

Performance and Power¹

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In this brief essay, I wish to approach the phenomenon of power from the perspective of “cultural pragmatics,” a new approach to social action as social performance. I am persuaded that this new understanding has large implications for theories of social structure and change.

Cultural pragmatics is, at once, a micro theory of action theory and a macro theory of institutions and culture. Each of these three levels is imbedded, moreover, inside a theory of historical change, which describes deep transformations in the conditions for social performance. It is these historical shifts in the interrelation of action, institutions, and culture that form the backdrop for new thinking about power.

Cultural pragmatics intertwines the traditions of culturalism and pragmatics that were pitted against each in seemingly endless conflict throughout the last century. There were, of course, significant efforts to transcend this throughout that time. If the current effort is different, one reason is that it seeks resolution neither through a one-sided and polemical *coup de main*, which purports to demonstrate that the other side is hopelessly

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wrong, nor through a kind of arithmetic process that sets empirical conditions for when one side or the other “really” matters, an additive and subtractive effort at resolution might be called the variable approach. With the idea of cultural pragmatics, I propose to resolve this long brewing conflict in a truly synthetic manner, which means, in effect, starting over. We need to begin from the beginning, with a basic philosophical or theoretical rethink. We need to do away with the traditional concepts of action and structure, and to dissolve, not reify, such dichotomies as culture versus institution and instrumental versus normative.

Actions are performative insofar as they can be understood as communicating meaning to an audience. For the purposes of understanding such performance, it does not matter what meaning “really” is, either for actors themselves or in some ontological or normative sense. What matters is how others interpret actors’ meaning. This does not mean, however, that the meaning of an action can be understood being emergent simply from interaction. Much more that is “structural” is involved.

How can we understand the “success” of a performative action? The notion of success, of course, comes from pragmatics. But it seems to me that success actually has a lot to do with meaning, and hence with communication. For an action to be successful, an individual or collective actor must be able to communicate the meanings of their actions that they consciously or unconsciously want others to believe.

Communication of belief is accomplished, metaphorically speaking, by becoming an actor in a script. Then, you need to get the others who constitute the putative audience for your action to take this script as real, to experience it, not as a “script,” not as symbolic or contrived, but as completely real, as having an ontological status. Such

successful conveyance means that you, as an actor, seem authentic to your audience. If they are to identify with you and to connect emotionally with your script, then they must believe you. They must accept your symbolic projection. They must speak your language, so that you care both reading from the same page.

From the manner in which I have put this, it should be clear just why we need to connect sociology with performance studies. It is in discussions about theatricality that we can find the tools we need to understand social action as performance. Performance studies is a broad and growing field inside and outside the U.S. Emerging from the collaboration between the avant-guard dramatist Richard Schechner and the anthropologist Victor Turner, it draws also from Erving Goffman and Clifford Geertz and from John Austin's language philosophy, which was taken up by Jacques Derrida and elaborated by Judith Butler. To this theoretical brew there is added more than a dash of traditional theatre and media studies and, more recently, a pinch of postcoloniality. Voila! You have the heady mix that makes up performance studies today.

For a multi-level sociological approach to performance, it seems essential to begin with the notion that every social performance is composed of certain elements. It is with the description of these elements, their interrelation and their historical variability, that the sociology of performance begins.

- (1) **Actor.** This could be an individual, a group, an organization, and may reference any level from casual and unstructured flow to class, gender, and national conflicts, such regional identities as Europe, or processes in the global civil sphere. Actors can be skillful or not, lifelike or wooden, imaginative or dull.

- (2) **Collective representations.** The languages actors speak are multiple, and the words and phrases that come out of their mouths are singular, but they are speech acts, not languages in the semiotic sense. Every speech is a play upon the variations of a background structure, the collective representations that define the symbolic references for every speech act. For most of human history these background representations had nothing written about them, though they were highly organized. When these representations are first objects of writing, it marks a major watershed in social performance, for it crystallized the distinction between more latent background representations and scripts, the action-related subset of symbols that constitutes the immediate background for speech.
- (3) **Means of symbolic production.** In order to communicate such foregrounded representations, actors need real material things, which are themselves, of course, meaningfully defined. For the messages of an actor to be projected, they need a stage, whether this is a place in the sand, a tree or a high spot of ground, a newspaper, television transmission, video cam, or website. Performers also need props, which can be a parrot beak, full costume regalia, background music, spotlight, or the semi-automatic rifle cradled casually on one's arms.
- (4) **Mis-en-scene.** Literally "putting into action," this French phrase has come to represent what directors do. It is the arranging, and the doing, of actors' movements in time and space. It is the tone of voice, the direction of the glance, the gestures of the body, the direction and intensity of the spot lighting.
- (5) **Social Power.** This dimension of social performance, often invisible, is critical in making the elements of performance available, or not. It can be defined as

resources, capacities, and hierarchies, but it involves also the power to project hermeneutical interpretations of performance from outside political and economic power in the narrow sense. (Though this understanding of power is related to the theory I develop below, it is narrow and more conventional.)

(6) **Audience.** All of the above become significant only insofar as they allow or prevent meanings from being successfully projected to an audience. Audiences are placed at different removes from actors, and they can be more homogeneous or divided.

Each of these elements can be examined in terms of its respective performative structure, which has critical implications for patterning performance. For example, the better the script, the more it is agonistic. From tension between pure protagonists and impure antagonists there can emerge the twisting and turning that grabs and intensifies reader identification. But scripts cannot be too complicated, for simplicity and clarity are also critical to performative force. Drawing on theatrical and literary theory, we can explore such critical technical considerations for each of the elements we have considered.

The challenge for social performance is to make its component parts invisible. If they are not invisible, action will *seem* to be performed. Not seeming to be contrived, making a performance seem real, is the sine qua non for successful performance. To create verisimilitude is to seamlessly string together performative parts. Everything must appear to be created for the here and now. Meaning must seem to come from the actor if it is to seem authentic, not from scripts, props, power, or audience. Performative success depends on connecting the audience to the actor, without mediation. Audiences see

themselves in the action. They are pulled in; they identify. Artificiality disappears. There is fusion between actor and audience and, indeed, among all the elements of performance. To make artifice seem natural: this is what it takes to be believed, to get others to accept your meaning.

In the course of historical time, the relationship among performative elements has been transformed. The simpler the society – the smaller, the less differentiated, stratified, and complex – the easier it is to achieve fusion, and, indeed, the more often it occurs. This is why, from the beginning of social science, analysts have associated “rituals” with simpler societies, a designation that can refer to family, peer group, and ethnic enclave and not only to simple collectivities in the historical sense. Rituals are the quintessence of the fused performance. It is easier to weave the elements of performance seamlessly together if they are not too separated to begin with. If a society is simpler, then it is more likely that actors will be understood, that scripts will be believed, that audience and actors will be familiar with one another, that dramatizations will seem natural rather than forced, and that power will be invisible or, at least, accepted as a natural thing.

Achieving verisimilitude is never automatic. It is always a performative accomplishment. But as societies become larger, more stratified, and more complex, it becomes more and more challenging. The reason is that the very elements from which performances must be put together have become increasingly defused.

(1) When writing emerges, structures of background representations become transformed into objectified texts. Authenticity is, in this way, much more subject to scrutiny, with texts themselves becoming subject to continual revision and reconstruction.

(2) Actors become are more likely to perform before audiences they don't know, with whom they do not share prior background understandings.

(3) Those who possess social power lead vastly different lives from audiences. In fact, they often are involved in deeply exploitative relationships with the very people whom they must performatively convince. Think here of the Egyptian Pharaohs, who sat at the top of a stratified social pyramid, but who needed to engage in continuous public ceremonies to maintain collective belief. It is no wonder that Weber called such leaders mystagogues.

(4) The means of symbolic production become more difficult to employ and to obtain, even as their role become more crucial. For, with the growing separation of audience from actors, elaborate forms of projection must be brought into play.

As the elements of performance become so defused, critics and intellectuals emerge. Conflict over interpretation becomes an always present dimension of social life. Even as state, class, and religious power become centralized and distant, so do audiences. As they become more distant, they are more doubting, more alienated, more fragmented by class and such other qualities as ethnicity, region, gender, race, and religion. No wonder that counter-publics develop and oppose the performances of centers. Or that popular cultures enter into the public sphere, they are simultaneously a roadblock to the successful projection of high and official meanings and a source for enlarging the reservoir of authentic performance available to marginalized subaltern groups.

Even as the elements of performance become separated from one another, the challenge for performance remains determinedly to refuse them. Yet with this defusion, it becomes increasingly difficult to create the seamless sense of the real upon which

success depends. Whether refusion can be achieved becomes, for every performance, increasingly an open question. No longer ascribed or automatic, refusion must now be achieved, and the process of legitimation becomes of great interest to social science. It becomes a moral and aesthetic question, too. Since romanticism, philosophers and artists have worried about the problem of authenticity, railing against artificiality, bad art, and bad faith. These vocabularies of criticism enter every human society as the elements of performance become defused.

The paradigmatic representation of this defusion process is theatre. Theatrical drama grows out of religious ritual, emerging in periods of sharply increasing social complexity. Greek drama grew out of Dionysian rituals, which explains why the fusion-haunted Nietzsche hated it so, and European drama emerged, during the early modern period, from the medieval Mystery plays performed at Easter time.

In the world of theatre, the defusion of performative elements becomes recognized, the challenge of overcoming artificiality institutionalized. In ancient Greece, competitions were staged and prizes awarded for play writing and for acting. Today, Oscars and Emmys are given to masters at producing and staging the now much more variegated elements of mass performance. One should note here how crucial is collegial control. The ability to effectively produce the elements of performance, and to bring them seamlessly together, cannot be ordered from outside. These are matters of craft, and their evaluation is subject to the horizontal authority of practitioners, not the vertical dictate of bureaucrats or bosses. The surprises endemic to award ceremonies remind us that the effectiveness of performance is always open for grabs, no matter how great power or reputation, or how much money is spent.

It is not accidental that theatre develops alongside the emergence of publics of potentially empowered citizens. From the perspective I am developing here, citizenship can be conceived as the separation and autonomy of a critical element of social performance. Citizenship is the legal capacity for skeptical viewership, the right to criticize and choose among performances, and the right to form one's own performances in response.

The implications of performance theory for understanding power should, by now, be pretty clear. According to traditional conceptions, whether Weberian or Marxist, power is institutional-structural. It is the ability to make somebody do something whether they like it or not. Coercion, or the ability to threaten it, is critical from such a perspective, which leads to the centrality of such ideas as control over means of production or monopolization of the means of violence. According to this traditional conception, you don't need ideas to exercise power; you just need resources and capacities.

Such thinking about power is as simplistic as it is omnipresent, but it also has element of truth. By identifying something as power, as compared, for example, to love, religion, or prestige, we wish to indicate a dimension of social life in which coercion can be evoked. Resources and capacities matter.

What's wrong, then, with emphasizing them alone? It is because, while supplying some of the most distinctive bases for exercising power, by no means do they supply all. Indeed, they leave the "action" of power -- the **performing** of power -- untouched. Power theories concentrating on resources/capacities leave out the independent shaping power of background symbols and forms, the figures and forms of script, the contingency of

mis-en-scene and actor interpretation, and the extraordinary significance of audience separation. Perhaps most importantly of all, this approach neglects how **performing power** is always mediated by accounts of its meaning and effectiveness, via the intervention of reports by journalists, critics, and by the inchoate but deeply resonant currents of the public's opinion.

The institutional-structural approach seems to assume, in other words, that the performance of power is easily fused. It is as if theatre had never developed, as if there were no such thing as the public stage and no capacity for counter-power at all. Yet the public is a stage. It is not easy for power to bring the defused elements of performance into alignment. The capacity for counter-performance is omnipresent.

Before elaborating on the new panorama of power opened up by this performative understanding, I wish to acknowledge there is a different alternative to institutional-structural theory, one which brings in ideology and knowledge. In the power theorizing first of Gramsci and then Althusser and more recently of Foucault, there developed within the institutional-structural position a new emphasis on representations and scripts. In the hands of these thinkers, however, such emphases, which would otherwise be welcome, actually become part of the problem, not the solution.

Such concepts as hegemony, interpellation, and power-knowledge obscure the contingency of performance and the complexity and independence of its elements. They replicate, in fact, the problems of linguistic structuralism. Concentrating on language at the expense of speech, they ignore the very contingency of performance that cultural pragmatics aims to embrace. The problem is not that these approaches are materialistic. They do not ignore representations. What they do, instead, is to assume powerful scripts,

great actors, compliant audiences, corrupted or brainwashed journalists, and bought-off critics. With a wave of the hand, texts become automatically transformed into successful action. Whether it is law, school books, movies, political campaigns, or wars, background representations are assumed to speak, and to speak persuasively. But we know from living our own lives and from the experience of history that this cannot be so. No text automatically achieves performative success. Neither does any actor, social power, or mis-en-scene. To look at language as power is no different than looking at power as if it were simply a language; it is to make Claude Levi-Strauss into Pierre Bourdieu.

If power cannot be simply coercive, it needs to be performative. If power is to be effective, performing power must be a success. To be really powerful means that social actors, no matter what resources and capacities they possess, must find a way to make their audiences believe them. To think about power more clearly, then, we need to consider the elements of performance, their internal complexity, and their independence. Judith Butler writes that “there is no power construed as a subject that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (*Bodies That Matter*, 1993, p. 225), and she refers here to the relatively straight-forward task of convincing an audience about one’s gender. We need not agree with the literal proposition that power is not a subject who acts to accept Butler’s larger, more rhetorical point. Shorn of the post-structural language, Butler is saying that power is not *only* a subject acting. An actor, the purveyor of power, cannot make power, or more accurately sustain it, through his or her action alone. Power is subject to the rigors of performance. The rigor of greatest interest to Butler is the need for power to constantly “iterate” background narratives and codes. Performing power depends, however,, on much more than that. It not only needs to iterate

earlier beliefs but to sustain a productive relation to all the other elements of performance as well. Faced with such rigors, power can indeed exist only in its instability.

Let me conclude with two necessarily brief illustrations. In *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'*, Diana Taylor studies the Argentine Junta in terms of the performance of masculinity and aggression. With its uniforms, parades, and militant moralism, the dictatorship sought to transform tradition and Catholicism into militant and intimidating force. With its often very public abductions, which allowed thousands of invisible executions, it put coercion on display. Yet, despite the Junta's extraordinary control over state resources and capacity, these performances of dictatorship eventually came to naught. The "mothers of the disappeared" formed in the public square of Buenos Aires. The durability and visibility of the *madres* constituted a counter-performance, quietly recalling the regime's murdered enemies and silenced opponents. The *madres'* spectacle unfolded in the great public square of Buenos Aires everyday, and their symbolic authority, which drew upon some of the same traditional values as the Junta, was too great for them to be physically dispersed. Eventually, this performative power had tremendous effect. Certainly other factors were involved, but the performance of counter-power by the *madres* was one important reason why the Junta eventually disappeared.

Dictatorship is the ability for central power to refuse every element of its own performance, while preventing other potential powers from ever doing the same. In this manner, there is a primitivization of power: social performance is pulled back under the center's control. Such central control over the elements of performance can be sustained, however, only with tremendous ideological work and the relentless exercise of force.

Certainly it is possible, even in modern and complex societies, for dictatorships to be successful. The repression and mass murders of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot are proof. But even inside these brutal historic regimes there were latent counter-publics and audience alienation, and at some times and places counter-performances broke through. Fusion is much more difficult to sustain when dictators are less totalitarian in their ambitions and can draw on less complex and abundant ideological and material resources.

Let us turn from outright dictatorship to the concerted exercise of power inside of more democratic regimes, where the consequential defusion of the elements of performance is given much freer rein. Despite neo-conservative aims, energy, and interests, and their control of the reigns of national political power, the Bush administration's run-up to the Iraqi war depended on the success of a complex production process. Such a war could have been launched, for example, only after September 11, 2001, an explosive trauma that which strongly energized elements of a Manichean plot. It also depended upon a successful out-of-town run, or rehearsal, in Afghanistan. Even with this, the Iraqi hawks still had to engage in endless performative evocations of the necessity for war, which they acted out in public speeches, interviews, talk shows, and op-ed pages. But these performances met with only partial success. The ability to launch a legitimate war eventually came to depend on Secretary of State Colin Powell's giving the "performance of his life" before the Security Council at the UN.

Even after the ineptitude and tragedy of the administration's war-making became evident, the American citizen-audience remained more receptive than it might because of the performative weakness of the other side. Instead of a compelling counter-narrative,

the enemy of the American and British occupation could display only murderous terror and a fundamentalist script repulsive to most democratic sensibilities. Nonetheless, despite the President's control over the levers of structural power, the performative success of his war making has steadily declined. His performance of war is mediated by critical accounts of journalists and pundits, by foreign leaders and intellectuals, and by angry parents of those who have died. The applause meter of public opinion polls is showing a slow but steady decline.

Skeptical audiences are the key to causing the performances of institutional power to fail. But the instability of power involves something more, the possibility of converting turn-off audiences into turned-on counter-powers through the staging of successful alternative plays. Democracy, in fact, might be conceived as a system that allows counter-performances always to be made. It does so by ensuring the independence of the elements of performance, by making it illegal for any actors to monopolize them. Of course, efforts are always made to do so. Power corrupts, but in differentiated and fragmented social orders it is very difficult for power to corrupt absolutely. Scandals and social movements confront such monopolizing efforts with cries of corruption, and they are performances, too.