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After Neofunctionalism: Action, Culture, and Civil Society

In chapter 1 of this book, I described the transition from an orthodox functionalism to a reconstructed neofunctionalism, and I suggested that the latter had succeeded in establishing itself in the field of contemporary social theory. As the preceding chapters attest, there is now quite a bit of neofunctionalist work, in terms of both discourse and research program, and these have had a growing effect on a fairly wide range of specialities in the sociological field.

Yet, as I also suggested in chapter 1, there is a paradox here. For by virtue of this very success one of the principal rationales for the neofunctionalist movement has disappeared. Parsons is now a "classical" figure. This means that while his ideas may continue to form the basis of traditions, they have also become available for use in more broadly synthetic, eclectic, and opportunistic ways. Inspired by the scope and ambition of Parsons' originating theory, neofunctionalism has been intent on incorporating the ideas of competing traditions and in developing new and more synthetic theoretical modes. While "Parsons" is a crucial resource in this endeavor, his ideas are, in fact, no more important than some of the critical achievements of other classical theorists, nor can they override the genial insights of some contemporaries as well. Perhaps it is only now, after "Parsons" has been rehabilitated, that it has become possible to link his ideas constructively with those in other traditions. That in doing so one moves beyond reconstruction to theory-creation is precisely the point. In my own work, there are three interrelated areas in which this movement beyond neofunctionalism is now taking place.

Action

One of Parsons' major theoretical achievements was to break down the concrete sense of the actor. Instead of describing individuals as taking part in a "society" outside of themselves, Parsons took an analytical view, suggesting that actors and societies were much more, and much less, than the concrete image that meets the eye. They are, in fact, compositions of different levels, of patterned meanings (the cultural system), of psychological needs (the personality system), and of interactional and institutional exigencies (the social system). With this three-system model Parsons early set his focus on what has come to be known as the micro-macro link. Actors, he believed, were not individuals per se, but specifications of broad cultural patterns that entered into role relationships and identities through socialization. Similarly, organizations were very different from the antisubjective "iron cages" of Weberian lore; they were sites where socialized motives and cultural patterns intermingled to form situationally specific norms that allowed functionally necessary roles to be performed in a mutually satisfying way.

This "three-system model" marks, in my view, a permanent contribution to social thought. Parsons was right to break down the concrete actor in this way. This deconstruction provides access to the interpenetration of subjectivity and objectivity, self and society, culture and need. These insights, indeed, remain very much on the agenda of social science today. Contemporary feminism, for example, too often seeks to explain sexism either as the result of patriarchal power, on the one hand, or psychological deformation, on the other, with scarcely any reference to the role of cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity that surely stand in between (cf., the critique by Bloch 1993, and the work by Lara 1998). Macrosociology, whether historical or contemporary in its reference, too often treats political, economic, and even cultural structures simply as networks of power (e.g., Mann), organizations that are constituted neither by meaning nor by motivation but by physical proximity and resource availability (cf., the critique by Eisenstadt 1989). For its part, cultural studies too often either treat culture as a constraint that is somehow "outside" the consciousness of concrete actors or, following Foucault, identify structures of institutional power with structures of cultural knowledge and eliminate the actor as an independent force.¹

Yet, it is now clear that this deconstruction could not create a fully satisfactory micro-macro link. While Parsons created a credible general

model of cultural, social, and psychological interpenetration, he did not produce an account of action as such, that is, of concrete, living, breathing actors making their way through time and space. What Parsons produced was a compelling macrosociological theory of the microfoundations of behavior; in doing so, however, he ignored the order that emerges from interaction as such (Rawls 1987). Parsons produced his three-system model in the late 1940s and early 1950s, before the "micro" revolution in American sociological theory got underway. When it did emerge, in the later 1950s, he did not change his theory as a result.

Micro theorists emphasized that the socialized self was the point where theories of action must begin, not end. Blumer wrote, for example, that actors always take their selves as an object. Goffman pointed out that conformity with values is not only the result of socialization but also a presentational strategy: idealization gains actors trust and space to construct the line of action they need. Garfinkel similarly bracketed the question of whether and how internalized values come to exist; values become operative and important, he believed, because actors take them to be there and know how to exhibit them in practice. Homans, too, considered value as a constant, treating as variable only the conditions of exchange. It is the different resources that individuals bring into the bargaining situation that explain the emergent organization of social life.

Parsons would have none of this. He neither appreciated the deepness of such insights, nor recognized their potentially far-reaching implications. This resistance was particularly damaging because, after the micro revolution, general theories of society simply had to change. The new microtheorizing stimulated the major new developments in macrosociological theory. The later ideas of Collins and Giddens were deeply affected by ethnomethodology and Goffman. Habermas's ideas were transformed by speech act theory and by the incorporation of *Lebenswelt* philosophy. Touraine's understanding of the social movement quality of postindustrial society was stimulated by action theories, Bourdieu's by phenomenology, Coleman's and Elster's by rational choice. It is this kind of crossing over, in fact, that defines the new theoretical movement in sociology.

My own efforts to conceptualize the micro-macro link (e.g., in Alexander et al. 1987) are indebted to these recent developments in general theory. At the same time, I remain deeply dissatisfied with them. They have avoided the negative results of Parsons' deconstructive ambition, but they have not incorporated its accomplishments.² In focussing on action they have conceived of the actor only in a concrete

way. The challenge for theorizing action in the present time is to go beyond this position: it is to understand the contingency of concrete, empirical interactions between actors who are themselves analytically conceived.

If one examines the articles and books that have articulated the new movement in general sociological theory since the early 1980s, one recognizes a strong tendency to identify actors (persons who act) with agency (human freedom, free will) and agents (those who exercise free will). I propose to think of this as a confusion of "agency" and "actor."³ This is a conflation that provided the starting point for the anti-Parsonian microsociologists whose work I have just praised. Considering the polemical stakes, however, one might argue that for these theorists in the second phase of postwar theory the conflation of agency with actors was a necessary and productive error; certainly, it was one that stimulated some of their greatest work. The problem is that this concrete approach has been taken into the third phase; it has been continued by macrosociological theorists who, far from being engaged in a polemic against macro and analytic theorizing, are seeking to establish the micro-macro link.

From neo-Marxism to rational action theory, from reconstructed conflict models to social movement and practice theories, the dangerous legacy of this fertile but fundamentally misguided conflation of actor and agency can be found. On the one side, agency is equated with the heroic masterful actor, whether in an individual (Homans) or a collective (Touraine) form. On the other side, facing this actor, one finds the image of society, the macro-order, as a self-reproducing, "user unfriendly" system, an order that partakes neither of actors nor agency.

This is exactly what is implied, for example, when Giddens (1979, p. 80) asserts that "actors draw upon structural elements." Actors, in other words, are not themselves social structures but agents. In the course of their action, such putatively nonstructural agents make reference to objects, to social structures, that are external to themselves. To be sure, Giddens overtly identifies the latter as "rules" rather than simply resources, that is, as structures that can be subjective and not only material in their ontological form. But Giddens treats rules themselves as objectified and depersonalized, presenting them, for example, merely as "techniques or generalizable procedures" (1984, p. 21), rather than as projections of subjectively experienced meaning. No wonder that Giddens (1979, p. 80) equates agency with "strategic conduct," that is, with the exercise of free will unconstrained by psychological identity or patterns of meaning.

Most of the other influential general theorists today have a similar

problem. Because they assume that both actor and society have only a "concrete" form, they can identify agency – the dimension of action that is independent of external or internal constraint – only with the whole person, with the acting individual as such. Collins, for example, equates the macro, or extraindividual, reference with material, impersonal resources like property, power, and physical space. He understands agency as generated by internal, emotional, and strategic responses to these environments, which are outside the actor as such. Habermas equates political and economic activities with systemsrational organizations that externally impinge upon subjective life-worldly activities, leaving agency to pragmatic speech acts that, despite his references to the developmental cultural logic of Parsons and the psychological logic of Piaget, have no relation to cultural action or psychological need as such.⁴ Luhmann's "autopoietic" systems, whether selves or institutions, are either tropes that obscure meaningful action and culturally ordered collectivities, or they are extraordinary reifications that deny such processes altogether. Joas and Honneth (cf., Alexander and Lara 1996) locate creativity in a similar kind of "philosophical anthropology," linking them to inherent qualities of actors rather than to dimensions of culture and social structure that can be vital resources in the construction of the capacities and identities of actors themselves.

I object to these identifications of actor with agency because they are guilty of misplaced concreteness. True, the traditional hierarchy of society and social actors is avoided, along with the microcosm/macrocosm idea in which actors are fit snugly into the social whole. But, rather than replacing or reinterpreting the familiar dichotomy between actors and structures, and allowing the subjective/objective dichotomy to be mediated in a new way, these identifications of actors with agency actually reproduce the dichotomy in another form. Rather than formulating a hierarchy, actors and structures are conceived horizontally, placed side-by-side in a manner that ignores how they interpenetrate with each other and create new, specifically social forms. What results is a mixture rather than a solution, a compromise rather than a reformulation. The notion that structures control actors who simultaneously constitute structures in turn – the incantation first produced by Bourdieu and later taken up by Giddens – describes a serial relationship rather than an interlinkage. Actors and structures are conceived to be empirically rather than analytically distinct. The result is a kind of juggling, keeping the balls of action and structure in the air at the same time. There does not emerge a fundamentally

different vision of the relationship of actors and societies.

A more complex position is needed that combines both analytic and concrete perspectives. Actors are not simply agents (those who possess free will), nor are structures necessarily contradictory to the conditions under which actors exercise self-control and autonomy, an accomplishment which is not at all the same as agency or free will. If we define action as the movement of a person through time and space, we can see that, whether antiinstitutional and independent or conformist and dependent, every action contains a dimension of free will, or agency. We can even go further and suggest that agency is what allows actors to move through time and space. But actors per se are much more, and much less, than "agents."

There are many ways to express this distinction. In my own work, I suggest that agency is the moment of freedom which occurs within three structured environments, and that two of these – culture and personality – exist ontologically only within the actor, conceived as a spatially and temporally located person. According to this model, actors certainly have knowledge, but it is an error to say – as Bourdieu and Giddens do, following Garfinkel – that actors are "knowledgeable agents" as such. This is an error because the knowledge that actors have does not come from their agency as such but from the cultural environment which surrounds it and transforms it into identity. That this subjective knowledge is the result of early interactions with others does not mean, moreover, that it can be viewed only as the result of an agent's "practical" experience, of "practice" in the pragmatic sense. Some knowledge does, of course, originate in idiosyncratic learning processes, and all of it certainly is applied, in the concrete context of time and place, in a manner that is specific to the actual individuals involved. Yet it is misleading to identify most of this knowledge as the actor's own. Rather, it is society's knowledge, despite the fact that any particular social reference may or may not be widely shared. Even when it is not widely shared, however, rather than being generalized from a series of particular experiences it has been learned from gestalts that such sequential encounters are seen to present.

Action, then, is the exercise of agency by persons. To both sides of this phrasing attention must be paid. On the one hand, action can occur only in relation to two highly structured internal environments. Action is coded by cultural systems and motivated by personalities. On the other hand, personalities and cultural codes do not exhaust the contents of a person's subjectivity. There remains the extremely significant dimension of agency. Philosophers may understand agency,

or free will, as an existential category; for sociologists it can be conceived as process, one that involves invention, typification, and strategization. These processes give pragmatic shape to the exercise of free will. They engage the structured, internal environments of action and move them through time and space. It is not only agency as articulated by these three primordial processes, then, but the agentic articulations of these internal environments that comprise "the actor."

This position can tell us something important about "social structures" as well. If actors are not only agents in the traditional sense, then structures are not only – not essentially, not even primarily – constraining forces which confront actors from without. Culture and personality are themselves social structures, forces that confront agency from within and become part of action in a "voluntary" way. Structures can be described as existing outside of actors only if we focus on a third environment for agency, the social system. I refer here to the economic, political, solidaristic, and ecological relations and networks formed by persons in the course of their interactions in time and space. Yet, because they are formed from concrete, empirical interactions – because they are, in fact, only aggregates of earlier actions themselves – it is impossible to conceive even of these "social system" components as things which exist independently of the patterned internal environments of the human beings who activate them.⁵ All of which is to say that the internal and external environments of action must be conceived in an analytical way, even as the contingency of empirical interactions can only be understood in its concrete form.

Culture

These reformulations of action theory lead to a much greater emphasis on action's cultural environment, which must be conceived as an organized structure internal to the actor in a concrete sense. Among the general theorists in the new theoretical movement, however, there is virtually no recognition of culture as a structure analytically separated from agency. In his structuration theory, Giddens speaks of rules and procedures but he never investigates the textured patterns of symbolic life. In his communicative theory of justice, Habermas acknowledges culture only as it has been "linguistified" into a universalistic morality whose presuppositions can be discussed in a rational and conscious way. In his microtranslations of macrosociology, Collins understands meaning primarily as sedimentation from the emotion of interaction

rituals. In Bourdieu's theory of practice, he does see culture as a structure, but his reductionist equation of culture with institutional structure means that culture has the effect of denying agency rather than illuminating it (cf. Alexander 1995).

This failure on the part of general theorists to consider culture as a structure internal to action is not entirely surprising; it reflects, after all, the same kind of concrete and empiricist approach to action that I described above. However, even specialists in cultural sociology – those upon whom general theorists writing about culture might be expected to rely – tend to treat culture in much the same concrete way. From the Birmingham school to the efforts of cultural sociologists like Archer and Swidler, action is understood as a process that often, or even typically, positions itself over and against "culture," standing outside patterned symbolic codes.⁶ Cultural theorists, in other words, often make the same kind of mistake as does general theory itself. Equating action with creative, reflexive, or rebellious agency, they identify culture with patterns that exist only outside of the actors themselves.

In this context it becomes very clear that there is more involved here than theoretical issues alone. This shearing of culture from agency also reflects an ideological sensibility, one that is widely shared by general theorists and cultural specialists alike. For their approach to agency is not only conflationary but celebratory and even heroic. According to one tradition (exchange theory), actors are rational, autonomous, self-sufficient, wily, and clever. According to another (ethnomethodology), they are knowledgeable, reflexive, self-monitoring, and competent. In the rhetoric of a third approach (symbolic interactionism), actors are endlessly creative, expressive, and meaning-making. These descriptive terms have a certain validity if they are taken as characterizations of the analytical properties of agency; the capacity for freedom, after all, is at the core of the democratic traditions of Western life. These qualities must be questioned, however, if they are taken to be descriptions of concrete actions, that is, of the properties of actors. Yet this is exactly what usually is implied.

If we do not conflate actors with agents, we are forced to recognize that actors are not nearly so heroic as these accounts suggest. They are often befuddled, passive, self-deceptive, thoughtless, and vicious. How can this be so, if agency itself can be described in a positive way? The answer is that agency expresses itself only through its cultural and psychological environments, and these latter forces structure agency in what are sometimes extraordinarily harmful ways. By

ignoring or underplaying the negative elements of action, then, strong theories of agency sometimes seem less like dispassionate efforts to describe action than efforts to mobilize moral evaluations about it. Touraine's "action theory" is a case in point. Against deterministic and structural theorizing, Touraine has rightly emphasized the importance of voluntaristic self-starting and free will in structuring macro-sociological life. Yet, on the basis of this analytic emphasis, he argues – empirically – for the positive, historically progressive role of social movements in postindustrial society, an elision that ignores some of the most typical and dangerous "action" movements in the twentieth century (cf. Alexander 1996).

Rather than theoretical generalizations about reflexivity, contemporary approaches to action – in general theory and cultural theory alike – seem more like reformulations of the moral and political tradition of natural rights. Instead of theorizing the relation between action and its internal environments, they have produced uplifting and hopeful elaborations of the normative discourse that underpins democracy itself. But we should become conscious of this discourse, not reproduce it. The first step is to recognize that it is a discourse; we must deconstruct it as an ideology regulating action rather than rationalize it as an explanation of action. Then we will see that goodness cannot be inherently associated with action; it can be attributed to action only because of the particular kinds of social, psychological, and cultural environments within which agency is expressed.

Insofar as we acknowledge the internal environments of concrete action, then, we will understand that action must be seen as a constant process of exercising agency through, not against, culture. That means that typification – the agentic process that reproduces social narratives and codes – is a continuous dimension of every action, not "instead of" but "alongside of" the dimensions of creativity and invention.⁷ Agency is inherently related to culture, not a process that stands outside it. Because agency is "free," action is never simply mimetic; it never simply reproduces internalized symbolic environments. Action involves a process of externalization, or re-presentation: agency is inherently connected to representational and symbolic capacity. Because actors have agency, they can exercise their representational capacities, re-presenting their external environments through externalization. This does not contradict the structural status of culture, any more than Lévi-Strauss's "bricoleur" negated the power of myth or Durkheim's insistence on the "religious imagination" eliminated ritual.

Yet, if Parsons' three-system division allows us to understand culture as a relatively autonomous structure that informs social action and organization, it does not describe culture as an internal environment of action when the latter is understood in a concrete sense. Parsons fails to connect culture with the concrete actor because, in his approach to meaning, he fails to recognize that cultural analysts must construct "values" from the actual discourse – the speech acts – of socially situated actors. Values as such do not inform, inspire, or regulate concrete action; they are analytic (re)constructions by analysts themselves, (re)constructions that are generated precisely by abstracting away from the actual forms of representation in which evaluations are made. This allows us to understand why Parsons provides a remarkably thin theory of the internal structuring of symbolic process, despite his strenuous insistence on culture's important role.

The problem occurs because Parsons ignored a second intellectual revolution that has fundamentally altered the social sciences in our time. Since the early 1970s there has been a sea change in ideas about culture's role in society, a shift that is sometimes called – certainly inadequately – the linguistic or the discursive "turn." In the context of American debates, this turn is reflected in the series of fundamental challenges that Clifford Geertz issued to Parsons (and Marx), when he insisted, for example, that literary tropes should take precedence over functional demands in explanations of ideology (Geertz 1964) and that thick descriptions of meaning must take precedence over inductions about values and methods devoted to causal explanation (Geertz 1973). In France and England, the linguistic turn was reflected in the growing impact of semiotics and structuralism, approaches that worked with ordinary speech and routine, publically available texts, reconstructing from them intricately ordered symbolic codes and narratives that seemed able to explain the detailed texture of meaningful social life. These movements stimulated, in turn, the creation of a new symbolic anthropology in the writings of people such as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Geertz himself. Eventually there emerged the enormously influential poststructuralism of Michel Foucault, which so powerfully proclaimed the social power of highly structured fields of cultural discourse. In Germany, hermeneutic philosophy also revived, with its claims that the understanding of social action must refer to the actor's experience of meaning and that such meaningful action can and must, as Ricoeur (1971) once put it, be interpreted as a text.

Because Parsons formed his initial understanding of culture before these developments emerged, there is certainly a biographical explanation for his failure to recognize their importance. At the same time, it is possible to see that from the beginning of his intellectual maturity Parsons was not at all sympathetic to strongly culturalist claims. One sees this, for example, in his early response (Parsons 1937) to the religious turn that Durkheim made in *The Elementary Forms*. While hailing Durkheim for recognizing the symbolic, Parsons criticized his program of “religious sociology” as idealism. Rather than seeing it as referring to the internal structure of symbols or to the continuing intensity of symbolic experience, Parsons reduced Durkheim’s “sacred” to Weber’s “charisma,” i.e., to an episodic response to social crisis and strain, and he described Durkheim’s understanding of ritual in a similar way.⁸

Rather than following Durkheim’s suggestions for a broad focus on symbolic patterns, Parsons chose to focus on “values,” which he defined as the subset of symbols refracted by functional needs and institutionalized in specific roles. In fact, however, as I have suggested above, Parsons gained access to values not so much through the interpretive analysis of actors’ meanings or discourses but by generalizing from patterns of actual behavior in the social world. This is precisely what Durkheim was trying to get away from in his later writings. Durkheim was intent on creating a very different kind of sociology, one that would never confuse the analysis of social functions with the patterned understandings of actors themselves. Rather than the weak cultural theory of values that Parsons recommended – which allowed him so neatly to differentiate sociology from anthropology – the late Durkheimian position implies a strong theory that argues against such a disciplinary separation and, in the process, against any radical disjunction between “traditional” and “modern” societies as well.

Such a strong program for cultural sociology – one inspired by the later Durkheim (Alexander 1990, Alexander et al. 1993, cf. Emirbayer 1996) – allows us to explore further one of the most important implications of the approach to action and its environments I have recommended above. It allows us to link action more closely to meaning as actors themselves experience it and to the cultural forms that, in structuring meaning, give it more independence from institutional pressures and system exigencies than Parsons’ value theory ever could allow. Actors are, in fact, deeply and continuously engaged in what Garfinkel called “indexicality.” Yet, in converting the contingent into the expected – by employing patterns of understanding that already

exist – they are not merely publically affirming a conformity with the values that effectively regulate social relationships. They are not, that is, merely engaging in “idealization” as Goffman understood it.

Actors typify not only vis-à-vis structures of meaning that are institutionalized, i.e., organized, sanctioned, and rewarded by or on behalf of the social system. At several points (e.g., Parsons and Shils 1951), it is true, Parsons did speak of the “pattern” integration of culture as straining against systemic or functional integration, and of the possibility of “cultural strain” that results. Most of the time, however, he understood strains as emerging from within the social system rather than culture. While his “theorem of perfect institutionalization” was conceived as an ideal typical model rather than an actual description of a frictionless social life, the concept clearly indicates that Parsons gave priority to social system over culture, to the institutional mechanisms which select from cultural patterns, to culture primarily as a mechanism for institutional regulation and control. He paid precious little attention to the internal codes and narratives of culture itself. Culture must be understood as socially relevant not in spite of, but because of its broadly coded and narrative form. It produces a “surplus of meaning” (Ricoeur 1977) in every action and institution, a surplus that creates tension and distance with every institutionalized and concrete act.⁹

Civil Society

This new thinking about action and culture has certain implications for analyzing social systems and their parts. Rather than trying to trace these implications in a general way throughout the various institutional domains, I will concentrate here on the civil sphere, the world of “civil society” that has become perhaps the most widely discussed social phenomenon in recent years (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992, Calhoun 1992).

If one looks at the microtheories of the second wave of postwar theorizing from a macrosociological point of view, one can see that these descriptions of the concrete forms of interaction suggest an informal social order, one that is not dominated by large-scale, coercive structures but constructed through various forms of communication and reciprocity. Rational choice theorists emphasized competition in a manner that suggested equilibrium could be reached despite inequalities of power. Blumer (cf. Sciulli 1988) suggested that actors succeed

in constructing coherent lines of conduct linking self and other. Goffman described actors' herculean efforts to present themselves as behaving decorously, despite his frequent emphasis on their hidden motives for domination and success, and he described the various forms of deference and impersonal yet constraining forms of solidarity upon which behavior in public depends and produces in turn. Garfinkel put interpersonal trust at the center of understanding, explaining that actors must postulate the existence of consensual rules and shared values even without any hard evidence that they actually exist. This postulate, and the forms of interaction it induces, enhances the likelihood that such informal trusting mechanisms actually will emerge.

However, when the innovators of the third phase of postwar theorizing – the new theoretical movement in sociology – incorporated the insights of microtheory, they paid almost no attention to this vision of an informally regulated, “civil” society that underlay its work. They incorporated its descriptive models of how concrete actors make reference to one another and to themselves, and built upon these “mechanisms” to develop macrosociological theories that emphasized communication, typification, self-reference, exchange, and the necessity for continuous action through space and time. But they ignored the larger sense of society that such processes had implied, which pointed to the authenticity of the moral order and to its resiliency as a resource for informal modes of social control. In Bourdieu's work, for example, habitually regulated life is manipulated by class and field domination and converted into strategic interactions through which actors seek to maximize capitals of various kinds. Habermas uses speech act theory and *lebenswelt* models of shared experience and interaction largely to construct normative alternatives to contemporary societies, not to describe processes within them; within the contemporary world, indeed, Habermas insists on the pulverization of informal relationships and trust by the “colonizing” systems of politics and money.¹⁰ Giddens describes a late modern world in which risk and danger are paramount, in which the self is continuously threatened with extinction, in which trust has almost completely broken down. Collins' world is one of competition and conflict, where emotion and morality are exchanged through rituals that tend to reinforce hierarchies of money, prestige, and social power.

What these intellectuals in the new theoretical movement have done is to synthesize microsociological models of interaction with the conflict-oriented structuralism that formed the other side of theorizing

in the second period of postwar work. Because they draw their map of the macro order from the materialist threads of Weberian and neo-Marxist theory, they employ a cartography of large processes that fails to explore the worlds of self, motivated choice, trust, normativity, and informal mechanisms of social control. It was this failure that Alvin Gouldner sharply criticized toward the end of his life. In *The Coming Crisis*, his radical denunciation of micro and macro forms of American sociology, Gouldner (1970) had himself emphasized coercive institutional power and class manipulation. After struggling with the deterministic and authoritarian tendencies that emerged in macrosociology over the next decade, however, Gouldner evidently began to change his mind. In the afterword to *The Two Marxisms*, he (1980) praised the subjective and local emphases of traditionally American forms of microsociology, arguing that they pointed to an understanding of a civil society outside the market and the state that structural theories ignored, not only to their scientific disadvantage but to their moral peril. Gouldner (1979) even gave a passing nod to the moral and normative macrosociological emphasis of Parsons himself, in the eulogy after Parsons' death that barely preceded his own.

For it was, in fact, exactly this kind of emphasis that had informed Parsons' theory of the macro order. Precisely because of the analytic nature of his theorizing, Parsons never lost sight of the manner in which larger structural processes were embedded in subjective expectations and informal, cultural forms of social control. With his three-system model, Parsons could argue that normative references and the subjective, responsible self were “always there”; with his theory of institutionalization, he could point to the existence of values that generated trust and respect within organizations; with his emphasis on normative and voluntary order, he could highlight the consensual and reciprocal elements in contemporary social life. In the last 15 years of Parsons' career, these general orientations ideas took their most interesting macrosociological form. Building upon Weber's understanding of legally regulated, universalistic communities, Durkheim's vision of organic solidarity, T. H. Marshall's model of citizenship, and most importantly perhaps his own sense and sympathy for the voluntaristic bases of American democracy, Parsons began to theorize about an intermediate realm of subjectivity he called the societal community. The latter, arguably, represented the most important contribution to macrosociology that Parsons ever made. It adds a fourth “sphere” to the traditionally two or three part divisions of

other macro models, pointing to a world that possesses the subjectivity of the lifeworld but, at the same time, the abstraction of more highly rationalized systemic spheres. At once a sphere of individual recognition and a world of integration, the societal community provides the sense of "peoplehold" that Parsons insisted was an important component of citizenship. On this basis, he identified "inclusion" as the fundamental, secular tendency of the contemporary world.

Yet this concept of societal community emerged only in Parsons' later period, when his sensitivity to strain and contradiction, and the critical character of his liberalism, had all but disappeared; when the endemic tendencies of his theorizing to exaggerate stability and integration were at their most pronounced; and when his substantive sociological ideas were coming more and more to be expressed in formalistic terms. These tendencies, particularly in the face of the radical conflicts over normativity and power that emerged during the period, had the effect of virtually burying the significance of this Parsonsian notion of societal community. For microtheorists, the voluntaristic character of the larger society was an implication they never thought to connect with an emphasis in Parsons' work, and Parsons himself never suggested any links between his own concept of societal community and their more actor-centered views. For the macrotheorists of that second phase, Parsons' emphasis on this sphere was rejected out of hand. In light of these earlier dynamics, it is not surprising that recognition of the vitality of an intermediate sphere of subjectivity and morality plays so little role in the synthetic theorizing that followed in the third phase.

In the last decade, however, the need for just this kind of thinking about an intermediate sphere has seemed particularly urgent. New kinds of self-regulating social movements emerged in the struggle against authoritarian regimes, fighting successful revolutions not for socialism but for democracy, solidarity, and the independence of the private world of individual rights. These political practices revived the eighteenth century concept of civil society, first among the activists themselves, later among political philosophers and social scientists. Concerns with a sociological approach to publicness, trust, solidarity, and responsibility began to assume center stage.

I am not the first theorist (see Cohen and Arato 1992 and Mayhew 1990) to observe that Parsons' earlier approach to societal community helps clarify this newly emerging concept of civil society, which remains confused and even mysterious despite the enormous debate that has mushroomed in the 1990s. With this concept, Parsons tried to

explain how a sphere of solidarity can, in fact, be differentiated from both market and state as well as from more specifically ideational and emotional spheres like religion, science, and the family. I have been fundamentally influenced by Parsons' general orientation to these problems in the work on civil society in which I am currently engaged (e.g., Alexander 1991, 1992c, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, Alexander and Smith 1993). At the same time, there are serious problems in Parsons' understanding of the societal community, problems that neofunctionalism has long pointed to but which it is now possible, and necessary, to explore in a more critical and systematic way. These problems begin with the weaknesses I have identified in Parsons' cultural theory. These are related, in turn, to Parsons' underemphasis on the strains between societal community and the other social spheres, and to his failure to understand the importance of the interactional level of civil society, much less its psychology, in their concrete forms.

The very possibility of institutionalizing a societal community depends upon the valuing of universalism. For Parsons, this means choosing the universalistic rather than particularist side of the pattern-variable dichotomy that regulates role relationships; this is the specifically "cultural" dimension at stake. Institutionalizing universalism in this way also implies that normative control of power and interest is established through patterns of legal control. These cultural choices and new modes of control are possible, Parsons believes, because there has emerged in most modern societies a very high degree of value generalization: the growing abstraction of Durkheim's collective conscience, the movement away from the detailed symbolic structuring of individual and group activities toward rules that create generalized guidelines for highly different kinds of concrete acts. In the legal order of the societal community this suggests an increasing role for procedural norms. Particular identities and the contents of various claims are not considered as such; rather, organizations and authorities are mandated to consider all actors and claims in exactly the same way, no matter what their particular point of view.

Parsons' confidence in the possibility of this kind of institutionalization of universal forms of life was reinforced by his insight into how the spread of mass education affected socialization.¹¹ Parsons described the "educational revolution" as a kind of practical Enlightenment. This understanding, however, had the unintended effect of legitimating Parsons' anti-"linguistic" view of meaning in the modern era, for it suggested that the mythical and arbitrary elements in the symbolic motivations of adults were in the process of disappearing. As Parsons'

saw it, the pre-adult timing of primary socialization ensured that modern citizenship values would have an a priori status; at the same time, the increasing length of the educational period of socialization has put into place a developmental process that increasingly decenters cognition, emotion, and morality, allowing them to become more "rational." Such highly educated and reflexive actors, according to Parsons, form the universalistic basis for the contemporary expansion of tolerance and inclusion. Controlling aggressive psychological impulses and regulating conflictual interaction, the increasingly transparent norms of educated persons ensure that contemporary institutions will respond not in closed but in open ways. Exclusion will become a relic of early stages in social development. Ascription and particularism, with their antimodern implications, are becoming things of the past.

If, however, socially relevant patterns of culture cannot be considered merely, or even primarily, as "values" that are specified and selected according to specialized exigencies and systemic needs, then the culture of civil society simply cannot be abstracted and generalized in the way Parsons believed. Certainly one can say that more universalizing cultural references gradually have emerged, but this universalism is expressed as much, if not more, by new code and narrative configurations – what I have called the "discourse of civil society" – than by the omnipresence of abstract rules. The internal symbolic structure of these patterns, moreover, makes it impossible to conceive of universalism as if it meant simply the putting into place of norms of fairness or procedural legal rules. In fact, the discourse of civil society can never be institutionalized as such, and it is for this very reason that it provides such a reflexive, often liberating mirror for the restrictions and abuses of civil and noncivil society.¹²

It is not only the transcendental and free-floating nature of universalism that creates new tensions, however, but the binary nature of symbolic classification itself. Universalism is not a choice that can exclude particularism from social life; it is a coded definition of categories of motives, relations, and institutions which take their meaning only in relation to what are conceived to be their opposites, that is, in relation to categories of "excluded" and "particularistic." The sacralized symbolic categories that construct universalism, in other words, can be defined only by publically contrasting them with the profane motives, relations, and institutions that characterize other kinds of individuals, institutions, and groups. It is for this reason that the excluded "other" always stands side-by-side with those who are

included in the civil sphere. Educationally generated reflexivity can never stand entirely outside these arbitrary elements in understanding; they are inherent in the very process of meaning-making itself.

If such a "strong" cultural theory can highlight the tensions in civil society that escaped Parsons' more abstracted and denatured approach to reason, a more concrete approach to subsystems, to interaction, and to psychological motivation allows our understanding to be deepened in similar ways. The most debilitating problem in Parsons' approach to the relation between institutional subsystems was his identification of empirical, concrete differentiation with the analytical separations of his conceptual ("AGIL") scheme. Parsons believed not only that interchange between subsystems was necessary because they had become gradually differentiated and separated from one another, but that in modern societies these interchanges would tend to be symmetrical, reciprocal, and mutually fulfilling. Just as the societal community would be facilitated by the emergence of more universalistic culture, it would be supported by industrialization and the market economy, by cross-cutting ethnic obligations, by political federalism, by religious denominationalism, and by gendered role divisions in family life.

This confidence in institutional reciprocity derives, at least in part, from Parsons' insistence on institutionalization in his approach to culture, for it suggests that universalism typically will play a regulating role. Yet, just as the discourse of civil society is at once utopian and destabilizing, promoting demands for inclusion even while identifying those who "should be" excluded, so do the boundary relations of civil society operate in a paradoxical way. Certainly civil society receives facilitating inputs from institutions outside of it, but it is subject to destructive intrusions at the same time. The divisive classes generated by economic life, the oligarchies generated by political and organizational power, the gender and age hierarchies of families, the demonology frequently legitimated by religious institutions, and the ethnic, regional, and racial dominations so often generated by the very construction of national civil states – such intrusions fragment and split civil society even while its very existence promises participation and restoration of the social whole (see Alexander 1997b).

A more concrete, empirical approach to action contributes further to this process of creating a new theory of civil society. It points, for example, to the importance of face-to-face interaction. Not only do such Goffmanian ideas as "civil inattention" and "face work" become crucial elements of the democratic social fabric, but phenomena such

as “turn-taking,” highlighted in ethnomethodological studies of conversation, come to be seen in a more historical and macrosociological light. Simmel’s understanding of exchange and conflict as forms of integration, Mead’s understanding of how the generalized other allows spontaneous cooperation, and Boudon’s insistence that actors seem always compelled to offer “good reasons” can now be understood as important descriptions of the distinctively interactional level of a civil order. Such a concrete approach to agency also points to the role that social movements play in allowing the contours of civil society to be constructed and reconstructed in response to the tensions generated by the discursive strains, institutional conflicts, and the psychological and interactional dynamics of everyday life.

I have argued here both for the fundamental importance of Parsons’ analytic approach to synthetic social theory and, at the same time, for the urgent necessity of going beyond it. Two revolutions have transformed contemporary social theory since the 1960s, neither of which penetrated Parsons’ most basic understandings. Microsociological theories explored the concrete nature of action and interaction; culturalist theories opened up the model of culture-as-language and allowed a more concrete focus on the actual patterning of discourse in texts and speech. The analytic emphasis of Parsons’ three-system model calls for critical revisions in these approaches, but they, in turn, demand a fundamental rethinking of his. I have explored some of the institutional ramifications of these new ways of thinking in my discussion of civil society, which also suggests that institutional subsystems most be understood in a much less equilibrating way.

These brief discussions can perhaps be seen as a prolegomena for a new form of synthetic social theory. Hegel believed that in order to truly surpass something one must include it in some new form. I am pointing to a new wave of theory creation that goes beyond the important achievements of neofunctionalism. If it eventually succeeds in doing so, a principal reason will be that it has come after neofunctionalism, not before.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu manages to accomplish all three of these reductionist moves at the same (cf. Alexander 1995).
- 2 In his own recent effort to rethink the micro-macro link – which he describes as “the articulation between institutional and figurational structures” – Mouzelis (1995, p. 7) makes a roughly similar complaint. Arguing that “we must relate what is happening in theoretical sociology

today to the Parsonian ‘constitutive’ contribution,” he suggests “one can maintain that most current tendencies fail to appropriately what is positive and useful in Parsons’ oeuvre.”

- 3 I draw here upon Alexander 1992a and Alexander 1993, which selves develop ideas from Alexander 1987.
- 4 It is in response not only to increasingly powerful criticisms from inist, communitarian, and Hegelian philosophers, and to develop in the work of his own followers, like Benhabib and Honneth, response to his long encounter with the cultural writings of Parson Weber that Habermas has come to acknowledge, in his most writings, that actors entering into Kant’s “moral” sphere – Habermas’ rationalized lifeworld of the public – can do so only on the basis of needs and identities formed in the “ethical,” particularist world called the *Sittlichkeit*. As he remarks in his response to a critical question responding to the English publication of his early work on the public sphere, “I think that I have in the meantime also changed my framework so that the permanent autonomy of cultural development taken more accurately into account” (Habermas 1992b, p. 46 articulating this new approach, Habermas makes precisely the case for argument for an analytic understanding of action I am calling for

The social integrative power of communicative action is first of all located in those particularized forms of life and lifeworlds that are intertwined with concrete traditions and interest constellations in the “ethical” sphere (*Sittlichkeit*), to use Hegel’s terms. . . . A public sphere that functions politically requires more than the institutional guarantees of the constitutional state; it also needs a supportive spirit of cultural traditions and patterns of socialization of the political culture, of a populace accustomed to freedom (Ibid., pp. 444, 45)

This acknowledgment of the internal environments of publically mediated action would entail a far-reaching reconstruction of Habermas’ discourse-ethics approach to the nature of collective order in democratic societies. It points to the necessity of going beyond abstracted universalism and procedural minimalism to some substantive understanding of how the universalism can be grounded in thick cultural traditions. I discuss this in my discussion of civil society below.

- 5 For an insightful statement of this position, specifically in regard to the relationship between network theory and cultural sociology, see Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994). See also the forceful earlier argument of Alexander (1990).
- 6 For criticism of the Birmingham School from this point of view, see Sherwood et al. (1993); for a discussion of the work of Archer and Swidler, as well as Robert Wuthnow, from this point of view, see Rambo and Chan (1990).

- 7 In his laudable effort to insert creativity into the core of action theory, Joas (1996) fails to conceptualize typification as a simultaneous dimension of action, one that unfolds alongside of invention and strategization.
- 8 Parsons' (1968) later critical response to Geertz's essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," is similarly revealing in this regard.
- 9 This is precisely Eisenstadt's point, of course, in his insistence on the centrality of strain and tension in axial age civilizations (cf. Alexander 1992b). It is because of this recognition of surplus meaning that Eisenstadt turns institutionalization theory on its head, suggesting that institutionalization actually produces tensions rather than resolving them. For a similar insistence on the manner in which cultural norms allow an experience of transcendence that facilitates antiinstitutional action, see Dubet (1994).
- 10 This problem is only partially mitigated in Habermas's (1996) most recent work on law. While notably conceptualizing law as, indeed, an institutionalized moral sphere partially independent of economy and state, this work still fails to grapple sufficiently with the non-formal, symbolic discourses of the civil sphere, the existence of which Habermas has gestured to in the writings I discussed in note 5.
- 11 See Turner's (1993) probing essay, which places Parsons' theory of the educational revolution into contemporary debates about social change.
- 12 In this regard, I would take issue with the anticultural thrust of David Sciulli's (1992) theory of societal constitution, which in other respects represents a high water mark of neofunctionalist work. Sciulli believes that the independent power of a civil sphere – which he links particularly to the institutional autonomy of the legal domain – is compromised if actors are described as linking social justice and equality to particular kinds of cultural ideals. Justice can only have a formal, procedural base. In my view, by contrast, institutional processes will always remain linked with, though not of course reducible to, particular kinds of symbolic codes and narratives. Thus, whereas Sciulli criticizes Parsons for dwelling in the 1950s on socialization, values, and family psychological dynamics, I would criticize him for not pursuing these interests thoroughly enough. This anticultural notion that fairness and inclusion can only proceed on procedural grounds results in part from Sciulli's encounter with Habermas, whose work on discourse ethics and legal proceduralism has provided the most sustained exemplar for such a position. It is a position that also negatively affects the theory of civil society offered by Cohen and Arato (cf. Alexander 1994).

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