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Jörgen Sparf

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Book Review

Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, ***What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization*** ***of Social Problems***

Jörgen Sparf

Mid Sweden University, Sweden

What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of ***Social Problems***

Jeffrey C. Alexander

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019, 176 p., ISBN
9781509538256. Paperback: \$22.95, €18.10
2019

Jeffrey C. Alexander is a key scholar in US sociology and among the most prolific and well-cited theorists in cultural sociology globally. During his long career at the University of California and Yale University, partly as founder and co-director of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology, he has written extensively about a wide range of topics, most notably trauma (2004; 2013), the civil sphere (2006), social performance (2011), and modernity and progress (2013)—all, more or less, under the umbrella of cultural sociology. With such an extensive and profound production, Alexander must be considered one of the scholars best suited to theorize on social crises and how they come about, which is precisely what he is doing in the short book *What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of Social Problems*. The book is an extension, and part reprint of, his 2018 article “The Societalization of Social Problems: Church Pedophilia, Phone Hacking, and the Financial Crisis” in the *American Sociological Review*. His theoretical model is slightly elaborated in the book, but most importantly, the empirical cases are more substantial and expanded with a fourth case, that of the #MeToo movement.

Alexander is trying to explain what happens when institutionalized behaviors and cultures in a specific social sphere become strained and erupt into a broader societal problem—a social crisis. Before this happens, reactions to strains are typically confined inside institutional boundaries and handled by intra-institutional elites according to the cultural logics of their particular spheres. Alexander's point is that a strained bubble does not burst from endemic triggers but from external discourses and institutions of the civil sphere. People, in general, might not have the interest or the energy to reflect on such details of social crises in their everyday life. Social crises, however, are ubiquitous and might impact people's lives, more or less directly. Because of this, Alexander's endeavor is honorable. He analyzes something which is all around us and, at the same time, makes a theoretical contribution in explaining how social problems are societalized.

In three short chapters, Alexander briefly conceptualizes his model and uses the rest of the book to illustrate the model with the aforementioned empirical cases. The backbone of his theory consists of five chronological phases (T1–5) in a process driven by bold journalists and steadfast lawyers as the two significant agents. The process is a standard way of thinking about social change, stemming from Kurt Lewin's model of organizational change back in the 1940s, Unfreeze – Change – Refreeze, here applied to social problems. Alexander's phases are:

T1 – Steady State: the normal situation when intra-institutional strains are managed within the sphere without public outrage.

T2 – Code Switch: signifying the point in time when a semiotic code is triggered, malaise is raised toward a particular intra-spherical practice, and broader public attention is directed toward the same.

T3 – Material Regulation: harsh regulatory interventions follow the code switch.

T4 – Backlash: institutional elites targeted by the civil sphere react negatively and might strike back at allegations and at regulation.

T5 – Return to Steady State: a deadlock will eventually lead to a new, steady, albeit non-agreed situation.

The book can serve as a free-standing piece, offering an idea of chronologically sequencing the societalization of social problems. The model, however, does come across more as a journalistic instruction to make sense of complex cultural processes rather than a tool for scientific analysis. The model's value increases when integrated with Alexander's larger theoretical contribution on the civil sphere, modernity, and trauma. When added to his cultural sociological

theories on modernity, the model becomes an interesting lens through which to understand the border-tensions between the civil and the economic structures and the conflicting challenges between these spheres.

While the short format of the book makes it accessible, there are some drawbacks. I will outline three of these in the remainder of this review. The first problem is the lack of societal context. However implicit, Alexander is decidedly talking about the United States of America. Despite the universality and global reach of the scandals and social crises that Alexander uses to illustrate his theoretical model, they originated in the US and resulted in socio-political and cultural consequences there. The one exception is the phone-hacking scandal which started in the UK media in the early 2000s. However, the case in point concerns the dominant position of the media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, an American citizen and permanent resident of New York since 1974. The lack of contextual positioning, in theory, is problematic because the social sphere has distinctly varied characteristics in different countries. A related limitation is that of color. Why does Alexander only talk about problems concerning (mainly) the white majority population? Would not racial discrimination, uneven crime and punishment statistics, and labor inequalities qualify as social problems? It is striking that the cultural sociologist Alexander does not elaborate on the theory's applicability to a variety of contexts and cases.

The second problem concerns the norm-heroic presentation of the agents in societalization. While investigating journalists and influential lawyers have leverage for awareness-raising, I would expect a broader selection of agential types to enter the stage. Politicians, activists, and whistle-blowers can indeed play crucial roles in transferring an issue to the agenda. The same argument goes for collective actors who mobilize forces locally, nationally, or internationally (read: Fridays For Future). Timing, commitment, and perseverance are probably equally important as having the right contacts in media and other social spheres.

The third problem concerns the applicability of the proposed model. For good reasons, Alexander uses well-known, contemporary crises where the focus is the "eruption", i.e., when an intra-institutional bubble bursts, revealing normatively questionable conduct. The conceptualized process only concerns the timeline from the sensational disruption until the situation settles again. From an analytical point of view, the characteristics of the preconditions would presumably also be necessary. Can we assume that the drama will play out in the same way in all cases, regardless of the history leading up to the eruptive event? The fact that a social problem becomes a social crisis at a certain point in time can surely not be coincidental. The ever-long history of female oppression and exploitation is not mentioned; the well-documented church pedophilia, going on for centuries, is left unaccounted for; the volatility of the financial markets and the recurrent economic crises are left un-commented upon. The background and history of difficult circumstances must be highlighted for the eruptive aftermath to make analytical sense. I expected more historical sensibility from a prominent cultural theorist such as Alexander.

Despite my critique of the model, and of Alexander's presentation of it, the utility of this book, in my mind, is two-fold. For professional journalists and students of journalism alike, this text offers a helpful tool for understanding social crises and describing them to a wider audience. On the other hand, there are dramaturgical classics out there which are more helpful in that respect. For the analytically interested social scientist, the book offers a separate tool that can be incorporated within Alexander's larger theoretical contribution. It concretizes the isolated segment of a dramatic disruption caused by an erupted tension when a sphere-specific problem becomes a social crisis.

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