REVOLUTION, REACTION, AND REFORM: THE CHANGE THEORY OF PARSONS'S MIDDLE PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The "conflict school" in contemporary sociology emerged in large part as a critique of the theory of social change that Talcott Parsons developed during his middle period, which began with the empirically-oriented essays that appeared after The Structure of Social Action *(Parsons, 1937), and extended through the simultaneous publication of* Towards a General Theory of Action *(Parsons and Shils, 1951) and* The Social System *(Parsons, 1951). The conflict critique, now enshrined in textbook lore and highbrow writing alike, accused Parsons of a static, idealist bias that ignored issues of process, conflict, and change. While Parsons's attitude toward change, during this and later periods of his development, was complex and often ambiguous, this evaluation was certainly incorrect. I will demonstrate, in fact, that in this middle period Parsons actually produced a more systematic and compelling approach to conflict and change than the theories produced by the conflict critics themselves.*

In the first part of this paper, I will present the formal elements of Parsons's change theory. The second part will add substance to this theory by showing how Parsons applied it to the empirical problematics of recent Western development. In the third section, I will relate this formal and substantive theorizing to the vastly misunderstood deviance paradigm from The Social System. *In conclusion, I will return to the question with which I began: What is the real relationship between the conflict theorists and their very useful straw man, "Talcott Parsons"?[1]*

The Formal Theory: Towards a Synthesis of Idealism and Materialism, Conflict and Equilibrium

The most general treatment of conflict and its repercussions in the middle period work occurs in Parsons and Shils' *Towards a General Theory of Action* (1951). This discussion, indeed, can be read as a powerful argument against the reductionist notion that a given theoretic-epistemic, or formal, position implies either empirical conflict or cooperation. To the contrary, Parsons and Shils argue that the very social processes that meet functional needs—particularly the allocation of facilities and rewards and the maintenance of cultural orientations—become the sources of instability both in the genesis of conflict and in its control. They emphasize, in fact, the lack

of complete complementarity among social, psychological, and cultural systems. On the level of values, strains can emerge because of inadequate socialization. But in a more systematic sense, tendencies toward value alienation are "endogenous": "There cannot be a society in which some of the members are not exposed to a conflict of values" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:229). Strains also can emerge from the social-system level, "from (particular) changes in the situation of the social system in relation to nature or to other social systems." More systematically, however, "the allocative process always produces serious strains by denying to some members of the society what they think they are entitled to" (ibid, 229). Finally, the phenomenon of internalization ensures that these strains do not remain "external" to the individual actor, but rather that they necessarily produce internal personality conflict as well.

> Very frequently the most important internal as well as external conflicts are not between obligations imposed by a general collective value system and "self-interest" but between the obligations of different roles, that is, between the constituent, more or less specific, need-dispositions in the superego. The actor is put in the position of having to sacrifice one or the other or some part of each. This is an authentically internal personality conflict, and not merely a conflict over the possible "external" consequences of sanctions . . . (ibid, 145).

Every conflict, in other words, is psychologically overdetermined. The combination of such strains may, on the one hand, "deaden the motivation of actors to role fulfillment and [cause] their apathetic withdrawal." On the other hand, if they are "associated with an identification with a collectivity or a class of individuals who come to identify themselves as similarly deprived," a much more active and rebellious response will ensue (ibid, p. 229).

In response to these "problematic facts," mechanisms of social control are invariably brought into play, corresponding to the integrative mechanisms that balance allocation. They are necessarily multidimensional in their composition: how else could they "match" the sources of strain? Underlying any attempt at social control is the problem of value consensus. The weaker the consensus, the more other mechanisms must be brought into play. "One of the most prominent and functionally most significant" of these other mechanisms, according to Parsons and Shils, "is the artificial identification of interest" (ibid, 230). Formulated originally in Eli Halévy's analysis of the political reform strategy of anti-individualistic Benthamite Utilitarianism (Halévy [1901-04] 1972), this notion of creating an "artificial identity" is a crucial one. In adopting it, Parsons and Shils differ from Halévy by defining the process in a multidimensional rather than instrumentalist way. Social authority tries to create the identification of interest not only through the manipulation of the "allocation of facilities," as the Utilitarians imagined, but also through "rewards [that] can redirect . . . motivational orienta-

tion[s] by offering them objects that are more easily cathected" (ibid, 230). If these attempts at reintegration fail, there remain the possibilities of "insulating" disruptions through such processes as the creation of subcultures or "contingent reintegration" through the therapeutic treatment of deviance, as in the case of psychotherapy for mental illness. Insofar as these processes fail to reintegrate, social conflict intensifies and structural change occurs.

The Substantive Theory: Rationalization, Anomie, and Revolution in Recent Western Development

Parsons's earlier *Essays* (Parsons, 1954), which rely more heavily than the later middle-period work on the conceptual scheme inherited from his classical predecessors, similarly emphasize the theoretic-epistemic basis of conflict and strain. In one of the earliest of his *Essays,* for example, Parsons warns against the tendency in common-sense thinking "to exaggerate the integration of social systems."

> For purposes of sheer comparative structural study this need not lead to serious difficulty, but when dynamic problems of directions and processes of change are at issue, it is essential to give specific attention to the elements of malintegration, tension and strain in the social structure (Ibid, p. 117).

In fact, more than half the essays Parsons wrote between 1939 and 1950 deal directly with such malintegration, tension, and strain. They do so in a distinctive manner, one that applies Parsons's abstract reasoning to a particular empirical problem.

Combining the change theories of Weber and Durkheim with his own theoretic-epistemic position, Parsons first presents an analysis of the strains inherent in recent Western development. The underlying process is what Weber called rationalization, which Parsons believes must be cultural as well as social. Science presents one of the most important rationalizing forces, an inherently dynamic element that progressively undermines traditional beliefs. Connected to science and simultaneously to other, more instrumental pressures, technology has an even more unsettling effect on the concrete circumstances of human life. Bureaucratization, contractualism, and the growing differentiation of what Parsons would later in *The Social System* call the achievement and ascriptive complexes represent other rationalizing processes that Parsons discusses at some length. Finally, critical thought promotes an anti-traditional "frame of reference for determining the proper attitudes of 'reasonable' men toward the social problems of the day" (ibid, 128-132).[2] As more specific manifestations of these trends, Parsons cites such factors as "the economic instability of market systems, rural-urban migration patterns, the growth of fad and fashion cycles in every area of social life" (ibid, 127-128).

Parsons moves beyond this neo-Weberian analysis, however, not only by maintaining, as Weber did not, the multidimensionality of rationalization but

by integrating this analysis with Durkheim's anomie theory, as modified by its connection with Freud. In the face of antitraditional disruption, Parsons contends, value orientations become either insufficiently specific or internally ambiguous. Since value commitments correspond to internalized object cathexis, such orientational confusion generates object loss and, therefore, expectational anxiety. The result is "generalized insecurity" and "free floating aggression," prime prospects for displacement onto "relations or symbols only remotely connected with their original sources" (ibid, p. 126).

These strains produce social polarization, in which, according to Parsons's scheme, projective fantasy both reinforces and distorts the instrumental and moral conflict between the "traditionalistic" and "emancipated" elements of the national community. It is important to emphasize, as Parsons does implicitly, that such polarization is as horizontal as vertical. It is not simply that rationalization and anomie create divisions between hierarchical groupings, but they intensify conflict within them as well: there are traditionalistic and emancipated elements among the lower, middle, and upper classes. These pressures trigger movements toward social control, and legitimate authoritative attempts to reintegrate the national community through appeals to consensus and through the manipulation of facilities and rewards. At this point, the crucial variable becomes the structure of this authority, that is, the society's hierarchical order, particularly the arrangement of social classes and the vertical problem of dominant-subordinate groups. To articulate this factor, Parsons brings into his argument a multidimensional version of Marxian analysis.

He begins by asserting the "inherent hierarchical aspect" of economic class relations in all industrial, not just capitalist, society. This hierarchalization occurs both because of pressure for efficiency generated by the economy of instrumental action and, in addition, because of the demands for equalization of status among kinship members generated by the economy of expressive needs (ibid, pp. 327-28). Still, such vertical differentiation need not undermine the possibilities for societal integration or for the authoritative social control processes that depend upon it. By itself, the division is a "latent conflict." Whether or not it will contribute to social polarization depends on whether the ["stratification] system does . . . [or] does not succeed in developing adequate control mechanisms" (ibid, p. 329). This coping must contend with certain distinctive exacerbating factors. On the instrumental side, the discipline and authority of impersonal organization creates opposition, an endemic problem intensified by the "general tendency for the strategically placed, the powerful, to exploit the weaker or less favorably placed" (ibid, p. 330). On the expressive-cathectic side, the polarity of high and low is increased by the psychological consequences of an individualistic occupational system, the arrogance of winners and the resentment of losers. This in turn relates to the way in which such attitudes, combined with family income and living conditions, create early socialization that positively handicaps lower-class individuals (ibid, pp. 329-330).

The crucial question is the degree to which such strains produce class-related cultures, the "differentiation of attitude system . . . to a greater or lesser degree around the structures of the occupational system" (ibid, pp. 330-331). To the degree that this does occur, communication across group lines is impeded and "the tendency to develop a hiatus may become cumulative." In such situations, social control of the polarization produced by the rationalization-anomie-projection cycle becomes impossible: authoritative attempts at reintegration are no longer acceptable. What can mitigate such class-cultural polarization? There are, first, standard mechanisms like the organization of reward allocation, and integrative structures like the law. But in addition to these, Parsons emphasizes a number of other particular factors: the supraclass impact of national, religious, and moral solidarity; the cross-class impact of ethnicity; the insulative mechanisms that conceal or diffuse differences in rank, reward, and competence (ibid, p. 332). Above all, however, Parsons emphasizes the more general inclusive factor of how "the precapitalist residues of the old class structure . . . [get] tied in with the consequences of the developing industrial society" (ibid, p. 332). This historical fact, the relation of the old class structure to the new, will determine the effectiveness of the reintegrating factors he has described.

It is not, then, industrialization or rationalization itself that creates social revolution and the breakdown of social control, "but its pathology and the incompleteness of its development" (ibid, p. 265). If the necessary mitigating factors—social, cultural, and psychological—do not occur, societal authority will be unable to counteract the general processes of polarization—both vertical and horizontal—that accompany rationalization and anomie. While in nineteenth-century Western society such breakdown appeared to herald the advent of left-wing socialism, in the twentieth it is radical right-wing movements that more often result. Fascism, Parsons wrote in 1942, "is at least as deeply rooted in the social structure and dynamics of our society as was socialism at an earlier stage" (ibid, p. 138).

Parsons, therefore, applies his theory of Western development and its vicissitudes to the mass movements of the radical right, particularly though not exclusively to the German case (see note 2, above). In Nazism, the national community was severely divided and reintegrating social control was impossible. Parsons considers the ultimate cause of this situation to be the distortions created by Germany's preindustrial past. As instrumental factors, he emphasizes the lateness of Prussian feudalism, the continuing power of the Junker military class, and the fact that the modern German state necessarily emerged under, rather than against, the aristocracy. For these reasons, neither the German bureaucracy nor the bourgeoisie ever gained any democratic autonomy of their own. On the cultural level, Parsons describes the reinforcing impact of Lutheranism, with its otherworldly attitudes and its relatively passive acceptance of state authority. In addition, peculiar familial structures became associated with the tensions of these more "public" structures, particularly the exaggerated emphasis on mascu-

line domination and female submission. Finally, Parsons incorporates the psychological level by defining "typical" German traits—the formalism of social relations, the emphasis on titles, the romantic and spiritualized orientation to nature and *Volk,* the military ethic of the community of brothers— as expressive symbols that functioned as cathectic outlets for the strains such precapitalist arrangements engendered.[3]

Given this situation, the "disorganizing effects" of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rationalization struck Germany particularly hard (ibid, p. 117). Because of the past structures, the inevitable polarization, both vertical and horizontal, was unusually intense. Because significant cultural groups in Germany were more conservative and traditional than their other Western counterparts, the German "rationalistic" or "emancipated" cultural leaders were exaggerated in their response. Parsons argues, for example, that "the German labor movement was considerably more extreme in the rationalistic direction than its counterparts in the Anglo-Saxon countries." As a result, their political program "came to be formulated in terms of the strict Marxist ideology which, above all, required drastic repudiation of traditional religious values" (ibid, pp. 119-120). The result, of course, contributed to further polarization, for it "undoubtedly made it easier for the labor movement to be defined as 'dangerously radical' to the rest of the population . . ." (ibid, p. 120 and pp. 130-134). Similarly radical cultural divisions occurred in every area of German life.

This "ideological definition of the situation," Parsons emphasizes, was "necessarily in the closest interdependence with the psychological states and the social situation of the people to whom it appeal[ed]" (ibid, p. 135). It overlapped, in the first place, with the vested, "real" interests of diverse and opposing groups—for example, with the urban-rural and capitalist-labor splits—and also with the difficult competitive position of the lower-middle class, the insecure feminine role, the particularly strained position of youth, the discriminated-against German Jews (ibid, pp. 136-139; for the analysis of anti-Semitism, see Parsons, 1942). The polarization was also overdetermined by the unconscious attempts of these groups to compensate for the very anxiety that their anomic situations had produced.

> [B]eing insecure they tend to "overreact" and both positively and negatively to be susceptive to symbolizations and definitions of the situation which are more or less distorted caricatures of reality and which are overloaded with affect. . . . The pattern tends to bear conspicuous marks of the psychology of compulsion (ibid, p. 137).

During Weimar, for example, the German left, broadly defined, engaged in "compulsively distorted patterns of extreme emancipation which [were] . . . highly provocative to the more traditionalized elements." At the same time, from the right, aggression was "turned toward symbols of the rationalizing and emancipated areas which were felt to be 'subversive' of the [traditional]

values . . . [in] an exaggerated assertion of and loyalty to these tradition[s]" (ibid, p. 116). Parsons calls this latter reaction fundamentalism.

In the face of this multilayered complex of polarization, effective social control and reintegration were unlikely. Still, the final dissolution of the German national community depended on a specific sequence of historical events (ibid, p. 116). Through political intrigue and the financial influence of the older elites (ibid, pp. 139-141), the Nazis were able to capitalize on these events and became the carrier group for the traditional elements in German society.

> "[F]undamentalist" sentiments crystallize about phenomena symbolic of the extremer forms of emancipation in defining what is dangerous to society. The coincidence in Nazi ideology of the Jews, capitalism, bolshevism, anti-religious secularism, internationalism, moral laxity, and emancipation of women as a single class of things is strongly indicative of this [polarized] structuring (ibid, p. 119).

The Deviance Paradigm: Reformulating Strain and Its Control

Parsons's chapter on social change in *The Social System* (Parsons, 1951: pp. 480-535) covers the same ground he worked out in the *Essays,* though in much less empirical detail. He discusses the crucial role of vested interests in creating polarization and the social impact of rapid cognitive development, particularly in socially disruptive technological changes. He also introduces some new variations on the general themes covered in his essay with Shils. For example, in analyzing the transformation of the Bolshevik movement after the Russian revolution, he focuses on the tension between the utopianism of communist values and the pressures generated by Russia's need to maintain the "empirical institutional clusters" that he had, earlier in the book, identified as basic to the functioning of any social system—the centralization of political coercion, uniform socialization, the integration of facilities and rewards, and generalized "religious" orthodoxy (ibid, pp. 525-535).

Rather than in this formal discussion of change, however, it is in *The Social System*'s analysis of deviance that Parsons introduces significant new elements into his theory of change. We have seen that in his essay with Shils, Parsons presented the therapeutic control of deviance, or "contingent reintegration," as the last and least important element in the social control of strain and conflict. In *The Social System,* this element becomes transformed into Parsons's major paradigm for social control, subsuming the authoritative "appeals to consensus" and the "artificial identification of interest" that were central to the theory presented with Shils. This deviance paradigm has consistently been misinterpreted as a psychological or individualistic approach that radically de-emphasizes large-scale and institutional change (Dahrendorf, 1959: p. 120. Blake and Davis, 1964: p. 472; Coser 1956: pp. 20-23). Despite some major problems, however, it is nothing of the kind. While Parsons has borrowed the formal logic of the patient-psychiatrist interaction,

the deviance paradigm can, in principle, be utilized in a multidimensional way.

In fact, the deviance model can be seen as providing a more systematic format for the earlier analyses of change and control that have just been described. It posits, first, an equilibrium-disrupting strain, the source of which, Parsons emphasizes, is situational—either social or cultural—but in either case external to the individual actor or institution (Parsons, 1951: 249-253, 267-296). In response to this pressure, the actor develops deviant motivation, in which compulsive conformity or non-conformity overdetermines the difference between acting units and creates polarization (ibid, pp. 251-256). The ensuing social control, directed at affective, instrumental, and cultural levels (ibid, pp. 256-267, 283-297) is differentiated by Parsons into four separate processes: the manipulation of rewards, the denial of reciprocity, permissiveness, and support (ibid, pp. 297-320).

It would not be difficult to apply this model to Parsons's analysis of Nazism—to the interaction among the strains that generated it, the psychological needs that distorted its expressive symbolization, and the efforts at social control that failed to provide authoritative reintegration. Yet such *ad hoc* analysis is unnecessary. Long before the deviance paradigm had ever been explicitly formulated, Parsons had already applied essential aspects of this theory of control to the case of Nazism. This effort, "The Problems of Controlled Institutional Change" (Parsons, 1954: pp. 238-274), illustrates the multidimensional origins and potential of the deviance model.

Parsons's intention in this essay is to describe how the Allies could transform post-War German society, an alteration that meant, for him, returning Germany to the "normal" development course followed by the Northern European democracies. He begins by noting that while most analysts of this problem have pressed for transforming the "typical German character structure which predisposes people," he himself believes a more "situational" focus to be more appropriate (ibid, p. 238). He recommends, first, a drastic "manipulation of rewards," namely the compulsory suppression of the Nazi Party and the Junker class. This step is necessary, he explains, not only by virtue of these groups' instrumental power but also because of the authority of their moral traditionalism (ibid, pp. 253-254). The suppression of the Junkers could be accomplished either through direct compulsion, by force, or through indirect inducement, by eliminating their economic base. The Nazification of the civil service and business class, Parsons continues, could be dealt with indirectly. If the "pre-capitalist" base of support for the radical right were eliminated, more democratic stratification patterns and class orientations would gradually assert themselves (ibid, pp. 254-56). He emphasizes, further, the psychological need for "permissiveness" in this reconstruction process, for any harsh action would encourage the defensive and projective distortion that characterized Nazi ideology. If, on the other hand, the Allies guaranteed order and security, the anomic basis for extreme anxiety would disappear. Finally, although ideological

conservatism would undoubtedly prevail initially over more liberal attitudes, the denial of all "reciprocity" for conservatism, by withholding moral, affective, and physical support, would be an effective, if indirect, deterrent to conservatism in the long run (ibid., pp. 256-258).

In considering how more direct, positive measures of redirection could be assumed—'support' in the terminology of the deviance paradigm—Parsons warns, once again, against an overemphasis on purely subjective pressures.

> The view so common among Americans that it is "conversion" to democratic values which is the key to bringing Germany "around" is one of the most dangerous misconceptions currently in the air (ibid, p. 271).

He rejects the family, educational system, or government as institutional foci for reform. Either they are inaccessible, or their manipulation would produce psychological overreaction. Instead, Parsons recommends a focus on the economic system, particularly on reforming the occupational system by making it more responsive to equality of opportunity and functional criteria of achievement rather than to more traditional, ascriptive pressures. If industrial expansion is encouraged and the earlier barriers that exacerbated vertical division removed, the other major causes of social polarization would be mitigated. For example, by providing greater security for the husband, the upgrading of occupational status would reduce the need for harsh paternalism in the home and would provide, as well, a wider scope for female independence (ibid, pp. 259-260). Similarly, by changing the economic and cultural situation in which the government acts, the latter's traditionalistic animus would gradually dissolve (ibid, 261-62).

Ten years later, in an essay written after the actual publication of the deviance paradigm, Parsons once again demonstrated the model's multidimensional potential, its continuity with his earlier change essays, and its analytic relevance to crucial contemporary problems. In this essay, entitled "Social Strains in America" (Parsons 1969, [1955]: pp. 163-178), he used the approach to analyze the causes of McCarthyism and the prospects for its amelioration.[4] As for causes, Parsons posits a situational conflict. The particular American patterns of rationalization and anomie have produced widespread reluctance to assume "national" obligations. This has been particularly manifest in the pervasive resentment, for both moral and instrumental reasons, of the older, established Eastern elite that traditionally offered national leadership. The economic shift westward, for example, exacerbated sectional divisions among upper-class groups. Immigration and rural-urban migration created ethnic animosity among other class segments, particularly within the lower-middle class. The failure of business and agriculture in the Great Depression and the ensuing regulatory legislation created a hostile and distrustful attitude toward national government, intensifying the individualism of certain groups of farmers and businessmen.

In opposition to these fragmenting national developments, however, the postwar international environment, particularly the Cold War, produced an urgent "need to mobilize American Society to cope with a dangerous and threatening situation." This mobilization could succeed only by subordinating private to public interest. This contradiction between national and international development, Parsons believes, placed further strain on the more traditionalistic, less secure segments of American society.

McCarthyism was, Parsons asserts, the reaction to this situational strain. Analyzing it as the psychologically overdetermined effort to resolve structural tensions, he explicates the key expressive symbols of the movement. The focus on loyalty, for example, resolved ambivalence by allowing traditionalist groups to combine exaggerated patriotism with aggression, for while they imputed disloyalty to others, it actually was doubts about their own national loyalty that was generating their anxiety. Communism was another multivalent symbol, allowing the internal and external sources of strain to be neatly tied together. Through this vehicle, radically "emancipated," left-wing groups could be scapegoated, as could the liberal, more establishment elites and institutions. Once again, this aggression could be projected outward while the underlying insecurity that these traditionalistic groups felt about their own commitments could be simultaneously assuaged.

By such a process of strain, conflict, and reinforcement, McCarthyism increasingly polarized American society. In order to re-identify interests and to restore consensus, authoritative social control had to be activated. "The problem," Parsons writes, "is in essence a matter of political action, involving . . . questions of leadership—of who, promoting what policies, shall take the primary responsibility" (ibid, p. 170). Such responsibility, the key factor in all integrative processes, would encourage wider governmental participation among citizens and, at the same time, support the strengthening of central government (ibid, p. 177).

Social control processes had not worked, Parsons believes, because no such national authority existed. The assumption of national responsibility was impossible because there was no group for whom "traditional political respect is ingrained" (ibid, p. 177). Since at least the 1930s, the American business elite had been discredited, and no other group had risen to take its place. Parsons argues that, in the long run, crises of the McCarthyite type can be resolved and national integration restored only by the development of a new, "functional" governmental elite. Primarily, this would involve the creation of two relatively cohesive groups: politicians, who could act and direct opinion in the national rather than sectional interest, and administrators or civil servants, who could effectively carry out the national will. This political elite, however, necessarily would work closely with intellectuals, religious leaders, and segments of the business community.

Conclusion: The Change Theory and Its Critics

As I mentioned earlier, the change theory of Parsons's middle period is of particular interest because it provided the polemical basis upon which

"conflict theory" was constructed. While there are certain legitimate aspects to the conflict critique, I wish to emphasize here the elements that were fundamentally ill-conceived.[5] In his influential early book, for example, Dahrendorf writes that Parsons's " 'array of concepts' is . . . incapable of coping" with social situations that do not manifest: (1) Stability, (2) Integration, (3) Functional coordination and (4) Consensus" (Dahrendorf, 1959: pp. 160-161). Mills concurred, arguing that in Parsons's theory "the idea of conflict cannot effectively be formulated."

> Structural antagonisms, large-scale revolts, revolutions—they cannot be imagined. In fact, it is assumed that "the system," once established, is not only stable but intrinsically harmonious (Mills, 1959: p. 42).

Gouldner's early critique is somewhat more nuanced. Acknowledging that two of Parsons's essays, on American social strains and controlled institutional change, deal quite effectively with change and conflict, he asserts that they can do so only by enlisting a number of "*ad hoc* concepts and assumptions" from Freud and Marx that are "nothing less than bewildering" given the true nature of Parsons's work (Gouldner, 1956: pp. 40-41).

On the basis of our preceding discussion, such interpretations can only be described as thoroughly misleading. Parsons's perspective does not focus on integration alone, nor does it assume consensus. To the contrary, it effectively articulates the most basic social antagonism.[6] Moreover, this change theory is firmly rooted in Parsons's most general empirically-oriented work—his substantive theory—and in the multidimensional presuppositions—the theoretic-epistemic synthesis of idealism and materialism—that inform it. Beginning with an emphasis on the tension between normative and factual levels, the change theory develops clear notions about the social, cultural, and psychological patterns of strain, conflict, and the inhibitions on social control. Moreover, Parsons's work in this area is not addressed simply to "modernization" or "development" in some abstract sense. His writings, to the contrary, present a sustained inquiry into the particular national patterns of Western development and the threat to this development posed by the radical right.[7] In conducting this inquiry, Parsons built upon the contributions of Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. He utilized them, however, only after filtering them through his own original multidimensional synthesis.

To conclude this essay, I will briefly consider the theories of Dahrendorf, Rex, and Coser, three of the most forceful opponents of Parsons's middle-period theorizing and the principal founders of the contemporary conflict school. I wish to suggest, first, that Parsons's middle-period change theory was fundamentally distorted by these critics: it was, quite obviously, far from the allegedly "static theory" they described. Second, rather than presenting the quintessence of such static theorizing, Parsons's theory actually provides a more general framework for the very models of conflict that these theorists proposed as so radically new: the "ruling class" situation described by Rex (1961), the superimposition-pluralization model proposed

by Dahrendorf (1959), and the notion propounded by Coser (1956) that it is the degree of structural flexibility that determines whether or not social conflict has a positive or negative effect.

To demonstrate the omnipresence of social conflict, Rex constructed a simple continuum of three different models of social domination. The models represented increasing degrees of overt coercion by the ruling class, a group whose ultimate power and fundamental control of events he took completely for granted. How and why one model predominated in one society rather than another, or at one social juncture and not another, Rex never made explicit; but he contended, nonetheless, that the given inequality of political and economic power was bound, eventually, to result in patterns of intensive social conflict. It was, of course, exactly the questions of "how" and "why" that had long animated Parsons's theory. It was precisely to understand the variable appearance and intensity of conflict in a class-divided society that he had laid out a complex model in which coercion and the lack thereof were linked to myriad subtly interrelated factors emanating from entirely different systems of society.

In the latter chapters of *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society,* Dahrendorf insisted that conflict between groups can occur only vertically, and that it can be based exclusively upon the rational-instrumental dimension of unequal access to the means of coercion. Parsons had already demonstrated, by contrast, that this component presents only one dimension of potential dissensus; he realized that empirical conflict was only a variable outcome of any power relationship. First, the origins of dissensus must be broadened to include the tension with normative order. Second, the outcomes of such strain are patterned by the nature of a society's psychological, cultural, and social systems. Third, because of these considerations there is a strong possibility that horizontal conflict will develop within any single hierarchical stratum, a fact that further complicates any tendency toward conflict generated by the dimension of power alone. It is certainly an ironic verification of the superiority of Parsons's change theory that in the monograph in which Dahrendorf himself attempted to explain a major case of historical conflict and change—*Society and Democracy in Germany*—he follows a mode of explanation that is more or less explicitly modeled after Parsons's own (Dahrendorf, 1967: pp. 52-53).

Finally, let us compare what we have learned of Parsons's detailed and systematic theory of change with a quotation from Coser's influential *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956:154). "A flexible society," Coser writes, "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," he continues, "[are] hardly available to rigid systems: by suppressing conflict, the latter smother a useful warning signal, thereby maximizing the danger of catastrophic breakdown." But this statement is, in fact, in full accord with the theory of change that Parsons had, by that time, already systematically developed! Indeed, while

Coser demonstrated this orientation by a series of powerful propositions about the behavior of small groups and their relationship to personalities—propositions generated from the work of two classical theorists—Parsons himself had systematically pursued this theme on a much broader scale. Reworking the entire legacy of classical thought, he had developed a truly empirical model of the complicated relationships that, in various Western countries, had created tendencies toward social rigidity or flexibility.

It is time to reread Parsons's middle-period theory of social change. There is nobody who has done nearly so well since.

NOTES

1. For an analysis of the social change theory in Parsons's later period—from 1952 on—see Alexander, 1978.

2. Parsons discusses in some detail these typical strains in Western development in a number of the essays included in this volume. In addition to this essay, "Some Sociological Aspects of the Fascist Movements" (Parsons, 1954 [1942], pp. 124-141) and "Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany" (ibid., [1942], pp. 104-123), see "Certain Primary Sources and Patterns of Aggression in the Social Structure of the Western World" (ibid., [1947], pp. 298-322), "The Problem of Controlled Institutional Change (ibid., [1945], pp. 238-274), "Population and Social Structure of Japan" (ibid., [1946], pp. 275-297), and "Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States" (ibid., [1942], pp. 89-103).

3. This summarizes the relevant parts of Parsons's argument in "Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany," (1954, [1942], pp. 104-123), and "Some Sociological Aspects of the Fascist Movements," (ibid. [1942], pp. 124-141).

4. Technically, this essay belongs in Parsons's later period, since it was first published in 1955, but for the purposes of the present discussion it has overwhelming connections to the middle-period essays on deviance and strains in Western development.

5. I explore the "legitimate" aspects in the later chapters of my book, *The Modern Reconstruction of the Classical Antinomies: Talcott Parsons*, which is the fourth and final volume of my work, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Alexander, 1981-82). The present article is drawn from Chapter Three of that fourth volume. For a discussion of some of the repercussions of the weaknesses and ambiguities of Parsons's change theory in the work of Parsons students—the "Parsonians"—see Alexander, 1979.

6. A few analysts have, in fact, drawn attention to the errors made by this conflict interpretation of Parsons's change theory. In a review of Parsons's ideologically-oriented writing, Andrew Hacker (1961, pp. 291-92), for example, describes Parsons's essay on McCarthyism as "a sophisticated analysis of tensions underlying recent American development" and as presenting society in "fundamental social disequilibrium." More generally, Atkinson (1972), pp. 24-25) has recently written that "there is nothing in his [Parsons's] theory . . . which precludes the possibility of offering an explanatory model of conflict" and, after discussing a number of the middle-period publications we have considered here, concludes that "we can see a continuing concern for aspects of conflict" in Parsons's work. He describes this change theory, however, as purely normative (ibid., p. 33). For a similar discussion which more accurately identifies the multidimensionality of the change theory, see Lipset's excellent survey of the Parsonian literature in "The Functionalist Theory of Change" (Lipset, 1975, pp. 173-184).

7. With the exception of "Age and Sex in The Social Structure of the United States," every essay cited above in note 1 concerns the radical right, either in Germany, Japan, or the U.S. Scholars influenced by Parsons have carried this analysis into the discussion of the radical right in other countries. See, for example, Jesse R. Pitts's

important article on polarization in France, "Continuity and Change in Bourgeois France" (Pitts, 1964); Robert N. Bellah's discussions of Japan, China, Germany, France, Italy and the U.S. in *Beyond Belief* (Bellah, 1970) and in "The Five Civil Religions of Italy" (Bellah, 1973); S. N. Eisenstadt's discussions of social polarization in *Modernization: Protest and Change* (Eisenstadt, 1966); and Lipset's discussions in *Political Man* (Lipset, 1959), and *The First New Nation* (Lipset, 1965).

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