Chapter 5

Contradictions in the Societal Community:
The Promise and Disappointment of Parsons's Concept

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Within the strongly empiricist framework of American social science, there is very little acknowledgment of the nonempirical, theoretically driven dimension of scientific change. Yet the major developments in social science do not emerge primarily from simple accumulation of empirical knowledge or from proving previous theories false. They grow from confrontations with other, hegemonic theories. These confrontations, which are often intense and highly emotional, may take the form of critical experiments that crystallize and operationalize more general commitments, but they usually also present themselves as more general, less empirical arguments about theoretical logic itself.

Because of the supra-empirical issues involved, it would be tempting to say that challengers to hegemonic theories are motivated simply by nonscientific concerns. It would be more accurate, however, to suggest that their social-scientific concern—their sincere, often fervent sense that the hegemonic theory is cognitively inadequate—is motivated as much by shifting historical experience among the challengers as by any technical inadequacy in the theories they challenge. Changing generational ideals; different class interests and cultural consciousness; ethnic, national, gender, sexual, and religious identities that depart markedly from the identities of those who created the hegemonic theory—these are all critical elements in creating new sensibilities and a sense of urgency about creating social scientific change. Because of this historical experience, social processes will be seen in new ways.[1]

These new sensibilities find intellectual expression at different places along the scientific continuum (Alexander 1982–83). They can be expressed in conflicts over presuppositions about action and order; in divergent feelings about social conflict and equilibrium; in more utopian or more pessimistic orientations to contemporary politics; and in different conceptions of social science itself, for example, in stronger beliefs in the legitimacy of pure positivism or in the contrary belief that normative commitments should become central to the practice of social science.

Such confrontations occur not only between social-scientific traditions but within them. Below the calm surface of the typical scientific community (Hagstrom 1965) that organizes disciplinary practice (Toulmin 1972), internecine disagreements often create whirlpools of discontent. When they remain below the surface, these tensions are the cause of theoretical revisionism. When contentious intellectual politics breaks through to the surface, the roiling results in broad-scale reconstruction and sometimes, when the stars are in the right place, in new theory creation.[2]

Whether these revisions, reconstructions, and recreations are progressive or regressive—whether they result in the creation of genuinely new knowledge or lead to a simplifying reduction ·

of complexity——is difficult for contemporary participants and observers to assess in an objective way. It is not much easier, in fact, for historians looking back from another time. Did intraparadigmatic revision ever lead to *genuine* reconstruction? Did overt efforts at reconstruction at some point lead to *authentic* theory creation? Even if reconstruction and theory did happen, did they actually lead to better theories, or just to new ones? Participants at the time may feel one way, subsequent observers may have very different judgments, and still later intellectual historians may make wholly different assessments.

Although this cognitive status of social scientific change is difficult to assess, its sociological path is pretty straightforward. In the human sciences, the scientific process proceeds in a tension-filled, nonlinear manner. It was not the objective facts of early industrial society that induced Karl Marx to become a materialist focusing on economic and class dynamics. These social circumstances were filtered through his participation in a series of different theory groups, and this group participation was subject to the kinds of experience shifts I have mentioned. Marx first was a Hegelian (elaboration), and then a left-Hegelian (revision and reconstruction), before he became a Marxist (theory creation). These transitions were induced not only by his generational and political experience, which offered Zeitgeists from liberal reform to revolutionary socialism, but by Marx's simultaneous participation in different national theory groups—the movement from Hegelianism to French socialist to English political economy not only was intellectual but represented actual geographical immigration as well.

Each new theory group in which Marx participated and from which he learned involved fundamental internal tensions, conflicts within which he took active part and from which his theory continued to evolve. In a significant manner, for example, the mature Marx could be called a political economist. In critical respects, his political economy differed in only degrees from Ricardo's, and even less so from the more radical, left-Ricardians of his time. Yet to Marx these degrees of difference seemed to be significant departures, and for those who became his followers they seemed to leverage Marx's theory onto a fundamentally different plane than the earlier, equally brilliant and sometimes even equally radical forms of political economy.[3] Each of the stages in Marx's theoretical development, in other words, involved intraparadigmatic conflict, conflict that eventuated in his stepping outside an established community to establish a new one of his own.

Similarly fraught internal relationships have also been critical in less historically exalted realms of theory creation. Harold Garfinkel was an ambivalent Parsonian (reconstruction) before he moved completely to a new theory group, becoming a sociological follower and interpreter of Alfred Schutz. Within the latter frame, he quickly became dissatisfied as well, moving away from reconstruction to a new theory. This new theory, like Marx's later work, responded to an ambition for separation as much as to fundamental differences of ideas. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology differed from the ideas of Schutz, Wittgenstein, and Husserl in relatively small ways and could have been expressed in terms of revision and reconstruction, but, from the perspective of theory creation these small differences became highly significant. In a related tradition, Erving Goffman seemed at first to be brilliantly revising and reconstructing the symbolic-interactionist tradition. Eventually, it became apparent that he was actually creating a new, dramaturgical theory of his own, or at least that is what many of his interpreters have claimed.

Talcott Parsons gained prominence by confronting and displacing earlier forms of American sociological theory. This conflict between what became known as the earlier and the later, Parsonian school of American sociological theory is well known, as is the conflict between Parsonian functionalism and Marxist and critical theory. What is much less well understood is that Parsons also defined himself antagonistically against classical European sociological theory. While claiming (Parsons 1937) that the early versions of his voluntaristic action theory merely crys-

tallized and synthesized the insights of the paragons of the European tradition, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, Parsons actually revised and reconstructed their ideas. As his intellectual career developed, and despite his continuing formal obeisance to Durkheim and Weber, Parsons not only reconstructed but eventually displaced these classical traditions, creating a new theory of his own. This complex and often ambivalent intellectual development spiraled through processes of critical reinterpretation, incorporation, and secession, the result of which were new phases and forms of Parsonian theory.

What has always been of even less interest to Parsons's interpreters is that his intellectual demarche generated conflicts within his own theory group even as it drew boundaries that challenged others. As Parsons moved from one phase of theory creation to another, the students whom he had earlier trained often became subtle opponents of later versions. From Robert Merton, Kingsley Davis, Robin Williams, and Bernard Barber to Robert Bellah and Neil Smelser and then to Leon Mayhew and Mark Gould, the loyal, intellectually convinced students of one time quietly claimed that the new Parsons had abandoned truth. Parsons was accused of moving backward to the future, and these former students constructed their functionalism not only upon earlier ideas of Parsons but often upon reconstructions of them that combined his theory with elements from those with which he had been in conflict (see Alexander 1979, 1983, 1991, 1992).

My own decade-long effort to create a neofunctionalism challenge to orthodox functionalism (Alexander 1985, 1997a; Alexander and Colomy 1985, 1990) represented a challenge of just such a reconstructionist type. It emerged after an initial phase of my intellectual development that aimed at theoretical elaboration and revision (Alexander 1978, 1979, 1982). After working for some years within the more critical, openly reconstructionist approach to Parsonian theory, I eventually gave up on such efforts entirely. In the last decade, having abandoned neofunctionalism (1997b), I have tried to initiate two new lines of theory creation, one in cultural sociology (Alexander 2003), the other in civil society (for example, Alexander 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

My efforts to theorize a civil sphere evolved in part from a sympathetic but critical engagement with Parsons's thinking about the societal community. In my earlier career, I understood the concept of the societal community as almost entirely satisfactory, interpreting it as among Parsons's most original ideas and building my own empirical projects upon its creative extension and elaboration (Alexander 1980, 1981, 1982). During my later, reconstructonist, phase, I tried still to work with Parsons's concept, though with such qualifications that a whole series of ad hoc theoretical and empirical adjustments had to be made (see, for example, Alexander 1988). In the last decade, however, as my work moved outside of any direct connection with the Parsonian vocabulary, I have left the concept of societal community for civil society, for reasons that I first presented in "After Neofunctionalism: Action, Culture, and Civil Society" (Alexander 1997b).

Certainly one can trace an internalist logic to this shift, but this movement beyond neofunctionalism was also stimulated by external influences. From the late 1980s, I became increasingly interested in the new forms of critical theory developed by Jürgen Habermas and in the debates within democratic political theory more generally. At the same time, I became much more sympathetic to developments in hermeneutic, semiotic, and poststructuralist thinking. Although I was not convinced of the face validity of either of these broad movements as such—the critical or the cultural—each left an indelible mark. The latter encounter pushed me to my theorizing in cultural sociology, the former, to my work on civil society.

Yet there were also nonintellectual elements pushing me to a new sociological theory of civil society. I had formed my generational sensibility during the late 1960s and early 1970s, during which time I had joined so many others in strenuously objecting to how American national

interests led to military interventions despite democratic pressures and other kinds of national op-
portunities. During Reagan's presidency, in the 1980s, I organized and remonstrated against Amer-
ican state policy in South Africa and in Central America. Throughout these formative decades I re-
mained deeply disturbed, as were so many other members of my postwar cohort, by the yawning
gap between the promises of justice that were made by the American political tradition and the
continuing realities of inequality, disorganization, and prejudice. I also become increasingly sensi-
tive to an extra-national event that eventually affected my thinking in an even broader way. Along
with other North Americans and Europeans in the postwar cohort, and most especially those
among this group raised in the Jewish tradition, I felt increasingly compelled to reflect upon the
world-historical implications of the Nazi Holocaust. The effect was that I became further distanced
from the optimism about modernity that was everywhere reflected in Parsons's later work.

DUAL AMBITIONS AND DIVERSE ORIGINS: INTEGRATION AND JUSTICE

The technical and intellectual origins of the societal-community concept reveal the possibilities
for its achievements but also the limits of its understanding. In the most immediate sense, it grew
from Parsons's interest in developing a more sophisticated theory of what he called the inte-
grative (I) subsystem of the AGIL interchange model that he and Smelser developed in the later
1950s (Parsons and Smelser 1956). More generally, the societal community emerged from the
normative, integration-centered solution to the Hobbesian problem of order that Parsons had
much earlier offered in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937).

Underlying these Parsonian theoretical commitments was Durkheim's concern for soli-
darity as a distinctive dimension of social life. The great French thinker believed that solidarity
could exist only when a community's members share the same moral sense, a belief manifest in
the fervor with which Durkheim continually evoked his master concept, society. Yet, as Bellah
noted on the first page of his still relevant introduction to Durkheim's writings (Bellah 1973),
even while Durkheim evoked the term "society" he was never able, or perhaps was never in-
clined, to move beyond vague metaphorics and conceptualize the notion in a clear and system-
atic way.

This is what Parsons aimed to do with the societal-community concept. It would system-
atically articulate for the first time Durkheim's more intuitive interest in solidarity and moral-
ity. What Parsons realized was that this Durkheimian focus would be conceived as an institu-
tional, or functional, dimension of society, one that would be separate but equal with the
economic (the A subsystem), the values-oriented (L), and the political (G). The societal com-
munity would provide a model for talking about the integrative subsystem and the functions it
fulfilled.

Integration was not, however, the only interest that informed Parsons's effort to concep-
tualize the societal community. It is clear that he also had the problem of justice in mind, a prob-
lem that had animated Durkheim's concern with solidarity as well. Durkheim was not a con-
servative, the putative identity for which he was criticized by Lewis A. Coser (1960) and praised
by Robert A. Nisbet (1965). He preferred restitutive to repressive law, and he did not fail to
insert a third book, on the pathological division of labor, to his 1893 thesis, *The Division of Labor
in Society*. Yet book III of this work, and even the discussions of anomie and egoism in *Suicide,*
remained residual categories in Durkheim's systematic theory of modernity. To think socio-
logically about justice and injustice Durkheim provided precious little to go on besides evolu-
tionary clichés and functionalist principles. To find more grist for his concept of the societal
community idea, Parsons turned to Weber and to the democratic socialist tradition.

Weber provides a comparative-historical theory of how societies were able to create rules so universalistic as to discipline and morally regulate the various economic, political, and status groups in society. This interest was most visible in his concept of fraternization, which he develops in his chapter on the city in *Economy and Society* (Weber 1978, 1212–1372). In these pages Weber explains that the origins of universal citizenship are to be found in the ethico-religious conception that all men and women were brothers and sisters, a conception he found institutionalized, not only as morality but as law and regulation, in the city states of the European Renaissance. Guided by this liberal spirit in Weber's work—of which the section on the city was only one example—Parsons wanted his societal-community concept to refer not only to communal solidarity as such but also to solidarity of an abstracted and universalizing—that is, Weberian—type.

In those revealing but neglected passages of *Economy and Society,* Weber had emphasized that universal religious ethics provided a framework that enabled the urban working classes to demand such rights as labor protection and wage increases. It seems appropriate, then, that when Parsons wished to further fill out the democratic dimension of societal community he turned to the social democratic theorizing of T. H. Marshall (1964). Building on Weber, Parsons used Marshall to demonstrate that the primordial solidarity of traditional society could be transformed into the moral bindingness of inclusive citizenship. Looking at the effects of war and economic conflict on the emergence of cross-class solidarity in modern capitalist society, Marshall (1964) had suggested that the hopes of reformist democratic socialism were fulfilled by the welfare state, which could provide an antidote to class stratification without the necessary demolition of market society. Although I will suggest below that Parsons's attitude toward democratic solidarity is much more fraught than Marshall's, there seems little doubt that in his later work Parsons did come to equate the modern societal community with the culture and institutions that sustained Marshall's three-level model of citizenship.

As I define the origins of Parsons's societal community concept, then, it emphasized two distinctive dimensions, integration and inclusion. Parsons himself would probably have rejected the idea that such a duality exists. Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of these two concepts—and the sociological forces to which they refer—is central to the argument that I will make about the ambitions and the difficulties of Parsons's work.

My argument can be simply stated. At its best, Parsons's approach to societal community sought to articulate the tense connection between the claims of social integration and the possibilities of justice. A good society needs to have community solidarity. But this community has to be articulated in a manner what allows its symbols and norms to include every group that is functionally involved in, or organizationally subject to, the values and institutions of the social system.[4] If you don't have solidarity, you do not have the subjective dimension of community. Without such subjective community, you cannot have feelings of mutual obligation, and without feelings of obligation there can be no voluntary assumption of responsibility. Yet feelings of moral solidarity are not enough in and of themselves. If the solidary norms of society are not broad and inclusive, the subjectively powerful community operates in a limited and excluding way. It will not, in other words, be just. You can have cultural hegemony without the normative structure of democracy, integration without justice.

Parsons was not sufficiently attentive to this distinction between integration and solidarity, and his theoretical and historical writings on societal community tended to confuse rather than clarify their relation. Obscuring the potential conflict between hierarchy and horizontal integration, these writings sometimes suggested that the functional need for hierarchy is more important, even in moral terms, than the question of whether the members of the wider society feel solidarity with one another. Without intending to, Parsons often sacrificed justice for solidarity.

At the same time, and to the contrary, in his empirical treatments of the contemporary American societal community Parsons actually tended to idealize rather than to neglect the connection between integration and justice. He seemed to assume, without in any way explaining how, that in the United States an almost perfect blend of social integration and social justice had in fact already been achieved.

I will suggest below that Parsons's evolutionary theory of modernity can be seen as an effort to finesse these two ambiguities in his thought—on the one hand the theoretical relation between justice and integration, and on the other the empirical relation between the United States and the rest of world history. That this resolution was not successful, I will demonstrate, is revealed by the train of semantic stuttering, or hesitations, that mark Parsons's exclamations about America's democratic triumph.

The major thrust of this essay is concerned with examining these problems. After bringing them to light, I will draw what I regard as the logical conclusion: something beyond reconstructing the terms of Parsons's societal community is needed. We need a new theory, one that recognizes, from the beginning, the tension between integration and justice. Separating the ideals of community from their uneven institutionalization, acknowledging that the symbolizations of collective identity depend on negative and not only on positive symbols, such a new theory would begin from a recognition that exclusion and inclusion are dialectically related in real existing societal communities.

FOUNDATIONAL AMBIGUITY ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF ORDER

Ambiguity about the relationship between integration and justice was already ensconced at the center of Parsons's theoretical project in *The Structure of Social Action*. While explicitly an effort at pure analytic theory, aiming only at interpretation and explanation, *The Structure of Social Action* implicitly addressed the issues of democracy, order, and justice raised by the social movements and instabilities of the interwar period. As I have suggested elsewhere (Alexander 1983), there are really two solutions to the problem of order in *The Structure of Social Action,* one democratic and critical, the other nondemocratic and potentially conservative. Both solutions derived from Parsons's critique of theories that emphasized instrumental rationality, which he called rationalistic utilitarianism or radical positivism.

Instrumental presuppositions about the nature of action, Parsons believed, made it impossible to understand how social order could be possible. In his democratic solution to the order problem, Parsons insisted that, insofar as a theory assumed purely instrumental action, it could envision only an aggressive, polarizing, and destructive social conflict. Within this framework, the only way to achieve order was to impose it from the outside, as Thomas Hobbes had believed when he argued the necessity for a coercive, antidemocratic Leviathan. As an alternative Parsons recommended that sociological theory step outside of limiting assumptions about instrumental rationality and recognize the centrality to social action of normative and cultural orientations. In this manner a more democratic solution to order would become possible.

This is my wording, not Parsons's. The way he himself put it was that bringing the normative element back in would allow theory to recognize *voluntary, self*-control. Such voluntaristic control creates an institutional and moral basis for an order that differs from antidemocratic power. In this solution to the problem as stated by Hobbes, Parsons followed John Locke's political response to Hobbes's antidemocratic opposition to the English revolution. Parsons himself does acknowledge Locke, but only in an analytical, not a normative, sense. Avoiding an explicitly normative position, Parsons follows Elie Halévy's (1901–1904/1972) criticism of Lockean political economy for emphasizing the natural as compared to the artificial identity of interests.

He goes beyond Halévy by suggesting that a sociological theory of normativity can translate the artificial identity of interest into more realistic (in other words, more institutional) and more democratic terms.

In Parsons's later work—from *The Essays in Sociological Theory* (1954) to *The Social System* (1951), the AGIL model (Parsons and Smelser 1956), and his evolutionary theory (Parsons 1966, 1973)—one can trace a line of theorizing that builds upon this democratic solution to the order problem. Parsons developed a model of the components of social action and social systems that constitutes a continuum from coercive to self-regulating and free (Parsons 1967 and, more generally, Parsons 1966, 1973). This continuum pushed to one side and implicitly criticized the dehumanizing and antidemocratic practices of instrumental rationality and coercion, and pointed to the alternative of cybernetically higher levels of intentional, culturally guided action and meaningful cooperation. Explicitly, Parsons praised cybernetic control for its efficiency. Relying upon information rather than energy, this normative solution evoked for Parsons the logic of the information revolution that so intrigued thinkers in that postwar period. But Parsons's emphasis on these normative forms of action and order allowed him also to achieve a different, more ideological purpose: to outline a social system based on ethical institutions such as law (Parsons 1977) and citizenship (Parsons 1965/1969), one in which the major media of communication were influence (Parsons 1969a) and value commitments (1969b) rather than power and money. It was this line of thinking that informed the democratic potential of Parsons's societal-community idea.[5]

The tragedy of Parsons's theorizing, in my view, is that from the very beginning of his work this democratic line in his thinking was shadowed by a nondemocratic one. This shadowing began with a different kind of solution to the order problem. In *The Structure of Social Action,* it turns out, Parsons was not only concerned with solving the order problem in a voluntaristic manner. He often suggested that the problem with the Hobbesian Leviathan was not its antidemocratic ethics but its empirical weakness. External force could not really solve the order problem. To be effective in curbing chaos and anomie, social order needed an internal reference: it would have to work on subjectivity. This internal order, or consciousness, can be altered only through norms; unlike material organization, norms can be internalized.

From this minimalist perspective, normative order represents an ideal in and of itself. Norms are the solution to the problem of order, and normative order is an alternative to Hobbes. The problem is that normative order per se is not democratic. It is merely cultural. If cultural control is powerful enough, it can achieve integration, inducing internally generated cooperation, consensus, and agreement. Yet such integration will be only hegemony, in Antonio Gramsci's pejorative sense, if it does not also define democratic alternatives, which means normatively emphasizing pluralism, criticism, and universalism. In other words, the minimalist solution to the order problem has the latent effect of substituting integration for justice, a displacement that has always been central to conservative, antidemocratic thought, the animus of which is revolution and disorder. If stability is all that matters, any normative framework will do. It need not be the sort of normative framework that promotes justice.

To make integration and stability so central is to sacrifice justice. If the basic tenets of justice are equality and recognition (Nancy Fraser [1997]), then the search for justice often leads to conflict, increasing rather than decreasing disorder and immediate social strain. Clearly, democratic forms of normative order can produce intense dissatisfaction and conflict, for there is a gap, or an endemic strain, between the idealized implications of a normative order—what might be termed its transcendent reference (Eisenstadt 1982)—and its particular institutionalization in any historically specific social system. If a society's norms are to inspire self-criticism and reflexivity, and to motivate and legitimate demands for justice, they inspire not only consensus but also social conflict, in order to allow social change. The institutionalization of a normative order may

lead to trust in the ideals that anchor a system, or even in the system as such, but at the very same time it can delegitimate those who hold authoritative positions or dominant role definitions (Barber 1983).

AMBIGUOUS DEFINITIONS OF SOCIETAL COMMUNITY

This presuppositional and ideological ambivalence about order and normativity is inflected in the foundational definitions that Parsons offers for societal community. These ambiguities are not residual to Parsons's definitions, but deeply embedded in them. They reveal themselves in virtually every definition Parsons offers of societal community. In what follows, I offer close readings of two of Parsons's most fundamental discussions of societal community. I differentiate the key statements in each discussion by number and the key propositions within each statement by letter. Parsons's own statements are in italics. My critical glosses follow after the italics.

It was in *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Parsons 1966) that Parsons introduced the concept of the societal community for the first time.

1. [a] *"The core of a society . . . is the patterned normative order through which the life of a population is collectively organized.* [b] *As an order, it contains values and differentiated and particularized norms. . . . As a collectivity, it displays a patterned conception of membership,* [c] *which distinguishes between those individuals who do and do not belong."* (Parsons 1966, 10)

1a. Parsons introduces here the distinction between the core of a society and the population at large. Whether he means to identify the core with a group per se or the center in a more metaphorical sense, it is clear that Parsons equates this core with both the normative order and the collective, non-normative organization of the life of the population. By the life of the population, Parsons seems clearly to refer to the individuals and groups who are administratively or functionally part of the social system but who are outside the core.

1b. Whereas the normative dimension refers to values that in principle can be shared across groups, the organizational, or collective, dimension defines the nature of membership and confines the enforcement of normative meanings to members of a particular group.

1c. Membership defines the distinction between those who are inside and those who are outside the organized collectivity.

2. [a] *Problems involving the "jurisdiction" of the normative system may make impossible an exact coincidence between the status of "coming under" normative obligations and the status of membership,* [b] *because the enforcement of a normative system seems inherently linked to the control (e.g., through the "police function") of sanctions* [c] *exercised by and against the people actually residing within a territory.* (Parsons 1966, 10)

2a. Those who are expected to adhere to the normative order may not actually be considered members in the society to which this normative order is considered to apply.

2b. There is a difference between the symbolic reach of a normative order and its enforcement. Enforcement involves complex organizational sanctions and often coercion, as the nearly universal existence of the policing apparatus suggests. It is the enforcement mechanism that defines effective membership in the sense in which the latter term refers to a social organization.

2c. People may be part of a society's territory, that is, part of the life of the population, but they may be excluded from membership and be the subjects of coercive sanctions. This repression may be authorized by one segment of the population, gen-

erally the core members, against another segment whose members may or may not accept the dominant normative order.

3. [a] *We will call this one entity of the society . . . the societal community. . . . It is constituted both by a normative system of order and by statuses, rights and obligations pertaining to membership* [b] *which may vary for different sub-groups within the community.* [c] *To survive and develop the social community must maintain the integrity of a common cultural orientation, broadly (though not necessarily uniformly or unanimously) shared by its membership, as the basis of its societal identity.* (Parsons 1966, 10)

    3a. The societal community is that part of the normatively defined community that establishes collective membership, though, as we will see below, membership itself actually may be graduated in some manner.

    3b. There are many subgroups in a social system that do not have full membership in the societal community.

    3c. The normative element of the society that defines the identity of the society is the culture shared by its core group members.[6]

These passages point to the tension between Parsons's explicit interest in integration and his implicit concern for justice. While committed to the possibility that the societal community can reconcile or synthesize these concerns, Parsons encounters rough seas when he confronts the fragmentation that characterizes empirical societies. What is so striking about these foundational passages is that, despite his clear stress on the integrating nature of the societal community, Parsons is compelled to acknowledge not only the existence of subgroups and segmentations that fragment actually existing social systems but also the fact that because of these divisions, it is unlikely that the norms of a binding community can be effectively applied to the population that inhabits a given territory. The reason Parsons offers for this alarming fact is that the normative reach of cultural values exists in tension with the realistic possibility of their enforcement. This is the reason, he suggests, why norms do not only create moral integration but also define membership: who's in and who's out. Taken by themselves, the norms that define the culture of the societal community might refer to everybody in the territory, the life of the population. There are subgroups inside this population, however, who may not actually be members of the community. For them, integration is not voluntary but coerced; the norms apply also to them, whether or not they believe in them. When this is the case, cooperation can be secured only by police power, that is, repression, not by influence or normative control.

    This reading of Parsons's initial discussion of societal community suggests that Parsons implicitly acknowledges that it may not be integrative for society in general but only for its core group. This possibility makes manifest that integration and justice are empirically unrelated. In fact, rather than combating exclusion, the societal community might actually produce it. This emphatically is not the way Parsons himself presents the case. He makes it seem as if the integrative impulses would embrace the community, if only it were not for the police function, which somehow has got in the way. If ever there were a residual category, this is it. Policing is not just a functional requisite of society. It develops also in response to the strains between those who are members and those who are not, and the efforts of the former to protect themselves, in terms of both identity and interest, from the latter.

    The same systematic ambiguity about integration and justice affects the definitions for societal community that Parsons offered in his companion volume, *The System of Modern Societies* (1973). The purpose of this later discussion is to bring societal community from ancient into modern societies. Whereas in the first book societal community was considered in terms of the empirical reference of simple, archaic, and seedbed societies, the later book brings the societal

community concept into contact with more recent Western history, from medieval society to the present day. Despite the difference in its empirical material, however, this second treatment repeats and reinforces the problems of the original discussion.

1. [a] *Because we treat the social system as integrative for action systems generally, we must pay special attention to the ways in which it achieves—or fails to achieve—various kinds of levels of internal integration. We will call the integrative subsystem of a society the societal community. Perhaps the most general function of a societal community is to articulate a system of norms with a collective organization that has unity and cohesiveness. . . .* [b] *The collective aspect is the societal community as a single, bounded, collectivity. Social order requires clear and definite integration in the sense, on the one hand, of normative coherence and, on the other hand, of societal "harmony" and "coordination." . . .* [c] *The primary function of this integrative subsystem is to define the obligations of loyalty to the societal collectivity, both for the membership as a whole and for various categories of differentiated status. . . .* [d] *In its hierarchical aspect, the normative ordering of the societal community in terms of memberships comprises its stratification scale, the scale of the accepted . . . prestige of subcollectivities, statuses, and roles and of persons as societal members. It must be coordinated . . . with universal norms governing the status of membership* (Parsons 1973, 11–12).

1a. Societal community is explicitly identified with integration in the sense of stability, unity, and homogeneity.

1b. The scope of normative integration is equated with a bounded and organized collectivity.

1c. This emphasis on loyalty seems to, but may not always, suggest that normative integration is inimical to criticism and that even those who are excluded from the organized collectivity can legitimately be expected to be loyal to the norms of the membership community.

1d. These sentences would appear to suggest that there are degrees of membership even within the societal community itself. Through prestige rankings, normative integration is adapted to the vertical imperative of stratification, allocating the qualities that define the core group to those who are most fully its members. More universal norms of membership might be in conflict with this stratificational dimension of normative order.

2. [a] *A society must constitute a societal community that has an adequate level of integration or solidarity and a distinctive membership status.* [b] *This does not preclude relations of control or symbiosis with population elements only partially integrated into the societal community, such as the Jews in the Diaspora, but there must be a core of fully integrated members.* (Parsons 1973, 17).

2a. The societal community is the core part of the social system that has a distinctive membership and achieves integration and solidarity.

2b. Solidarity and integration of the core group can exist side by side with coercive control exercised by the core group against excluded members. The achievement of solidarity is not mitigated by the existence of this repression, for membership as a category and a fact still exists for some subgroup in the population.

THE MAGICAL SOLUTION TO AMBIGUITY: RETURNING TO THE JEALOUS GOD OF EVOLUTION

Parsons was a liberal, not a conservative (Alexander 2001d). He could not accept in good conscience a societal community that integrates only the minority core group and justifies the ex-

clusion and repression of those who remain outside. Yet this is precisely the situation he has conceptualized in the discussions I have analyzed above. How will he escape this dilemma? One way would be, in effect, to *theorize* the contradictions. How would societal community have to be conceptualized to explain how and why integration in one part of the society can produce exclusion for others? To take this path would involve a critical examination of every actually existing form of societal community. From the perspective of Parsons's personal theoretical development, there would appear to be two problems with this approach. First, it would undermine the upbeat attitude Parsons takes to social integration generally. Second, it would undermine the celebratory quality of his treatment of contemporary American society, an issue to which I will return. If Parsons was to avoid these problems, he would have to find another way of resolving this ambiguity. He locates this path in the approach he had once famously disparaged as the jealous god of social evolution (Parsons 1937, 3).

If Parsons had confronted the ambiguity of societal community head-on, he would have had to enter into the thicket of contradictions that it entails, exploring why and how the societal community becomes embedded in, and disembedded from, the primordial values and powers of a society's core group. Rather than embracing and articulating ambiguity, however, Parsons engages in a kind of splitting. He makes use of evolutionary theory to place the bad, nondemocratic societal community on one side of the evolutionary scale and the good, democratic societal community on the other. In this manner, Parsons makes his societal community discussion linear rather than dialectical: it emphasizes progress and betterment rather than contradictions and negative possibility.

The more democratic the societal community, the more congruence exists between integration, membership, and the population living inside the relevant territory. Parsons puts this possibility into evolutionary terms; it becomes a matter of going from the traditional to the modern period. In the traditional forms of society, Parsons's favorite polemical targets were China and India. In Imperial China, despite the possibilities for integration opened up by social structure and culture, "the Confucian cultural system . . . prevented Imperial China from . . . including the masses of the population in the reorganized system" (Parsons 1966, 77). As for India, the duality which was central to its religious legitimation was never transcended in the direction of the inclusion of the nonprivileged in a more equalized societal community (Parsons 1966 78–79). It is in this manner that the exclusionary dimensions of societal community are confined to earlier forms of society.

Insofar as modernity is achieved, the tension between integration and justice is resolved. Contemporary social structure, Parsons writes (1973, 99) with evident relief, is characterized by a special kind of integration. What has happened is that the subsystems that fused and overlapped in traditional society have undergone a series of "declarations of independence" (1973, 99). Just as the market, the state, and the family have all become independent of one another, so, most important for Parsons's concern, has the societal community. It is no longer connected to core groups or to any particular value, but has become an abstract community of equals, a single societal community with full citizenship for all.

Such differentiated societal community based on transcendental solidarity evidently was not adumbrated but precipitated by what Parsons calls the "evolutionary breakthroughs" of world history. The possibility began with Greek philosophy, which Parsons describes as "the first formal and general conceptualization of the normative framework of human life which clearly abstracted moral obligations" (1966, 106). This first breakthrough was carried further by the European Renaissance and Reformation. These cultural high points contributed singly to the process that Parsons conceptualized as value generalization, the gradual separation of the normative culture that regulated society from the normative values of the core-group values.

More institutional change points in the same direction, involving an ongoing process of structural differentiation. Taken together, value generalization and structural differentiation add up to adaptive upgrading, the optimistic, ameliorating concept that Parsons employs to characterize historical development as such. The wonderful thing about evolutionary theory is that it literally compels integration to take a less primordial, less core-group-centered form.

> Adaptive upgrading . . . *requires* that specialized functional capacities be freed from ascription within more diffuse structural units. . . . Upgrading processes may *require* the inclusion in a status of full membership in the relevant general community system of previously excluded groups which have developed legitimate capacities to "contribute" to the functioning of the system. (1966, 22, emphasis added)

The difficulties of maintaining such a buoyant outlook on the inclusive character of social development in the latter half of one of history's bloodiest centuries are not to be underestimated. One maintenance strategy is to avoid spending too much time on the repressive and violent episodes that have marred the path of modernity. Thus, while Parsons expansively lauds the Reformation and Renaissance, his discussion of the Counter Reformation is terse and condensed (see Alexander 1988). As for the Nazi movement, even with its immense mobilization of power, from the vantage point of two decades Parsons feels safe in concluding that it seems to have been an acute sociopolitical failure and not a source of major future structural patterns (1973, 130). Parsons even finds a way to be optimistic about the uncomfortable link between modernity and war. While acknowledging that certainly the history of modern societal systems has been one of frequent, if not continual, warfare, Parsons observes what he takes to be the reassuring fact that "the *same* system of societies within which the evolutionary process that we have traced has occurred has been subject to a high incident of violence, most conspicuously in war but also internally, including revolutions" (1973, 141, original emphasis).[7] But Parsons's major strategy for maintaining evolutionary optimism is to focus on the United States, which he called the new lead society of contemporary modernity (1973: 86). In the United States, Parsons suggested, "The principle of equality has broken through to a new level of pervasiveness and generality. A societal community as *basically* composed of equals seems to be the 'end of the line' in the long process of undermining the legitimacy of . . . older, more particularistic ascriptive bases of membership" (1973, 118–19, original emphasis).

With the emergence of American society, and its maturation during the civil rights era, the conflict between integration and justice has disappeared. In terms of social evolution, it is the end of the line, or at least the beginning of the end.[8] The jealous god of evolution has been appeased.

Or has it? Despite his declarations that evolution is progressive and that the American societal community is fully evolved, Parsons still cannot entirely avoid certain uncomfortable facts. Although he is not able systematically to discuss or explain the continuing repressiveness and exclusionary qualities of contemporary societies, very much including the United States, neither can he entirely wish them away. What he does instead is to establish a series of lexical exceptions to his semantic rule. The pathologies of modern societal communities are not systematically discussed, but their existence is noted by conjunctive and adverbial qualifiers that denote their absence.

Parsons's evolutionary treatment of contemporary societies is punctuated by a grammar filled with buts, despites, howevers, of courses, and althoughs. It is through this grammatical technique that all the particularistic repressions that restrict actual existing societal communities are magically overcome. Here are some illustrations selected from *The System of Modern Societies* (1973; emphases added):

> "At one extreme, the principal content of the normative order may be considered more or less universal to all men. *However,* this raises acute problems of how far such highly uni-

versalistic norms can be effectively institutionalized in the actual operations of so extensive a community. . . . [Thus,] modern societal communities have generally taken a form based upon nationalism" (20).

"In fully modern societies . . . there can be diversity on each basis, religious, ethnic, and territorial, because the common status of citizenship provides a sufficient foundation for national solidarity. . . . The institutions of citizenship and nationality can *nevertheless* render the societal community vulnerable if the bases of pluralism are exacerbated into sharply structured cleavages. Since the typical modern community unifies a large population over a large territory, for example, its solidarity may be severely strained. . . . This is particularly true where . . . regional cleavages coincided with ethnic and/or religious divisions. Many modern societies have disintegrated before varying combinations of these bases of cleavage" (22).

"*Despite* Ireland, therefore, Britain became relatively united ethnically" (57).

"American territory was *initially* settled mainly by one distinctive group of migrants. . . . The United States was *for a long time* an Anglo-Saxon society, which tolerated and granted legal rights to members of some other ethnic groups *but* did not fully include them" (87–88).

"Negroes are still in the early stages of the inclusion process. . . . It may, *however,* be predicted with considerable confidence that the long-run trend is toward successful inclusion" (89).

"*Although* American society has always been differentiated internally by class, it has never suffered the aftermath of aristocracy and serfdom that persisted so long in Europe" (90).

"The participation of the wealthier and more educated groups . . . has been disproportionate, *but* there has also been a persistent populist strain and relative upward mobility" (90).

"*Although* the franchise was originally restricted, especially by property qualifications, it was extended rapidly, and universal manhood suffrage, *except* for Negroes, was attained relatively early" (91).

"*On the whole,* the structural outline of 'citizenship' in the new societal community is complete, *though not yet* fully institutionalized" (93).

"This movement has thus meant an immense extension of equality of opportunity. . . . At the time, *however,* the educational system is necessarily selective" (95).

"*Although* 'discrimination' by lineage membership, social class, ethnic origin, religion, race, and so on is tenacious (110).

"In our general paradigm of social change, we have stressed the connection between inclusion and adaptive upgrading . . . *but* they are not identical (115).

"There are *of course* important flaws. One surely is war" (115).

"The second mode is focused in the institutionalization of equality of opportunity. . . . This ideal is *of course* very far from full realization" (120).

"There has, *of course,* been a great deal of conflict, 'frontier' primitivism, and lag in some of the older parts of the system relative to the more progressive parts" (140).

"*Certainly* the history of modern societal systems has been one of frequent, if not continual, warfare" (141).

THE IDEOLOGICAL MOMENT AND AMERICAN HUBRIS

In the preceding discussion I have concentrated on the theoretical distortions in Parsons's thinking about societal community. I have demonstrated how the nondemocratic solution to Hobbes marked Parsons's presuppositions, models, and empirical explanations. As I have also suggested, however, there is as well an ideological dimension at play, and I wish to briefly acknowledge it here.

During the Cold War, Parsons wished (rightly in my view) to defend capitalist democracies against Communist dictatorships. For him, this defense entailed (wrongly in my view) reading modernity in an American manner. This complacent liberalism became more pronounced in Parsons's later work, whose polemical intent Parsons just about wears on his sleeve.

Writing during the polarization of the late sixties, Parsons in *The System of Modern Societies* acknowledges (1973, 116) that despite his optimistic declarations about evolution, there is a "general moral malaise in modern society." In the same work he even goes so far as to admit that "current widespread fears of imminent and ultimate nuclear holocaust raise a question that cannot be answered objectively with much confidence" (141). Rather than offering a systematic explanation for such fears and dangers, however, Parsons blames the messenger. Like many antiradical theorists before him (for example, Aron 1957), he accuses intellectuals of overlooking everything that is positive about modern life. "Contrary to the opinion among many intellectuals," he insists, "American society—like most modern societies without dictatorial regimes— has institutionalized a far broader range of freedoms than . . . any previous society" (Parsons 1973, 114). The problem is not in society, but in the intellectuals themselves: "ideological complexes with paranoid themes are very old indeed" (116). Parsons's ambition could not be more clear. It is "to establish sufficient doubt of the validity of such views" (142).

UNDERSTANDING THE DIALECTICS OF MODERNITY

At one point Parsons acknowledges that, while "in our general paradigm of social change we have stressed the connection between inclusion and adaptive upgrading . . . *they are not identical*" (1973, 115, emphasis added). This is an extraordinary admission. That they are identical was the point of Parsons's evolutionary theory. He did not try to explain, except in an ad hoc, residual way, what in fact might constitute the gap between them. What might such an attempt at theoretical explanation entail?

To reconstruct a more satisfactory theory of the societal community, one would have to look closely at how processes of anti-universalism, which have often led to destruction rather than progress, were (and are) built into the processes and definitions of modernity itself. In evolutionary terms, how has the modern societal community remained fused with market, state, and cultural communities, including those defined by class, race, sex, ethnicity, religion, and gender? Does this fusion allow hierarchy and fragmentation to be legitimated in modern societal communities, to the extent that even democratic societies are repressive and exclusionary in significant ways? If the gap between membership categories and populations-in-territory remains wide, is it not the case that core-group integration often proceeds at the expense of justice for stigmatized groups who are outside the centers of modern societies?[9]

If the endemic and dangerous persistence of particularism and exclusion is theorized, then one must dispense with the utopian idea that value consensus will produce social integration, much less justice. The "index of incomplete institutionalization," Parsons (1973, 103) once suggested, "is the insistence by individuals and groups on recognition of their particular and partial 'rights' by means of techniques ranging from simple assertion through organized protest to obstruction." Par-

sons implies here that protest for rights expansion reflects the failure of modernity to somehow become complete. It would be immensely preferable to acknowledge that rights-oriented conflict actually is evidence of the fullness of modernity, not of its failure but of its success. As Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (Alexander 1992) suggests in his very different theory of institutionalization, the tension between ideal and reality can never be eliminated. The gulf initiated during the axial age will not be overcome, and duality will always mark the modern and postmodern condition.[10]

By understanding the contradictions in Parsons's concept of societal community, one can envision what a more critical, dynamic, and systematic theory might be. For there is, indeed, a sphere of solidarity that needs to be differentiated from the other spheres if justice is to be achieved. In terms of its idealizing aspirations, such a civil sphere envisions a system of culture and institutions that rests upon demanding norms of mutual respect, equality, and autonomy. The degree to which such a differentiated community actually exists can be empirically investigated and theoretically conceived. This investigation would show that the very culture of rationality and universalism creates a shadow discourse of repression and that the continual fragmentation of actually existing civil spheres justifies core-group domination and subjugation—even as it provides the culture and institutions to create justice in turn. It would expose new kinds of boundary relations, between the civil and uncivil spheres, and develop a theory, not only of facilitating inputs, but of destructive intrusions that trigger social movements for civil repair (Alexander 2000).

This new approach to civic solidarity might transform and extend Weber's idea of fraternization. It might make more specific and institutionally grounded Durkheim's concept of society. It might provide a more critical sociological companion for democratic theory.

NOTES

1. In the 1960s, a radical postwar generation issued fundamental challenges to dominant theories. In the three decades since, dominant theories have been challenged by feminist theorists, newly self-conscious race intellectuals, and by those who have spoken on behalf of gay and homosexual rights. These are only the most obvious examples of the experiential basis for intellectual change. For a broader discussion of the social sources of intellectual challenge in the American case, see Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman (1994).

2. Alexander and Colomy (1992) have earlier conceptualized scientific change in terms of a continuum stretching from least challenging to most challenging: elaboration and specification, revision, reconstruction, and new theory creation. "When the stars are right" refers to many ideal and material factors of social organization that are independent of the cognitive status of theory creation.

3. Marx often said that his mature work differed from Ricardo's only in the technical sense in which he had been able to conceptualize surplus value, which was dependent upon what he considered the critical insight that workers sold their labor power, not their labor per se, to the capitalists for a wage.

4. Habermas (1996) tries to resolve this problem in two related but unsatisfactory ways. First, he classifies all substantive values as belonging, not to the sphere of Kantian morality, but to the ethical sphere. Yet, no matter what the philosophical justification for such bifurcation, it is meaningless in sociological terms, since both "morality" (in the rationalistic, Kantian sense) and "ethics" must be institutionalized in the social system. Second, Habermas tries to avoid the tension between normative integration and justice by claiming that the normative order regulating the public sphere is, or at least must be, exclusively procedural in nature. This would not be a good idea even if it were possible, but it is not.

5. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, following Habermas's stress on the importance of Parsons's work but showing more sympathy and insight about the sociological power of Parsonian sociology for democratic social theory, make (1995) a sophisticated and intriguing connection between civil-society theory and Parsons's theory of influence. They argue that a democratic civil society, one dominated by procedurally oriented discourse ethics, grows out of the preconditions that allow influence to replace money and power as the central medium of exchange. This discussion points to the same democratic line in Parsons that I reference here and makes some of the same fundamental criticisms I will level below.

The force of Cohen and Arato's argument is to some degree vitiated, however, by their insistence that the democratically appropriate form of influence can only be "the achievement of solidarity through discussion and deliberation of individuals who choose to participate in an association" (Cohen and Arato 1995, 131), a position they contrast with a conception of value-based, diffused influence. This distinction, from a sociological perspective, is untenable, since every free and rational discussion must be based upon the presuppositions of a language game, or set of value commitments, that is itself, at the time of argument, not open to question. That is one of the fundamental points in Parsons's analytical model of the generalized media of exchange. Although I no longer find this work satisfactory in many ways, this point remains entirely valid, pointing to the empirical-sociological as compared to the normative-philosophical point of view. Leon Mayhew's *The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence* (1997) presents a more institutionally oriented critique of societal-community theory from a Habermasian perspective.

6. This critical reading differs rather fundamentally from Uta Gerhardt's, which in other respects contributes a helpful scholarly reconstruction of the history of the societal-community concept:

> Parsons wrote the slim volume *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966). In the second chapter, the core of the book, he used the notion of societal community for the first time. He ventures [to answer the question of] what were the integrative forces that held a society together to the effect that social relations would not disintegrate in the face of institutional differentiation in the course of the history of modernization. His answer contained the concept of societal community, explained tentatively as that forum for moral commitment which rendered more or less diverse populations identifiable members united in their identification with their cultural and/or national common heritage. (Gerhardt 2001, 180)

7. Parsons hardly wrote about Stalinism at all, perhaps a legacy of his earlier, 1930s "progressivism" and his continuing antagonism, during the postwar period, to the rigidly anti-communist foreign policy of American conservatives. When Parsons wrote about the USSR in the postwar period, he tended to emphasize its modernizing tendencies and its capacities for evolutionary progress, implicitly opposing the more radical-right elements of America's Cold War foreign policy.

8. I am aware that one can locate references in Parsons's writing that illuminate future developmental challenges for social evolution, such as his references to the affective revolution in his later work. In Giuseppe Sciortino's chapter of the current volume (chapter 6), he builds from such discussions to present an alternative to the critically oriented reading of societal-community theory I offer here, transforming such ad hoc references into a coherent and pluralistic theory of contemporary solidarity. This is an impressive interpretive achievement. Still, in my view Sciortino gives the original Parsonian project too much sympathy, downplaying the conservative and quiescent, nondemocratic lines I am pointing to here. Sciortino engages in both revision and reconstruction, in my terms, his goal being to present what a "complete theory" of the societal community would look like. Because I see more fundamental contradictions in Parsons's theory, I do not find the conceptual resources within the theory to complete it. So I believe the only viable option is theory creation.

The inadequacies that Sciortino himself finds in the societal-community theory point beyond it. He criticizes Parsons for his difficulty in articulating the "relational nexus between the normative definitions of membership . . . and the actual pattern of social solidarities and groupings existing in any given society," his "lack of a structural theory of solidary groups," and his focus in modern society on differentiation rather than on segmentary groups—"segmental categories are often mentioned but seldom placed at the center of inquiry." Despite this disagreement, Sciortino's hermeneutical reinterpretation of Parsons which aims at finding the resources to explain such phenomena is impressive and useful.

9. In a different and earlier Parsonian language, this is exactly the point that Mayhew (1968) quietly made in perhaps the most acute criticism ever penned by a card-carrying Parsonian. Mayhew argued against seeing ascription as traditional and achievement as modern. He demonstrated how achievement carries strong imperatives that sustain ascription, such that ascription is functionally efficient.

10. This is similar to the argument Cohen and Arato (1995, 125 n.6) make in their "immanent criticism" of Parsons's societal-community theory, with which in other respects I have disagreed. They suggest that it "both elaborates the normative achievements of modernity and represents these as if they were already institutionalized." The job of critical theory, by contrast, is to "throw much doubt on the claims of successful institutionalization."

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