

# THE LOGIC OF CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

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## TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE LOGIC OF CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

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Perhaps one of the most significant turns in critical social theory has been the collapse of the structural and functionalist understanding of the institutions that make up modern social life. The general thesis that guided social theory and much of the social sciences—“critical” and otherwise—held that there existed a background logic for the systems of action and behavior that social actors performed. There was a systemic logic to the patterns of behavior that bound individuals at the most internal, personal level to the system of norms and expectations that existed outside of them. The vision of society that it promulgated was one that was in contrast to conflict theories which emphasized differential interests, asymmetrical relations of power, and the real possibility of concrete social change and transformation.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, an emphasis on the equilibrium of systems glossed over these differentials and struggles over power, influence, and resources. But jettisoning the systemic, structural-functionalist understanding of social life—particularly as brought forth by Talcott Parsons—prevents us from seeing the deep mechanisms of personality adaptation, subject-formation, diagnosis of social and personal pathologies, and a critical appreciation for the strong centripetal power of modern—particularly capitalist—institutional arrangements that predominate in modern society. In this essay, I would like to reconsider the contributions of Parsons with respect to this complex of problems, and show his deep relevance for reviving a more robust critical social theory.

At the heart of much of classical Critical Theory and Western Marxism was the thesis that saw modern industrial civilization as promoting a consensus of value-orientations that allowed for a passive acceptance of capitalist economic institutions and patterns of culture that legitimated them.<sup>2</sup> Basic

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<sup>1</sup> This argument was most forcefully made by Ralf Dahrendorf in the late 1950s. See his “Out of Utopia: Towards a Re-Oriented of Sociological Analysis.” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 64 (1958): 115-127. For a more extended discussion, see his *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 157ff.

<sup>2</sup> See T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 120-167; and Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964)

to this ideas in critical social theory was that modern society rested on a certain passivity of ethical agency that allowed the interests of capitalist social relations and production to embed themselves in their subjective drives and interests. As Marcuse was brought to remark: "The political needs of society become individual needs and aspirations, their satisfaction promotes business and the commonweal, and the whole appears to be the very embodiment of reason."<sup>3</sup> At the heart of this theory was a structural-functional reasoning that gave critical theory a coherence and organized it as a way of approaching all aspects of modern society. Parsons, when seen in this light, despite his anti-politics and the conservatism that surrounded his theory at the time, can be reconstructed to provide a return to a structural-functional analysis that can return critical theory to its central purpose in understanding the cognitive and cathetic fusing of individual thought and action to the structural imperatives of capitalist society.

The move toward subjectivity in the late Frankfurt School critical theory is partially to blame for this move away from structural-functionalism. Implicit in Marx was a theory of capitalist society that relied on the integrative power of social, political, and cultural institutions. For Marx, this was seen as largely as a theory of false consciousness, something that was removable through the penetration of an alternative ideology informed by a critical, structural analysis of the motion of capital and its effect on social power. Central to the merging of theory and practice was a labor movement informed by the scientific analysis of capitalism and its dynamics. This emphasis on the base-superstructure thesis was at the heart of critical theory from the inception. By incorporating Weber and Freud, Fromm, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse were able to move toward a theory of modernity that laid bare the ways that modern society was able to shape pathological forms of subjectivity. But they were unable to lay out the precise mechanisms of this approach; they relied, oftentimes, too heavily on Freudian concepts that tied them to themes of psychoanalysis (such as the thesis of the "culture industry") and, in the later work of Adorno and Horkheimer in particular, to a move toward a radical subjectivity as a means to resist the all-encompassing forces of reification<sup>4</sup>. Even Fromm, whose social-psychological analyses of capitalist society did not make such a move, only offers a sketch of the precise ways the social order is able to pervert the personality system of the individual. But in Parsons, in

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<sup>3</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, ix

<sup>4</sup> This is particularly pronounced in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973) as well as his parallel argument in *Aesthetic Theory*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

my view, we see a systemic approach to the ways social structures are able to come to secure compliance to its imperatives and produce new forms of social stability. His approach shows that this is not a matter of ideology nor a manipulation of some “libidinal economy.” Quite to the contrary, the personality system of the individual is shaped and formed at an early age toward cognitive and emotive forms of obedience, foreshadowing—in a more satisfying way—the later approaches of thinkers such as Bourdieu on the same question.<sup>5</sup> Parsons shows us how a structural-functionalist approach is able to flesh out the precise ways personality systems are adapted to the functional norms of modern institutions and create what we can call a “culture of passive compliance” to the imperatives of capital and its pathological effects, or what Weber referred to as “the domestication of the dominated.”

Contemporary social and political theory have decidedly moved away from this paradigm of thought, and the collapse of structural-functional thinking has had deleterious effects on progressive thought in general and critical theory in particular. I want to argue for a modified return to some of the central theoretical insights of Parsons’ work to help us think in a deeper, more incisive way about the modern social systems that ensconce individuals and their agency. I want to urge critical theorists to take up once again the concern of confronting the connection between capital as a specific institution that patterns power relations and systems of domination, subordination, and control and the ways that this affects and shapes modern forms of subjectivity—in particular with reference to the systems of power in everyday life. Parsons in particular is a powerful thinker because of the extent to which he was able to lay the foundations for a comprehensive understanding of the most elementary ways that individuals are socialized to orient themselves—in thought, feeling, and action—within the context of certain normative constraints and to attain a value-consensus around the

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* also relies, in my view, on a problematic thesis of the ways individuals orient themselves to contexts of social power. His idea of the “practical sense” (*le sens pratique*) one possesses is seen as inscribed in the body itself, as “bodily hexis.” As such, it moves from being a feature of the *personality* of the individual, to a *corporeal* predisposition: “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.” *The Logic of Practice*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 69-70. Bourdieu approaches a more convincing theory of power and domination in his analysis of “symbolic power” and its relation to language. Here, however, there is a move toward a theory of ideology detached from concrete institutional logics even as it lacks an analysis of the process of ego-formation in social agents. See *Language and Symbolic Power*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 163-170. As I will show, Parsons’ basic theoretical schema offers a more detailed analysis of the social and personality variables that secure obedience and forms of modern domination.

goals of the prevailing social order. Taking this analysis further, we can say that capital as a system of organizing society, can be seen as increasingly able to secure such a value consensus.

His ideas about social integration and normative mechanisms of social control are also more advanced and, I contend, more far reaching in terms of their consequences than ideas such as Foucault's "governmentality" that are in fashion today.<sup>6</sup> The main reason for this is that these theories abstract us from the specific nodal points of power: that the capitalist system itself is able to shape and construct social relations in ways that, over time, have become able to secure it from the kind of threats posed from mass mobilizations and cohesive social movements. If I am right and Parsons' theories can be used to breathe life into the functionalist powers of modern institutions, then the kind of resistance needed to dislodge it must be rethought. Despite Parsons' own distance from so-called "materialist" explanations in social science of his own time (particularly Marxist analysis) I believe we can see in his work a powerful corrective to the excesses of subjectivity and the cult of praxis in leftist social and political thought as well as the illusory emphasis on discourse theory and deliberation as a means to outflank the traditional impulse of critical theory.

If critical social and political theory are once again to grasp the most central mechanisms of social control, domination, and subordination, then it requires a turn away from the current of thought that has been prevalent on the left that has placed excessive emphasis on agency and praxis at the expense of structure and function. It must also confront the mainstream understanding of the nature of domination in the modern context which employs the language of a sterile liberalism or a revived neo-republicanism<sup>7</sup>—the radical

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<sup>6</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*. (Paris: Gallimard & Seuil, 2004). For the neo-Foucauldian reworking of this idea, see Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. (London: Sage Publications, 1999), as well as Barbara Cruikshank, "Revolutions Within: Self-Government and Self-Esteem," in Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (eds.) *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For an application of this to critical theory, see Eric Boehme, "Embodiment as Resistance: Evaluating Stephen Bronner's Contributions to Critical Theory," in Michael J. Thompson (ed.) *Rational Radicalism and Political Theory: Essays in Honor of Stephen Eric Bronner*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> The neo-republican theory of "freedom as non-domination" has become an influential new thread in political theory. See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Quentin Skinner, "Freedom as the Absence of Domination," in C. Laborde and J. Maynor (eds.) *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 83-101; John Maynor, *Republicanism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 108-140; and Frank Lovett, *A General Theory of Domination and Justice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). I critique this theory of domination in my forthcoming paper "Reconstructing Republican Freedom: A Critique of the Neo-Republican Concept of Freedom as Non-Domination." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (forthcoming, 2012).

vision must be reworked through a more accurate understanding of the deeply rooted forms of social power that shape our lives. Focus needs to be placed on the ways that value-orientations of individuals are shaped and patterned by the structural domain of society, specifically by the economic organization of the social order. This is crucial because the sphere of values—defined here as the ways the personality relates to the objective world epistemologically as well as affectively—is decisive in the ways that individuals and groups grasp and make sense of their world. The problem of reification is therefore, on this view, a problem of value-orientation.

The current intellectual fetish around issues such as identity politics, neo-anarchism, and so on all need to be seen in this context. These are expressions of a distorted, false way of thinking about the world; they are ways of conceptualizing social relations, the nature of human subjectivity, and the nature of society itself that take us away from the objective realities that shape our lives and impede broader forms of resistance from taking shape. In Parsons' work, I believe we find an entrée back into a more concrete, more objective, more powerful way of critically engaging not only the sclerotic effects modern capitalism has on political resistance, consciousness, and social solidarity, but also a critical bulwark against the irrationalist tendencies in contemporary critical theory. If we return to the interdisciplinary orientation of Frankfurt School theorists, we see that this was the central conviction that ran through the best of their work: that modern (capitalist) social systems have the effect of adapting the personality of agents to the systemic patterns of society itself. I think the insights of Parsons can help us rethink a more general paradigm for understanding the deep consequences of the ways that forms of authority and domination permeate and serve as the central mechanism of modern societies.

Primary among these is the ways that we are able to conceive of one the more pervasive problems of modern political and cultural life: the increased stabilization of modern liberal-capitalist societies. Perhaps the most important problem critical theory faces in contemporary society is to explain the ways in which mass democracies are able to tolerate the pressures of capitalist crises as well as the deleterious effects of contemporary hyper-capitalism. The extremes of economic inequality, the degradation of social solidarity, as well as the flattening of cultural and personal life, are all accepted and legitimated by modern society. Although social and personal pathologies persist and deepen in modern culture, correct knowledge of the mechanisms of social control as well as psychological and cultural processes authority-legitimation remains abstract. What Parsons is able to open up for us in a

crucial way are the mechanisms that have led to a decline in the frictive, conflict-oriented nature of civil society and democratic politics. The erosion of the effectiveness of large-scale social movements, the solidity of capitalist economic systems of material reproduction, the ideological firmness of the legitimacy of this system, and the general integration and cohesiveness of these various social systems—polity, economy, culture/society—speak to real problems for critical theorists. I will seek to outline a basic logic for critical social theory: a logic that allows us to see the tendency of modern societies to become more stable in the face of increasingly extractive economic and administrative social structures as well as the norms that govern them.

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The decisive attack on Parsons did not come from conservatives, but from critical theory itself. Habermas elaborated his critique of Parsons in the second volume of his *Theory of Communicative Action* in the early 1980s arguing that Parsons' theory of society collapsed because of the particular way he fused the action-theoretic and systems-theoretic aspects of his theory of society.<sup>8</sup> More to the point, Habermas saw that Parsons did not leave adequate space for a theory of action to be independent of the theory of systems. "In my view," writes Habermas, "Parsons underestimated the capacity and degree of self-sufficiency of action-theoretical concepts and strategies; as a consequence, in constructing his theory of society he joined the system and action models too soon."<sup>9</sup> Of course, from the point of view of the state of critical theory in the 1970s, this was an accurate and well-timed criticism. What Habermas correctly pointed to was the lack of space for the processes that unleash rational forms of political critique and resistance as well as a more satisfying conception of democratic validity for ethical postulates. A rational, democratic transformation of society would need to come about through the communicative activities of individuals oriented toward mutual consensus. From this point of view, Parsons was seen as imprisoning the subject and its ability to act (action-theoretic frame) within the systems of social norms and institutional logics (systems-theoretic frame). In place of the supposed rigid theorization of social action elaborated by Parsons where individuals

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<sup>8</sup> Habermas outlines a preliminary criticism of Parsons in *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 78-88.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 204.

were oriented toward egocentric motivations for success, Habermas puts forth a theory of social interaction and socialization based on the paradigm of reaching mutual understanding.<sup>10</sup> From this point of view, Habermas consigns Parsons—as well as Hegel, Marx, and Lukács—to an outdated paradigm that he wants to upend through a theory of consensus built on the theory of communication. In place of a theory of society which sees relations between the structural differentiation of complex social systems on the one hand and cultural forms of meaning on the other as reflected in each other, Habermas contends that there is a communicative mechanism which lends the notion of public reason a decisive importance. As a result, the paradigm of structural-functionalist modes of socialization and social integration are seen as essentially vestigial.<sup>11</sup>

We should examine this critique by Habermas with scrutiny. To be sure, the move from subject-centered reason to that of an intersubjective paradigm oriented toward mutual understanding was a crucial move toward revealing and deepening the discursive processes that could lead toward a more flexible, more enlightened conception of civil society. For Habermas, the crucial insight was that modern societies were distinguished from traditional (or “conventional”) ones by their decoupling of a system of reified norms from forms of action oriented toward mutual understanding. The more societies freed themselves from institutions that impeded communication, the more they would force themselves to call into question the validity of the social practices and values that gave traditional societies their cohesion. On this view, the paradigm of communicative action made the structural-functional argument essentially obsolete: now we would be able to conceive of social integration as separate from forms of system integration—social actors were now free to invent, through a rational form of consensus based on the paradigm of communicative action, new forms of politics and culture; they would be freed from the problem of being fused to the structural imperatives of institutional logics. What was prior, according to Habermas, was the communicative paradigm rather than the background conditions that shaped subjectivity and consciousness itself since individuals were mainly constituted through linguistically mediated forms of interaction.

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<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 271-286.

<sup>11</sup> This is also a position adopted by Axel Honneth in his reworking of the tradition of critical theory. See his essay “Critical Theory” in *The Fragmented World of the Social*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 61-91.

Habermas effected a shift in social theory from a paradigm that emphasized objective forms of life that “preform the encounters of individuals with objective nature, normative reality, and their own subjective nature”<sup>12</sup> to one that emphasizes discursive practices as a means toward enlightened political action and critique. In a simultaneous critique of Lukács and Parsons, Habermas argued that the assumption that there exist “background conditions” that shape the subjectivity of subjects misses the crucial insight of the linguistification of consciousness and the pragmatist insight of the fluid construction of world-views through communication.<sup>13</sup> This has led to a wholesale rejection of the kind of structural-functionalism that was necessary to understand the macro-structure of modernity. Habermas’ critique led to a fuller turn—one begun in the late work of Adorno and Horkheimer—away from a concern with the organizational structures and imperatives of the social order and its effects on subjectivity and consciousness. At the heart of critical theory is the teasing out of those mechanisms in modern society that erode critical reflection and encourage the democratization of social institutions. I think that Parsons can help revive this concern by showing the mechanisms of socialization which are fused to structural imperatives of social systems—mechanisms of socialization which in fact refute the thesis of Habermas and others that insist upon the pragmatist understanding of democratic will-formation. In contrast to this view, I want to suggest that we take seriously once again the ways that social systems are able to distort critical consciousness and serve to adapt the personality structure of modern man to the structural imperatives of the social order. Understanding the durability of authority relations, the erosion of critical thought, and the movement toward an increasingly integrated, conservative social and political culture (in the sense of forms of thought and action that bolster or reinforce the status quo) can be more effectively achieved, in my view, by considering the ways that individuals are socialized (i.e., adapted) into modern social systems.

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<sup>12</sup> Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, 187. Also see the discussion by David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 148-171.

<sup>13</sup> For an important critique of Habermas on this point, see Byron Rienstra and Derek Hook, “Weakening Habermas: The Undoing of Communicative Rationality.” *Politikon*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2006): 313-339.

At the core of Parsons' understanding of modernity are several mechanisms which allow for the peculiar way modern societies are organized and maintain their cohesion. Parsons did not orient his research toward a critical stance on modern social institutions. He was interested in developing a grand theory of social action. But I think that Parsons is able to bring together certain strands of non-Marxian social theory which can serve as a sophisticated and deeply explanatory theory to compliment a critical political economy. Parsons points to the ways in which modern social systems are capable of further fusing individual agents to social systems by forcing certain elements of the individual personality to conform to the norms of different institutional and systemic contexts. The central problematic of disclosing the systemic nature of social relations was to show how social actors are absorbed into the systemic processes of the domain of social institutions. Parsons argues that individuals choose to perform certain actions, orient themselves to certain goals, and cathectically shape their personal emphasis and emotional orientation toward certain social objects and values, but that these choices, although entered into willingly, nevertheless are constituted by the integrating power of the various social systems which we inhabit. Authority and social power is about the inculcation of certain values and symbols that individuals absorb in order for the systemic operations of modern institutions to operate. Overcoming the highly individualistic, atomistic conception of man—one that was being developed by the epistemological turn in neo-classical economics with thinkers such as Frank Knight, Carl Menger and others—was central for Parsons to defend a sociological conception of man as opposed to the growing hegemony of *homo oeconomicus*.<sup>14</sup> In strong contradistinction to the epistemological trend that was forming neo-classical economics in the early half of the twentieth century, Parsons sought to reconcile the problem of human voluntarism with the reality of a highly institutionalized modern society. This means that he is able to give us insight into the ways in which individuals participate and legitimate institutions and social practices that can be seen as running against their interests, even that are pathological in nature.

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<sup>14</sup> See Parsons' early essay of 1935, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," in Charles Camic (ed.) *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 231-258.

To achieve this, Parsons takes Weber's conception of subjective value-orientation to a new level. He argues that social values are the means by which we form our roles and pattern our actions, expectations, and emotional investment in certain types of action.<sup>15</sup> Values are *socially grounded* in three distinct, but interrelated spheres of direction: existential beliefs about the world, motivational needs, and relations to others. These three spheres build off the other; they are concentrically organized in that the motivational needs become a function of existential beliefs just as our relations to others is a function of our motivational needs. Individual agents are therefore brought into the fundamental problem of justifying, at the deepest subjective level, the values that orient their social action: "The existential propositions which men invoke to answer what Max Weber called the 'problems of meaning,' the more or less ultimate answers to questions on *why* they should live the way they do and influence others to do so, may thus be called the field of the *justification* of values."<sup>16</sup> Individual agents therefore absorb certain values which then form certain needs within the individual. It is not that we possess pre-given social needs, rather, we intake a set of values which themselves form needs. This Parsons discusses in terms of a "gratification-deprivation balance" within a given personality.<sup>17</sup> We orient our cognition, cathexis, and evaluative capacities toward the gratification of approval, of recognition, of respect, and so on and away from the lack of these things or the disapproval of others, their rejection of us. This means that the personality structure of the individual is shaped and formed by a need to comply with the basic rules and expectations of the value system shared by others.<sup>18</sup>

This plays a crucial role for Parsons because it is here we begin to see the ways in which social systems are able to adapt individuals to their functional

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<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of the relation of values and value-orientations and their relation to social action in Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (eds.) *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 159-189.

<sup>16</sup> Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*. (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1960), 174-175.

<sup>17</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*. (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 7.

<sup>18</sup> André Gorz points to this insight as a critical move against Habermas in the sense that economic firms create patterns of rationality that are external to as well as prior to the choices and socialization of individuals. This raises the functionalist critique that individuals are fitted into the processes of social institutions, eroding crucial forms of spontaneous agency. Gorz refers to this as the "sphere of heteronomy" where the division of labor begins to have a regulatory effect upon social actors in that they begin to follow certain pre-programmed scripts of action and behavior: "economic rationality has conferred increasing importance upon sub-systems functioning by programmed hetero-regulation: that is to say, upon administrative and industrial machineries in which individuals are induced to *function* in a complementary manner, like the parts of a machine, towards ends that are often unknown to them and *different from those offered to them as personal goals*." *Critique of Economic Reason*. (London: Verso, 1989), 35.

logics. For Parsons, institutions are “generalized patterns of norms which define categories of prescribed, permitted and prohibited behavior in social relationships, for people in interaction with each other as members of their society and its various subsystems and groups.”<sup>19</sup> Institutions therefore constitute the patterns of behavior of individuals in the sense that they articulate “legitimated directionality of behavior.”<sup>20</sup> Institutions have a power to differentiate roles and individuals are expected, for the institution to be successful, to inculcate the required value-orientations requisite for those roles. This leads Parsons to consider the various mechanisms that exist for the formation of the internal value system of individuals. What is crucial for a theoretical understanding of modern institutions is to bring Weber’s insight about the nature of modern authority into the domain of the constitution of the personality, of subjectivity itself. The functionalist insight here is different from its previous incarnations, such as Evans-Pritchard and Herbert Spencer. In contrast to these older views of functionalism, Parsons sees modernity as a series of subsystems the complexity of which cannot function without properly inculcating individuals with the appropriate orientations of action needed for those subsystems to function, something Parsons refers to as “functional prerequisites.”<sup>21</sup> The functionalism is defined by the structuralism—the binding force of modern societies consist in the adaptation of the personality structure of individuals to the functional imperatives of its institutions.

It should be remembered that Weber’s theory of modern authority or domination (*Herrschaft*) was premised on the idea that individuals were constituent agents in a relationship of domination (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*). This was achieved by orienting the value systems of individuals toward the imperatives of institutional logics. Weber pointed to the category of “routinization” (*Veralltäglicung*) as the means by which the individual entered into a relation of obedience (*Gehorsam*) to the systems of power in modern bureaucratic societies.<sup>22</sup> But Weber was unable to flesh out the mechanisms

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<sup>19</sup> Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See *The Social System*, 26-36.

<sup>22</sup> See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1972), 122-148. This is also developed by Herbert Marcuse, see his “A Study on Authority,” in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Marcuse points out that “The recognition of authority as a basic force of social praxis attacks the very roots of human freedom: it means (in a different sense in each case) the surrender of autonomy (of thought, will, action), the tying of the subject’s reason and will to pre-establish contents, in such a way that these contents do not form the ‘material’ to be changed by the will of the individual but are taken over as they stand as the obligatory norms for his reason and will.” 51.

of routinization that shaped the personality structure of individuals, instead relying on the hermeneutical device of *verstehen* to show how different subjective world-views and actions translated into broader patterns of social coordination. Missing from this analysis were the actual processes which were responsible for this adaptation of individuals to systemic imperatives. For Parsons, the answer was to be found in the mechanisms of social control, or the ways in which social systems—the economy, the polity, and so on—are able to fuse the personality structure of individuals to systemic imperatives. This is achieved through “socialization,” of the ways in which the personality is shaped to think (cognition), feel (cathexis), and value (evaluation) are ordered according to the needs of the particular institutional goals that one inhabits or functions within. We are formed within a culture which mediates our subjective elements, which shapes our personalities:

The keynote of the conceptualization we have chosen is that cultural elements of patterned order which mediate and regulate communication and other aspects of the mutuality of orientations in interaction processes. There is, we have insisted, always a normative aspect in the relation of culture to the motivational components of action; the culture provides standards of selective orientation and ordering.<sup>23</sup>

We are therefore concerned with the ways in which culture—which I will argue later needs to be seen as framed by the economic logic of capitalism—is able to mediate subjective value orientations through the process of socialization. In many ways, the mechanisms of socialization are an elaboration and deepening of this insight of Weber, but he also adds the dimension of social psychology to give his account of the personality structure of individuals more depth and complexity. Like Weber, Parsons sees that the mechanisms of socialization constitute the means by which any system is able to function since it requires individuals to subordinate themselves to the logic of the different institutions we inhabit. From Durkheim, he takes the notion of a commonly shared set of values which a plurality of participants share to a level where the mechanism of legitimation and consciousness formation can be opened up. In this sense, we leave the domain of traditional forms of “coercion” (*Macht*, for Weber) and enter into a more pernicious form of social control: one based upon the inculcation of value-orientations within the personality structure of the individual himself.

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<sup>23</sup> Parsons, *The Social System*, 327; also see Clyde Kluckhohn, “Values and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action: An Exploration in Definition and Classification.” In Parsons and Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, 388-433.

Now, the issue of values and value-orientations is essential. Although Parsons seeks to utilize the concept of the personality structure of the individual as a crucial layer of the process of societal legitimation, he does not wholly take over the concept in a purely Freudian sense.<sup>24</sup> Rather, he sees the personality as constructed, in a sense, by a series of social practices and social relations which have the effect of orienting individuals toward certain goals. The relation between ego and alter(s) is a crucial one because it takes Weber's concept of "routinization" to a next level. The relation between them is important because it is the means by which value-orientations are absorbed by ego. "It implies that ego and alter have established a reciprocal role relationship in which value-patterns are shared. Alter is a *model* and this is a *learning process*, because ego did not at the beginning of it possess the values in question."<sup>25</sup> The realm of learning solves a series of moral problems for the individual in the sense that they no longer pose a problem for legitimate action. The process of learning through routinization therefore creates a constellation of value-orientations where "moral problems are treated by the actor as solved."<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the individual no longer sees certain actions as morally problematic and accepts them as legitimate forms of action, cognition, feeling, and evaluation. Values therefore become central because they are able to harmonize our conceptual frames with the institutional and societal context of our world. These subjective value-orientations find their objective referents not only in the operations of institutions, but in the symbolic sphere of culture itself. This symbolic system is not enough, however, to hold all legitimacy in check. After all, the systems and subsystems within which we live and work must be able, in some way, to function and deliver on the goals toward which we have been socialized.<sup>27</sup> Beyond this, the individual is willing to tolerate other pathologies that may result from that systemic context.

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<sup>24</sup> In this sense, I see Parsons' use of psychology and theories of the personality as distinct from Frankfurt School critical theory, in particular of Marcuse, Adorno, certain aspects of Fromm's work, as well as that of Wilhelm Reich.

<sup>25</sup> Parsons, *The Social System*, 211.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons and Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, 166.

<sup>27</sup> The early Habermas is more Parsonian on this point: "[O]nly when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crises. Disturbances of system integration endanger continued existence only to the extent that social integration is at stake, that is, when the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social systems." *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 3. Hence, like Parsons, we can see that crisis is not associated with the conditions of social systems, but the threats they pose for the ego upon their disintegration.

Although in traditional societies authority worked by inculcating norms to which all members were expected to conform, Parsons is aware that modern societies must deal with the problem of subjective action and value orientation. Weber was also aware of this, as was Durkheim. But Parsons is able to give this theory a new depth by isolating elements of sociation which shape and form subjective value-orientations. This leads him to a theory of action which is deeply socialized, but one which is also able to show us the ways that domination and authority require complex symbolic, cultural, as well as psychological forms of social control. By seeing social subsystems and institutions as tending toward either integration or disintegration, the stability of social systems depends on the extent to which individuals possess value-orientation which direct them toward role expectations which keep individual agents in check—in effect shaping them in accordance with the norms of other social actors within the given institution. For Parsons, this was the act of *identification*, which is a situation wherein the ego takes over, or internalizes, the values of the given model of action required of the institution or subsystem.<sup>28</sup> We do not merely imitate what we see around us, we come to *identify* with the values and norms we see others valuing and performing. This constitutes the essence of socialization or a “socializing effect” which is “conceived as the integration of ego into a role complementary to that of alter(s) in such a way that the common values are internalized in the ego’s personality, and their respective behaviors come to constitute a complementary role-expectation-sanction system.”<sup>29</sup> For Parsons, alter is a crucial variable in this process since ego is shaped by the role expectation-sanction system that the alter exhibits—teachers, family members, co-workers, and so on, all constitute alters responsible for the ego’s formation of role expectations in different subsystem contexts. The expectation-sanction system is crucial because of it is the base of the process of socialization: “the socialization effect will be conceived as the integration of ego into a role

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<sup>28</sup> Parsons takes, but deepens, the concept of “identification” from Freud who defines it as “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person.” But it is further elaborated in tripartite form: “First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of introjection of the object into the ego; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct.” *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. (New York: Norton, [1921] 1959), 46, 50. Parsons takes this as a basic mechanism of the way a personality is shaped, but adds to this the layer of values: the individual comes to value in a conscious way the feelings of attachment he experiences in following certain roles, the rules of which are shared by others. His participation in that norm-governed network of rules requires some degree of attachment in terms of cognition, cathexis, and evaluation for them to become legitimate. Without this conscious legitimation through value-orientation, the operation and existence of complex social systems would be impossible.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons, *The Social System*, 211.

complementary to that of alter(s) in such a way that the common values are internalized in ego's personality."<sup>30</sup>

The act of identification is strong because it has the effect of anchoring the subjective orientations of the individual by molding both the *cognitive* and *cathetic* layers of the personality structure in turn forming the basis for the *evaluative* structure of the individual. For Parsons, this means that each agent is formed by the structural constraints placed on intersubjective ego-formation. Mechanisms of social control work by implanting within the individual a counteracting force against tendencies to deviate from the role-expectations that he occupies in any given subsystem. These role-expectations are properly internalized by the ego through what Parsons terms a "relational possession" where ego forms a reciprocal attachment to alter. The ego then "acquires a 'stake' in the security of his possession, in the maintenance of alter's favorable attitudes, his receptiveness-responsiveness, his love, his approval or his esteem, and a need to avoid their withdrawal and above all their conversion into hostile or derogatory attitudes."<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the individual is turned into his own self-regulating actor, one who helps to re-equilibrate the subsystem itself, but based on the intersubjective relations of norm-governed behavior. As opposed to traditional societies, modern societies need to invest these "mechanisms of value-acquisition" with remarkable power (i.e., reinforcement-extinction processes) because the norms are defined by the functional imperatives of the system rather than oriented toward mechanical forms of solidarity or based upon metaphysical world-views. These "mechanisms of the personality" are distinct from mechanisms of the social system itself. Although distinct, they are complimentary since without the required self-regulation on the part of the individual, the systemic imperatives of modern institutions cannot succeed. Parsons sees the systemic imperatives of social institutions as possible only through its capacity to successfully moderate forms of social control, i.e., by managing forms of deviance. This becomes a crucial element in his theory of modern social systems since the imperatives of social systems require mechanisms that adapt members of society to its imperatives.

It seems clear that this shows us the extent to which systems of power require not only legitimation, but a deep-seated mechanism of ego-formation based on systemic *and* intersubjective grounds. Parsons' insight into the nature of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

the ego's value acquisition and internalization is that it operates within the domain of intersubjective conformity so that we learn to identify ourselves with certain roles and functions based on the ways other act and expect us to act. But also, and perhaps more importantly, his theory is that this process molds the emotional investment of the ego to seek to ingratiate alter(s); it is a process that can lead to the justification of systemic logics not based on a critical-rational faculty, but on the socialized cathexis of the personality toward goals shared by others within the specific subsystem. Indeed, one's very existential self is, to a great extent, functionally dependent on following norm-governed roles and maintaining the systemic nexus within which that personality has been formed.<sup>32</sup> The stability, or "equilibrium," of any system is dependent on such a process. This thesis implies that the system itself becomes a background condition for processes of ego-formation. The durability of power systems are therefore structured by these processes of formation, not only at the level of cognition, but of the value-orientations and emotional investment of individuals. If we are to escape the dual positions of radical subjectivity as well as see through the limitations of discourse-based theories of democratic will-formation, then we must see how Parsons' understanding of such a socialization process permeates and in some ways corrupts the prerequisites for those two positions. Here is where, as I see it, critical theory's enduring legacy lies: in the ways that capitalist institutions and imperatives have the power to reform and neutralize the background conditions necessary for forms of political resistance, in particular, for the higher-order forms of communicative action that would allow Habermas' pragmatic critique to be effective.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This phenomenon has been elaborated by a different and unrelated body of theoretical literature in political psychology known as "systems justification theory." See John T. Jost, Mahzarin R. Banaji, and Brian Nosek, "A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo." *Political Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2004): 881-919. Also see Tom R. Tyler's interesting paper, "The Psychology of Legitimacy: A Relational Perspective on Voluntary Deference to Authorities." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1997): 323-345; as well as Tom R. Tyler and E. Allen Lind, "A Relational Model of Authority in Groups," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 25 (1992): 115-191. For a different theoretical approach to the phenomenon of hierarchy justification, see Jim Sidanius, Felicia Pratto, Colette van Laar, and Shana Levin, "Social Dominance Theory: Its Agenda and Method." *Political Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2004): 845-880. Also see Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61-126.

<sup>33</sup> To a certain degree, Habermas admits this by pointing to the possibility of "systematically distorted communication," which prevents social actors from reaching mutual understanding in social contexts. "Such communication pathologies can be conceived as the result of a confusion between actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success. In situations of concealed strategic action, at least one of the parties behaves with an orientation to success, but leaves the others to believe that all the presuppositions of communicative action are satisfied." *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 332

This can be more firmly grasped when we see how Parsons theorizes the forms of deviance that accompany the various mechanisms of socialization since he conceives the domain of conformity-deviance as “inherent in and central to the whole conception of social action and hence of social systems.”<sup>34</sup> Since social systems seek equilibrium, or a condition wherein they are able to function so as to maximize their goals, forms of deviance emerge from a problem not of the system itself but from a lack of motivation on the part of actors within the system to uphold the roles necessary for systemic equilibrium.<sup>35</sup> Now, since roles are constituted intersubjectively, deviance means a withdrawal of cognitive and emotional resources from the goals of the system or the role(s) the individual is required to perform, what Parsons refers to as “pattern responsibility.” This equilibrium condition can only hold within institutional logics when the intersubjective relations of different individuals possess a “complementarity of expectations” among the different roles individuals fulfill. But when any given ego or personality structure has not properly absorbed the “expectations of the interaction system,” there is a deviance in his social actions: one either gives too much of his personal resources to the role demanded (compulsive-conformity) or too little to them (alienative-withdrawal or rebellion).

What is insightful in this analysis is that we can begin to see the ways in which modernity is capable of disabling effective critical attitudes and, as a result, robust forms of political engagement with the system. Parsons points to the idea that power in modern societies is largely symbolic in the sense that the obedience of individuals to others within a hierarchy can only be secured once their personality has been adapted to systemic needs through a process of value-acquisition and internalization. Now, this means that deviance—in the sense of withdrawal or rebellion—is distinct from critical reflection since the latter requires a systemic understanding of the objective conditions of the

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<sup>34</sup> Parsons, *The Social System*, 249.

<sup>35</sup> It should be pointed out that this is considered one of the more vulnerable areas of critique for functionalist theory. As Wolfgang Streeck has recently argued, “research shows that functionalist constructions that view capitalist systems as seeking and remaining in static equilibrium are wishful thinking at best. In an institutional perspective, capitalist actors are most realistically stylized as endowed with an ethos of unruliness that makes them routinely subvert extant social order in rational-egoistic pursuit of economic gain.” *Re-Forming Capitalism: Institutional Change in the German Political Economy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4-5. But this misses the point that I am developing here. It may be true that firms and their directories seek constant movement and disequilibrium in order to make gains in the broader market. But this says nothing about the actual conditions *interior to firms and everyday working life*. The reality speaks against Streeck’s criticism, in this regard: in order to guarantee certain kinds of productivity and maximize certain kinds of extractive power over workers, an equilibrium of social control is not only necessary, it becomes a broader cultural imperative as well.

system as well as a moral-evaluative perspective to open it up to critique. Mere deviance alone is little more than a pathology of the common value system. The power of social systems therefore lies in their respective abilities to adapt individuals to the roles necessary for the functioning of institutions. Deviance under such systemic contexts becomes less politically or socially disruptive the more that these systems are able to secure actions and motivations toward compliance.<sup>36</sup> When deviance does occur, in other words, it becomes less effective in terms of its ability to disrupt the functional imperatives of the different subsystems. The main reason for this is that the cognitive ability to grasp the mechanisms of domination which cause the feelings of alienation and existential anxiety are disabled—not only does it become difficult to grasp conceptually the nature of the modern social order, it becomes difficult to accept the pathological nature of it as well.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, we can begin to see an explanation for the decreasing effectiveness and lessening attraction for counter-movements against major systemic imperatives such as the economy, the state, and the culture of obedience to, or at least compliance with, authority.

The problem of deviance in modern societies, then, is quite different from what it had been before the permeation of modern forms of ego-formation which accompanied and made complex industrial society possible. Whereas in previous historical periods, social systems—the economy, religion, the polity, and so on—would collapse as the values that underpinned them eroded, modernity creates pockets of deviance which do not threaten the systemic imperatives of the various subsystems; rather, these pockets of deviance become pathologies of society and the personality. A cult begins to grow around certain forms of popular culture, certain deviant forms of sexuality, identity politics begins to take on an increasingly cultural, rather than really political, stance, and an emphasis emerges on symbolic ways of withdrawing from the nexus of values that stress conformity, what Paul Piccone once termed “artificial negativity.”<sup>38</sup> Concerns with identity and postmodern

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<sup>36</sup> In this sense, we see the rise of the culture industry and its ability to absorb certain cultural elements of deviance and transplant them back into the symbolic culture of the system as non-deviant objects of mediation. One can think of the commodification of certain kinds of music, film, and other forms of expression which have become integrated into the broader culture of compliance.

<sup>37</sup> This thesis is developed by Erich Fromm in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1973). Fromm argues in this regard: “if others threaten him with ideas that question his own frame of orientation, he will react to these ideas as to a vital threat. He will say that the new ideas are inherently ‘immoral,’ ‘uncivilized,’ ‘crazy,’ or whatever else he can think of to express his repugnance, but this antagonism is in fact aroused because ‘he’ feels threatened.” 223.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Piccone, “Artificial Negativity as a Bureaucratic Tool?” in Gary Ulmen (ed.) *Confronting the Crisis: Writings of Paul Piccone*. (New York: Telos Press, 2008). This problem of the conflation of radical culture with radical politics is usefully probed by Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

ideas about emancipation become saturated with a “physical and erotic spontaneity against the ascetic routines of the modern working world.”<sup>39</sup> Parsons’ emphasis on value consensus should be read in a more critical light: it means that for systems of such complexity—such as the modern economy, of the legal system, of the modern state, and so on—to be able to function with efficiency, a set of common values must be secured among social actors which reduce the friction of institutional logics. These values which underpin the legitimate domination of modern social systems means, from a political vantage point, that the notion of a “double-movement” of the type theorized by Karl Polanyi becomes ever more difficult to emerge. Instead, those periods in the past—say the tumultuous nineteenth century and early-twentieth as well—which saw upheaval, social unrest, dissent, and revolutionary activity were possible in a period before such forms of value consensus were able to thoroughly permeate the culture, cognition, personality structure, and practices of social actors. Today, we witness the erosion of rational-radical politics as it competes with a left increasingly defined by passive, alienative withdrawal on the one hand and a mainstream of society that is saturated by conformity-dominance on the other.

But all of this leads us back to the very criticisms that led critical social theory away from this paradigm: namely, the lack of insight into ways in which we can counter the systemic imperatives of capitalist society. Surely, it is argued, we are not that over-socialized; we possess some degree of agency; institutions are not that inflexible, and there are moments of crisis and opportunities for social change and transformation. Indeed, the latter phase of Parsons’ work after 1970, with his turn toward a theory of social cybernetics, became more vulnerable to these criticisms.<sup>40</sup> But on the whole, the period of his work from 1950 through the late 1960s shows us a theory of modernity which we must consider in order for a more robust critical theory of society to be sustained. Parsons is emphatic that the connection between social systems and the personality is one of strong conformism, and this has led many to reject—prematurely, I believe—his ideas as inflexible, unable to formulate a theory of resistance. What Parsons is able to formulate is an interesting theory

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*. (London: Verso, 1987), 176. Relevant to this discussion is his analysis of Lyotard and Foucault, 134-207.

<sup>40</sup> Of course, this move in Parsons was echoed in Germany by the evolution of Niklas Luhmann’s more comprehensive systems theory. See his *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). For a more critical exploration of Luhmann’s ideas in the face of modern trends in critical theory, see the debate between Luhmann and Habermas, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialetechnologie. Was leistet die Systemforschung?* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971).

of the nature of deviance and the ways that our rejection of norm-governed patterns of action and belief leave us in a curious position of irrelevance.

By isolating this mechanism of socialization and the processes of social control, Parsons is able to point in a very distinct way to the mechanisms of authority relations, in a more concrete way than Weber was able to in his writings on authority and domination. In this sense, what we can call the “constitution problem” emerges as the central domain of Parsons’ contribution to critical social theory. This can be understood as the ways in which personality structure is shaped and formed by objective, social conditions and institutions. In the more advanced ideas of critical theory, such as Lukács’ idea of reification or Adorno’s concept of the subject-object relation, we see a concern with the ways the objective world is perceived and framed by social subjects. They emphasized a Hegelian conception of consciousness and categories of cognition rather than the internal value orientations of individual actors and their relation to the whole personality structure of the individual.<sup>41</sup> But Parsons, taking a view derived from Weber and Durkheim, adds to this way of thinking by emphasizing the internalized value-orientations of individuals as the self-regulating mechanism of the social order; he is able to point to the ways that these value-orientations are tied to broader, objective, institutional logics. For this reason, it seems to me Parsons’ particular brand of structural-functional analysis ought to be revived, but in a more critical way. Integrating this way of thinking into the broader fabric of critical theory is therefore what I would like to consider next.

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In spite of himself, Parsons shows us a way back to a series of crucial categories needed for the coherence of critical social theory. I would like to point to three different but interrelated concepts which we can see as crucial for anchoring a critical social theory/social science. First, there is an overcoming of the thin, utilitarian conception of social actors and their deep embedding within social systems. This does not mean, as with Luhmann, that agency is eclipsed

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<sup>41</sup> Lukács saw this in terms of “reification” (*Verdinglichung*) where certain objective attributes of the social world are rendered invisible to consciousness. This is the etymological implication of the word *Ding* which in Kantian and neo-Kantian language was meant to denote the subject’s inability to perceive any object as an object of knowledge, or *Objekt*. See his *History and Class Consciousness*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). Adorno, by contrast, emphasizes the need to hold on to a critical space between subject and object so that a genuine agency can be protected from the reifying tendencies of modern social systems. See his “Subject and Object,” in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. (New York: Continuum Press, 1994), 497-512.

by social context, it means that modernity places a particularly strong weight on the formation of individual agency. Second, there is the importance of seeing the personality as in tension with his social environment. What was missing in critical theory from the beginning was a cohesive theoretical paradigm that could explain the symmetry between the institutional power dynamics of capitalist institutional logics and the internalized obedience to these systems on the part of the subject. By blending Marx, Freud, and Weber, critical theory attempted to weld together these different theoretical paradigms in order to explain the crucial problem of the erosion of critical thought and its ability to confront the colonization of society, culture, and consciousness by the capitalist logic of valorization. Although Parsons cannot be seen as attempting this from his own theoretical vantage point, there is little question that he was able to achieve a highly integrated and cohesive theoretical understanding of this precise problem. In this sense, the relevance of Parsons needs to be seen in the extent to which the mechanisms he points to are able to help us come to grips with the further expansion and deepening of these forms of thought that persist in modern society.

The reaction in recent decades against all forms of structural analysis has taken social and political theory far from a position of conceptualizing and confronting forms of power relations that are deeply held as legitimate in modern society. To this extent, I think that Parsons can be read in such a way as to make him the opposite of how he was seen and interpreted for the past fifty years: namely, as a theorist of legitimate domination, of the ways that power relations can be embedded not only within the general culture of everyday life, but also within the personality structure of individuals. More specifically, I think that this reading of Parsons can be fused to the theories of Marx in such a way as to make more compelling and satisfying the theory of base and superstructure, or the hypothesis so central to critical theory that the structural and systemic imperatives of capitalism the absorption of authority necessary for the continued accumulation process.<sup>42</sup> If Parsons

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<sup>42</sup> Note David Harvey's interesting, but theoretically thin, analysis of the phenomenon of the "culture of consent" in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). "[T]he neoliberal revolution usually attributed to Thatcher and Reagan after 1979 had to be accomplished by democratic means. For a shift of this magnitude to occur required the prior construction of political consent across a sufficiently large spectrum of the population to win elections. What Gramsci calls 'common sense' (defined as 'the sense held in common') typically grounds consent. Common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the 'good sense' that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day." 39. The question remains what mechanism exists at the social psychological level to create this kind of consent building. I think the turn to Gramsci remains a seductive but theoretically weak move and suggest that we consider an analysis derived from Parsons instead.

was concerned with forming a theory of society around the norm-governed dynamics of systems equilibria, he was unable to locate a general source, a hegemonic point of origin for these normative systems. Parsons himself saw his reading of social theory as anti-Marxist in the sense that it focused on the problems of values and social integration. His anti-Marxism was reinforced by his reliance on Weber and Durkheim as the central pillars of classical sociological theory.<sup>43</sup> A straight reading of Parsons—one that has, wrongly I think, forced critical theorists to throw out baby with bathwater—leads us to the conclusion that he simply sees norm-governed systems as through a positivist lens, as ahistorical and part of the nature of man and society. But we can easily take his general apparatus and dislocate it from such assumptions and methodological dilemmas and provide a theory which can bring back the structural-functionalist understanding of modernity and its deep consequences on the nature of the personality structure. Although Parsons took an acritical attitude toward the strength of value-consensus in modern societies, there is no reason for us to take a similar view. Instead, I will suggest here that we need to blend his analysis with Marxian understanding of capitalist production process in order to provide critical theory with a firmer theoretical ground.

We can begin by seeing that whereas classical Marxism was content with an unsophisticated mechanistic understanding of the relationship between individual and group psychology on the one hand and the economic structure of society on the other, the view adopted here is that the mechanisms of socialization, in particular of value acquisition, is one of the central mechanisms of base-superstructure analysis. It constitutes the means by which individual consciousness and personality structure is constituted by

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<sup>43</sup> Parsons put forward this view in his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action*. (New York: The Free Press, [1937] 1968). In his preface to the 1968 edition of the work, Parsons legitimated his exclusion of Marx from his reconstruction of modern social theory "Durkheim and Weber seem to me to be the *main* founders of *modern* sociological theory. Both were in explicit revolt against the traditions of both economic individualism and socialism—Weber in the latter context perhaps above all, because of the spectre of total bureaucratic 'rationalization.' In a sense, Tocqueville and Marx provided the wing positions relative to this central core. Marx was the apostle of transcending the limitations of the partial 'capitalistic' version of rationalization through its completion in socialism... Tocqueville, on the other hand, represented the anxious nostalgia of the *Ancien Regime* and the fear that the losses entailed in its passing could never be replaced. Indeed, to a preeminent degree, Tocqueville was the apologist of a fully aristocratic society." *The Structure of Social Action*, vol. 1, xiii. Parsons was unable to appreciate the sociological contributions of Marx, specifically for a theory of social systems, instead choosing to see him in simplistic political terms. But it is clear, in my view, that the concerns of more sophisticated Marxist theorists such as Lukács as well as the Frankfurt School took seriously the need to theorize the problem of ways that individuals were shaped by the logics of capitalist social systems, something Parsons was simply unwilling to recognize or accept.

the socio-economic environment under conditions of capitalist modernity. This was addressed, albeit abstractly at times, by the main thinkers of the tradition of Western Marxism—such as Lukács, Korsch, and Gramsci—but was then lost as Frankfurt School critical theory succumbed to subjectivist notions of resistance, especially in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* as well as the cynical indictment of modern rationalism.<sup>44</sup> Before this turn, when considering the problem of the prevalence of domination in modern society, Horkheimer pre-figures many of the ideas more fully elaborated by Parsons, although from a very different political and evaluative position: "Here it is in order to discuss briefly some of the aspects of this mechanism, e.g., the situation of man in a culture of self-preservation for its own sake; the internalization of domination by the development of the abstract subject, the ego; the dialectical reversal of the principle of domination by which man makes himself a tool of that same nature which he subjugates; the repressed mimetic impulse, as a destructive force exploited by the most radical systems of social domination."<sup>45</sup> For Horkheimer, these processes were based in the expansion of instrumental rationality and a preponderance of human domination over nature which was then extended to a domination of man by man.<sup>46</sup> Instead of following Horkheimer's path, we should see that the forms of domination in society have a structural basis and that its roots lie not in a particular epistemological trajectory, but in the structural imperatives of capitalism itself and these *structural* imperatives—e.g., the accumulation of capital—require a *functionalist* form of social integration wherein modern forms of legitimate authority are grounded not only in the norms of formal institutions but also become embedded in the symbolic elements of the broader culture. This is Parsons' understanding of culture in modern societies as "patterned or ordered systems of symbols

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<sup>44</sup> Adherents of structural analysis in Frankfurt School critical theory were Friedrich Pollock, the early work of Max Horkheimer, as well as Franz Neumann, and Otto Kirchheimer. All saw, from their respective points of view and areas of expertise, that the structural nature of modern capitalism was the point of origin for other institutions of society, culture, and the psychology of the individual. For a discussion, see Moishe Postone, "Critique, State, and Economy," in Fred Rush (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 165-193. Postone correctly points to an understanding of "structuralism" that was shared by these theorists: "'structure' here refers to historically specific congealed forms of practice, forms that are constituted by and constitutive of practice," 192. In this sense, I believe we can perceive a fruitful point of intersection for Parsons' understanding of practice as the process of value-internalization and ego-formation on the one hand and the substantive analysis of the structural nature of institutional action under capitalism provided by Marxist theory on the other.

<sup>45</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*. (New York: Continuum Books, [1947] 1974), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, this was also the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well. See the important corrective to this move in critical theory by Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17-40.

which are objects of the orientation of action, internalized components of the personalities of individual actors and institutionalized patterns of social systems."<sup>47</sup> We are therefore brought back to the Marxian thesis of base and superstructure: the creation of background conditions within culture, law, the state, consciousness, the very personality of the subject which have as their root the structural needs of capitalist accumulation. The adaptation of social actors to this system constitutes the very essence of modern forms of authority.

Taking this view shows us that Parsons' notion of a normative functionalism grounded in an intersubjective system of ego-formation need not be attached to the values that he himself saw in modern society, i.e., that forms of socialization and integration were based in a consensus of common values shared by the majority. Rather, we can see that blending his ideas with Marx show a fit between his ideas about value-orientation and internalization on the one hand and the Marxian understanding of political economy on the other. Indeed, it shows us that the binding force of legitimate authority has become so deeply rooted within modern (specifically American) culture and society that resistance to its imperatives become increasingly weak in their effectiveness to dislodge its imperatives. What Parsons refused to see was that the structural elements of modern society are themselves governed by the necessities of capitalist accumulation; that patterns of economic growth, the agglomeration of capital, and so on require an increasingly tighter layer of legitimate authority as a means to secure the structural demands of the system as well as stave off forms of deviance which stem from the social, economic, and cultural costs that it produces. The functionalist element refers to the extent to which this process of system integration is able to succeed, to the extent to which ego-formation and personality structures are shaped to accept the values required for the continuation of the systemic imperatives of capitalist institutions.<sup>48</sup> This can be seen in Parsons' understanding of social power where he argues, contra C. Wright Mills, that power needs to be seen as a medium for the securing and obtaining compliance with "collectively

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<sup>48</sup> The separation of structure and function is deeply problematic leaving us with a formalistic social theory. As Lucien Goldmann has argued, "the indissoluble link between structure and function, resulting from the relatively durable nature of functions and the relatively provisional nature of structures, constitutes the motive power of history or, to put it another way, the historical character of human behavior. Thus, if one separates structure and function, he has already committed himself to the creation of either an ahistorical and formalistic structuralism or a functionalism with the same orientation." *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 14.

acknowledged obligations.”<sup>49</sup> Parsons argues that: “[t]he capacity to secure compliance must, if it is to be called power in my sense, be generalized and not solely a function of one particular sanctioning act which the user is in a position to impose, and the medium used must be ‘symbolic.’”<sup>50</sup> Power in the modern sense therefore must be able to absorb as many of the symbolic-creating institutions and mechanisms in society in order to secure functional imperatives.<sup>51</sup> Hence, stronger motivation is created for the adaptation of schools, of cultural institutions, and so on in order to create a significant hegemony of norms to which individuals feel compelled not only to follow and see as legitimate, it also erodes the collective cache of values that could serve as a basis for legitimate deviance from the growing network of norms that congeal around a strong inducement-coercion mentality among individuals.

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The relevance of these insights for the revival of critical social theory ought to be seen as obvious. First, the onslaught of postmodernism and other forms of irrationalism that began to permeate critical theory have had the effect of thoroughly disabling any genuine sense of political resistance. What concerns these trends in political thought are the ways in which subjectivity is capable of being a resource for political resistance. On this view, the structuralist and the functionalist are conservative in the sense that they somehow deny subjectivity its rightful place in being able to shape its own sense and vision of what is politically possible and desirable. But where this goes wrong is in lacking a mechanism for the production and re-production of a specific kind of authority and power: one that is organized around the imperatives of an increasingly integrated social system which requires the production of forms of consent based on intersubjective means. More to the point, what Parsons provides us with is a mechanism for understanding the way that modern forms of power are rooted in personality formation, and the Marxist re-reading I privilege here shows that Parsons’ normative functionalism

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<sup>49</sup> For an excellent discussion of the Mills-Parsons debate on the theory of power in modern society, see Dennis Wrong, *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 237-248.

<sup>50</sup> Talcott Parsons, *Politics and Social Structure*. (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 362.

<sup>51</sup> In many ways, this was also the thesis of the “culture industry” argument put forth by Adorno. See T. W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” and “Culture and Administration,” both in *Adorno: The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991).

can and must be read alongside the structural understanding of capitalist institutions illuminated by Marxist political economy to rejuvenate critical theory. We are able to deal with the problem of “false consciousness” in a more satisfying way by providing a mechanism which can account for its generation and content.<sup>52</sup>

But where this way of thinking goes terribly wrong is in its inability actually to grasp the correct object of critical thought. There simply is no subjectivity that can be unmasked, no reservoir of pent up libidinal energy to be released, that can serve as the source for political resistance. The deep ways that individuals are socialized to accept the patterns of modern institutions as legitimate is underrated by such approaches. From a political point of view, the kind of resistance that we have witnessed has been unable to pose a serious threat to the system for precisely this reason.

Indeed, the crucial issue is to be able to point to, tease out, the mechanisms of social and cultural life which have the ability to weaken forms of resistance within the society as a whole. Whereas the current vogue of exaggerated subjectivity sees resistance as simply defining oneself against the system and its imperatives—something recently laid out in a very problematic way by Simon Critchley<sup>53</sup>—what is really needed is the transformation of those systems of socialization, not their eradication *tout court*. Defined by what they oppose, these theorists escape into subjectivity, into a crude neo-anarchism, situational ethics, and so on, and thereby cripple our ability to organize politically around the real institutional problems of the capitalist social order. What is needed is a translation of the current systems of socialization; to find ways in which the powers of modernity can be shifted toward common ends, not the creation of a utopian alternative culture which poses no threat to the system but is simply seen as a deviant and, quite simply, irrelevant. Subjectivity does not *precede* the objective context within which it finds itself; rather, it is dialectically shaped by it. In this sense, the current manifestation of radical politics has become increasingly ineffective in terms of its ability to dislodge the institutional forms that constitute and reproduce capitalist

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<sup>52</sup> G. A. Cohen was perhaps closest to this position in his advocacy of seeing a Marxian theory of ideology in terms of a functionalist method, particularly in seeing Marx's theory of ideology as a functional development of a social system governed by capitalist laws of accumulation and reproduction. See his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 278-296. Also see the discussion by Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 168-222.

<sup>53</sup> See his problematic book, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. (London: Verso, 2008).

modernity. As Parsons was able to show in his discussion of deviance, modern forms of legitimate authority are able to integrate the personality structure of the individual to such an extent that detaching from the system of norms that have become so hegemonic means that our withdrawal from the systemic nature of role-orientation becomes nullified as a mode of resistance. The system re-equilibrates itself by coding such behavior as deviant, and, as long as the system remains generally legitimate, deviance is unable to become true dissent. In this sense, I think that these insights emphasize even more the Marxian thesis of base-superstructure relations and the reasons why radical thought and praxis needs to be focused on the functional imperatives that integrate the social order.

On this view, the core problem remains to confront the mistaken idea that human agency is independent of the strong forces of systemic logics and their ability to constitute the value-orientations of individuals. If Lukács had seen this problem in neo-Kantian and Hegelian terms with his concept of “reification,” Parsons sees the problem in a more elaborate way: in terms of the actual process of the personality development of the ego itself.<sup>54</sup> This means inquiring into the ways that our thickly constructed subsystems of modernity have the ability to pre-form the cognitive and emotive structures of individuals orienting them toward obedience and conformity in very specific ways. This means approaching questions of subjectivity with great care since it cannot be taken for granted that subjectivity is something that can be used as a starting point for theoretical analysis. Instead, we are forced back onto the Hegelian notion that our own subjectivity is an immanent property of the system of mediations that any individual acquires. Critical thought can only gain real ground once again once we see that the system logics of capitalist society necessitate a cohesion of legitimate domination which can only be countered by direct intervention into the systems of accumulation that serve as the point of origin for the outer shells of legitimate domination. Radical politics needs to embrace once again a radical stance with respect to the economy and privilege the state’s power to encourage new directions for institutional activity. An economy oriented toward public concerns, a state which privileges public interests over private interests, and social movements that seek to enlarge the sphere of public accountability of social institutions such as capital—all are means of countering this trend and they are ends to which radical politics needs to orient itself. In many ways, this was the reason

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<sup>54</sup> See the discussion by Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism: Lukács and the Marxist View of Reason*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

Marx moved toward a social scientific paradigm of critique: the mechanisms of capitalist institutions serve as the organizing principle for other social, cultural, and political institutions.

I think this resonates with the deeper, more radical insights of Marx and the classical phase of critical theory. It lies in the insight that the objective, material, economic imperatives of modern society have deep rhythmic effects on subject formation.<sup>55</sup> The Marxian thesis of “base-superstructure” takes on a more nuanced, more compelling form once we see that the capacities for critical, democratic will-formation are severely hampered by the substance and logics of modern institutions, especially once we see that the integration of subsystems have become increasingly subordinated to economic imperatives. It is questionable to what extent the communicative paradigm of discourse ethics is capable of serving as a compelling mode of resistance and critique to this tendency. Quite to the contrary, reconsidering Parsons’ powerful understanding of the nature of social systems and ego-formation, we are forced to confront that reality that subjective orientations are increasingly fused to such systems. The lingering notion that modern forms of global capitalism will begin to create their own gravediggers, that spontaneous movements will begin to emerge to challenge the system, that capitalism’s latest crisis foreshadows its own demise, are all absurd if we take Parsons seriously even in the slightest. A critical social theory with true political aims must focus on the ways that large scale mass movements cannot be created without the erosion of ideology and false consciousness which we can reframe in this analysis as an absorption into a value system that prevents individuals from engaging critically with the systems that govern their lives. On this view, Parsons can lend to Marxism a powerful force in understanding the reproduction of authority and a “culture of compliance” that prevents the accumulation of critical capacities within modern culture. We are thrown back to the Lukácsian dilemma of creating class consciousness within a society that is constituted by ever increasing, ever more tightly bound forms of socialization and legitimation and to a system ever more organized toward capitalistic growth at the expense of human development. This means an impoverishment not only of the symbolic culture of political resistance, it means, more importantly, the erosion of the cognitive structures and patterns of thought needed to counter the systemic imperatives of modern capitalism.

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<sup>55</sup> See the more recent discussion of this theme by István Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, vol. 1. (New York: Monthly Review, 2010).