

# INTRODUCTION

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**AT THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION'S** annual meeting in 1975 in San Francisco, Dennis Wrong chaired a session on the "state of contemporary theory" that drew hundreds of people. One of the panelists, Stephen Warner, drew a loud, appreciative laugh from the crowd when, playing on a slogan of the youth culture, he observed "there are no functionalists under thirty years old!" Warner actually went on to suggest that youthful critics might well want to rethink their position; but in the spirit of the time it was his ironic observation that seemed to his audience not only true, but just.

Little less than a decade later, an anonymous reviewer for the *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)* began his or her critique of an article I had submitted in the following way: "This is only one example of the revival of functionalist theorizing which has recently surfaced, a development of which I am fully aware even while I find it appalling"! Another *AJS* review of my work, a published one of my first volume, lamented, "the library of critiques" of functionalism "must be taken from the shelves again." In a similar vein but with opposite affect, a participant at a session on cultural sociology at the 1984 ASA meetings spoke in ringing tones about "the new Parsonian revolution" taking place in the discipline. These remarks were made in a very different time, but they were equally true and perhaps equally just.

It is history that Parsonian sociology, né "functionalism," crashed in the 1960s. The king fell; and for a long time it looked as if he would share Humpty Dumpty's fate; that is, nobody would be able to put him back together again. It has now become clear that this is not the case.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This introduction enlarges on my "Chair's Message" in *Perspectives*, 1983, 2(2), pp. 1-3. In a revised form it was first presented at the Sociology Colloquium at the University of Alberta in February 1984 and later at the Conference on Neofunctionalism sponsored by the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association in San Antonio, Texas, in September of that year. Most of the chapters that appear in this volume were initially presented for that conference as well.

The Parsonian legacy—if not Parson's original theory—has begun to be reconstructed.<sup>1</sup> We are witnessing today the emergence of neo-functionalism, not functionalism exactly, but a family relation.

“Functionalism” was never a particularly good word for Parsons's sociological theory. Its use was more the upshot of intuition and tradition than of theoretical logic. The term evidently emerged from the study group that L. J. Henderson conducted at Harvard in the 1930s. A physiologist deeply affected by biological functionalism and by Pareto (Barber, 1970), Henderson introduced Parsons, Homans, Merton, and other fledgling theorists at Harvard to Canon's powerful use of homeostasis in *The Wisdom of the Body*; he also evangelized for Pareto's general theory, in which systems and equilibrium concepts played prominent roles (Homans, 1984). Homans moved from here to the functionalist anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown. Parsons went on to Durkheim and Weber. He began using the term in the late 1930s, implying by it a vague notion of system and “interdependent parts,” and he made it a central and elaborate feature of his Presidential Address to the ASA in 1945 (Parsons, 1945). Yet if we look at references to functionalism among the younger group of Harvard-trained theorists in the 1930s and 1940s—Homans, Parsons, Merton, Barber, and Davis among others—we see quite a bewildering variety of epistemological, ideological, empirical, and theoretical connotations.

Even as “functionalism” emerged as a major theoretical movement in the late 1940s, however, its ability for precise denotation was fiercely contested. Merton was regarded as one of its principal exponents; but in the late 1940s, he set out (Merton, 1967) to strip the term of its ideological implications, its status as an abstract model, and its substantive empirical commitments. He sought to reduce it, via the anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown, to a kind of supermethod. To be functionalist, Merton held, was quite simply to explain causes by effects. But although this response to critics was enormously successful in a diplomatic sense, it was not, it seems to me, particularly helpful theoretically. It had much more to do with the anthropologists' critique of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory than with the actual practice of sociological functionalism in the twentieth century. It did not, in fact, actually describe what the foremost practitioners of functionalism, Merton himself very much included, actually did.<sup>2</sup>

Merton's students, themselves key figures in the first functionalist heyday, provide further evidence for the ambiguity of the term. Coser (1956), Gouldner (e.g., Gouldner, 1960), and Goode (1960) developed a distinctively “left-functionalism,” to use Gouldner's term. They stressed the theory's accessibility to critical and materialist thought and claimed

that functionalism was a crucial element for explaining disintegration and social conflict. By the mid-1960s, Parsons—the arch “integrationist” of the tradition—himself denied the functionalist designation, suggesting that his cybernetic emphasis and interchange model made such a static label obsolete. Henceforth, his collaborators and students would refer to their work as “action theory.”

Despite such contradictory usage and internal dissent, however, “functionalism” seems to be a name that has stuck. I want to take the bull by the horns and suggest that the term indicates nothing so precise as a set of concepts, a method, a model, or an ideology. It indicates, rather, a tradition. Qua tradition, certain distinctive characteristics can, indeed, be adduced fairly from the efforts that have been conducted and criticized in their names. Traditions, of course, are accessible only through interpretation. What follows indicates my own sense of the future direction of this tradition as much as a discovery of its past.

(1) Although not providing a model in an explanatory sense, functionalism does provide a general picture of the interrelation of social parts, a model in a more descriptive sense. Functionalism models society as an intelligible system. It views society as composed of elements whose interaction forms a pattern that can be clearly differentiated from some surrounding environment. These parts are symbiotically connected to one another and interact without a priori direction from a governing force. This understanding of system and/or “totality” must, as Althusser (1970) has forcefully argued, be sharply distinguished from the Hegelian, Marxist one. The Hegelian system resembles the functionalist, but it posits an “expressive totality” in which all of a society’s or culture’s parts are seen as representing variations on some “really” determining, fundamental system. Functionalism suggests, by contrast, open-ended and pluralistic rather than monocausal determinism.

(2) Functionalism concentrates on action as much as on structure. Its conception of action, moreover, focuses as much on expressive activity and the ends of action as on practicality and means. In particular, functionalism is concerned with the degree to which ends succeed in regulating and stipulating means. It seems quite mistaken, in this regard, to equate functionalism with the sociologism of Durkheim or the quasi-utilitarianism of Radcliffe-Brown.

(3) Functionalism is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functionalist systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such. It is used in several different ways, as a homeostatic, self-correcting equilibrium, as a moving equilibrium to describe developmental structures of growth and change,

and as a partial equilibrium model of the type that Keynes used to describe the systemic strains in a capitalist economy.<sup>3</sup>

(4) Functionalism posits the distinctions between personality, culture, and society as vital to social structure, and the tensions produced by their interpenetration as a continuous source of change and control. In addition to “social” or institutional analysis, then, functionalism focuses on a relatively autonomous culture and on the centrality of socialization.

(5) Functionalism implies a recognition of differentiation as a major mode of social change—whether cultural, social, or psychological—and of the individuation and institutional strains that this historical process creates.

(6) Functionalism implies the commitment to the independence of conceptualization and theorizing from other levels of sociological analysis. Each of these six theses can certainly be identified with other lines of work in the social sciences. No other tradition, however, can be identified with all of them.

It is true, of course, that these are certainly not the only, or even the principal, characteristics of functionalism that are lodged in the public mind of social science. Functionalism has been burdened with anti-individualism, with antagonism to change, with conservatism, with idealism, and with an antiempirical bias. Parsons’s defenders have usually dismissed this baggage as ideological illusion. In my own work, by contrast, I have found Parsons’s functionalist theory to be highly ambivalent and often contradictory (Alexander, 1983, pp. 151-276). Every element critics have polemicized against is there, though these elements by no means exhaust the meanings of his work. Parsons’s functionalism gave sociologists a lot to choose from. Depending on their intellectual and historical circumstances, they took their choice.

Beginning in the early 1960s, historical and intellectual developments allowed the negative elements in this complex picture increasingly to dominate the collective consciousness of the discipline. By the mid-1970s they had crystallized into a conventional wisdom that froze the functionalist image in time. This was doubly unfortunate, for it was precisely at this time that the most sophisticated interpretations of Parsons’s theorizing had begun to change dramatically.

This changing understanding has unfolded over the last 10 years. It has taken place for several reasons. One must look first, ironically, to the very success of the “vulgate.” The critical vulgarization of Parsons succeeded in undermining his overwhelming authority. Once this hegemony had been destroyed, parts of his theoretical system could much more easily be appropriated in creative ways. One was no longer viewed as a “Parsonian” if one incorporated significant insights from

Parsons's work, despite the best efforts of recalcitrant "anti-Parsonian warriors" to make the anachronistic and polemical label stick. Second, the ideological climate had noticeably cooled. A younger generation of theorists emerged who did not experience the political need to attack the liberalism for which Parsons stood. In the present neoconservative climate, indeed, it is hard to remember how Parsons's social-democratic reformism could have inspired such political hatred and venality. Third, European social theory has begun to grow once again. Without the earlier, exaggerated American attachment to Parsons, these Europeans, especially Germans, have been able to appropriate Parsons in surprisingly positive ways. Fourth, functionalist theory was, quite simply, a very sophisticated theoretical scheme. Parsons had a genial intelligence matched by few of his peers, or ours. That is the necessary, if not the sufficient, reason why the functionalist tradition still has the makings of a successful sociological theory.

What has been emerging from this reconsideration is less a theory than a broad intellectual tendency. I call it neofunctionalist in conscious similitude to neo-Marxism. First, like neo-Marxism, this development has involved a determined critique of some of the basic tenets of the original theory. Second, like neo-Marxism, it has sought to incorporate elements of purportedly antagonistic theoretical traditions. Third, like neo-Marxism, this neofunctionalist tendency is manifest in a variety of often competing developments rather than in a single coherent form. Let me consider each of these parallels in turn.

Neo-Marxism began in the 1950s as a movement of critical reflection on what came to be called orthodox Marxism; it began, that is, as an interpretive genre. What happened was that a series of self-consciously revisionist interpretations "discovered"—in reality, produced—a different Marx. Neo-Marxist interpretation emphasized a radically different periodization of Marx's work, highlighting the significance of the early over the later writings. It found in Marx a very different epistemological framework, emphasizing idealism rather than materialism or Kantianism. It located new, significant intellectual precursors like Hegel, rather than thinkers like Saint-Simon and Ricardo. It claimed for Marx strikingly different ideological affinities, arguing for a democratic and humanistic Marx rather than a Leninist, authoritarian one.

Over the last decade a similar process of reinterpretation has ensued within, or on behalf of, the functionalist tradition. The ideological rereading has perhaps been the most dramatic. The argument for a non-conservative functionalism, a more conflict-oriented and critical reading, was begun by leftist theorists like Atkinson (1972) in the early 1970s, who claimed that Parsons's theory was not fundamentally different from

Marx's or even from that of Marcuse, which embodied the theory of New Left. Other critical theorists, like Taylor (1979) and Gintis (1969), who identified even more closely with Marxism, began also to stress the parallels between Parsons and Marx and the critical side of the functionalist approach. The latest development of this influential movement within critical theory is the interpretation that Habermas has developed in the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), which finds significant liberating elements in Parsons's thought even while it scores his conservatism. Liberal theorists have also contributed to this ideological reevaluation. Rocher's (1975) early interpretation, for example, stressed that Parsons's theory could rise above its American bias despite Parsons's own personnel commitments to it. Menzies (1976) documented some socialist implications in Parsons's stratification theory. In an extraordinarily revealing reversal of his earlier position, Gouldner (1980, pp. 355-373) described Parsonian sociology as contributing to a liberal theory of civil society that could provide a democratic and humanistic alternative to orthodox Marxism. My own work on Parsons's ideology (Alexander, 1978, pp. 61-72; 1983, pp. 128-150) has tried to bring out its critical potential, though I have pointed to the much more quiescent view of modern life that develops in his later work.

Most of these theorists have revised the epistemological understanding of Parsons as well, viewing him as much less idealistic than the earlier, established position had claimed. Taylor sees functionalism as giving significant weight to economic and political, not just cultural, factors; and Habermas goes to the extent of criticizing Parsons for an anti-normative explanation of political and economic spheres. Menzies, too, sees the later Parsons as all too naturalistic. More recent works, like those of Bourricaud (1977) and Adriaansens (1980), provide detailed evidence for an anti-idealist epistemology. Savage's (1981) Althusserian interpretation dismisses the idealist interpretation. Although I have found Parsons's idealism to be, on the contrary, quite debilitating, I have also found (Alexander, 1983, pp. 8-150) that there is a significant multi-dimensional theme as well. The most ambitious reconstruction of Parsons's epistemology, that conducted by Munch (1981-1982), argues that his Kantian framework allowed material factors free reign while preserving the freedom that comes with a normative bent.

These new epistemological and ideological interpretations clearly call for different precursors, though the construction of a new, intellectual lineage for Parsons has not yet proceeded as far. Whereas Mills linked Parsons to the conservative Hegel and Gouldner to the English and French antirevolutionary reaction, Bershady (1973) and Munch place him squarely in the democratic and humanistic tradition of Kant. I have

linked Parsons to the social-democratic, welfare state tradition of T. H. Marshall and have suggested, in addition, that the more critical strain in his work has roots in the reformist "social control" tradition of American pragmatism (Alexander, 1983, pp. 385-387).

Finally, most of these new interpretations of the meaning of Parsons's work have generated new periodizations. The thrust has been to argue against the orthodox position that Parsons's work necessarily improved with age. Habermas and Menzies, for example, praise his earlier writings but see in the later work a systems bias that involves serious reification. Andriaansens attacks the middle-period work, especially *The Social System*, as a fundamental deviation from the synthetic thrust of the early and later work, a view that is shared by Sciulli and Gerstein (1985). Although I have argued for the analytical superiority of Parsons's later work (Alexander, 1983, pp. 61-73, 194-211, 259-272), I have also suggested that his essays of the late 1930s and 1940s, because they are more empirically concrete, more group-oriented, and more critical, provide a significant corrective to his later work on social change.

Neo-Marxist interpretation gradually paved the way for social scientific explanation that moved in the same direction. New substantive theory and new empirical work were produced by the older generation of scholars like Hobsbawm and Genovese—who sought to salvage the Marxian legacy—and eventually by a younger generation attracted to neo-Marxism for intellectual and political reasons. Once again, within functionalism the situation has been much the same. In the course of the turbulent period of the 1960s, an older generation of functionalists initiated subtle but often far-reaching changes in "orthodox" theory. Suggesting new twists on traditional ideas and incorporating what had usually been taken to be antagonistic theories, these sociologists drew upon Tocqueville, Weber, Marx, and Habermas in their efforts to attain new levels of empirical specificity, a fuller appreciation for power and conflict, and more probing kinds of ideological critiques. Following in their wake, theorists in the younger generation have taken up a variety of neofunctionalist paths. This recent movement, moreover, has not been confined to the United States. The extraordinary revival of Parsonianism in Germany (Alexander, 1984) has, in fact, been a reconstruction of Parsons's legacy in a neofunctionalist vein, providing new substantive theories and empirical explorations (e.g., Miebach, 1984) of diverse scope and outstanding quality.<sup>4</sup>

The articles that follow—all of which appear here for the first time—exemplify the tendencies I have described. All of them, for example, argue for a form of functionalism that is epistemologically multidimensional. A few are overtly critical of idealist tendencies in Parsons's original

work, as when Barber argues against the Parsonians'—i.e., the orthodox—tendency to credit professional groups with purely normative, altruistic interest. Turning Parsons's professions theory against itself, Barber outlines a more synthetic functionalist approach to social control that can incorporate the insights of materialist critics like Friedson and Berlant. Other contributors eschew the critical mode. Whatever Parsons's own inclinations, they themselves start from the assumption that a materialist, or conditional, reference must always be there. Thus Colomy writes about the cultural and political-economic bases of party formation; Eisenstadt and Smelser argue for the recognition of group self-interest and coalitions in explaining social change.

There is also the unmistakable strain in these chapters of ideological critique. Virtually every contributor pushes functionalism to the left. In several chapters this takes the form of a warning against Parsons's optimism about modernization. Lechner turns Parsons's change theory on its head by converting his focus on "the problem of order" into a theory of disorder. In this way he can use categories of Parsons's later change theory to investigate fundamentalist reactions to modernization rather than progressive realizations of it. In a similar vein, Colomy formulates an approach to differentiation that is as prepared to explain its failure as its success. But this leftward push also takes a specifically Marxian form. Gould argues that functionalist theory must be developmental as well. He uses Hegel, Marx, and Piaget to develop—within the functionalist vocabulary of Parsonian theory—an explanatory framework for the transitions between feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. Scullin also elaborates a functionalist-Marxist integration. On the one hand, he suggests that Parsons's empirical generalization about growing collegiality is the necessary complement to Habermas's proposal for consensual and voluntary communication. On the other hand, he insists that functionalist theory is lacking just the kind of normative and critical dimension that a theory like Habermas's can provide.

We can also find in these contributions an argument for an explicit democratic thrust within functionalist analysis. Barber's demand for a commitment to informed consent in the theory of professions is one example; Scullin's emphasis on the necessity for antiauthoritarian collegiality is another. The most detailed elaboration of the democratic framework that is implied by Parsons's theory can be found in Prager's theory of the public. A differentiated societal community, Prager shows, involves the commitment to a vigorous and democratic public life.

Neofunctionalism, then, responds sharply to the ideological and epistemological attacks that were leveled at the orthodox tradition. The two other major substantive challenges to functionalism have emerged

from conflict and interactionist approaches. If anything, neofunctionalist theorists have been even more concerned with responding to these. It is a remarkable fact—which Munch, in his commentary, has quite rightly underlined—that almost every contribution to this volume is a “conflict theory” of one sort or another. Gould argues for a third, structuralist dimension to sociological theory because he wants general functionalist reasoning to be specified by historically concrete predictions of strain and contradiction. Eisenstadt argues against a reified approach to system boundaries because he sees them as constructed through conflict and maneuver. Smelser rejects the notion of differentiation being decided by adaptive efficiency in favor of a criterion that resembles hegemonic group interest, defined in ideal and material ways. Colomy makes group conflict the central object of his analysis, insisting that differentiation and conflict are two sides of the same coin. Prager conceptualizes the public as an arena for democratic conflict; Barber inserts a conflict dimension into the professional/client relationship.

These references to conflict, moreover, are often accompanied by an emphasis on contingency and interactional creativity. Rossi finds a convergence between the indeterminacy of subsystem exchange and the dialectical tension between subjectivity and constraint that he himself stressed in his own revisions of structuralist theory. Eisenstadt insists on the openness of systemic tendencies to individual choice and group process. Colomy draws upon Eisenstadt’s work on symbolic entrepreneurs to elaborate a systematic theory of how voluntary “strategic groups” modify and direct the more structural elements of social change.

What is truly important about these contributions, however, is not that they have “taken account” of contemporary theoretical developments. It is that they have done so from the point of view of a common tradition; it is this common tradition that allows the “whole” of each contribution to be more than the mere sum of its parts. The lessons of 20 years of theoretical debate become articulated in a functionalist way. The idea of a system with interrelated and relatively autonomous parts, the tension between ends and means, the reference to equilibrium, the distinction between personality, culture, and society, the sensitivity to differentiation as a master trend, and a commitment to independent theorizing—all of these basic fundamentals of “functional” thinking permeate the chapters included here. Ideological critique, materialist reference, conflict orientation, and interactional thrust can in this way emerge as relatively coherent variations on a theme rather than as a collection of eclectic, completely diverse essays in sociological theory. In the quest for scientific accumulation, the coherence that this kind of coordinated revision provides is a definite advantage. But there are

more substantive advantages as well. Within a neofunctionalist framework, materialist reference is never separated from culture or personality systems; contingency is related to systemic process; ideological criticism of society occurs within a multifaceted understanding of social differentiation; and thinking about conflict is intertwined with theories of integration and societal solidarity.

This is not to say, of course, that the authors presented agree with one another in anything other than a broad, orienting way. For some there is such agreement; the chapters by Eisenstadt, Smelser, and Colomy form quite a close-knit group. These chapters, however, differ in quite striking ways from Lechner's more general and classificatory approach; Munch, for his part, finds all four lacking an explicit systems framework. Munch's view of theoretical autonomy is much more abstract and normative than the empirically concerned theory of Barber. Rossi interprets values in structuralist terms; Sciulli finds an antivalue, processual tendency in Parsons's later work. Colomy finds a substantive, developmental theory of change; Gould finds none. Sciulli calls for a theory of normative development; Prager finds much that is already there. These controversies occur within more generalized agreement. They illustrate my earlier point that neofunctionalism is a tendency rather than a developed theory.

The chapters presented here, moreover, by no means exhaust neofunctionalist work. Among the older generation of revisionists, the recent writings of Robert Bellah, Edward Tiryakian, Clifford Geertz, Alex Inkeles, Leon Mayhew, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Roland Robertson, Rainer Baum, and Donald N. Levine come to mind. Among the younger generation, one would also cite the work of R. Stephen Warner, Dean Gerstein, Viviana Zelizer, Victor Lidz, Gerald Platt, Charles Bosk, Adrian Hayes, and Gary Rhoades. Within the current German revival, one would want to include, along with Munch, Luhmann, Schluchter, and even Habermas.

No one knows where such developments will lead, whether a neofunctionalist school actually will emerge, or whether, instead, neofunctionalism will shape contemporary sociology in less conspicuous ways. In the past, Parsons's controversial reputation meant that even some of the participants in this revival were loathe to acknowledge his influence. The appearance of this volume and other recent publications (e.g., Sciulli & Gerstein, 1985) seems to indicate that this period is over. The movement to reappropriate Parsons in a neofunctionalist way is gaining momentum. Whether it is simply old wine in new bottles, or a new brew, is something history will decide.

## NOTES

1. This dramatic revival of functionalist interpretation, theory, and empirical work is documented by Sciulli and Gerstein (1985) in their recent article in the *Annual Review of Sociology*.

2. In an interesting and revealing echo of that early response to functionalist theorizing and its critique, Michael A. Faia (forthcoming) has written a major "defense" of functionalist sociology. In *The Strategy and Tactics of Dynamic Functionalism*, he responds to critics by defining functionalism as a logic of empirical analysis that studies causes through effects, suggests this is much more widely practiced than is usually thought, and argues that it should be taken as the best way to approach structural and dynamic explanations. Faia's impressive book very much reflects the revived interest in functionalism, but its "methodological" definition places it outside of what I call neofunctionalism.

3. See Bailey's (1984) recent efforts to differentiate the ways in which Parsons used equilibrium and to develop a more precise way of talking about systems integration.

4. This German work brings out clearly what is also a pronounced tendency in the American material: Neofunctionalism sets up "hyphenated" relationships with other traditions, including critical Marxist theory, Weberian thought, Durkheimianism, Freudianism, and so forth. In its orthodox Parsonian phase, functionalism tried to coopt these other classical theories; in the post-Parsonian phase, their differences with Parsons's thought seem, to the contrary, positive and fruitful, and functionalist theorists have taken them up once again. This, of course, has also been a striking characteristic of the neo-Marxist movement, which has produced psychoanalytic Marxism, structural Marxism, and existential Marxism, to name the best-known cases.

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