

Witkin III

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I am fortunate to have as my respondents two scholars who have made, and continue to make, important contributions to what Professor Alexander terms the “strong program” for a sociology of the aesthetic. They have responded in very different ways. Professor Atkinson has used the occasion to present [a personal commentary](#) on the sociological neglect of the aesthetic dimension and has explored the implications of recent thinking and ethnographic research that responds to that neglect by bearing upon issues that are linked to those I raise. Because Professor Atkinson’s paper does not directly address the arguments in my paper, I have been invited by the editors to reply specifically to the critical comments made by Professor Alexander in [his response to my work](#). The space allocated to me for my reply will only permit me to focus on his central argument to the exclusion of other points he makes.

Alexander develops a critique of my essay founded upon identifying what he holds to be two conflicting and contradictory positions concerning the autonomy, sensibility, and agency of the subject. What Alexander calls Witkin1 is the ‘good guy’ who “conceives of action in a non-rational way and who filters structural determinism via the understanding that is uniquely afforded the subject”. Witkin2 is the ‘bad guy’ who extinguishes the creative autonomy of the subject in favour of the determining power of the organization (or of capitalism) “to prepare the subject worker to acquiesce to organizational efficiency, to the soulless iron cage...of the utterly bureaucratic machine”. Alexander concludes that “the invigorating sense of actor subjectivity and the intriguing interest in the independence of the aesthetic order fades away...If this is so then the autonomy of the subject (Witkin1) is only apparent and the independence of the aesthetic order illusionary and epiphenomenal”.

The tenor of my thesis is to argue — against the grain of classical sociology — that the aesthetic dimension has been as key to the making of modern societies as it has been to the making of pre-modern societies. I have chosen the hard case provided by the paradigm of modern administrative systems as “rational-technical machineries” to argue the point. The rational and instrumental character of modern business and administration has, for many, given rise to the false conclusion that the aesthetic plays no part in the development of these systems. My concern has been to assert the opposite, namely that instrumental and economic forms are themselves an aesthetic achievement. Wherever discretion, skilfulness, integral order, and response flexibility

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inheres in organisational roles, the aesthetic dimension, as an intelligence of feeling, is called into play. The aesthetic, in this wider sense, is constitutive of the sensibility and agency required for skilful action. It represents an empowerment of the subject and of subjective process, but this claim has nothing to do with notions of ‘freedom of the individual’, ‘the good life’, ‘personal expression’, and so forth.

There are many aspects of organisational life that are disempowering. Classical sociology has dwelt on these at length. Alexander is implicitly referring to them in his designation of Witkin². They have included the de-skilling of workers and the maximisation of managerial control over every aspect of the labour process, with a corresponding diminution of the control exercised by workers over performance — the oft’ claimed reduction of workers to the status of automatons and to appendages of the ‘machine’. Habituation, alienation, and all elements contributing to organisational an-aesthesia are real enough, and my arguments do not amount either to a denial of these aspects of organisational life nor to a claim that the aesthetic dimension of organisational life is some kind of antidote for them.

However, the dystopian paradigm of organisational control, with its claims concerning the disempowerment of lower echelon workers as subjects, (Taylorism), only tells part of the story. The associated development of managerial and administrative functions and the concentration of skilful agency within the higher reaches of the organisation has meant that the organisational process is delivered in a different way by workers who make up the ‘salaried staff’ as distinct from those who are ‘wage labourers’. The former status presupposes a certain, albeit limited, degree of autonomy and responsibility, or commitment and identification. At this level at least, the aesthetic dimension of organisational life comes into play, disciplining the ‘presence’ of actors and driving organisational process in the opposite direction, towards an empowerment of the subject (surely not identical with the ‘empowerment of the individual’ and certainly not with ‘freedom from constraint’). The organisational process is carried in the sensibility and agency of organisational members and is realised there, in and through a specific set of aesthetic relations (an “aesthetic imperative”) and an aesthetic intelligence (an “intelligence of feeling”). It is a process that I have elsewhere called “subject-reflexive” to contrast it with the “subject-reactive” behaviour associated with the disempowerment paradigm.

It makes sense to see the organisational aesthetic as having its locus and origin in the situated practises and understandings of members responding (subject-) reflexively to the demand characteristics of the action situations in which they work. The fact that the organisations individuals enter have their aesthetics already formed does not make this less true. In any skilled performance involving creative choices, the subject must produce the sensibility and agency with which those actions get done; if realising the existing organisational aesthetic no longer suffices for this purpose then the demands of practice alone should determine that the organisational aesthetic will undergo change. The ‘presence’ cultivated in organisational subjects is what I identify with the integrity or coherence of the organisational process. While there are aspects of this presence that are specific to subjects working within particular sites and specialisms within the organisation, there are some elements of organisational presence that remain more or less invariant across the organisation. It is these invariant elements that constitute the organisation’s underlying aesthetic code.

The concept of a society or an organization as a collective, shaping and controlling the actions of its members, is neither incompatible nor in conflict with the idea of

reflexive subjects for whom the organisation is a domain of practice and **whose practice is an integral part of that shaping and controlling**. It can be argued that under modern conditions, organisational control over instrumental outcomes is increasingly secured by reliance upon subject-reflexive (subject-empowerment) controls as opposed to subject-reactive (subject-disempowerment) controls.

All this would be more or less irrelevant to Alexander's Witkin¹. He appears to be a version of the free creative spirit of the Romantic era. I am certainly in agreement with Alexander concerning the need for a “strong program” with respect to a sociology of the aesthetic. In pursuit of such a program I would never have entertained Alexander's Witkin¹, who is a ‘nice guy’ but clearly has no legs to stand upon. There is more to recommend his Witkin² who is at least a man of business who understands, like Andre Gide, that the aesthetic is born of constraint and dies of freedom. Personally, however, I have elected to move beyond this polarity, pinning all my hopes for making a contribution to Alexander's strong program on (let's call him) Witkin³...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Witkin is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Sociology & Philosophy, University of Exeter, and Faculty Fellow at the Centre for Cultural Sociology, Yale University. He is an Associate Editor of *Sociological Theory*. His main areas of research include sociology of the arts, art, agency and social formation, the arts in education, and the aesthetic dimension of organisational cultures. His publications include *The Intelligence of Feeling* (1974), *Art and Social Structure* (1995), *Adorno on Music* (1998), and *Adorno and Popular Culture* (2002). He is currently completing an historically grounded study on art, agency, and modernity, (to be published by SAGE, TCS Book Series).