

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie  
= Swiss journal of sociology

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

**Band:** 21 (1995)

**Heft:** 3

  

**Artikel:** A response to Jeffrey C. Alexander

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814774>

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## A RESPONSE TO JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER\*

*Richard Münch*

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Jeffrey Alexander has written a pamphlet that misrepresents and distorts my argument in such a fundamental way that the contrary to my intentions emerges. He has rewritten my essays and produced a new text that has nothing in common with what I have said. His indictments are therefore without any evidence in my work. He violates the most basic rules of fair discourse and text interpretation, which are:

- 1) To read the text assuming the best possible intentions on the part of the author.
- 2) To place the text in the context in which it was written and recognize the task it had to fulfil.
- 3) To take into account the text's background which is provided by the author's other written work.
- 4) Never to add something new to the text endowing it with a meaning which it did not possess beforehand.

### 1. Assume the Best Possible Intentions

Alexander accuses me of a "nationalist" and "chauvinist" turn though I am actually arguing in favour of exactly the opposite – more plurality (p. 2). Some exaggerations do indeed occur in my articles. However, I have made these consciously for rhetorical reasons and in order to make distinctions clearer, and they have been clearly relativized. Alexander, however, exaggerates the exaggerated ten times more and rephrases my words so that they say something which I never intended.

I have never claimed that any one of the various sociological traditions is superior to any of the others, particularly not the German tradition. I have emphasized that the German tradition is "responsible(!) for the suffering of a

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\* This reply was first circulated in *Theory*, Newsletter of the Research Committee on Social Theory of the International Sociological Association (Spring 1995) and reproduced in agreement with the author and with kind permission of the editor of the Newsletter, Professor Kenneth Thompson (The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom). A substantially longer version of this response can be obtained from the author.

large part of the world's population ..." (1991: 327; see also 1993: 50). I have not implied that this suffering was merely the unintended consequence of a positive endeavour as Alexander imputes (p. 17, note 13). Not one of the other traditions is characterized in such a "negative" way. Nevertheless Alexander is still able to accuse me of claiming superiority for the German tradition (p. 17, 24)!

## **2. Recognize the Task Set for a Text**

I prepared the 1991-essay for the Nedelmann/Sztompka volume in Winter/Spring 1990/1991 and replaced that in Spring 1991 with the essay finally published in the volume of 1993, because the editors wanted a greater emphasis on the German sociological tradition. This is the reason why there is a shorter part on American, French and British sociology and a longer part on German sociology in that essay. The essays were written in 1990 and 1991 consecutively, and not in 1991 and 1994, as Alexander assumes (p. 2, note 2i, p. 5, note 5). He could have checked with me when they were written. However, if given the opportunity I would not change anything today. The essays were written in a geopolitical framework because of the question addressed by the whole volume: the situation of European sociology in the nineties. An attempt to determine the position of European sociology inevitably leads one to make external and internal comparisons and to put these comparisons in a geopolitical setting. The essays address questions of theory-politics from a German view, as this was the task set by the editors. I was not asked to deal with the question from a French or American view, the essays are not chapters of a theory textbook, nor are they treatments of theory itself. Alexander therefore falsely understands the essays when he criticizes them for a lack of theoretical argument (p. 2). There cannot be a theoretical argument when I am dealing with the politics of theory. Nevertheless, where space was available I have included some theoretical argument, particularly in the treatment of the German tradition – a fact which Alexander ignores.

## **3. Take into Account the Background Provided by Other Texts**

The Sztompka/Nedelmann volume set me a task that inevitably necessitated European-American and internal European comparisons. If I compare four baskets of fruits I am not interested in the many varieties of fruits we find in

each of them, but in the ones that are in only one. And I try to explain why that one fruit is in one particular basket.

Alexander would have been able to understand this method much better if he had consulted those of my writings in which I deal with such questions. I have done so extensively in *Die Kultur der Moderne* (1986). Ironically the criticism of this book which is repeated most often is that it is too sympathetic to the American model of modernity and tends to use that model as a measure for the most successful path to modernity. Nevertheless, I have emphasized in the book that the different versions of modernity worked out in different institutional and cultural settings all have their own light and dark sides, and have their own worth as contributions to a pluralistic notion of modernity.

Alexander ignores also my broad account of the development of sociological theory from the 1850s to the present that explicitly takes into account the overlap of national and crossnational paradigmatic traditions, the national, international, periodical universal and timeless universal network of sociological theory. The book conceives of theorizing as of the continuous weaving of a universal network of theories to which every single theory makes a distinctive and important contribution. The book consists of 35 chapters on theories, 18 of which deal with contributions by American theorists! That is, more than 50 per cent of the most important contributions to sociological theory are of American origin in my view. The ratio for the classical period from the 1850s to the 1920s is one out of seven, for the period from the 1920s to the 1960s it is ten out of twelve, for the period since the 1960s it is seven out of sixteen. The change of the ratio tells us something about the "dominance" of European sociology in classical times, the "dominance" of American sociology in the middle period and the approaching of a more balanced state in the recent decades.

Alexander also ignores my book *Dialektik der Kommunikationsgesellschaft* (1992) that deals with the dialectics of liberation and the constraint in the development of global communication and he disregards *Das Projekt Europa: Zwischen Nationalstaat, regionaler Autonomie und Weltgesellschaft* (1993). The latter discusses extensively the process of European integration in its economic, political, solidaristic and cultural aspects, conceiving of that process again in dialectical terms. If a change in my thinking has taken place, then it is that of more emphasis on the dialectical nature of modernization.

## 4. Do Not Input Meaning Into a Text That Is Not There

### 4.1 *Cultures and Societies*

If we compare cultures and traditions of sociological thought – and this was my unit of analysis – we are interested in their identity. Putting cultures and traditions of sociological thought in a geopolitical situation means that we attempt to determine their chances of survival and their unique contribution to the cultural richness of the world. And we are concerned with the question of whether globalization will wipe out the different cultures and produce one global culture or whether it will preserve the pluralism of cultures. Globalization does not only endanger the diversity of organic species, but also that of cultural species. It is absolutely legitimate to raise such questions in our global situation – and I believe it is urgent to do so.

I have explicitly spelled out the hope that the new geopolitical situation will favour a more balanced state in which we can draw from a richer plurality of social thought in competition, exchange, communication *and* alignment between the European and American sociologies and beyond (1991: 320). This means, I have embedded the geopolitical analysis in a broader idea of balanced pluralism in universal discourse. However, Alexander has such a narrow idea of geopolitics that he seems to be unable to understand this argument. Because he reduces geopolitics to the battle of nation-states and regions, he cannot see anything other than nationalism and chauvinism when geopolitical theory is used for purely explanatory purposes. He does not distinguish between geopolitical theory and geopolitics. And he falsely equates geopolitics with the nationalist striving for domination. It seems impossible for him to conduct geopolitics aiming at a balanced plurality of cultures within a universal framework. Only within such a framework and in such a balanced state can we learn from each other without losing our identity.

### 4.2 *Standardized High Quality Products*

I said that “World sociology has been dominated by American sociology since the Second World War” (1993: 45). And I gave the examples of the superior professionalization of American sociology and an innovative interpretation of Humboldt’s idea of integrating research and teaching in the American universities. I have stated that more professionalization brings about more standardization. I have also spelled out that this implies continuous high quality work (1991: 318). Because the American academic system is more professionalized than any other academic system, I have always admired the high quality

of its products. On the other hand, we would be blind if we did not see the other side of this coin, a side which *is* inevitable – that of more standardization.

If Alexander denies this interrelationship between high quality and standardization, then he just wants to have the good sides of life without the bad ones. An academic system which is more professionalized than any other academic system must indeed *by derivation* produce higher quality work, but with the effect of more standardization. This implies also *by derivation* less deviation from standard quality toward the extraordinary, both in the negative and the positive sense.

The reviewer system of the leading American sociology journals demonstrates how a high standard quality of sociology articles can be guaranteed to readers all over the world, because they apply this system in the most rigorous way and because they are the most widely read journals in the world. That there are other journals in American sociology serving particular markets does not alter anything that I have said.

#### 4.3 *The Logic of Comparison and the Construction of Ideal Types*

In comparative terms, it is uninteresting to describe the various products a specific sociological culture offers. Instead, we must search for that which we are unable to find in other cases, and this must be sought out in its most elaborate form in a particular setting in order to spell out a specific type of thinking, its cultural and social setting, its internal logic and consequences. Our task is not that of the historian – that is, to describe an individual historical phenomenon.

What does Alexander know about the method of constructing ideal types, when he asks about their historical concreteness? A better understanding of what I am doing here would have opened him another door to my statement that we can find French, British, German or American theorizing everywhere in the world (1991: 329, 1993: 61). Because I have addressed cultures, not nations and nation-states, this statement is of real importance and not a minor relativization of my argument (p. 23, note 14). It does not relativize my construction of ideal types, only the geographical area of their application.

I am well aware of the variety we find in American and European sociologies if we look at them in historical terms. I do not need Alexander's advice to get to know them. But this is not the question here. Such a reference to the internal variety of national cultures does not tell us anything about what makes them distinct. We can discover this only by comparison.



In geopolitical terms it is important to recognize such differences in order to understand what chances of survival certain types of thinking and carrying out of research have. In terms of universal discourse, we have to acknowledge their equal right to take part in discourse so that we can draw on the broadest supply of theoretical resources.

#### 4.4 *The Meaning of "Americanization"*

Another false attribution is Alexander's interpretation of my usage of the term "Americanization" (pp. 14–19). In my view this term means nothing else than the simple fact that any American sociologist uses his mother tongue (which is also different to British English), the philosophies in which he was mostly trained at home and at school, and the everyday interpretations prevailing in his life-world in order to interpret what he is observing, hearing or reading (1991: 316). Every concrete act of Parsons' interpretation of Weber, for example, has to be interpreted in such a context. That means, Parsons or any other American sociologist cannot do anything else than put Weber in the context of his philosophical and social world, as any one else has to do in his or her context. It is unavoidable that such a transmission changes some of the original meaning. If we take into account that Parsons transmitted social theories from *different* European origins into one American context, we consequently have to be aware that he *had* to integrate what was formerly separated in social theory. Whoever fulfils such a task inevitably has to *narrow down* a formerly richer but unordered and contradictory body of knowledge simply in order to be consistent and simply because knowledge from various cultural and social settings is placed into one cultural and social setting. This has the paradoxical result that American sociology is richer than any single European sociology tradition but poorer than all European sociologies together. Its richness or pooriness is a question of perspective.

#### 4.5 *Diversity and Creativity*

This is the point where I can deal with the question of creativity. Again, I have to explain the analytical nature of my statement to Alexander. I have formulated that European sociology *can* be more creative than American sociology because of its greater diversity (1993: 47). As I have shown, diversity within Western thought is greater in Europe than in the United States, *but only in as much as we take Europe as a whole*. Diversity might be equated with creativity just in the sense of more room for diverse products of knowledge. Beyond that, "creativity" means also innovation. If the different cultural traditions in Europe

remain separated they will always reproduce themselves internally without innovation. If there is more communication, there will be more cross-fertilization and incentive for cultural change. In this sense, a diverse Europe will be much less creative (innovative) than the United States, if there is no communication between cultural traditions. This has partly been the reason in the past why American sociology has been more creative (innovative) than the single self-contained European sociologies for a long time. The more European sociologies communicate with each other however, the more they will mobilize their diversity and thus will be more creative (innovative) than an academic system that is more professionalized and bound to *one* cultural context. However, the American academic system will be able to compete in this regard as long as it links itself in the same way to the European traditions as they relate to each other.

There is no sentence in my essays or elsewhere in my writings which would justify the imputation “that most sociological theories function as supporting ideologies for the struggles of their regions and nation-states” (p. 4). I have also never used the terms “sacred” and “profane” for comparing European and American culture and sociology, as Alexander imputes (p. 7), nor have I characterized American sociology as inferior to European sociology (pp. 7–8).

#### 4.6 *Ethnocentrism*

Alexander is furious (pp. 6–8) because I have said that the competing microsociological paradigms share the “ethnocentric idea that society is constituted of the many activities of free, independent agents who realize their individual selves through competition, exchange, negotiation and cooperation” (1991: 317). Who wants to object to the statement that it is a common belief that distinguishes those paradigms for example, structuralism or poststructuralism, class-conflict theory, systems theory or discourse-theory? That social order is created by individuals day by day is an idea that has been emphasized nowhere as much as in various paradigms of American sociology. I have called this idea “ethnocentric” because its proponents did not explicitly take into account that the idea applies much more to American society than to any other society. The discussion on this topic was led in universalistic terms as if it could be decided in general whether social order is something given and externally constraining on the individual or something created by individuals, though it is apparently an empirical question which side of the two prevails. The answer to this question varies from situation to situation, institution to institution, society to society. I do not see how Alexander wants to question that there is an element of ethnocentrism in the way in which the empirical – namely, familiarity with American everyday life – is taken as an indication of



the universal. And I do not see how he wants to question that empirical down-to-earth approaches are more inclined to this error than more abstract approaches. This is the reason why I have said that the microsociological paradigms are more closely bound to American reality than Parsons' more abstract approach. I think I can maintain this statement easily against Alexander's objections.

Every society contains some ethnocentrism. And it is even more prevalent, the more a particular society is able to live a self-contained life, the more it occupies a dominant position in the world and the greater its part in global communication simply due to its sheer size and to the fact that its own language coincides with the one used in global communication. The members of such a society feel less constraint to take into account what happens outside its boundaries. Nobody would deny that the United States are in such a position. And it is commonsense that this position furthers ethnocentrism in that country. This, for example, is indicated by the number of pages in newspapers reporting on events outside the US, by the number of people speaking one or more foreign languages, by the extent of high school graduates' knowledge of foreign countries and their history, and by the number of non-American sources cited in American sociology journals. I am sure that Alexander would not be able to object to such a statement if empirical evidence were available. But I am the last person who would blame American sociologists for this problem, because I am able to explain it and because I know that it is better to have the United States in this position than any other society in the world. Its internal pluralism makes its ethnocentrism the least dangerous of all ethnocentrisms in the world. However, it would be wrong to overlook the fact of ethnocentrism.

## Conclusion

I am willing to take part in any attempt at approaching a universal sociological discourse, but not in the hegemonic manner that Alexander adopts. I would not take the de facto international discourse for the universal. And I oppose strictly, when someone like Alexander comes and takes his world for the universal, making judgements about the "particularism" and "nationalism" of people who refuse to accept Alexander's own particularism as the universal. This is particularly true if the statements of the self-declared universalist are based on such a narrow knowledge of sociological work – upon which he comments like a global McCarthy. In doing so, Alexander destroys the basis of free speech in exactly this global discourse in the name of which he pretends to speak.

Alexander introduces his own political correctness in the global discourse of sociological theory. A politically correct theorizing in his terms would have

to keep silent about the hegemonic part of global discourse on which he himself relies so much. What he conducts, is geopolitics under the guise of universalist rhetoric.

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