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Part II
Theoretical Engagements

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From 1968 to 1951: How Habermas Transformed Marx into Parsons

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The 1960s marked a major shift in theoretical sensibilities within sociology, evident in the increasing criticism of what was perceived as an 'orthodox consensus' within the discipline (Atkinson 1971).[1] This orthodox consensus was associated with the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons, which he had presented as the necessary framework for sociological analysis (Parsons 1954 [1950]), as well as at the 'abstract empiricism' of quantitative research (see Mills 1959; Willer and Willer 1973). What lay behind this shift in sensibilities, and grew in momentum, was the rise of new social movements to challenge the prevailing status quo, in particular the Civil Rights Movement in America and, waiting in the wings, second-wave feminism and the Gay Liberation Movement. Moreover, the USA – what Parsons (1966) had called the new 'lead society' – was embroiled in the Vietnam War and opposition to it was growing, while, in Europe, the events of 1968 appeared to be dramatic harbingers of radical social change.

It seemed that after a period of social conformity and conservatism in the 1950s, Western societies, far from being characterized by an 'end of ideology' (Bell 1960), were entering a new 'noisy ideological age' (Baltzell 1972). Parsons's structural-functionalism was the main sociological approach that explicitly addressed macrosocial process, but with its emphasis on social integration, rather than conflict, and on the social system, rather than agency, it was widely seen as deficient in precisely those areas of understanding that were now most pressing. From this moment, there was a move within sociological theory away from the Parsonsian problematic to embrace issues of agency, conflict and change.

This shift in the social context of social theory coincided with Jürgen Habermas's first engagements with sociological theory, largely conducted through the modified Marxism of the Frankfurt School. If, initially, his criticism of Parsons was less than systematic – in common with others, he regarded the deficiencies of structural-functionalism as mostly self-evident – the development of his own position brought him to an understanding of Parsons's theory as something that needed to be addressed more fundamentally. Thus, by 1981, Habermas was writing that 'any theoretical work in sociology today that failed to take account of Talcott Parsons could not be taken seriously' (1981: 174).

The sociological substance of Habermas's theory – broadly, as developed between the early article on 'Technology and science as ideology' (1971 [1968]) and his magnum opus, two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 [1981]; 1987 [1981]) – is a sustained bringing together of Marx (mediated by Weber) and Parsons. However, while the 'dialogue' begins strongly in the voice of Marx, it concludes with that of Parsons being dominant. In the process, Parsons's categories live on in the work of Habermas, but, rather than transcending their flaws, Habermas reproduces them. In this chapter, I shall suggest that this convergence is indicative of wider problems in attempts to recuperate Marxism within sociological theory, problems that have given rise to an impasse and are a continuing legacy of 1968 for sociological theory.

I

Parsons, himself, intended his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (*TSofSA*) (1937), to delineate a shift in sociological theory. In the process, he identified the elements of a general frame of reference that he argued would unify hitherto conflicting forms of social analysis derived from positivist and idealist traditions of social thought. He identified convergent tendencies towards this common framework from within each tradition, and he illustrated this convergence in a detailed treatment of the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto and Alfred Marshall. His account of this '1890–1920 generation' of social theorists of economy and society represented them as a transitional generation presaging a synthesis that would establish the foundations of future scientific endeavours (Parsons 1937). Marx is notable by his absence. The 1890–1920 generation, for Parsons, was a 'transitional' generation, because it was also located in a transition in the institutional development of capitalism itself, a transition that was becoming ever more evident. Developments in capitalism, and not just in the

social sciences, were contributing to the declining salience of Marx's arguments.

In the period between writing *TSofSA* (1937) and *The Social System* (1951), Parsons elaborated these arguments in a range of other books (many co-authored) and articles. The latter book articulated a 'structural-functional' account of society and the relations among the disciplines. In effect, the object of sociology came to be interpreted by Parsons as 'the theory of the social system in its sociologically relevant aspect' (1954 [1950]: 5). The social system was characterized by Parsons in terms of coordinating mechanisms that are generative of tendencies towards perfect integration, considered analytically as an asymptote of the system. 'Environmental' contingencies occur as 'strains' and 'disturbances' that are accommodated to the coordinating mechanisms of action systems (which include the 'rationalization' of their action by actors as integral to the generation of the mechanisms of systems).

The core of these arguments remained in all of Parsons's subsequent works, which can be regarded as their elaboration, rather than a fundamental transformation, as Alexander (1984) proposes. In particular, he went on to develop a conception of coordinating mechanisms in terms of four functional imperatives (goal attainment, adaptation, integration and pattern maintenance) and divided the social system accordingly into four subsystems (polity, economy, societal community and latency subsystems). These further developments did nothing to allay the unease of critics, an unease that was initially focused on *The Social System* and grew throughout the subsequent decade. Moreover, the rising tide of criticism was in stark contrast to Parsons's claims about the foundational role of his general theory, which was to serve an integrative function for the activities of the sociological community itself.

The problems were twofold. One was the emphasis on the integration of the 'total action system'. Parsons frequently argued that this was an *analytical* assumption, rather than a *concrete* description, but while this is a qualification of fundamental importance, it does not eliminate the issue of the problematic empirical reference of the analytical theory. The latter is intended to refer to concrete circumstances, but reference is in terms of the mechanisms identified through the idea of functions. These identify tendencies towards integration as a property of concrete systems of action, *in so far as they can be analysed as systems*. The second issue was that of how the empirical reference of the scheme bears upon its adequacy. Any lack of integration in concrete systems of action is, for

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Parsons, precisely that, *concrete*, lacking any *equivalent* theorization to that of integration in terms of the scheme and its analytical categories.

What also appeared crucial to his critics was that precisely what was identified by Parsons as 'mere' empirical phenomena, namely conflict, contradiction and transformative social change, were all issues that came to the fore in the changed social circumstances of the 1960s (see, for example, Dahrendorf 1958; Gouldner 1970; Lockwood 1956, 1964; Rex 1961). Moreover, although the scheme was described, analytically, as containing no concrete data that can be 'thought away', it seemed to embody the circumstances of late capitalism (its separations of economy and polity, etc.) as the 'end point' of history. It was, then, a developmental scheme in which no further fundamental transformations were conceivable, except as regression or de-differentiation (Holmwood 1996).

II

As already suggested in the introduction, the 1960s initially presaged a major change in theoretical sensibility and, to many commentators, an apparent shift in the focus of conceptualization as significant as that claimed by Parsons for the 1890–1920 generation. Parsons's neglect of Marx, alongside the claimed convergence of Durkheim and Weber, two sociologists frequently seen as offering radically distinct approaches, was something that came to the fore with critics seeking alternative readings of the 'classics' that would open up the dimensions of conflict and change apparently neglected by Parsons (see Pope *et al*. 1975; Warner 1978).

While Marx, especially, was seen to have contributed to those areas where Parsons's theory was perceived as deficient, on closer examination, this response also frequently conceded the same point that Parsons (1967) had made, and that had led to his dismissal of Marx, namely that Weber incorporated the important insights of Marx, but did so in a way more appropriate to the development of systematic sociological theory (Rex 1961; Lockwood 1964; Habermas 1987 [1981]). Not the least of the reasons for this preference for a Weber-inflected version of Marx was that Parsons was seen to have shifted from an action frame of reference to a systems approach in which 'external structures' dominated over actors. Critics frequently perceived a problem of structural determinism in Marx too, albeit a determinism directed towards the production of change. In this context, Weber was seen to be superior to Marx, just in so far as he addressed action as a fundamental category of social theory. At the same time, he seemed to share Marx's concern with power

and social change, which is not to say that Weber's writings were not themselves argued to be imbued with other problems.

Habermas (1971), writing from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, published a series of essays that continued the theme of the tendency of 'politics' to be reduced to 'administration' and the public sphere to be dominated by 'expertise'. To some extent, Weber represented an antidote with his appreciation of value-rational action alongside instrumentally rational action. However, for Habermas, Weber did not develop this framework sufficiently, and so remained captured by a 'subjective' conception of action that did not develop the implications of systems of purposive rationality *and* intersubjective meanings (1971 [1968]: 91). Habermas proposed to do this through the dimension of 'work' and 'interaction', or what he would later call 'system' and 'lifeworld'.

Initially, Habermas barely referenced Parsons, except to state that he shared Weber's 'subjectivism', implying a failure to transcend the individualistic means – end framework of the latter. Significantly, however, when Habermas specified the substance of the two dimensions of work and interaction they appear remarkably similar to what Parsons himself had proposed. Thus, he writes, 'Purposive-rational action realizes defined goals under given conditions. But while instrumental action organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to criteria of an effective control of reality, strategic action depends only on the correct evaluation of possible alternative choices, which results from calculations supplemented by values and maxims' (1971 [1968]: 92). In contrast, he writes, 'by "interaction", on the other hand, I understand *communicative action*, symbolic interaction. It is governed by binding *consensual norms*, which define reciprocal expectations about behaviour and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects. Social norms are enforced through sanctions' (1971 [1968]: 92).

What is striking is that Habermas also follows Parsons in terms of how he attributes violations of order to contingency. In the case of purposive action, violation has the form of incompetence, while in the case of the violation of norms, it has the form of 'deviance'. In the former, violation elicits failure, or lack of success, as intrinsic to the action, while in the latter case it elicits sanctions from others. He states further that 'learned rules of purposive-rational action supply us with *skills*, internalized norms with *personality structures*. Skills put us in a position to solve problems; motivations allow us to follow norms' (1971 [1968]: 92).

It is perhaps a little too soon to claim that these have a similar elaboration to that found in Parsons, where coordinating mechanisms

of interaction serve to secure the integration necessary to their character as systems. At least initially, Habermas distanced his account from that of Parsons by attaching it to another critique, that of David Lockwood's (1964) discussion of 'system integration' and 'social integration'. Habermas treated these as equivalent to his own categories of 'system' and 'lifeworld'. However, I shall suggest that these terms play a different role for Lockwood than they do for Habermas. An examination of their role in Lockwood will indicate the way in which a very specific Marxist concern with contradiction begins to be displaced in Habermas's treatment.

We have seen that criticisms of Parsons tend to focus around issues of conflict and social change. At the same time, the distinction between the social system conceived *analytically* in terms of its integration and *concrete* systems which are less than fully integrated was also seen implicitly to be a distinction between action in conformity with the system and action as *deviance*. In so far as Parsons was able to deal with conflict, it seemed to be only by regarding it as a form of deviance. At the same time, systematic processes are associated with mechanisms for securing the reproduction of systems against potential deviance. What is missing is an identification of systematic mechanisms producing deviance (or, more properly, since the very term 'deviance' implies its contingent, rather than systematic, character, *oppositional interests*). As already argued, the problem seems to point both to the lack of generality achieved by the Parsonsian scheme and to a limitation in its conception of action.

Drawing on Marx's analysis of capitalism, Lockwood suggested that what was missing, in functionalism and conflict theory alike, was a concept of *system contradiction*.[2] Simply put, Parsons had no place for the idea that the parts of a social system may contain tendencies towards malintegration. According to Lockwood, those tendencies may eventually come to the surface in the form of oppositional interests and conflicts among actors. These conflicts may, or may not, then be contained by the normative order. Thus, Lockwood proposes an independent role for the dimension of social integration in managing problems of system integration.

Rather than proposing two separate models of 'conflict' or 'consensus' as earlier conflict theorists such as Dahrendorf (1958) and Rex (1961) had done in response to *The Social System*, Lockwood argued that it was necessary to consider the question of cooperation, conflict and social change in terms of two distinct, but inter-related, sets of processes. One concerned normative processes of *social integration*, the other concerned

material processes of *system integration*. The problem with Parsons was that he conflated the two and emphasized the mutual operation of both sets of processes; the task for Lockwood was to be more aware of the possibility of contradictions within the system and how they are managed at the level of social integration.

Lockwood's article was highly influential, but it was not clear what kind of further development he thought should follow from it – his own book-length study based on the article (Lockwood 1992) did not appear until very much later. He used Marx's account of the contradiction between forces and relations of production in capitalism as an example of a problem at the level of system integration, but he did not fully endorse the example as one that was correct in its own terms. Its purpose was to show a type of sociological argument that was outside the confines of Parsons's functionalism and, in this respect, the point was very effectively made. However, it is difficult to see that there could be a *general statement* of contradiction, rather than a series of substantive analyses of specific contradictions, each difficult to accommodate to the Parsonsian treatment on integrative tendencies (see Holmwood 1996).[3]

While others also took up Lockwood's categories and sought to develop them as part of a systematic framework, in particular Giddens (1984), Archer (1988) and Mouzelis (1995), Habermas is particularly interesting because of his own background in Marxism. Ironically, this involved turning around the significance that Lockwood had drawn from Marx's analysis of the contradictions of capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, given the continuity of capitalism, it must appear that system contradictions have been successfully managed at the level of social integration. If Lockwood perceived the problem in Parsons's work to be the absence of a concept of system contradiction, the problem in Marx's work potentially appeared to be an inadequate account of mechanisms of social integration. At the same time that Habermas adopted the categories of system and social integration from Lockwood, then, he shifted the focus back towards mechanisms of social integration, in particular considered from the perspective of supplying a missing 'normative' dimension.

It is this that explains certain peculiarities of Habermas's (1981) first sustained critique of Parsons. Habermas associates the dimensions of system and social integration with two distinct approaches to the coordination of action. Each offers a paradigm of action, but, while the mechanisms of social integration are directly based on action orientations, the mechanisms of system integration operate through the consequences of action.[4] Thus, he writes that

> in the former case, action is integrated through conscious mutuality in the action orientations of the parties concerned. In the latter case, action is integrated through a functional coupling of the consequences of action to each other, consequences that may remain latent or beyond the conscious horizon of the action orientations of the actors involved.
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> (1981: 175)

According to Habermas, the task for social theory is how to synthesize the two approaches and how to prevent their 'bifurcation' (in which one dimension comes to be over-emphasized at the expense of the other), something he believes occurs both in Marx and, more importantly for our purposes, in Parsons (although, even here, his criticism is ambivalent because he has to recognize that the latter's four-function paradigm has two sets of functions each specified in relation to what Habermas identified as the dimensions of system and social integration; the bifurcation is, in fact, better expressed as a problematic elision of the fundamental difference between them).

The critical literature on Parsons had developed since Lockwood had written, and Habermas accepts many of the interpretations that had become standard, especially those of Scott (1963) and Martindale (1971). Thus, he identifies phases in the development of Parsons's theory that have him beginning from an appropriate recognition of 'action' in *TSofSA* and tipping over into a 'systems' approach that displaces 'action'. The consequence, however, is that, unlike Lockwood, he criticizes Parsons for an overemphasis on system integration at the cost of a properly worked out conception of social integration as its complement.

In setting out this account of Parsons's theoretical development, Habermas makes the argument familiar from his earlier essay on science and technology that, in Parsons's early writing, 'in the last analysis the single unit act of an isolated actor remains the critical building block' (1981: 179). For Habermas, this emphasis on the 'monadic actor' means that coordination mechanisms operating through the unintended consequences of action receive greater theoretical emphasis than those that derive from actions oriented to mutual understanding and, therefore, 'with the concept of values as an already intersubjectively shared culture' (1981: 180). As Habermas puts it, 'if one first treats action-oriented decisions as *an emergent of the private arbitrariness of isolated actors,* as Parsons did then one deprives oneself of a mechanism that could explain the emergence of a system of action out of unit acts' (1981: 180). These, of course, are significant misrepresentations

of Parsons's work. Indeed, Habermas's own account contains the very specification provided by Parsons in *The Social System*.[5]

Significantly, Habermas believes that Parsons came closer to an adequate approach in his later work when he elaborates his conception of different systems, namely personality system, social system and culture system. However, the linking of these three systems is inadequate, he believes, precisely because Parsons lacks an appropriate development of the subjective aspect of action, as is found in phenomenological or hermeneutic schools of thought. Yet, the basic architecture of the theoretical framework appears to be very similar to the one advocated by Habermas. In part, this is because Habermas fails to comprehend that the different phases in the development of Parsons's theory are driven by the attempt to overcome the dualism of two paradigms within a single frame of reference. Indeed, Habermas comes to criticize Parsons for failing to recognize the intermediation of culture, society and personality, writing that 'Parsons abandoned trying to explain in action-theoretical terms the notion that cultural values enter society and personality via institutionalization and internalization, respectively. Instead a model of mutually interpenetrating but analytically separate systems gains a central position on his theoretical stage' (1981: 183).[6]

Yet Habermas's formal scheme of categories is also convergent with that of Parsons, in the sense that he comes to accept that the two paradigms of system and lifeworld each operates in terms of two functional imperatives (see, Habermas 1984). Indeed, when he addresses the issue that any scheme of functional imperatives tends to overemphasize integration, he has recourse to the idea that functional imperatives can operate autonomously as well as interdependently.

At the same time, Habermas confirms Parsons's account of structural differentiation that is derived from the analysis of functional imperatives, as a *description* of modern societies. However, his own interpretation of the critical resources integral to the paradigm of the lifeworld suggests to him that this can also be represented as a form of alienation. Here, Habermas apparently draws on Marx, but, once again, his critique is different from that of Lockwood. Where the latter had drawn on the idea of the contradiction between forces and relations of production within the processes of system integration, Habermas draws on Marx's idea of an alienated lifeworld, separated from economic and political subsystems and subordinated to them, and thereby deformed. The problem, Habermas suggests, is that the steering mechanisms of system integration continue to require legitimation, but the lifeworld may lack the capacity to do so because of its deformation.

Given that Habermas fails to identify any substantive problems of system integration, the problem of social integration that he identifies is essentially that of *anomie* – loss of meaning – rather than alienation. What drops away is the specific idea of system contradiction as discussed by Lockwood (as an issue *within* the system and not simply *between* it and the dimension of social integration).

Habermas is critical of Marx precisely because he fails to recognize that structural differentiation is a necessary feature of modern society. Habermas specifically represents the creation of differentiated subsystems as a process of societal learning by resolving system problems that represent evolutionary challenges (1987 [1981]: 305). The creation of separate 'media-steered' subsystems is not itself the problem for Habermas. He writes,

> Marx conceives of capitalist society so strongly as a totality that he fails to recognize the *intrinsic* evolutionary *value* that media-steered subsystems possess. He does not see that the differentiation of the state apparatus and the economy *also* represents a higher level of system differentiation, which simultaneously opens up new steering possibilities *and* forces a reorganization of the old, feudal class relationships. The significance of this level of integration goes beyond the institutionalization of a new class relationship.
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> (1987 [1981]: 339)

Nor is the 'new' class relationship the same as that set out by Marx. With the rise of the welfare state has come an 'institutionalization of class conflict' in the sociological sense, where 'the social antagonism bred by private disposition over the means of producing social wealth increasingly loses its structure-forming power for the life world of social groups, although it does remain constitutive for the structure of the economic system' (1987 [1981]: 348).

Given that Habermas accepts that the social antagonism contained within the economic subsystem does not operate within the lifeworld, it is difficult to know what remains of its substance as contradictory (in either Marx's or Lockwood's sense). Moreover, when Habermas identifies pathologies of capitalist modernity, these are associated with the 'fragmentation' of the lifeworld and its 'colonization' by systems of purposive rationality. Even where the system dominates over the lifeworld this, apparently, does not bring social antagonism into the lifeworld, but is part of a process of masking contradiction!

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At this point, Habermas is operating within the same problematic theoretical context as Parsons. On the one hand, general theory sets out the general requirements of systems of interaction as practical systems and as systems of communicative action. Both dimensions are defined by the requirements of integration. Obviously, Habermas presents an apparently more radical approach than Parsons, suggesting that the logic of practical systems can dominate over the lifeworld. However, his own theoretical approach suggests that there is an overarching logic, which is expressed in the four-function paradigm that each shares, and describes a balance in the operation of functional imperatives as the optimal state of a system of interaction.

In this context, it is somewhat surprising that Habermas declares that Parsons lacks the theoretical resources to address the resistance to colonization that the lifeworld can engender, since the resources that Habermas is identifying are derived from the theoretical categories they have in common. Indeed, part of the misunderstanding is that they disagree in their description of the concrete systems of capitalist modernity to which they apply their theories. What Habermas describes as the colonization of the lifeworld in late modernity, Parsons describes as a relatively healthy societal community (Parsons 2007).

However, Parsons's and Habermas's presentations of general theory are not without problems that bear upon the issue of its logical consistency, even in its own terms. In the case of Parsons, this is the presentation of a system of action in the context of untheorized and contingent deviance. Second, and more importantly, it appears that general theory *presents the analytical form of a generalized action system as without problems*. The integrated form of the generalized action system is, for Parsons, as Alexander (1985) says, a 'possibility' – in terms both of the 'valid knowledge' and of the 'values' that it expresses. It would, therefore, be impossible to associate problem-solving activity with the substance of social life, since a 'possible' solution is already available in the facilities integral to the theoretical form of the system to which concrete actions asymptotically tend. In so far as Habermas also sets out the characteristics of systems and their coordinating mechanisms, he reproduces this formulation. Notwithstanding any wish to argue that the 'logic' of systems can give rise to the 'colonization' of the lifeworld, any resources for resistance are given in its corresponding (and, apparently, countervailing) logic.

Ironically, it would seem that, from the perspective of Habermas, late modern lifeworlds do lack resources to ward off the colonizing tendencies of systems of purposive rationality, while for Parsons the transition

from early to mature capitalism is to be characterized by a deepening of the structures of the societal community. However, in representing the colonization of the lifeworld in terms of the expansion of subsystems of economic and political rationality that are otherwise to be recognized as positive, it seems to be Habermas that lacks the resources for their critique. Certainly, the Marxist account of their contradictory character no longer supplies the substance of that critique and remains only as a rhetorical shell.

The problem for Habermas is that he entered the terrain of Parsons and accepted that a general theoretical framework is a necessary pre-condition for social enquiry and that it can be grounded in terms of a generalized problem of social order. Thus, Habermas writes, 'naturally even the simplest action systems cannot function without a certain amount of *generalized* action assumptions. Every society has to face the basic problem of coordinating action: how does ego get alter to continue action in the desired way? How does he avoid conflicts that interrupt the sequence of action?' (1987 [1981]: 179). Any general statement of the problem of order begs the question of a general solution, for it sets order not against particular problems, as did Marx, but against a general threat of chaos, where, according to Habermas, 'the fundamental function of world-maintaining interpretive systems is the avoidance of chaos, that is, overcoming of contingency' (1976: 118).

With statements like this, Habermas's convergence with Parsons is complete. At the same time, the implication must be that the problems of such schemes are not contingent to a particular writer – either Parsons or Habermas – but are intrinsic to the very project of general theory (see Holmwood 1996). Adding Marx does little to transform the scheme, but rather gives rise to the systematic evacuation of precisely those concerns with agency, conflict and change that led to calls for his incorporation into the synthesis of classical social theory held to be the necessary foundation for social enquiry.

On the one hand, the profound and sweeping nature of Marx's theoretical scheme reinforced the idea that it would be compatible with the project of general theory. On the other hand, Marx's focus on the particularity of social contradictions – that they are always specific and substantive, requiring solution in their own terms, and never general – suggests an alternative approach to that of general theory. The legacy of 1968 in social theory has primarily been in the development of general theory leading to the impasse described in this chapter. This impasse has been recognized, but frequently, as in the case of postmodern theory, leading only to the embrace of the very contingency that is part

of the impasse. Indeed, this is itself part of the emphasis on 'agential disruption' brought in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s. What has been tried less frequently is the address of substantive social contradictions – contradictions other than those identified by Marx – as the object of social theory.

Notes

1. This is an edited version of a paper that first appeared in *the Czech Sociological Review* 44(5), 2008. Thanks to the editors for permission to reproduce it here.
2. He also offered an illustration drawn from Weber of the contradiction of patrimonial bureaucracy in a near-subsistence economy.
3. In fact, in Lockwood's own later work he seems to come implicitly to this conclusion. Much like Burger (1977), he suggests that the problem of order – of the relation between normative and non-normative influences on behaviour – is better addressed in a series of substantive studies than it has been in terms of general theory. He writes, 'this is another reason for thinking that the search for grand theory, whether by way of synthesis or contestation, may be misdirected' (1992: 395).
4. This corresponds with Lockwood's statement that the distinction between 'system integration' and 'social integration' is a 'wholly artificial one' (1964: 245), implying that they are two perspectives on a single system of action.
5. Thus, Habermas writes, 'I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agent involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions. In this respect the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of the interpretive accomplishments required for communicative action' (1984 [1981]: 285–6). This is mirrored in Parsons's statement that 'the most important single implication of this generalization [of symbol systems] is perhaps the possibility of communication, because the situation of two actors are *never* identical and without the capacity to abstract meanings from the most particular situations communication would be impossible. But in turn this stability of a symbol system, a stability which must extend between individuals and over time, could probably not be maintained unless it functioned in a communication process in the interaction of a plurality of actors. It is such a shared symbolic system which functions in the interaction of a plurality of actors which will here be called a *cultural tradition*' (1951: 11).
6. It should be clear that Parsons does have a clear view of 'interpenetration' operating through processes of institutionalization and internalization. Indeed, Lockwood's criticism of him was precisely that these were the primary processes within his account. Habermas's criticism is more effective against Parsons's German student Niklas Luhmann's idea of autopoietic social systems (Luhmann 1995 [1984]). The latter does propose a form of general systems functionalism that is hostile to the 'humanistic' orientation of a theory

of communicative action. According to Luhmann, self-regulating social systems construct themselves self-referentially as social relationships made up of differentiated subsystems. These subsystems interact, but have their own relatively autonomous logics, and are not limited by a pre-given set of functions. However, this is not what Parsons is arguing. Since he explicitly sets out four functional imperatives with a similar substance as that identified by Habermas, it is hard to accept that he gives over the functions of 'integration' and 'latency' to self-steering systems of purposive rationality.