

Evaluating Geopolitical Impact through the Concept of Social Performance: The Case of a Mormon General Conference

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사회적 수행의 개념을 통한 지정학적 영향의 평가 -몰몬교 연차대회를 사례로-

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Abstract : Critical scholarship has shown itself much more adept at identifying and analyzing the content of religious geopolitics than its impacts or effects. This article suggests ways in which the concept of social performance can be used to more carefully consider the effects of religious geopolitics. Judith Butler's identity-oriented notion of performativity is usually geographers' point of entry into issues of performance. But its strong poststructuralist distrust of agency limits its power among those who question poststructuralism's grounding beliefs. This article illustrates the added utility of other theories of performance—particularly the recent pragmatic, dramaturgical, and non-poststructuralist theorization of social performance by the cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander—in evaluating the impact of religious geopolitical action. It does so through the case of a recent, particularly geopolitically laden Mormon General Conference. It concludes, through Butler and Alexander, that this General Conference likely accomplished significant geopolitical work. But it also, mainly through Alexander, argues that this work likely had limited capacity to motivate new or additional geopolitical action. Its power was more to reinforce than transform.

Key Words : critical geopolitics, performance studies, Mormonism, religion, Jeffrey Alexander

요약 : 종교 지정학은 그 영향이나 효과 보다는 내용을 확인하고 분석하는데 초점을 두고 있다고 비판을 받는다. 본 논문은 종교 지정학의 영향을 신중하게 고려하기 위하여 사회적 수행의 개념을 사용하는 측면들을 제안한다. Judith Butler의 정체성 지향적인 수행성의 개념은 주로 지리학자들이 수행의 문제에 접근하기 위한 시작점이 된다. 그러나 정체성 지향적인 수행성의 개념은 인간의 자율적인 행위 수행(agency)을 매우 불신함으로써 후기구조주의의 기본적인 믿음에 대한 의문을 제시하는 연구자들에게 그 개념의 영향력은 제한적이다. 본 논문은 종교 지정학적 행위의 영향을 평가하는데 수행의 다른 이론의—문화 사회학자인 Jeffrey Alexander에 의한 사회적 수행의 최근의 실용적, 연극론적, 비후기구조주의의 이론화—부가적인 유용성을 최근의 지정학적인 몰몬교 연차대회를 사례로 실증한다. 본 연구는 Butler와 Alexander를 통해서 몰몬교 연차대회는 유의미한 지정학적 성취를 이루었다고 결론짓는다. 그러나 본 연구는 주로 Alexander를 통해서 이러한 지정학적 성취는 새롭거나 추가적인 지정학적 행위를 유발시키는데 제한된 역할을 했다는 것을 논의한다. 이러한 지정학적 성취의 영향력은 변환시키기 보다는 강화시키는 것이었다.

주요어 : 비판 지정학, 수행연구, 몰몬교, 종교, Jeffrey Alexander

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades many geographers have moved away from geopolitical research that serves the interests of states and other powerful political actors. They have shifted toward analysis revealing and critiquing the ways in which geographic assertions and assumptions help political elites maintain power and create/perpetuate friction between political and cultural groups (Ó Tuathail, 1996). This *critical geopolitics* fruitfully shows, among other things, how geopolitical thought is much more than a specialized concern of international relations experts. Instead, such thought saturates much of society (Agnew, 2004). All the key elements of geopolitical thinking—such as the spatial reasoning and the creation/reinforcement of political communities through strong distinctions between one's own society and others (or even demonization of others)—occur among ordinary people as well as the political elite. Such thinking can be seen in many places: popular magazines, television/movies, comic books, video games, religion, sports, business strategizing, etc. The goals of policy makers may thus be variously bolstered, modified, or resisted by elements within popular culture and even mundane, everyday life. As a subfield of critical geopolitics, *popular geopolitics* analyzes relationships between visions, attitudes, and actions of political elites and those within society more broadly (see for example, Sharp, 2000; Dodds and Atkinson, 2000; Dodds, 2007). But it does more than that. It also shows how groups not normally regarded as geopolitical actors often view and act geopolitically toward the world. Various non-state actors may lack a military element, and thus not be geopolitical actors in a narrow sense of the term. But they can be geopolitical actors in a broader, cultural sense of the term to the degree

that they desire to extend their influence spatially within the world and create strong distinctions between selves and others, allies and enemies. Thus they are not fully geopolitical in the way states are, but they do operate in a culturally geopolitical manner because of their imaginative geographies—creating meaning about the place of themselves and others, and seeing the world through geopolitical lenses.

Popular geopolitics has become a strongly textually-oriented research approach (Thrift, 2000; Müller, 2008; Power and Campbell, 2010). Textual analysis allows for careful examination of taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship between geography and politics, and popular attitudes are easily accessed through textual media. As a relatively new subfield, much of popular geopolitics' task has involved identifying the breadth and types of geopolitical visions—a task particularly suited to textual research. Various ethnographic and other methods have recently been added, particularly in understanding how certain geopolitical visions appeal to (or are resisted or otherwise not fully taken on by) particular audiences (for example, Secor, 2001; Megoran, 2006, Dittmer, 2008; Sturm, 2008). Yet several questions remain only thinly examined within popular geopolitics. Among these, the question of impact or effect is particularly important. Textual and ethnographic methods give strong insight into the meanings of particular popular geopolitical visions and actions, but they provide little sense of how broad and deep the influence of those visions/actions is. I elsewhere use survey methodology to explore some aspects of the question of impact (Yorgason, in preparation). In this paper I turn to the concept of social performance.

Theorists of performance or performativity argue that the impact of ideologies or discourses (such as popular geopolitical visions) lies not simply in the rhetorical power of their texts, but

also in their particular expressions through embodied action and social events. Thus we can methodologically treat popular geopolitics not simply as texts enunciating a position but also as action holding the potential to motivate and change social conditions. Conceptualizing popular geopolitics as performance allows us to more sharply ask about the impact of specific popular geopolitical expressions. However, while theories of performance/performativity open up the question of effect, the conceptual path to answers has not been very clear. A recent theorization of social performance by the cultural sociologist Alexander (2006) is a step forward in this regard. Alexander's theory—to my knowledge not yet much utilized by geographers (for a brief reference, see Howe, 2009)—allows more careful consideration of the effects of popular geopolitical action. I introduce the utility of Alexander's theory by re-examining a type of popular geopolitics I have long studied—the geopolitics of the Mormon religion. The paper specifically examines as geopolitical performance a Mormon General Conference,¹ a semi-annual two-day event in which Mormon leaders give instruction and advice to church members.

With this focus, the analysis also contributes to the recent upswing in critical scholarship's interest in religion's participation in the geopolitical constitution of society (see especially the special issue in *Geopolitics* introduced by Agnew, 2006, as well as Dittmer and Sturm, 2010). Religious action may be geopolitical in two non-exclusive ways. It may support particular geopolitical visions connected with states or other actors (i.e. American Evangelical support for muscular US foreign policy), or it may utilize religion itself as a direct geopolitical actor (religious institutions and individuals in contest with religious and non-religious actors for control and influence within space). While work remains, scholarship over especially the past decade and a

half provides insight into the content of such actions. But, as with popular geopolitical visions generally, geographers have much further to go in understanding the impact of these actions beyond the relatively small groups who most directly engage in them.

Using (especially Alexander's) formulation of social performance, this paper thus considers how one Mormon General Conference with particularly heavy geopolitical content, identified initially through critical geopolitical textual analysis, may or may not have significant geopolitical impact. The paper proceeds by first reviewing Mormonism's positioning historically as a geopolitical agent. It then specifies why this General Conference is an example of geopolitical action worth analyzing. The paper then reviews the concept of performance, starting by highlighting the utility and problems of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which has been so influential among geographers. Broadening the conceptualization leads us to Alexander's theory of social performance. The heart of the paper outlines Alexander's main argument and then uses it to assess the impact of the Mormon General Conference.

2. Mormonism's geopolitical positioning

The Salt Lake City, USA-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or LDS Church) is the overwhelmingly largest 'Mormonism', or religious grouping professing loyalty to the 1820s-1840s teachings of the American prophet Joseph Smith. It claims about fourteen million members. (If national surveys and censuses from a handful of countries are representative, however, perhaps 20-40 percent fewer may self claim membership.) The church's early history strongly divided it from

the larger American society. This Mormonism's first 80 years included episodes such as virtual expulsion from a few US states, Smith's murder, a difficult 'exodus' to (what soon became) the US West's Great Basin, attempts to create an autarkic semi-theocracy, explicit surveillance by the US Army, US government actions that threatened the church's existence through the systematic dismantling of LDS polygamy, and a three-and-a-half-year-long Senate hearing over whether an LDS apostle could serve in the US Senate (essentially a trial of whether the church itself was sufficiently American). Early Mormons developed an intense sense of community, feeling set apart and persecuted for being on the Lord's errand. Yet most of the twentieth century can be read as a story of integration into American society. Mormons sought acceptance and belonging within the United States and began to see themselves—and were increasingly seen—as exemplars of a fundamentally American identity and at times even purveyors of a super-Americanist ideology (Mauss, 1994; Shipps, 2000; Yorgason, 2003; Chen, 2004; Givens, 2007).

By the second half of the twentieth century, Mormonism was also rapidly expanding outside the United States. Challenges to the institutional church ranged from maintaining unity across cultures, to backing away from some of Mormonism's more overt Americanism, to gaining proselytizing and social footholds in a huge variety of social and legal situations. Mormonism's geopolitical presence is thus not solely constituted in relationship to U.S. society, though its presence is clearly most strongly felt there. Its East Asian presence is modest, but growing (more than 80,000 members in South Korea, and about 125,000 in Japan and 50,000 in Taiwan, for example). Mormonism's heavily social theology makes church members, wherever they are, into much more of a coherent and unified community than is the case for

members of most churches (Yorgason, 2010). Although it has no military identity, Mormonism operates geopolitically in every country where it has a presence through its careful spatial strategizing about how to increase its influence within the country's space. For example, it is currently creating links with the Chinese government and planning how to best build its strength in China once that country legally permits proselytization (Stack, 2010).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Mormonism's drive for acceptance within the United States particularly encountered potholes and detours (Shipps, 2000), though some of these troubles were also registered elsewhere within the world. These troubles continued in the twenty-first century. Some Mormons even consider 2008 a potential turning point. Because of such things as the animus toward US presidential candidate Mitt Romney for his Mormonism (for academic treatments see Medhurst, 2009; Baker and Campbell, 2010), the difficulty Americans had in distinguishing the LDS church from a notorious polygamous Mormon splinter group in Texas despite frequent media acknowledgement of the difference (Children of men, 2008), and the bruising battle over California's Proposition 8 whose proscription of gay marriage Mormons heavily supported (Van Biema, 2009), increasing numbers of Latter-day Saints felt that once again significant persecution confronted them. The October 2008 General Conference took place amid these changing sensibilities (along with broader anxieties accompanying initial US acknowledgement of the recession). (The Proposition 8 battle proved particularly long-lasting [reverberations continue today] and geopolitical. Proposition 8 sought to remove the right to same-sex marriage within California. That right had been initially proscribed by California voters, but then overturned by California courts. Hundreds of same-sex

marriages had been performed. While many churches supported Proposition 8 [though others opposed it], the LDS Church and Mormons were particularly prominent. Both before and after the November 2008 vote that passed Proposition 8, Mormonism was strongly and often bitterly accused by opponents of inappropriate geopolitical influence [extending its influence from its headquarters in Utah to California, and thus taking away rights in a region where Mormons constitute only a small percentage].)

3. The October 2008 General Conference and its Geopolitical Content

According to long-established pattern, LDS General Conferences convene twice a year in Salt Lake City, during the first weekends of April and October. The conferences feature one-way communication. For ten hours over two days church leaders instruct and advise members. Custom dictates that the highest church leaders (members of the First Presidency) speak longest, with medium-length speeches from the next tier of leaders (the Twelve Apostles), and shorter addresses by other leaders (members of the church's Quorums of the Seventy; the Presiding Bishopric; or leaders of the Primary [for children], Young Women and Sunday School auxiliaries). While speakers may collectively cover a whole range of topics, custom also leads most speakers toward uncontroversial, sometimes bland expressions of LDS doctrine. Believers occasionally discover keen and previously unconsidered insight. Some speakers possess more skill than others. But believers more typically find the power of the messages in the repetition and reminder of known beliefs and the authority of the speaker—what Mormons would

call, while adding the idea of heavenly inspiration, the 'spirit' of the message—rather than the novelty of ideas or polish of presentation.

Though regularized with largely predictable content, General Conferences matter within Mormonism. The General Conference has become a near ritual unto itself because of its long-established procedures and since Mormon culture inclines toward approaching it through regularized actions and habits (see Conference conventions, 2008). General Conferences very likely have the largest audiences of any Mormon events. Translated and broadcast over network, cable, and satellite channels, closed-circuit feeds to LDS church buildings, and now streamed over the Internet, General Conferences likely reach an audience of two to three million during the General Conference weekend itself (official estimates are not announced). As a long-time participant observer and life-long member of the LDS Church, I suspect half again as many watch/listen to/read at least parts of the proceedings later. Mormons believe that God reveals his will to church leaders. However, revelations are seldom canonized these days, so Latter-day Saints generally consider General Conference 'talks' (Mormon lingo for 'sermons') to be church members' most direct access to God's communication with church leaders. Many members regard General Conference addresses as at least quasi-scriptural.

General Conference is clearly just one of many venues of Mormon geopolitical action (Yorgason and Robertson, 2006). In connection with California's Proposition 8, to take one example, many sites had greater immediate impact—such as the church buildings where members often mobilized and strategized; the places where LDS, Catholic, and Evangelical representatives met; the streets where Mormons petitioned their neighbors; and the television studios and

newspaper columns where Mormons presented their arguments. Yet the October 2008 General Conference deserves analysis as a site of particularly concentrated cultural geopolitical action, and especially expressions of a geopolitical orientation toward the world. One may need to go back 100+ years when Mormons still felt themselves under acute attack, or at least to the 1950s and 1960s when Cold War thinking more directly entered church leaders' messages, to find a General Conference with as much geopolitical content. Nevertheless, I should not overstate the matter. The differences were more subtle than overt. Most members who listened to the conference probably did not notice a significant geopolitical thrust.²⁾ Defining geopolitics rather broadly, nine out of thirty-two total talks had significant, though sometimes oblique and brief, geopolitical content.

Continuing recent patterns, little in the conference related directly to the American nation-state or international (inter-state) relations. Mormon culture still carries much residual über-Americanism, but overt support for particular international political projects has been largely absent in recent years from official church forums, such as General Conference (for a somewhat ambivalent exception, see Hinckley, 2003). The church surely assumes that such expressions hinder its international growth. The president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Packer (2008), came the closest to overt Americanism. He lauded nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints' American patriotism in spite of their difficult relationship with American citizens and government. Yet Packer's subsequent assertions—that Latter-day Saints are patriotic in whichever country they live, and that the early-Utah episode demonstrates most of all the godly virtues (such as forgiveness and forsaking revenge) Latter-day Saints had in their hearts—moderated the Americanism.

Intimations of Mormonism itself as a geopolitical actor were more common. A handful of speakers recalled Joseph Smith's prophecy that God's work would roll forth via the church

boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done. (quoted in Ballard, 2008; see also especially Eyring, 2008b)

Such statements connected expectations of a glorious church future to assertions of a modest and persecuted past. LDS leaders used the increasing persecution they and many ordinary Mormons sensed in 2008 to encourage the Saints to glance both backward to Mormonism's history and forward to its destiny. In that context the apostle Robert D. Hales instructed Latter-day Saints not to react aggressively to opposition to their religion (2008). An admonition not to escalate tensions in encounters with others, his talk took as a given that the church and its members faced strong social animus. Exemplifying his point through some of the worst cases of scriptural and historical persecution of believers, Hales evoked a world structured by Mormonism and its foes antagonistically arrayed.

Other messages prioritized this 'geopolitical' structure. Dalton (2008), general president of the LDS Young Women organization (for ages 12-18), proposed raising a banner to the world about returning to virtue. (Contemporary LDS discourse conceptualizes virtue mostly in relation to sexuality and [female] dressing habits.) Individual Latter-day Saints have great power to change the world, she asserted. Seventy member Hamula went further, pulling out a discourse I thought had been banished from more 'official' expressions of Mormonism to the dustbin of local

meetings and youth conferences (2008). He told Mormonism's young men that God had reserved them to be born in these last days of the earth's history because of their faithfulness in the 'pre-mortal existence' (a concept unique to Mormonism within Christianity). With the earth entering the final stages of the cosmic war between good and evil, LDS young men have a special calling as God's warriors. The power to choose good over evil is within you, he told his audience, and doing so is vitally important because the world has never exceeded its current wickedness.³⁾ (Military metaphors directed toward male LDS teenagers are primarily operationalized these days through those teenagers' personal choices regarding pornography, out-of-wedlock sexual relations, smoking and drinking, and, at times, homosexuality.)

In 1995 the LDS Church issued a Proclamation on the Family. The document has focused much of the church's political, cultural, and social strategy ever since. Apostle Russell M. Nelson's conference address touted the Proclamation and LDS temple marriage (marriage for 'time and eternity') as a blueprint for eternal happiness, not only for Mormons but for all people (2008). Although speaking one month before California's Proposition 8 vote, Nelson made no direct mention of gay marriage and he clearly worried about improper heterosexual relations. However he quickly referenced homosexual relations when he spoke of a few relationship choices, cunningly crafted by Satan, that could not be 'upgraded' to eternal marriages.

A message on one of the most significant themes to Mormon history and geopolitics—Zion—was both surprising and unsurprising. Contrary to trends within Mormonism for nearly 100 years, Apostle Christofferson (2008) conceived of Zion not only as a people and their purity of heart, but also as a place. It may not a single place today, he conceded; instead

congregations and districts of Latter-day Saints create networks of Zion throughout the world. Like other speakers, he used the Biblical binary logic of Zion coming forth out of an evil Babylon and spoke of Latter-days Saints' destiny to perform great work throughout the world. But he surprisingly emphasized eliminating poverty as necessary to create Zion. A strong theme during Mormonism's first 50 years, material equality has generally been downplayed since. Christofferson argued that responsibility to one another outweighs participation in a consumerist (materialist, in Mormon parlance) society (see also McMullin, 2008). Materialism, he added, not only distracts from more important matters but is 'one more manifestation of the idolatry and pride that characterize Babylon'.

Mostly conservative but partially potentially progressive, the geopolitical ideas from the October 2008 General Conference were not new to Mormonism; most have existed at least latently for many decades. Perhaps the most significant message was the geopoliticization of the church's self-conception, the rhetorical structuring of the world into camps supportive of Mormonism and virtue on the one hand, and those bent on persecuting Mormons and pursuing Babylon's vices on the other. Textually, there is much in these messages for a critical scholar to analyze, especially since the messages were stronger in this General Conference they have been in General Conferences for many decades. However, consideration of the General Conference as geopolitical performance both expands and sharpens the investigation.

4. General Conference as geopolitical performance

1) Butler

Conceptualizing *performativity* in geography almost always starts with Judith Butler's poststructuralist ideas about performing gender, sex, and sexuality (1990; see also 1995). Greatly simplifying, geographers have taken up this concept largely through the notion of repeated performances of dominant discourses. Individuals become subjects via subjugation through these recurring acts. We become a particular gender, for example, by repeatedly performing the acts society tells us belong to that gender. These performances reproduce and naturalize dominant discourses. Geographers have built on these ideas by emphasizing the spatiality that such performances require and the spaces they utilize (for example, Duncan, 1996; Driver and Gilbert, 1998; for a recent, innovative use within critical geopolitics, see Bialasiewicz *et al.*, 2007). Butler denies that pre-discursive moments constitute the self. Indeed, she insists, anything approaching common notions of agency in these subjugated subjects is illusory. If something akin to agency exists, it resides not in individual choice but flows out of the tensions created by the imperfect (because human) repetition of discourses. Social and cultural change does not result from reflexive agents who see outside their subject positions. Instead, slippage in performance may occur because the discourses themselves are multiple and sometimes contradictory. While the discourses often effectively mask their arbitrary and frequently binary expressions, those qualities can be undermined as subjects perform multiple discourses.

In these terms the 2008 General Conference may have done significant geopolitical work,

hardening distinctions between the LDS 'us' and the worldly 'them' and using spatial metaphors, if not explicit spatial strategy, to point to Mormonism's role within a world in which Mormons are a tiny minority. Speakers frequently called upon the largely binary distinction between a growing, virtuous (or at least striving-to-be-virtuous) Zion and an aggressively decadent Babylon. This discourse, mostly unquestioned and repetitively cultivated throughout Mormonism's history may be a leading element within a particularly Mormon subject/identity position. Two aspects of this discourse's performance within this conference likely strengthened it. First, the point was simply repeated more often and explicitly than in any other recent General Conferences. Several speakers reminded the Latter-day Saints that church members will pass through trials but the church will strengthen itself in the process. In addition the performances may have—almost paradoxically—bolstered the discourse's taken-for-grantedness. The discourse frequently served as the unquestioned premise upon which other points were considered—for example, Hales's admonition not to be adversarial when encountering opposition or Christofferson's call for greater social and material unity. Use of the discourse as a starting point for further reasoning likely led most LDS listeners to stronger identification within the Zion/Babylon dichotomy.

Butler's claim about the power of repeatedly performing dominant discourses contributes undeniably to identity theorization. Yet Butler's theory has not gone unchallenged. Many scholars, myself included, would like to glean insight, but worry about its strong distrust of agency and, more generally, about poststructuralism's often absolute and dogmatic prioritization of discourse in constituting the human individual. Contrary to the aims of many geographers using Butler, Nelson (1999) argues

for example, the theory itself, with hostility to agency and intentionality, provides no path to resisting dominant discourses (see also Jacobs and Nash, 2003). Many geographers have uncritically used the concept of performativity while simultaneously employing a non-poststructuralist notion of agency. The problem, to Nelson, rests not in their impulse to attach some form of agency to Butler's theory, but in not acknowledging that Butler's theory itself cannot fully accommodate that agency.⁴⁾ While many scholars have critiqued and/or extended Butler's performativity, I focus here on ideas about how the concept of performance might better allow for agency.

2) Alexander

It is helpful to venture outside of geography, because theories of performance there more often overlap with and temper theories of performativity. Butler becomes less the canonical starting point than one of the signposts along a sometimes eclectic theoretical path (c.f. Katzenstein and Sil, 2004). One work integrating performance and literary studies (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995), for example, strongly invokes Butler but finds the prior question of J.L. Austin just as compelling: when is saying something doing something? Performativity's repetitions there share attention with performance in its more common sense: an extraordinary act that transforms its audience in some manner. Another work, in critical religious studies (Bell, 1998), does not mention Butler, preferring to root theories of performance in anthropology and sociology, in thinkers such as Turner, Goffman, and Geertz, in addition to (Austin's) philosophy. To Bell, performance approaches, but is not quite, ritual. Studying religion as performance provides a counterweight to textual analyses of religious messages, allowing scholars to confront

questions of impact and effect. Because of its 'dynamic, diachronic, physical, and sensual characteristics' performance accomplishes work beyond the text (Bell, 1998, 209). Similarly, Thrift (for example, 2004) has been a leading advocate within geography of trying to understand the bodily engagement and non-representational knowledges that performance makes possible (see also Watson, 2003; and the partial critique by Nash, 2000). For Bell, the concept of performance is attractive precisely because it draws attention to human agency. Or as Crouch (2003, 27) notes, it provides opportunities to 'think and rethink'. The concept thus need not assume that repetition alone is the key to understanding the subject-making power of discourses.

Based on a philosophy of 'cultural pragmatics', which insists both on the importance of the cultural content of textual representations but that these representations never simply 'speak for themselves', the cultural sociologist Alexander takes these inclinations to employ a more traditional notion of agency and not privilege Butler's performativity in a productive direction (2006, 33). Rejecting the structuralist/poststructuralist position that performances instill particular subjectivities essentially regardless of the audience's agency (see also the similar critique in service of a different theoretical position in Mitchell, 2004), Alexander emphasizes the difficulty rather than the ease by which performances carry significant impact. Alexander's central problematic is why social performances do or do not 'succeed'—that is, whether audiences find social performances authentic and persuasive, whether performances move audiences morally, and ultimately whether the performances allow their 'actors' to more effectively pursue their interests. The problem is particularly acute in modern, highly differentiated societies, Alexander argues. In such societies, symbolic communication does not succeed nearly

as easily as it does in less complex societies, where simplification of meaning in ritual provides unity of purpose. Yet, he asserts, even moderns yearn for and occasionally achieve the intense symbolic communication that brings people together as collectivities (see also Giesen, 2006). Rituals and modern symbolic communication thus exist along the same performance continuum. But while these modern performances resemble rituals,

... we also clearly sense that these processes are not rituals in the traditional sense. Even when they affirm validity and authenticity and produce integration, their effervescence is short-lived. If they have achieved simplicity, it is unlikely they will be repeated. If they are repeated, it is unlikely that the symbolic communication can ever be so simplified in the same way again. (Alexander, 2006, 31)

Modern societies' complexity, fragmentation, differentiation, self-reflexivity, and rationality conspire to call such communication into question. Stated simply, we distrust ritual and other symbolic communication.

In order to succeed, Alexander continues, modern symbolic communication must 'fuse' together a whole variety of elements, components typically de-fused in complex societies. The elements re-fuse only in relatively extraordinary circumstances (actors thereby successfully and apparently authentically 'display for others the meaning of their social situation', p. 32). Following Butler in this regard, Alexander argues that performances succeed when audiences apparently seamlessly re-experience already socially established meanings through performances that mask their performative nature. For Alexander the elements that must be re-fused, interrelated but each following relatively

autonomous logics, include:

Systems of collective representation: background symbols and foreground scripts. Background symbols and foreground scripts refer respectively to the implicit and explicit signifiers through which actors and audience live their lives and create meaning. They typically connect to society's existential aims, cosmological sense-making, and comforts and certainties of identity. They incorporate 'codes that provide analogies and antipathies[,] and ... narratives that provide chronologies' (p. 33). In LDS General Conference, these are the direct and implied references to a shared Mormon system of meaning-making and common past, present, and future.

(Social) actors. These are the people who put the collective representations into circulation anew—in the case under consideration, the Mormon leaders speaking at General Conference. They may or may not be aware of themselves 'playing a role' in making these representations; in other words, they may or may not sense a separation between their performative and non-performative selves. But actors 'succeed' to the degree that the audience identifies its own emotions, aspirations, and moral evaluations with those the actors perform.

Observers/audience. The largest part of the audience for General Conference is Mormons with strong emotional/spiritual investment in and identity with the religion. A few others also observe the performance. They include non-Mormons considering joining Mormonism, less invested or even disaffected Mormons, and critics of Mormonism both internal and external to the LDS Church. In all cases, however, characteristics inherent in modern audiences create challenges in bridging the actor-audience gap: for example, differing social statuses, suspicion and mistrust, and low levels of attention to the particular performance. This last challenge acknowledges an LDS truism: many Latter-day Saints experience

boredom and displaced attention during General Conferences.

Means of symbolic production. This most directly refers to access to the physical resources needed by actors to perform their script adequately (such as a physical place, or props and scenery), as well as the wherewithal to make sure that the production is transmitted to the audience.

Mise-en-scène. By this term Alexander means the literal act of putting the text into the scene. In artistic performances, the challenge with *mise-en-scène* includes choreographing the performance within a limited time and space. The challenge for social performance, I suggest, is greater since the time and space that constitutes the appropriate scene for the performance is harder to pin down. Actors need not only find a suitably delimited time and space in which to perform but also to appropriately and skillfully insert their performances into the time-spaces of the larger social context.

Social power. Social power gets at questions such as: who is allowed to act? Under what conditions? Who will be permitted to attend? How is the audience able or unable to respond? Will those who produce the performance be those who explain it, or will others have more interpretive power? In sum, it can be argued, Alexander's theory accommodates agency and intentionality (with strategy and the possibility of success or failure), but, with re-fusion difficult, is not naively voluntaristic:

While re-fusion is made possible by the deposition of social power, the very success of a performance masks its existence. When performance is successful, social powers manifest themselves not as external or hegemonic forces ... but merely as sign-vehicles, as means of representation, as conveyors of the intended meaning. (p. 56)

Butler's theory of performativity has much utility in illuminating the power of often performed discourses. But in addition to possessing a vision of structure-agency I find more compelling than that held by Butler's poststructuralism, Alexander's theory is better situated to assess specific, infrequent instances of geopolitical performance (see also Table 1). This latter theory attunes us more precisely to the conditions under which particular performances may or may not succeed.

3) A successful geopolitical performance?

Alexander's theory points toward conditions that would make the October 2008 General Conference a successful geopolitical performance—resonating with, integrating, and motivating the community of Mormons. Of course with the conference asking for no overt response from listeners and with no way to construct a before/after assessment of Mormon attitudes, full evaluation poses difficult methodological problems. Even Mormons' ardent action on Proposition 8, one possible indicator of geopolitical effect, already had overwhelming momentum before this General Conference. Nevertheless, preliminary consideration leads to some tentative conclusions.

To Alexander one of the necessary re-fusions for successful social performance is the 'script', contingently performed by the 'actors', working in parallel with the culture's background representations. Four aspects of this fusion are particularly important: a) cognitive simplification, with clear, simple, often stereotyped storylines; b) time-space compression, with the scene unfolding in a single narrative place and continuous time; c) moral agonism, or 'performing the binaries' (p. 61) of, for example, good versus evil; and d) twisting and turning, the development of the drama from one crisis to

Table 1. Comparison of Butler's concept of performativity and Alexander's concept of social performance.

	Butler's Performativity	Alexander's Social Performance
Theoretical Perspective	Poststructuralism	Pragmatism
Center of Focus	Mundane, ordinary, often-repeated, taken for granted actions; events that garner very little attention	Exceptional events that have the power to produce an extraordinary sense of social integration
Attitude toward Agency	Agency does not exist ontologically prior to discourse, thus rejecting the common use of the term; it may exist as people apprehend and work through the contradictory nature and slippages of discourses	People are agents in the common sense of the term
How Change Occurs through Performance?	Due to the multiplicity of not-entirely consistent discourses in existence; also, humans never perfectly reproduce discourses	Agency creates the possibility of change; but profound social change is difficult to produce because modernity inclines us to distrust performance
Importance of the Dramaturgical Qualities of Performance	Low	High
Who Performance Most Strongly Affects?	Performers (audience is somewhat secondary)	Audience (Performers are secondary)

another to maintain audience interest. This General Conference fares well in a couple of these aspects. All the geopolitical content shows clear and simple narrative lines, emphasizing moral agonism, recalling long-expected stories within Mormonism (church growth, worldly evil, Mormons defending themselves against persecution, etc.). With its highly routinized proceedings, the General Conference likely succeeded less at generating twisting and turning within the 'script', however. (On time-space compression, see below).

General Conference likely re-fused audience and script/actors with partial success, as well. Unlike many modern social performances, General Conference background cultural representations and audience are not very separate from one another. As strongly committed members of the LDS Church, most in the audience share general expectations of

Mormonism with church leaders. Most have little desire to bring modern distrust to their analysis of the performance, hoping instead that the conference strengthens their faith and Mormon identity. This General Conference's 'script' clearly oriented itself toward, rather than challenging, that desire. As Alexander puts it, the audience more easily identifies with group-affirming than universally aspiring performances. Nevertheless, as Alexander also notes, there is a doubleness to interpretation. Audiences inevitably compare scripts to the great scripts of earlier times. Did this General Conference's script setting Mormons against the rest of the world, for example, compare favorably to the powerful scripts from Mormon history on that general theme? Or was it an uninteresting attempt at recalling those more compelling scripts? I suspect that, at best, this particular script fell somewhere in the middle.

Alexander also argues that for successful re-

fusion, actors must perform their roles well. Most Mormon leaders clearly do not fully possess the skills of many successful social performers elsewhere to make their performances appear natural and unrehearsed (thus heartfelt). But such skill may be less relevant than other attributes to LDS General Conference audiences. The occasion and the positions leaders hold confer legitimacy and authenticity more directly. Speakers also produce authenticity and accomplish re-fusion with the audience through other means. For example, First Presidency member Eyring (2008a) spoke of the especially heavy load he felt upon being assigned to be an apostle. Eventually he coped through laying his burdens upon and trusting God. His brief story produced authenticity because in a lay church with heavy responsibilities broadly distributed, many Mormons feel similarly inadequate but through similar processes find a way to carry out their duties. Authenticity here increased through identifying common experience. So while performances may appear stilted (to be sure, Eyring's twinkling face and emotion-rich voice also helped him appear authentic to the script), Mormon audiences likely perceive only relatively minor separation between actor and script.

Beyond authenticity, successful actors need access to social power and symbolic production to make the scene relevant. At first blush, Mormon leaders easily meet this test. LDS production and distribution networks are unrivaled for a church its size. Simply put, Mormonism watches (and listens to and reads) General Conference. The high quality broadcast/video production lends a sense of gravity to the proceedings. The physical features of the immediate scene add to the atmosphere. The magnificent 20,000-seat Conference Center—which recently replaced the revered Temple Square Tabernacle as the General Conference venue—and its solid if not ornate pulpit, toward

which the camera almost always focuses, imply that the speakers deserve serious attention.

On the other hand, Mormon leaders have less control over critics' reception of the performance. Even though most in the audience approach General Conference devotionally instead of critically, there are always exceptions, some inside and others outside the church. Unlike many successful social actors, and partly because their viewpoints are so well known in advance, Mormon leaders rarely have the performance skills to even temporarily quiet such critics. However, when these critics respond to General Conference, it is typically because General Conference provides an occasion upon which to attach long-standing critiques, not because the particular events of the conference provoke new or unexpected indignation. Much like General Conference itself, most of the criticism is predictable and routine, with only slight variations on a theme from conference to conference. Thus while the criticism is irrepressible, its power should not be overestimated. Since General Conference performances are mostly unsurprising, thus typically un-newsworthy broadly, criticism has a challenge in making itself heard. Critics' voices typically do not reach beyond local newspapers (such as online readers' forums) and a few corners of the blogosphere. Most of those in the LDS audience to whom the critics would like to speak simply ignore the criticism. Thus Mormon leaders' advantage over their critics in distributing their General Conference message is typically large.

The rare occasion when criticism of LDS leaders makes national headlines demonstrates these points by its contrast. In 2009 Apostle Dallin H. Oaks received severe national condemnation for a speech claiming anti-religious forces in the United States were rolling back religious freedom. He compared responses

toward Mormonism after Proposition 8's passage to voter intimidation against African Americans in the pre-civil rights legislation-era American South (Oaks, 2009), provoking ridicule for what critics felt was a false analogy. While many Mormons undoubtedly used his point to strengthen their geopolitical vision of a world antagonistic toward Mormonism, his inability to anticipate or manage the criticism suggests that this was an unsuccessful social performance on the broader scale. In other words, it did not ultimately aid LDS Church objectives of opening up more space for religious perspectives in US public policy debates. But, as noted, that case is a relative exception. General Conferences typically are not, and the specific conference under consideration here was not, subject to such powerful, broadly publicized criticism. With the October 2008 General Conference, LDS Church leaders distributed their messages successfully, by and large.

The re-fusions that may be most difficult for General Conference relate to the spatiality of social performance, including *mise-en-scène*, or putting the script within the scene. Alexander's theory has important spatial elements. Yet it can be argued that its spatiality is insufficiently explicit. As mentioned earlier, in noting the challenge of re-fusing background representation with the script, Alexander writes of the necessity for time-space compression. Effective social performance, he suggests, compresses time by creating a sense of continuous action, with clear causes and effects. This occurs most effectively within a single or a few dramatic scenes. Effective performance likewise compresses space by folding the performance into a single narrative place (p. 61). A similar challenge applies to *mise-en-scène*, where, Alexander notes, the script and performance come into confrontation within a given time and space. 'Even after a script has been constructed that allows background culture

to walk and talk, the "action" of the performance must begin in real time and at a particular place' (p. 63). Nevertheless it is worth making more explicit than Alexander does how the extension of time-space is inherent in its compression. Indeed, we might add, performances stand a greater chance of re-fusing the script with background representations and performance of the scene in a particular time-place when their time-space compression adequately invokes the presence of those other spaces and other times. In other words, the compression must produce (usually implicit) links to other times and places rather than squeeze those connections out of the picture. Social performance succeeds more when, through concentration of meaning and appropriate location in time and space, it participates in an ongoing drama with important implications in past and future as well as within a variety of spaces and places.

General Conference's nature virtually precludes full success here. As a regularly scheduled event with a routinized, largely textual format, General Conference has difficulty conveying a sense of organic participation in ongoing and ever-shifting broad social dramas. Although both actors and audience have some bodily involvement at General Conference, the format effaces the embodiment. Messages appear to move only from speaker's head to listener's head, or perhaps heart to heart. Similarly, General Conference speakers may comment on social happenings, but they do not easily produce the sense that the commentaries constitutes key scenes in social dramas extending into time and space beyond General Conference's confines. So while, for example, Hales (2008) used scriptural and historical examples of persecution of believers to textually link (compress/extend) contemporary time and space to other time-spaces, that linkage occurred more through analysis than participation. Hales's talk did not itself become a

fully living and breathing part of the social drama. Instead it was only able to ask audience members to intellectually consider how their own lives are part of the drama; the complete re-fusion of the text into drama would have to be accomplished later by audience members individually. Thus General Conference talks have difficulty fully extending their own scene into larger social dramas.

However, for one brief, extraordinary moment Apostle Nelson (2008) nearly overcame this limitation. At one point when referring to gay marriage and relationships without speaking their name, as alluded to above, he turned with surprising seriousness to the camera (surprising since the talks are almost always serious) and warned of the dangers in Satan's counterfeit paths. For that brief instant, even though substance remained largely textual within the regular General Conference format, Nelson appeared to be literally, almost viscerally, part of the conflict over marriage he was describing. The battle was not simply somewhere 'out there', but it felt (to this listener) like the times and spaces involved in the battle over gay marriage had been condensed into that Conference Center in Salt Lake City. Nelson momentarily was a protagonist rather than a commentator. In Austin's terms, by speaking he was doing; he produced a performative speech act. He thereby offered his audience an opportunity to identify not only with his words but also with his direct participation in an important social drama. By making this claim I do not deny the political significance of 'commentary'. However its transformative potential is less than performance that effectively re-fuses the script with a scene successfully compressed and participating in an extended time-space. So while General Conference routinely performs significant cultural/political work, that forum only rarely and fleetingly achieves the immediacy with which Nelson

briefly put his script into the larger social drama. The format of General Conference makes it difficult for Mormon leaders to consistently create successful *mise-en-scène*.

5. Conclusion

This article considers the 2008 General Conference as a site of LDS geopolitical action. California's Proposition 8 vote, just around the corner, gave the conference's geopolitics immediate significance. But potential effects extended beyond that single battle. With Butler and especially Alexander as guides, I have questioned the conference's impact as geopolitical performance. The conference's textual messages, in Butlerian fashion, likely reinforced long-held Mormon dispositions and identity positions. Analysis via Alexander adds insight into the conference's transformative potential. The October 2008 General Conference 'succeeded' as geopolitical performance in having a culturally resonant message reach its intended audience effectively and authentically. But, with difficulty of putting the script into the social scene, it likely succeeded only marginally in motivating specific action or allowing Mormon leaders to more effectively pursue their geopolitical vision than they would have done before the conference.

It is impossible to retrospectively create a before-after scenario to more rigorously test the causality implied in this claim. But we can look at subsequent events. On the one hand, this General Conference certainly played a role, though probably not determinative one, in the strong response by Mormons in California (and more diffusely throughout the rest of the United States) in support of Proposition 8. Their sense of being collectively arrayed against groups

attacking 'morality' surely contributed to Mormons' noted enthusiasm in support of Proposition 8. On the other hand, Proposition 8's victory produced a backlash in which Mormons' collectivism, place within the national conversation, and (geo)political agenda have been heavily questioned on the national scale. While Mormonism's geopolitical statements and action have not ended, they have subsequently softened. The comparative lack of geopolitical content in the General Conferences of 2009 and April 2010 (though the October 2010 Conference featured a partial return a geopolitical stance in relation to same-sex marriage) perhaps suggests that from the institutional church's perspective the strong geopolitical moment had passed. This subsequent evidence accords with the argument in this paper that the 2008 General Conference's geopolitical impact was more marginal or reinforcing of identity than transformative or motivating.

Clearly there are tools beyond the concept of social performance with which to pursue the question geopolitical impact. Nevertheless, for those who would rather regard poststructuralism as an analytical tool than epistemological doctrine, Alexander's theory provides a useful complement to many of the textual and Butlerian tendencies within popular geopolitical analysis. It reminds us that not all texts and all performances are equally effective. Even though General Conference provides nearly the most authoritative expression of geopolitical ideas possible in a Mormon context, there are reasons to question its performative impact. A more textual analysis might not allow us to see those reasons. Alexander's theory suggests that scholars should pay attention to the conditions under which some statements, visions, and events become more influential geopolitically within popular culture than others. And it provides a useful set of conceptual tools through which geographers can

begin to take up the task.

Notes

- 1) 'General Conference' is shorthand for *178th Semi-annual General Conference, October 2008*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, URL: <http://lds.org/conference/sessions/display /0,5239,23-1-947,00.html>, accessed 27 May 2010.
- 2) Readers of the stories covering the conference session in the *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City's LDS Church-owned newspaper) noticed some of the Conference's individual 'geopolitical' elements, without using that term of course, but no respondent found any sort of geopolitical theme among the elements (Readers comments, 2008). However, two newspaper reports collectively mildly hint toward such themes (Dougherty, 2008; Stack, 2008).
- 3) Excerpts from Hamula's talk subsequently set the intended meaning for (and thus in a sense allowed for the creation of) a video pastiche of church leaders speaking on the war between good and evil at a (non-official) website promoting LDS political conservatism (Latter-day Conservative, 2010). The other statements by church leaders, by themselves much softer in viewing the world dichotomously and arguably severely decontextualized, receive exaggerated meaning by beginning the video with Hamula's speech.
- 4) Nelson recommends Smith (1988) concept of the 'cermed' subject as a corrective, seeking to avoid the pitfalls of absolute intentionality and absolute subjugation. Mahmood (2006) takes issue with the tendency to use Butler in the service of resistance differently, emphasizing other registers through which some approximation of agency may exist. To be fair, Butler herself avoids the term 'resistance' for its implication of intentionality (Butler, 2006). Bialasiewicz *et al.*, (2007), however, find a properly nuanced conception of agency within Butler's performativity. While large theoretical debates (between poststructuralism, Marxism, and pragmatism, for example) are not reducible to disagreements over the structure-agency relationship, the degree to which these subject-agency disagreements regularly recur in those theoretical debates is striking (see Nelson, 1999; Mitchell, 2004; Alexander, 2006; Bialasiewicz *et al.*, 2007). It is striking because most theoretical perspectives currently in use in

human geography agree that a proper balance must be found between structure and agency; the disagreements occur over which theory best achieves that balance in practical research.

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