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## From Functionalism to Neofunctionalism: Creating a Position in the Field of Social Theory

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The essays collected in this book, introduction and conclusion excepted, were written from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. They were not the only theoretical pieces I wrote during this period, but they include virtually all the essay-length writing I devoted to Talcott Parsons. They represent the principal articles in which I constructed and elaborated the neofunctionalist project, a project that was undertaken with a small number of like-minded colleagues in the USA and Europe and which attracted increasing attention during this time.

In terms of the discipline of sociology and social theory more broadly conceived, neofunctionalism has been understood as a movement of ideas that marked a shift in the predicted slope of knowledge/power, to mix a concept from trigonometry with a term of Foucault's. Faced with the emergence of a neofunctionalism in the 1980s, theorists whose formation occurred in the 1960s – when a radical sociology was supposed to have broken definitely with Parsons – spoke of a “surprisingly successful comeback” and of neofunctionalism’s “important impact on contemporary theory.” Younger, post-sixties theorists saw the emergence of a neofunctionalism as a refutation of the linear assumptions about scientific development that the preceding generation had continued to hold. “The revival of Parsonian thought is one of the distinguishing features of 1980s sociology,” one such reviewer wrote. It suggested a “cyclical pattern,” one which features replacement rather than displacement and suggests that “different schools of thought replace each other in commanding our attention over time” and that “leading figures in the various theoretical traditions follow this same pattern.”<sup>1</sup> In the most recent effort yet to essay

the position of neofunctionalism in contemporary sociological theory, Mouzelis (1995, p. 81) describes what he calls "the present feeling about Parsonian grand theory" in a similar way. Observing that "Parsonian functionalism, after a rashly sweeping dismissal during the 1960s and 1970s, experienced a considerable revival in the 1980s and 1990s," he concludes that "given the remarkable rigor and depth of Parsons' theoretical constructions, the present task of sociological theory should be not its overall rejection, but a thorough restructuring of its weaker, problematic dimensions."

As a development that shifts intradisciplinary divisions, and as a movement in theoretical ideas more generally, neofunctionalism has had an effect that is increasingly broad and widespread. Indeed, conceived of as an effort to alter not only disciplinary structures but the discourse and self-consciousness of contemporary social theory, neofunctionalism has accomplished what it originally set out to achieve. It is virtually impossible, at this point, to theorize about contemporary society without reference to some of the major themes in Parsons' work: to his notions about structural differentiation, which continued Durkheim's and Spencer's earlier ideas in a more sophisticated form;<sup>2</sup> to his ideas about inclusion, which built upon Weber's ideas about rationalization and fraternization and Durkheim's thinking about solidarity;<sup>3</sup> to his thinking about culture, which translated Weber's focus on the economic ethics of world religions into a much more general theory of moral institutionalization;<sup>4</sup> to his ideas about the necessary interplay of personality and social structure, which built upon Freud and Mead.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s there were many important sociologists who believed that these and other issues could be understood only in "Parsonian" terms. Today, almost nobody would think in this way. On the other hand, in the early 1980s, before the neofunctionalist movement appeared, many of the most influential thinkers believed that it had finally become possible to think about issues such as these without any reference to Parsons at all. Today, only a few persons continue to argue in this way. "Parsons" has moved from being a dominant intellectual force, to a figure upon whose very significance many important social theorists cast serious doubt, to a "classical" figure in contemporary intellectual life.<sup>6</sup>

Parsons' contributions are now accepted as unquestionably important, even while his theories are no longer acceptable as such. This paradox is only an apparent one. Thus, there are very few, if any, contemporary social scientists whose work follows Weber's detailed

plan for the study of society. Neither are there any "Durkheimians" or "Simmelians" in this sense. Yet the enormous influence of these earlier classical figures remains. They are regarded as exemplars of certain ways of thinking, as providing particular paradigms for particular kinds of delimited studies, as supplying polemical resources for criticisms that allow broader intellectual links to be established and denied. Parsons' position in the social sciences is now much the same. As a theoretical figure in contemporary life his star will undoubtedly rise and fall. But as a figure in history, and in the living history of the social sciences and social theory, his position now seems secure. His writings and career are increasingly treated as data for the history of sociology as such.<sup>7</sup>

Neofunctionalism has been a major project for me, in a personal as well as in a theoretical and professional sense. Insofar as I have succeeded in helping to (re)establish the legitimacy of some of Parsons' central concerns, I regard this project as completed. It is this very completion that has allowed me increasingly to separate my own understanding of social theory from Parsons' own, to look beyond Parsons, to think about what comes "after Parsons," to build not only upon "Parsons," but upon other strands of classical and contemporary work, to create a different kind of social theory. Still, whatever comes after neofunctionalism will be deeply indebted to it. This is true, I would argue, not only for my own intellectual development, and for the increasing number of other contemporary thinkers whose ideas have passed directly through the filter of Parsons' work, but for sociological theory in most, but not all, of its contemporary manifestations.<sup>8</sup>

During the time I composed the essays collected here I wrote also about other things. Rereading Weber, I focused particularly on the antipathies in his theorizing about modern society (Alexander 1987a) and on the relationship between his rationalization theory and Durkheim's later work on the symbolic basis of society (Alexander 1992a). I immersed myself in microsociologies of action (Alexander et al. 1987) and semiotic and poststructural analyses of meaning (Alexander 1990). I deepened and made more systematic my earlier objections to Parsons' theories of action and value (Alexander 1987b), and I began critically to examine problems of contemporary democracy (Alexander 1991a) and to develop a sociological model of civil society (Alexander 1992b). From these investigations there percolated a series of theoretical and empirical publications that, it must be said, cannot very well be understood in a precisely neofunctionalist

way. They must, rather, be seen more broadly, as part of that wider stream of contemporary thinking which I have called "the new theoretical movement" (see chapter 8). I write about these developments in my thinking, and their relation to neofunctionalism, in the concluding chapter of this book, chapter 9, which I have entitled "After Neofunctionalism: Action, Culture, and Civil Society."

The new theoretical movement can be seen as a third phase in postwar sociological theory. Parsons' ideas had a certain hegemony in the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, a hegemony which was relative, to be sure, less a form of domination than an influence that displaced but in no way prevented the elaboration of other traditions. When this hegemony ended, there followed an intense and productive period of one-sided polemical theories that were built upon criticisms of Parsons and aimed to substitute one particular element of action or order for the synthesis that Parsons had tried to build.<sup>9</sup> Sometime during the 1970s, however, there emerged the beginnings of a different kind of theoretical emphasis, one that sought to integrate different lines of thought and move beyond the one-sided polemics of earlier years. The theorists who have formed the main lines of this movement employ concepts that reflect different emphases and interests, and I have at one time or another offered pointed criticisms of most of their work. Some of these critical remarks are reproduced in the essays included here; other have appeared in some earlier collections of my essays (Alexander 1988a, 1989). It is upon the basis of these disagreements that I offer the suggestions for new directions in social theory in my concluding chapter. Nonetheless, despite these deep disagreements, I believe that my own ideas and the theories I criticize together form part of the same broad yet nonetheless distinctive theoretical movement of contemporary sociological thought. Each of the central theoretical currents in this stream forms variations on common themes.

One may understand what was, and remains, distinctive about this new theoretical movement in sociology by employing some of the terms that Paul Colomy and I develop in our investigations of knowledge accumulation and competition in science (chapter 2), a general model that can be taken as framing the other contributions in this book. Initially, the figures who are now considered to be representatives of this new theoretical movement – among them Giddens, Habermas, Luhmann, Munch, Bourdieu, Boltanski and Thevenot, Collins, and myself – were intent on revising the perspectives we had inherited from Parsons and his critics. Our intention was to

move beyond the most destructive and debilitating divisions of post-Parsonian thought. I am thinking here of works like Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971), Habermas's *Toward a Rational Society* (1971), Collins' *Conflict Sociology* (1975), Bourdieu's (1970) early writings on Algeria and his middle period work on educational reproduction (e.g., Bourdieu 1973), and my own *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982–3).

These earnest early efforts soon gave way, however, to more forceful challenges to the inherited perspectives of the two early theoretical phases, to a deepening sense of their inadequacy that led, not to revisionism, but to full-blown reconstructions of earlier lines of thought, for example, Giddens' *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976) and *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), the essays collected in Habermas' *Communication and the Evolution of Societies* (1979), Collins' work in the early 1980s on interaction ritual chains, and my collective volume *Neofunctionalism* (1985).<sup>10</sup> For some of the participants in this new theoretical movement, even these reconstructive ambitions eventually seemed too limiting. They began to devote themselves not to revision or even to reconstruction, but to developing entirely new and original positions of their own, e.g., Giddens' *The Constitution of Societies* (1984), Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), and Boltanski and Thevenot's *De la justification* (1991).<sup>11</sup> I can now see in some of my own efforts of the late 1980s a subtle but distinctive shift in theoretical emphasis and tone. In addition to the pieces noted above, I think particularly of my surprisingly sharp criticisms of Parsons' approaches to differentiation (Alexander 1988b) and culture (Alexander 1987b, 1990).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that other theorists who were involved in efforts at reconstruction resisted the temptation to develop new theories or dramatic shifts in emphasis. Weberian sociologists, for example, sought to reconstitute the originating paradigm by incorporating new theoretical developments in a "Weberian" way (e.g., Schluchter 1981, 1989). Conversation analysts claimed that they were only doing ethnomethodology in a different key. Efforts like these to maintain the continuity of traditions have sometimes taken the form of antagonism to more radical efforts at reconstitution; arguments have been made that the purity of second-phase theories must be maintained (e.g., Pollner 1991).<sup>12</sup> There is, nonetheless, an undeniable and growing recognition that the theoretical terrain is shifting beneath our feet, that we are in the midst of

what might be called a postclassical phase of sociological theory.<sup>13</sup> For the first time in a generation, new and very different kinds of sociological theories are being produced.

From the very beginning, in fact, neofunctionalism was an effort to relate Parsons to different forms of classical and contemporary work. In telling this story, it seems relevant to introduce some autobiographical information, particularly since neofunctionalism, at least in its Anglophone form, has often been associated with my name.<sup>14</sup> In chapter 3, Paul Colomy and I specifically take up the movement from functionalism to neofunctionalism, and most of the other chapters in this book can be understood as expressions of this movement and theme. As Parsons has achieved "classic" status, however, this story is coming to an end. The narrative shifts to the future and away from the past, to the movement beyond neofunctionalism, from within the movement and outside of it as well. I take up this second story in my concluding chapter.

I became interested in the thought of Talcott Parsons just at the point, during my last years at Harvard in 1968 and 1969, when I began to see myself as a politically engaged Marxist theorist. It was this interest that separated my own intellectual development from others in my intellectual generation of "young radicals" in the United States. In this separation I was stimulated particularly by Parsons' last brilliant student, Mark Gould, who insisted that, just as Marx had built his theory upon Hegel and the classical political economists, so contemporary radical theory would have to build upon Parsons as well. During my first year in graduate school at Berkeley, in 1969–70, as I became more involved in the sophisticated intricacies of contemporary Marxian thought, I kept this advice in mind, following closely the lectures of Neil Smelser, for example, who was Parsons' most original structurally oriented student. I recall that when I returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the end of that first year, Gould reiterated his "warning" to me (cf., Gould 1981), as did the radical political economist Herbert Gintis, who had put Parsons' ideas to such highly original use in his PhD thesis on welfare economics, which Gintis formally dedicated to Parsons and Marx.

I followed my young counselors' advice, agreeing with them that Parsons was a "great" thinker, not just another influential one. From the very beginning of my interest in Parsons, then, I intended to combine his ideas with those of thinkers in other frames, at first with those of Marx, later with those of Durkheim and Weber, whom I began to read more systematically after that first year. My ambition

was to create a more synthetic social theory, and I regarded Parsons not as an end point but as a place to begin. I found Parsons' theory something I could think with, but never with it alone. Parsons himself persistently claimed to be building directly upon the ideas of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, although as he matured he became more interested in using these other ideas to develop his own. However, neither I nor my German neofunctionalist colleague Richard Munch thought of Parsons' own ideas in this kind of linear, evolutionary way. We viewed them, rather, as providing a pathway back to the classics, and eventually to contemporaries as well. In the end, the most bracing thing about Parsons' ideas was, in fact, their synthetic ambition and scope. Because he aimed at creating a total theory – a method, a philosophy, a macrosociological model, even a new morality – he inspired me and my neofunctionalist colleagues to think broadly and inclusively as well.

This ecumenical ambition has taken in my work both analytical and substantive forms. It is clear, for example, that the chapters in this book aim to incorporate and interrelate various, often antagonistic strands of contemporary and classical thought. In this effort, I employ, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, the "theoretical logic" I developed in my initial books as a criterion for criticizing the one-sided nature of many individualistic and collectivist theories. Yet, especially in light of the highly "analytic" nature of these early works, it is important to emphasize that, from the beginning, I also explicitly employed Parsons' ecumenical ambition in a political and moral way. My early graduate student years in Berkeley coincided with a Leninist turn in the politics of the New Left. Secrecy and political authoritarianism were increasingly displacing the openness and emphasis on participatory democracy that had characterized radical student politics in the sixties. In its conflicts with Maoist and Stalinist splinters and sects, some campus movements associated with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began to advocate revolutionary violence in turn. I looked to Parsons and to Weber in order to find a theory of democratic social change that took violence as an exception rather than a rule. In their writings I found theorizing that recognized and encouraged the capacities for criticism and anti-authoritarian action within democratic societies themselves. This ideologically democratic and pluralist dimension of Parsons' work is in a formal sense independent of the analytical thrust toward theoretical integration and multidimensionality, and was never recognized as an ideology by Parsons himself. Nevertheless, it has an elective

affinity with this analytic orientation that seemed to me very important at the time, and still does today (cf., Holton and Turner 1986).

Such a combined commitment to a critical pluralist ideology and a synthetic analytic theory informed my first published article on Parsons, "Formal and substantive voluntarism in the work of Talcott Parsons: a theoretical and ideological reinterpretation" (Alexander 1978).<sup>15</sup> The spirit of this early piece, which mirrored that of my PhD dissertation at Berkeley, was that with some substantial but not fundamental adjustments Parsons' theoretical model could provide an appropriate scheme for reincorporating classical ideas and producing a new, truly synthetic vision. After I left graduate school in 1976 and assumed my first faculty position at UCLA, however, this line of thinking began to change. I realized that the Parsons I had written about should be understood more as "Parsons," that my reading was interpretive and not just descriptive.

Between 1976 and 1980, as I revised my dissertation, I came face to face with the strong currents of microsociology at UCLA and also with the new movements of culturalism that were emerging in the social sciences at large. I realized that, in order to construct "Parsons," rather than Parsons, there would need to be a larger reconstruction of his thought. As a result, during these years I came to feel increasingly distant from Parsons himself, from many of the established, more senior Parsonians, and from most – although by no means all – of his later students. When I published *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, I devoted the initial volume to developing a discursive model of social science that challenged, among other things, the scientific self-understanding that Parsons had of his own theory.<sup>16</sup> In the fourth volume (Alexander 1983), devoted entirely to Parsonian ideas, I spent fully half of my discussion criticizing Parsons' originating work, and I carefully culled the writings of his "revisionist" students to identify new lines of development from his brilliant but deeply flawed original position.

When some of the initial reviews of *Theoretical Logic* appeared, I realized that I had not been clear enough about the distance that now separated me from the original tradition, a distance that, at the same time, did not imply a critical break. It was in response to being misunderstood that I introduced the term "neofunctionalism" (Alexander 1985). While admitting that "functionalism" in itself communicated relatively little, I intended with this usage to draw a parallel between the kind of revisionism – Colomy and I later called it reconstruction – that had created neo-Marxism.

The neofunctionalist label succeeded in providing for me and my like-minded colleagues a theoretical space. It allowed us to maintain our links to some of Parsons' key ideas while criticizing his theories in fundamental ways. It was precisely the failure publically to register complaints, we suggested, that had inhibited and eventually undermined earlier, more traditionally Parsonian work. Without making claims for comparable importance, we explicitly argued that our theorizing would be as different from Parsons' originating theory, and as similar to it, as the work of Lukács or Gramsci had differed from, and resembled, that of Marx. Just this kind of reconstructionist ambition has informed the very wide range of neofunctionalist writing that Colomy and I describe in chapter 3: historical and comparative discussions of structural and cultural fusion rather than differentiation; feminist analyses of patriarchal socialization rather than rational ego formation; socialist and radical investigations of the exploitation and domination that continues to permeate democratic life.<sup>17</sup>

During this period of the middle and late 1980s I began systematically to revisit theoretical traditions that I had previously understood to be antithetical to the project of synthetic, Parsonian, and even neofunctionalist work. I read much more sympathetically than I once had the writings of microsociological thinkers like Goffman, Homans, and Garfinkel; of conflict theorists like Rex; and of critical social theorists like Habermas and Walzer. While I remained convinced that these alternative traditions were not satisfactory in themselves, I came to believe that "Parsons" would have to be altered as fundamentally as they. In *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II* (1987d), I argued that only a new kind of synthetic model – one which built upon some of Parsons' basic ideas but differed from it both in specific and general ways – could get beyond the problems these challengers had discovered in Parsons' work. The growing sense that there were fundamental and intrinsic difficulties in Parsons' theorizing also informed my contributions to the collective work on the microlink that I helped organize during the same period of time (Alexander et al. 1987), and it also underlay, as I have suggested above, my criticisms of the endemic optimism of Parsons' differentiation theories (Alexander 1988b) and the reductionism that debilitated his "value" theory of culture.

During these years I felt increasingly impatient, not only with Parsons' original ideas, but with "Parsonian" thinking on these and a wide range of other issues.<sup>18</sup> At an international meeting in the late

1980s, a theorist in the older Parsonian generation asked me if I ever had anything positive to say any more about Parsons. It was a question well taken, although by no means entirely fair. I began to realize that, for me, the neofunctionalist reconstruction of Parsons' legacy was not going to be enough, despite my commitment to defending the integrity and brilliance of Parsons' founding theory and despite my admiration and support for the impressive new lines of neofunctionalist work. When I defend "Parsons" from his critics in chapters 3-7, below, my aim is to preserve the integrity of his ideas, but not to preserve them as such. I wish to prevent basic misunderstandings of his thought.<sup>19</sup> If such distortions prevail, they would encourage the mistaken belief that contemporary theorizing can avoid the necessity to systematically work through Parsons' ideas. As Habermas warned in *Theory of Communicative Action*, such a "detour around Parsons" would undermine the possibility of creating truly sophisticated forms of critical theorizing about the contemporary world.

Neofunctionalism has succeeded in helping to establish Parsons as a classical figure. One illustration of this new status is that theorists pick and choose from among Parsons' many, often contradictory, ideas without apologizing for leaving the rest behind. David Lockwood, one of the first and most acute radical critics of Parsons' middle period work, has recently (Lockwood 1992) employed the presuppositional framework of Parsons' first book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), not only to criticize the determinism of neo-Marxist class analysis but to attack the very Durkheimian ideas about solidarity that Parsons himself thought *Structure* had advanced.<sup>20</sup> Eschewing Parsons' developmental history and his cultural and psychological theories alike, Mouzelis (1995) builds upon Parsons' differentiation of analytic from substantive theorizing, and his AGIL model of functional requisites, to advance his own more institutional approach to the micro-macro link.<sup>21</sup> Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992; cf. Alexander 1994), two of the most important contemporary political theorists in the Habermas tradition, draw deeply and originally from Parsons' ideas about social differentiation and the societal community to reconstruct Habermas's ideas about communication and the contemporary public sphere, ideas that Habermas himself believed to have fundamentally displaced Parsons' own. Another illustration of Parsons' new status can be seen in the fact that, while various segments of his writing provide exemplars for contemporary research and theorizing in a range of specialized fields (see, e.g., the contributions to Colomy

1992a and also Robertson and Turner 1991), these writers rarely feel compelled to place their treatment within the broader Parsonian frame, much less to identify themselves with neofunctionalism.

Finally, and most paradoxically, Parsons' work is once again being used, this time in a relatively unpolemical manner that suggests a kind of perverse respect, to exemplify theoretical and empirical paths that contemporary authors wish to argue against. When Holmwood and Stewart (1991), for example, take issue with the synthesizing tendencies I have discussed above, not only with my own work but also with that of Bourdieu, Giddens, Collins, and Habermas, they condemn them not only as "just like" Parsonianism but as having been inspired by it. At the same time, they suggest with apparent nonchalance that a truer reading of Parsons might actually show a way out of the cul-de-sac they believe to have been created by this new synthetic wave. Likewise, when Dimaggio and Powell (1991) construct an intellectual pedigree for the "neo-institutional" approach to organizations, they highlight the distinctiveness of this contemporary tradition by contrasting it with Parsons' and Selznick's original understandings of values and legitimation in institutional life. That it was Parsons himself who first identified institutionalization with the capacity for legitimation, and that Selznick conceived of his own work as a critical response to Parsons' own, are points that Dimaggio and Powell do not feel compelled to make. When Joas (1996) wants to make the case for placing creativity and expressivity in the center of general sociological theory, he legitimates his position by engaging in a polemic against, not only Parsonian, but neofunctionalist thought.

This melange is the fate of those who have achieved a classical position in social science. It indicates a position of historical eminence rather than contemporary domination. Such a status is not, of course, exactly what Parsons and his followers had in mind. Contemporary importance is the ambition of every great and ambitious systematic thinker; in the end, however, historical eminence is all that any thinker in the social sciences can ever attain. Neofunctionalism today is a vital current in contemporary work. As one strong strand in the fabric of the new theoretical movement, there is every reason to expect that creative and important sociological studies will continue to be written in its name. At the same time, there is a dialectic in the movement of creative thought that cannot be ignored. The very success of neofunctionalism points beyond it as well.

## Notes

- 1 For these and other remarks about the context of neofunctionalism, see the first section of chapter 3.
- 2 See, for example, the very wide range of the articles devoted to social differentiation in Alexander and Colomy (1990). The general thrust of Niklas Luhmann's work remains closely informed by Parsons' approach to differentiation (e.g., Luhmann 1990), this despite the movement toward communication and autopoiesis in his later work. One should also mention the series of articles and books on "interpenetration" by Richard Munch (e.g., 1983), a concept explicitly derived from Parsons' particular approach to differentiation.
- 3 See, for example, work by the British and Australian sociologist, Bryan Turner (e.g., 1986, 1992) and the writings of Mayhew (1990, 1997).
- 4 See, for example, Eisenstadt's writings on civilization (e.g., 1988), Robertson's (1990) on globalization, Lipset's (1990) comparison of the USA and Canada.
- 5 See, for example, Chodorow's (1978) discussion of feminism, which was deeply affected by Parsons' early work on sex and gender and his later work on the asymmetries of socialization. Johnson's (1988) contributions to this debate can be read as a radical-feminist reconstruction of Parsons' approach to these topics. See also Parsons' continuing prominence in recent collections of psychoanalytically related sociological writings (e.g., Prager and Rustin 1996).
- 6 In his plenary address to the World Congress XIII of the International Sociological Association, Alain Touraine spoke of "the classical founders of sociology, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Parsons." I mean "classical" in the constructivist sense I elaborated in Alexander (1987c), according to which the name of an intellectual figure comes to function communicatively as a kind of condensed, shorthand symbol for a complex set of ideas. In referring to Parsons in quotation marks, as "Parsons," I mean to refer to this constructed figure rather than to the works of the man himself.
- 7 See the work of writers like Camic (e.g., 1991 and chapter 6, below), Wearne (1989), Buxton (1985), Wenzel (1990), Neilson (1991), Joutsenoja (1996), Sciortino (1993), and Gerhardt (1993) for examples of the serious historiography that is now ongoing about Parsons' relationship to sociology, society, and other disciplines. At the present moment, there may be more historical investigation on Parsons than on any other figure in the history of social science.
- 8 Giddens' shifting position in relationship to the neofunctionalist tradition is revealing in this regard. In the Preface to his systematic statement of structuration theory, Giddens (1984) acknowledged that, while his

theorizing intended to integrate various hitherto separated strands of theoretical work, he had avoided any reference to the revival of functionalist thinking that could be seen in the work of writers such as Luhmann, Munch, and myself. Yet in his prolific writings on "late modernity" in the 1990s, Giddens has based much of his empirical thinking upon the idea of the risk society introduced by Ulrich Beck, whose ideas clearly represent a reformulation of Luhmann's notions about systems differentiation and action as the reduction of uncertainty. He has also incorporated many of the dichotomous ideas about modern and traditional societies associated with Parsonian work on modernization. For a critique of this overreliance on these earlier Parsonian simplicities, see Alexander (1996).

- 9 For a discussion of these historical developments, see Alexander (1987d).
- 10 It will be noted that these theorists are all macro in their orientation, despite the fact that the work of each is distinguished precisely by efforts to bridge the micro-macro link. I am not aware of any contemporary effort to create a general social theory that has a distinctly micro-orientation. It is difficult, moreover, to find the same kind of revisionist and reconstructionist impulses within the microtraditions that emerged in the postwar theory's second phase, despite the fact there have clearly been major changes, for example, in Chicago school theories, changes that Colomy and Brown (1992) have clearly linked to the rise of functionalism. Conversation analysis can certainly be seen as a revision of ethnomethodology, but it is not a revision that points toward a more synthetic, micro-macro aim. Although there has developed a more institutionally related strand of conversation analysis (e.g., Boden and Zimmerman 1990), this strand does not, by and large, make an effort to establish systematic links with cultural or institutional analysis (for a recent exception, see Roth 1995); to the contrary, it continues to insist on maintaining its distinctiveness vis-à-vis them. Contemporary exchange theory, most formidably represented by Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990), is the only microtradition that has participated in some of the synthesizing effects of the third phase. Two reservations are in order here. It has done so by moving toward a macro level of theorizing, and with few exceptions (Elster 1992) it has sought to remain a one-sided theory and not to participate in the kind of "outreach" that so characterizes the dominant general theories of our day. For an extended critique of Coleman's work in this regard, see Alexander (1992c).
- 11 In terms of the last reference, I am suggesting that, although the timing and national context is different, one finds in France a similar movement from revision and reconstruction to theory-creation in the "second generation" of theorizing that has developed recently vis-à-vis the legacies of Bourdieu and Touraine. Boltanski was more pragmatic and constructivist than his teacher in his still Bourdieuan work, *Les cadres* (1982),

but he went beyond reconstruction when he created, with Thevenot, *De la justification* (1991), which forcefully broke with Bourdieu and incorporated discourse theories, pragmatism, and pluralism. The same kind of break, this time vis-à-vis Touraine, can be seen in Dubet's important *Sociologie de l'expérience* (1994).

The national variations of the "new theoretical movement" are obviously highly significant. In France, for example, there never was any Parsonian hegemony. Instead there was a clear domination of Marxian and structuralist thought, despite Gurvitch's institutional influence. In this context, the ideas of Bourdieu, Touraine, Boudon, and Crozier can be seen as creating a "second phase" which was decisively influenced by the second phase of American theorizing as well as by the European traditions which gave some of these American traditions their roots. While none of these French theorists were microsociologists, each represents a much more decisively agency-centered idea. There are elements in Touraine's thought, and particularly in Bourdieu's, which can be seen as representing "third" phase movements to create more synthetic models. The highly original recent efforts of Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) and Dubet, however, represent this synthetic effort in more distinctive, more ecumenical, and I think ultimately more effective ways.

- 12 Collins' (1986) collection of probing historical and comparative essays, entitled *Weberian Sociological Theory*, represents another variation. Rather than identifying this collection in terms of the rubric "conflict theory," the second-phase term he did so much to elaborate, he chose to identify in terms of a classical figure. In other words, Collins' movement into a more synthetic position – his third-phase, micro-macro link – has clearly displaced the terminology of phase two, Collins' (1990) own protests to the contrary.
- 13 This new theoretical freedom in relation to the polarizing dichotomies of postwar debate in sociology has, not surprisingly, corresponded with a much more permeable boundary between sociological theory in a disciplinary sense and social theory more broadly conceived in a post- or non-disciplinary way. To move beyond the second phase of postwar theoretical development is, in fact, to move beyond any necessary relation, not only to Parsons but to his theoretical antagonists, virtually all of whom were theorists in a specifically sociological sense. Whereas reconstructive efforts in the second phase tried to create new syntheses by breaking down boundaries within sociological theory – between Parsons and his antagonists, and among the antagonists themselves – third-phase efforts have tried to reconstruct sociological traditions by breaking down boundaries between sociology and theorizing that has emerged in other disciplines, not only in social science but in literary theory and philosophy. Third-phase efforts to create genuinely new theories in sociology have moved even further in this regard, systematically

incorporating ideas from semiotics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, geography, hermeneutics, pragmatism, symbolic anthropology, rhetoric, game theory, and speech act theory, among others.

While the discussion of sociological theory in this chapter is entirely an internalist one, these developments were certainly deeply affected by movements in the intellectual world more generally and by broader societal change (see, e.g., Alexander 1995a). Thus, third-phase movements toward reconstruction and theory-creation were, and are, stimulated by the emergence of new politically generated theories such as feminism, multiculturalism, civil society, and postcolonialism. Because these other kinds of "new theoretical movements" do not have a disciplinary emphasis *per se* – although they have, in fact, often been influenced by many of the disciplinary developments I have discussed here – they have further contributed to the boundary blurring qualities of contemporary efforts at theory construction and creation in sociology. Joas's *The Creativity of Action* (1996) is the most recent case in point. In his third-phase effort at theory creation, Joas draws his inspiration primarily from American (pragmatic) and German (idealist) philosophy to mount an argument against what he claims to be the normative, antiexpressive biases of Luhmann and Habermas, on the one hand, and Parsons and American neofunctionalists, on the other. For a broader discussion of historical shifts in the relation between sociological theory and social theory more generally, especially theoretical developments in philosophy and literary studies, see Alexander (forthcoming).

- 14 The question about the quite different yet related trajectory of German neofunctionalism is an issue that Colomy (1990a) has taken up explicitly but which deserves to be more widely discussed. The question is made more complex by the apparently growing reluctance of some German neofunctionalist theories to acknowledge the linkages between their theoretical reconstructions and Parsons' earlier ideas. In addition to Luhmann's own persistent efforts to deny his indebtedness to classical thinking as such, see Munch's recent attempts (e.g., 1991, 1993) to distance himself and his German colleagues from "American sociology." I critically respond to the distortions of this claim, and to what I regard as Munch's gratuitously geopolitical emphasis, in Alexander (1995b). See Munch (1995) for a reply to this criticism, and the extended debate in the subsequent issues of *Revue suisse de sociologie*, which reprinted the dialogue that first appeared in *Theory*, the Newsletter of the Research Committee on Sociological Theory of the International Sociological Association. While issues of national ideology are clearly relevant here – as the most recent and most historical contribution to this debate (Hess 1997) attests – in theoretical terms the main differences between Anglo-American and German neofunctionalism relate to the fact that the latter were not compelled to make their way vis-à-vis



- the wide swath of micro and macro critiques of traditional Parsonian ideas. One finds, as a result, much more continuity in German thought with such core Parsonian ideas as evolutionism and systems theory, and much less emphasis than American neofunctionalism on contingency and power, conflict and group interest, and institution building.
- 15 These emphases – analytic and substantive revision, and critical pluralism – have forcefully and productively informed the neofunctionalist writings of Sciulli (1992), who aims explicitly at creating a “non-Marxist critical theory,” and Leon Mayhew (1990, 1997), who has drawn upon Parsons’ theory of the societal community to develop a critical alternative to Habermas’ approach to the public sphere.
  - 16 This discursive position is elaborated and specified in chapter 2.
  - 17 The most systematic and sophisticated collections of neofunctionalist work along these lines are Colomy 1990b and 1992a. Colomy’s introductions to these volumes (1990c, 1992b) and to his companion volume on the functionalist tradition (Colomy 1990b) stand out as the most mature and nuanced presentations of the relation between the functionalist and neofunctionalist traditions. They also represent original “case studies” of the theoretical model of scientific development that Colomy and I discuss in chapter 2, as does Colomy and Brown (1992).
  - 18 The two *festschrift* articles I wrote during these latter years – upon the retirements of Bernard Barber (Alexander 1991b) and S. N. Eisenstadt (Alexander 1992d) – are revealing examples of the shift vis-à-vis Parsons that my thinking was undergoing during this time. When I spoke about Barber and Eisenstadt in my earlier discussions of revisionism (1979 and 1983, pp. 277–8), I had emphasized their continuity with Parsons’ ideas even while they critically responded to its problems. In the later treatments, I emphasized, instead, the distance between their work and his, and I tried to highlight the manner in which their recent thinking had contributed to the solution of problems shared by a wide range of classical and contemporary work.
  - 19 While all of the essays in Part II are written with reference to “Traditions and Competition” – the general model of the cumulation and disaccumulation of scientific knowledge that Colomy and I develop in chapter 2 – they elaborate this argument in very different ways. Chapter 3, “Neofunctionalism Today: Reconstructing a Theoretical Tradition,” represents a kind of broad case study for the model, presenting an analysis and overview of neofunctionalist developments in relation both to Parsons’ founding theory and developments in contemporary theory. By contrast, chapters 4–7 are directed very specifically to debates about Parsons’ early writings. In “Parsons’ *Structure* in American Sociology,” I relate the changing interpretations of *Structure*’s argument to ongoing historical shifts in what was considered the cutting edge of contemporary theoretical debates, and to sociological theory today. Certainly the

- discussions in chapters 5 and 6 are similarly insistent in their efforts to relate *Structure* and other early works to contemporary concerns, but they do so much more in relation to disputes about the historical setting of Parsons’ work and its theoretical intent. The chapters are closely interrelated, since both are responses to arguments – made by Donald L. Levine and Charles Camic (who was his student) – that the one-sided, polemical intent of Parsons’ supposedly synthetic early writings is disturbingly revealed by the theories he failed to incorporate into his synthesis. While trying to address these claims in their own textual and historical terms, the intent of these essays is, once again, decidedly theoretical and contemporary. (See Levine 1989 for his response to chapter 5 and Camic 1996 for his response to chapter 6.) “Structure, Value, Action” (chapter 7) is written in response to the publication of a previously unpublished but extremely interesting early manuscript Parsons devoted to institutions and organizations. The three sections of this chapter – “Historicist Claims,” “Interpretive Disputes,” and “Theory Today” – graphically reflect the different concerns I am trying to balance in the essays throughout Part II.
- 20 See Smith’s (1994) penetrating review of Lockwood’s book, which, in addition to criticizing Lockwood for his failure to understand the complexity of the late Durkheimian frame, notes the striking paradox that Lockwood fails to acknowledge how heavily the very framework he constructs for criticizing normative functionalism is indebted to Parsons’ early work.
  - 21 Mouzelis’ rationale (1995, p. 7) reflects rather precisely the new, pragmatic eclecticism I am suggesting here: “Without being a Parsonian, my own theoretical strategy . . . aims more at restructuring rather than transcending functionalism. . . . Following Habermas, we must relate what is happening in the theoretical sociology today to the Parsonian ‘constitutive’ contribution.”

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## 2

## Traditions and Competition: Preface to a Postpositivist Approach to Knowledge Cumulation

*Co-written with Paul Colomy*

Sociology once aspired to be a cumulative science. Its practitioners once sought to develop and continuously expand verified knowledge about social patterns, social processes, and their underlying causal dynamics. A generation ago, sociologists shared a fervent belief that such cumulation of scientific knowledge required only that scholars "work like hell" testing hypotheses and theories (Cressey, quoted in Laub 1983, Zetterberg 1955). The result of these labor-intensive efforts was a plethora of paradigms, models, concepts, and empirical investigations concerning virtually every imaginable facet of the social world. Like the natural sciences it emulated, sociology seemed to be making indisputable progress (Stinchcombe 1968).

Today, for a large and growing number of sociologists (e.g., S. Turner 1988), this vision of progress seems to have been a mirage. The contrast between the earlier generation's ardent faith in the possibility of scientific growth and the current cohort's profound uncertainty about the ultimate product of their social science labors is stark and dramatic. Skepticism has supplanted faith, and words like malaise, pessimism, disintegration, and disillusionment increasingly color discourse about contemporary sociology (J. Turner 1989a, B. Turner 1989, Collins 1986).

To account for this change is certainly important, and we hope that one by-product of this discussion is the outline of an explanation that adds something to those already offered (e.g., Wiley 1979, 1985, Collins 1986, J. Turner 1989a, S. Turner and J. Turner 1990). This is