# FORMAL AND SUBSTANTIVE VOLUNTARISM IN THE WORK OF TALCOTT PARSONS: A THEORETICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION*

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*Contemporary discussions of Parsons's thought have faltered because they are insufficiently generalized. Only after his theoretical and epistemological logic has been explored, for example, can his more specific, ideological purpose be correctly understood. Parsons's theoretical ambition has been to resolve long-standing antinomies in social thought. His theory, to the degree it succeeds, formulates two central points: the social basis of individual autonomy and the multidimensional basis of social order. These positions present the heart of Parsons's formal theory. In his analysis of historical development as differentiation—cultural, structural, and psychological—Parsons combines this formal logic with an ideological commitment to the expansion of individual freedom and conscious control. Incorporating elements of liberal, idealist, and materialist arguments, he outlines a theory of substantive voluntarism that is, potentially, neither conservative nor static. Considered as a whole, Parsons's theory contains serious contradictory strains. Nevertheless, his analysis of formal and substantive freedom represents a major contribution to social thought.*

The charismatic power of a great thinker raises to a heightened pitch the normal level of irrationality produced by paradigm conflict. In defense against such a powerful intellectual center, there emerges alongside the usual thrusts of serious theoretical combat an antagonistic tradition of misinformed, often trivial, sometimes grossly distorted commentary that attempts to present itself, and is partly accepted as, critical truth. At the same time, the attractive power of this center is such that those who follow the thinker prove unable to present an objective critical evaluation of his intellectual contributions. Only with the passage of time, as the center loses its immediate power, can a perspective which is both critical and appreciative be attained and the thinker's permanent contributions to intellectual tradition be properly assessed.

We can observe this tortuous path of assimilation in the reception of Marx's work and Weber's, but the process seems particularly striking, and particularly apropos of the subject of this essay, in the case of Durkheim. As a forceful figure both intellectually and personally, Durkheim created a powerful sociological school which followed Durkheimian theory in a manner which greatly extended its scope and application but did little to articulate its foundations or to clarify its critical weaknesses (Clark, 1973). At the same time, Durkheim's theory was subject to a barrage of what was often distorted and tendentious criticism, directed not only towards his theoretical conceptions but in addition towards his ideological involvement in the reconstruction of the French republic (Lukes, 1972). Only in the late 1930s and the 1940s, with the work of sociologists like Parsons and Merton and anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard—and, indeed, after the decline of almost all literalistic Durkheimianism—was the attempt begun to reappropriate Durkheim's theoretical work. And only in the last decade has the debate about his ideological perspective been sufficiently separated from the rigid radical/conservative dichotomy to enable the true humanitarian and progressive impetus of his work to be understood (Lukes, 1972: Chaps. 17, 26; Giddens, 1971: Chap. 7; Marks, 1974; Bellah, 1973).

A remarkably similar process of assimilation and its vicissitudes appears to be the fate of Talcott Parsons's work. After an initial period of the inflation of his intellectual prestige and the creation of a large number of distinguished followers, there emerged a second period during which it suffered an intensification of the same kind of distorted critical appraisal on both the theoretical and ideological levels. There have been recent indications that a more balanced sort of critical assessment is in the process of emerging, as thinkers of different theoretical and political traditions have returned to Parsons's work and argued for the centrality and significance of its central concerns (Atkinson, 1972: 1–143; Jessop, 1972; Gintis, 1969; Rocher, 1975; Bershady, 1973; Turner, 1974: 15–76, 193–210; Turner and Beeghley, 1974; Lipset, 1975; Johnson, 1976; Menzies, 1977; Alexander, 1979). It is as a contribution to this theoretical and ideological reassessment that this essay is intended.

## MISINTERPRETATION AND THE VOLUNTARISM PROBLEM

The sociological conventional wisdom has pegged Parsons as a functionalist, an equilibrium or consensus theorist, an ideologist. Such characterizations have been promoted not only by his critics but often by his supporters as well (Lockwood, 1956; Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1958; 1959; Mills, 1959; Martindale, 1960; Gouldner, 1967; 1970; Rex, 1961; Foss, 1963; Friedrichs, 1970; Wallace, 1969; Bottomore, 1974; Levy, 1952; Smelser, 1959; Mayhew, 1968b; Rocher, 1975; Johnson, 1973; 1975; Lipset, 1975; Baum, 1976; Loubser, 1976; Van Zule Slabbert, 1976). None of these descriptions, however, is sufficiently generalized to comprehend Parsons's most fundamental theoretical contribution. This lies, I would argue, more in the realm of what might be called sociological epistemology, in the formulation of a distinctive epistemological position and in its translation into the realm of sociological explanation.[1] To fully illuminate this realm of Par-

sons's work would involve exploring a wide range of diverse issues. In the present context I will limit my focus to only one aspect of the problem; namely, to the issues of voluntarism in Parsons's thought.[2] After elaborating, in a condensed manner, the nature of Parsons's theoretic-epistemic position on this issue, I will demonstrate its relevance for practical sociological work by indicating how Parsons combines his commitments in this realm with the ideological and empirical positions which govern his theory of social change. I will call the position Parsons has articulated on the theoretic-epistemic level his "formal voluntarism" and its empirical-ideological articulation, his commitment to the standard of "substantive voluntarism."

In social theory, the issue of voluntarism revolves, on the most general level, around two long-standing debates, the arguments over nominalism vs. realism, and subjectivism vs. objectivism (Aristotle, 1962: Bk. 7, 3, 4; Plato, 1945: 80–5, 88–92, 321–36; Augustine, 1948: Chap. 14; Halévy, 1901–1904; Stark, 1962; Sartre,

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[1] For example, while there is no doubt that Par-

sons's functional commitment has had an important impact on his theoretical system, the influence has been on the level of model rather than on the level of epistemic presuppositions—a level which, because of its greater generality, is theoretically more significant. Furthermore, even as a model, the functional system provides wide limits of flexibility which can in no sense be associated with propositions about empirical equilibrium or conflict, or with notions about idealism-materialism, individualism-sociologism, conservatism-radicalism—as has so often been assumed (Sztompka, 1968; 1974; Stinchcombe, 1968: Chap. 3; Smelser, 1972; Hobsbawm, 1973; Lipset, 1975). This literature indicates that the notion of system is an open one, which assumes a particular content only in relation to specific theoretic-epistemic, ideological, and empirical commitments. Little significant understanding of the varied course of Parsons's intellectual development can be derived from studying his theory's functionalist aspects, whereas a great deal of that variation can be illuminated by focusing on its theoretic-epistemic assumptions.

[2] Though voluntarism plays a crucial role in Parsons's work, it should not be considered the master key that unlocks his entire theory. For a fuller discussion of the different levels involved in his analysis—and a methodological justification for the distinction between the theoretic-epistemical, ideological, and empirical level of sociological discourse which I assume here—see Alexander (1979: Vol. 2, Pt. 3; and Vol. 1, Chap. 2).

1968; Martindale, 1960; Hughes, 1958; Habermas, 1973a; Wilson, 1970). Parsons's position on these questions has been as radically misinterpreted as his position on the less generalized issues of system models, consensus theory, and ideological commitments. Basically two kinds of charges have been made. According to one strand of the critical literature, oriented to the nominalist-realist debate, Parsons is decidedly an antivoluntarist. These critics portray Parsons's writings, particularly his later ones, as concerned only with the organic whole, as taking an antiindividualist, determinist position (Scott, 1963; Martindale, 1960; Friedrichs, 1970; Atkinson, 1972; Pope, 1973; Menzies, 1977). The other critical strand, oriented to the subjective-objective question, takes a rather contradictory position. According to these critics, Parsons is an idealist who envisions no significant constraints on individual action (Lockwood, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959; Gouldner, 1970; Heydebrand, 1972). For critics of the first persuasion, Parsons's stand on the subjective-objective issue is irrelevant; what matters is simply that he postulates supraindividual constraint per se (Atkinson, 1972: 1–145). For critics of the second persuasion, however, it is Parsons's position on the nominal-realist, or individual-society, question which is unimportant. For them, Parsons's emphasis on norms in itself commits him to an unacceptable degree of voluntarism. On one matter, however, both of these critiques are in agreement: Parsons's failings, whatever they may be, are vitally connected to his ideological conservatism.

The great contradiction between these two critical positions should alert us to their problematic status. In the following, I will demonstrate that both of these critiques are mistaken, not only in their characterization of Parsons's theoretic-epistemic position, but in their ideological critique as well.

What neither group of critics has seen, apparently, is the synthetic nature of Parsons's theoretical intention, the manner in which a major segment of his work has been directed, from the beginning, toward bridging these fundamental theoretical dilemmas (see Devereux, 1961). Western thought can be regarded as involving two great traditions (Ekeh, 1974): the individualist (nominalist) and collectivist (realist), each of which in turn includes both romantic (subjectivist) and rationalist (objectivist) strands. To correctly comprehend one major thrust of Parsons's intellectual project, and certainly to penetrate his most important contributions, his writing must be viewed as a vigorous dialogue with each of these traditions. We will see that in his formal, theoretic-epistemic work, Parsons sought to articulate a structure for social action that ascribed voluntarism to the influence of subjective ideal elements, which are internalized by the individual and which allow him or her autonomy vis-à-vis material constraints. In this manner, Parsons rejects the nominalist notion that freedom involves the complete lack of constraint. On the other hand, in his application of this position to concrete empirical situations, Parsons has utilized this structure to articulate a model of historical development keyed to the standard of individual control over both material and ideal constraints. Parsons's relation to these two critical traditions, in other words, attempts to achieve a dialectical kind of negation, an *aufhebung* which preserves kernels of theoretical truth while it transcends the theoretical position as a whole.

## FORMAL VOLUNTARISM: THE THEORETIC-EPISTEMIC SYNTHESIS

### The Individualist Tradition

The most important source for Parsons's explicit emphasis on voluntarism is the individualist strands of Enlightenment thought. These are the traditions which stand at the heart of nineteenth century liberal ideology and emphasize free will as the principal ethical criterion of freedom. In its social scientific form, this ideological point is transposed into a distinctively individualistic theoretical position, which perceives social action as initiated by, and society as resting upon, discrete individuals who are free to pursue their interest as they have defined it. Historically, in terms of nineteenth century thought, this indi-

vidualist social science was articulated by neo-Kantian and Utiltarian theory (Martindale, 1960:216–66; Halévy, 1901–1904). In contemporary terms, the individualist tradition manifests itself in the sociological schools of symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, and phenomenological and existentialist sociology, all of which consider the freedom of the individual person as the starting point for theoretical analysis.

Parsons's response to this tradition argues that its voluntarism is based upon a radical misunderstanding of the theoretical role of the concept "individual," a problem which he attributes to a metamethodological problem; namely, the empiricist confusion of concrete and analytic frames of reference (Parsons, 1937: 72–4, 87–125; see also Whitehead, 1925; Schwanenberg, 1971; 1976; Fararo, 1976; Burgher, 1977; Parsons, 1970a). The concrete individual, i.e., the living, breathing, visible person, is of course free and autonomous in a certain limited sense. This describes the picture of the individual in society described by the nominalist critics. But when such empiricism is penetrated, when this person is viewed analytically rather than concretely, we can see that he is, in fact, a composite of different social forces, the most important of which are the symbolic forces which contain normative elements. Since these elements are internalized, they are in empirical concrete terms invisible: hence, when we look at an individual person, he appears to be discrete when in fact he is interpenetrated with other individuals by virtue of shared symbolic norms. It is at this point that Parsons arrives at his great insight into the voluntary quality of action. He reasons that if no individual can actually be free of constraint in the radical sense propounded by individualist theory, then what we normally perceive as free, intentional activity must in fact involve the actor's application of an internal normative standard of judgment.

If the fact of normative internalization eliminates the pure voluntarism of the perfectly free will, it simultaneously implies voluntarism of a more limited yet nonetheless significant type: the autonomy of individuals vis-à-vis the material elements of their situation. If what appears to be the individual expression of free will is actually the determination of a certain type of social force, namely, normative symbolism, it is at the same time a very different kind of social force than that exercised by material conditions. Parsons's point, in other words, is that in order to preserve the voluntarism of the individualist strain of social thought, any conception of material forces as the exclusive determinants of social action must be overcome. "The voluntaristic system," Parsons (1937:82) writes, "does not in the least deny an important role to conditional . . . non-normative elements." It does, however, "consider . . . them as interdependent with the normative."

The originality of this aspect of Parsons's contribution, which has been thoroughly misconstrued by interpreters within the individualist tradition, is, then, his comprehension of the essential compatibility of an emphasis on voluntary individual will with a collectivist emphasis on normative interpenetration. It was, in fact, precisely to achieve this synthesis that Parsons (1937:343–409) in *The Structure of Social Action* launched his attack on Durkheim's unsophisticated sociologism. After this critique, Parsons could fully accept Durkheim's insight that the reconciliation between individual and society could be achieved only by accepting certain elements—norms—of the idealist position, a position often associated with political conservatism. Yet contrary to conservative theory, Parsons rejected the individualist perspective while pointedly retaining a voluntaristic emphasis. Parsons criticized Durkheim for obfuscating this voluntarism, but he did so only in order to formulate more effectively Durkheim's proposition that individualism, in an ideological sense, need not imply individualism in a theoretical one (Giddens, 1972:364; Bellah, 1973a).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is this solution to the individualist problem, this attempt to articulate voluntary action, that constitutes one part, and by far the most conspicuous part, of Parsons's famous solution to the problem of order. Normative interpenetration is induced by two individuals sharing or internalizing a

common symbol. Symbols are invariably organized into certain kinds of patterns, that is, into nonrandom kinds of arrangements. For this reason, Parsons states that just as a discrete individual is an impossible social fact, so is nonordered social action. Symbolic interpenetration means that a certain element of order exists between individuals (Parsons, 1937: 59–60, 94–6, 314, 337, 738–9; see also Levine, 1969). Order means nonrandomness, not equilibrium.

In addition to the confusion of order and equilibrium, there have been two other kinds of criticism of Parsons's theory of order, both of which involve misinterpretations so basic as effectively to turn his theory on its head. The first type of critique equates Parsons's use of order with an emphasis on conformity or passivity. Yet to make such an equation, as the preceding argument has demonstrated, is to misconstrue the entire thrust of Parsons's work and to commit the very theoretical error which his own formulation of individual action was intended to circumvent. Parsons's point, of course, is that whether independent or passive, action always involves an internalized component. It is, therefore, perfectly consistent that such criticisms of the order theory have been associated with the nominalist, individualist tradition, which views Parsons's emphasis on supraindividual force inherently antivoluntary (Pope, 1973; Cohen et al., 1975; Atkinson, 1972:181, 213; Bendix, 1970:121).

The other type of criticism levelled at Parsons's theory of order differs radically from the preceding by contending that Parsons's formulation actually allows too much voluntarism rather than too little. This accusation usually is made by materialist critics who themselves oppose the individualistic strand of social theory. Their attack, therefore, focuses on the ideal elements in Parsons's order proposal rather than on his emphasis on supraindividual order per se. By relating action to internal normative elements, it is said, Parsons has ignored the very type of supraindividual social forces which constrain action rather than facilitate it (Lockwood, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959; Rex, 1961:78–155; Gouldner, 1970; Burgher, 1977). In-

deed, if Parsons's theory of action was limited to the elements discussed thus far, this criticism would be a telling one, and Parsons's theory would have to be considered a variation, albeit a sophisticated and voluntarist one, of the idealist tradition along the same lines as Durkheim's work. This, however, is not the case. We will see, in fact, that Parsons's theory of formal voluntarism embraces and transcends both major variants of the collectivist tradition.

## The Collectivist Tradition

In addition to incorporating the individualist theory associated with nineteenth century liberalism and the normative emphasis associated with romanticism, Parsons's synthesis is also intended to subsume theoretical strands most often associated today with certain kinds of exchange and Marxian approaches—in particular the perception of individual freedom as dependent on certain kinds of supraindividual material conditions. Yet, as in the case of individualist theory, this incorporation is partial and accompanied by a formal theoretical critique. In *The Structure of Social Action* and throughout his later work, Parsons (1937:87–125) labels the exclusive emphasis on material conditions the "Hobbesian tradition" and he devotes himself to illuminating its inherent weaknesses, not by referring to some problem of order and consensus, and certainly not by weighing its ideological merit, but rather by analyzing the failures of its sociological epistemology. Parsons develops his critique primarily through a discussion of variants of nineteenth century social Darwinism. To make our analysis more contemporary, we will take some literary license and illustrate Parsons's reasoning, in a manner in which Parsons himself does not, with reference to the Marxist version of the Hobbesian tradition. In doing so, we will further indicate the tension between ideological and theoretic-epistemic approaches to freedom.

A fundamental irony of the Marxian strand of the socialist tradition is that, while its theory of material constraints has vastly increased our insight into the requi-

sites for voluntary action, its theory of social action—at least action before the achievement of a truly Communist society—perceives actions as being externally determined, and holds that the structure of objective factors squashes the human potential for intentional action or praxis. Aside from the ideological reasons for such a position, Marx's denial of voluntarism in capitalist society has two fundamental causes which are theoretically sui generis. In the first place, voluntarism is impossible because Marx's theory remains implicitly committed to a concrete perception of the individual actor, which means that freedom can be portrayed only as a condition in which external, material constraint is actually abolished. In the realm of scarcity, therefore, freedom is not possible. However, the antivoluntarist implication of the Marxian theory of freedom does not derive primarily from this concrete perception of the individual per se. Rather, it stems more from Marx's commitment to a certain perception of that individual's motivation; namely, a rationalist one—once again, a theoretical commitment that holds only for the period of capitalist and socialist scarcity. The same tradition that emphasizes material conditions portrays human action vis-à-vis these forces as thoroughly utilitarian. Therefore, although Marx envisions human action as potentially voluntary, as praxis, he conceived the capitalist processes of objectification, alienation, and fetishism as reducing the scope of action purely to a focus on means to the exclusion of ends.

It is here that Parsons's second great insight in *The Structure of Social Action* comes into play. He argues that such an exclusive focus on technical rationality reduces ends to the status of means. As a result, the international element of action is eliminated and determination by conditions becomes all-pervasive (see Halévy, 1901–1904). The logic here is fundamentally theoretic-epistemic rather than ideological or empirical. It implies, in other words, that by virtue of its instrumentalist position, Marxian theory is in the same logical camp as theories of political Hobbesianism or realpolitik, despite the latter's ideological incompatibil-

ity with the libertarian aspirations of Marx's socialist theory. Because of its similarly rationalist perspective on motivation, realpolitik theory also perceives social processes as determined by conditions which are over and above the voluntaristic control of ethical norms (Aron, 1971; Mommsen, 1971).

Parsons's strategy vis-à-vis such collectivist instrumentalism is to transform its problematic elements while incorporating these features that are compatible with a voluntaristic position. To accomplish this task, Parsons (1937:91–4, 99–100, 106, 109, 290–1, 344–9, 508–9, 576, 658) refers back to his earlier solution of the individual and order problems and, simultaneously, moves to fill out this earlier formulation by embracing elements from the materialist tradition. Relying on this first formulation, Parsons can state that because action is symbolically guided and internally directed, it contains a normative component and therefore cannot be reduced to a reflex of external material conditions. But by also orienting himself in a positive way to the materialist tradition, Parsons completes this earlier construction by asserting that this symbolic action always occurs within a conditional environment of material facts which produces pressure for the pursuit of efficient means. The key intellectual figure in this final element of Parsons's theoretical synthesis is Weber, who outlined a method for carrying forward Marx's materialist concerns without the latter's exclusive emphasis on instrumentalism. It was for this reason that, despite his own inconsistency in applying this method, Weber constituted, along with Durkheim, not only a principal reference in *The Structure of Social Action,* but a continuing source of theoretical and empirical guidance for Parsons throughout the rest of his career. It is Weber's voice we hear, not Durkheim's, in Parsons's protest that a voluntarist theory must be resolutely anti-idealist. Whereas "the voluntaristic type of theory involves a process of interaction between normative and ideal elements," Parsons (1937:82, 466) writes, "at the idealist pole the role of conditional elements disappears . . . and 'action' becomes a process of emanation. . . . "

Parsons's (1937:77) definition of the unit act, the basic element of social life, is thoroughly multidimensional:

> In a unit act there are identifiable as minimum characteristics the following: (1) an end, (2) a situation, analyzable in turn into (a) means and (b) conditions, and (3) at least one selected standard in terms of which the end is related to the situation [i.e., a norm].

### The Theoretical Synthesis and Parsons's Program

Action may be described, in other words, as both instrumental and normative. In terms of the subjective-objective debate, action's voluntarist quality is preserved by the latter, its determinist quality by the former. In terms of the nominalist-realist debate, action is both individual and social. Individual action is ordered by the patterning of normative symbols and by the organization of material constraints. Yet, since normative patterns are internalized, a significant cause of any action rests with the willed behavior of the concrete individual.

In order to understand fully this attempt at theoretical synthesis, it is vital to assess its peculiar status in Parsons's work. By transforming the distinctive elements of individualist, idealist, and materialist theory into a broader whole, Parsons's intention has been to delineate the structure of action and society apart from any of its particular manifestations, in the same manner that Chomsky has focussed on generative grammar as the universal structure of language (Chomsky, 1968; Bershady, 1973). In Parsons's (1937:733) own terms, the elements of action he has articulated have phenomenological status, in Husserl's sense. According to this analytic perspective, voluntarism is a formal property of action; it does not depend on the particular historical nature of the ideal and material conditions which constrain it.

A major part of Parsons's intellectual effort has been devoted to developing this understanding of the formal structure of multidimensional causality and value internalization into a fully elaborated theory of social life. We have dealt here mainly with his first and classic formulation in

*The Structure of Social Action.* In his middle period, he developed this approach much further, in the analysis of allocation and integration, the dichotomy of instrumental and expressive action, the differentiation of cultural, social and personality systems, the notions of cultural generalization and organizational specification, the analysis of pattern variables as characterizing both cultural and organizational patterns, and in his analyses of the socialization of autonomy (Parsons and Shils, 1951:53–110; Parsons, 1951; 1954; 1955; 1964). In his later work, he continued the search for synthesis in his A-G-I-L formulation, which conceptualized society as resting on the interaction of four subsystems: economics, politics, integration and value maintenance. Despite the widespread belief to the contrary, this new vocabulary represents not so much an effort to articulate the logic of functional systems per se, but an attempt to delineate in a systematic manner the degrees of material and ideal focus in any social system. In his formulations of the concrete media representing each such analytic dimension of interchange between subsystems, Parsons carried this interrelationship to its most refined level (Parsons et al., 1953; Parsons and Smelser, 1956; Parsons, 1969:157–522; 1967:385–520; Parsons and Platt, 1973).

### SUBSTANTIVE VOLUNTARISM: THE IDEOLOGICAL-EMPIRICAL SYNTHESIS

A theory of formal voluntarism is necessary but not sufficient for a theory of substantive voluntarism because such a substantive theory is linked not only to presuppositions about theoretic-epistemic strategy but also to explicit ideological standards and propositions about the empirical world. Parsons's approach to substantive voluntarism is embodied in his theory of social change as differentiation. This change theory has been widely misinterpreted. It has long been argued, of course, that Parsons does not have a theory of systemic change at all. Recently, however, in response to the voluminous scholarly writing on differentiation, the anti-Parsonian critique has evolved into

an argument that the functionalist approach to change is, in fact, overly systemic (Smith, 1973). On the other side of the debate, Parsons (1967; 1970b; 1971c:27) himself has tried to describe his approach to change as being completely nonideological, as basing its analysis of evolving social structures exclusively on the criteria of which structures bring greater adaptive capacity to the social system. Neither of these interpretations is valid. Once again, we must step outside the polarization between Parsons and his critics to gain the proper perspective.

We have seen that Parsons critically reformulates the theoretic-epistemic content of the rationalist, progressive strands of individualist and collectivist thought. By no means, however, does he simultaneously abandon their ideological commitments to the expansion of voluntarism. To the contrary, it might be argued that Parsons has reformulated these theories precisely to preserve the essential libertarian aspects of their ideological perspectives. In formulating his own ideological perspective, in other words, Parsons's relation to these traditions is very different than in his formulation of the theoretic-epistemic problem.

If formal voluntarism refers to a universal property of all action abstracted from time and space, and from any specifically ideological properties, substantive voluntarism refers exactly to the opposite: to the degree that particular historical and social conditions allow the realization of individual freedom defined in terms of a particular ideological perspective. Therefore, although Parsons has discarded the individualistic position as a formal framework, his theory of differentiation accepts it as providing the basic parameters within which any theory of substantive freedom must be rooted (see Tiryakian, 1975:27–31). In contrast to his formal theory, Parsons's (1967; 1971b; Parsons and Platt, 1973:42ff) substantive theory does, in fact, take the concrete person as the point of reference. Parsons accepts, in this case, the classical liberal emphasis on the autonomy of the concrete individual, although this autonomy is, once again, a multidimensional one. Substantive voluntarism obtains to the extent that the concrete person exercises autonomy vis-à-vis both the normative and conditional aspects of his situation. To determine the degree of autonomy of the concrete person, however, Parsons (1967) must examine the nature of its collective constraints. Just as Parsons accepts the individualistic position in his substantive, if not his formal theory, so too he incorporates the collectivist ideological commitments to freedom into his substantive theory while rejecting its formal theoretical framework. Whereas in the formal theory, Parsons's challenge is the task of interweaving norms and conditions, in his substantive theory his concern becomes the quality of norms and the quality of particular conditions.

To comprehend this substantive strategy, it is necessary to appreciate that both the traditions of critical idealism and materialism can be seen as defining freedom as the achievement of different types of differentiation.[3] Within the socialist materialist tradition, for example, the most persistent strand of Marx's

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[3] The normative approach to freedom is obviously complex, but its very centrality in Western thought makes it a vital part of any ideological evaluation. Freedom can, of course, be viewed as natural or given, as an inherent part of any individual action. Beyond this individualist position, freedom can be viewed as dependent either upon external, supraindividual circumstances or upon conditions internal to the individual. Hobbes (1651:Chap. 21), for example, points to external circumstances: a "freeman is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to do." For those in the internalist tradition, however, it is precisely the nature of this will which is at issue, not the circumstances that hinder it. Thus, as Marcus Aurelius is reported to have said, influenced as he was by the Stoics: "It is possible to live well *even* in a palace." Or as the early Christian, John, proclaimed, "Know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Freedom, in other words, is a matter of the quality of insight and perception. Within each of these general traditions there are, of course, various more specific controversies; viz., does external freedom depend on the acquisition of individual liberty or on equality? For a broad discussion of these issues and their treatment in the history of Western thought, see Adler (1958).

As a sociological theorist, however, Parsons's major contribution to this discussion lies, like Weber's, in his provision of historical-empirical categories for normative argument. He argues, in effect, that the internal and external conditions of freedom depend on the extension of cultural, social, and psychological differentiation (see Bay, 1958).

(1875:16–37; see Jessop, 1972: 46–7) sociological theory can be viewed as identifying structural fusion as the source of the inequity and domination of capitalist society. Stated negatively, only by divesting the economic structures and its dominant class of their dedifferentiated relationship to and control over the other institutional dimensions of social life can individual freedom over the environment be attained. In a positive sense, the state, as an expression of an autonomous electorate, must be able to assert its control over the economy. In general, there should be free competition of ideas and an expansion of the range of opportunities for individual action. Rather than dependent on a type of property, law must become the expression of an independent sense of right (Marx, 1843; 1875; Smelser, 1972; Avineri, 1969: Chaps. 1, 2, 6–8; Bottomore, 1974: 72–84). Although this moral position on substantive development has become distorted in the Leninist and romantic forms of Marxist thought, both of which propose forms of dedifferentiation, it has been carried on by the social-democratic tradition of Marxism (Lichtheim, 1961: Chaps. 5–6; Bottomore, 1974:97–113). In addition to Marx, of course, there are other significant intellectual formulators of the socialist theory of freedom as increased differentiation, the most important of whom extend the conception more explicitly to the noneconomic dimensions of life. Perhaps the most important of these figures are Michels (1962) with his theory of political democracy as the competition of elites, and T.H. Marshall (1965), who emphasizes the social aspects of citizenship (see also Lipset, 1962).

The Western intellectual tradition that emphasizes freedom as differentiation on the ideal or normative level rather than on the material one is less explicit although no less significant. Its premise is that individual autonomy defined as the individual's control over his or her internal environment occurs to the degree that spiritual and ethical issues are transcendent vis-à-vis earthly concerns. This position has been articulated by such diverse traditions as the Judaic and Christian notions of divine law and the natural law traditions of the French Enlightenment (Weber, 1952; 1954; Nelson, 1949; Becker, 1935); the Protestant notion of the sanctity of individual conscience and the legitimation of individual doubt and its secular expression in theories of democratic rights (Weber, 1958b; 1958a; Parsons, 1937:51–8; Little, 1969; Walzer, 1965; Tiryakian, 1975: 24–30); and the various conceptions of freedom tied to the autonomy of secular intellectual thought from the Greeks and the Humanists to Bacon (Voegelin, 1956; Strauss, 1953; Shils, 1972).

It is, then, out of these two conceptions of liberty, the individualist and collectivist, that Parsons has forged the principal part, and certainly the most enduring part, of his substantive theory of social change. He embraces the ideological position that the freedom of the concrete individual depends on the differentiation of both conditional and normative structures, but at the same time he articulates these substantive goals through the synthetic perspective which he used to criticize the formal aspects of these same traditions. In fact, it is possible to argue that only by transcending the formal, theoretic-epistemic problems of these arguments can certain long-standing ideological problems be overcome (Bay, 1958). For example, by ignoring the impact of collective forces, particularly the accumulation of economic and political power, individualist perspectives risk the social irrelevance of traditional liberal ideology (Parsons, 1928; 1929; see also Lipset and Ladd, 1972). On the other hand, by postulating only rationalist-utilitarian motivation, Marxist theory risks the ideological acceptance of anti-normative, nondemocratic force (Trotsky, 1938; Merleau-Ponty, 1947; Parsons, 1967:102–35). Finally, by ignoring the conditional, constraining dimensions of social life, idealist democratic ideology risks the possibility of an abstract utopianism (Parsons, 1967; Marx and Engels, 1848:61–4).

By grounding his theory of substantive voluntarism in the formal integration of these three positions, Parsons attempts to avoid such pitfalls. According to his theory of social change, personal au-

tonomy is achieved to the degree that the institutions associated with the different dimensions of society, the functional subsystems of economics, politics, integration, and value maintenance, become differentiated from one another and, in the process, develop (1) their own independent criteria for performance as expressed in institutionally separated media; and (2) the capacity to mobilize the resources of other dimensions by asserting a partial but independent regulation over them. Although these developments—which Parsons calls the growth of institutionalized individualism—are viewed as occurring within the context of the social system as a whole, they can be seen as involving differentiation of three distinctive types: cultural, structural, and psychological (Parsons, 1966: 20–9; 1971b; 1971c: 18–28).

## Cultural Differentiation

In terms of the formal theory of multidimensional causality, cultural, or value patterns constitute a dimension of every social structure and, at the same time, an independent dimension subject to an independent set of causal forces. In terms of Parsons's substantive theory of social change, it is necessary to consider the development of these patterns as an independent process of differentiation with a distinctive relationship to the achievement of substantive voluntarism. The achievement by the value dimension of society of transcendent regulative power vis-à-vis more conditionally-oriented social structures, Parsons believes, is directly related to the capacity of a society, or a particular society group within it, to engage in reform and directed social change (see Durkheim, 1893).

Parsons (1966; 1961; 1963) follows Weber in viewing the most significant historical periods of cultural differentiation as the radical breaks in normative order created by religious upheaval, particularly the rise of transcendent religions that occurred in different civilizations during the first millenium and the later cultural break created by the Protestant Reformation. Bellah's (1970:20–50) article, "Religious Evolution," represents the most sophisticated formulation, couched within the general framework of Parsons's formal theory, of the relation between stages of religious transcendence, social reform, and the achievement of substantive voluntarism (see also Eisenstadt, 1973: Chaps. 6–9). Little's (1969) highly original historical monograph, Religion, Order, and Law, demonstrates how the differentiation of the symbolic order is a basic prerequisite for political and legal differentiation and, in general, for the increase of individual autonomy. On a more specific level, symbolic differentiation has been dealt with in terms of the differentiation of specialized types of cultural patterns. Parsons (1961b; Parsons and Platt, 1973; Chap. 6), Eisenstadt (1969:64–7), Geertz (1973), and Barber (1971) emphasize the significant social leverage provided by the emergence of secular political morality or ideology. Parsons (1951: Chap. 6; Parsons and Platt, 1973: Chap. 6) and Barber (1952: Chaps. 2, 11) analyze the emergence of social and natural science in terms of the historical impact of this differentiation of an autonomous cultural pattern of secular rationality.

The most systematic and widely tested Parsonian framework for dealing with the relation between the development of substantive voluntarism and the emergence of autonomous cultural levels is the pattern variable scheme, especially the universalism-particularism dichotomy. In Parsons's perspective, the cultural pattern of universalism promotes critical judgment because it demands that all particular traits be evaluated according to a broader, more general set of principles. Universalism, in other words, is a form of differentiation: it creates distance between the cultural norms and the object of judgment. In a series of essays on Japan, Turkey, the nations of Western Europe, and the United States, Bellah (1970: 53–189; see also Geertz, 1971) has traced the effect of religious particularism and universalism on the possibility for achieving democratic political activism. Lipset's (1967) The First New Nation is the most important application of the pattern variable schema to the specific question of the impact of different kinds of Western political cultures on the possibility for structural reform.

Finally, it is important to emphasize, particularly because of the critical misunderstanding of Parsons's level of abstraction, that this Parsonian analysis of developmental changes in ideas is not an idealist, emanationist approach any more than is Freud's developmental theory of personality or Weber's sociology of religious change. Although Parsons's multidimensional theory allows isolation of the independent effect of developments in the cultural sphere, it simultaneously indicates that such changes must always be related to developments in other dimensions. The movements towards cultural differentiation and universalism are movements by social groups, who have responded to conflicts and strains which may have originated in any dimensional location by formulating new and more transcendent symbolic patterns. The interpenetration of self-interest, religious interest, and religious differentiation is nowhere more effectively demonstrated than in Eisenstadt's (1969: Chaps. 4–9; see also Eisenstadt 1964a; 1964b; 1965; 1973:119–50) discussion of the struggle between bureaucracy and church in the historical empires.

### Structural Differentiation

Struggles by groups to maintain and usually to increase their scope of action also initiate differentiation in the structural sphere, which in Parsons's terms refers not to material conditions per se but rather to institutional organization in each of the four different dimensions of the social system. What is at stake in this aspect of differentiation is the long and painful growth of the autonomy of different institutional sectors, the evolution from an historical situation in which single institutions, groups, and leaders perform, and therefore monopolize, multifunctional tasks to a more diversified structural situation in which there is more of a single function focus. Differentiation in any given dimensional sphere can be described as a never-ending process. It begins with the simple emergence of a new structure (for example, a centralized government bureaucracy) and only gradually achieves a certain level of substantive autonomy, as when a central government structure becomes constitutionally democratic or achieves the ability to command economic resources for public action. Each phase of structural differentiation is linked to greater self-expression, to increased voluntarism, for a particular group, and usually to an increase in the supply of resources—economic, political, integrative, or value-oriented—for the expansion and growth of groups in certain other sectors. At the same time, any given phase will usually also involve the suppression of rights and the restriction of voluntarism for certain other groups, and for this reason any instance of structural differentiation often triggers renewed struggle.

The differentiation of the economic market system, with its power to command resources from other sectors and its development of an independent form of media in money, represents a classic example of how structural differentiation can interweave autonomy, expansion of resource production, and the partial suppression of rights. Parsons (Parsons and White, 1964; Parsons and Smelser, 1956: Chap. 5) and Barber (1974) have compared the degree of substantive voluntarism associated with a differentiated economy to the situation in preindustrial, undifferentiated situations. *Economy and Society* (Parsons and Smelser, 1956) remains the most sophisticated general statement of the relation between a differentiated economic system and other sectors of the social system. The historical processes by which successful economic differentiation and the expansion of the scope of action have been achieved, and through which successive noneconomic differentiation in turn has been produced in response to the suppression of preindustrial modes of societal integration, have been the main concern of Smelser's (1959; 1968: Chaps. 6–8) discussions of modernization. Eisenstadt's (1969: Chaps. 2, 3, 8, 11, 12; see also 1964a; 1964b; 1965) *The Political System of Empires* contains an historical and theoretical analysis both of the conditions that make economic differentiation problematic and of how economic dedifferentiation prevents the expansion of substantive voluntarism

through its dampening effect on the possibility for differentiation in other dimensional spheres.

Another major focus of the multidimensional approach to the problem of substantive voluntarism has been the process of the differentiation of political structures. Political differentiation creates the structural apparatus for a society to define self-conscious goals and in doing so to discipline and regulate the resource production of other spheres. Such capacity is achieved through the differentiation of organs for executive administration, like bureaucracies, and of organs for mobilizing support and articulating grievance, like parties and constitutions. These developments depend on, first, such internal factors as the quality of political leadership, and, second, the differentiation of external resources, like economic adaptation sufficient to produce tax revenues, the increasing breadth of integrative groupings necessary for mobilizing support, and the growth of transcendent cultural standards as references for political reform. Eisenstadt's (1969) writing on the historical empires represents the broadest empirical analysis of this kind of interrelationship, a framework extended over the full historical range of political structures in Eisenstadt's (1971b) *Political Sociology*. On a more abstract level, Parsons (1967:422–65; 1969:163–78; 1971c) has written extensively on the different kinds of dimensional inputs associated with the emergence of dictatorship, bureaucracy, democracy, and collegiality as forms of political organization. In discussing the differentiated conditions necessary for the democratic competition of political elites, Lipset (1962; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; see also Surace, 1976) has moved beyond the rationalistic formulations of Michels (1962) and placed that central ideological issue on a different plane of analysis. Smelser (1973; 1974; see also Huntington, 1968:93–139; Rueschmeyer, 1977) has analyzed recently the political forces that maintained a condition of functional dedifferentiation in the California system of higher education in the 1960s. These notions have also been pursued at length within the Parsonian tradition of political science, particularly by Almond (1956;

1960; Almond and Powell, 1966), Apter (1958; 1966; 1972), Easton (1953; 1965), Deutsch (1963; 1964), Mitchell (1958; 1972), and Johnson (1966). In her work, Keller (1963; see also Eisenstadt, 1971c) formulated the implications of differentiation theory for institutional stratification studies; she argued that the process replaces "ruling class" by "functional elite."

The other dimensions of structural differentiation and the types of substantive voluntarism which they entail have been accorded less attention to the degree they depart from the traditional concerns with economy, polity, and religion. In regard to the integrative dimension, with the exception of the phenomenon of citizenship to be discussed below, the focus has been limited to the problem of the differentiation of legal structures. In addition to the discussions by Parsons (1971c: Chap. 2) himself, the work of Little (1969) and Mayhew (1968a) traces a continuum from the first delineation of distinctive secular rights to the successive attempts at their real institutionalization. In terms of differentiation in the value dimension— excluding religious patterns, which we have already analyzed as cultural developments—the emerging autonomy of families, peer groups, schools, and scientific institutions has been discussed, respectively, by Smelser (1959), by Eisenstadt (1971a) and Parsons (1964: 155–82), by Parsons and Platt (1973), by Dreeben (1968) and Ben-David (1971). The manner in which these developments facilitate the growth of substantive voluntarism will be the subject of the analysis of psychological differentiation below.

Little theoretical or empirical work has been done on bringing these various analyses of structural differentiation together to develop a more integrated theory of multidimensional causality and a fuller notion of the ramifications of the growth of substantive voluntarism in a differentiating system. Perhaps the closest attempt to such a synthesis is Parsons's (1971c: Chaps. 2, 6; 1967: 490–520; Parsons and Platt, 1973: Chap. 4) analysis of the differentiation of the integrative dimension of the nation, the dimension he labels the "societal community." To the

degree that the societal community is differentiated, the national community becomes defined universalistically; such universalism implies that in crucial instances an egalitarian national solidarity will supercede the more particularistic definitions of national community generated by class, race, ethnicity, region, or religion. Clearly, the emergence of such a societal community is a major prerequisite for the achievement of substantive voluntarism, for the ability to control and reform the production of different dimensional resources in an egalitarian way. As such, this differentiation is dependent on very distinctive kinds of developments in the economic, political, value and normative spheres. It can be viewed, in fact, as the result of the interminable struggle by social groups in each of these different spheres for continually more effective inclusion into the national society (see Eisenstadt, 1969: 248). Obviously such a process raises the continual possibility for dedifferentiation, which can be defined as a narrowing of the definition of national community in a particularistic direction, resulting in the constraint and reduction of substantive voluntarism. It is possible to draw a direct relationship between Parsons's (1954:104–44, 298–322; 1969) discussions of such dedifferentiation in integrative structures—his essays on the sources of Fascism and political aggression in Western society and McCarthyism in American society—and the conception of status politics developed by Hofstadter (1952) and Lipset. Lipset (1967: Chaps. 7, 9; see also Pitts, 1964), in fact, has used extensively an implicit dedifferentiation notion to trace the manner in which dominant class, political, and solidary groups have skewed European social developments towards Fascism or Communism. More generally, this notion of differentiation and the societal community directly connects Parson's (1967: 385–421;1960: 295–321; 1971c: 30–2, 92–3; Eisenstadt, 1969: 80) theory of substantive voluntarism, as I have developed that conception here, to the more empirical theory of voluntary groups and voluntary associations developed in other sociological literature.

In this section, I have demonstrated

that arguing within the general multidimensional framework of his formal theory, Parsons has attempted to develop an empirical and historical theory of the structural requisites for freedom and of the structural contradictions that constrain its achievement. As such, despite the still elementary level of its articulation, Parsons's theory of historical development presents the possibility for advancing well beyond the individualist, idealist, or materialist approaches to the problem of the institutionalization of individual freedom in social life.

### Psychological Differentiation

As I mentioned earlier, the most important explicit source of voluntarism as a hegemonic ideological principle in Parsons's theory has been the individualist focus of liberal thought. Parsons's dialectical relation to this tradition, theoretically and ideologically, reaches its apogee in his analysis of the psychological aspects of the differentiation process. Through his conception of what he called the Resource Chart, Parsons (Parsons and Smelser, 1956:139; see also Smelser, 1959; 1962) integrates Freudian and Piagetian theories of individual development with his analyses of cultural and structural differentiation. The Resource Chart conceptualizes the sequential stages involved in the production of an individual from the earliest stage of childhood to achievement of the adult role. In terms of Parsons's later theory of subsystem interchange, this process can be described as the passage from full-time participation in the institutions of the value maintenance dimension to participation in the institutions of the more conditionally-oriented organizations of adult society. Since the effect of cultural and structural differentiation is to separate value maintenance institutions both from one another and from institutions in other dimensions of the social system, the impact of such differentiation of the Resource Chart can be visualized as increasing the number of developmental stages involved in the passage from childhood to adulthood. In terms of Freudian theory, the greater mobility required for this transition to adulthood can be accom-

plished only by increased ego autonomy and control over affective dependency. Conversely, in terms of differentiation theory, this social demand for psychological voluntarism meshes with the psychological opportunities provided by certain structural developments: the growing separation between the increasingly functionally-specific nuclear family and the institutions that develop to fulfill other social functions facilitates rebellion, separation, and neutralization vis-à-vis basic object relationships.

This interweaving of the Freudian understanding of individual personality growth with the broader theory of substantive voluntarism as the product of cultural and structural differentiation has been developed most by Weinstein and Platt (1969). In The Wish To Be Free, they contend that it was the development of structural differentiation—in Parsons's technical sense, the expansion of the Resource Chart—which eventually created in nineteenth century Western society the opportunity for successful Oedipal rebellion and separation from authority. In turn, they argue that this expansion of the developmental process and increase in psychological autonomy were themselves crucial and independent variables in the subsequent development of substantive voluntarism through the differentiation of other institutional spheres. At the same time, Weinstein and Platt (1969) emphasize that just as social and psychological differentiation are related in a positive manner, so can they be negatively interrelated. The lengthening of the passage from full-time participation in value maintenance institutions to more participation in conditional dimensions is not only a liberating but also a perilous development. By radically increasing the challenge of the transitional process, it also increases the likelihood for failures, for the pathological dedifferentiation that Weinstein and Platt (1969: Chap. 7) call the universal reactions to modernization. In his essay on youth culture, Parsons (1964: 155–82; see also Slater, 1961a; 1961b; Chodorow, 1974; 1978) has described one stage of this dedifferentiation as a basic structural problem of modern society.

This kind of historical analysis of the interplay between psychic and social differentiation has also been pursued by Bellah (1970:76–99) in a suggestive essay, "Father and Son in Confucianism and Christianity." Bellah (1970) follows Erikson (1950) in describing how universalistic developments in the religious sphere provide a point of leverage for the development of greater psychological control over primary object relations, particularly over those objects associated with authority and domination.

The moral development side of the Resource Chart concerns the issue of socialization rather than personality development per se, and rests upon two basic insights by Parsons (1964:17–33, 78–111): (1) no aspect of affective development, even within the nuclear family itself, is ever separated from the development of symbolic-moral matters; and (2) structural differentiation and the increasing isolation of the nuclear family create the necessity for the differentiation of a range of transitional structures to mediate the passage from childhood to adulthood. On the basis of these propositions, Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1955:119–23, 136, 155; see also Menzies, 1977:104–9) integrates his analysis of personality development with the pattern variable schema of cultural differentiation and Piaget's theory of moral and cognitive development. According to Parsons, the relation between mother and child transmits to the child a thoroughly particularistic moral pattern, in that it presents, from the child's perspective, the very prototype of a relationship in which no higher differentiated standard or judgment is possible. Furthermore, even though relative to this initial relationship moral development in the family becomes increasingly universalistic, family morality remains particularistic relative to other institutions because of its primarily affective function. It is clear, in other words, that if substantive voluntarism is to be achieved—in pattern variable terms, if the universalistic pattern is to be internalized—further stages of affective and moral socialization beyond the nuclear family are a necessity. The school is perhaps the most significant

institution which becomes differentiated in response to this need, and the most important discussions of schooling in terms of the pattern variables are Dreeben's (1968) *On What Is Learned in School* and Parsons and Platt's (1973: Chaps. 2, 4) *The American University.* The successful contribution to this extended socialization process of the other newly differentiated structure, the adolescent peer group, has been analyzed by Eisenstadt (1971a; see also Fass, 1977) in *From Generation to Generation*; the more particularistic pathological aspects of peer group culture by Pitts (1964:49–59) and Parsons (1951:286–93).

As this brief section indicates, Parsons's work contains a complex theory of psychological differentiation which is thoroughly interwoven with his theories of differentiation on the cultural and structural levels (see also Inkeles, 1971). It should also be clear that, within the general framework of his formal theory, this analysis of psychological developments is keyed to the evaluative conception of freedom as the achievement of individual autonomy and control. The view of Parsons's theory as an oversocialized conception of man completely ignores this vital aspect of Parsons's substantive work and, in turn, the distinctive formal apparatus upon which it is built (Wrong, 1961; Gouldner, 1970: 218–39).

### Differentiation as a Conflict Theory

Parsons has utilized his theoretical framework of formal voluntarism to explore the requisites for a theory of individual control in the cultural, structural, and psychological spheres. No matter how differentiated, of course, individual action remains connected and disciplined by the environments of nature, on the one hand, and by what Parsons (1966; Chap. 1) calls the ultimate reality of existential meaning on the other. Parsons's theory of institutional differentiation is not intended to deny this fundamental connection. Nevertheless, he has clearly proposed a change theory which is geared to the problem of the expansion of individual freedom and choice. It is far from the theory of

conservation—of the status quo, of the seamless webb of social intercourse, of the supraindividual system—that his critics have charged.

To the contrary, Parsons's (1961:344; Parsons and Shils, 1951:216) differentiation theory proposes, in principle, that the process of differentiation, and the increasing independence of structures and individuals which results from it, will increase the general level of social conflict, although it may at the same time increase institutional flexibility in handling and channeling conflict's repercussions. Since societies, particularly modern and modernizing ones, are continually subject to strains at all levels and at varying intensities, social change must be viewed as a constant and highly uneven process (Smelser, 1971: 7). According to the Parsonian theory of change outlined above, societies have two options in response to such strain: either differentiation or de-differentiation. Because it allows flexibility in the face of vested interests, both material and ideal, differentiation is linked to the capacity for system reform and to the extension of individual freedom. If a society is unable to engage in differentiation, the social response will be to suppress the reaction to strain rather than to eliminate its source. The possibility will be raised for the conflation of differentiated structures and the reduction, rather than expansion, of the possibilities for individual autonomy and control (Smelser, 1962; 1974; Eisenstadt, 1964c; 1969; Weinstein and Platt, 1969). By creating an historical theory that describes a continuum of different kinds of reaction to strain and the conditions under which each might occur, Parsons has developed a perspective that, far from neglecting conflict, presents the framework for a comprehensive approach to its explanation and evaluation (see also Rueschmeyer, 1977).[4]

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[4] In fact, Parsons's theory of social change can be seen as providing a more general framework for analyzing the very theoretical points advanced by the three conflict theorists who have been some of his sharpest critics (see Atkinson, 1972); the ruling class situation described by Rex (1961); the superimposition/pluralization theory proposed by

### IRRESOLUTION IN THE THEORETICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

As I noted at the outset of this essay, my purpose has been to initiate a new reading of Parsons's work. In supporting my proposal that the notions of formal and substantive voluntarism provide one element of such a framework, I have ignored aspects of Parsons's writing which are contrary to this major thrust. Although a lengthy analysis of these contradictory strands does not have a place here, I will mention the kinds of problems I have in mind (see Alexander, 1979).

The problematic aspects of Parsons's theory are elements that reflect an ambivalence about the very theoretical and ideological tensions that Parsons has resolved so effectively in the strands of his work analyzed above. Because of this ambivalence, his work, considered as a whole, contains major contradictions on both formal and substantive levels.

On the formal level, the synthetic approach that Parsons so carefully develops is crosscut by a significant idealist strain. Simply in terms of his focus of attention, the internal dimensions of values and norms, both as institutional spheres and as cultural patterns, have received vastly more of his attention than the conditional dimensions of economics and politics. More importantly, when these latter dimensions do become the focus of Parsons's extended attention, they are described empirically in such a manner that they facilitate rather than conflict with the normative inputs to their production (see Gouldner, 1970:286–325). Furthermore, the systemic conflict that Parsons does find throughout social life much more

Dahrendorf (1959); and the notion propounded by Coser (1956) that conflict can have a positive function for societies with sufficiently flexible social structures. Compare, for example, the following quotation from Coser (1956:154) with the differentiation theory outlined above:

A flexible society benefits from conflict because such behavior, by helping to create and modify norms, assures its continuance under changed conditions. Such mechanisms for readjustment of norms is hardly available to rigid systems: by suppressing conflict, the latter smother a useful warning signal, thereby maximizing the danger of catastrophic breakdown.

often occurs in the value or normative dimensions and in the tension between these dimensions and the more conditional ones, than within the economic and political spheres themselves. In addition to these problems, a strain of holism characteristic of an unreconstructed realism coexists alongside Parsons's focus on the independent role of the individual in action. For example, Parsons emphasizes conflict between internally integrated subsystems and between groups which share the same overarching value commitments rather than conflict between groups within the same subsystem which, to use Evans-Pritchard's (1953) term, "refract" common value patterns into partial and opposed commitments.

The same kinds of ambiguities of resolution represent significant strains in Parsons's ideologically related approach to social change. For example, in his description of cultural differentiation as generalization, there is a tension between a rather conservative emphasis on generalization as simply the provision of greater integration and the other emphasis, described above, on its promotion of increased critical activism and, indirectly, social conflict (Parsons, 1971b; Toby, 1975). Or again, there are clear signs that Parsons has only incompletely resolved his relation to the individualist emphasis of traditional liberal ideology. In comparison to some other analysts of differentiation at the psychological level, Parsons's recognition of the alienative psychic costs of substantive voluntarism has been strikingly inconsistent. While in some essays he traces with great subtlety the alienation attendant on the realization of autonomy and differentiation (1954: 89–103, 177–96, 298–322; 1964: 112–26, 257–96; 1971a), in others he portrays the achievement of individualization and affective autonomy as relatively unproblematic (1967:3–34; Parsons and White, 1969). And although his basic commitment to the collectivist tradition is clear in his support of welfare state laissez-faire ideology, Parsons (1954:386–439) underplays, in a manner characteristic of traditional liberal individualism, the social costs of economic systems that institutionalize private property (1954; see Gouldner, 1970:302–4,

320–3). Despite the effective argument that can be made that democratic socialism represents an advance towards social differentiation and towards the achievement of substantive voluntarism, Parsons has always dismissed out of hand the developmental advantages to be gained from institutionalizing public ownership and redistributive public policies (see also Rocher, 1975:144).

It should be clear, in light of the entire preceding analysis, that none of these emphases is a logical or necessary part of Parsonian theory, in either its formal or substantive versions. It is not accidental, in this regard, that our references in the preceding section were to Parsons's students and coworkers as much as to Parsons himself. It has often been Parsons's students, not Parsons, who have explored the full range of the theory's application—in the formal realm to the problems of political and economic conflict, in the substantive theory to the application of the social criticism inherent in its central logic. Within the framework of the formal theory, for example, Smelser (1973:390–7; 1971:8–9; see also Rueschmeyer, 1977) has recently criticized Parsons's underemphasis on the problem of power; and in his own work, Smelser has portrayed the differentiation of the political, not the cultural dimension as the crucial factor in the development of substantive voluntarism. Similarly, Eisenstadt (1969) has written at great length, in the formal framework of multidimensionality, about the often insurmountable conditional problems presented by economic classes and by the centralization of political power. And Lipset's (1967; see also Pitts, 1964) utilization of the pattern variable scheme contains an extensive analysis of political conflict in terms of subgroups representing opposing value patterns. On the ideological side, the last decade has produced a distinctly leftward movement among some Parsonians, who are responsible for a series of essays which critique contemporary Western society from the general perspective established by differentiation theory (Pitts, 1974; Bellah, 1970: 193–257; 1975; Eisenstadt, 1973: 231–57; Gould, 1976; Smelser, 1975).

## CONCLUSION

I have argued here against a number of standard interpretations in the rapidly growing commentarial literature on Parsons's theory. In opposition to these charges, I have proposed that one of Parsons's major contributions can be most effectively appreciated in terms of the dichotomous classification of a concept which has been central to Western thought, the concept of voluntarism. In his formal framework, Parsons articulated a self-conscious integration of individualist, idealist, and materialist theories which described the properties of action in terms of an interweaving of the voluntarism produced by the pursuit of normative ideals and the constraint induced by the chains of material necessity. By developing within this formal approach a theory of historical change as differentiation, Parsons proposed a framework which potentially integrates the emancipatory aspects of individualist, idealist and materialist ideology and, in doing so, provides the basis for evaluating history in terms of its realization of voluntarism in a substantive sense.[5] Yet despite the enor-

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[5] Because of this synthetic intention, I would argue, Parsons's change theory has potentially universal application, far beyond the range of Parsons's own usage. It is revealing in this respect to compare differentiation theory with the approach to change taken by Jürgen Habermas, the Frankfurt school Marxist. The purpose Habermas has set for himself—to preserve Marx's ideological commitment to freedom while transforming the instrumentalism of his theoretical apparatus—leads him ineluctably to a change theory that resembles Parsons's own. Differentiation theory, however, can clearly be viewed as subsuming Habermas's theory of communication distortion. In working out the latter idea, Habermas's (1973a:315) intention is to construct a theory of human "evolution toward autonomy and responsibility" keyed to the ideal of increased "freedom from domination." In order to do so, he realizes that his theory must measure progress toward "human adulthood" on the psychological level, and he incorporates Freudian concepts to accomplish this (1970:119; 1973b:256). Habermas acknowledges further that, in addition to including the structural emphasis of Marx, he must address the problem of the historical development of moral systems (1973b:2–3) and the preconditions of an autonomous public opinion, one with the capacity to mediate between a society and its social values (1970:72–4). Despite the often brilliant texture of his argument, however, Habermas has failed throughout

mous accomplishments of Parsons and the members of his sociological school, the theories of both formal and substantive voluntarism remain relatively undeveloped. Not only are vast theoretical, ideological, and empirical issues barely articulated, but Parsons's own contributions have been marred by contradictory strains. Parsons's fundamental contributions to social thought have only begun to be reappropriated.

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most of his career to make significant progress on any of these questions. This failure can be linked, I believe, to his insufficient regard for the complexity of social life. In addressing the issues of institutional interrelation and the relation of institutions and personality, Habermas has simply lacked the theoretical vocabulary to distinguish the complex causal processes involved. On the issue of moral and symbolic development, moreover, he has had no substantive theory at all. Only in his most recent work has Habermas (1975) begun to surmount these difficulties. It is far from accidental that he has done so only by drawing extensively on Parsons's own theoretical system.

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