Synthesis and Fragmentation in Social Theory: A Progressive Solution*

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Postmodern claims for the lack of general coherence in social life and therefore in social research are merely a version of recurrent attempts to accept incoherence as adequate in explanations. Incoherence, however, is less sharply distinguished from the synthetic and generalizing theories that it is held to have replaced than its proponents and critics suppose. Generalizing approaches, in fact, were built around contradictions that contributed to their instability and facilitated postmodern fragmentation. In this paper we demonstrate the central contradictions in social theory, showing their common occurrence in apparently opposed positions. Both postmodernism and what it seeks to replace are features of a conservative and unproductive social science. We trace the contradictory continuities through major modern schools of social theory in order to clear the ground for a progressive social science which accepts contradictions as problems that must be solved creatively in the practice of social research.

Recent commentaries on the state of sociological theory view the current situation as one of crisis. Alexander (1988b, p. 77) writes that the promise of the 1960s and the 1970s gave way a decade later to fragmentation and despair, whereby theories seemed "enervated" and "debilitated." This is no isolated judgment; a sense of crisis is a pervasive feature of current theoretical discussion. Sociological theories appear to have exhausted their potential for insight and development. Seidman believes that "sociological theory has gone astray . . . unconnected to current research programs, divorced from current social movements and political struggles, and either ignorant of major political and moral public debates or unable to address them in ways that are compelling or even understandable by nontheorists" (1992, p. 47).

The transformation of the sociological *conscience collective* from optimism to despair and fatigue has been rapid. Through the 1960s and 1970s, social theorists from different traditions believed in general theory as ultimately resourceful and progressive. Yet those days of hope are not so distant from the current postmodern perception that a general, integrated theory is impossible in practice and even perhaps offensive in principle, as is often supposed. We had different and opposed hopes, each making general claims. There was no single general theory—only competing claims to generality. The patent failure of all these general claims, according to postmodern theorists, led to the denial of generality (see Seidman 1992), but others see new opportunities for a new, all-encompassing synthesis. Alexander writes that "where even 10 years ago the air was filled with demands for radical and one-sided theoretical programs, in the contemporary period one can only hear urgent calls for theorizing of an entirely different sort. Throughout the centers of Western sociology—in Britain and France, in Germany and the United States—synthetic

rather than polemical theorizing is now the order of the day" (1988a, p. 77. Also see Giddens 1987; Ritzer 1990).

Once again, the novelty is rather less than is claimed. The most central of the competing claims for generality has always been a "synthetic" approach (in the days of hope, variously called Weberian, structural functionalist, or voluntaristic).[1] The sense that this approach is novel owes more to the biographical experience of social theorists than to an examination of the history of the social sciences. In every era we can find theories of both fragmentation and synthesis, and not only in opposing theorists. The contradictory impulses to synthesis and to fragmentation occur within theorists, not merely between them.[2] The problem is endemic to the project of social theory; it is not merely a moment in its history.

In this paper we address some major theoretical approaches—those of Weber, Parsons, Giddens, Alexander, and Habermas—in order to identify common problems and to show the contradictory character of social theory. Our purpose is first to lay bare the substance of this unprogressive, contradictory social theory, and then, once this has been done, to suggest necessary elements of a successful and progressive social science.

STRUCTURE AND ACTION

When we argue that modern social theory is contradictory, in truth we are saying no more than is said by each of the different theorists we discuss. Some initially deny the necessity of contradiction (although all find it in the writings of other social theorists), but each comes ultimately to acknowledge contradiction in the most elaborated statement of their own position. Our claims for an underlying and contradictory unity of social theory, then, are based not on an external imposition of connections between approaches, but on internal demonstrations of how they are related and how all are present in each, regardless of starting points. Because the apparently different positions are drawn from an underlying position that they share, each, as it is developed, tips into the others. As an example, let us briefly consider Weber's arguments and the criticisms directed at them.

Weber initially set himself the task of demonstrating the absurdity of the "postmodernism" of German cultural theorists in their attack on general coherence and their acceptance of the "unknowable" as peculiarly significant (see Weber 1975).[3] The *Methodenstreit* in nineteenth-century German social science presented Weber with a dualism between the general requirements of structural categories and the particularity of subjective experience, which he proposed to answer by arguing for their mutual consistency within a means-end scheme of rational action (see Weber 1949, 1975). Yet no other synthetic theorist believes that Weber's solution is adequate (see, for example, Alexander 1983; Giddens 1977, pp. 89–95; Parsons 1937). Most accept that the problems of dualism return to undermine his synthetic claims; his synthetic theory gives way to distinct forms of action: one is *zweckrational* action, competent but constraining; the other is *wertrational* action, apparently free but socially meaningless (see Weber 1968). Others, accepting this characterization of his theory, regard Weber as the forerunner of *complementary* theories of action, although his theory is overdeveloped in its *zweckrational* aspects and underdeveloped in its other aspects (see, for example, Habermas 1984). Still others, Weber's later stoical

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[1] "Particularism" also was present. Garfinkel (1967), for example, declared his hostility to the reconstructive aims of general social theory during the 1960s and 1970s.

[2] In his earlier work, for example, Seidman (1983) presented the integration of classical social theory as a positive achievment, only to repudiate it in his later work (see Seidman 1992).

[3] Weber, for example, writes of the German historical school that their arguments "are all based on the same curious idea: the idea that the dignity of a science or its object is due to those features of the object about which *we can know nothing at all*. In which case, the peculiar significance of human action lies in the fact that it is *inexplicable* and therefore *unintelligible*" (1975, p. 238).

resignation to the failure to overcome dualism makes him the embodiment of postmodern sensibility (see, for example, Lash 1987; Schroeder 1987).

The "synthetic" approach is the major direction of social theory, but each of those who propose it believes that he or she is correcting a contemporary and historic division in approaches. The reality they believe they confront is a social theory of competing camps— "structure" and "action," "positivism" and "idealism"—where all of those who previously claimed the necessity of synthesis are held to have contributed to division.[4] Giddens, for example, writes of a mainstream, "positivist" position in social theory in which "there is no place for a conception of the actor as a reasoning agent, capable of using knowledge in a calculated fashion so as to achieve intended outcomes" (1977, p. 85). Giddens thinks this dominant conception has given way under the weight of criticism from continental, hermeneutic philosophies. He believes, however, that this criticism, together with the object of its criticism, has produced a series of contradictory dualisms which characterize the field of social theory—dualisms of subject and object, individual and society, and associated voluntaristic and deterministic sociologies. In place of these *dualisms,* Giddens proposes a "duality," or mutual consistency, of the opposed categories. According to "duality," "structure is not as such external to human action, and is not identified solely with constraint. Structure is both the medium and the outcome of the human activities it recursively organizes" (1987, p. 61). This, Giddens believes, will provide the basis of a new, fruitful synthesis in social theory.

Giddens regards Parsons as a positivist, committed to one side of the dualistic form of modern social theory. Yet Parsons, too, had looked forward to a synthesis of "objective" and "subjective" points of view. Like Giddens, he believed that the dominance of positivism over social theory had had unfortunate consequences; the emphasis on externally observed events and the neglect of subjective aspects of action, he argued, derived from the hostility of positivism to a conception of the human being as "essentially an active, creative evaluating subject" (1935, p. 282). The opposition to positivism within German cultural theory had erred on the other side, however, whereas Weber's attempted synthesis, according to Parsons, had taken too much from the individual, unpredictable emphasis of cultural theory to represent an adequate solution (see Parsons 1937). His own theory, he promised, would be adequate in providing "a bridge between the apparently irreconcilable difference of the two traditions, making it possible, in a certain sense, to 'make the best of both worlds'" (Parsons 1937, p. 486).

Like Giddens, Alexander believes that Parsons ultimately failed, but once again, Alexander maintains an attachment to the synthetic project and even to Parson's categories, arguing that they can be made adequate with a different development (see Alexander 1984, 1988a). He argues that the initial reaction to Parsons involved a polemical polarization of one-sided criticisms that now have become exhausted. "Neither micro nor macro theory is satisfactory," he writes, and "action and structure must now be intertwined" (1988b, p. 77). Every synthetic theorist, then, sets out to overcome contradictory dualisms while accepting the categories of the dualisms. Each believes that there must be an approach in which the categories are noncontradictory, though no one else has found it.

Weber sought an approach to meaningful action which would unite the freedom and creativity of the acting subject with the facilities and constraints of the environment in which action takes place. Although they accept the deficiencies of his approach, other

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[4] This presentation of the social sciences as divided between two competing camps is quite standard. Dawe, for example, writes of "two sociologies" that are "grounded in diametrically opposed concerns with two central problems, those of order and control. And at every level they are in conflict. They posit antithetical views of human nature, of society and of the relation between the social and the individual" (1970, p. 24). (Also see DiTomaso 1982; James 1984; Lukes 1977; Martindale 1971; Mayhew 1980, 1981).

synthetic theorists closely follow Weber's initial statement of the project. Each synthetic theorist accepts that the basic components of action are *ends* (the purposes of actors), *means* (what must be manipulated competently in the realization of ends), and *conditions* (what cannot be manipulated competently, but must be accommodated and calculated upon). Action, to be rational, must be adequate as to the knowledge necessary for the realization of ends. Thus Giddens writes of "the 'technical grounding' of the knowledge that is applied as 'means' in purposive acts to secure particular outcomes" (1976, p. 83), while Parsons writes of the "norm of intrinsic rationality" governing the relationship between means and ends, which is grounded in "valid knowledge" (1937, p. 600). When conditions and means are classified as "technical" in substance and, as such, "external" to any given actor, the "subjective," voluntary aspect of action is associated with the actor's capacity to form ends (see Alexander 1982a, p. 62; Giddens 1976, p. 75; Parsons 1937, p. 45).

The freedom of actors to form ends, however, cannot easily be separated from issues of the organization of systems of action. All synthetic theorists agree that certain properties of social relationships are not simply the aggregate of individual actions and must be addressed in the development of a theory of social action. These are what Parsons calls the "emergent properties" of systems of action, what Giddens calls their "structural properties," and what Alexander calls the "presuppositional" issues of "order" (see Alexander 1982a, p. 90; Giddens 1976, p. 122; Parsons 1937, p. 739).

Synthetic theorists identify two major issues of order in the coordination of action; we can call these *personal* order and *interpersonal* order. The first is concerned with the individual actor's organization of his or her activities according to a personal hierarchy of preferences and the relationships among the means of realizing those preferences. Every action occurs in contexts produced by past actions and, in turn, affects the possibilities of future action. The requirement of a "technical" efficacy of means must be complemented by a requirement of consistency in the relationship among purposes where acts are mutually dependent as means and conditions of other acts in personal means-end chains (see Alexander 1982;, p. 71; Giddens 1976, p. 84; Parsons 1937, p. 740).

Interpersonal order concerns the coordination of systems of action where these induce the activities of a number of actors. Here the actions of any given actor form the means and conditions of other actors in the same system. As Giddens says, "[S]ystems of social interaction, reproduced through the duality of structure in the context of bounded conditions of the rationalisation of action, are constituted through the *interdependence* of actors or groups" (1979, p. 76. Also see Alexander 1982a, p. 90; Parsons 1937, p. 51). There exist, then, an issue of the mutual dependence of all actions in the system and a requirement of consistency similar to that in personal order. In any stable system of interaction, the values, preferences, and other considerations that organize an individual actor's choice of ends must be consistent with those of other actors.

In the light of these requirements, the openness of action cannot be maintained. The coherence of systems of interaction depends on the predictability of purposes. Action is organized in relation to processes of the system whereby ends are mutually consistent. Thus, in fully integrated systems, the individual appears as an expression of structures, despite the almost universal perception that structures should be viewed as a human production. In that all meaningful behavior is structurally located, unintegrated behaviors are irrational. This problem in Weber leads to the interpretation of Weber as trapped between an "iron cage" of purposive rationality, which is indifferent to human action, and a meaningless "decisionism" as the escape from structural constraint (see Habermas 1984; Parsons 1937): This position is not greatly removed from that which he dismissed so mockingly when he addressed it in the writings of the German historical school.

Each synthetic theorist sees this problem quite clearly in other would-be synthetic theorists, not only in Weber. Giddens, for example, argues that in his developed theory, Parson's actors are offered no more than the routine reproduction of structures. He writes, "[*T*]*here is no action in Parsons' 'action frame of reference'*, only behaviour which is propelled by need dispositions or role expectations. The stage is set, but the actors only perform according to scripts which have already been written out for them . . . men do not appear . . . as skilled and knowledgeable agents, as at least to some extent masters of their own fate" (1976, pp. 16—17; author's emphasis. Also see Habermas 1987, p. 235). "Behavior," Giddens implies, is a positivistic category in which human beings are viewed as carriers of social structure, whereas "action" has the connotation that social structures are the product of human activity. It would appear that Parsons, whatever his initial claims, neglected the special quality of human beings as "active, creative, evaluating subjects."

Yet Giddens's own starting point is the same as that of Parsons. If we briefly trace his own development through his criticisms of Parsons, we shall see how he converges with Parsons on the deficiencies of that position. Giddens cannot sustain his criticism that Parsons's actors have no skill or knowledge. Indeed, these qualities are implicit in his own statement of Parsons's position. "Knowledge" would be necessary to "role *expectations*"; "skill" would be a condition of adequate "role *performance*." The problem is not the presence or absence of "skill" or "knowledge" but the view that these could overcome the problem of agents as "carriers" of social structure. In fact, as Giddens develops his argument, role performance becomes "action" rather than "behavior." He writes, "Parsons's actor is . . . portrayed as an unthinking dupe of his culture and his interaction with others as the enactment of . . . need-dispositions rather than as, as it truly is, a series of *skilled performances*" (1976, p. 113). The criticism of Parsons is still that he neglects action, but now the action he neglects is associated with role performance. Parsons, it seems, recognizes only need dispositions.

Giddens's own version of actors' skill and knowledge in everyday life is that it consists of "practical" consciousness rather than "discursive" consciousness. The substance of practical consciousness is "routines," and Giddens believes that modern social theory tends to overemphasize the level of actors' motivational commitment to the social systems reproduced in their practices. "Most elements of social practices," he writes, "are not directly motivated. Motivational commitment more typically involves the *generalised integration of habitual practices,* as reflexively monitored productions of interacting agents, *with the basic security system of personality*" (1979, p. 128; my emphases). It would appear that an adequate approach must stress the importance of habituated role performance *and* of need dispositions in the understanding of social structures. In the light of this notion, it is not surprising that others have found in Giddens exactly what he criticizes in Parsons. Archer, for example, writes that Giddens "commits himself to the enormous coherence of the signification system, such that actors' inescapable use of it embroils everyone in its stable reproduction . . . we are now presented with another over-integrated view of man" (1988, p. 87). The convergence of Giddens with Parsons is a consequence of the components of their positions, not of any personal attitude towards the development of those components.

LEVELS OF STRUCTURE AND ACTION

"Synthesis," or "integration," is proposed as a means of unifying apparently antithetical categories, particularly categories of action—as exemplified by "ends"—and structure—as exemplified by "means" and "conditions." The collapse of "ends" as creative entities,

however, does not eliminate the dualism to which it was addressed. That dualism is the failure of structural statements to account adequately for important aspects of behavior. It would seem that whatever form of structure is proposed, antistructural, unconstrained experiences exist. As a consequence, one tendency in synthetic theory is to argue that structures are abstract possibilities not fully realized. Parsons, for example, distinguishes between "perfect integration" as an analytical construct and the "concrete" circumstances of systems, which manifest strains and disturbances (see Parsons 1951). Giddens distinguishes between the "structural point of view" and that of "strategic conduct," arguing that what appears, from the viewpoint of structure, "as a normatively co-ordinated legitimate order" represents contingent claims from the viewpoint of strategic action (see Giddens 1979, p. 86). Alexander, for his part, writes that "functionalism is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functionalist systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such" (1985, p. 9). Integrated structures, according to this view, are feasible but unrealized.

In the separation of the "abstract" from the "concrete" or "empirical," every synthetic theorist moves from a duality of structure and action to a tripartite division. Parsons, for example, distinguishes between personality, social system, and culture (see Parsons 1951). In this, he is followed by Alexander and Giddens, though the latter uses the terms *person, society,* and *structure* (see Alexander 1984; Giddens 1979).[5] An examination of the reasons for introducing a level of social system between individual and structure (or culture) will help us to identify the incoherence intrinsic to the general undertaking.

The deviations from structure are not only personal and idiosyncratic but also, in more important instances, collective and stable. The initial synthetic tendency, grounded as it is in a theory of voluntaristic action, was to argue that any behavior might be rational as long as it met the technical requirements of successful accomplishment. It was as if any individual could draw on knowledge for his or her peculiar purposes. The purposes of others, however (and therefore, for others, those of the individual), soon were recognized as a crucial aspect of knowledge. Thus, successful social behavior could not be viewed in terms of peculiar purposes. That individuals act in peculiar, unsocial ways is recognized and is the basis of a distinction between "personality" and the higher levels of "social system" and "structure." On close examination, however, those peculiar aspects of personality always are subject to irrational, usually subconscious, processes.[6]

The behaviors that are most problematic from the perspective of structure, then, are those which are not easily assigned to deviant individuals. These are the stable behaviors of groups within a society which cannot be explained by structural principles because the purposes they embody seem to be at odds with purposes that could be drawn from a coherent knowledge form. The behaviors are stable in the sense that participants believe they realize their objectives. Their apparently deviant values and priorities do not bring them into open conflict with other groups in society. Because of such problematic collective behaviors, the level of "social system" must be separated from the level of "structure" (or "culture").

The vertical separation of levels is an attempt to purge the structural or cultural level of the explanatory difficulties associated with the circumstances in which it does not apply.

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[5] Parsons offers an additional level of "organism" to deal with unmotivated aspects of individual behavior. In addition, the differences in terminology are a potential source of confusion. We shall use the terms *structure* and *culture* throughout as interchangeable (even though Parsons uses the term *social structure* to mean the specific organization of a social system).

[6] Most theorists turn to psychoanalysis for "resistant" aspects of personality (Giddens 1979; Habermas 1971; Parsons 1959; Wrong 1961).

Indeed, most theorists' "observations" of "deviant," yet stably reproduced, behaviors are the initial impetus to arguing the need for an action perspective founded on the subjective meaning of behavior to actors. If behaviors at the levels of social system or personality were consistent with structural (or cultural) principles, there could be no statement of one level that did not imply simultaneously the substance of the other levels (Giddens, for example, seemed initially to claim this for his "duality" of structure and action). The distinction between levels is made so that one can argue that additional processes exist, which can operate at the "lower" levels at odds with those which might be expected on the basis of the operation of the "higher," structural principles.

We can illustrate this argument with reference to neo-Marxist approaches. Paradoxically, Marxism is the one major tradition with an essentially transformative methodology, but the failure of its specific accounts of development and change has caused Marxist methodology to degenerate into forms of apologia virtually identical to the nonprogressive approaches to which it is ostensibly opposed. Thus neo-Marxists confront the problem of a "structure" that defines a set of "objective" interests of the proletariat, from which the behaviors of those accepted as proletarian deviate in practice. The "deviant" actions, apparently unproblematically, are reproduced and thus are regarded as "subjectively" meaningful to actors themselves, although they are "objectively" meaningless.[7] Neo-Marxist theorists go on to distinguish an abstract, structural level of "mode of production" and a concrete, lower level of "social formation" (see, for example, Althusser 1969; Poulantzas 1973; Wright 1985). The latter is organized in terms of principles that are adequate to the reproduction of day-to-day life, but in certain instances contradict the "higher"-level principles of the mode of production. Neo-Marxists may believe, in a formal sense, that "in the last instance" the principles of the mode of production must triumph, but, as Althusser says, "the lonely hour of the last instance never comes" (1969, p. 113).

Parsons proposes a similar formulation whereby "higher"-level possibilities are contradicted by "lower"-level exigencies. He writes,

> [T]his problem may be summed up as that of whether a completely pattern-consistent cultural system can be related to the exigencies both of personalities and of the social system in such a way that complete "conformity" with its standards can be adequately motivated among all the individual actors in the social system. Here it may be merely asserted without any attempt to demonstrate, that such a limiting case is *incompatible with the fundamental functional imperatives both of personalities and of social systems* (1951, p. 16; my emphasis).

Parsons is not denying conformity with cultural principles in a diversity of individual experience; he merely denies *complete* conformity. This relative freedom from cultural determination, he argues, gives personality and social systems their meaning as distinct levels.

At the same time, Parsons argues that there exist imperatives of *interdependence,* specifying consistent relationships among levels, and imperatives of *independence,* at odds with that consistency; interdependence contradicts any integrity of levels, while indepen-

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[7] Recalling the central themes of social theory, neo-Marxist writers warn of the consequences of a "positivistic" overemphasis on "structural" determinants and argue for the importance of "praxis." Anderson, for example, proposes that "structure and subject . . . have always been interdependent as categories" (1983, p. 55), but finds that Marxist and post-Marxist approaches are divided between a "rhetorical absolutism" of structure and a "fragmented fetishism" of the subject. Like other synthetic theorists, Anderson accepts the categories, arguing for "a theory of their *relations.* Such a theory, historically determinate and sectorally differentiated, could only be differentiated in a dialectical respect for their interdependence" (1983, p. 55).

dence contradicts what they have in common. Insofar as the levels of society and person-
ality contain both interdependent and independent elements, they contain principles at
odds with each other *within* each level.[8] Personality consists of structurally meaningful
definitions of self and of antistructural imperatives; society (or social system) consists of
structural role expectations and of antistructural collective activities. As the elaboration
of our argument will make clear, similar processes can be found in Alexander and in
Giddens.

The statement of structure is not itself insulated from problems by these processes.
Every issue of meaning is a structural problem as well as an individual or social problem,
and each synthetic theorist goes on to develop contradictory principles at the level of
structure. We shall return to this point shortly; at that time we shall see that all attempts
to insulate the "structural" from the explanatory problems fail, and that each theorist
ultimately presents functional, or structural, components as mutually contradictory.

STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL IMPERATIVES

At this point we need a slight diversion in order to survey *complementary* theories as an
aspect of the movement towards the acceptance of experience as essentially contradictory.
The recognition of division *within* each level gives rise to competing, complementary
theories of action which argue for a *horizontal* distinction of forms of action, as well as
for a *vertical* distinction of levels. We have argued that all approaches, drawn as they are
from an underlying contradiction, are present in each approach. As we shall see, the
culmination of both the synthetic and the complementary approaches is that they are
brought to both horizontal and vertical contradictions.

The most sophisticated development of a complementary approach is found in the work
of Habermas. He attempts to argue for a horizontal division between two analytically
distinct forms of action. Habermas believes, as do synthetic theorists, that social theory
has been dominated by a positivistic, "system-theoretical" paradigm which is concerned
with technical issues of action as the expression of systems. He argues, however, that
there also exists a parallel, but underdeveloped, "action-theoretical" paradigm which is
concerned with action oriented to the production of meaning, or reaching understanding.
The focus of this paradigm is *communicative* action, which is distinguished from the
purposive-rational action of the system-theoretical approach (see Habermas 1984, 1987).
Both paradigms are necessary, he states, but in contrast to synthetic theorists—who also
recognize this dualism as it operated in the history of social theory, seeking to integrate

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[8] Obviously, similar problems of independence and interdependence infuse the neo-Marxist treatment of mode
of production and social formation. Poulantzas, for example, writes that different "levels" of structures and
practices "present their own specificity, relative autonomy and particular effectiveness inside the unity of a mode
of production and of a historically determined social formation" (1973, p. 41). Ironically, critics of Marxism
who are committed to a synthetic approach argue that this sort of statement in neo-Marxism is incoherent, even
though it converges with the position they are proposing (see, for example, Alexander 1982b; Lockwood 1992).
Alexander, for example, writes,

[E]very major revision of Marx's thought moves back and forth between the two equally unacceptable
horns of the "Marxian dilemma." On the one hand, if it is to converge with the original theory, the
revision must introduce determinism "in the last instance." This, of course, can only be achieved by
partly neutralizing the revisions themselves. On the other hand, if the theorists will not neutralize their
contributions, and if, at the same time, they wish to avoid the direct opposition to Marx's theory that
would place them outside the Marxist tradition, there is only one option available, they must leave their
revisions largely unspecified and, in the process, open up their theories to serious indeterminacy. A
theoretical revision of Marx can only resolve this choice between indeterminacy and the last instance
only if it takes neither option; to that degree it moves beyond the boundaries of Marxism itself (1982b,
p. 345).

Beyond the boundaries of Marxism lies the very same formulation!

its constituent elements—Habermas believes they must be developed separately as distinct forms of action in order to clarify more fully the relationship between them.

Habermas's distinction between paradigms takes what appears to be problematic, or "independent," at each level in the synthetic approach and attempts to separate it from what appears to be consistent across each level. As a consequence, he gives to communicative action the form that others have attributed to Parsons's theory of action. Habermas writes, "[U]nder the functional aspect of *mutual understanding,* communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge; under the aspect of *coordinating action,* it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity; finally under the aspect of *socialization,* communicative action serves the formation of personal identities" (1987, p. 137).

Giddens views statements like this as indicative of Habermas's convergence with Parsons. Habermas, he believes, accepts "Parsons' 'model of society', which accords a centrality to values and norms in social integration; the thesis that society and personality are homologous, or 'interpenetrate'; and the significance attributed to 'internalisation' in the theory of socialisation" (1982, pp. 159–60). Just as Giddens fails to recognize Parsons's emphasis on the independent operation of levels, so he fails to address the role of the "system-theoretical" paradigm in Habermas's approach. This fact, however, does not really help Habermas, just as it does not help Parsons. His problems are other than those attributed to him by Giddens; they are problems that all of these writers share.

Habermas's parallel hierarchies of communicative action and purposive-rational action are associated with normative structures of "inner nature," on the one hand, and material structures of "outer nature," on the other. He believes that the latter came to dominate in Parsons's theory, despite an early recognition of the significance of the former. Thus Habermas writes of "the simultaneous levelling of the once central distinction between functional and social integration; the two are brought together under 'integration'. This shift *makes unrecognizable* the seams that resulted from joining the two paradigms of 'action' and 'system'. Parsons makes the important—but nowhere explicitly acknowledged—decision to drop the concept of a social integration established via values and norms and to speak from now on only of 'integration' in general" (Habermas 1987, p. 241).

Habermas takes from Lockwood the distinction between "functional" system integration and social integration, that he overemphasized social integration at the expense of a proper development of the concept of system integration (see Lockwood 1964). Neither criticism adequately represents Parsons's position (although the fact that each can be made indicates problems in the approaches of Parsons and his critics alike). Like Habermas, Parsons came to propose that the "realistic exigencies" of personality and social system which are at odds with the "interdependencies" of cultural processes form a parallel hierarchy. Parsons writes,

> [A]ny processual outcome results from the operation of plural factors, all of which are mutually independent if there is scientific reason to distinguish them . . . This elementary truth does not, however, preclude the hierarchical ordering of the factors. We have distinguished two basic, interrelated hierarchies—those of necessary conditions and of cybernetic control. . . . In the sense, and *only* that sense, of emphasizing the importance of the cybernetically highest elements in patterning action systems, I am a cultural determinist, rather than a social determinist (1966, p. 113).

Just as the "ideational" is argued to be "counterfactual" in its deviation from the "practical," the implication of hierarchy in the statement of "practical systems" is that

they can have an equivalent "counterfactual" status. Lockwood, for example, argues that certain potentialities of practical systems need not apply. He writes of the possibility of a lack of fit between an institutional order and its material structure whereby "the material substructure in such a case facilitates the development of social relationships which, *if actualized* would directly threaten the existing institutional order" (1964, p. 252; my emphasis).[9]

Habermas makes a similar claim with regard to societal "learning processes." He writes that there are two conditions of learning: "on the one hand, unresolved system problems that represent challenges; on the other, new levels of learning that have already been achieved in world views and are lately available but not yet incorporated into action systems and thus remain institutionally inoperative" (1979, p. 121). The hierarchies of "inner" and "outer" nature, then, each have abstract, unrealized potentialities and concrete circumstances that deviate from those potentialities. Whereas "nonnormative," practical intrusions "explain" the nonrealization of normative potentialities, "normative" intrusions "explain" the unrealized system potentialities. Two hierarchies are no better than one. The statement of *two* hierarchies is an attempt to deal with the contradiction of *one* hierarchy, but the consequence is that contradiction is multiplied. It now defines both hierarchies and the relationship between them.

Within the two hierarchies, the level of the personality receives less attention than the two higher levels of social system and culture (or society and structure). We would expect this because the peculiar characteristics are of this level idiosyncratic and, from the perspective of social behavior, irrational. Parsons proposes four functional prerequisites that are necessary to the constitution and operation of any social system. Two of these imperatives—pattern maintenance and integration—are concerned with normative issues; the two others—adaptation and goal attainment—are concerned with the nonnormative. This perspective gives us the *horizontal* distinction of hierarchies. Similarly, two are concerned with cultural (or structural) principles—integration and goal attainment—and two—pattern maintenance and adaptation—with society issues of integrity in a potentially hostile lower-level environment. This perspective gives us the *vertical* division of levels.

According to Alexander (1984, 1988a), these are the categories of Parsons's most satisfactory treatment and are necessary to any adequate approach. Adequate or not, they are certainly found in other approaches. Notwithstanding his criticism of Parsons, Habermas accepts the four functional prerequisites and similarly associates them with his normative hierarchy of communicative action into nonnormative hierarchy of purposive-rational action. Apparently they are necessary to any statement of action-theoretical and system-theoretical paradigms rather than indicating that the latter paradigm dominates over the former. Habermas writes,

> [W]e [can] analyze events and states from the point of view of their dependency on functions of social integration (in Parsons's vocabulary, integration and pattern-maintenance) while the non-normative components of the system serve as limiting conditions. From the system perspective, we thematize a society's steering mechanisms and the extension of the scope of contingency. We analyze events and states from the point of view of their dependency on functions of system integration (in Parsons's vocabulary, adaptation and goal attainment), while the goal values serve as data (1976, pp. 4–5).

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[9] Lockwood illustrates the unrealized potentialities of practical relationships in a Marxist division between "base" and "superstructure," where neither has the force of necessity. This is the very position to which neo-Marxists are brought in their attempts to argue for the continued validity of Marxist categories despite their nonapplicability in specific circumstances.

Giddens's hostility to Parsons's scheme of functional prerequisites is apparently un-equivocal. He writes that "the term 'function' . . . is of no use to the social sciences or history; indeed it would do no harm to ban it altogether as any sort of technical term" (1981, p. 18). He proposes in its place the concept of "structural features"; they have the same substance as do functional prerequisites in Parsons and Habermas. Giddens writes, "[F]our structural features are implicated in the reproduction of *all social systems,* and simultaneously supply the basic logic of a classification of institutions" (1981, p. 47; my emphasis). He states further that "structure can be conceptualized abstractly as two aspects of rules—normative elements and codes of signification. Resources are also of two kinds: authorative resources which derive from the coordination of the activity of human agents, and allocative resources, which stem from control of material products or of aspects of the material world" (1984, p. xxxi). It would seem that function is banned only as a *term.*

Just as the contradictory requirements of interdependence and independence undermine the coherence of different levels and of separate hierarchies, so functional prerequisites are similarly incoherent. If they were merely the categories of a descriptive approach to societies, then it might be argued that they could serve a heuristic purpose whereby the extent of their realization in practice would be an "empirical" issue. Each theorist suggests that this is so in claiming that each may operate independently of the others. Parsons, for example, argues that "these four dimensions are conceived to be orthogonal; their values are independently variable in the sense that change of state with respect to any one cannot be interpreted to have an automatically given relation to change of state in any of the others (except so far as this relation comes to be known and formulated as a law of the system)" (1959, p. 631).[10] At the same time, however, each writer is also suggesting that meeting all four prerequisites (at least to some extent) is definitive of a society or social system. After all, Parsons calls them *prerequisites,* while Giddens argues that they are "implicated in the reproduction of all social systems" (1981, p. 47).

Neither the independence of orthogonal dimensions nor the mutual necessity of functions can be established. That *both* are argued derives from the contradictory character of the principles or functions. As a consequence, theorists come to argue that each principle, far from being either independent from each of the others or in a relationship of mutual necessity with each of those others, *actually requires the negation of the others for full realization.* Just as Parsons argued that there were "imperatives" of personality and social system which limit the complete realization of culture, so he believes that there are imperatives of functions which are inconsistent with their mutual realization. He writes, "[I]t is also true that maximization of all four, and probably of any two, is not possible in the same state of any given system" (1959, p. 631).[11]

Alexander has said that functionalism is predicated on "integration as a possibility," but here Parsons is founding functionalism on its impossibility! The "interdependence" of functional imperatives, or structural principles, is held to be contradictory; if all functions are implicated in all social systems, a necessary feature of human societies is that they are contradictory. For this reason Giddens writes that "structural contradiction refers to

[10] In *The Structure of Social Action,* the claim of general theory in the action frame of reference made possible the formulation of such "analytical laws." Such laws, Parsons argued, state "a uniform mode of relationship between the values of two or more analytical elements" (1937, p. 622). Further, "analytical elements, once clearly defined, will be found to have certain uniform modes of relation to each other which hold independently of any one particular set of their values" (1937, p. 36).

[11] Habermas and Alexander also argue for the mutual inconsistency of functional prerequisites, but in the context of a denial of Parsons's similar argument. Alexander writes that Parsons "demonstrates an alarming propensity to present 'adaptive' and 'goal attainment' institutions as facilitating the realization of norms and values, neglecting *their functional capacity for antithesis and negation* vis-a-vis normative ideals" (1984, p. 231). Habermas writes, "Parsons has no theoretical tools with which to explain *the resistance that cultural patterns with their own independent logics offer to functional imperatives*" (1987, p. 231).

the constitutive features of human societies. I suggest that structural principles operate in contradiction. What I mean by this is that structural principles operate in terms of each other but also contravene each other" (1984, p. 193).

Giddens's "duality of structure" was offered (as were Parsons's action frame of reference in its initial statement, and Habermas's complementary theories of action) as a solution to the dualism of subject and object, individual and society. Giddens has come full circle, but now he accepts the substance of that dualism, writing,

> I want to suggest the following, as a fundamental theorem: in all forms of society, human beings exist in *contradictory relation to nature* . . . the "contradictory unity" that is man's distinctiveness from nature sustains the accommodations reached with it, and the modes of control to which nature is made subject. But the relation between *Dasein* and the continuity of Being is always mediated: by society, or the institutions in terms of which, in the duality of structure, social reproduction is carried on. The existential contradiction of human existence thus becomes translated into structural contradiction which is really its only medium (1979, p. 161; author's emphasis).

Not incidental to this undertaking is the development that has taken Giddens from the starting point which offered the solution to contradictory dualisms to social contradiction as the defining characteristic of human existence. There are many hopeful starts; each ends in contradiction.

CONCLUSION

In social theory, the cycle from integration to disintegration and back again is not, as it is usually presented, an uneasy relationship between distinct theoretical traditions and philosophical presuppositions, but the working through of the internal deficiencies of a single dominant conception of social theory. Contemporary social theory is formed in contradiction, and each approach is an expression from within that contradiction. The general characteristics of contradiction explain the different, and seemingly quite distinct, theoretical claims associated with each approach.

Contradiction consists of mutually exclusive but entailed categories. Attempts at *synthesis* reveal their antithetical character; attempts to divide approaches and their categories and to set them up as *distinct undertakings* reveal their entailment. The *entailment* of the divergent approaches consists of the mutual necessity and the "overlap," in certain respects, of their categories. A stress on this point leads to *synthesis* as a theoretical strategy, but, of course, entailment is only one side. *Mutual exclusivity* of categories explains the move toward fragmentation and separate development. Because both are contained within a mistaken enterprise, an emphasis on one tends to give way to the other as it is developed and as its inadequacies become obvious. Thus, as synthetic projects fail, scholars attempt to make the components of their *dis*integration the bases of mutually exclusive, *complementary* elements in the understanding of social behavior. This process involves a claim that each element can be internally consistent, contradicting the other only externally, but we have shown that accepting contradictory categories as necessary in explanation locates contradiction *within* each category as well as between them. As theories develop, it is impossible to keep the separate elements apart; each element occurs in the other as its negation.

We have seen how contradictions are embodied in the different categories of social theory—structure and action; levels of structure (or culture), social system, and personality; functional imperatives (or structural features) of social systems. It seems obvious that

contradictory theory could not advance explanation. Yet when we are faced with the reality of contradiction in social scientific constructions, it is accepted that contradiction *defines* social science. Smart can stand for many, including (as we have seen) Giddens, against whom he believes he is arguing when he writes,

> [A]t the basis of the human sciences is a conception of man as both subject and object and . . . this dualism is a precondition of the field of inquiry. As such therefore no resolution or synthesis of the dualism or duality may be located within the field of inquiry of the human sciences. To consider the conception of man as both subject and object, and the analogues of action and structure and their respective derivative sociologies as a problem awaiting synthesis or resolution, is to pose for solution that which must remain insoluble within the terms of reference of the human sciences (1982, p. 121).

This embrace of contradiction is exemplified most clearly in postmodernism. Lyotard proposes that social theorists should give up their false quest for generality and coherence, for the "grand narrative" that will explain society. Social theorists, he argues, have a "nostalgia for the whole and the one" (1984, p. 81) when they seek to reduce the complex particularities of social existence to a single scheme. Similarly, according to Baudrillard, "social reality" is a "chaotic constellation" that is "unpresentable" in the terms of the standard sociological theories (1983, p. 4). Lyotard claims that instead we should "wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the difference and save the honor of the name" (1984, p. 82).

Ultimately the argument is that theories must be contradictory because social existence is contradictory. But how could we apprehend the "true" nature of social existence independently of the social theories mobilized to account for it? It is an unwarranted empiricism that accepts the incoherence of the social theorist's categories as describing social reality rather than theoretical confusion.[12] In fact, what postmodern theorists represent as a response to "general theory" and its flawed concern with "totality" is the failure of general theory. Stated simply, postmodernism is the acceptance that theories which are descriptively inadequate *in their own terms* are, *in that inadequacy,* descriptively adequate as statements of social existence. The substance of the claims of postmodernism does not lie in the self-evident failure of general social theory to meet the exigencies of social life in the sense that its categories are irrelevant, or less than fully relevant, but *in the conception that its internal flaws are the relevant features in understanding social experience.* This point explains why postmodernism, in confronting the inadequacies of "general theory," does not move to the need for a greater adequacy but accepts its contradictory particularities. Whatever its strictures, "general social theory" in its failures is "postmodern," just as "postmodernism" is founded on the failures of "general theory."

At the beginning of this paper we offered a different approach to the theoretical task in sociology. We can contrast the social scientific acceptance of contradiction with the attitude that obtains in the physical sciences. In making this comparison, we are not committing ourselves to a form of positivism. Although new, postpositivist philosophies of science have challenged the standard accounts of physical science, the explanatory drive remains

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[12] Baudrillard's affirmation of the "chaotic constellation" of reality, for example, evokes Marx's statement in the *Grundrisse* to the effect that the representation of a "chaotic whole" is a consequence of an uncritical acceptance of "appearances." Marx writes, "[I]t seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete . . . However, on closer examination this proves false" (1973, p. 100). The consequence of such a "beginning," according to Marx, is a "chaotic conception of a whole" (p. 100).

firmly tied to problem solving as the creative activity of science.[13] To be sure, physical scientists will engage in all sorts of devices to "fit up" their theories, but the point is that they must address their problems as *intrinsic to their own understandings*. Where problems lie and how they are to be addressed are not given a priori, but mutual coherence of theoretical statements, including their empirical instances, remains a condition of explanatory adequacy. Natural scientists must accept any problem as *their* problem—that is, as lying within *their* constructs as an indication of specific inadequacies. A new unity is possible only by creatively solving the problem that occasioned the separation of the "general" from the "particular."

What, then, is so peculiar about the human sciences that it seems to excuse its practitioners the struggle with what is contradictory? How do social theorists come to claim that what they do not understand could not be brought to sense? Elsewhere we have examined at some length what we called the "social scientific fallacy," whereby social theorists *avoid* what physical scientists *accept*—the need to reconstruct failed explanations (Holmwood and Stewart 1991). The substance of this fallacy is the claim that *behaviors which are inexplicable in the categories initially mobilized to explain them can be rendered intelligible without addressing the substance of the social scientist's constructions in which the behaviors occur as a problem*. This claim is bound up with a distinction between physical and social science, one which is contained in the very distinction between categories of "structure" and "action."

Whereas the objects of the physical sciences merely reflect routine processes, it is argued, human beings intervene in the world and thereby can produce novel and discontinuous effects. In contrast to what holds true for physical scientists, social scientists apparently may regard any apparent explanatory problem as reflecting the peculiar nature of their objects—that is, as deriving from their status as human subjects capable of freedom and choice. Conversely, it is believed, any decision by actors to behave differently need not bear on the theoretical adequacy of the construct previously held to obtain. It could have been "true" if it had been "chosen." On this basis it is stated that theoretical constructs can be valid despite their lack of application to the specific behaviors to which they are addressed. Thus it is believed that the social sciences need not require a reconstruction of theoretical objects and relationships; a lack of integration of the theoretical and the empirical is regarded as definitive of social inquiry rather than as an occasion for creative reformulation.

Alexander, for example, argues for a "presuppositional" distinction between the "general" and the "particular" as the basis of his attempt to establish the integrity and "autonomy" of general theory. He writes, "[t]hat theorizing at the general level—theorizing without reference to particular empirical problems or distinctive domains—is a significant, indeed, a crucial endeavor should, it seems to me, be beyond dispute" (1988b, p. 77). It seems to us that this sort of claim, far from being beyond dispute, is at the heart of the current malaise in social theory. To see what is wrong with such a claim from the perspective of postpositive philosophy of science, we need merely contrast it with Lakatos's criteria (1970, p. 116) for the replacement of one research program by another when they all refer to superior resources in explaining empirical problems significant within each program.

Stephen Turner recently argued that there are defensible successes in social science which are at odds with the "utopian" claims of "general theory" (see Turner 1992). This,

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[13] The "standard" view of science is associated with a conception of science as a set of universally true statements of externally and independently established objects, where scientific development consists of the gradual accumulation of true statements. The growing challenge to this view culminated with Kuhn's (1962) work. For a general discussion, see Hesse (1980), Newton-Smith (1981), and Papineau (1979).

we believe, is the positive direction that is necessary in the social sciences, but the problem of general theory is not merely that its claims are "utopian." They are also contradictory in their own terms. In answer to the question "What is generalized in general theory?" we are now able to answer that "general theory" generalizes particular explanatory failures.[14] For this reason we offer no alternative in the same terms as those of the theories we are criticizing. To the question "How, then, would *you* relate structure to action?" the answer must be that the division of these categories is an indication of problems in sociological explanations, not the means of solving them. The categories derive from and lead us back to incoherence. This paper has shown that it is impossible to sustain the claim that contradiction can be explained by mere difference in forms of social behavior. The proponents of "action" present the rigid adherence to "deviant" observations as an appropriate form of humility, on the part of social scientists, toward the subjective meanings of actors, but in truth this adherence is an unwarranted privileging of social scientists' incompetence.

We need to see knowledge as an expression of human *accomplishment*. Knowledge is not complete; there are problems to be solved, new resources to be created. The true nature of human creativity is this expansion of resources. Where are we to locate creative activity? Obviously it must address the substantive failures in our understanding, which set limits to our competence. From our argument it follows that every occasion on which the division of the general from the particular seems descriptively necessary in the social sciences is (as in the physical sciences) an occasion on which that description is unsatisfactory. All "contradictory particularisms" consist of representations that are neither theoretically acceptable nor adequately defined empirically. We require a recognition of every contradiction as an explanatory problem.

If physical science is to be taken as the exemplar of general theories, we must recognize that neither physical science nor social science can sensibly be regarded as a closed system of truths, more or less adequately realized. Both must be viewed as a process of the dynamic solution of located problems, which constantly redefines the most general categories. The achievements of physical science are massive and do not depend on a final explanatory adequacy. The temporary perception of generality that scientific achievement produces exists in relation to the solution of specific problems. All forms of science advance as they solve located problems; in that advance, the ideas of their nature and of appropriate methodologies change. The substance of the changes is not a cumulative approach to an unfolding reality but the radical redefinition of understanding and standards of adequacy.

A conception of "totality" is not necessary if one is to move toward adequacy and coherence by solving specific problems. The orientation to the progressive task in the social sciences does not require a general set of principles, or frame of reference, specified in advance and external to specific forms of social scientific explanation. The irony of contemporary social theory is that despite an apparent acceptance of the new understandings provided by postpositivist theories of science, these understandings are contravened in theories of social science. Whereas postpositivist philosophy of science is antifoundational, the proponents of "general theory" in the social sciences are implicitly offering a foundational social theory (albeit of final explanatory inadequacy!). Where social theorists

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[14] We do not have the space for a detailed treatment of a specific explanatory problem which would show how the characteristics of "general theory" are reproduced in a particular empirical case (see Holmwood and Stewart 1991). Even so, our brief example of the emergence of distinct "levels of analysis" in neo-Marxist accounts of capitalism suggests the practical context in which "meta-theoretical" claims emerge. Indeed, Habermas's and Lockwood's claims for the abstract potentialities of practical systems which need not be actualized are illustrated by reference to the Marxist conception.

are explicitly antifoundational, as in the case of postmodernism, they deny the coherence and integration of theoretical categories and relations which, for postpostivist theorists of science, are conditions of explanatory adequacy.

Our object in this paper has been to expose the contradictory nature of modern social theory as an antidote to its unprogressive definition of social issues. Social scientific achievements exist, but modern social theory has served to retard rather than advance social science at precisely those points where the exercise of creative reformulation is necessary. Modern social theory, in its various forms, has advanced the acceptance of contradiction as the substance of social life.

Although we attack social theorists for projecting their *own* confusions as adequate statements of the nature of social existence, *we are not denying that contradictions are a feature of social life*. Social theory is scarcely the only social practice in which contradictions can occur. In most areas, however, contradictions are considered unresourceful and unacceptable as accounts of experience. The resolution of a contradiction may not suggest itself immediately, but until it arrives, bringing an increase in resources and competence, the contradictory substance of experience is lived as incompetence. Social theorists attempt to rename incompetence as human creativity or to promote it as human destiny. We hope we have shown that the contradiction which social theorists embrace so readily is not beyond resolution and that the true issue for social science is not to accept or celebrate its own problems as definitive, but to solve them creatively in addressing the solution of other social problems. A creative and progressive social science would produce new resources through the transformation of theoretical objects and relations. Of course, to accept the task is not to accomplish the required reconstruction, but accomplishment requires the acceptance of the task. Modern social theory turns us away from such acceptance.

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