

Action and Event

The Social Theoretical Precursors of Performance Theory

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There are some debates in theatre and performance studies to which we return, again and again, to tell the story of our field. Well-known polemics regarding whether “theatre” or “performance” should delineate our proper subject matter help us define our scholarly work. The “ontology” debate—the question of whether performance subsists in fleeting sensory interactions, living only in the present, or whether it is always already mediated, or remains as much as it disappears—grants semantic unity to an otherwise ambiguous term. But our work carries forward another field-defining question, one that is less well understood. It concerns performance and social change: the extent to which performance can meaningfully alter social relationships at the systemic level. The latent theoretical tension underlying this question originates in the two major social theories that informed the idea of cultural performance in its earliest self-defining phase—those identified with Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx.

We understand that performance is a social activity. The notion that performance—defined for my purposes as a varied set of embodied cultural activities—creates, reproduces, and/or modifies social relations is the founding notion of performance studies. This idea, which we can call the “efficacy thesis,” was propounded with far-reaching influence by Richard Schechner. Schechner’s early thinking on the relationship between theatre and ritual was informed by an eclectic set of sources.¹ After meeting Victor Turner, Schechner absorbed a functionalist view of culture common to the areas of 20th-century sociocultural anthropology where Durkheim held sway. For British cultural anthropologists including Victor Turner, the social theories of Durkheim (especially) and Marx provided fundamental premises regarding the nature of social order and the potentials of social action. They supported the view that cultural practices affect the broader field of social relations. But the social theoretical background of our field has fallen out of view. We still theorize performance using concepts—such as social drama and repetition—that emerged from the

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1. Among the inspirations of Schechner’s thinking on theatre and ritual prior to his meeting of the minds with Victor Turner were hypotheses on the origins of drama, anthropological theories of play, Erving Goffman’s social psychology, and the anthropologist Milton Singer’s studies of Sanskrit traditions in the modern world. While the “structural” Durkheim that filtered through the structural functionalist and British traditions of sociocultural anthropology is my emphasis in this article, the performance theory of the 1970s and 1980s to which Schechner and Turner contributed most represents a convergence of several distinct strands of Durkheimian ideas. These include a more “radical” vein infused with Nietzschean notions of tragedy (Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois) as well as a latent “cultural” tradition that worked its way through semiotic and structuralist theories of the symbolic realm of subjectivity (Claude Lévi-Strauss) (see Alexander and Smith 2005:3, 9–11).

functionalist premises of mid-20th-century cultural anthropology. We are as a group, however, surprisingly unaware of the social theories that informed this anthropological tradition, and thus also of the implicit beliefs about the nature of interconnected human life that they entail.

Our incognizance of performance theory's social theoretical background, however, has not prevented the theoretical tension rooted in these legacies from occasionally rising to the surface. In 1982, Turner responded harshly to "armchair Marxist" critics of cultural anthropology, dismissing them as power-obsessed moralists (1982:8–9). For Turner, Marxist critics such as Jairus Banaji (a critic of British anthropology; see Banaji 1970) failed to grasp the complexity of social life witnessed by participant observers, like himself, who lived among indigenous people in Africa, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the colonized world. Turner was more concerned with the reputation of British anthropology than with the theoretical antinomy between Durkheim and Marx. But his broadside provides a rare view of the two contrasting perspectives on social order and historical change that underlay performance studies discourse. Nearly 20 years later in a plenary talk at the 1999 American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference, later published in *Theater*, David Savran cited this passage while observing that performance studies suffered from an "undertheorization of the social" (2001:94). For Savran, Turner's invective helped explain the field's neglect of economic analysis and its wispy commitments to historically grounded claims. While the field's increasing text-centric "aestheticism" could be explained by the gravitational pull of poststructuralism, its "fatal choice," according to Savran, was alignment with the idealist, atemporal, and conservative inclinations of symbolic anthropology. What Savran didn't state outright was that these criticisms of Turner's symbolic anthropology are also common knocks on Turner's primary sociological influence, Durkheim (Ortner 1984:128–32).

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There is an intellectual history that links performance theory to the legacies of Durkheim and Marx, and while it is known that social theory was an important precursor to performance studies, this relationship has never been systematically examined (Carlson [1996] 2018:6, 9; Davis and Marx 2021:7; Shepherd 2016:21). Classical social theory entered the anthropological tradition that

would eventually give rise to performance studies at two junctures: structural functionalism and the "Manchester school" of social anthropology. The most prevalent origin stories of performance studies underassess the role Durkheim, especially, played in laying down our conceptual and methodological foundations. An oft-cited narrative credits Erving Goffman—along with other idiosyncratic mid-20th-century thinkers—for reinvigorating the theatrical metaphor for social life. But this way of telling the story of performance studies neglects the sociological backstory of British anthropology, which was a much more significant intellectual precursor (Carlson [1996] 2018:32–61). Durkheim's theories of social cohesion and religious life entered British anthropology largely thanks to the work of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), the main developer of the structural-functionalist research paradigm. Structural-functionalist methods and premises formed the core training of later figures who supplied the founding insights of performance studies. Turner, as is well known, was trained in structural-functionalist methods. But Erving Goffman, too, inherited functionalist and Durkheimian ideas through his dissertation advisor Lloyd Warner, who was a protégé of Radcliffe-Brown (Smith 2006:31–32; Goffman 1959:26–27, and 1971:vii). It is primarily through cultural anthropology, and foremost through Turner's work with Schechner, that Durkheim's views of the social significance of culture became foundational, if implicit, premises for early performance studies. But this collaboration was also the conduit through which the most pronounced strain of Marxist thought infused early performance theory.

Durkheim's dominance in British cultural anthropology helped keep Marxist thought at the margins of performance studies after Turner and Schechner's collaboration began in 1976. But at the Manchester School of anthropology, headed by Turner's mentor Max Gluckman (1911–1975), Marx

was taken seriously even as Durkheim was considered foundational. This aspect of Turner's scholarly training provides important context for one of the distinctive characteristics of performance studies: its activist orientation. Performance scholars and artists possess what Marvin Carlson has called a "materialist concern for exposing the operations of power and oppression" ([1996] 2018:214) and emphasize cultural performances that subvert norms, or offer "gestures of social resistance" (McKenzie 2001:8–9). One might propose that this tendency originated in Schechner's participation in the Black freedom movement and his antiwar activism, or in the quasi-political live art organized by Allan Kaprow and members of the Fluxus group.² But as a matter of intellectual history, the Durkheim/Marx tension was present both within Gluckman's methods of social and cultural analysis and, in an attenuated way, within Turner's theory of symbolic anthropology.

Performance theory was initially explored by Schechner in "Approaches" (1966) and then developed from 1967 through the 1970s at New York University by Schechner, his colleagues, and their students. This work was further advanced by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who came to NYU in 1981 and became the chair of the Performance Studies department.³ In its early phase of development, performance theory inherited a composite of Durkheimian and Marxian social theoretical tendencies. The dominant strain, which drew from Durkheim, made its way into early performance theory mainly by way of Turner's Manchester School training, and found some support in Erving Goffman's ritual model of social interaction, for which dramaturgical forms serve as regulative features of a "normative ordering of interactional conduct" (Smith 2006:32). The weaker, Marxian strain can also be traced to the Manchester School, and was bolstered by the Black freedom, antiwar, and anticolonial protest activities in which Schechner participated in the 1960s and 1970s. The tension between Durkheimian idealism and Marxian materialism thus underwrote divergent views of the social power of performance within the same body of theory. Performance appeared as both the normative citation of previous actions, and as a creative practice with world-changing potential. At stake in this contradiction was the matter of whether performance should be understood mainly along functionalist lines—as normative action within processes that mediate conflict, reproduce social structure, and generate repetitive forms of social life—or mainly as instrumental action that, depending upon contingent historical circumstances, possesses the emergent power to profoundly alter social structures.

The tension between Durkheimian and Marxian influences continues to affect our ways of thinking about performance. This manifests itself both in the self-reflective discourse of the field and in our conceptual vocabulary. As faith in the socially consequential nature of performance and the progressive activist leanings of the field became entrenched, certain ironies could not escape attention. Two years after Savran suggested that his peers had abandoned materialist social analysis for poststructuralist aestheticism, Jon McKenzie observed that opposed meanings had become attached to the term "performance" at the turn of the 21st century (2001). Performance had become a buzzword in both corporate organizational management and in edgy live art. Moreover, performance scholarship had also coalesced around a "liminal-norm," wherein "the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance" had become "normative" in scholarly practice (McKenzie 2001:50). While Turner's fieldwork among the Ndembu people in 1953–54 indicated that symbolically laden embodied communication tended to "reinforce existing social structures," by the 1990s, performance scholars had recontextualized liminality, using the idea to interpret but also to

2. Schechner identifies Kaprow, along with Goffman, among the figures who inspired his early theoretical writing about performance. While Kaprow's Happenings are commonly understood as reactions to the Vietnam War, in a 1967 interview for a Pasadena Art Museum catalog Kaprow himself disavowed any political objectives (in Ho 2019:29n54).

3. Michael Kirby and Brooks McNamara contributed significantly to the intellectual exchange at New York University in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Peggy Phelan, Diana Taylor, James Amankulor, and others joined. A comprehensive history of performance theory would also discuss the distinct research and teaching of Dwight Conquergood and colleagues at Northwestern University. Because Conquergood also embraced Turner's symbolic anthropology and developed ethnographic methods of study drawn in part from British anthropology, some of the same tendencies and theoretical tensions that I explain here can also be traced through the Northwestern tradition (Shepherd 2016:163).

“construct” objects of inquiry that featured subversive creative activity (McKenzie 2001:50–51). Forgotten was the functionalist notion that liminal rites and rituals of rebellion can be understood to shore up the very relationships and systems of domination that they ostensibly challenge.

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The tension between Durkheimian and Marxian thinking helps explain the efficacy thesis and its discontents. But it also bears implications for key terms that shape the way we think about the social ramifications of performance. Contemporary theorists of performance, including Diana Taylor and Peggy Phelan, commonly use “action” and “event” to describe performance phenomena. While these terms entered the performance studies lexicon

from various sources, they designated important concepts for Manchester School anthropology. Within this context, to think of performance as action suggests a Durkheimian framework that emphasizes subjective factors such as internalized norms, values, ideals, and feelings. Action also suggests—inasmuch as it is derived from this voluntaristic perspective—a functionally integrated and self-equilibrating society within which social order is achieved and conflict contained as individuals cite and repeat preexisting models.

The language of events is just as prevalent in performance theory (Camp 2018). While Schechner’s theoretical writing suggests that he adopted the language of events from neo-avantgarde art practices, I will argue that the term “event” in performance studies discourse also points to a relatively neglected feature of our intellectual history (Schechner 1966:26). Max Gluckman’s social anthropology constructed discrete phenomena in the stream of social life as “events,” and defined them as “social situations” arising from actors’ responses to both moral and material factors. For Gluckman, then, the discourse of “events” was closely related to a Marxian facet of his thinking, one that bore the ambition of developing a scientific theory of historical change. To describe performance as an event, therefore, suggests an emphasis upon objective social circumstances over subjective factors. In contrast to Durkheim, Marx stressed the determinative force of history, locating human action in a configuration of real material forces, rather than in an ideal realm of moral choice. Gluckman, while fundamentally Durkheimian and functionalist in his view of social order, nonetheless embraced Marx’s emphasis on political economy and the importance of contingent historical circumstances in determining not only action, but also social structure. The concept of the event as used in 21st-century performance theory, moreover, retains connotations of particularity and uniqueness, rather than repetition. This suggests an affinity, however remote or attenuated, with Gluckman’s efforts to incorporate a sociological theory of historical change into anthropological research methods.

Structural Functionalism

The theoretical tension we inherit from sociocultural anthropology emerged, originally, in the contrasting social theories of Marx and Durkheim. Each thinker reacted distinctly to rapid industrialization in Europe and to the political movements of their respective times (Giddens 1971:199–204). Marx was committed to the necessity of a socialist revolution. He believed history was driven by changes in modes of economic production and that contradictions inherent in capitalist societies would bring about epochal transformation. Durkheim, being more aloof from actual politics, was less interested in conflict and historical mutation than in the ways societies bound themselves together and produced the patterns of social life. This helps explain the emphasis he placed on factors that allow societies to cohere, such as morals, shared ideas, and religion. On Durkheim’s account, therefore, alienation (*anomie*) and conflict were ameliorable symptoms of intensified divisions of labor and social differentiation in complexifying societies.

Marx and Durkheim’s differences informed a tension among distinct theories of social action that ran through 20th-century sociology (Alexander 1982b:299; Smith 2020:186–94). This tension stemmed from the contrast between Durkheim’s “idealist” view of social action, for which individual

action is voluntary—a matter of normative decisions rooted in affective and moral inner life—and Marx’s later materialism, for which actions must be understood instrumentally, as the outcome of human beings responding rationally to objective realities in specific historical conditions (Alexander 1982b:65–67).⁴ In his later work Durkheim explained human action as a result of subjective factors that originate socially: collective representations that approach objective moral truths. Despite his progressive and reformist beliefs, Durkheim has been perceived as conservative because in his view societies attain stability under the guidance of norms that arise from an ongoing universalization of morals (Smith 2020:61, 214–18). Marx, by contrast, worked from the conviction that it was material reality that acted upon minds. Historical social forms should be understood, in his view, as arrangements springing from underlying economic relationships. These relationships ultimately shape the conditions under which people act and their understanding of their place in the world.

The British cultural anthropology in which Turner was trained incorporated Durkheim’s theories of the social order. The supposition that cultural practices do not merely reflect but rather participate in forming social relations originated with structural-functionalist anthropology, exemplified by Radcliffe-Brown. In contrast to the pioneering ethnographer Bronisław Malinowski, whose distinct functionalism viewed culture as serving the needs of individuals, Radcliffe-Brown believed that societies could be analytically described by attending to interrelated and interdependent elements within them. For Radcliffe-Brown, “cultural” elements such as norms, traditions, and customs, as well as economic and other institutions such as kinship and religion, functioned together to serve the needs of the whole society (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:5). Radcliffe-Brown drew from the tradition of French social thought leading back to Montesquieu, and was a prime vector introducing Durkheimian theory into British anthropology. In brief, structural functionalists understood societies as discrete systems with interdependent component parts—such as institutions and customs—which they sought to explain in terms of their “function.” For Radcliffe-Brown, the “first step in an attempt to understand a regular feature of a form of social life [...] is to discover its place in the system of which it is a part” (1952:12). This formed the basis of a pervasive set of ethnographic research methods, and remained an influential paradigm through the first half of the 20th century, inspiring Talcott Parsons and other sociological “systems theorists” as well as leading cultural anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas. In the 1920s and ’30s, Radcliffe-Brown applied Durkheim’s notion of social integration and the importance of religious life to the anthropological study of traditional societies in the Andaman Islands and Australia. The elements of social life Radcliffe-Brown analyzed encompassed what we now call performances. Radcliffe-Brown, for instance, understood “cultural process” as a specific feature of human social life constituted by “the transmission of learnt ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (5).

Among the inheritors of the structural-functionalist legacy were Max Gluckman and his student Victor Turner, who did not so much reject its premises as turn their attention to the repetitive dynamism that sustained social order. This can be seen in the functionalist views Gluckman and Turner harbored regarding the way dynamic communicative processes contributed to social order and continuity. For Radcliffe-Brown, just as in physiology the “function” of an organ refers to the mutually dependent relationship between the form and the life process of that organism, social systems and their component features could be analyzed in terms of “the interconnection between the social structure and the process of social life” (1952:12). Social structures such as kinship bonds are presumed to exist as interconnections that facilitate processes necessary to the whole society, and thus to the persistence of the structures themselves. One of Gluckman’s major contributions to sociocultural anthropology was his pivot to analyze the processes themselves. For example, Gluckman’s *The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia)* ([1955] 1967) is a foundational work of legal anthropology.

4. This sense of the dichotomy between “idealism” and “materialism” is taken from Jeffrey Alexander’s interpretation of classical sociological theory (1982b). But Durkheim can also be considered an “idealist” in another sense, by virtue of his indirect engagement with Kantian and Hegelian philosophy (Tekiner 2002).

During the 1930s, a critical period in his intellectual development, Gluckman came to see cultural processes as a vital part of dynamic social continuity.⁵ This turn to process was pivotal not only to the Manchester School under Gluckman's later leadership, but also, eventually, to Schechner's performance theory, when ritual would become a paradigmatic category of repetitive cultural practice. Gluckman's inspiration to move beyond the synchronic analysis typical of structural functionalism came, in part, from a time-worn social scientific notion: the organic metaphor. A series of lectures given by Radcliffe-Brown in 1939 introduced Gluckman to Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of the social sciences. Whitehead argued that nature itself was a set of evolving processes. As Robert J. Gordon notes, Whitehead influenced Gluckman "to use the organic analogy, not in the Durkheimian sense of a closed entity, but rather as a continuously emerging living process" (2018:138). In a letter to a colleague in 1973, Gluckman explained that this organicist insight suggested to him that anthropology as a discipline sought a "particular pattern of interdependencies between a passage of events" (in Gordon 2018:137–38).

By analyzing cultural processes involving ritual, Turner followed Gluckman's example. Gluckman himself wrote that while Turner's study of the social life of the Ndembu people "emphasizes how endemic schism is in village life, he shows how the pattern of social relations endures" ([1965] 2017:238). Turner, for his part, explicitly acknowledged that his social drama schema described stabilizing processes that contribute to the persistence of social structure.

Processual analysis assumes cultural analysis, just as it assumes structural-functional analysis, including more static comparative morphological analysis. It negates none of these, but puts dynamics first. (1974:44)

Turner did not deny the importance of structure in permitting one to recognize order in the flux of social life. "Structures," he writes, "are the more stable aspects of action and interrelationship" (1974:36). Directly citing Durkheim, Turner explains that such structures exist as shared mental contents: "ideas, images, concepts, and so on." These are, explicitly, the elements of group consciousness—collective representations—that Durkheim had posited.

In the intersubjective collective representations of group, one would discover "structure" and "system," "purposive action patterns" and, at deeper levels, "categorical frames." These individual and group structures, carried in people's heads and nervous systems, have a steering function, a cybernetic function, in the endless succession of social events, imposing on them the degree of order they possess, and, indeed, dividing processual units into phases. (1974:36)

But linking the subjective conditions of social actions to more or less stable collective representations was not Turner's only Durkheimian notion. He would also argue, as Durkheim had, that the symbolic content of ritual gatherings motivates participants to take action. Turner put it simply: "Symbols instigate social action" (1974:55). Ritual symbols, "under optimal conditions, may reinforce the will of those exposed to them to obey moral commandments, maintain covenants, repay debts, keep up obligations, avoid illicit behavior" (55). Turner, in other words, worked out cultural mechanisms to explain what Durkheim had claimed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: that the function of religion was not to make us think, but to make us act. Durkheim had claimed that the ideas articulated in religious gatherings ("cults") do not "enter into us and blend into our inner life" when "we think about them," but only when "we place ourselves under their influence." Durkheim concluded that it was not merely action, but repeated action, that granted ritual its power in social reality: "In short, we must act; and so we must repeat the necessary acts as often as it is necessary to renew their effects" ([1912] 1995:420). While Durkheim's statements must not be taken for a fully formed theory of performance, he recognized that ritual did not merely disseminate common beliefs but also played a role in guiding social action.

5. Robert J. Gordon describes this time in Gluckman's career as a moment of "intellectual ferment" involving intensive thought about the methodological and epistemological questions at the foundation of social anthropology (2018:135–38).

Especially concerning the problem of theorizing social action and change, Gluckman, and to a lesser extent Turner, drew inspiration from Marx. However, both figures were rightly identified with the structural-functionalist and Durkheimian school, not least by their critics on the Marxist left. Structural functionalism lost prominence in the middle decades of the 20th century, due partly to criticism that it obscured power relations within the “tribal” societies of Australia, Africa, and elsewhere that had supplied its case studies. The figure of white participant observers “gazing down” from positions of privilege came to appear less and less benign (Smith 2020:158). As resistance to colonial enterprises flared, critiques intensified. In 1970, Jairus Banaji argued that structural functionalism had been less a genuine social theory than a set of methodological precepts borne by colonial agents. These methods morphed into an idea “which seemed to account for the survival of primitive formations in their *traditional* forms” (1970:73–74). This supported the illusion that colonized peoples were stuck in a repetitive temporality outside of history—a view that ideologically supported British and other colonizing and imperial powers. Banaji charged that rather than perceiving indigenous societies in specific historical conditions, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski viewed them as self-equilibrating systems produced—like organisms—by an immemorial series of historical accidents (1970:73).

Far from exempting the anticolonialist Manchester School from this critique, Banaji applied it to them without reservation. While acknowledging that Gluckman had challenged orthodox functionalism by examining conflict in Southern African societies, Banaji argued that Gluckman ultimately viewed such antagonism within a self-stabilizing system. The history of native Africans thus became “a repetitive, circular history, a history void of any historical necessity, a non-history.” Turner was dismissed in turn as merely transposing Gluckman’s “circular diachrony on to the ritual plane, conceptualizing social life as an endless ‘dialectical’ interplay of structure and anti-structure” (Banaji 1970:75). For Banaji, Turner was the product of an ideologically blinkered anthropology from which history was excluded from the outset, since the concept of structure in functionalist method served to exclude precisely the sorts of social antagonisms that in fact explain historical change.

In his 1982 book, *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner would respond to the charge that he and other cultural anthropologists in the structural-functionalist tradition were blind to historical change and material power relations:

At first I was taught by British “structural-functionalists,” descendants not only of the British empiricist philosophers, Locke and Hume, but of the French positivists, Comte and Durkheim. Armchair Marxists have accused those of us who lived close to the “people” in the 1950s in African, Malaysian, and Oceanian villages, often for several years, of “using” structural functionalism to provide the “scientific” objectification of an unquestioned ideology (colonialism in pre-war anthropology, neoimperialism now). These dour modern “Roundheads”—an infra-red band on the world’s spectrum of Moral Majorities—have become so obsessed with power that they fail to sense the many-leveled complexity (hence irony and forgivability) of human lives experienced first hand. (1982:8–9)

Turner’s response to leftist critics of structural functionalism may indeed indicate alignment with his Durkheimian roots and an estrangement from Marxist politics. This is borne out by Turner’s personal political trajectory. As a young man, he was a member of the Communist Party. Like many others, he left the party in 1956, after the Soviet Union brutally put down the Hungarian Revolution.

But what Schechner and other early performance theorists derived from Manchester School anthropology was not unalloyed structural functionalism, complete with the primitivist baggage Banaji and other critics ascribed to that way of thinking. For one matter, Turner’s own relationship with Marxist ideas was complex. He cited Marx repeatedly in his theoretical writing, crediting him among the sources of his sociogenic theory of time (1974:24; [1969] 2017:83). However intriguing we may find Turner’s political commitments, serious engagement with Marxist thought in the immediate intellectual background of early performance theory is found in Gluckman’s research innovations.

Gluckman and Marx

Despite pioneering approaches to the study of culture that helped inspire Turner's symbolic anthropology, Max Gluckman is not widely known in performance studies.⁶ But he was an important figure both for the prehistory of performance theory and for a broader turn in 20th-century anthropology. One recent assessment holds that Gluckman was pivotal in reorienting anthropology away from its primitivist roots. Grahame Foreman argues that, far from relegating the indigenous people of Africa and the broader colonized world to a perpetual status outside of history, Gluckman showed their participation in ongoing historical change (Foreman 2013:2–3). The structural-functionalist methods Gluckman learned had been implicitly devised in order to reconstruct the state of indigenous societies before contact with Europeans, but when directed toward the contemporary scene of South Africa and Rhodesia in the 1930s, they plainly showed that colonized non-Europeans were sophisticated modern subjects. Following up on the methodological innovations that led to this discovery, Gluckman's Manchester group later worked to both reconcile functional analysis with historical research and equip it with a robust theory of social change.

Directing anthropological methods toward the contemporary world led also to a concomitant notion: that industrialized societies were also “saturated with social and cultural difference,” their cultural practices incorporating elements of ritual (Foreman 2013:1). This way of interpreting the intercultural features of modern social life in various localities came to distinguish 20th-century British social anthropology, and it provided a fundamental premise to performance studies. Gluckman's contributions to social anthropology anticipated other core elements of performance studies as well. The field's abiding “materialist concern” carries forward Gluckman's anticolonialist convictions, and its continuing theoretical inquiry into the temporal aspects of social life (including the processual dimension of ritual, the repetitive and citational nature of social life, and the aesthetics of disappearance) were anticipated by Gluckman's efforts to reckon with social change. Gluckman's investigation into the phenomenon of social change involved a serious engagement with Marxist thought. To be sure, Durkheimian functionalism supplied the basic social theoretical premises for both Manchester School anthropology and Turner and Schechner's early performance theory. But Gluckman's research into the social structure of 1930s South Africa, in particular, shows that Marx also shaped this lineage. Gluckman is thus critical to understanding the theoretical tension around the problem of social change that persists in performance studies today.

The structural functionalism practiced by Gluckman's functionalist predecessors—mainly Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown—sought to model whole societies in terms of their organic functional interdependence. They were inclined, therefore, to see indigenous traditional societies as interdependent among themselves, and functionally independent from the European colonizing societies with which they had, in fact, become deeply intermeshed. Gluckman, by contrast, examined present, concrete social situations, rather than preconceived systemic models. He recognized that, by the 1930s, the different racial groups of South Africa formed a complex, interlinked social entity. Cross-cultural relationships were plainly determined in large part by economics, and equilibrium was sustained by the European colonizers' threat of force (Gluckman [1940] 1958:42). Acknowledging this reality necessitated a theory of society equipped to confront specific historical facts and less reliant upon abstract models. This helps explain Gluckman's interest in Marx, and by extension, his tendency to treat social and cultural life in terms of *events* brought about by objective, material conditions, rather than as formulaic *actions* attended primarily by moral and other subjective factors.

Gluckman's innovative methods and receptivity to Marx are evident in his early and influential essay, “Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand,” more commonly known as “The Bridge.” In this essay, published in parts between 1940 and 1942, Gluckman recounted events surrounding the ceremonial opening of a bridge near Mahlabatini in the north of South Africa on 7 January 1938. Gluckman attended the ceremony alongside both European administrators

6. Among the few who have cited Gluckman in performance scholarship in recent years are Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004:75, 293) and Elaine A. Peña (2017:12).

and Zulu leaders and laborers, and he described several interactions among members of different groups before, during, and immediately after the ceremony. Notably, Gluckman treated South Africa as a unified social system comprising several “colour groups” (though he dealt exclusively with white-black relations), and subsets within and across the major racial groups (for example “Pagans” and Christians, administrators and laborers). Only by recognizing that “Zulus and Whites were involved in a single social system,” could the interactions at the Malungwana bridge be understood (Gluckman [1967] 2017:xviii; see Gluckman [1940] 1958:9–10).

“The Bridge” shows signs of Gluckman’s emerging historical materialist perspective on colonialism in Africa. He foregrounded the economic interests that form social structure and pressure individual actions. Noting the presence of a “labour recruiter” for the Rand Gold Mines at the ceremony, he observed that the “economic integration of Zululand into the South African industrial and agricultural system dominates the social structure” ([1940] 1958:12–13). Orthodox structural-functional analysis emphasized factors—such as kinship ties—that differentiate individuals within ethnically homogenous social groups. For Gluckman, while such factors remained crucial to understanding the South African social system, they subsisted alongside the economic forces that bound the Europeans and native Africans in a set of oppositional and cooperative tensions. Their “mutual, if differential and separate, exploitation of natural resources” constituted “a material basis for the differentiation, and for the co-operation, between Zulu and European” ([1940] 1958:18).

Gluckman plainly pointed out the inequality between the European colonial administrators and entrepreneurs on one hand, and the Africans on the other: “They do not separate into equal groups of equal status: the Europeans are dominant” ([1940] 1958:13). He explained this inequality in economic terms. Despite class differences within each group, he identified the Europeans as “capitalists and skilled workers,” and the Zulu people as “unskilled peasants and labourers” (17). The racist system of colonial administration, coupled with capital’s need for exploitable labor, entangled the government in “contradictions from which it struggles to escape” (15). For instance, great numbers of Zulu men were recruited to work in mines far from home, but segregationist policy prevented them from resettling outside of designated reserves. Other contradictions emerged, such as when white officials in the reserves who have to apply the decisions of the government against the interests of the Zulu “become personally attached to their people,” and “occasionally stand for those inhabitants against the White group whose domination they represent” (24).

Gluckman’s materialist analysis of South African society went beyond his emphasis on economic relations. He portrayed the conflicts arising from these relations as intrinsic to the social structure rather than as a superficial challenge to an otherwise organic whole. For Gluckman, the “very conflicts, contradictions, and differences between the Zulu and White groups, and within them, and the factors overcoming these differences [...are] the structure of the Zulu-White community of Zululand” (26). White and Black South Africans found themselves in transient alignments across the color line on the basis of material interests, religious beliefs, and wealth disparity. Social cohesion is not achieved so much by the solidarity these cross-cutting ties produce as by the way that the “unequal opposition between the two colour-groups determines the mode of their co-operation” (26). In an insight that anticipates Erving Goffman’s analysis of face-to-face social interactions, Gluckman explained that individuals adjust their behavior to the situation, navigating modern society by taking cues from a shifting mix of imperatives:

The shifting membership of groups in different situations is the functioning of the structure, for an individual’s membership of a particular group in a particular situation is determined by the motives and values influencing him in that situation. Individuals can thus live coherent lives by situational selection from a medley of contradictory values, ill-assorted beliefs, and varied interests and techniques. (26)

Despite the structural-functional approach signaled in this language, the complex social realities of 1938 South Africa could not be portrayed within a timeless, repetitive cycle. Gluckman found that the societal contradictions imposed on individuals “through the pulls of different values and groups” were serious, and situations involving black-white relations were prevalent and

increasing (26). What he analyzed was a “temporary equilibrium” poised for significant, irreversible social change (26). Applying structural functionalist methods to the concrete social reality of South Africa revealed the need to equip social anthropology with a scientific theory of history. It was in this context that Gluckman first cited Marxist thought overtly. In a footnote, he posited that conflict and the overcoming of conflict, “fission and fusion,” were two aspects of the same ubiquitous social process, “c.f. the theories of dialectical materialism and Freud’s theory of ambivalence” (6). But Gluckman was not content to invoke such concepts. To understand the contemporary scene of South Africa, he explained, a sociologist had to “analyze the equilibrium of the African-White community at different times and show how successive equilibria are related to one another” (27).

Opening social anthropology up not just to time, but to history, required serious engagement with archives and other sources of historical data. In “The Bridge,” Gluckman included a historical survey of Zulu South Africa in which he characterized successive states of social equilibrium from the late 18th century (citing tribal histories) through the arrival of English settlers and Dutch-speaking Boer trekkers in the early 19th century. This aspect of “The Bridge” weakens Banaji’s

It is partly from the methods Gluckman presented in “The Bridge” that performance studies inherits a distinctive feature of its scholarly discourse: the notion of the performance “event.”

claim that Gluckman’s anthropology adopted an ahistorical model of societal function. According to Banaji, Gluckman’s “equilibrium model was the product of a transposition to the synchronic plane of an entirely vacuous, because intuitive, diachrony” (1970:74). But Gluckman engaged seriously with the history of the Zulu nation, which he characterized as a series of equilibria punctuated by migration, diplomacy, and warfare with neighboring peo-

ples. His historiographic imagination regards the future as an open field in which material forces and group dynamics interact in ways that fundamentally alter previously settled social structures.

The problem of generalizing the distinction between societies in a repetitive state and those in a period of major structural change would become a theme for Gluckman’s research over decades. Later, he would distinguish between the periodic “rebellions” of a stable society and the “revolutions” that result in thorough structural change (Gluckman [1965] 2017:xxi, 165). This way of formulating the distinction was present already in “The Bridge.” In periods of “comparative stability,” conflicts, especially between generations, appear but are resolved by changing personnel, or other “constituent parts of the system,” while the pattern of interdependence within the system persists (Gluckman [1940] 1958:46). In periods of change, the character of the parts and their patterns are altered, giving rise to a new and different equilibrium. Here again, Marxist theories of historical change provided Gluckman with an important referent. Comparing Whitehead’s distinction between “vibratory locomotion” and “vibratory organic deformation” to the relationship between processes “inherent in repetitive equilibria” and those “present in all changing systems,” Gluckman referred to a corresponding “dialectical materialist formulation” that contrasts developmental and nondevelopmental social patterns of successive negation (48–49).⁷

The legacy of Gluckman’s anthropology of social process within performance theory can be clearly seen in its influence upon Turner’s work on ritual. But his contributions to methods of studying performance go beyond drawing attention to processual forms. The “extended case study” method of research exemplified in “The Bridge” involved extensive historical research and systematic description of prevailing structural functional interrelationships. It was innovative too for orienting study toward the present, perceptible stream of concrete social life. It is partly from the methods Gluckman presented in “The Bridge” that performance studies inherits a distinctive feature of its scholarly discourse: the notion of the performance “event.” What’s more, as with the turn from synchronic structure to dynamic process, Gluckman’s development of the idea of the “event” bears the influence of Marxist social thought.

7. Here Gluckman cites John Strachey (1942).

A bridge is constructed; it is sponsored by the local Zulu authorities, designed by British engineers, and dedicated in a joint ceremony with various administrative and tribal powers on display. We would recognize this ceremony as a performance—an embodied symbolic display unfolding in a sensuous spatiotemporal present. For Gluckman, and for a generation of anthropologists trained in his methods, however, the ceremony is an “event.” This phenomenon involves voluntary actions by individuals, and it could be analyzed according to the subjective determinants and meanings in the minds of the participants—indeed, this would be the approach developed by Turner and other exponents of symbolic anthropology. But for Gluckman, the event is decipherable with reference to the objective “social situation” in which it is embedded. Events like those recounted in “The Bridge” allowed the anthropologist to analyze and to reveal “the underlying system of relationships between the social structure of the community, the parts of the social structure, the physical environment, and the physiological life of the community’s members” (Gluckman [1940] 1958:9).

While events as such do not, for Gluckman, necessarily imply a state of social change, he introduced the concept “event” amidst a theoretical discussion of changing social systems. “The Bridge,” in fact, culminates with an effort to “formulate abstractly processes of social change, i.e., certain invariable relations between events in changing social systems” (55–56). That Gluckman understood this as an effort to secure the scientific status of sociology is one of many indications that the event concept derives from Marxist aspects of his thought. Another can be found in the distinctive research method of the Manchester School: the extended case study. By examining a society both in depth and over time, Gluckman and his students attempted to detect the processes involved in the genesis, gradual change, and disintegration of the historical circumstances that contributed durable elements to a social system (Glaeser 2005:17). “The Bridge” attained a reputation as the model extended case study, but Gluckman, decades later, was known to point to another exemplar: Marx’s *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. As Richard Werbner relates:

Marx’s 18th Brumaire was the text Gluckman had me read in 1959, in order to learn from it as the best example of the extended case method. How do sequences of events—*relations between events* not the events as such—and relationships matter and make it possible for a central, would-be heroic figure to play his part? It was a question of documenting and analysing a highly significant *social process*, Marx’s method being exemplary for that. (2020:55–56)

The emphasis upon events and relationships over individual action, as we have seen, distinguishes the materialist-theoretical leanings of Marxist sociology from the idealist bent of the Durkheimian tradition. Gluckman’s social anthropology was undoubtedly a composite of these two sociological traditions. But Werbner’s recollection suggests that Gluckman received not only elements of this materialist perspective but also a penchant for thinking historical events dramaturgically from his readings of Marx. The *18th Brumaire* shows this inclination in Marx’s thinking extensively. The epigrammatic line “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” announces an ironic theme that continues through the book (Marx [1852] 1963:75–77). This theatrical metaphor elicits Marx’s contempt for the actors in the 1851 coup d’état, in which Louis Bonaparte, his accomplices, and his adversaries made a travesty of the performative aspects of the French Revolution. But Marx’s theatrical thinking also served as an imitable aesthetic vehicle for a way of thinking through relations between historical events. In 1920, Vladimir Lenin applied this logic to the Bolshevik Revolution, claiming that “without the ‘dress rehearsal’” of the abortive revolution of 1905, “the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 would have been impossible” ([1920] 1999:34).

Actions, Events, and Efficacy

Suppose that there is a discrete category of communicative action called performance, and that the activities under this name generate social facts. Is their function with respect to social life foremost to preserve existing patterns and uphold societal structure? Is performance part of a repetitive, citational, and normative process wherein organized symbolic display manages conflict and reproduces, or merely modifies, existing relations? Are the circumstances that give rise to these practices, then, somehow different in moments of overt conflict or precipitous change, allowing them sometimes

to catalyze chains of events that replace one order with something fundamentally new? When and how does an action become an event?

Such questions, for the most part, remain implicit in performance studies discourse. We avoid them because they are social theoretical problems, and as much as we know that performance means nothing—indeed cannot exist—apart from social life, our interpretive practices are poorly equipped to offer explanations that refer to objective social structures or systemic social relationships. This is a curious fact in light of the importance sociology held for the anthropologists in the immediate background of the field's origins, but it is in line with intellectual trends of the late 20th century. Performance theory under its own name participated in a broader turn toward culture in humanistic spheres of knowledge that transpired in the 1970s. Turner and Clifford Geertz, along with a pantheon of thinkers across fields, led humanistic inquiry into the domain of subjectively experienced meaning. This entailed leaving aside older explanatory frameworks grounded in objective social facts. Meanwhile, grand theories of social explanation lost prominence within (and beyond) sociology itself, as specialization intensified and empirical study expanded (Healy 2007:90).

This did not eradicate social thinking in performance studies, or in greater humanistic scholarship. A Marxist social theoretical orientation, for instance, could be redirected toward the cultural sphere in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who identifies ideology as “the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art” (1993:76) or in ideology critique writ large (Jameson 1998:84–85). In performance studies, even amidst a turn to what Savran called “textual radicalism,” generations after Schechner and Turner kept

[I]n current performance studies scholarship, performance efficacy—the idea that performance is consequential social action—is largely disarticulated from the theories of society out of which it originally emerged.

social facts in mind. Scholarly work in the 1980s and 1990s substantially illuminated what Janelle Reinelt calls the “social aspects of performance, their imbrication in structures of power and modes of production, their ideological meanings and uses” (2001:99). The sexual and racial facets of social difference and the interrelated structural inequality in postcolonial and imperial societies across the globe have been powerfully illuminated through the conceptual lens of performance. Through its

generative relationship with queer theory and queer-of-color critique, moreover, performance theory has contributed to theories of social change through the notion of performatively generated emergent sociality, or “worldmaking,” with overt reference to Marxist thought (Muñoz 1999:196–99).

There are signs, too, of a revival of direct engagement with social theory in performance research. Relatively recent scholarly projects have engaged seriously with Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, and even Gabriel Tarde (Felton-Dansky 2018; Cabranes-Grant 2016). An overt affiliation, moreover, continues between 20th-century performance studies and the Durkheimian social theoretical tradition. This appears in the work of Jeffrey C. Alexander, a social theorist who in the 1980s undertook an ambitious schematization of theoretical logic in social theory (Alexander 1982a, 1982b). Alexander has since turned to cultural analysis, and argues as part of his notion of “cultural pragmatics” that cultural agency exerts meaningful influence upon social relations. In articles in *Sociological Theory* and *TDR*, Alexander invokes Turner and Schechner's analogy between social and theatrical performances to argue that today many social performances fail to re-fuse necessary objective and subjective elements that more easily cohered in smaller, ritual-saturated societies (2004, 2017). Even more recently, a research group in the UK is committed to examining “together the economics and the social function of performance” (Blackwell-Pal et al. 2021).

These projects notwithstanding, in current performance studies scholarship, performance efficacy—the idea that performance is consequential social action—is largely disarticulated from the theories of society out of which it originally emerged. However, the terminology of “action” and “event” that performance studies inherited from social theory suggests that the Durkheimian and Marxian intellectual traditions still shape the way we think about performance, whether we know it or not. “Action” and “event” are common terms in performance studies scholarship. Both denote a temporal form (a before-and-after), indicating movement within a social field. The terms are not

irreducibly opposed, not either/or. The same phenomenon may be described as an action and as an event. However, these terms bear semantic differences rooted in the contrasting social theoretical contexts that cultivated them and introduced them into the field.

Action, derived mainly from the Durkheimian functionalist tradition, emphasizes subjective voluntary choice conditioned by norms, values, and meanings borne by agents. While latter-day functionalist theory emphasizes a tension of agency-within-structure, the version of these ideas that appeared in Turner's cultural anthropology and saw broad and subtle diffusion into the greater field of performance issued mainly from structural functionalism, and thus retained an emphasis on the reiterative and integrative aspects of cultural process (Healy 2007:89–90). The paradigmatic case is Turner's use of action within "social dramas," which, as Judith Butler observed, suggests "that social action requires a performance which is repeated" (1988:529; McKenzie 2001:166–69). Schechner, while not at first directly influenced by structural functionalism, developed a set of ideas that explored the anthropological dimensions of theatrical performance that were compatible with Turner's. Schechner proposed that theatrical aesthetics be understood in terms of "a specific coordination of play and ritual" (1973:29). Translated into Durkheimian terms, this explained theatre as part of a broader set of phenomena in which individual communicative actions participate in stereotyped processes such as rituals, supplying creative responses to a flexible and resilient set of relations.

Schechner's performance theory evolved by bringing together sophisticated dramaturgical concepts with elements of Turner's anthropological approach (comparative ethnography; Durkheimian belief in the importance of culture to social cohesion; attention to processual dynamics) to define performance as a category of social action.⁸ Schechner's notion of "restored behavior" shows its functionalist underpinning through the interpellation of not just behavior, but the "ontogenesis of individuals," into a social process wherein individuals reactivate preexisting behavioral scripts (1985:36–37, 113).

The theorists who have most productively developed the concept of performance as social action retain aspects of a functionalist emphasis on voluntary choice within a system of normative social constraints. Butler's early theory of gender performance incorporated ideas from Turner along with phenomenology and feminist thought, especially the existentialist feminism of Simone de Beauvoir, for whom, as Butler notes, "any gender [...] is an historical situation rather than a natural fact" (1988:520). The idea of gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" posits voluntary agency conditioned by norms and punitive sanctions: "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (1988:526). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler draws not on Turner, but on J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech. But this version of Butler's theory of gender performativity preserves the assumption of normative pressure to cite "prior actions," and repeat a "prior authoritative set of practices" (Butler 1993:172; Muñoz 1999:80–1).

Diana Taylor limns the theoretical structure of her concept of the "animative" along parallel lines. Working in the context of anticapitalist protest in the Americas, Taylor draws on Austin's theory of performative speech to theorize the "embodied, communicative act" of refusing to supply a compelled utterance or gesture. The animative is theoretically oriented around a subjective choice—one that is public and conditioned by risk of sanction—but also, solidarity and joyful fellow feeling. With Austin's concepts, Taylor formulates a socially situated performer very much in Gluckman's processual functionalist cast; the animative subject is "relational and responsive," performing within a social matrix of "authorized frameworks and consensus" (2020:47–49). The animative is thus a negative instance of functionalist social action—the individual may refuse the action indicated by an illegitimate or unjust norm. Taylor's animatives presuppose a system of norm-laden relations, but invoke no enfolding processes that neutralize conflict—or realize social change. The animative, and the more-or-less organized protests they may spark, "open up a space toward something [...] that has not yet arrived and that might never be achieved" (50).

8. In particular, see "Selective Inattention" and "Actuals" (Schechner [1988] 2003).

Taylor's candid assessment of the efficacy of performative refusal highlights one of the problems we incur from our Durkheimian functionalist inheritance. Methods rooted in the functionalist tradition, because they tend to explain how social order overcomes conflict, only weakly explain social change. Marxist historical materialism, by contrast, explicitly offers explanations of historical social transformation. As discussed, Gluckman developed the concept of the event not only to define the aims of a scientific social anthropology (to analyze "certain invariable relations between events in changing social systems"), but also to designate "social situations" that we now call performances ([1940] 1958:53). Performance "events" in this context inscribe these phenomena within a science of historical change. Just as the language of "action" implicitly suggests that social life is repetitive, composed of norm-laden subjective choices that respond to a set of more-or-less stable and self-equilibrating relations, the discourse of events implicitly cites a Marxian view of historical contingency that situates social phenomena within a social field pregnant with potential structural change.

The notion of "event," as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, is one of the conceptual signatures of performance studies (2004:43). This is not solely explained by the sociological background of symbolic anthropology. Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*—along with a broader set of avantgarde art work emphasizing process, the materials of everyday life, and aleatory results—influenced Schechner's early theory of performance. This can be understood as part of a distinctive postmodern shift, wherein a modernist conception of a work of art as a material object was replaced "with the notion of art as an event" (Schneider 1997:209n30). This vector of "event" discourse may have been distinct from the anthropological conduit linking Schechner and Turner to Gluckman and Marx, but it bore its own historical materialist valences. The Fluxus Group, inspired by the formal experiments of Kaprow and others, also drew inspiration from the overtly Marxist Situationist International. Fluxus incorporated formal aspects of the Situationist aesthetic program (its "game of events") but left aside its Marxist theory of society (Bishop 2012:85, 89, 132).

Within performance theory of the late 20th century, event discourse proliferated and it retained shades of its materialist origins. Schechner uses the term, on one hand, as a categorical designator for phenomena within the broad spectrum of performance ([1988] 2003:290). His usages encompass ritual and other repetitive processes suggesting functionalist lines of interpretation. But when used in a theoretical register, the term "event" connotes objective social situations rather than the structure of subjective choice associated with action. Schechner explains his early term "actual" by invoking Kaprow's "simple but altogether upsetting idea of art as an event," setting the novel category of "performance" against Aristotelian mimetic action ([1988] 2003:28).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses the language of events with greater semantic specificity. Her research on cultural display, moreover, attends to the social situations enfolding performance, evoking the processual approaches to ethnography developed by the Manchester School. Examining the "processes of detachment and contextualization" that produce "ethnographic objects" found in museums, cultural destinations, and other sites of exhibition, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett directs more attention to institutional factors and *mise-en-scène* than to symbolic content or to the choices of actors. In her own terms, this is a method that resists "stripping the observed behavior of contingency in order to formulate norms, ideals, and structures of competency" (1998:75). The "event" emerges, then, less as a catchall term for cultural activity than as a concept that refers to the spatio-temporal structures that shape participation in and confer value upon cultural entities. Exhibitions, for instance, build "the role of the observer into the structure of events" otherwise "not subject to formal viewing" (47).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's event-oriented approach to performance carries forward aspects of Manchester School sociocultural research. Beyond her emphasis on the social, institutional, and physical settings of performance, she shows receptiveness to elements of Marxist thought, albeit within a strictly cultural frame of reference. Her analyses of cultural display are tied to broader questions concerning the "political economy of display" (3). The "circulation of value" she detects within processes that support ethnographic exhibition refers to an aesthetic or cultural conception

of value, though she acknowledges its links to economic value (149–52). This conceptual nexus of display and “value” identifies a conceptual point of contact between Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Peggy Phelan, another theorist whose use of the terminology of events reflects the enduring, if attenuated, influence of Marxist social thought in performance theory.

Phelan’s potent critique of visibility politics adopts a feminist psychoanalytic framework in order to “find a theory of value” for “a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable” (1993:1). This notion of value is rooted in a psychoanalytic concept of desire rather than materialist theories of culture. Phelan makes this opposition explicit, differentiating her aim to value what escapes visible representation from theories for which “material conditions” determine “social, racial, sexual, and psychic identities” (5). This opposition, however, underplays Phelan’s receptiveness to Marxist theory. She repeatedly cites capitalism’s exploitation of women, in particular its self-perpetuating ideological injunction to produce and reproduce visible representations (11, 135). Thus, while Phelan’s influential claim that performance is intrinsically ephemeral—an “undocumentable event” defined by a type of value that resists reproduction—should not be interpreted as a sign of overt alignment with Marxist social theory, there is reason to count her as representing a Marxist, rather than Durkheimian, tendency in contemporary performance theory. Like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s, Phelan’s use of the “event” descriptor signals an emphasis on the contingent social circumstances around performance over the norms and other subjective factors pressuring voluntaristic action.

Though the ontological claim—“performance’s being [...] becomes itself through disappearance”—emerges from Phelan’s theory of subjectivity, the claim itself is not part of a theory of individual voluntary social action. Phelan explicates this idea by treating performance less as a category of psychic event than as a type of social situation. This occurs foremost in negative statements: performance cannot enter “the economy of reproduction”; it “refuses this system of exchange”; and it “resists the balanced circulations of finance” (146, 148, 149). But Phelan also posits a positive sociality to performance, one that “honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value” (149). While these statements do not articulate a theory of society, they do situate performance events within a coherent set of social relations both at a systemic level (capitalist market exchange) and more narrowly (the limit of the spatiotemporal present). Phelan moreover explains the value and specificity of performance in terms of its dispositions toward these contrasting sorts of objective social relationships. The “greatest strength” of performance is its “independence from mass reproduction”; any performance event, moreover, entails forms of collaborative sociality that can alter inherited power relations (149, 173).

Performance theorists from the 1970s onward should not be sorted into partisans of Marx’s or Durkheim’s overarching theories of society. One of the legacies of the Manchester School is that social anthropologists commonly held Durkheimian and Marxist views in mind simultaneously, despite sharp contrasts between the way the two saw the problems of social conflict and order, and explained social action and change. My aim here, accordingly, has not been to divide performance theorists into camps. Rather, I hope to show that distinct tendencies in social thought have been present in our most influential texts for generations, and that it is possible to identify those tendencies through the uses of particular terms. “Action” and “event” are two of the most prevalent but underexamined aspects of our social theoretical inheritance.

This is not merely an exercise in illuminating the intellectual origins of our field. Students and scholars of performance are interested in knowing what potential embodied communicative action may possess to alter the course of history. This cannot be answered without framing a theory of social change, and any theory of social change presupposes a theory of society. Since the founding of performance studies, we have been generally disinclined to think in terms of social facts, or in terms of social relations on the level of institutions, social structures, or all-encompassing social systems.

Students and scholars of performance are interested in knowing what potential embodied communicative action may possess to alter the course of history.

The social theoretical background out of which the foundational premises of our field emerged has become remote from view. Addressing our thinking to the problem of performance efficacy does not, to my mind, call for a revival of 19th-century explanatory frameworks and methodologies. But familiarizing ourselves with the questions, methods, and arguments these frameworks generated can offer clarity to questions that presently confuse us, and supply us with conceptual tools that will help us with the work ahead: rigorously assessing the potential of performance to effectuate social change.

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