić 2012: 15, see also Prodanović in this volume). Michael Burawoy's American Sociological Association presidential

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1   The choice of those three approaches is guided by the theoretical and methodological closeness to the central subject of this article – the symbolic aspects of social reality, but the list is certainly not exhaustive. For example, the absence of British cultural studies is quite apparent. All the more so given that the rise and rapid expansion of cultural studies almost resulted in sociology losing its analytical monopoly over one of its prime objects of study – culture. A decade ago, Kurasawa argued that in certain English-speaking intellectual environments (the UK, Australia, Canada) "sociology could become a subfield of its rebellious stepchild, which appears to be more in tune with the contemporary preoccupations and interests of academic and lay audiences alike" (Kurasawa 2004: 53–54). However, the choice was placed on critical discourse analysis instead, as it stresses the discursive aspect of the subject at interest more strongly (Blommaert 2005: 23).

address, adapted and published in his influential 2005 text *For Public Sociology,* provoked considerable attention and academic debate, forcing many sociologists all over the world to rethink the implications of their work. "Over the last half century", Burawoy writes "the political center of gravity of sociology has moved in a critical direction while the world it studies has moved in the opposite direction" (Burawoy 2005: 7). Burawoy places an open call for *public sociology*, both the *traditional* and *organic* public sociology. The former is represented, for example, by sociologists who write in the opinion pages of newspapers and comment on matters of public importance, or in a public debate fueled by a sociological book. For its part, organic public sociology is one that directly engages in a dialogue and, more importantly, in a process of mutual education with various *publics* and *counterpublics* (labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups etc.). On the other hand, the role of *critical sociology* in his view is to examine the foundations of the research programs of professional sociology, to make it aware of its biases and blind spots, and to promote new research programs built on alternative foundations[2]. Critical sociology, metaphorically speaking, should be the conscience of professional sociology. Both critical and public sociology produce reflexive knowledge, interrogating the value premises of society as well as of the sociological profession itself (Burawoy 2005: 7–11). In addition to Burawoy's analytical scheme, critical sociology can also be understood as a study of power, sociological practice of social critique, of unmasking and debunking the hidden, taken-for-granted power relations shaping social life (Swartz 2003: 797). Having this distinction in mind, we will now turn to the three approaches to study of culture and symbolic practices, each being critical and engaged in its own particular way.

Culture as powerful symbolic practice: the three approaches to discourse, culture and society

I Critical discourse analysis: the special guest appearance

Before turning to the rivalry of Bourdieu's and Alexander's sociological takes on studying the symbolic dimensions of social order, in this part of the paper I will examine one of the key gestures towards the development of critical approaches to language, culture, and society outside sociology – critical discourse analysis (CDA). Critical discourse analysis presents an interdisciplinary field gravitating around several distinguishable schools guided by a common interest in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic investigation of semiotic data. In the tradition of CDA, discourse has been conceptualized as socially constitutive, but at a same time socially

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2   These roles are set according to Burawoy's division of sociological labor into four analytically distinguishable sociologies: professional, critical, policy and public sociology.

conditioned and constituted. CDA analyzes discourse as a form of social practice, and considers *the context of language use* crucial. This implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and situations, institutions and social structures which frame it (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The overall impact of discourse analysis on social research methodology may be described as *the interpretive turn*, the systematic exploration of the meaning-laden dimensions of social life, driven by the imperative that "the hermeneutically oriented enquiry into social practices is one of the key tasks of critical social science" (Susen 2015: 64).

The role of critical discourse analysis in establishing the legitimacy of a linguistically oriented discourse analysis firmly anchored in social reality and driven by a deep interest in various forms of social inequality was groundbreaking. CDA was founded on the premises that linguistic analysis can, and indeed should, provide valuable additional perspective for the existing scientific approaches to social critique (Blommaert 2005: 6, 22). Researchers in CDA strive towards uncovering powerful and discriminatory ways in which social structure constitutes and is constituted by discourse patterns and in this cross-section they situate the critical dimension of their work. However, as is often claimed among the CDA scholars, it is not enough to uncover the social dimensions of language use, these dimensions should become the legitimate objects of moral and political evaluation, and their analysis should have effects in society: empowering the powerless, giving voices to the voiceless, exposing power abuse, and mobilizing people to remedy social wrongs (Blommaert 2005: 25).

Power (more precisely, linguistic manifestations of power) is the central theme of CDA and researchers are interested in the way discourse (re) produces social domination. Main areas of CDA inquiry therefore include political and institutional discourse, language in media, ideology, racism, discourse on immigration and similar topics. However, the objects under investigation do not have to be 'negative' or exceptionally 'serious' social or political events or social texts, in fact, any social phenomenon can be challenged and not taken for granted in the analysis (Wodak and Meier 2009: 2). Having that in mind, it is curious that the role that discursively shaped cultural practices and traits play in constructing stratificational categories, identities and distinctions is rarely investigated in this field. Aside from the shared views on the nature of symbolic order as a site of conflicts and struggles that result in numerous social-structural effects, there is little exchange between CDA and traditions of studying social classifications and symbolic boundaries. What we may term the 'discourses of culture' (language of cultural evaluation and exclusion and discursive treatment of actual cultural practices) are constitutive of symbolic boundaries and therefore frequently used as tools in the symbolic struggles in society. There is no reason

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why these should not be understood as discursive resources like any other and subjected to critical discourse analysis.

The second weakness of critical discourse analysis is that, although the empowerment of subjects and giving voice to lay actors is one of the central goals of CDA, more often than not there is in fact 'a problem of voice' in CDA. This manifests in producing a 'view from above rather than from below', as the ordinary actor is pushed out of the analysis and the researcher remains the ultimate referee of meaning. Critical discourse analysis is also not properly equipped to analyze how a text can be read in many ways (Blommaert 2005: 31, 33). This constitutes a problem for an approach claiming to be *not only critical, but also engaged* (and engaged in a double conversation with various publics, in Burawoy's terms), an issue that critical interpretive research programs often share.

II Pierre Bourdieu: language, culture and symbolic power

> If there is no science but of the hidden, then the science of society is, per se, critical (…) the hidden is, in this case, a secret, and a well-kept one, even when no one is commissioned to keep it, because it contributes to the reproduction of a 'social order' based on concealment of the most efficacious mechanisms of its reproduction and thereby serves the interests of those who have a vested interest in the conservation of that order.
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> Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 218

In his 2003 article David Swartz discusses how Pierre Bourdieu became a leading public intellectual in the later part of his career, a role that contrasts largely with his many years as a professional and critical sociologist (Swartz 2003). Indeed, for most of his sociological struggle, Bourdieu voiced sharp criticism of certain forms of political activism of intellectuals and stressed the importance of building sociology as a rigorous but critical scientific craft, exempt from external constraints. His political fights then were largely internal to the intellectual field, and against academic bureaucrats and pop sociologists (Gartman 2007: 408). Swartz offers an explanation for the sharp shift in Bourdieu's strategy, from critical to public sociology, taking into account various factors such as his move from a position of marginal obscurity to one of increasing institutional centrality and public visibility in 1990s, which gave him more symbolic power to fight. Changes within the French intellectual field which undermined the autonomy of the intellectual, together with increasing media orientation of French intellectual life were also important moments that brought about Bourdieu's political engagement (Swartz 2003: 799–803).

Before he came to assume the role of public intellectual in France during the 1990s, Bourdieu devoted much of his theoretical and empirical research to founding and building upon his critical sociology of symbolic power. In

his view, sociology is at its best when it is critical and committed to revealing domination, inequality, violence, socially induced suffering, particularly in social phenomena where it is not immediately visible (such as in 'noble' spheres of education, art, cultural practices and tastes, science) hidden behind various veils of legitimation (Spasić 2012: 18–20). Throughout his work, he was dedicated to exposing the social mechanisms of creation and reproduction of power structures in society, guided by belief that theoretically and empirically founded social critique is the best tool to undermine their legitimacy. For Bourdieu, the sociological endeavor should be *critical* from the beginning and *engaged* only later. That is to say that the very choice of research topic should reflect the researcher's moral and political considerations; in this way the research output could be politically relevant and significant[3] (Swartz 2003: 792–798).

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Regardless of the particular research subject, Swartz contends, Bourdieu "always asks one and the same crucial question: how do systems of social hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce themselves from one generation to the next, without much overt resistance, but also without conscious, explicit recognition by their members" (Swartz 1997)? In Bourdieu's view, symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of social integration: the consensus regarding the meaning of the social world contributes substantially to the reproduction of the social order. Due to its significance in the founding of the social order, the symbolic field is always dynamic and figures as the arena for multiple *symbolic struggles*, the struggles over the very definition of the social world (Bourdieu 1991: 166–167). One of the main stakes is the monopoly over official, authorized (and legitimate) naming and classifying, and *symbolic work* is crucial in these struggles. Individual and collective agents wielding this right, control *the production of common sense* and are in a position to "impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favourable to his or her social being" (Bourdieu 2000: 187). Also, while the political field is the primary ground where the "dominant principle of domination" is decided, the struggles do not remain limited to the area explicitly marked as political: all cultural symbols and practices embody interests and serve to enhance social inequalities (Swartz 1997: 6). Therefore, in Bourdieu's view, if sociology remains at the level of the objective establishment of classes and class relations, measuring exclusively 'hard' variables, it misses an essential part of the picture – the symbolic work that gives domination the appearance of legitimacy[4].

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3   This, in turn, poses a threat to critical sociology as it often looks for domination and domination is what it finds (Spasić 2012: 21).

4   Despite his insistence on the analysis of the symbolic work in the constitution and reproduction of social order, as well as on the need to take the subjective representations of social agents into sociological account, Bourdieu's approach might not be the

To conclude, Bourdieu the critical sociologist, sees as his duty to expose the symbolic mechanisms of reproduction of social order in order to break the spell of misrecognition: "if people understand the ways in which cultural capital serves as a disinterested cover for the reproduction of economic interests, then the system of inequalities will stand exposed to the informed and concerted actions of the dominated" (Gartman 2007: 400). For "to change the world", he writes, "one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced" (Bourdieu 1989: 23).

III Jeffrey Alexander: the strong program in cultural sociology

> Sociology has never allowed culture to speak its name. By contrast, the other arenas of society – whether economics, politics, religion or family – have been thoroughly described, their structures deconstructed and their internal logics articulated, even as analysts have connected such structures to forces 'outside'. This has not been the case for culture. It has been reduced to ideology or to values, and its contents have largely been read off the architecture of other structures, as a reflection or an inverted mirror. The ambition of my cultural sociology has been to open up this black box, to provide the internal architecture of social meaning via concepts of code, narrative and symbolic action, so that culture can finally assume its rightful place as equivalent to, and interpenetrated with, other kinds of structuring social force.
> Alexander 2005: 22

Another recently advocated approach which contributes significantly to theorizing culture as symbolic code is the strong program in cultural sociology, devised by Jeffrey Alexander and his associates and presented in his seminal book *The Meanings of Social Life* (Alexander 2003). Cultural sociology can be seen as one of the manifestations of the interpretive turn in social sciences and humanities that has positioned meaning at the heart of social life, and therefore in the center of social inquiry (Kurasawa 2004: 54). As culture's central category is the creation of meaning, Alexander proposes that this is where any adequate analysis of social reality must start. This was not really the case before, he claims, as the history of social sciences has always featured a sociology *of* culture, seeking to explain what created meanings, how structures of culture were formed by other (material) structures, and never *cultural sociology* as he envisions it (Alexander 2003: 5).

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most representative of the interpretive turn. His ambition, in fact, was to overcome what he conceived as an artificial and counterproductive dichotomy of the 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' modes of knowledge, manifesting in oppositions between positivist and hermeneutic on one side, and empiricist and interpretivist approaches in the social sciences, on the other. He, in turn, proposed their integration into a more general framework, a 'general science of practices' (Bourdieu 1989; see also Swartz 1997: 52–60, Susen 2011: 402).

The starting premise of the program is that culture is one of the distinct, relatively autonomous and irreducible 'environments' of human action. Therefore, instead of being treated as a weak, dependent variable, it should be given back its significance and its true share in the shaping of social life. In order to accomplish this, Alexander invites us to refrain from reducing culture to what it is not – to class divisions, economic capital, power distribution, status markers, market mechanisms, or individual psychology. In brief, the 'relative autonomy' of culture, sharp analytical uncoupling of culture from social structure, is the first and most important of the three defining characteristics of the strong program. The second is "the commitment to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way", or a Geertzian thick description of codes, narratives and symbols that create the webs of social meaning. The third premise entails the need to anchor causality of meaning-making in concrete actors and agencies, through a detail empirical specification of how culture interferes and directs what really happens in society (Alexander and Smith 2003: 12–14).

Some authors have pointed out Alexander's tendency to prematurely discard other frameworks for the study of culture (sociologies *of* culture), instead of seeking to establish a conversation with them. This particularly applies to *The Meanings of Social Life* where Alexander is looking to establish paradigms, with its manifesto-like opening chapter clearing the field of approaches to culture from other contributors, most notably from Pierre Bourdieu (Kurasawa 2004; Gartman 2007). This should not come as a surprise, since the two antagonists differ both in terms of the foundations of their critique and in the objectives of public engagement of their sociologies.

To begin with the notion of critique, Bourdieu's approach is critical in the sense of a conflict theory of society, while Alexander's cultural sociology is critical exactly in Burawoy's sense of the term, as its primary goal is to promote new research program that addresses the biases and blind spots of professional sociology. In other words, Alexander is critical of critical theories of culture, and his call for the autonomy of culture sometimes arrives at the familiar gate of functionalism's value consensus. Most importantly, while for Bourdieu the cultural practices are complexly intertwined with the competition for power and material resources, Alexander insists that cultural structures (epitomized in 'the civil sphere' as he envisions it) can also provide grounds for critical distance from the social structure and the resources to criticize or even to gain independence from the structures of power and inequality (Gartman 2007: 386, Spasić 2011: 234). In short, Alexander sees the civil sphere as a stronghold of critique, the foundation of critique immanent to social practice, and this is one of the reasons he needs the normative frame of the autonomy of culture.

Thus emerge the differences in their views on public engagement of sociology. Aligning with Bourdieu's position, Gartman states that the biggest weakness of Alexander's approach is in the assumption that political discourse of the American civil sphere is based on a shared set of codes and symbolic structures, employed equally by all (Gartman 2007: 397). Gartman goes on to suggest that Alexander's criticism of Bourdieu's cultural sociology is driven not merely by theoretical concerns in sociology but also by a political interest – his defense of the liberal democratic project. Here we can see how the two rivals diverge not only in the professional and critical dimensions of their sociologies, but also in the matter of the goal of their public engagement. It is Alexander's devotion to democracy which leads him outside academia's ivory tower and motivates him to make contributions to society by theorizing democracy and criticizing its current aberrations, reminding lay actors of democratic promises of emancipation and inclusion (Spasić 2011: 233). For critical sociologists such as Bourdieu, the stage is set in a fundamentally different way. The autonomy of culture from the economy and material structures, in their view, is not, as Alexander claims: "a prerequisite for the proper understanding of social life. It is the accomplishment of social life, the end and aim of associated humanity. To assert that this end has already been achieved, in the here and now, is not only a barrier to good social science; it is also a barrier to the realization of autonomy itself" (Gartman 2007: 411).

Conclusion

What could be the conclusion from this brief examination of the three approaches, which differ from each other in terms of their research agenda, approach to social critique and public engagement as much as they seem to overlap? It should be noted that I am not interested here in taking a seat at the negotiating table for the custody of study of culture. Whether culture and the symbolic sphere in general are considered an independent or dependent variable, all three approaches elaborate on the importance of studying symbolic structures for social sciences and humanities and it is precisely in this field of enquiry where they place their stakes on the critical and engaged dimension of their approach. This is based on a shared conviction that engagement in detailed reconstruction of discursive manifestations of power, symbolic struggles or discursive codes and cultural structures in a given society can provide valuable insight that could open up space for social engagement. However, I would argue that in order to fully grasp the importance of symbolic aspects for the everyday reproduction of social order, the focus of analysis must also be placed on the role cultural traits and practices (understood as a discursive resources like any others) play in constructing stratificational categories, identities and distinctions, masking the very roots of inequalities that created the perceived

cultural differences in the first place. In this respect, Bourdieu's perspective might be complemented with Alexander's dedication to hermeneutically thick description and thus improved in its interpretive power, adding the material power of cultural structures to the picture. The same applies to critical discourse analysis' contribution to the methods of studying the specific instances of discourse, and elaborate research tools for discursive strategies applied in symbolic struggles.

Finally, the problem of voice is also an issue that should be addressed. The question which remains to be solved is the following: How could we engage in organic public sociology and at the same time produce social critique, while insisting on the critical interpretation of symbolic aspects of reproduction of social order? Put differently, is there a way to avoid taking up the privileged epistemological position inside the critical interpretive approach to discourse, society and culture? All the more so given that the subject at hand involves structures of meaning and method of interpretation, which brings into play considerably more risk of pushing ordinary actors out of the analysis and producing top-down social critique. One need not be a critical discourse analyst to see that the position of the author of these pages is very close to Bourdieu's, stressing the importance of being critical, and only after, if possible, engaged. But is it cowardly then to give organic public sociology up too easily and remain within critical sociology, in the safe zone of academia's ivory tower where one is engaged only in conversation with closed texts? The answers to this question go far beyond the scope of this paper. One of the remedies might lie in reflexivity, for to be good at being critical, one must excel at being reflexive. And one must always remember to save place in the analysis for ordinary actors and their voice(s).

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Između kritičkog i angažovanog: zašto je važno istraživati simboličke aspekte reprodukcije društvenog poretka

Apstrakt

Krajem 20. veka dogodile su se značajne promene u društvenim i humanističkim naukama. Simbolički aspekti reprodukcije društvenog poretka, kao i uloga kulturnih praksi i diskurzivnog rada u tom procesu, našli su se u središtu proučavanja u okviru ovih oblasti. Opšte je prihvaćeno shvatanje da je diskurs duboko utkan u društvo i kulturu, te da je stoga i blisko povezan sa svim oblicima moći i društvenih nejednakosti i da ga samim tim treba uvrstiti među centralne istraživačke teme savremenih društvenih nauka. Cilj ovog rada je da kritički preispita uticaj tzv. „interpretativnog obrta" na proučavanje kulture i simboličkih struktura u društvu. Analiza se fokusira na tri pristupa proučavanju diskursa, kulture i društva: kritičku analizu diskursa, sociologiju kulture Pjera Burdijea i strogi program

kulturne sociologije Džefrija Aleksandera. Svaki od datih pristupa se zatim provlači kroz analitičku rešetku zasnovanu na podeli sociološkog rada koju je osmislio Buravoj, pogotovo na distinkciju između kritičkog i angažovanog momenta u sociologiji i društvenim naukama uopšte. Na kraju, autorka smatra da detaljnom rekonstrukcijom simboličkih borbi u društvu možemo steći značajne nalaze o načinu funkcionisanja društvenog sveta, koji posledično mogu da otvore put novim oblicima društvenog angažmana. Međutim, kako bi se u potpunosti razumeo značaj simboličkih aspekata reprodukcije društvenog poretka u svakodnevnom životu, analiza mora da obuhvati i ulogu koju kulturne odlike i prakse igraju u stvaranju stratifikacijskih kategorija, identiteta i distinkcija, prikrivajući ukorenjenost kulturnih razlika u društvenim nejednakostima.

Ključne reči: diskurs, kultura, simbolički poredak, interpretativni obrt, kritička sociologija, javna sociologija