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REVIEWS

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PERFORMING POWER, MARCUS MORGAN, POLITY, 2025

Milica Resanović, Research Fellow, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Marcus Morgan's book *Performing Power* (2025) represents an important contribution to understanding the symbolic and affective dimensions of political life. While performance has long served as a productive metaphor in social and political theory, Morgan offers the most systematic and ambitious attempt to develop a theory of social performance, drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology. At the same time, he shows how material structures and power relations shape the emergence, enactment, reception and interpretation of performance. The book offers a nuanced theory of social performance, foregrounding the enabling and constraining force of cultural structures while integrating the material conditions that shape its production and consumption. The result is a rich and analytically rigorous framework for understanding how power is structured, exercised and contested in contemporary societies.

The book is divided into three parts: conceptual clarification, analysis of performative structures, and development of a new theoretical model. The first part offers a critical engagement with theories of power and performance, the two foundational concepts of the study, and explores their points of intersection, connections that are neither immediately obvious nor intuitively grasped. The opening chapter (Chapter 1) provides a systematic overview of major conceptualizations of power in sociological and, more broadly, social theory. Following a critical review of complementary and competing approaches, Morgan turns to Isaac Reed's typology of power to argue that the performative–pragmatic dimension has received comparatively less attention than the realist–relational and discursive dimensions. Thus, from the outset, the importance of performance in the production, transmission, and legitimation of power is clearly signaled. Subsequent sections further examine the symbolic and expressive force of performance in political contexts. Before doing so in depth, however, Chapter 2 turns to the concept of performance itself, as well as the related notion of performativity. Morgan delineates the distinction between artistic and social performance, while also tracing the connections between what is conventionally recognized as performance and what may be understood as such. Although the differences are significant, the book maintains that the two phenomena are not fully separable but relationally constituted.

Social performance, which is the primary focus here, "borrows" implicit rhetorical structures and aesthetic properties from the theatrical realm, shaping its efficacy, its capacity to generate meaning, and ultimately the impressions audience form. Acknowledging that the term performance often carries connotations of artificiality and deception, the book argues for a broader understanding of performance as a mode of meaning-making oriented toward achieving particular ends.

For Morgan, the concept of performance makes it possible to avoid privileging either structure or agency, and instead taking social reality in a synthetic manner. The second part of the book (Chapters 3 and 4) is devoted precisely to examining the cultural structures in which performance is grounded and analyzing their character. Drawing on the conceptual apparatus developed through Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and cultural sociology, Morgan offers a well-structured and systematic reconstruction of the cultural grammar of performance, placing particular emphasis on binary codes, narratives, genres, and characters and their modalities, as well as on the process of casting characters. Through the lens of civil sphere theory (CST), the book highlights the role of binary oppositions, most notably the Durkheimian sacred/profane distinction, in power struggles within the civil sphere. Yet, performance succeeds not simply through the coding of actors, motives, and institutions as democratic or anti-democratic, but through persuasive and often affectively charged narratives that bind these binaries into meaningful stories. The author then turns to rhetoric as a structured means of producing persuasive speech and performance, with particular attention to its capacity to mobilize audiences. Beyond argumentation, rhetorical efficacy depends on the nonverbal dimensions of performance, which shape persuasion and foster audience identification, facilitating specific ways of feeling, thinking and acting. The final performative structure Morgan turns to is ritual. Drawing on Émile Durkheim and his intellectual heirs, while incorporating key innovations introduced by Victor Turner, he conceptualizes ritual not simply as a stabilizing mechanism of social integration, but as a dynamic force capable of generating social transformation.

The third part develops Morgan's new theoretical model of performative success (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). Drawing heavily on Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology, he begins with the model of social performance articulated within cultural pragmatics. For Alexander, social performance entails the mobilization of a background system of collective representations, actors capable of bringing these codes and scripts alive, specific spatial and temporal settings, particular audiences who interpret the meanings of the performance, and relations of power. Success is emergent rather than guaranteed: it depends on the effective fusion of the performance elements in ways that secure audience identification, emotional engagement and orientation toward action. In the following chapters, Morgan builds a systemic framework for modeling social performance by drawing on, but also, significantly revising Alexander's theoretical system. He retains the Strong program's commitment to treating culture as relatively autonomous and to viewing performative acts as mobilizations of existing cultural structures. However, he offers a different conceptualization of power. By distinguishing among its various dimensions, he maps the power relations that shape the context in which performance emerges and unfolds, as well as the forms of power generated through performance itself. In doing so, he moves beyond treating power as merely one element among others and develops a more complex

account of performative success. Rather than locating success in the fusion of elements, as in Alexander's approach, Morgan argues that it hinges on resonance: the capacity of skillful actors to mobilize shared cultural structures, recombine them in innovative ways, and frame perceived problems so that the audience experiences the performance as offering solutions or a resolution of emotional tensions. This shift from fusion to resonance constitutes one of the book's most original theoretical interventions.

The book's value lies in its analytical framework, which uses a Marxist-sounding vocabulary to illuminate the complexity of symbolic action and public struggles over power. Symbolic production (or performance itself) presupposes means of production that are both symbolic (codes, narratives, genres, rituals) and material (stages, studios, platforms), as well as the labor involved in their deployment. Opposed to this stands symbolic consumption, which likewise depends on symbolic competences (familiarity with performative conventions), material access (media, tickets, transport), and interpretive labor. At the same time, Morgan reconceptualizes power as shaping the context within which performances unfold, while performances may in turn reinforce or subvert existing power relations. For Morgan, context refers not only to forms of domination embedded in language and culture, but also to differential access to the material means that render performances persuasive and shape audiences' interpretive capacities. In doing so, he avoids the common critique that culturalist approaches neglect material resources and remain overly idealist.

One question that remains open concerns the extent to which actors are strategically oriented. The book distances itself from conceptions of culture as a "tool kit," rejecting the view that actors consciously and instrumentally select performative structures. Instead, these structures are presented as deeply internalized, shaping dispositions and perceptions, particularly when they draw on seemingly universal cultural forms such as binary oppositions. At the same time, it is evident that those involved in the production of performance do make choices, selecting narratives and symbolic resources in ways that increase the likelihood of conveying a desired message and orienting audiences toward particular ways of thinking or acting. A tension thus emerges between viewing social performance actors as either strategically oriented or guided by largely tacit, semi-reflexive engagements with deeply embedded cultural structures.

A second question that arises, particularly in relation to the analysis of social movements, including the one examined in this special issue, is whether this approach can adequately account for protest and activism in authoritarian contexts. A difficulty occurs when state authorities monopolize the material means of symbolic production and restrict critics' ability to reach an audience. Control over the media, for instance, often prevents critics from staging performances through which they might articulate criticism of the regime or advance alternative visions of social life and responses to pressing problems, thereby limiting both the reach of their message and the scale of their mobilization. In this light, the absence of an explicit institutional dimension within the theoretical model, particularly an analysis of the dynamics of regulatory and communicative institutions, so central to civil sphere theory, on which Morgan explicitly draws, may narrow the explanatory scope of his approach, as this institutional component remains underdeveloped in his account. Nevertheless, the theoretical model undoubtedly helps explain how, even under such conditions, certain actors succeed in

winning hearts and minds, triggering mass mobilization and articulating resistance despite significant structural and institutional constraints.

The issues raised above in no way diminish the book's value, which lies above all in its development of an innovative approach grounded in a skillful synthesis of diverse theoretical traditions. Although theoretically ambitious, the book is written with remarkable clarity and accessibility. It offers a conceptual apparatus capable of inspiring new research across a wide range of political contexts, whether contemporary or historical. The work represents a careful and rigorous effort to illuminate the symbolic and affective dimensions of political mobilization, dimensions that are often treated superficially, yet may be more crucial than ever for understanding the social realities in which we live and for interpreting events that can otherwise be hard to grasp. Given its theoretical foundations and the vocabulary it adopts, it comes as no surprise then that the book will be of primary interest to sociologists, while its conceptual innovation extends its relevance well beyond that discipline.