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REDUCTION AND DECEIT IN SOCIAL THEORY

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In his essay in praise of the post-positivist philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, Raymond Aron wrote that 'to recognize the impossibility of demonstrating an axiom system is not a defeat of the mind, but the recall of the mind to itself'. To recall our mind to ourselves we must recognize that mindfulness is part of our science. The sociological mind thinks against empirical reality as much as having its impressions stamped by it. This very simple thing is what I would like to call theory. Theory refers to those non-empirical elements which, by standing 'against' the empirical world, allows us to see it more clearly. Theory is sometimes temporally prior to empirical observation; it is always analytically independent.

This definition of theory is deliberately broad. It implies, for example, a critical attitude not just towards logical positivism but to philosophical empiricism as well, for the latter assumes the doctrine of falsification, which holds that theories can be refuted by something called the non-theoretical factual world.

Yet facts are themselves products of two different pressures. While they receive structured impressions from the physical world, the framing of these impressions depends on metaphysical assumptions that have already been learned. We talk in our scientific work about facts as opposed to theories. While this is a vital and necessary analytical distinction, we should not deceive ourselves that it is an ontological one. Decisions about facts are matters of

scientific convenience; they allow us to leave unchallenged a certain range of material at a particular point in time. These decisions often reflect ad hoc contingencies. The material we are prepared to challenge now assumes the status of the hypothetical; it becomes 'non-factual' and 'theoretical'. What we are not prepared to challenge at this point is allowed to remain as fact. Decisions about facts reveal as much about the scientific consensus in the professional community at a particular point in time as they reveal about the accuracy with which these scientific statements mirror nature. There is a symbiotic interpenetration, then, between theories and facts.

It is because they rigidly demarcate theories and facts that most practising social scientists deny that science progresses in response to non-empirical theoretical processes as much as in response to the expansion of empirical knowledge through induction or controlled experiment. Yet, if facts are not ontologically separated from ideas, then non-empirical arguments which change ideas will play a decisive role in the perception of new knowledge, in disputes about falsification and disputes over measurement.

If the perception of facts is dependent upon intentions rather than reflections, then there is a discomfiting relativity about scientific knowledge. Three reactions to the recognition of this relativity are possible. The first is to ignore it. Empirical sociologists carry on because they have not only the conviction but the phenomenological experience that they are discovering new knowledge. This experience is reinforced by the fact that an empirical researcher is typically a member of a reference group defined by agreement about the framework of his or her research programme. This joint membership makes superfluous reference to the theory that informs the factual perceptions of the members of the group. That this research programme is, at any given point in time, only one of several competing approaches to an empirical problem does not in itself contribute to theoretical unease. The findings of other researchers in the field can be dismissed as inaccurate in their observations and methods rather than as inspired by compelling yet divergent theoretical assumptions.

The second reaction to the inevitable relativity of social scientific knowledge embraces it as *Welanschauung* and rejects the quest for certainty altogether. In the last two decades, as the *fin-de-siècle* draws near, this position has appeared increasingly attractive. The

most serious students of science (Latour, 1987) argue that consideration of the possibility of norms of objectivity contributes nothing to their empirical investigations of scientific conduct; indeed, they argue that the practice of science is no less subjective than any other lifeworld process. In the work of Richard Rorty (1979), relativism has been apotheosized as the legitimate heir of postanalytic philosophy. In the work of Clifford Geertz (1973), it has been anthropologized as thick description, a method that would make efforts at theoretical abstraction irrelevant. In the work of J.-F. Lyotard (1984) and Michel Foucault (1972), relativism is heralded as the local narrative that will succeed modern objectivity in the postmodern world.

For those who accept the relativism of knowledge but do not wish to embrace relativism as a creed, there is a third alternative. That is to make the case for the possibility of increasing objectivity within the framework of post-positivist thought (Alexander, 1990). Except in the most vulgar sociological terms, after all, science is certainly not the same thing as falling in love, although passion and morality play a role in both. In science it is the ethos of objectivity that is the object of passion; in love, it is passion itself, and the unique and particular individual who seems to embody it. Objectivity strives for universalism, for the depersonalization of what Thomas Nagel (1986) calls 'the view from nowhere'. The role of intention in science means, of course, that nowhere can never be achieved, for we always must be somewhere to have this view. Still, one's point of departure can be decentred in a more or less determined way.

Depersonalization depends on finding standards of evaluation that are outside the phenomenon at hand, standards that can be rationalized, abstracted, generalized and reflected upon in a public and relatively disciplined way. If the impact in social science of non-observable presuppositions is just as important as the impact of observable facts, the challenge is to make the former amenable to more or less rational discussion. Can they be formalized in some way? Can explicit criteria be developed for evaluating competing non-empirical claims?

This is the ambition to which theoretical sociology aspires. One response is to formulate what I have called 'theoretical logic' (Alexander, 1982-3). My claim has been that there is a structure, more accurately a series of structures, that inform the fact

knowledge of social science. Whether we are conscious of them or not, these theoretical structures form the contours of our empirical practice. Because they form closely similar patterns across a wide diversity of social scientific work, they have what seems to be a relatively objective status. They are not invented by empirical sociologists or even by the greatest theorists themselves. They should be seen, rather, as part of the mind of social science, as forms of thinking that are recapitulated and recombined in remarkably similar ways across wide chasms of time and space. The effort to develop a theoretical logic is an attempt to make such structures explicit. Only in doing so can we reflect responsibly upon the commitments that our theorizing inevitably makes.

This call for a theoretical logic brings to our self-conscious attention common practices that are often dismissed as unscientific. Arguments about non-empirical qualities are omnipresent among practising social scientists. We discuss and debate the ideological meaning of certain positions; we argue and dispute the impact of different methodological techniques; we fiercely dispute the assumptions about human nature that one or another position implies. Yet we are inclined to regard such discussions and arguments as being far afield from 'real science'. We are apt to see them as padding, as the context of science, as things we talk about in introductions or conclusions, or as matters we discuss with friends and students. Few sociologists are likely to regard these arguments as the stuff of real science itself. From the perspective I am developing here, however, we must take all of this very seriously. These discussions reveal the informal and tacit knowledge that leads us to the heart of science. Theoretical logic addresses itself to these common practices. It seeks to develop systematic and explicit standards to evaluate such discussions and disputes.

Theoretical logic can be developed at different levels of generality. We can make explicit and more universal our understandings of ideology, of models, of meta-methodological assumptions and methodological techniques, of propositions about empirical conflict and order. Much contemporary theoretical debate has radically distorted theoretical logic by singling out one of these levels as more important than the others. For thirty years we have been treated to announcements of radical versus conservative sociology, positivist versus theoretical, conflict versus order sociology, functionalist sociology versus institutional. Each new school claims that

the chosen dichotomy can explain the general character of theory itself. Yet each, in truth, only addresses a particular level of analysis. These radical simplifications have camouflaged the true complexity of sociological thought and the relative autonomy of its various parts. Contemporary debates reflect superstructure/base reasoning. We need a more subtle appreciation of relative autonomy and mutual interpenetration.

In my own work on theoretical logic I have tried to insert another level into this contemporary debate, a level I have called the presuppositional. All theorists, and indeed all empirical sociologists, presuppose fundamental qualities about the nature of action and the nature of order: what kinds of motives do social actors have (action), and what allows acts to be put together into relatively coherent patterns (order)? It is vitally important to see that these are independent choices. They have, as it were, theoretical autonomy, and it is precisely out of this autonomy that the complexity of contemporary sociology proceeds. Sociologists can adopt an individualistic attitude toward order (emphasizing negotiation, emergence, choice) or they can make a decision for collectivism (emphasizing the supra-individual, *sui generis* quality of social patterning). But either choice still leaves the decision about action open: will individualistic theories be instrumental (assume that action is rational) or will they be normative (allow non-rational motives)? A collectivist theory can be instrumental or it can be normative. It can also, of course, seek to incorporate both dimensions of action at the same time.

When one looks back over the history of social thought, and to sociological theory in the post-war world as well, one can only conclude that the human mind seems intent on simplification and reduction in the presuppositions it makes. For the sake of simplicity and elegance, to allow greater deductive power, to create an aura of emanational inevitability — and for many other reasons as well — social thought tends always towards the one-dimensional. It makes itself either instrumental or normative but rarely tries to embrace both. It is because of this tendency that strains toward idealism and materialism have dominated so much of our intellectual history.

Yet if the human mind seems attracted to simplification and reduction, it seems also to be the master of (unconscious) denial and deceit. For the practitioners of one-dimensional theory present

their reductionist choices as if they had been 'thrust upon them', that is, as if they were not really choices at all. This is accomplished by a subtle but apparently intuitively accessible theoretical strategy. The autonomy of action and order is eliminated. The two choices are conflated with one another. Those who engage in one-dimensional thought present their decision about order — to others and, it seems, also to themselves — as if it were necessitated by their single-minded decision about action alone. What has happened is a form of reduction. One of the central questions of social theory has been conflated with the other.

This strategy is omnipresent in the collectivist tradition. Marx maintained that the only real alternative to individualism was historical materialism. His vast corpus is punctuated by emphatic calls for social as compared to individualistic analysis. He writes in his famous Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1962 [1859]: 363).¹ In the *Grundrisse* he insists that 'society does not consist of individuals' but rather that it 'expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand' (1974 [1858–9]: 265). It is not the individual who determines society, but society that determines the individual. But what, we might well ask, is society? The answer that Marx offers, in the clearest possible terms, is that society takes form only as the mode of production. The logic is as follows: social theory = society, not individual; society = economic, not moral constraint. Thus Marx (*ibid.*: 156–7, original italics) explains at a different point in the *Grundrisse* that 'socially determined interest . . . can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society.' Hence the 'reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals', Marx insists, is a 'social bond' that is expressed 'in *exchange value*'.

These theoretical equations hold good, of course, only if we combine our commitment to collective order with instrumental assumptions about action. The truth is that decisions about action are independent of decisions about order. In principle, we can combine collective order with non-rational action, with the result that the 'social' alternative to individualism assumes a normative rather than material form. It is the very knowledge of this theoretical possibility, however, that Marx sought to avoid. By conflating

action with order — reducing the action question to something that is answered by the order decision — Marx 'pretended' that there was no choice at all, that to be collective theory has to be instrumental. Indeed, for Marx normative structures are not really structures at all. In his writings after 1846 he always claimed that Hegelianism was really individualism in disguise.

This camouflaged reduction is nowhere more clear than in his attack on Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Marx begins by likening Proudhon to Hegel, that is, to an idealist who views society as the product of individual actors. In Proudhon's work, Marx (1963 [1847]: 109) asserts, 'he is constructing the world by the movement of thought'. Once the ghost of Hegel has been invoked to reduce normative currents to individual desires, Marx can contrast Proudhon's emphasis on ideals and principles with his own emphasis on real history and social factors. Lampooning Proudhon's essay as suggesting that it is 'the principle that made the history and not the history that made the principle', Marx concludes (*ibid.*: 115) that 'logical sequence' must be reject as a social force. The real environment of human actors is not moral or cultural principles but economic forces.

Truly, one must be destitute of all historical knowledge not to know that it is the sovereigns who in all ages have been subject to economic conditions, but they have never dictated laws to them. Legislation, whether political or civil, never does more than proclaim, express, in words, the will of economic conditions. (*ibid.*: 83)

It might be said that by adopting this theoretical logic Marx sought to usurp the social for his own (instrumental) purposes, to limit the collectivist approach to economic and material concerns. In this ambition he seems to have succeeded. Henceforth, discussions of 'social origins', or of 'social history' would have a special kind of meaning. They would be weighted down, with order in the material sense. Henceforth, sociological discussions of 'structure' would — despite the best efforts of thinkers from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss to Merton — have a material, political or economic ring. One thinks here, most recently, of Treiman's (1977) work on international stratification, which claims a 'structural approach'

even to processes of prestige, of Skocpol's (1979) book on revolutions, and of Blau's (1977) structural theory of inequality.

This materialist conflation is a great camouflage, and that is precisely the point. If social equals material, who could challenge Marx's theory if he or she wished to remain 'collective' and structural, that is, if one wished to avoid the randomness of individualistic non-sociological thought?

Elie Halévy poses the same kind of deceptive alternatives in his great book, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (1972 [1901-4]). He writes that a theorist must accept either the 'natural identity of interests' posited by the individualistic school of classical economics and early Utilitarianism or, one must opt for the 'artificial identity of interests' of the later Bentham and Marx. Halévy's purpose here, however, is the opposite of Marx's. He wants to discredit collectivist theory and he sees artificial identity theory as proto-totalitarian because it perceives structures as external and coercive. Still, Halévy's theoretical logic is something of a ruse, for he claims, deceitfully, that collectivist theory must be 'artificial' or not at all. This claim is as misleading as Marx's, and for the same reason. It acts as if questions of action are decided by decisions about collective-versus-individual order. In this case, of course, the short-circuit is designed to push us away from collectivist theory rather than towards it.

Peter Blau and James Coleman follow the same theoretical strategy, but with a theoretical ambition more in line with Marx. For Blau, 'structural effects' must be anti-psychological (Blau, 1960) and even, more recently (Blau, 1977), physical and demographic. Sanctions are most effective if they rely on 'external fear'. Again, an argument is presented that collective order works only with instrumental motives. Coleman's (1966) theory is much the same. He argues for the collective character of 'decisions' against what he takes to be George Homans' individualism. Yet Coleman's collectivity turns out to refer only to external force. Why? The secret is that his structures are no more simply collective than Homans' are simply individual. Each theorist's decision about order subsumes and obscures his commitment to action in an instrumental form.

What shows the truly presuppositional status of this theoretical strategy is that it has been used to justify the completely opposite kind of one-dimensional thought, namely sociological idealism.

Durkheim's theory is as paradigmatic for this tradition as Marx's was for materialism. In 1909 Durkheim wrote an essay on the social sciences. What he (1978 [1909]: 75) said was extremely revealing. Until recently, he wrote, thinkers believed that social change was arbitrary and individualistic, that powerful men, like legislators and kings, 'could at their pleasure change the nature of societies, make them change from one type to another.' But such beliefs, Durkheim suggests, are illusory, for social life changes only according to collective not individual forces, and these forces can be understood in terms of immutable 'laws'. This point, of course, could have just as easily come from Marx's pen. It closely resembles, down to the reference to kings, Marx's 1846 attack on Proudhon's theory in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Both theorists deny explanations that are individualistic, and both stake their own unique theoretical claims on the fact of their collectivism alone. But, while Marx moved from his critique to the 'obvious' point that kings were ruled not by themselves but by economic forces, for Durkheim the obvious reason for the superiority of collective facts is their moral nature. Perhaps we should examine this strategy in more detail. In contrast with Marx, the deceptive reduction of Durkheim's argument is much less well understood.

Durkheim's dualistic theory of human nature equated individualism with egoism and materialism, linking the higher, more altruistic and moral parts of human nature to supra-individual society. Only after he had published *Division of Labor in Society*, however, did Durkheim rely exclusively on such a purely normative explanation of social facts. To camouflage the nature of this normative choice — indeed, to hide the fact that a choice has even been made — he argues that the only way to explain the 'social' is to turn to the moral. The theoretical logic is: social theory = society, not individuals; societal = moral, not physical, constraint. This theoretical camouflage allows the conflation of action and order, and it is central for every one of Durkheim's principal works.

(1) To justify the exclusively moral emphasis of *Suicide*, Durkheim (1951 [1897]: 211) argues that social functions, such as economic reproduction, which are 'indispensable for physical life', are forces that 'concern only the individual'. The collective 'bond' that man accepts (*ibid.*: 252), is 'not physical, but moral; that is, social'. The reason that financial upheavals are crises (*ibid.*:

246–9) is not because they are disturbances in the material order. Because the forces exterior to an individual ‘can only be moral’, financial upheavals create crisis only if they affect moral society.

(2) In his revisionist Preface to the second edition of the *Division of Labor* (1933 [1903]: 5–6), in 1902, Durkheim attacks the ordering power of labour division as follows: ‘To be sure, individuals working at the same trade have relations with one another because of their similar occupation.’ But this kind of organization – the cohesion that results from the division of economic labour – rests upon physical and material needs, and these relations, Durkheim now concludes, can ‘have nothing ordered about them’.

(3) In his lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, Durkheim reiterates the same point. Without ‘moral discipline,’ he argues (1961 [1925]: 141) in his introduction, ‘there would be no reason why he [the individual] should not make his way or, at the very least, try to make his way, regardless of everyone in his path’.

(4) Durkheim later justifies his sociology of education on precisely the same grounds. Education concerns itself exclusively with morality because morality is the only force that can order individual life. ‘To the egoistic and asocial being that has just been born,’ Durkheim writes (1956 [1903]: 125), society ‘must, as rapidly as possible, add another, capable of leading a social and moral life.’ This ‘is the work of education’.

(5) In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1965 [1911]), the economic life of aboriginal tribes is the prototype of the dispersed, individualistic existence that attenuates the collective energy generated by ritual association. The social life of the aborigines is composed of ‘two phases’ – the economic, which is profane and non-social, and the ritualistic, which is sacred and social.

This fateful dichotomy is already apparent in Durkheim’s first essay on religion, ‘*De la définition des phénomènes religieux*’, where he (1899: 25–6) describes profane things as ‘quite naked individual impressions’. It reappears even in his philosophical essay on the dualism of human nature, where the profane is identified (1973 [1914]: 160) with ‘sensations coming from the physical world’ and with ‘vulgar things that interest only our physical individualities’.

Durkheim’s reduction of action to order set the stage, when combined with the language philosophy of Saussure, for the

emergence of normative structuralism in contemporary anthropology, semiotics, and post-structuralism.² In these traditions, too, the term ‘structure’ is designed to deceive as much as to explain. Lévi-Strauss is no more structural than Marx, nor is Barthes, for that matter, more ‘structural’ than the later Sartre. The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes is a form of synchronic idealism. Their conflation of action with order camouflages this normative choice, presenting it as what it is not: as the only possible collective, supra-individual theory rather than as one among many.

The other legacy of Durkheim’s reduction can be found in Parsons and the contemporary normative tradition he ambivalently sought to sustain. At the heart of *The Structure of Social Action* there lies a crucial ambiguity: is what Parsons (1937) calls ‘radical anti-individualistic positivism’ a true alternative to individualistic Utilitarianism, or is it not? Logically, it should be, and Hobbes, Bentham and Marx should be listed among the founders of modern, sociological thought. To some degree, Parsons concurs. He does so because his theory opens up one of the few multidimensional approaches in the history of social thought. In the end, however, Parsons will not have it, often claiming that only normative approaches are real solutions to the problem of order. This, of course, is patently false, as Rex (1961) forcefully demonstrated almost thirty years ago.³ Collectivist theory can be normative or material. In so far as Parsons equates norms with order *per se*, he does so to preserve the hegemony of idealism. While it is only normative order that allows voluntarism to be maintained, Parsons acknowledges his commitment to voluntarism but does not wish to make it a decisive criteria for theoretical choice. The choice hides itself behind Parsons’s equation of norms with order. If this equation were true, then the instrumental tradition of Hobbes, Bentham and Marx could not properly be called sociological. This would be convenient for Parsons; the only real alternative to his own approach would have been forced to leave the scene.

Conflating action and order is an attempt to hide the act of theoretical choice. To do so is to present theorizing, the very essence of mind, as a negation of mind itself. This is ironic, but it is also useful. If theoretical choice is eliminated – if materialism or idealism can be made to seem the necessary outcome for any who would choose the collectivist position – then the possibility of counter-argument is permanently overcome.

It should be clear that this same reduction of action to order permeates the individualistic tradition of social theory as well. Homans (1964) rests his claims for exchange theory – and his attacks on Parsons and Lévi-Strauss – on the slogan 'Let us bring men back into sociology, real men, with flesh and blood.' He portrays his theoretical decision, in other words, as having to do simply with matters of order alone: individuals must be recognized, not just supra-individual social order. Yet, once again, this is a hoax, Homans has not simply made decisions about order but also about action. His men have only certain types of blood: type 'E' for egoism and type 'I' for instrumental. They are exchangeists. Homans wants to commit us to such an understanding of action without telling us he is doing so; under the guise of maintaining a more individualistic order, he will force his readers to be instrumentalists as well. This obtusation can be theoretically compelling even while it leaves us without access to the world of ideas and norms.

The normative individualistic tradition typically operates in the same way. Herbert Blumer and Harold Garfinkel describe their one-dimensional, idealist approaches not as normative theories but simply as theories which focus on the individual. For Blumer, this is the world of interaction, for Garfinkel (most recently) the realm of individual practice. But of course interaction and practice can also be conducted instrumentally, not simply through the meaningful intentionality that the traditions of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology uphold.

The reduction of action to order is a strategy, an element of theoretical logic that shows, as it were, the secret shame of one-dimensional theory. One-dimensional theories do not want to go parading about naked. Rather than presenting themselves for what they are, they try to be deceptively clothed. Why shame instead of pride? Because the more closely we examine the logic of the great corpus of sociological theory, the more clearly it becomes evident that in some part of their minds one-dimensional theorists know they are wrong.

If we look hard at the classical statements of idealism and materialism, and at the major idealist and materialist traditions, we see that one-dimensional theory is inherently unstable. It is destined to be denied, even by those who invented it. The thought of its foremost practitioners, not to mention the traditions which

were treated by each, fairly burst with residual categories. We find, everywhere, unsystematic references to the kind of action and order which these theories ostensibly tried to displace.

At certain points in his career, for example, Marx allows that the cost of labour may be affected by national traditions and not just by the cost of reproduction. If taken seriously, this allowance would entirely undermine his wage theory and, eventually, his theory of revolution. In the *18th Brumaire*, Marx often makes psychological courage and rational morality decisive, and he sharply separates class interest from class politics. Durkheim, for his part, time and time again uses the normal/pathological distinction to bracket his insistence on norms, acknowledging that the 'sickness' of industrial society allows instrumental motivation and the 'forced' division of labour free reign. If this were true, however, Durkheim's voluntaristic and normative theory would hold good only for some future utopia. Indeed, in many respects the third book of the *Division of Labor* may as well have been written by Marx.

Yet such self-contradiction in the founder's thought pales in comparison to the systematic antagonism toward onedimensional theory that is often betrayed in the traditions they inspired. Under the guise of explication and elaboration, the greatest students of Marx struggled valiantly against key themes in the master's thought (Alexander, 1982: 343–70). Lenin, Gramsci, Mao, Lukács, Habermas, Sartre – all were deeply affected by idealism and worked furiously to establish some normative foothold in materialism. Their thought veers between the Scylla of indeterminacy, where they unsystematically introduce their voluntarism, and the Charibdis of the last instance, where they touch base with economic determinism. Indeed, it was Engels himself who first sought to undermine Marxism's systematic one-dimensionality. In his letter to Bloch, Engels (1962 [1890]) denied that Marx had sought determinism (the very thing Marx had struggled his whole life to achieve), pointed to the *18th Brumaire* (Marx's most ambiguous and unsystematic work) as evidence for this claim, and established the very categories of 'mutual influence' and 'last instance' that would allow idealism to be introduced by later students. At first these followers created the myth of 'vulgar Marxism' to cover their disloyalty, as if they were only refuting the likes of Kautsky and Plekhanov. Later they used Marx's early writings in much the same

way. Yet these fig-leaves cannot hide the rather embarrassing fact that the history of Marxism is itself a demonstration of the errors of Marx's one-dimensional vision.

Such *sub rosa* but none the less radical revision marks the history of Durkheimianism as well (Alexander, 1982: 306–27). More than ten years after Durkheim himself had forcefully rejected a materialist approach to the relation between morphology and consciousness, his most important student and nephew, Marcel Mauss (1979 [1906]: 34), argued in his famous ethnography of the Eskimos that it was precisely the ‘implacable physical laws’ of climate which explained Eskimo morphology and, from that, almost everything else about Eskimo life. Mauss concludes (*ibid.*: 80) that ‘social life in all its forms – moral, religious, and legal – is dependent on its material substratum’, stressing that everything ‘varies with this substratum’. Bouglé contradicted Durkheim’s idealism in much the same way, implicitly eliding moral density with Marx’s emphasis on productive force. ‘Social density,’ he wrote in *Qu’est-ce que la Sociologie?* (1921 [1907]: 27) ‘depends closely on the modes of economic production; one form of collective property tends to augment it, whereas other tend to diminish it.’ Halbwachs, claimed in his *Les Causes du Suicide* (1930) that he was merely updating Durkheim’s early classic in empirical terms. Actually, he turned it theoretically upside down. His main variable, like Durkheim’s, was frequency of interaction, but he used it in a utilitarian rather than a moral way, claiming that it provided ‘opportunities for suicide’, not moral bonds. To be sure, Durkheim’s students were ambivalent. Alongside their effort to embrace materialism, they also engaged in moral theorizing. And they, too, had their intellectual fig-leaf. Just as Marxists could justify idealism by referring to some earlier writings, so could the Durkheimians. They constantly pointed to the materialistic segments of Durkheim’s *Division of Labor*, acknowledging only in their private correspondence that by the late 1890s Durkheim himself had decisively refuted this earlier work.

Similar contradictions can be observed in the one-dimensional traditions of individualist thought. Exchange theory fairly bursts at its seams. In the book which initiated its modern form, Homans (1961) devoted an entire chapter to ‘justice’, explaining it by the peculiar ability that feelings of moral solidarity have to deny the logic of instrumental calculation. Coleman (1966), ostensibly

trying only to correct Homans’s individualism, introduces the normative framework of constitutionalism that implicitly corrects his instrumental perception of action as well. Blau (1964) escapes from rationalism by introducing values as emergent properties, but he would like to insist they are emergent simply from exchange. More recently, social science has been inundated with arguments for indirect exchange and for the importance of institutional and normative compensations for transaction costs, formulations which save the concept of exchange only by drastically changing the instrumental conception of action upon which it rests.

This brief essay began from an explicit acknowledgement of the relative autonomy of theoretical from empirical thought and of the relativity of social knowledge that this implies. Its aim has been to demonstrate the possibility of making universalistic and comparatively objective statements within this post-positivist frame. Employing the standards of ‘theoretical logic’, I have revealed the unconscious strategies of reduction and deceit that permeate sociological theory. I have suggested that one-dimensional thinking reduces the complexity of social life to a single mode and that this reduction is camouflaged by the theorist’s claim that questions about action can be reduced to those about order. This claim, I have argued, is deceitful. From the original deceit derives the camouflaged revisions of the followers and from both of these sources some of the most tendentious and contentious disputes in contemporary social thought.

If we wish to avoid deceit, we must avoid reduction. If we acknowledge that decisions about order do not close off options about action, we can see more clearly that social theory involves several relatively independent decisions. At the very least, this recognition should force one-dimensional theory to take responsibility for its limited character. It is even possible that the embarrassment of this disclosure will make such simplified thought more difficult to uphold.

Social theory must avoid the simplifications of one-dimensional thought. The reduction it entails is unstable. Its deceit is uncomfortable. Social theory should be multidimensional. This is the only way to avoid damaging residual categories and to make followers happy and honest. It is also the only way to understand the true complexity and richness of social life.

NOTES

1. In the analyses of Marx and Durkheim which follow, I am drawing directly from my discussions in Alexander (1982).
2. For a discussion of these contemporary approaches as close legacies of Durkheim's later 'religious sociology', see Alexander (1988).
3. Rex dissected Parsons's misleading reduction of the order problem to normative co-ordination and demonstrated in an extremely powerful way the false dichotomy that marred Parsons's formulation. 'Is the problem posed correctly by Parsons in the first place?' Rex asks (1961: 102). He answers in the negative: '[Parsons] presents us only with stark alternatives. Either we have social order or we have Hobbes' war of all against all.' Rex (*ibid.*: 106) shows that, on the grounds Parsons offered himself, 'factual order' could solve the problem of order as well, and criticizes Parsons on the grounds that the sets out a range of possibilities but he goes on to develop a particular one of them only.' For a discussion of how Rex clarified these problems, and of how his own solutions led him to adopt conflationary positions of his own, see Alexander (1987: 127-54).

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7

THE SIEGE MENTALITY: The Rex–Parsons Debate Revisited¹

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Of all the areas where the works of John Rex and Talcott Parsons have had an influence, conflict is the one on which Rex has written most, and Parsons, least. This might seem predictable when we recall that Parsons's main intellectual concern was supposed to be with the problem of order, but I argue that behind most functionalist (and many anti-functionalist) writers on conflict, there lurks the figure of Parsons, whether identified or not, and behind most of the writings of Parsons himself there lurks the spectre of conflict, often in the form of deviance, whether identified as such or not.

This essay tries to solve a puzzle generated by the critique of Parsons to be found in the theoretical writings of the foremost proponent of conflict theory, John Rex. Rex's conflict theory, as elaborated in his *Key Problems in Sociological Theory* (1961) and *Social Conflict*, twenty years later, can be read as an uncompromising rebuttal of Parsonian functionalism on the grounds that Parsons prioritizes order while Rex prioritizes conflict. For two decades the paradigmatic split between order and conflict conceptions of society dominated sociology. The puzzle is that, for Parsons, as for Merton and other functionalists, order and conflict are *both* highly problematic, to the extent that, as I shall argue, functionalists can be said to labour under a veritable siege mentality. While Rex himself goes some way to acknowledge this (see, for example, 1981: 45, 102) it seems to make no difference to the conflict theory