Religion and Secularism

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3. Performing Secularity

Toward the Construction of a Concept

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Abstract

This essay argues that a critical synthesis of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Jeffrey Alexander can be used to construct a concept of "secular performances." Via Taylor it is argued that performing secularity means displaying-in-action fragile, non-naïve interpretations of persons, objects, communities, and patterns of action. Via Asad it is argued that secular performances are received in the senses before they are reflexively chosen in the mind. That is, secular performances are staged by actors and displayed before audiences both of which are already-capacitated by secular disciplines. And via Alexander it is argued that secular performances take place within a differentiated context of action. These are performances, then, that aim to re-fuse the elements of social action that have become de-fused within complex societies. The essay closes by noting the paradoxical limits that secular performances have for achieving re-fusion and, thereby, motivating meaningful communicative action.

Keywords: secularity, performance, plurality, embodiment, Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, Jeffrey Alexander

Introduction

Despite suggestions that we give up discussing it altogether, and despite efforts – not least by José Casanova[1] – to disambiguate its iterations, "secularity" continues to occupy thought. It occupies the thought of the present essay as well, which is an attempt to construct a concept – the concept of secular performances – through a critical synthesis of the work that three major thinkers, each having a different methodological specialty, have done on secularity: the philosopher Charles Taylor, the anthropologist Talal Asad, and the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander.

We begin with Taylor, in particular the effort made in his magisterial *A Secular Age*, to distinguish between three different referents that "secularity" can have. This initial effort at clarification will lead to a preliminary conception of the secular as what Taylor calls the "immanent frame." Via Taylor, we will see that the secular, far from being a negative space within which believers, unbelievers, and nonbelievers of all stripes can interact, is instead a positive, historically accomplished, phenomenon. Further, we will note how Taylor views the immanent frame as an orienting force, a field that shapes and directs those immersed in it.

This reading is then supplemented by Talal Asad, particularly by Asad's determination to reveal what it means for the secular to be non-neutral. That is, my effort to synthesize Asad and Taylor will hinge on the ways that Asad concurs with, deepens, and challenges Taylor's conception of the secular. Via Asad, we will see that the secular is more than just an orienting frame; it is an active field of power that empowers and disempowers particular formations of the embodied self. It is through this critical synthesis that I will argue that secularity must be conceived not only in terms of the constraints it imposes (constraints on forms of belief or of acceptable versions of religion in its public or private elements, for example) but in terms of the kinds of embodied experiences it empowers – that is, performance-as-embodied.

It is with the aim of understanding this performative aspect of secularity more clearly that sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's work is recruited. In particular, we will draw upon his concept of "cultural pragmatics" to conceptualize the elements of performance that actors must reunite in order to accomplish a meaningful performance in a secular context.

In what follows, then, my aim will be to investigate (1) what the secular is and (2) how the secular self is performed or displayed in our age. This is an attempt at concept construction and so bears within it all the limits of such efforts at theorizing. But it is to be hoped that it also bears some of this method's particular fruits. An introductory sketch having been drawn, then, we turn our attention to limning the secular more clearly.

Taylor: A Fragile, Plural, Secular Imaginary

Charles Taylor opens his monumental *A Secular Age* by delineating three ways in which secularity can be understood. The first, which Taylor provocatively names secularity 1, refers to the way that public spaces, and the common institutions and practices found there, have

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[1] Casanova distinguishes multiple conceptions of secularity. He writes: "Rethinking secularism requires that we keep in mind the basic analytical distinction between 'the secular' as a central modern epistemic category, 'secularization' as an analytical conceptualization of modern world-historical processes, and 'secularism' as a worldview and ideology" (2011: 54).

been emptied of a transcendent referent so that they can function *etsi Deus non daretur*. Secularity in this sense refers to the functional differentiation of aspects of society as a normative ideology. That is, it refers to the way that different spheres of human activity – the economic, political, and cultural spheres, for example – come to be governed by their own internal logics rather than by, say, religious authorities.[2] Taylor's definition of secularity 1 is, then, quite similar to what José Casanova (1994) called secular-*ism*: a worldview or ideology similar to other "-*ism*'s."

Taylor then distinguishes secularity as an –*ism* from secularity as a process, that is, from secular-*ization*. It is secularity as process, Taylor's secularity 2, that captures predictions of "the falling off of religious belief and practice, people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church" (2007: 2). Evidence for and against secularity 2 is what has occupied much of the work done on the "secularization thesis" in sociology, with theorists such as Steve Bruce, Philip Zuckerman, and the early Peter Berger (1990) arguing that secularization and modernity went hand in hand, and theorists such as Roger Finke and Rodney Stark and the late Peter Berger (1999) disrupting and nuancing it.

Taylor himself, however, wants to attend to neither of these versions of what it is to be secular. Instead he trains his attention on a third form of secularity, secularity understood as the lived conditions for belief. As he puts it, secularity 3 is "a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search take place" (2007: 3). This framing of secularity is a not a thesis about the differentiation of social functions or the decline of religious practice, but about the ontic background within which experience is constructed and explained. It is this third version of secularity that Taylor names the immanent frame. It will be important for the course of our argument to say a few words about the character of the immanent frame in order to set the stage for understanding ways the secular is performed, but before doing so we ought to note the clarity that Taylor's delineation allows. What we are able to see is that secularity 1, secularity 2, and secularity 3 – secularism, secularization, and the secular-as-context – refer to distinct elements. Confusing them or attempting to define "religion" in contradistinction to only one of these, will almost certainly lead to conclusions that will be difficult to sustain when the other referents of secularity are taken into account.

What, then, is this secular context of understanding, this condition of belief and practice, that Taylor terms the "immanent frame"? It is one in which "the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular" (2007: 542). This is the kind of collective understanding that secular persons must have in order to make sense of our selves and our actions as we do. Although space precludes unpacking each part, we can say that Taylor offers this definition after having traced the historical constructions of each of the key descriptive terms noted above – a buffered identity, a disciplined self, secular time, and instrumental rationality. To these he adds one last factor to complete the picture of secularity 3, the immanent frame: the self-sufficiency of the natural, immanent order. The immanence of the

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[2] The processes by which these different spheres attained this self-sufficiency has been detailed by a variety of thinkers: it is Habermas, for example, who gave the classic description of the structural transformation that led to the modern public sphere governed by the logic of practical reason.

immanent frame is meant to describe a context in which the meaning of human life and social structures can be described without transcendent reference. Knowing, and even more *experiencing*, may be explained solely in reference to this-worldly factors.

Key to this explanation (and something that it might be easy to mistake given that *A Secular Age* is itself an intellectual history) is that secularity 3 does not primarily refer to a set of beliefs about the world.[3] The immanent frame is not the description of a mental act or a set of portable, "excarnated" concepts that must be assented to. Instead, life in a secular age, life within the immanent frame, is "one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of imaginable life for masses of people" (2007: 19-20).

The phrasing of this quotation is important in two ways. First, Taylor here explicitly moves from conceptions of, ideas about, human flourishing, to imagination of how flourishing takes place. This is important because it tracks the move Taylor is making away from secularity as a set *of* beliefs about the world to secularity as a *lived context for* belief. Second, we note that Taylor is careful to say "within the *range* of imaginable life." This indicates something that Taylor elsewhere makes explicit: the immanent frame can be lived differently (see 2007: 374f. for a discussion of the four-cornered confrontation of interpretations that happens in the cross-pressured spaces of the immanent frame). That is, while all of those who inhabit the immanent frame "accept some definition of greatness and fullness in human life," in our secular age debates about how that fullness ought to be explained, about what explanations best measure up to the reality of our experiences, are constitutive (2007: 597).[4] So we begin to see that, for Taylor, it is certainly not the case that the secular selves who inhabit the immanent frame are "non-believers" only able to give immanent explanations of their experiences of fullness. Instead, it is fundamental to the description of the immanent frame that it is "spun," or particularized, or lived in a plurality of ways. In other words: the secular is lived plurally (see 2007: 546-56).

We can begin to get a grip on this plurality of ways of living secularity 3 if we imagine them spread out along a continuum. On each end of this continuum are positions that have hardened, become fixed; the persons who inhabit these polar stances refuse to see their position as exactly that: a position. On one hardened end of this continuum are those who inhabit the immanent frame as reductive materialists. For these there is no rational possibility of explaining the movement toward or away from constitutive goods using anything but "natural" means. On the other end of the spectrum lie religious fundamentalists of all stripes – those who refuse to countenance non-transcendent explanations of particular experiences. But between these two hardened positions there is an entire range of possible options, a plethora of ways of articulating the understanding of oneself, one's communities, and the

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[3] See the "Editor's Introduction" in Warner et. al.: 10-15. The editors note that Taylor "also seeks to steer clear of some of the common complaints against a belief-centered account of religion. He does not mean belief in specific doctrines. Nor does he understand belief as an abstract intellectual commitment to the truth of a propositional statement" (10).

[4] See Taylor's earlier *Sources of the Self* for a discussion of what he calls "hypergoods," which are "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these [others] must be weighed, judged, decided about" (1989: 63).

world. "We live in a condition," Taylor says, "where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on" (2007: 11). And, again, we must remember that each of these construals, these stances toward what it means to live a full human life, are not just theories but the "sensed context within which we develop our beliefs" (2007: 549). They are less explicit theories about the world than embodied realities. As James K. A. Smith has put it, the immanent frame is "less a reasoned picture or articulated worldview and more a Wittgensteinian 'picture' that holds us captive precisely because it's not conscious" (94).

This leaves us with two final points we must draw from Taylor. First, not only can the immanent frame be spun in an enormous variety of ways, it is often the case that these spins happen because life within the immanent frame is felt as cross-pressured. That is, for the many who live between the two hardened poles, it is increasingly possible to feel that our experience could be explained in a multitude of ways. We who inhabit the immanent frame feel capable of, even pulled toward, using *both* immanent and transcendent explanations for the same experience. It is precisely this experience of standing within the cross-pressured space where, like William James, we can feel the winds pulling us "now to belief, now to unbelief" that Taylor is trying to make habitable in his description of the secular as the immanent frame (2007: 549; Taylor makes explicit use of James in 2003).

Second, Taylor's description of secularity 3 as plural means that secularity is felt as an erosion of the confidence we have in our own experience. Naïveté, in other words, has exited the stage. Now, this does not mean that it is impossible to relegitimate the particular spin we put on the immanent frame we inhabit – both Christopher Hitchens and Jerry Falwell, Jr. can serve as counter examples were we to claim otherwise. But even in such instances, these relegitimations are no longer naïve but must be accomplished, and often accomplished, in resistance to claims to contrary.[5] So we can see that, for Taylor, secularity also means that "naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike" (2007: 21). The consequence of this is that secular identities become increasingly fragilized – a point which resonates with the work of Talal Asad and to which we will turn in a moment. But before turning from Taylor to Asad, it will be helpful to review what Taylor's clarification of these three forms of secularity has done for our own effort to construct the concept of secular performances.

First, we have seen that secularity is a not a set of beliefs, but a lived condition named by Taylor the "immanent frame." This frame includes a whole set of cosmic and social imaginings about the distinction between the natural and supernatural that have been constructed over extended periods of time. Second, we have noted that this secularity is plural. The plurality of the immanent frame was explained by the fact that particular spins can be given to it. Some live the immanent frame as more open than do others. Third, because it is not naïve, secularity is lived fragilely. From this baseline, we can already see that performing secularity 3 is not the same as performing secularity 1 or 2. That is, performing secularity, in the sense we are aiming at here, does not mean emptying public spaces of transcendent content – in this case it does

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[5] Casanova gives a good example of this spiral of proposal, counter-proposal, counter-counter-proposal (and on . . .) that can happen in such a circumstance in his laudatory, critical response to Taylor (2010: 268-70).

not have the political meaning of removing a statue of the Ten Commandments from in front of an Oklahoma Courthouse. Nor does it mean enacting the decline of engagement in religious practices or belonging to religious institutions; performing secularity does not mean ceasing to go to Mosque or to mass. Instead, performing secularity means enacting, displaying-in-action, fragile, non-naïve interpretations of persons, objects, communities, and patterns of action. It means showing, in discourse or in deed, that "I too could interpret my experience otherwise; I too live my commitments fragilely."

Our review of Taylor has already born much fruit for the project of clarifying what the performance of secularity might mean. Indeed, given the clarity of this conceptualization of these three forms of secularity, *A Secular Age* might seem like the logical place to conclude, rather than to begin, an analysis of secularity. Still, and despite his deeply historical argument, Taylor's perspective is often silent on the issue of power (see Mahmoud). So it is to Asad that we turn in order to add to our concept a deeper sense of how secularity empowers and disempowers particular formations of society, government, community, and the self.

Asad: Embodying the Secular Imaginary

Talal Asad's pursuit of an anthropology of the secular shows one major similarity and one major difference with Taylor's. They are similar in that Asad too takes the secular to be not a neutral field but an active space, and they are different in the methodological attention Asad pays to the structuring effects of power, especially to the exclusions it produces. But to similarities first.

In his early *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad deconstructs Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion as cultural system, arguing that this attempt at a universal definition ignores how religion is also a "domain of power" that categorizes and classifies, includes and excludes (1993: 29). In order to make this power structure clear, Asad argues that religion ought not to be interrogated as an essential, universalizing category but instead in the way it shapes particular "space[s] of practice and belief" that are legitimized by particular administrative orders which attempt to "classify, control and regulate the practices and identities of subjects" (1993: 27, 29). Although Asad is here talking about religion as a category, he brings a similar perspective to his later work on what he terms religion's "twin concept," secularity.[6]

It is in his *Formations of the Secular* that Asad makes this perspective most clear. There he argues, like Taylor, that the secular is improperly understood when it is thought of via a subtraction narrative; the secular is not an empty space in which the "real" human emerges once religion has been sloughed off. Instead, as he puts it, "the concept of 'the secular' today . . . doesn't simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability. . . . Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world . . . and of the problems generated by that world" (2003: 191-92). The similarities with Taylor's conception of the secular as not a neutral field but as a positive, constraining and empowering,

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[6] This is a consistent perspective of Asad's, covering not only religion and secularity but politics as well. E.g., Asad has written that "perhaps in our contradictory societies, very contradictory experiences and sensibilities must mediate in complicated ways the spaces and processes in which political actions are supported or obstructed, claims to knowledge validated or dismissed" (2007). Asad's central interest is in analysis of the particular ways that "actions are supported or obstructed" (2007).

concept are evident. Just as Taylor refused to define secularity as a subtraction story, so neither will Asad settle for a definition of secularity that is simply a rehash of a pseudo-Marxian liberation from the opiate of religion.

Still, while Taylor's conception of secularity is not negative but positive, it is still an "imaginary" – a collective understanding, a horizon within which particular selves and forms of action come to be construed as sensible. Asad is more attentive to the way power is embodied. A few words about how this attention to power shapes Asad's thinking will be helpful in pointing up this key difference.

Power functions for Asad similarly to how it does for Foucault. That is, power is understood neither as Weberian domination (77-128) nor as Arendtian collaboration (1963: 21; 1998: 200f.), but as "the effect of a network of motivated practices" (Asad 1993: 35). In this reading power takes religious or secular forms because of the ends to which it is directed rather than because it has a particular point of origin.[7] What this means is that all experience – whether religious or secular – is constructed experience. An example of this way of thinking can be seen if we look to a compelling reading Asad gives of what is perhaps a surprising subject: St. Augustine of Hippo.

Asad argues that Augustine knew that it was not just cognitive symbols that implant dispositions in persons, but power, disciplining apparatuses. As an example of such he cites the lesson Augustine took from the tortuous process of learning Latin he underwent as a boy. From this experience Augustine later wrote that "fallen men . . . need restraint;" that "even man's greatest achievements had been made possible only by a 'straight-jacket' of unremitting harshness" (Asad 1993: 34). Augustine, Asad shows, knew well that it was power – in the form of disciplines and practices – that creates the conditions of experience. It "was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth," his excursus on Augustine concludes, "but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth" (1993: 35).

But this is not only true for particular "religious" experiences. Instead, this line of argumentation has led Asad to a whole constellation of investigations about the ways that the modern secular world empowers and constrains what embodied subjects learn to say or to do, how discourses are shaped, and how practices and affects are motivated. For example, in an essay on nationalism and Islam, Asad shows that the secular, read now as a power field, constrains the kind of challenges that can be made to it, only granting legitimacy to (1) religion as a set of private beliefs and worship practices and (2) religion as forms of public engagement that do not disrupt secular selves or communities (see 2003: 198-200).[8]

It is here that we can begin to see the fundamental difference between Asad's and Taylor's conceptions of the secular. While both work toward a positive conception of a non-neutral secular space, and both understand that this space shapes the kind of selves, communities, and

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[7] We might say that this reading is "telotic" rather than "archaic" in this sense: it is distinguished by what it seeks to unite and separate rather than whether it originates from an "authentic" essence.

[8] Interestingly, this point resonates quite deeply with the conclusions Casanova draws regarding the form through which modern, deprivatized religions can support the public sphere read as civil society. See, for example, his conclusion, where he writes: "it is ultimately only public religions at the level of civil society that are consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures" (1994: 219).

practices that are legitimated within it, Taylor does so with the aim of opening up a space for conversation, for thought – for the construction of a Rawlsian overlapping consensus or a Gadamerian fusion of horizons. Asad, on the other hand, does so in order to show how these very conversations have borders that must be constructed and maintained. Further, Asad's focus is on how these borders empower certain modes of life and disempower others – especially forms that the secular regards as incompatible with it (see 2011). This point is made not simply to claim that Taylor's project is "optimistic" while Asad's is "realistic." Instead, it is to note that their attempts to understand how one might act within or resist the power of the secular are quite distinct.

For Taylor, resolutions to the dilemmas constitutive of the immanent frame may come from within the frame itself. People, in other words, have the opportunity to use the accomplishments of modernity – accomplishments like authenticity, human rights, the nation state, etc. – to reshape the very cage within which we are constrained. Asad is less sanguine. While he understands that Taylor ought not be subjected to the same sort of ahistorical, ungenealogical critique he lodged against Geertz (see 2012: 48), Asad still holds that Taylor is too focused on a Western, Christian conception of belief. "At the end of [*A Secular Age*] one gets the clear sense," writes Asad, "that for Taylor a reconstituted Christianity would preserve the virtues of liberal modernity without its malaise" (2012: 48-49). Asad's critique, and this is the key to understanding their debate, is that while Taylor recognizes that the modern social imaginary is non-neutral, he seeks to affirm what is good in it rather than challenge it for what it excludes.

In other words, the focus on, say, authenticity in individual and communal forms still submits to the version of the (religious) self that is permitted by the power-regime called secularity. And this is important because certain other forms of religious practice – forms like those taken by Danish Muslim immigrants, as described by Jennifer E. Veninga in her paper in this volume, for example – are excluded as irrational and often made invisible. So, while Taylor is trying to preserve the best virtues of liberal modernity (see 1994: 25-74), Asad forces us to reckon with what communities, traditions, and persons must sacrifice in order to in-habit – or, rather, to be inhabited by – these liberal virtues. Let us say a few words about why Asad thinks this is the case before turning to his own hopes for a resolution to the problems of the secular power-regime, and then to how this furthers the aim of our essay to think the practice of secularity.

The central reason Asad is so attentive to the extent to which Taylor's immanent frame constrains religious life-forms is because he is concerned about two things: the first of which is that the kind of religion permitted by secularity is unable to contribute to solving the present crises of liberal capitalist democracies. Asad might say that Taylor's search for fullness is unable to resolve the malaises of modernity. Asad is suspicious that the fragility that characterizes secular performances has become an engine that drives (neo-)liberal capitalist democracies. "What if liberal democracy," Asad asks, "continually disrupts the conditions on which what Taylor calls 'the sense of fullness' depends?" (2012: 51). Asad's first concern, then, is that liberal democracy feeds on the very fragilities that the immanent frame produces – indeed,

that this is precisely why this particular religious formation is permitted by the secular power structure.[9]

Asad's second concern is that acceding to a version of religion acceptable to the secular power regime means becoming a different kind of self – a secular self rather than any other kind. This second concern leads directly to two of the research trajectories that Asad pursues in hopes that they will reveal capacities for resisting the secular power regime: thinking either (1) through communal action and ritual or (2) through the body and the senses.

Regarding ritual and collective action, Asad has been persistent in asking how can "respect for individuals be ensured and conditions be fostered that nurture 'collective ways of life'" (2003: 178). Is it possible to construct conditions, he wonders, that do not turn the persons who inhabit them into covert secular agents? Part of his attempt to answer such a question has been to focus "on what it takes to live particular ways of life continuously, co-operatively, and unselfconsciously" (2003: 178).[10] The other research trajectory attends to bodily practices and to how these embodied practices construct our sensorium. Along this path Asad's attempt has been to carve out ways of identifying how sense-capacitation can build sensibilities that are distinct from belief structures. In his words, "instead of approaching such behavior in terms of belief . . . one might enquire into how the bodily senses are cultivated or how they take shape in a world that can't be humanly controlled" (2012: 54).

Both of these possible paths out of the constraints of the secular-as-power-regime are attentive to the subtle ways that the secular seduces persons to accept its constraints. And Asad – like many who feel the winds of belief pushing us now to one interpretation, now to another – knows how difficult this offer can be to resist. "Market and political seduction in modern secular society are not always irresistible," he has said, "but the resistance, to be effective, requires stubborn religious conviction" (2011: 300). The question with which Asad leaves us is whether this conviction may be read not as a set of ideological religious beliefs sealed off from rational discourse, but as either (1) traditional collective action or (2) bodily practices and sense-capacitation.

We have had to burrow deeply into the critical dialogue between Taylor and Asad. Now we must ask how this has benefited our current effort to construct a conception of how the secular is performed. From Taylor we saw that performing secularity within the immanent frame, meant enacting fragile interpretations; it meant displaying – in the act of interpreting and explaining one's own experiences – the fragility of one's commitments (which, ironically, can also take the form of a stubborn refusal to face that very fragility). To this a critical synthesis of Asad allows us attend to how secular performances are not just interpretational enactments of a social imaginary, but embodied realities. That is, long before any interpretational display of fragility has been made, secular performances are embodied within

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[9] See Juergensmeyer, who argues that social and political tensions today are imagined as confrontations between secularism and religion precisely because the secular order "marginalizes religious values, practices, and identities and creates a potential scapegoat for cultural frustrations" (185).

[10] It is with regard to such concerns that Asad might become a surprising resource for those who read tradition and tradition-ing in a MacIntyrean manner as, for example, David McPherson does in his essay found in this volume.

particular communities. Our sensorium has been capacitated by secular disciplines, and our audial, tactile, and olfactory responses have been conditioned long before secularity becomes a reflexive interpretation or self-conscious practice. As behavioral psychology has shown, we have reactions of disgust or approval well before a cognitive reaction.[11] What our turn to Asad shows, in other words, is the extent to which secular performances lie between the sensing of a thing and the displaying of what has been sensed. It helps us to see how it is that in the act of interpreting the sensed response one has to an object one is, at the same time, performing and constituting one's own secular self.

Alexander: Performing the Embodied Secular Imaginary

The above comparative and synthetic work on Taylor and Asad has provided a firm grasp on secularity, even intimating how secularity is enacted. But a full conceptualization of performance and performativity in a secular context is still lacking. Such a concept can, however, be found in sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's work on cultural pragmatics.[12] By "cultural pragmatics" Alexander means the social processes by which actors display the meaning of a social situation for others.[13] A review of Alexander's cultural pragmatics will not only provide a concept of performativity but also allow us to see the constraints that bind secular performances in their attempts to convey meaning.

Key to understanding the concept of performance is distinguishing it from action. Not all actions are performative. Instead, Alexander argues that actions "are performative insofar as they can be understood as communicating meaning to an audience" (2005: 2). In other words, a performance is a process by which a given actor displays "for others the meaning of their social situation" (2004: 529). It is in this context that we can see that a successful performance is one through which the definition of the situation being put forward by a given actor is taken as legitimate by an audience. That is, a successful performance is performatively powerful – it is a performance that enacts a situation structured as a given actor intended.

But how can such successful performances be understood? From what elements are they composed? To answer such questions Alexander turns to the kind of dramaturgical theory pioneered by Victor Turner (1969, 1974). Alexander concludes that every social performance is composed of six elements: (1) the actor, (2) the collective representations that define the symbolic references of the action, (3) the means of symbolic production deployed, (4) mis-en-scene, (5) the social power of the actor to project a given definition of the situation, and (6) the audience (2005: 4-5). The challenge for successful social performance has always been,

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[11] See Jonathan Haidt's work on moral reasoning as a post-hoc construction arising from quick, automatic evaluations rooted in social and cultural influences.

[12] It ought to be noted that Alexander's use of "performativity" differs significantly from the terminology of "performative utterances" coined by Austin. While for Austin performative utterances "do" something, such as confer a bachelor's degree at graduation, for Alexander, performances are power-laden and collaborative enactments of social meaning that go well beyond, although they certainly include, the spoken word.

[13] Alexander holds that cultural pragmatics is an analytical pair with cultural symbolics. This means that the putting of a meaning into practice is both tied to and yet analytically distinct from, the analysis of the relation between signs in a given cultural symbol system. As Alexander puts it, "cultural action puts texts into practice, but it cannot do so directly," that is, independently of cultural symbolics (Alexander and Mast: 5).

regardless of temporal or cultural context, to make these disparate elements invisible by fusing them together. That is, the aim of a performance is to allow the action to become fully "real" by synthesizing all of the aspects of a performance, thereby making the distance between audience and actor disappear and fusing the two together. As Alexander puts it, the aim of performance is "to make artifice seem natural" (2005: 5).

While there are strong echoes of Goffman's (1959, 1967) work[14] on the collaborative process of defining and mutually sustaining a given situation, Alexander's work, adds a diachronic element to the synchronic analysis noted above. With the addition of this diachronic element, performativity becomes helpful for our present project of conceptualizing secular performances. In early societies, Alexander contends, actors were more readily able to construct successful performances and thereby to communicate meaning collectively. This was because they shared a common "range of potential understandings" that governed social action, a range of understandings that was regularly communicated to the whole of society in its collective ritual practices (Alexander and Mast: 17). It is ritual, then, that serves as the quintessential example of successful performances. This means that, for Alexander, the less differentiated the society, the easier it is to achieve a fusion of the diverse action elements and for meaningful performances to be enacted. What has changed in the transition to modern societies, which have grown increasingly differentiated, "is that the centrality of such ritual processes has been displaced" (2004: 527).

The consequence of this displacement of the regular unification of the elements of cultural performance as found in ritual is that it becomes increasingly difficult to accomplish the fusion a successful performance requires. In Alexander's terminology, in the modern context the elements of social performance have become "de-fused" (2005: 6-8). What this means can be seen, for example, in noting that actors in a de-fused context are more likely to perform before audiences that do not possess the same set of collective representations or who are not familiar with the same means of symbolic production. In such a differentiated context, says Alexander, the "social actors who play ritual leaders have become defused from their roles, and audiences have become defused from ritual productions" (Alexander and Mast: 17). Rather than referring to the disappearance of the sacred or the disenchantment of the world, then, secularization read via performativity refers to a context of action. This secular context is one characterized by "differentiation rather than fusion" (Alexander and Mast: 8).[15]

Further, even though the context for action has changed, the aim of secular performances has remained the same: the successful projection of cultural meaning from actor to audience. This means that, as Alexander puts it, the "goal of secular performances" is the same as that of sacred performances, "to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance audience" (2004: 547). The challenge facing actors in this kind of context is, then,

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[14] In both of these works, Goffman attempts to delineate the ways that actors both collaborate in giving meaning to a situation and disrupt such efforts at meaning making.

[15] Justin Wilford, in his study of the post-suburban transformation of American Evangelicalism, *Sacred Subdivisions* (2012), also aligns de-fusion and secularity. He writes: "secularity is the state of widespread social and cultural de-fusion. It is an environment in which the background cultural-religious codes are no longer fused with shared narratives, symbols, and performative acts" (Wilford 2012, 14).

to somehow re-fuse the elements of performance for an audience that shares increasingly few of them.

Noting the challenge to the creation of "fused performances" in "complex societies" does not, however, mean that such performances do not occur (Alexander 2004: 537). Alexander points to two particular contexts in which they do. The first is within homogenous, primary groups such as the family, or particular kinds of religious or artistic communities, or, perhaps, gangs. These are groups that share enough context that the elements of social performance can be more readily fused. The second are those more rare, fleeting events in which the wider society – or at least a significant portion of it – is temporarily re-fused. In a secular society, however, Alexander holds that such rare moments of re-fusion allow "a kind of temporary recovery of the ritual process. It allows contemporaries to experience ritual because it stitches seamlessly together the disconnected elements of cultural performance" (2004: 548). Alexander has put this theory to the test primarily in political contexts, such as in analyses of the speeches of former President Barak Obama (2010).

A final point about the nature of performances is relevant for our purposes here: the way in which power is incorporated into it. For Alexander, in a de-fused context, actors must labor to make their performances powerful not only by reiterating the background narratives but by working to "sustain a productive relation to all the other elements of performance as well" (2005: 11-12). The difficulty of maintaining this relation to all six elements of performance shows why it is that, within a differentiated, secular context, power is comparatively unstable and powerful collective performances comparatively rare. It also shows precisely how it is that secular performances can fail: because actors have been unable to "sew back together" one or another of the particular elements that make a performance connect seamlessly (2004: 529).

Alexander's work on performativity, then, has added a number of tools to our present effort to construct a concept of secular performances. It has shown that performances are collective affairs, dependent not only on an actor, but on an audience. It has shown why it is increasingly difficult to make collective definitions of the situation hold over time and across context. And it has given us conceptual tools for describing how performances can be both successful and unsuccessful – in particular, that performances fail when actors are unable to re-fuse the de-fused elements, elements increasingly not shared by the audience before whom they are being enacted.

Conclusion: A Concept of Secular Performances

In conclusion we can ask: what results has this effort at concept construction born? Like all concepts this one will both reveal and conceal, and as such it ought to be held lightly and used where it is helpful. Nevertheless, we can now ask: what kinds of phenomena can the concept of secular performances bring to light? I argue that this concept can aid in highlighting three qualities: fragility, embodiment, and collectivity.

First, from Taylor's conception of secularity as social imaginary, we have seen that secular performances can be recognized by the cracks in the interpretations they offer. They are discourses and deeds that display their non-naïveté, that "I too could interpret my experience otherwise; I too live my commitments fragilely." Second, from Asad we have seen that secular performances are not first interpretations and then experiences, but rather they are embodied

experiences that compose a secular sensorium first. Active secular performances emerge from a secular sensorium that has been capacitated for certain modes of experience. And third, from Alexander we have conceptualized secular performativity as that kind of performance which begins from within a de-fused context, with the recognition that, for example, collective representations are in fact not at all collective – and that it is only by admitting this lack of coherence that collectively meaningful performances can be enacted.

What, then, are secular performances? What does it mean to perform secularity? If what we have shown above is accurate, we can say that secular performances are a certain *kind* of attempt to re-fuse the disparate elements of social action listed via Alexander above. Let us look briefly at two of these elements in particular: the second and the sixth. The second, collective representations, shows that secular performances are those that build upon secular symbol structures, in other words: upon the secular social imaginary of the immanent frame. This means that secular performances are those that attempt re-fusion within a context in which the collective representations referenced are taken to be non-naïve, alterable, contingent. Secular performances in this sense are those that attempt meaningful communication not by attempting to rebuild a common symbol system, but by admitting the disparity and difference, the fragility and de-fusion, of the set of collective representations in which both actor and audience are embedded. Secular performances are, in other words, those that attempt re-fusions in a reflexive, non-naïve mode. This leads us to the sixth element: audience.

Not only are secular performances those that attempt re-fusions by drawing upon a non-naïve set of collective representations, they are those performed before a disparate audience that recognizes that this is the case. Further, via Asad, this is a recognition that is sensed before it is thought. That this is the case means that limits are placed upon the kind of performances that can be meaningfully enacted. In other words, secular performances are those that attempt re-fusion precisely by *accepting* and *appealing to* the limits that secularity as a power-regime puts on possible action. This does not mean that these performances cannot be critical, disruptive of particular power regimes, but it does mean that they *will struggle to be disruptive of the secular regime that empowers them*. And this because to attempt otherwise means rupturing the secular sensorium that capacitates modes of experience and, very likely, thereby failing to re-fuse the elements of action and produce meaningful performances.

What we face here are the limits of the capacity of secular performances to be otherwise than secular within a de-fused, differentiated context. The paradox is this: performances in complex societies must be received and sustained by an audience possessing a secular sensorium in order to be successful. For this to happen, the collective representations appealed to must be the non-naïve, fragile symbols of the immanent frame. But even successful performances will, in such circumstances, only reaffirm the fragility of interpretations and the sensed capacities that already exist within both actors and audience. What this means is that this critical synthesis of Taylor, Asad, and Alexander has led not only to the construction of a concept that sheds light on secular performances, but also to a limning of the black edges beyond which that light fails to reach.

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