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IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS:
TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE THEORY OF ACTION

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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Program Department of Sociology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul as partial requirement for obtaining the Doctoral Degree in Sociology.

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Porto Alegre

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To my parentes

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To the friends I made at the Graduate Program in Sociology at UFRGS, represented by *Alvaro*, *Andressa*, *Luiz*, *Paulinha*, *Thales*, and *Vilson*, I thank them for making my stay in Porto Alegre a time I will always remember with great affection.

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Theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world':
to rationalize, to explain, and to master it.
We endeavour to make the mesh ever finer and finer.
Karl Popper

ABSTRACT

The present thesis aims to provide a theoretical reconstruction of the theory of action, understood here as a kind of general frame of reference, but also as a research program in the human sciences. The problem of investigation here addressed is that of clarifying the *extension* and *limits* of such theory. The general argument of the thesis is that this intellectual tradition goes back further than Parsons immediately pointed out during his first tentative synthesis and that it can be traced back at least as far as to Kant's critical philosophy; from the point of view of its developments, it extends forward into contemporary sociology, but it also finds limits there due to its primary focus on the instrumental-normative divide, thus demanding some further reformulations. In order to support this argument the present thesis is divided into four chapters: (1) the first one addresses the issue of metatheory in order to situate the procedures and the goals of the present reconstruction; (2) the second one deals with the intellectual origins of the theory of action, which covers the contributions coming from classical sociology, especially Durkheim and Weber, and its Neokantian frame of reference; (3) the third one reconstructs in further details the development of the first major synthesis in the theory of action, the so-called "voluntaristic" theory of action, as first proposed by Talcott Parsons; (4) the fourth and last chapter analyzes some developments in action theory and the challenges coming from recent debates that were carried out by authors like Alexander, Münch, Joas and others.

Keywords: Theory of Action, Action Theory, Talcott Parsons, Sociological Theory, Metatheory.

RESUMO

A presente tese visa oferecer uma reconstrução teórica da teoria da ação, entendida aqui como uma espécie de quadro geral de referência, mas também como um programa de pesquisa nas ciências humanas. O problema de investigação aqui abordado é o de esclarecer sua extensão e seus limites. O argumento geral da tese é que esta tradição intelectual remonta mais longe do que Parsons imediatamente apontou em sua primeira tentativa de síntese, podendo ser retraçada em suas origens até a filosofia crítica de Kant; do ponto de vista de seus desenvolvimentos, ela se estende até a sociologia contemporânea, mas também encontra aí limites, que se devem a sua demasiada ênfase na divisão instrumental-normativa e acabam por requer assim algumas reformulações adicionais. A fim de sustentar este argumento, o presente trabalho é dividido em quatro capítulos: (1) o primeiro aborda a questão da metateoria a fim de situar os procedimentos e os objetivos da presente reconstrução; (2) o segundo trata das origens intelectuais da teoria da ação, que abrange as contribuições provenientes da sociologia clássica, especialmente Durkheim e Weber, e seu quadro de referência neokantiano; (3) o terceiro reconstrói com mais detalhes o desenvolvimento da primeira grande síntese da teoria da ação, a chamada teoria da ação "voluntarista", como proposta inicialmente por Talcott Parsons; (4) o quarto e último capítulo analisa alguns desenvolvimentos da teoria da ação e os desafios provenientes de debates recentes realizados por autores como Alexander, Münch, Joas e outros.

Palavras-chave: Teoria da Ação, Teoria da Ação, Talcott Parsons, Teoria Sociológica, Metateoria.

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike most works in the sociological field, the present thesis can be classified as a metatheoretical work, which means, for didactic purposes, that it deals with theories as its main objects of investigation. In this general field, one finds not only a series of discourses about how social life operates but a series of arguments about the history of sociology itself, which can, in principle, be told and retold in countless ways. Faced with this ocean of hermeneutic possibilities, the establishment of meaning connections pursued by the researcher reveals itself as fundamentally dependent on processes of theoretical reconstructions that may privilege certain specific aspects within the research programs at stake – such as their context, their empirical findings, their models of analysis, their theoretical schemes, or even their metatheoretical assumptions. Within this field of possible reconstructions, one of the most persistent and fruitful ways of approaching the problems of sociological theory seems to be the one according to which the history of the discipline can be understood, from the point of view of its main assumptions, as oscillating between moments characterized by great attempts at theoretical synthesis and moments of discursive fragmentation. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that this mode of reconstruction, carried out by distinguished sociologists in the twentieth century, not only has yielded some of the most important developments in the history of sociology but it may still be fruitful to think about the present state of affairs in contemporary sociology

Once the issue of synthesis was identified as a fundamental axis of the history of sociology, the object chosen by the present research as its primary focus of analysis and investigation was what is here called "theory of action", with a special emphasis on its first modern formulation, the voluntarist theory of action, as conceived by Talcott Parsons in the 1930s. The choice of this object is justified, in this context, for two reasons: first, because of the centrality exercised by the Parsonsian synthesis, understood by many as a template for the later synthetic attempts taking place under the label of "new theoretical movement" in the 1980s; second, because its due investigation could serve as the first step to those concerned with establishing new connections and new theoretical syntheses within contemporary sociology, which is currently characterized by a pronounced discursive fragmentation.

The problem of investigation posed here is the one concerning the enlightening of the *extent* and the *limits* of this attempt at synthesis carried out under the auspices of the Parsonian

enterprise. The central argument of the thesis can thus be divided into two moments. (1) First, I argue that the "theory of action," as first expressed in the Parsonsian synthesis, can be understood as having a wider scope than sociologists usually think. It embraces a lineage of thinking that has its roots in Kant's critical philosophy, develops into the sociologies of Durkheim and Weber, to be then formulated and developed by Parsons. I argue that this continuity can be consistently understood from the point of view of its metatheoretical presuppositions and the positions taken by these authors concerning the problems of action and order, taken as organizing problems of sociological theory. In the following, I argue that this lineage extends to contemporary developments that include, most immediately, the neo-functionalism of Alexander and Münch. (2) With respect to the limits of this lineage of thought, I subscribe to the general argument of authors concerned with action theory, such as Joas and Staubmann, who have drawn attention to the difficulties faced by such theory in thinking about issues concerning what I have called here the "aesthetic-expressive" dimension. In the final part of the thesis, I suggest that, in principle, such limits can still be overcome within the framework of Kantian critical philosophy that, according to the argument developed here, underlies the theory of action. In order to support such a general argument concerning the extent and limits of the theory of action, the theoretical reconstruction proposed here is divided into four chapters.

In the first chapter, I deal with the theme of theoretical reconstructions in the context of postwar sociological disputes and the emergence of metatheory as a subfield of research. Also in this chapter, I present a classification of the types of metatheoretical work, their cognitive goals, and their potentialities in an attempt to provide a justification for theoretical work in sociology. In the last part of the chapter, I present some open lines of research in this field and connect these with the research agenda of the present thesis.

In the second chapter, I begin the reconstruction of the intellectual origins of the theory of action by means of a central thread that refers to the distinction between metatheoretical assumptions and the fundamental problems in social theory. Firstly, I argue that this double axis of analysis can only be fully appreciated in connection with the first and second Kantian critiques. I then argue that both Durkheim and Weber should be understood as heirs of this intellectual lineage and that there is a significant convergence between them in what concerns the levels of both the metatheory and the presuppositions of their social theories.

In the third chapter, I analyze Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action, understood as a first systematic synthesis of the theory of action. Following the same axis applied to Durkheim and Weber, I reconstruct the Parsonsian theory from the point of view of its metatheory and its

more general theoretical assumptions. In this case, I seek to provide a systematization capable of doing justice to Parsons' systematic spirit and, in the process, correct minor blind spots in his theoretical edifice. In the case of the theory of order, I draw on his reconstruction of positivistic theory, but supplement it with an equivalent interpretation of the idealistic theory, in order to balance his reconstruction of the history of social thought.

In the fourth and last chapter, I focus on further developments of the theory of action. First, I discuss the unfoldings of the voluntaristic synthesis and the move towards a general theory of action. Then, I explore the late refinements of Parsons' theory of action. Finally, I present some contemporary developments on the legacy of the theory of action in order to point out both its limits and possibilities.

Before ending this introduction, I would like to say something about the methodological procedures employed here. In the present thesis, I make use of a methodology that can be called reconstructive. In this case, the reconstructive activity starts from the formulation of provisional hypotheses about the unity of a meaningful complex underlying a certain set of theoretical statements, which, in turn, may be more or less useful in assisting their interpretation. Through this confrontation with a certain set of statements, the hypothesis about their meaningful unity can be reformulated, which leads to a new interpretation of the particular statements, and so on. This whole process of (re)constitution of meaning takes place through the selection of particular statements or sets of statements and their arrangement in a certain order that intends to make clear hitherto unobvious relations between arguments and lines of thought present in the texts. In a way, theoretical reconstruction is always a new construction of meaning.

Reconstructive theoretical works, from smallest to largest ones, always make use of certain metatheoretical concepts and analytical distinctions that derive from distinct intellectual lineages and which can be proved more or less fruitful for certain tasks. The most sophisticated reconstructions not only make adequate use of these intellectual tools but are also usually aware of their historical roots, implications, and limits. Our "tentative hypothesis" in this respect was that for the purposes of reconstructing the main assumptions and the cognitive goals of the "theory of action", especially the Parsonian version, it would be useful to return to the set of concepts provided by Kant's critical philosophy. I will argue that there are good reasons for subscribing to such a tentative hypothesis and, in fact, this has already been done in the secondary literature. Still, while the provisional hypothesis serving here as my starting point is not original, the hermeneutic reconstruction initiated from it preserves, I would argue, the

singular traits that characterize every reconstruction. The quality of such singularity is to be judged, of course, by its readers.

CHAPTER 1
METATHEORY AS A THEORETICAL STRATEGY IN SOCIOLOGY

1.1   THEORETICAL   DISPUTES   AND   METATHEORETICAL   SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Among the so-called human sciences, sociology is probably the one that enjoys a closer relationship with its classical theorists. Seen by some as a symptom of a certain lack of scientific maturity, this fact can be understood, however, as a sort of hermeneutic advantage from which the theorist of the human sciences - irrevocably immersed in a plurality of paradigms - can attribute a temporal order to his/her discourse. Perhaps because of this perception, sociology experiences, more than other disciplines, a movement of constant rediscovery and revisiting of its own history and of its classical proponents.

Within the sociological history of the twentieth century, however, the reconstruction and re-reading of the classical authors were seen by many as more than just a manner of intellectually ordering of the paradigms at stake. As Alexander (1987b) has shown, beyond this hermeneutic function, the return to the classics was understood by many sociologists as a strategic move for the demarcation and legitimization of their own research projects, whether with the purpose of constituting new theoretical syntheses, demarcating specific traditions or even settling polemics. The interpretation of the classics, in this sense, was systematically used as a kind of "theoretical argument".

1.1.1 - The Sociological Classics and Theoretical Disputes in the Post War Period

The first great theoretical synthesis of modern sociology, put forward by Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), largely used this type of strategy. After almost eight hundred pages of close examination and exegesis of classic texts, the American sociologist seemed to set out not only specific interpretations of each of the authors at stake - from which he could justify sociology and supply it with a canon for the first time - but an original theoretical argument, his famous "convergence thesis," which brought together names such as Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber under common protocol in an attempt to establish both a general

interpretive grid and a unified theoretical framework for future sociology, the so-called "voluntarist theory of action". Part of the alleged impact of this book seems to be due to the success of the articulation between textual exegesis and original theoretical elaboration. In fact, there have been very few moments in the history of sociology in which such significant advancements could be observed on these two fronts.[1]

As a consequence of his innovative and wide-ranging arguments concerning the history of social thought, Parsons soon became both a central intellectual figure and a major target of interpretative criticism to all those who wanted to settle within the sociological field. The disputes around his work, as it is well known, took place on both fronts: the interpretation of classics and the meaning of convergence thesis, on the one hand, and the strengths and limits of his theoretical edifice, on the other. In the first of these fields, it is possible to say that despite the interpretive endeavors of collaborators and former students − such as Eisenstadt's interpretation of Weber (1968) and Bellah's presentation of Durkheim (1973) − the readings promoted during the 1960s and 1970s within the specialized literature tended to question Parsons' interpretations through a series of polemic disputes.

In Weber's case, this attempt appears more explicitly in the introduction of a famous edition of Weber's texts organized by Gerth and Mills (1946), in which the authors - by means of an analysis centered on the dichotomy between bureaucracy and charisma - end up emphasizing the conflictual aspects of Weberian theory so that it is brought closer to the theories of Marx and Nietzsche. This interpretative dispute, however, reaches a new level with the publication of Weber's biography written by Bendix (1960) and the works of his student, Roth (1968; Bendix & Roth, 1971).[2] In this case, the criticism was directed to an interpretation overly focused on the themes of rationalization and the processes of normative integration, an approach that seemed to imply, from the perspective of these authors, a certain evolutionary trend. Bendix and, above all, Roth, opposed this Parsonian Weber to another Weber, more attentive to the processes of domination and for whom the concern with the construction of analytical models and typologies would be subject to an empirical interest toward the historical singularities and particular destiny of the West. The elements of the classic debate – which

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[1] It is worth mentioning that as his project developed, Parsons revisited, from time to time, the works of classical sociologists to make further readings, comments, and elaborations (1942a; 1942b; 1950; 1960; 1968; 1973b; 1980; 1981). In the end, he believed to have developed a theory that was at the same time an extension and a renewed synthesis of classical social theory, in which he highlighted as privileged interlocutors the figures of Durkheim, Weber, and Freud. (cf. Parsons, 1970, 1973a, 1981).

[2] Parsons reviewed both the biography written by Bendix and the volume published by Bendix and his student, Roth. (See, respectively: Parsons, 1961, 1972).

would be reopened in Germany in the 1970s, after the intervention of Tenbruck – between evolutionist and historicist readings of Weber's work were thus given.[3]

The story of Durkheim's reinterpretation is somewhat more nuanced. His figure appeared for a long time as associated with a certain sociological conservatism, a thesis that seemed to be popular even in his homeland.[4] In United States, the thesis of the conservative Durkheim was sustained by Nisbet (1965). Perhaps because of this association, the creative reassessments of Durkheim's texts aroused little interest among critical sociologists and all the anti-Parsonians during the 1960s. It was only in the 1970s that a renewed image of Durkheim started to rise. In the English-speaking countries, this was largely due to the intervening of Giddens (1971), who defended the unity of Durkheim's work in opposition to the Parsonian thesis of the "two Durkheims". More importantly, Giddens tried to reconcile Durkheim's theory of the division of labor with Marx's writings and concerns, arguing for his interest in the processes of social change within industrial societies. In the same period, Lukes (1973) published an intellectual biography of Durkheim − hailed by some as the best biography ever written about a social scientist − without much reference to Parsons. From then on, not only did a series of works appear in France and the USA in order to renew the readings of the Durkheimian work and its school (Clark, 1973; Kando, 1976; Besnard, 1979), but the old thesis of the conservative Durkheim – not supported by Parsons, but somehow associated with his name − comes to be severely questioned (Filloux 1976; Lacroix, 1981).

This critical movement would eventually reach its climax in what became known, during the 1970s, as the "de-parsonization" of the classics (Pope, 1973; Cohen, Hazelrigg, Pope, 1975). In fact, it was only in the 1980s − when world social theory experienced a certain revival of the parsonianism − that the interpretative pendulum returned to a position of proximity and, at times, defense of Parsons' interpretive legacy. The Kantian approach of Weber's work by Schluchter (1981), the "presuppositional" interpretations of the classics by Alexander (1982b, 1983a), the neo-voluntarist readings on Durkheim and Weber sustained by Münch (1982b), all are representative of this kind of movement.

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[3] Interesting overviews on the reception of Weberian theory in the US and its debates can be found in Antonio (2005), Scaff (2011: chap. 12 and 13) and Sell (2013: chap. 1). For an approach to the competing use of the Weberian concepts among different schools, see Kivisto (1990).
[4] As Heilbron (1985: 203) points out, this general anti-Durkheimian perception present in the postwar French intellectual environment seems to have been summarized in Sartre's famous statement (taken from an essay on Bataille in 1943), later repeated as a motto by many students: "Les faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses" [The social facts are not things].

As previously mentioned, the controversies within the specialized literature were only a part of the disputes at stake. Parsons' true centrality to the field can only be properly understood in view of the debates raised by his substantive theory. It is noteworthy in this regard that distinct authors such as Jonathan Turner (1974), Edward Tiryakian (1979), Jeffrey Alexander (1987a), and, more recently, Hans Joas (2004) argued, in different contexts, that each of the different theoretical movements of post-war sociology − the exchange theory, the symbolic interactionism, the ethnomethodology, and the conflict theory − all arose, in a sense, in opposition to the Parsonian theoretical hegemony. It is clear that, in the end, the two types of debates − about the interpretation of the classics and the theoretical propositions − always maintained a straight connection. In this regard, it seems quite symptomatic that a good part of criticisms against Parsons' theoretical edifice has resorted either to alternative interpretations on classics or by selecting other names for the sociological pantheon, authors supposedly underestimated by him, such as Mead, Simmel, or even Marx.

In the case of *exchange theory* − perhaps the sociological tradition that is less tied to the figures of the sociological pantheon −, the criticism against Parsons was directed at his way of reading and assembling central theoretical questions, something Parsons himself believed to have drawn from the classical theorists of the turn of the century, especially Durkheim and Weber. In his famous inaugural speech to the ASA presidency, George Homans (1964), a former student of Parsons, insisted against his old professor in an anti-functionalist approach to sociology (including the classical one), accusing him of having left little or no space for human action as well as having relied on too abstract and deterministic schemes. In general terms, the tradition of Homans (1961) and Blau (1964), as is well known, tended to revive utilitarian thinking − although with a focus on the strategic aspects of interactions rather than in its economic dimension −, an intellectual tradition regarded by Parsons in 1937 as outdated (one may recall the famous opening: "who still reads Spencer?"). In this context, to rescue an intellectual tradition and to show its possible vitality, even if on a modified basis, was a way to build a well-founded opposition to Parsons, which would have been wrong in its diagnosis.[5]

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[5] Within the sociological literature, Parsons' historical reconstruction of the tradition he called "positivism-utilitarianism" was criticized by authors such as Camic (1979) and Mayhew (1984) in terms of its historical and even methodological claims. The Parsonian argument about the sociological deficit of utilitarianism, according to such authors, would be incorrect from the point of view of a proper understanding of the true intellectual intentions of authors such as Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Hume, Mill, among others. Authors like Alexander (1983b), however, support the correction of the Parsonian argument in analytical terms, i.e., emphasizing, despite any declared pretensions, the difficulties faced by this tradition with regard to the analytical treatment of nonmaterial, symbolic, and normative elements within action frame of reference.

It was not only the exchange theory that drew upon an under-represented tradition in the Parsonian canon. In the case of *symbolic interactionism*, its main representative figure, Herbert Blumer, worked insistently on a series of texts throughout his career (1937, 1966, 1981, 2004) in an attempt to sustain George Herbert Mead as being both a sociological classic and a forerunner of interactionist tradition. In opposition to the alleged normative bias of structural-functionalism, this sort of argument tended to emphasize the importance of processes of communication, interaction, and meaningful negotiation as crucial moments in the constitution of both the expressive self and the interactional order. Departing from this type of argument − which relied on a particular treatment of Mead's work − the interactionists belied to have made a case for pragmatism as one central line of force to sociological analysis. Once again, a tradition supposedly ignored by Parsons was called to take part on the canon of the discipline.[6]

The other branch of interpretive micro-sociology, *ethnomethodology*, initially presented some difficulties in establishing its intellectual affiliations. In any case, this tradition - whose main representative, Harold Garfinkel, had also been a Parsons' former student - did not fail to express its opposition to structural functionalism. In this context, the old problems of action and order began to be reconfigured so that the normative emphasis of functionalism happens to be replaced by a sort of genetic reflection concerning the cognitive frameworks capable of structuring action and the resulting "order". (Garfinkel, 1967) Such differences, of course, are also stated in terms of distinct intellectual roots. In this case, however, the strategy was not to mobilize affiliations forgotten by Parsons but to insist on alternative treatments of those classics that he had enlisted as his precursors. In contrast to Weber's Neokantian reading via Jaspers − later recognized by Parsons (1979) as his great metatheoretical influence − the ethnomethodologists adopted the phenomenological approach proposed by Alfred Schutz. In addition to disagreements regarding Weber's specific interpretation, however, Garfinkel (2002) would later dispute even the Parsons' understanding of Durkheim, allying the French sociologist with the ethnomethodological program.[7]

In the case of *conflict theory*, the role of interpretive disputes as a sort of legitimation strategy is probably the most evident. Lewis Coser (1956), for example, draws upon the works of Simmel and Freud as central references in the elaboration of his functionalist theory of conflict while Rex (1961) sustains a certain centrality of Marx in order to correct the mistakes

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[6] It is also possible to find some interactionists attempts of reinterpreting authors of Parsons canon such as Durkheim (see: Fabermann & Stone, 1967) and, more recently, Weber (see: Segre, 2014)

[7] For an ethnomethodological reading of the works by Durkheim and Weber, see Hilbert (1992). More recently, Garfinkel's pupil, Anne Rawls (2003, 2004), has been working on an interesting ethnomethodological reinterpretation of Durkheim's work.

of Parsonian functionalism. At the same time, authors like Dahrendorf (1959) and, later, the young Collins (1975), rely on a conflictual interpretation of Weber's work where the dimension of strategic actions, power disputes, and social domination, as well as a certain historicist emphasis, are opposed to the supposedly normative, functionalist and evolutionist aspects emphasized by Parsons.[8] Once again, this type of reconstruction of the classics is not limited to an interpretive dispute, but refers to a critical diagnosis: structural functionalism would be, according to these authors, too much committed to the notion of system equilibrium and would be incapable of capturing the real historical movement of societies.

1.1.2 - A New (Meta)Theoretical Movement

At the end of the 1970s, the sociological scene was characterized by a significant theoretical and interpretative fragmentation. None of the opponents of Parsonianism seemed to have achieved the hegemony of their predecessor. In a way, this multiplicity of theoretical perspectives appeared in the eyes of most American sociologists as an urgent problem and the general climate seemed to be that of a "coming crisis in Western sociology", to mention a famous title of the time (Gouldner, 1970).

According to the empirical view current in sociology at that time − classically represented by authors such as Zetterberg (1954), Homans (1961), and Wallace (1969, 1971) − theory should follow a strictly inductive logic and, ultimately, all theoretical divergences should be able to be translated in such a way that they could be solved on the basis of more localized empirical work, usually associated with the use of quantitative methodologies. The remaining divergences, according to this type of perspective, would result either from the temporary persistence of error (negative sense) or from the growing division of labor and specialization of empirical work (positive sense).

As Zhao (2001) pointed out in a retrospective account, the prevailing belief was, for some time, that the problem of theoretical fragmentation, or at least a good part of it, would be solved by future improvements in research methodologies. However, as these improvements were being achieved and the theoretical situation remained without a solution, the sociological interest started to return more and more to the problem of the theory construction. The classical work of Stinchcombe (1968) on the construction of theories in sociology, the attempt of

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[8] At this point, of course, such authors make use of and agree with the interpretations previously mentioned within the specialized literature such as those promoted by Mills, Bendix, and Roth.

Friedrichs (1970) to promote one sociology of sociology, and the works of Ritzer (1975a, 1975b, 1981) on the paradigms in sociology constitute some examples of this kind of epochal perception.

It is worth noting, in this case, that the sociological interest in the construction of theories echoes and refers to some developments taking place in the field of the philosophy of science at that time. In this context, the traditional empirical view of science according to which theoretical language would be conceived as possibly adequate but fundamentally distinct from observational language - in which a possible linguistic neutrality of observations would be assumed - came under severe criticism. After Popper's (1934) famous criticisms to the notion of verification and the problems raised by Quine (1951) regarding theoretical underdetermination, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a new wave of criticism towards that sort of scientific view traditionally linked to logical empiricism. In this case, one may find a series of philosophers concerned no longer exactly with the question of theoretical underdetermination by experience, but with the possible overdetermination of the latter by theory. Authors like Hanson (1958), Kuhn (1962), Toulmin (1972), Laudan (1977), and Lakatos (1978) started to call attention to theoretical, metatheoretical, and historical elements to guide the processes of observation, categorization, modeling, empirical tests, and explanation taking place in "paradigms" (Kuhn), "research programs" (Lakatos), and "traditions of research" (Laundan).

From the sociological point of view, this general discussion called attention to the need of reconstructing and explaining not only the logic of the discoveries or observations but also the foundations of the theoretical logic of research programs in sociology. Debates about the nature of theories (their logical and semantic structure) and the models of explanation (e.g. causal, interpretive, functional, genealogic) then become privileged objects of reflection not only for methodologists but for a whole generation of ambitious young sociologists − that turned out to be the protagonists of what would become known as the "new theoretical movement" (Alexander, 1987c). In this context, one may recall the epistemological and methodological discussions presented in Bourdieu's *The Craft of Sociology* (1968), Habermas's *Logic of the Social Sciences* (1968), as well as in *The New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), published some year later by Giddens, and Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-3; esp. vol.1).

However, this kind of general orientation towards the clarification of the theoretical logic and the elaboration of theories came accompanied, as suggested above, by a pressing

concern: the need to overcome the post-Parsonian theoretical fragmentation. This task was carried out through several attempts of reviewing, reinterpreting, and restructuring the debates posed by the previous generation of theorists. The first wave of reflections on the theoretical and epistemological bases of sociology was then followed by a series of critical balances about the legacy of functionalism, structuralism, interactionism, ethnomethodology, rational-choice theories, phenomenology, historical materialism, etc. These traditions of thought became thereby prime targets of critical reconstructions by authors such as Habermas (1976), Giddens (1979), Collins (1981), Alexander (1987a), Archer (1988), and others.[9]

Finally, this set of critical balances was succeeded by the emergence of original attempts at synthesis in which the fundamental dichotomies hitherto present in the sociological field − such as agency-structure, micro-macro, objectivism-subjectivism, systems-lifeworld, hermeneutics-structuralism, materialism-idealism − seemed to be reconfigured and supposedly overcome on the basis of new conceptual and presuppositional schemes. Although this sort of ambition seems to have been executed, at times, by means of simple theoretical exposition − this is the case of the praxeological theories presented in Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* (1980), and Giddens' *Constitution of the Society* (1984) − it is nevertheless symptomatic that the period of the new syntheses has largely returned to the old Parsons' analytical strategy according to which the overcoming of the fundamental sociological dichotomies should be executed through deep exegesis and metatheoretically oriented reconstructions. Not by accident, some of the main attempts at synthesis during this period − such as Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981); the aforementioned volumes of Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-3), Münch's *Theory of Action* (1982); Lockwood's *Solidarity and Schism* (1992) − openly follow the reconstructive model of Parsons' first book, The *Structure of Social Action.*

In the midst of the theoretical effervescence of the 1980s, it became increasingly evident that the sociological task depended not only on the progress of empirical research, with its various methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) for collecting and processing information, but on the deepening of a self-conscious, metatheoretically informed theory. At that moment,

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[9] As Alexander (1897b, 1987c; ALEXANDER et all, 1987) well shows in a series of reconstructions whose arguments we follow, there were within each of the important currents of sociology of the 1960s and 1970s also attempts by some of its younger proponents to re-establish a theoretical link between micro and macro as well as rationalist and culturalist approaches. In this case, it is possible to mention: in the case of symbolic interactionism, the structuralist approach of Stryker (1980); in the case of ethnomethodology, the attempts at integration present in the volume organized by Cicourel and Knorr-Cetina (1980); in the case of exchange theory and its unfoldings, the attempts at linking micro and macro carried out by Colleman, (1987); and, finally, in the case of conflict theory, the various attempts at elaborating a multidimensional approach made by Collins (1981, 1987, 1988).

the metatheoretical reflections themselves - which until then were formulated and often confused with the empirically oriented theorizing activity - began to be seen by some as a field in its own right and endowed with particularities that would require, as in the case of operational methods, a proper sort of reflection.

In the mid-1980s a polemic began - which would last until the 1990s - about the role and potentialities of this new field that seemed to grow in strength. At this time, some famous theorists such as Turner (1985, 1990), Collins (1986), and Skocpol (1987) took a critical stance, denouncing the "dead ends" of metatheoretical reflection in sociology.[10] The criticism of the supposed unproductiveness, lack of creativity, scientific dispersion, and excessive abstraction that metatheoretical activity entails, however, has had the opposite effect. The polemics surrounding the theme ended up drawing the attention of important authors who came out in its defense. After some notable programmatic efforts - led by authors such as Ritzer (1988, 1990, 1991) and Zhao (1991) - in defense of the field and of the establishment of its general parameters of action, a famous volume dedicated to the theme was published in the early 1990s, in which the guidelines previously formulated were discussed and further developed by authors such as Alexander, Berger, Lemert, and Tirykian, besides Ritzer himself, who organized the volume (see: RITZER, 1992a). The first conditions for a collective undertaking around the establishment of a properly metatheoretical agenda were given.

1.2 - THE METATHEORETICAL ACTIVITY

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[10] It is worth noting that the meaning of the term "metatheory" in this context is not a consensual one among the various authors and the debates are not free from misunderstanding. Skocpol (1987), seems to associate metatheory with a work of cataloging, organizing, and sometimes commenting on previous theories, a stylistically alluring but incredibly unproductive activity: like "(...) houses of mirrors, brilliant but exitless" (1987:10). Yet her assessment goes further and is not restricted to a mere criticism of the low productivity of this activity. At times, metatheory would tend to get in the way of scientific progress: "metatheoretical exercises risk creating artificial ideal-typical categorizations that obscure rather than illuminate the more fruitful tendencies in substantive theory and research" (1987:10). Collins (1986), in a different way, recognizes the level of "presuppositions" as inextricably linked to theory and empirical observation (1986:1345) and, in this case, ends up admitting, even if not explicitly, a positive place to metatheoretical reflection. Nonetheless, he associates the metatheoretical activity of his time with the refluxes of a certain anti-positivist turn that started in the 1960s, from which the observational language would be constantly put in check and, as a result, the very idea of a possibly objective sociology. His critique, in this case, is directed at the metatheoretical discourse identified with a certain kind of radical subjectivism, characterized as being "explicitly or implicitly relativist" (1986: 1343). Finally, Turner, who initially sustained some harsher criticisms of metatheory (1985), partially retreats from his position by acknowledging the possibility of a proper metatheoretical use: that of studying "(…) the structure and implications of existing theories" (1990:38). His criticism then turns to metatheories that are overly speculative and wrapped up in the endless ritual of quasi-religious re-readings and reconstructions of sociology's sacred figures.

As Ritzer (1988) and Zhao (1991) have rightly remarked, the attempt to establish a metatheoretical research agenda in sociology - in this case, a "metasociology" - was first enunciated in the 1950s by Furfey (1953). The theorists involved in the debates of the 1990s - on both sides - acknowledge this first attempt, but maintain a very similar critical position towards it: Furfey's project would be marked by the misguided attempt to establish the prerequisites or normative conditions prior to any theoretical endeavor. By trying to establish such criteria - for example, those of the demarcation between valid and invalid knowledge, relevant and irrelevant phenomena to sociology, adequate and inadequate methods of procedure - as a task prior to the sociological enterprise and, therefore, without resorting to the development of theory as an element capable of informing the possible resolutions of this type of debate, Furfey's position would run the risk of "putting the cart before the horse" (Ritzer, 1988: 189).

A more modest view of meta-theory sees it as an activity of a posteriori reflection, that is, as an activity that uses historically given social theories as its main object of analysis. In Brazil, this kind of view was first supported by Oliveira Filho (1976, 1995) and later by Vandenbergue (2013), for whom such activity would be aimed at an a posteriori reconstruction of the "rational" or "transcendental" assumptions - ontological, epistemological, logical, etc. - of theoretical schemes and research programs. In the view of authors like Ritzer (1988, 1990, 1991 1992a, 2000), metatheory in sociology would have the function of recognizing, mapping and assessing the general structure and underlying context of different theories, either with the purpose of better understanding them, solving or reconfiguring problems of theoretical structure, or even finding more adequate criteria for the organization of the theoretical field as a whole. Lets take a closer look at what this type of activity consists of and some of its ramifications.

1.2.1 - General Coordinates for Metatheoretical Reconstruction

For Oliveira Filho (1976), metatheoretical reconstructions constitute, within the social sciences, a second-level activity, which means, in this case, that they would not directly address the problems of the social world but rather the theoretical language about the social world: their focus would be aimed at the linguistic conditions rather than the ontological conditions of the social sciences. This way of conceiving metatheoretical activity presents, at first glance, two peculiarities. First, it draws attention to the fact that metatheoretical analysis must present

certain instruments of reconstruction - intellectual tools with which to engage in the activity of analysis - suitable for the analysis of argumentative language and discourse in the human sciences. Second, it suggests that the analysis can be carried out, as in the case of linguistics, according to two distinct axis, namely, the synchronic and diachronic. Ritzer (1988), in turn, insists that a broad approach to metatheoretical activity should proceed by means of a reconstruction capable of mapping not only the general structure of the theory and its rational presuppositions, but the context and the socio-institutional circumstances underlying its production, incorporating to the metatheoretical field a type of reflection that one might call "sociology of knowledge", in that case, a sociology of sociological knowledge.[11]

Based on these considerations, it seems appropriate to map the metatheoretical activity according to two fundamental axes that seek to account for the elements of metatheory analysis. A first axis should concern the differentiation between the elements of intellectual structure (text) and the elements of social reality (context) that make up the different sociological theories and traditions. On the one hand, there are cognitive factors such as, for example, the rational assumptions of theoretical activity, its logical structure, its models of analysis, its conceptual schemes, its research methodologies, etc.; on the other hand, there are those elements that are external to the cognitive structure (but which are related to it), such as the social background of the theorists, their professional networks, institutional ties, political and ideological affiliations, worldviews, historical moment, among other elements that make up the environment (context) of theoretical production. It is possible to say that this first axis marks the distinction between intellectualist and sociological approaches to sociology itself, a distinction that brings into play issues concerning the justification and genesis of knowledge, its alleged objectivity and historicity, as well as the constant tension between universal and particular arguments within sociological theories.[12]

A second axis that seems relevant to us emphasizes the elements of analysis according to their spatiality and/or temporality within the theories and research traditions: I refer here to

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[11] To this first axis that distinguishes intellectual and social factors, the author adds a second axis - which I will not take up as a priority in the present model of analysis - whose purpose would be to distinguish between the elements (whether of structure or context) that fall within the disciplinary field of sociology and those that are external to it. This double intersection leads him to distinguish four types of metatheoretical objects: (a) the conceptual schemes and hypotheses elaborated within a research program - as well as their respective logical, epistemological, ontological foundations, etc.; (b) the levels of intellectual exchange between the theory in question and other areas of research; (c) the networks of researchers involved in this production, their lines of influence, and their engagements in theoretical-methodological polemics; (d) the broader institutions that form the social environment of theoretical production in sociology - universities, funding agencies, etc.

[12] This distinction between intellectualist and sociological strands holds a homology with what Vendenberghe (2013:16) has called elsewhere a "philosophizing sociology" (in search of the universals of sociology) and a "sociologizing philosophy" (in search of the social conditioning of philosophical activity).

the axis that divides the objects of interest of the synchronic and diachronic approaches. The first (spatial) axis of investigation focuses on the (intellectual and contextual) elements of sociological theories in terms of their relations at a given moment in the history of sociology and has as its cognitive purpose, in this case, the mapping of systems of relations present within both text and context: on the one hand, relations between concepts, hypotheses, models of analysis, etc.; on the other hand, relations between intellectual, institutional, ideological field positions, as well as historical and biographical factors. On the diachronic (temporal) axis, the concern is not with the set of structural (symbolic and material) relations given at a certain moment in sociological history, but with the changes that have taken place within that system during a certain time span. In the case of an intellectualist analysis, the aim is to identify, for example, syntactic and semantic changes that rearticulate categorical relations within a given theory or theoretical tradition. [13] In the case of contextual analysis, the diachronic approach is interested in the apprehension of changes within the socio-historical environment of the theory production capable of impacting such type of activity. One may find below a tentative graphic representation of the two axes mentioned.

Figure 1: Elements of Metatheoretical Inquiry [14]

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[13] Such changes may occur both within the theoretical logic and in the logic of research. On the one hand, changes may occur, for example: by the change of meaning of certain theoretical terms; by the resolution, attempts at resolution, or even a mere increase in awareness of logical problems concerning the coherence of propositions; by the incorporation of hitherto residual categories within the conceptual scheme. On the other hand, changes may occur, for example, through the appearance of new empirical elements, through developments in the field of methodological operationalizations, or even through the incorporation of observational and formalizing tools from other fields.

[14] The arrangement of the elements in the first quadrant was inspired by the model provided by Alexander in the first volume of *The Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982a)

(1) Structuring elements of theories or theoretical traditions:

Presuppositions;

Analytical models;

Conceptual schemes;

Substantive Problems;

Hypotheses;

Methodological tools;

Substantive information.

(2) Changes within theoretical structures over time:

unfoldings of theoretical logic via syntactic and semantic modifications;

unfolding of the observational logic via methodological modifications and new observations

Intellectual Structures

Synchronic   Diachronic

Social Context

(3) Social context of theories and theoretical traditions:

Worldviews;

Social institutions;

Networks of disputes and alliances within the sociological field;

Influence of peers;

Social background of the researcher.

(4) Impacts on theories by modifications of contextual elements over time:

socio-historical genesis of research theories and methodologies

Here is a model of mapping the elements to which metatheoretical activity is directed, which seems appropriate in the case of sociology - but which could also be applied, in principle, to other disciplinary fields of the human sciences, and even to philosophy itself. Such a mapping refers to the general coordinates of the field, understood here as ideal types of research that, in practice, can hardly be carried out purely, i.e., focusing on a single set of elements.[15]

That being said, one must not get it wrong about the possibilities of articulation at stake. For the distinctions presented in the model above refer not merely to the privileged election of some factors or elements whose reconstruction increases the power of analysis and criticism of sociological theories, their developments, and their substantive problems. Rather, what is at stake is a set of differences in metatheoretical research strategies, i.e., strategies that put into

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[15] Concretely, it is possible to argue that although metatheoretical works tend to direct most of their attention to elements in one or two of the boxes represented above, this process is hardly accomplished without references, implicit or explicit, to elements in the other boxes.

operation different assumptions about the nature of theories and that use, in the process, different reconstructive tools.

From the point of view of the metatheoretical analysis, it seems to us that the first distinctive axis – the one that marks the differences between the theoretical and methodological reconstructions focused on the intellectual structure of theories and those focused on their social context – has a higher degree of cognitive relevance. This is because the research strategies demarcated there – privileging, on the one hand, elements of quadrants 1 and 2, and, on the other, elements of quadrants 3 and 4 – seem more disparate from the point of view of their assumptions and their methods than the divergences between the poles of the second axis (synchronic-diachronic). Intellectualist approaches to theories, for instance, must presuppose (in what concerns the theoretical nature) a syntactic order partially autonomous from social constraints, i.e., a clearly defined analytical split between theoretical text and context. In this case, the primary instruments for a proper reconstruction will be the tools coming from in textual analyses (i.e. procedures of syntactic, semantic, logical-argumentative analysis) to be employed in the analysis of theoretical systems. The approaches of this sort proceed thus towards a cognitive-logical (textual) reconstruction of theories (synchronic cut) and their temporal unfoldings (diachronic cut). Approaches focused on the social context, on the other hand, take for granted (either tacitly or explicitly) a radical interdependence between theoretical order (text) and extrinsic elements (context), or at least they assume that this relationship enlightens fundamental cognitive aspects of the theory that otherwise could not be explained or understood – in which case then it is assumed, to a greater or lesser degree, that a purely intellectual understanding or formalization is erroneous, ideologically drive, or simply meaningless. To this kind of approach corresponds the primacy of other tools of reconstruction than those of linguistic analysis (whether structural or comparative). The reconstruction of external phenomena (context) can occur through models (which can also operate by synchronic and diachronic cuts) of institutional analysis, network analysis, historical analysis, biographical analysis, etc. understood as factors affecting theoretical activity.

Finally, it is worth devoting a few words to the different strategies aimed at each of the different quadrants of our model of analysis. In this case, it also seems pertinent to try to provide some examples of works capable of being located in each of them, at least in terms of their tendency, insofar as they seem to privilege elements of one or the other kinds in their metatheoretical analyses.

In the *first* quadrant, it is common to find works that focus on the reconstruction of the structural unity - but also on the internal contradictions and limits - of a given theory or theoretical tradition. In this case, although they do not ignore the temporal axis, this tends to appear more in terms of the updates and empirical applications of an intellectual structure that, in a way, remains the same - just like the formulations of a language that, despite the production of new statements, remains syntactically the same. These are works that tend to privilege the unity and intellectual identity of a given theory, theorist, or school of thought. Some examples of such structural reconstructions are: Schmaus' (1994) work on the theoretical structure underlying Durkheim's work; Schluchter's (1981) Kantian reading of Weber's work; Barber's (1994) short essay on Parsons' The Social System; Heritage's (1987) general discussion of the ethnomethodological tradition. In the case of the analysis of traditions or matrix of thought, it is possible to mention Ritzer's (1975) analysis of the three great paradigms in sociology and Collins' (1991) mapping of what he considers to be the four fundamental sociological traditions.

In the *second* quadrant, we find the intellectualist reconstructions that, although proceeding through successive synchronic analyses, have as their focus or cognitive interest the rational development and structural modification of certain theories or theoretical traditions with a view to solving certain theoretical and/or empirical problems. It seems to be common, in this type of approach, that the synchronic reconstruction of certain theories (with their respective impasses) is brought into play for the sake of the adequate appreciation of a certain theoretical modification or innovation that, in this case, constitutes the true cognitive core of the metatheoretical reconstruction. This movement, as we shall see in the next subsection (1.2.2), can be motivated by the historical understanding of a particular change within a theory or theoretical tradition, but also by the ambition to achieve, through reconstructive and corrective work, an original theoretical development. In addition to the aforementioned synthetic-reconstructive works of Parsons (1937), Habermas (1981), Alexander (1982-3, 1987a), Münch (1982b-c), and Lockwood (1992), this type of strategy also includes reconstructions such as those promoted by Joas (1996) concerning the theory of action.

Before moving on to the next quadrants, it is important to emphasize that the differences that mark the first two quadrants are necessarily tenuous. In a first moment, as we said, they go back to cognitive interests that tend to either permanence or change of a given theoretical structure and are related to the use of reconstructive tools focused either on syntactic or on comparative analysis. However, once one conceives this intellectual structure in a multidimensional way - that is, as encompassing theoretical elements situated at different levels

of abstraction, such as assumptions, models, concepts, hypotheses, and so on. - the question of permanence and change necessarily becomes complex. For if this is so, then unless we are facing a complete reconfiguration - marked by comparative incommensurability and a total loss of theoretical identity - all changes within a theory must be understood as situated at certain analytical levels and, therefore, must be conjugated with permanence at one or more levels.[16] Insofar as they analytically combine theoretical permanence and change, considerations of this kind not only complexify the relationship between synchronic and diachronic approaches but also allow us to think about changes in theoretical logic without necessarily abandoning a minimum common ground of reference and in view of which it would be possible to assess the claims of rational accumulation and progress of theoretical knowledge.[17]

In the *third* quadrant, we find works devoted to the analysis of contextual elements and their respective correspondences with a particular theory or school of thought at a given moment in sociological history. Works of this type tend to subsume or formalize contextual events and facts - such as biographical data, institutional disputes, collaborative networks - in order to assemble a picture or grid of correlations whose inquiry aids the understanding and/or explanation of a given framework of logical positions within a theory or intellectual tradition. Mullins' (1973) mappings of networks of personal proximities, publications, and departmental networks in the context of American sociology, Clark's (1973) institutional analyses in the context of the birth of French sociology, and Besnard's (1979) analysis of collaborative networks within the Durkheimian school are some examples of works along these lines.

In the *fourth* and last quadrant fall those analyses devoted to temporal changes within the context and their genetic impacts on the activity of theory production, whether in the case of individual theorists or broader intellectual traditions. In this type of approach, the analysis tends to focus not exactly on the structural elements of a given contextual situation, but on the temporal changes of that situation and their impacts on the activity of theory construction in a given time interval. Rather than pointing to a set of correspondences between environmental elements and theoretical elements, this type of approach tends to focus on the genesis and historical development of a given theory or tradition. Some examples of this type of framing can be found in Mannheim's (1936) analyses of the theories of Marx and Weber, Coser's (1978) contextualization of American sociology, and a number of (somewhat divergent) accounts of

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[16] The argument put forward here is that a certain change at the conceptual level, for instance, does not necessarily imply a change in the general models or philosophical assumptions of the theory.
[17] Jeffrey Alexander (1982a: 24-30), made this point in his plea for a multidimensional theoretical logic.

the birth of sociology by authors such as Nisbet (1966), Giddens (1972), Seidman (1983), and Leppenies (1985).

As we said, the allocation into the various quadrants is always done in a tendential manner and goes back to the predominance of certain cognitive interests on the part of a given reconstructive work. In most cases, as we said, metatheoretical works end up combining elements from more than one quadrant. It is not uncommon, by the way, for works to attempt to combine elements from all quadrants by a kind of metatheoretical eclecticism. This seems to be the case, for example, of the monumental intellectual biography of Durkheim written by Lukes (1973), of Ringer's (1997) work on Weberian methodology, and Jay's (1973) history of the Frankfurt school, just to mention three well-known examples.

1.2.2 - The Intellectual Purposes of Metatheory

We have previously mentioned that the metatheoretical activity responsible for identifying, mapping, and evaluating theoretical structures and contexts does so with a number of distinct purposes in view. According to Ritzer (1990), the metatheoretical activity would present at least three distinct cognitive ambitions: 1) the improvement of knowledge of a given theory, tradition, or theme of reflection; 2) the fostering of substantive theoretical advances or the development of new theories through the work of reconstruction and debate with other theoretical approaches; 3) the elaboration of general analysis schemes or interpretive grids capable of encompassing and rendering intelligible the various developments in the field of sociological theory. If in the previous point we have seen the elements (contextual/material and textual/ideal) and the procedures (spatial/synchronic and temporal/diachronic) of metatheoretical research, in this section we will make some comments about the meaning or purpose of such kind of research. We understand that although the different types of metatheoretical research listed in the quadrants above (fig. 1) may have greater or lesser affinities with a particular cognitive purpose, in principle, all of these purposes or goals can be achieved through any of the specific types of metatheory.[18]

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[18] On this point, we depart from Ritzer's approach. Although in the 1980s he developed a metatheoretical typology capable of distinguishing the intellectual/social and the internal/external elements of sociological theories (Ritzer, 1988) - whose model has partial similarities with the one we elaborated in section 1.2.1 - in the following years (Ritzer, 1990, 2000) he would end up subsuming this initial discussion to a specific type of metatheoretical activity (M_1), to which he would add two other unexplored types (M_2 and M_3). In this new phase of his thinking, the different types of metatheoretical activity would refer precisely to the three ambitions listed above - and his initial metatheoretical typology would be reduced to only one of these activities, i. e., reconstruction with a view to increasing knowledge of a given theory or research tradition (M_1). Unlike Ritzer, we do not reduce the metatheories

A first metatheoretical ambition, as mentioned, consists in obtaining a gain or increment in present knowledge regarding a particular theory, research theme, or tradition of thought in sociology. Such an objective - when understood in terms of an ultimate purpose and not as a mere means at the service of another cognitive interest - goes back to the idea that the human sciences are sciences not only marked by a plurality of paradigms and perspectives - hence the pertinence of the need to understand a multiplicity of theories and approaches - but sciences in which the classics play a fundamental hermeneutic function (see Alexander, 1987b). In this case, it is clear that knowledge about the various sociological theories of the present and the past must be understood as endowed with its own scientific interest. In the field of metatheoretical work, there is a plethora of works along these lines, and even those works that do not primarily address this goal can hardly bypass it without costs.

The second ambition of metatheoretical activity – i. e., that of reconstruction aimed at innovation and advancement of theory – also corresponds to a widespread practice in sociology. Virtually all social theorists with significant contributions end up reconstructing and critically debating the theories of their predecessors and opponents. This kind of work – which takes a range of theories as an object of reconstruction in order to innovate and creatively synthesize them – is based on a perception alluded earlier: that the advancement of theoretical and discursive knowledge about the social world, which is the real goal of the humanities and social sciences, depends not only on new empirical knowledge and methodological developments but also on the solving of problems that are eminently theoretical. Moreover, it involves the awareness, tacit or explicit, that the development of the human sciences is not reduced to a mere formalization of the observational activity, but depends on a theoretical logic that operates through a variety of non-empirical arguments.[19]* Although we have said that most theorists proceed, more or less consciously, according to this kind of metatheoretical activity, the major examples of this kind of ambition go back, of course, to the tradition of the great synthetic reconstructions. Besides the "voluntarist theory of action" (Parsons, 1937) and the "new theory movement" (Alexander, 1987c), some works such as those of Smelser (1968), Giddens (1971),

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in our model (figure 1) to one specific ambition, but insist instead on the intersecting possibility under which the various types of metatheory can serve various cognitive purposes.

[19] It is quite remarkable that theoretical arguments about certain assumptions (e.g., logical, anthropological, ideological), certain models of analysis (e.g., focusing on equilibrium or conflict), certain images of the nature of action (fundamentally strategic or non-strategic) constitute discussions that cannot be decided exclusively by empirical arguments. In principle, each of the different social theories can be criticized on each of these points by arguments of quite different kinds whose persuasiveness sometimes goes back to rhetorical, stylistic, aesthetic, and even ethical considerations. In this case, the appeal of a given theoretical system - or of some of its internal elements - comes to be evaluated, at least in part, according to criteria such as those of simplicity, precision, balance, harmony, emancipatory value, and so on.

and Stompka (1979), characterized by exegetical reconstructions, seem emblematic in this sense.

Finally, the third and last goal of the metatheoretical activity is less common but no less important. The elaboration of schemas capable of providing not only a mapping but an intelligible classification to the various unfoldings and courses of activity within sociological theory certainly constitutes a fundamental goal of the metatheoretical activity. This type of ambition is based on the perception that the human and social sciences, that is, those that have humans as the subject and object of their reflection, are sciences marked by an inescapable self-reflexive condition. In this case, the knowledge of the general coordinates that mark the activity of theoretical self-objectivation would always constitute an indispensable condition for adequate knowledge. Although the elaboration of intelligible classification schemes of theoretical activity is a more complex and certainly more difficult task than the usual mapping of authors, schools, and traditions, it seems to have been the target of some sophisticated attempts: this is the case of the classifications provided by Wallace (1969, 1971), of the paradigmatic models elaborated by Ritzer (1975a, 1981) and of the presuppositional theoretical logic and the action-order grid worked out by Alexander (1982a, 1987a).

1.2.3 - Some Criticisms Leveled at the Metatheoretical Activity

It is well known that the "grand theory" à la Parsons, with its respective metatheoretical reconstructions, had always been an object of distrust for a large part of the sociological field, and one might merely recall here the critical stance taken by authors as disparate as Homans, Garfinkel, and Gouldner, to mention just a few examples. From the narrowest behaviorism to the most radical Marxism, passing through microinteractionism, pragmatism, and rational choice, metatheory seems to have been almost always understood in a derogatory way. For some, to enter the metatheoretical terrain would be to insinuate oneself into philosophical labyrinths, from which the sane researcher could hardly return undisturbed; an activity of sterile erudition that would confuse and paralyze substantive sociological development. In this sense, there were (and still are) not a few who took it (and still take it) as a kind of obscure hermetic exercise, overly abstract and committed to sort of useless, undynamic conceptual apparatus – perhaps even ideologically committed to immobility.

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, when metatheory became the subject of a polemical dispute, many of these criticisms were taken up and discussed.[20] Within this collection we find, for example: (a) the critique that metatheories would be just ways of cataloging theories into schemes in which they would sometimes not even fit very well, and, therefore, a work without real cognitive and substantive achievements; (b) the critique that metatheory would be dependent on other people's works, that is, that its raw material would be other theories (c) the critique – immediately linked to the previous one – that metatheory would lack creativity d) the critique that metatheory would obstruct the progress of theory by throwing it into unsolvable questions; e) the critique that metatheory would be too abstract and, therefore, would have little connection with the solving of real empirical problems. Some responses or counter-arguments in defense of metatheoretical activity could be summarized as follows.

A) One may concede that the activity of classifying theories according to general schemas takes place in many metatheories, especially those that operate by way of reconstructing and mapping conceptual schemas. It is possible to argue, however, that such classifying and cataloging activity is an indispensable task to all rational and discursive knowledge, be it scientific or philosophical. In the case of sociology, this task presents as its cognitive gain the ability to recognize differences and similarities between theoretical systems, which means, in this case, an increase in knowledge about the sociological discourse itself. A number of works previously mentioned in this chapter make use of this type of reconstructive strategy: Wallace (1969), Turner (1974), Alexander (1987a), Archer (1988), and Münch (1994).

B) Contrary to what one might think, not all metatheories are dependent on the work of others because there is in the field of metatheoretical activity a whole body of research that addresses the social and intellectual context underlying theoretical production. Investigations into the networks of social scientists or even the institutional conditions of the sociological field, for example, do not draw on other people's work as the primary matter of their analysis. Reconstructions of this kind can be found, for example, in the already mentioned texts by Friedrichs (1970), Tiryakian (1979), and Heilbron (1985). Despite this kind of consideration, it can be argued that all researchers rely on the

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[20] Ritzer even catalogs them in order to answer them. In the next paragraphs of this section we will follow closely the argument advanced by him (1988: 192-194).

theories of other social scientists, even for conducting empirical research. The literature review is proof of this. Moreover, a good portion of researchers also depend on data collected by other people or institutions.

C) The level of creativity of metatheory – as well as of other areas of sociology and other fields of knowledge – cannot be judged by its raw material, that is, by the fact that it works with theories created by other people, but by the results obtained from that starting point. It is even possible to argue that some of the most creative social theorists have always worked with the theories of other people, making analyses, criticisms, adaptations, and creating new syntheses from their respective raw materials. Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, and all the representatives of the synthetic theories previously mentioned under the rubric of the "new theory movement" are examples of that. Of course, such authors are exceptions to the rule – and precisely because of that they are regarded as particularly relevant – but here one needs to compare the situation of metatheory with that of the other subfields of sociology. Considering the routinization of research according to the standards of normal science – in which presumptions of great inventiveness are routinely put aside – it seems hard to imagine that other areas of sociology would show a much higher degree of "creativity".

D) Before we ask ourselves whether metatheory actually stands in the way of theory progress, we could ask the opposite question: would it not be precisely the obstacles to the development of sociological theories that would motivate and provide an impetus for metatheoretical research? We have seen earlier, moreover, how major movements of metatheoretical reconstruction and synthesis have emerged in contexts allegedly marked by fragmentation and theoretical impasses. Although it is possible to admit that metatheoretical reflections disconnected from the theoretical practice run the risk of placing it in the midst of inadequate problems, we should still ask ourselves the following: how, after all, would a small field with few researchers, as is the case of metatheory, be able to prevent the progress of much more well-established fields, such as those of empirically driven research and even of the theory production itself? Considering that most researchers – at least those who work in a "normal" science routine – are hardly very well familiar with the metatheory literature, the thesis becomes unrealistic.

E) Although the overly abstract character of metatheory is notorious, it is difficult to establish any necessary connection between this kind of statement and a presumed deficit of translation from the abstract to the concrete. In the case of metatheory, of course, its abstract character is due to a rather trivial fact: although having references - even if eventually tacit and indirect - to the concrete world, its cognitive activity is situated at another level of abstraction. It works with problems that are partly different from those of traditional theory and, at least in part, proceeds by a rationale that is relatively distinct from observational rationale. In any case, it is possible to argue that metatheories, in a more or less pronounced way, always have the claim (and carry the possibility) of a translation of their statements towards other levels of abstraction. If this does not occur it is likely that there is indeed a problem. Still, one must insist that the translation deficit does not necessarily imply a problem in the metatheory in question - for example, being endowed with unnecessary complexifications or semantic ambiguities that make it difficult to move to other levels of operationalization. In fact, translation problems can be attributed to other factors, such as the inability of "translators" - that is, all those who set out to translate them into theories and operationalize them in research - or even a lack of interest and training of researchers in metatheoretical issues.

1.3 - THE SEARCH FOR AN INTERPRETIVE FRAME IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

As we have said, the activity of reconstruction can be carried out through a set of tools provided by linguistics, semantics, argumentative logic, etc. From this most fundamental set of tools, various reconstructions can be realized following very different axes of analysis, classification schemes, and categorizations, directed to certain sectors of cognitive interest within the history of sociology. We can single out as having played a central role within the sociological narrative some major interpretive grids such as: materialism-idealism (see: Parsons, 1937; Alexander, 1982); explanation-understanding (see: Von Wright, 1971; Apel, 1979, Feest, 2010); individualism-holism (see: Collin & Zhale, 2014); micro-macro (see: Alexander et all, 1987); etc. Each of them corresponds, as is known, to a different kind of dispute: about the ultimate nature of the entities and mechanisms of the social world; about the

cognitive processes best suited to the human sciences; about the nature of concepts, about the levels of analysis, respectively.

As Alexander (1982a) has aptly pointed out one might add to such grids, located in distinct presuppositional spaces, other axes referring to distinctions situated at other analytical levels of theoretical activity concerning: the general models of analysis (functionalism x institutionalism, organicism x mechanism); the ideological positions (conflict x equilibrium; individualism x communitarianism); the conceptual schemes (agency x structure x culture); the methodology (positivism x antipositivism x postpositivism), etc. Through the various intersections of these axes, one could answer the fundamental questions of social theory, recently summarized by authors such as Joas and Knobl (2004), namely: what is the nature of social action, what is the nature of social order, and what determines social change?

Far from being able to reconstruct the various debates regarding the interpretive grids that have classically driven sociological discourse, it seems pertinent to the present thesis to emphasize the relevance of the axis synthesis-fragmentation since it is the key to the reconstructive enterprise at stake here. Moreover, it may shed light on the connection between the history of sociology as it was summarized in the first part of this chapter and the general outline of metatheoretical research that took place in the second part.

1.3.1 - In Search of a Theoretical Synthesis

At the beginning of this chapter, we have mentioned that the history of sociology can be told and retold in many different ways. From a metatheoretical perspective, one possible way of rendering intelligible the sociological development in the twentieth century is to understand it as if it was characterized by a sort of pendular oscillation between periods of synthesis and fragmentations. Following this sort of interpretive grid one might identify the following moments: (i) a process of intellectual maturation resulting from the attempt made by the classics to solve some of the fundamental antinomies of social thought; (ii) the overcoming of the classics through Parsonian synthesis; (iii) the exhaustion of the universalist ambitions of structural-functionalism; (iv) the follow-up of a generalized fragmentation and a series of theoretical disputes characterized by new divisions between micro-macro, objectivism-subjectivism; (v) finally, the emergence of a new large-scale convergence represented by the authors of the "new theoretical movement".

Bearing this in mind, we could ask if that wake of authors from the 1980s and 1990s have finally succeeded in their synthetic ambition: have they established a general framework or any minimum consensus on the theoretical field capable of avoiding the intense fragmentation of sociological discourse and the general feeling of disorientation that follows from it? (cf. Seidman, 2013:2, Lizardo, 2014) The answer to that question seems to be a complex one. Considering the more general level of theoretical discourse, there seems to be, in fact, a new conventional wisdom expressed in most of the textbooks of the discipline according to which social theory should seek to avoid one-dimensional explanations of social phenomena as well as the pitfalls of old and rigid dualisms that have for a long time haunted sociological theory. These general (and negative) orientations, however, are hardly translated into a common set of (positive) epistemological statements or presuppositional questions that sociology is supposed to solve. On the contrary, new epistemological debates − concerning foundationalism and non-foundationalism, realism and constructivism, etc. − as well as those concerning the political, normative, and anthropological presuppositional elements in theoretical discourse have persistently popped out in the last decades.

The result is that even in the field of its more general history − i.e., that one dedicated to the elaboration of a narrative capable of telling about the formation and persistence of a sociological self-identity − the feeling of "crisis" seems to be very evident. (Turner, 2009: intro; Vendenbergue & Fuchs, 2019). As if after the great attempts at sociological synthesis in the 1980s, the history of social theory had again been fragmented; as if the diagnosis of the end of metanarratives, which excited part of social thought in the same 1980s had in fact come true and the more general social theory had since been immersed in an erratic polyphony of discourses with sometimes weak or even contradictory validity claims; a scenario in which the era of the great synthesis, from Parsons to Habermas, would have definitively ended.

Concerned with this new moment in the history of sociological thought, authors such as Alain Caillé and Fréderic Vandenberghe (2016) presented a brief overview of the fragmentations within recent social theory. The scene would now be perhaps a little more complex than it was once. At present, one would not only see reassessments of the old divisions that have long marked the field of routined sociology, such as the classical oppositions between theoretical and empirical researchers or even the various internal disputes between competing sociological approaches − e.g. critical theory vs. systems theory, macro-sociology vs. micro-sociology, utilitarian vs. institutionalist theories. To this set of internal fragmentations, one might now add new disputes that could be better located in the "surroundings" of sociological

discourse. As if the disciplinary and ritualized character of sociology − centered on some classical references and topics − had led to a detachment with intellectual enterprises that are not immediately disciplinary or are even transdisciplinary but equally focused on the problems of the contemporary social world, such as the "Studies" – cultural, decolonial, scientific, governmental, gender, race, etc. – or even the social, political and moral philosophy:

> The question is now if all that theoretical effervescence in the social sciences that is largely happening outside of the discipline of sociology – in the Studies as well as in moral, social and political philosophy – though having important repercussions on it, could somehow be considered part of sociology? Is it possible to work towards a new synthesis of social theory, the Studies as well as moral and political philosophy? And, if so, could sociology be at the forefront of the new synthesis? (CAILLÉ & VANDENBERGHE, 2016: 6).

In the view of this new theoretical scene in which the discursive fragmentation seems to give rise to the possibility of new articulations and far-reaching elaborations, what we propose is the following: step back for a moment and take a close look into what has been perhaps the most fundamental theoretical axis of human sciences and which has provided the grounds for the most comprehensive intellectual synthesis of the past. I am referring here to the project of achieving a general "theory of action". As mentioned in this chapter, many distinguished sociological theorists have engaged themselves in the intricates of the "grand theory" in the search for some kind of comprehensive theoretical integration. For our purposes, it is important to note that underlying many of these intellectual enterprises there was the acknowledgment of the theory of action as both a landmark and a starting point to further reformulations and innovative development in social thought. Among the most ambitious and sophisticated elaborations following this very lineage one may count: Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Münch's *Theory of Action* (1982), Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-83), Giddens's *The Constitution of Society* (1984), and Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990), Joas' *The Creativity of Action* (1992), and Fararo's *Social Action Systems* (2001).

In modern sociology, however, this kind of theoretical effort may be traced back to the works of Talcott Parsons, who used to see himself as standing on the shoulders of great classical sociological figures, especially Durkheim and Weber, in a search for establishing the fundamental analytical units and the ways of proceeding its proper approach in human sciences. This project − first developed under the label of "voluntaristic" and later that of "general" theory of action (Parsons 1937; Parsons and Shils, 1951b) − is of main interest for our purposes both because of its metatheoretical ambition and its substantive theoretical content. On one hand, it

was concerned with the achievement of a general analytical theory capable of integrating the most advanced pieces of abstract theoretical work of its time and the specific historical and empirical realities they address in order to achieve a truly positive synthesis. On the other hand, it searches for formal and substantive conditions of a social theory in which the analytical units can be explained (and understood) in terms of ordered patterns while retaining an element of individual voluntarism. (cf. Münch, [1982]1987)

We believe that the rational reconstruction of the core elements of this kind of project − as long as maintaining an open eye to the new developments in the contemporary social thought as well as to the possibilities of articulation open by them − may serve all those interested, like Caillé and Vandenberghe, in the possibilities of working towards "a new synthesis of social theory, the Studies as well as moral and political philosophy". To put a little differently, the reassessment of the "theory of action" may shed some light on one of the most important and controversial tasks of theoretical discourse: the searching of a general analytical scheme that enables a systematic and comprehensive reconstruction of the central questions in sociological theory. Before entering into this kind of question, however, it seems important to turn to the philosophical roots that inform the classical and modern versions of the theory of action if we are to fully appreciate its theoretical meaning. This will be the central topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Intellectual Origins of Theory of Action

2.1 PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS: KANT AND NEO-KANTIANISM

For the purpose of reconstructing the underpinning assumptions and the main purposes of "theory of action", especially the Parsonian version, it is useful to return to that one who is arguably the most significant thinker of the modern age, Immanuel Kant. Through his intellectual program of carrying out a systematic − yet not demolishing − critique of reason, he achieved three distinct revolutions that reframed philosophical thought ever since: an *epistemological* revolution, where pure theoretical reason (and its dialectic tendencies toward illusion and dogmatisms of all sorts) is disciplined by a transcendental inquiry about the analytical and aesthetic conditions of possible knowledge; an *ethic* revolution, where all theoretical "knowledge" about unconditioned is ruled out to give room to a practical reason which, assuming our freedom as necessary for action, provides an unconditional set of commands that lead to considering all rational agents as ends in themselves; finally, an *aesthetic-teleological* revolution, where the experience of beauty can be taken as providing after all − and despite all the apparent randomness of the world − a sense of an ordered universe where we have a place and purpose, in this case, the purpose of achieving a peaceful political order with respect for human rights. (Kant, 1781/1787; 1788; 1790)

With this three-fold move, Kant was able to elaborate a systematic critique of the abuses of traditional empiricist and rationalist metaphysics, on one hand, and vindicate reason against its radical critics, on the other. (O' Neill, 1992). In the end, Kant could provide a positive answer to all those who had charged enlightenment of tearing apart the traditional orders − with its proper beliefs, values, and customs − without replacing it with anything but skepticism, relativism, and uncertainty. The centrality of Kant to the modern history of thought, however, is not reduced to the sophistication of this theoretical system or to the positive content of his defense of the enlightenment project. It has to do also with the way he reorganizes the central problems of philosophical discourse and the questions raised during the debates that followed. For those interested in theory of action and human sciences in general, it is important to note that most of its metatheoretical debates could be retraced back to both the critical reactions and the positive reassessments to Kant's legacy.

On one side of the picture, one may find the immediate reactions coming from Fichte, early romantics (Novalis, Schlegel, and so on), and all those engaged in exploring the nature of the underlying principles concerning the apriori synthetic activity identified by Kant as giving the unit to both the consciousness and the basic structures of experience.[21] The distinct answers to this question − through paths which emphasize the aesthetic experience (Schelling), the conceptual unfolding of mind (Hegel), or some pervasive will (Schopenhauer) underlying our representations − as well as the very series of critiques of Kant's transcendental idealism will lead to those branches of modern thought influenced by figures like Marx, Nietzsche, and even Freud. A kind of tradition that could be extended to distinct and even opposing figures like Adorno, Heidegger, and several postmodern thinkers to whom modernity is addressed more in terms of its unfulfilled promises.

On the other side of the picture, one may find right after the developments of german romanticism, and the idealist wake that succeeded, those who, following Liebmann's famous words, insisted that the philosophy should go "back to Kant", or least assume a more positive and reconstructive approach to his legacy and the enlightenment project. Here one may find a broad group of authors concerned with possibilities of integrating the transcendental philosophy with both the main developments in modern positive sciences − a task carried out by Cohen, Natorp, and the young Cassirer − and practical and historical questions concerning values and norms − a path followed by Windelband, Rickert, Lask, and others.[22] It will be this attempt to develop a positive articulation between a scientific methodology and the study of culture that will be at the basis of the classical sociological works of Weber, Durkheim, and others. The same kind of concern leading, within the philosophical discourse, to the works of figures like the mature Cassirer and Jaspers, whose echos can be found also in the integrative and synthetic theoretical efforts of Von Wright, Apel, and even Habermas.

Theory of action, as an integrative theoretical program in human sciences, is part of this second intellectual lineage that engaged in positive attempts to go "back to Kant" in order to understand the main challenges posed by modern societies. We have mentioned above that "theory of action", understood as a general analytical scheme in human sciences was supposed to deal with some fundamental problems: at the *metatheoretical* level, it should provide a model for a positive synthesis between (a) the most sophisticated bodies of abstract theoretical knowledge available and the empirical realities addressed by them while making use of a model

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[21] A usefull reconstruction of german idealism and its distinct answers to Kant can be found in Pinkard (2002).
[22] A classical assessment of Neo-kantianism can be found in Konkhe (1991).

capable of articulating (b) causal and functional explanation with hermeneutic and historical understanding; at the *(socio)theoretical* level, it should address the questions of the conditions of possibility of a system of actions capable of articulating (c) an objective symbolic order in action systems while preserving an element of subjective autonomy. In the present section, I will argue that the answers provided by the theory of action to each one of these problems can be fully appreciated only in terms of their relation to the questions posed by Kantian philosophy: the metatheoretical questions can be understood in terms of Kant's theoretical philosophy while the socio-theoretical questions concerning action and order can only be understood in face of Kant's practical philosophy.

2.1.1 - Kant's theoretical philosophy
and the metatheoretical problems in Theory of Action

Kant has insisted, maybe like no one other in the modern age, on the articulation between the abstract theoretical frames of concepts and the intuitive (spatial-temporal) experience as a necessary condition of scientific knowledge: "without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind." (Kant, 1787, B75). He arrives at this kind of position not because of any prior eclectic inclination toward rationalist and empiricist arguments but as the result of a systematic inquiry into the conditions of possibility of knowledge in general. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant departs from the analysis of the most successful pieces of knowledge available on his time − Logic, Mathematics, and Physics − in order to discover which were the fulfilled conditions that made it possible for them to follow the "secure path of science" (Kant, 1787, B vii). What becomes clear during his analysis is that knowledge both in its pure and empirical forms is only possible when intuitions from the sensibility − given under the aesthetic forms of space and time − are synthesized by or brought together with help of concepts of understanding.[23] Ordered and systematic knowledge is neither limited to sheer generalizations from a collection of discrete sense data, like in traditional

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[23] In *pure* theoretical science, knowledge is intellectually constructed through the application of pure concepts to pure intuitions. This is the case of geometry, for instance, where the pure concept (e.g. the intellectual definition of the triangle) is synthesized (represented) in a pure form of intuition (space) so that this very construction enables the achievement of proofs and demonstrations. In *empirical* knowledge, on the other hand, we have the following: an empirical intuition coming from our senses and given under space and time (the two a priori forms of sensibility) becomes an object of thought − i.e. it is subsumed under discursive objective knowledge − through pure concepts of understanding (categories regarding quantity, quality, relation, and modality). In both pure and empirical knowledge, what we have is a necessary interpenetration between intuitions and concepts.

empiricism, nor reduced to a set of theoretical deductions from a group of first principles, like in traditional versions of rationalism.

At the end of his argument, Kant arrived at the following: that the possible knowledge, contrary to what had been thought until then, demanded the fulfillment of two transcendental conditions regarding the very possibilities of intuition and concepts. The first condition is given by the transcendental forms which make possible any sensibility, namely space and time as a priori forms: the possible knowledge is always limited to what could be spatially or temporally represented or to what at least make reference to the pure representation of time (like in arithmetics) and/or space (like in geometry) (cf. Kant, 1787, B37-59). On the other hand, the second condition of possibility is provided by transcendental forms that made any conceptual thinking possible, which Kant calls "categories of understanding": objective and universalizable knowledge of the sense manifold would be possible only through apriori intellectual connections articulated by pure concepts of understanding regarding quantity, quality, relation, and modality (cf. Kant, 1787, B 106). This is the positive answer provided by the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the problem of knowledge and its sources.

To this positive answer, however, Kant adds a negative one whose purpose is to clarify the limits of the possible knowledge. This type of analysis is done mainly in the last part of the book, named "transcendental dialectic", in which Kant poses the following sort of question: what happens when our understanding and, even more, our reason, tries to "know" objects that are not subsumed under the apriori forms of space and time? In the last part of his book, Kant returns to the three main questions that had haunted the metaphysicians of his time: the question of the immortality of the soul (concerning the ultimate conditions of the thinking *subjects*), the question of the beginning of the world (concerning the ultimate conditions of natural *objects* taken as a whole), and the question of the existence of God (concerning the possibility of a creative and mediating *totality* of subjects and objects). In all these cases, of course, the objects in question do not present any intuition. The soul, the totality of the objects of the world, and God do not find space-time counterparts. In fact, they are major objects of philosophical interest to the very extent that they transcend the whole empirical realm, which they would rather precede and conditionate. But precisely because of this, argues Kant, reason finds itself behind these objects as if it was incapable of reaching a final verdict. Its chains of reasonings, as long as according to the rules of speculative thought, can be directed to different sorts of conclusions. In order to illustrate his argument, Kant provides "rational" chains of arguments leading to proofs of both the existence and non-existence of God; in favor of the thesis that the world has

a beginning and that the world is infinite, and so on. To put things in this terms is, in fact, the Kantian way of insisting that the dialectics of reason, when left by its own fate, cannot lead to the truth of objective knowledge, but only to a "logic of illusion" (Kant, 1787, B86, B349 ss). When directed toward objects that do not find in experience their touchstone Reason becomes inconsistent and inconclusive. This is the negative thesis of *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Despite the positive advancements in delineating both the conceptual and the intuitive nature of knowledge − which can be thought of as a sort of reflexive achievement for all future theories of science − the conclusion of the book seems to raise challenging questions to the so-called human sciences. After all, if the scientific knowledge is only possible to those objects capable of presenting a kind of space-time intuition, how can we make sense of those alleged sciences which, as we know, do not necessarily find objects situated in time and space, or even objects submitted to a formalization of mathematical type. This seems to be the case, at least to some extent, of historical and human sciences which count on the possibility of achieving scientific "knowledge" about chains of meanings, representations, and so on. Here is where the metatheoretical problems concerning the necessary connections of abstract theory and concrete experience in science − addressed by Kant in terms of the interpenetration of concepts and intuitions − are connected with those regarding the distinct modes of explanation.

Part of the solution provided within the neo-Kantianism, as we know, was to insist on the distinction between two different ways of knowing: on the one hand, one would find the nomologic knowledge operated by the natural sciences, as described by Kant in his first critique; on the other, one would find a kind of knowledge that is proper to the so-called human sciences. In the latter case, knowledge would no longer seek strict objective or even cognitivist aims. Rather, it would become interested in the historical particularism of its objects, their singular qualities, and the hermeneutic understanding of their contextual meaning. This sort of distinction − when taken in epistemological rather than ontological terms (e.g. Dilthey) − was one of the bases of Southwestern Neo-Kantian school of Windelband and Rickert, whose influence on Max Weber's attempt of compatibilism between causal explanations and hermeneutic understanding is well-known.

There was, however, another way out of this apparent dilemma concerning the possibility of human sciences. A path that was in certain aspects anticipated by Durkheim − especially in some small texts (1898, 1901) between *Le Suicide* and *Les Formes* − and later explored by neo-Kantian figures like Cassirer and french structuralists like Lévi-Strauss. In this case, the cognitivist claims of Kant's first critique were neither abandoned nor integrated with

a hermeneutic approach but understood in terms of general formal procedures − shared by both natural and cultural sciences − regarding intuitions and concepts. According to this kind of approach, the knowledge of representations would be made possible through its formalization into symbolic patterns capable of positive analysis: in natural sciences, the spatio-temporal representations would be formalized in terms of mathematical language in order to be organized into positive conceptual knowledge and causal explanation; in cultural sciences, since the (individual and collective) representations are not given under strict mathematized forms of space and time − but rather in a topological or relational sort of "space-time" − they would be formalized according to a distinct symbolic model, a "structural-functional" or "structural-linguistic" model (like that one developed by Saussure and Jakobson), that would then enable the apprehension of series of intellectual and symbolic connections inside representational systems.[24]

In the end, both Durkheim and Weber accept the positive argument provided by Kant about the conceptual and intuitive nature of scientific knowledge and end up facing the challenges posed by Kant's interpretation in the "transcendental dialectics". In so doing, both of them engage in close dialogues with neo-Kantian philosophers − in one case, Rickert and Windelband; in the other, Renouvier and Boutroux. In their intellectual elaborations, moreover, neither Durkheim nor Weber roll out a positive model of causal explanation but rather connect it with other types of explanation, like functional and hermeneutic ones. In so doing they articulate, at the metatheoretical level, the general lines that will be later followed by Parsons' theory of action.

2.1.2 - Kant's practical philosophy
and the socio-theoretical problems in Theory of Action

In his first Critique, Kant emphasized that knowledge proceeds, in its pure forms, by constructing *connections* in apriori forms of space and time and, in its empirical forms, by disclosing *connections* on experience. Therefore, scientific explanations of natural phenomena

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[24] We will argue that one of the reasons why Durkheim could not follow this structuralist path all the way is because he could not completely subsume the questions regarding the meaning of representations into questions concerning its structural positions. Regarding this point, it seems important to mention the detailed and persuasive book written by Warren Schmaus (1994) where he argues that Durkheim, contrary to what many interpreters usually think, had also attempted to achieve a sort of integrative synthesis between causal (and functional) explanations, on one hand, and a hermeneutic inquiry about social meanings of collective representations, on the other.

take the form of an inquiry about the connective nexus between distinct elements in distinct series of phenomena: positive explanation is achieved as soon as a phenomenon is traced back to antecedents which are at the same time sufficient and necessary to its occurrence. But since the causal antecedent can always be inquired by reason in terms of its own causal antecedents, a complete and satisfying explanation, at least from the viewpoint of reason, can only be achieved when the cause discovered is a sort of "first cause", i.e, a cause that initiates a whole series of consequences without being caused by any other. This is how reason arrives at the metaphysical concept of freedom, understood as the capacity of acting (and giving rise to a possible series of events) without being determined by any other necessary causal power. In so doing, however, theoretical reason faces a fundamental antinomy: although its reasoning suggests this idea of transcendental freedom, it cannot really know it since in space-time phenomenical experiences we can always ask for prior causes, we can always connect events with temporal antecedents, and we can never achieve something like a first cause. In the realm of phenomenal experience, nothing comes out of nothing.

At the end of the "third antinomy", Kant concludes that this image of freedom glimpsed by Reason can only be conceived as being outside the laws of our theoretical knowledge. In other words, it can be conceived as belonging to the noumenal rather than the phenomenal realm of space-time events. This distinction of Kant's transcendental idealism − between phenomenal experience and things-in-themselves − presents, however, a striking consequence: it opens up the possibility that the events conceived as causally determined in the phenomenal world may be viewed as presenting "freedom" in noumenal terms. Although one cannot access this realm through the forms of possible knowledge, one can conceive it without being inconsistent with these same theoretical forms. With this strategic move, Kant opens the door for Reason, in its practical usage, to reflect on matters that theoretical philosophy can only abstain from.

In his second *Critique*, Kant (1788) deals with a fundamental problem − closely connected with that of transcendental freedom − that cannot be solved on the grounds of strict theoretical knowledge but persistently impose itself on us since it concerns our practical life: how should we orient ourselves in the face of the world and the others. Here again, Kant's critical enterprise is divided into an analytic part, concerned with the elements and principles capable of giving the positive grounds to rational orientation in practical problems, and a dialectic part, concerned with the antinomies proper of reason in its practical use − which, in this case, has to do more with the speculative postulates reason has to presuppose to operate consistently than with illusions leading it astray. The importance of Kant's practical philosophy

to the theory of action lies mostly in the first part of the book, which can be interpreted as an inquiry about the transcendental conditions that make an autonomous moral *action* capable of being consistently universalized into a voluntary moral *order*.

The question about the possibility of a practical reason leading to autonomy and morality is that of knowing if our actions − and the will on which it is grounded − can be determined by principles rationally chosen by us on universalistic grounds; principles whose normative force are not hypothetical − that is, submitted to a previous determination or subjectivistic inclination toward certain objects, desires, or any other material experiences − but capable of being assessed by all rational agents endowed with a free judgment. Implicit in this way of addressing the problem of the practical reason there is a critique of all empiricist positions, to whom reason would be no more than a sort of instrumental activity capable of evaluating the courses of action in terms of their consistency with hypothetical desires and preferences; a reason that would be, following Hume's words, a mere "slave of the passions". From this perspective, it becomes evident that in its hypothetical form, reason cannot lead but to heteronomous action, i.e., actions whose determination may be traced back to external conditions of all sorts. This is why right at the introduction of the book, Kant insists that "it is (...) incumbent upon the *Critique of Practical Reason* as such to prevent empirically conditioned reason from presuming that it, alone and exclusively, furnishes the determining ground of the will (Kant, 1788:16).

Throughout the text, the question about the positive conditions of autonomous moral *action* is answered by reference to the capacity of pure practical reason for serving as lawgiver to the will. Since the determination of the will by the external objects of the desire cannot give rise to any general principles to action, the only path to consistent autonomy lies in the capacity to follow those prescriptions whose normative force comes from its very form; prescriptions whose justifying reasons are sufficient to the rational agents and are freely chosen for their own sake instead of serving any other purpose. Authonomy is, then, the capacity to transcend the egoist drives, inclinations, and desires of all sorts when they are inconsistent with those practical principles that one recognizes and accepts as grounded on reasons that speak to his mind. It means to follow the "laws" that one gives to him/herself based on the free exercise of his/her own rationality (cf. 1788: 33-42).[25]

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[25] Kant recognizes that human beings are not purely rational beings − i.e, beings freed from material inclinations, desires, and constraints of all sorts − to whom a harmony between actions and rational practical principles would immediately follow. Indeed, it is for this very reason that moral principles would appear to us under the sign of "duty". Also, he is not either saying that rational practical principles require a complete neutralization of sensibility. What Kant argues is that since we are, at least in part, rational beings, we can, in spite of our inclinations, recognize

The problem of a voluntarist moral *order* follows immediately from this sort of consideration about unconditional regulative principles of the will. Throughout the inquiry about the conditions that practical principles must satisfy if they are to give rise to ordered patterns of moral action, Kant argues that not every maxim can be consistently generalized so that it can be presented as a sort of practical "law". Just as the singular perceptions and experiences could not alone lead to general laws in science, also the hypothetical imperatives and subjective maxims could not give rise to any necessary law in morality. Since there is no immediate connection between single experiences and general laws, the order must be achieved by a transcendental intervention of reason: while ordered knowledge of science rises only through apriori synthesis prescribed by theoretical reason, an ordered morality rises only through categorical imperatives prescribed by practical reason. An autonomous moral order is then produced when patterns of action and practical problems of experience are organized according to a "categorical imperative" of the following sort: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law" (1788: 30). Although formal and empty at first, it is important to note that for Kant this kind of regulative principle leads to a transcendental normative content: treating rational nature, and consequently, all rational and self-consciousness agents, never as mere objects of utility but as ultimate ends. Indeed, since our reason and our capacity to deliberate is what makes possible our actions in the first place, it would be self-defeating to take it as mere value to be weighted among others. A free moral order requires this principle to be treated as an unnegotiable value.

Although Kant points out the connection between this sort of morality and a political order centered on the individual as the bearer of autonomy and fundamental (human) rights, he does not properly address the problem in terms of its sociological and historical emergence. Kant was more interested in questions of validity (*quid juris*) than in questions of empirical historical and historical genesis (*quid fact*). Once again, it is the classical sociological tradition, especially Durkheim and Weber, that will follow this path so extending Kantian thought to domains that Kant himself had not properly explored. It will be one of the arguments of this thesis that both of them will address the problems of social action patterns and value systems in the spirit of Kant's critical philosophy and that both of them will develop a multidimensional approach concerning the transcendental problems of social theory.

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the normative force of morality through the use of our reason and our consciousness. Therefore, it is possible to achieve actions that although not completely freed from sensibility, are not ultimately grounded on it.

Our argument, of course, is not that significant differences are absent in the works of Durkheim and Weber but that *from the point of view of a rational reconstruction of the main metatheoretical and substantive-theoretical problems in theory of action* both of them can be interpreted as converging to the same kind of answers. We also do not pretend to ignore that in the works of both of them it is possible to find, to some extent, ideas coming from philosophical references sometimes even opposed to Kant, like Nietzsche (Weber) or even Spinoza (Durkheim). For our purposes, though, this is of minor importance for two reasons: first, because no one of them is consistently Nietzschean, Spinozian, or whatever throughout their intellectual development, which means that the ideas coming from these other references can hardly be articulated with their fundamental sociological approaches without producing a considerable amount of residual categories; second, and most important, because the neo-Kantian framework that we are pointing out is, as far as we understand, a sort of "rational core" that we reconstruct for the sake of the intellectual and scientific interest it presents for contemporary sociology in its most sophisticated variants − which means that it does not really matter if the "real" Durkheim or the "real" Weber were consciously and coherently following this rational core all the time as long as it can be found (or reconstructed) in their work without systematically distorting their main thoughts.

2.2 SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS (I) ÉMILE DURKHEIM

A major reason why Durkheim is usually regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology is that he was one of the first ones to engage in a systematic effort to define the proper objects and the adequate ways of explanation of this new science. In its classical formulation, the object of sociology, which Durkheim calls "social facts", comes to be known as "(…) ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual, and which are endowed with a power of coercion by virtue of which they impose themselves on them" and the first methodological rule of sociology calls for "to consider social facts as things" (Durkheim, 1895: 8, 19). It is indeed well known, and it is not at all surprising, that these first formulations – emphasizing the external and coercive aspects of social facts as well as its equation with 'things' outside the subject – gave birth to a series of misunderstandings and accusations: Durkheim was blamed, among other things, of having suppressed subjective freedom as well as all psychic/spiritual elements of social life and many have ranked him as a sort of materialist/positivistic thinker. In

the second edition of his methodological treatise, published six years later, Durkheim adds then a new preface in order to eliminate the ambiguities that were still revolving around his controversial formulations. In this new preface, social facts are spelled out as taking place in what Durkheim calls "collective representations". Indeed, he comes to say that "(…) social life is entirely made up of representations" (1895/1901: ix) so that sociology turns out to be ultimately the science of social or collective representations, i.e. a science seeking its laws and its proper dynamics.

Much ink has been spilled to decide if this terminological move from "things" to "representations" reveals a true turning point in Durkheim's intellectual development or if it is just a different, more precise way of stating the same ideas – as Durkheim himself seemed to believe.[26] While this classical debate about the "two Durkheims" might be scholarly relevant, it is not crucial to our immediate purposes and I will not take part in it here. It suffices to say for now that the fundamental role of representations in Durkheim's intellectual project is well-known among contemporary scholars (see: Pickering, 2000). To highlight this terminological move towards representational sociology is relevant to the purposes of the present argument because it may pave the way, as we will see, to a proper understanding of Durkheim's place and legacy within the narrative here put forward.

Unlike Weber, Durkheim is not always rightly understood as part of this intellectual tradition here called "theory of action"; moreover, has was for a long time associated with Comte and the positivistic tradition, so that its affiliation with the neo-Kantian lineage may not be so evident at first sight. My argument in the next pages will be that in order to fully appreciate both Durkheim's neo-Kantianism and his place in the history of the theory of action one must properly understand the theory of collective representations as being the very heart of his sociological enterprise. As mentioned, the relevance of his theory of representations is widely recognized by contemporary scholars. What is not always very clear for most of Durkheim's interpreters, though, is the intricates of the connection between his account on representations

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[26] Within the Durkheimian studies, at least since Parsons, several interpreters have grappled with the question of the unity of Durkheimian thought. There seems to be a tension between, on the one hand, the interpretations made by those who sought to incorporate Durkheim's thought in order to solve certain theoretical and empirical problems within the research agenda of sociology – this is the case not only of Parsons, but also of authors such as Alexander (1982b, 1988) and Collins (1994) – and, on the other hand, those interpretations made by authors who tried to provide a more contextual approach of Durkheim's work, usually specialized scholars, such as Jones (2001), Schmaus (1994), Rawls (1996), among others. In the first case, the emphasis tend to lie more in the breaks and internal transformations of Durkheim's thought, which means that one might find alongside his works more than one Durkheim; in the second case, it lies in rendering Durkheim's work intelligible so that a certain unity and coherence may be envisioned among his several works. Within this latter literature, instructive overviews of these polemics can be found in Schmaus (1994:12-17) and Rawls (1996: 468-477).

and these two Kantian fronts here defined in terms of metatheory/epistemology and (social)theory/morality. As a consequence, the proper place of Durkheim in the history of the theory of action is usually blurred. In the next two subsections (2.2.1 and 2.2.2), I will deal with these two topics in order to show how Durkheim's theory of representations might be more adequately understood as an attempt to deal with both the transcendental problems in epistemology and the challenges of a voluntaristic approach to social order as delineated in the first and the second Kantian critiques respectively.

2.2.1 – Durkheim's neo-Kantian Metatheory

To be sure, the concept of representation was never expressly defined by Durkheim. Far from contradicting our claims regarding the centrality of the concept, this observation can be understood, though, as a sign of its wide acceptance in the French intellectual milieu. Indeed, if Durkheim did not define it is because he did not need to do so; and it suffices to remember here that the term was systematically worked out by authors such as Renouvier, Boutroux, and Hamelin.[27] What is crucial in this passage from social facts as "things" to social facts as "representations" is not only that such a terminological change renders explicit the underlying dialogue going on with the aforementioned author from the neo-Kantian lineage. Rather, it points to the very synthetic character of Durkheim's intellectual project: his theory of representations is built up as an attempt to overcome both, materialist and idealist one-dimensional accounts of social life. As we will see in the next pages, this point might be appreciated from distinct analytical angles. The argument here put forward will take place firstly at a *formal* general level involving some preliminary remarks about the structure and the scope of the concept; then it will pass over the proper *epistemological* level, focused on the considerations about the possibility of a science of (collective) representations; finally, it will

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[27] It would not be exaggerated to say that in Durkheim's intellectual context the concept of representation could only be properly understood in the light of this myriad of authors that, in one way or another, would belong to the so-called French neo-Kantianism. After all, neither French positivism nor French (eclectic) spiritualism – the other two traditions that, alongside Kantism, had an impact on Durkheimian sociology – dealt systematically with the concept of representations. In a book in which he analyzed the influence of eclectic spiritualism in Durkheim's thought, Schmaus (2002: 64) remarks, for example, that this tradition, started by Maine de Biran and developed by Victor Cousin, was in line with the critique of representations developed by Thomas Reid. From the Scottish common sense tradition in which Reid takes part, they would absorbed the idea that only the assumption of a direct perception of objects – without any representational mediation – could free philosophy from the skepticism expressed in the quarrels between Kant and Hume. Parallel to this kind of consideration, Stedman Jones (2000: 37) aptly recalls that Comte, the main representative of French positivism, never made use of the term representation to refer to society, reality, or even science.

address yet in outline the more operational level of explanation, concerning the cognitive goals and the methodology sustained by Durkheim.

As I have mentioned in the last section, the attempt to achieve a balanced position regarding the positive roles of concepts and intuitions in scientific knowledge was at the very heart of Kant's epistemology. Once properly understood in its formal general level this Durkheimian passage towards representational sociology reveals exactly the same sort of commitment. The term representation, as adopted by him, is particularly strategic here because its semantic scope seems to oscillate between the poles of sensibility and understanding. In French, the term representation (*représentation*) refers at the same time to the image of what is represented and to the very act of representation. In a parallel with the Saussirian idea of the linguistic sign, what one may find here are the dimensions of what might be called the "represented" and the "representative", respectively. (cf. Jones: 2001: 68) I would argue that far from being a conceptual lapse, this oscillation taking place at the heart of the concept is conscious and absolutely important for Durkheim's sociology. Indeed, if representations seemed adequate as a conceptual tool for an investigation of social phenomena, it was precisely because this notion seemed to synthesize the *externality* of the phenomena given to the mind and the *internality* of its constitutive forms. The debt here is, of course, to Renouvier, for whom the notion of representation, in a more radical way, seemed to be able to equate at once the subject and the object as logical aspects of the concept. This semantic oscillation, if properly understood, should refer precisely to the attempt of collective foundationalism, capable of overcoming, at the same time, objective materialism and subjective idealism.[28]

Once one passes from these remarks about the representations as a general concept to the considerations about the scientific formulation of representational sociology, one is necessarily led back, at least in so far as one remains in the Kantian tradition, to the problem of the conditions for the possibility of science. Even though many scholars have properly thematized the Kantian references in Durkheim's thought, it seems that such epistemological passage remains not adequately understood even today. At this level, as I have indicated in the

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[28] Susan Stedman Jones was probably the one who better understood this point: "Renouvier insists that his theory of representation avoids both pitfalls [objective materialism and subjective idealism]. He asserts that we know nothing of the self except through the logical forms of representation. In this sense the self is not logically anterior to representation. Equally the object is known only through forms of thought that are non-material, and thus is not logically anterior to representation. However, we do experience a difference between that which is self and that which is nature. This he acknowledges and builds into his definition of representation. He accommodates them by a distinction that is logical rather than ontological. The self logically belongs to the inner aspect of representation, and nature to the outer aspect. It acknowledges the Kantian point that all reality is known only logically through representation and its logical forms". (Jones, 2000: 47).

last section, one must return to the two transcendental conditions for the possibility of science formulated by Kant in the "aesthetic" and the "analytic" parts of the first critique, according to which scientific knowledge would require space-time intuitions and synthetic connections under discursive concepts. Durkheim's insistence on the possibility of representational sociology suggests that for him the theory of collective or social representation meets these two conditions. That is to say that, for him, representations would be given under the scope of a proper space-temporal domain where some sort of synthetic connections might be conceptually envisioned and discoursively described.

In order to appreciate how Durkheim is able to think so it might be instructive to return to his first thorough attempt to deal with the problem of representation in a text called "Individual and Collective Representations" (1898). The general argument here is that the representational domain, like all the other domains of phenomena, is the result of a *sui generis* synthesis where the combination of certain basic elements would give rise to certain complex supervenient phenomena endowed with both specific properties and proper dynamics, whose enlightening would require a particular sort of explanation.[29] In the first part of the article, Durkheim makes use of this argument concerning emerging spheres of reality to claim that individual representations, the proper matter of psychology, while emerging from an organic basis could not be reduced to the mechanic, materialist elements of the body, as supposed by authors such as Rabier and James. In the second part, he uses the same line of reasoning to argue that collective representations, emerging from the synthesis of individual representations, could be not reduced either to the "mechanistic", "biological" elements of human life, or to the mere spontaneity of the human mind. According to him, such representational domain could not be subsumed then by "the principles of the old materialist metaphysics" to which "(…) the complex [is explained] by the simple, the superior by the inferior, and the whole by the part" nor by any kind of teleology of "idealist metaphysics", in which the parts would be merely the expression of abstract totalizing principles. (cf. 1898: 41ff). But what does it mean to say, after all, that social representations have their own domain, distinct from other phenomena of the

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[29] The emergentist argument, which underlies basically all Durkheim's works, is clearly stated, for instance, in the following passage in *the Rules*: "Whenever any elements, by combining, give rise to new phenomena, it is necessary to conceive that these phenomena are situated, not in the elements, but in the whole formed by their union. The living cell contains nothing but mineral particles, just as society contains nothing but individuals; and yet it is obviously impossible for the characteristic phenomena of life to lie in atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen. For how could the vital movements occur within non-living elements? (...). And what we say of life could be repeated of all possible syntheses. The hardness of bronze is not in the copper or tin or lead which were used to form it and which are soft or flexible bodies; it is in their mixture. The fluidity of water, its alimentary and other properties are not in the two gases of which it is composed, but in the complex substance which they form by their association." (1895/1901: xv)

material world and even from other representations of the human mind? For Durkheim, this amounts to saying that they have causes, functions, and meanings that differ from those of other phenomena located under the scope of different sciences, which means that their explanation must necessarily be distinct. The meta-methodological idea underlying this sort of thought was elegantly described by Durkheim in a letter some years later:

> "[Such an idea] I owe it first of all to my master Boutroux who, at the École Normale Supérieure, regularly repeated that each science should be explained, as Aristotle said, by 'its own principles': psychology by psychological principles, biology by biological principles. Deeply moved by this idea, I applied it to sociology" (1907: 403).

If properly understood, such a way of putting things – i.e. the idea that social representations should be explained by "its own principles" – reveals two aspects of Durkheim's emergentist approach that are not by accident straightly connected with the two conditions for the possibility of science above mentioned. (1) The first and most evident is that social representations have their "*own* principles", which indicate, as have been mentioned, that they have their own domain. One might note that this domain is not organized by space-time coordinates in the same way as regular mathematical space-time but by a sort of structural/topological space-time of qualitative rather than quantitative relations. It is the logical space-time where the relations among representations take place. I would like to argue here that once this space-time domain is formalized under symbolic patterns – even though these might be distinct than those provided by the mathematical language, as in the cases of the Saussurean formal linguistics and Levi-Straussian structural anthropology – the *intuitive* form of representations is given, which means that the first condition to the possibility of science is met. (2) The second thing to be noted is that such a domain has its "own *principles*", which indicates that there are some fundamental connections organizing representational dynamics. This has to do, of course, with the *sui generis* synthesis taking place firstly among individual representations, leading to the emergence of collective representations, and secondly among the collective representations themselves, leading to what Durkheim called the "laws of collective ideation" (cf.1898:45n). The point here is that once such *sui generis* synthetic connections taking place at the representational sphere are able to be recognized as such (which implies that they are capable of being brought to, or translated into, the forms of connection under understanding by means of conceptual language) the second condition for the possibility of science is also observed. The result, for Durkheim, was that sociology seemed to be then justified in its attempt to investigate not only the representations elaborated *in* society (coming

from the synthesis of individual representations) but those elaborated *by* society (as the result of the merging of collective representations themselves). With this move, of course, Durkheim was not only trying to pave the way for a sociological investigation of the collective forms of conscience taking place under certain sorts of individual interaction but he was also bringing attention to the need "to investigate by comparing mythical themes, legends, folk traditions, and languages, how social representations attract and exclude one other, merge or differ from each other, etc" (1895/1901: xvii), a path later explored in further details by the French anthropological tradition of Mauss and Levi-Strauss.

After the remarks about the formal scope of the concept, on the one hand, and the epistemological justification of its scientific inquiry, on the other, a few words must be said about how Durkheim's synthetic metatheory might be connected with a theory of explanation in human sciences. In the end, the theory of collective representations would be an attempt to deal with both ideal-meaningful and objective-material spheres of social life by means of representational, symbolic mediation. The external sign of such collective representations could be given objectively, for instance, in terms of suicide rates, penal codes, rituals, and so on, but according to the argument here analyzed, they make a necessary reference to currents, forces, and ways of thinking and feeling lying in what one might call the internal dimension of representations. By pointing out this two-fold aspect, of course, Durkheim is trying to deal with the fact that representations seem to present not only causal and functional properties but also semantic properties, which means that the cognitive goals of sociology could not be boiled down to causal and functional explanation but must require a moment of hermeneutic interpretation, even though this is directed to collective rather than individual subjective meaning.

The fact that Durkheim, like almost all his French contemporaries, has not drawn, like his german counterparts, a significant methodological distinction between natural and cultural sciences – or even between idiographic-individualizing and nomothetic-generalizing sciences – seems to have been misleadingly taken as if Durkheim was oblivious to "understanding" as a cognitive goal complementary to "explanation". In an analysis of the debates revolving around the "explanation" and "understanding" in both German and French contexts, Schmaus (2010) aptly pointed out that for Durkheim such epistemic goals are not conflated with methodological decisions and that his fundamental methodology of "hypothetical construction" (rather than naïve inductive generalization) and "crucial tests" (or "crucial experiments") would be consistent with regular hermeneutic procedures as delineated by Dilthey and others. According

to this argument, hermeneutic procedures could be understood in terms of tentative hypotheses formulation about the meaningful whole to be tested by its use as a background for the interpretation of the parts, a procedure that, in turn, would lead to revising or refining the first hypothesis and so on. The main difference here would be that while in historical sciences such method would lead to the test and revision of hypothesis concerning the meaning of particular historical events, in natural or law-like sciences it would be used to test and revise putative general laws. The point could be made clear, for instance, through the instructive comparison between the competing approaches of Levi-Bruhl and Durkheim on "primitive mentality": while for Levi-Bruhl such representational systems could be explained from the outside but remain opaque to the modern's understanding, Durkheim's emphasis on the fundamental continuity between "primitive" and "modern" ways of thinking is strictly connected with his attempt the render the first's representations intelligible by the same fundamental categories underlying modern thought (i.e. from an internalist perspective as well), something which is only possible as soon as understanding and interpretation are somehow recognized as a relevant moment within explanation procedures. (cf. 2010: 113-118).

2.2.3 - Durkheim's neo-Kantian Social Theory

For the purposes of the present reconstruction, it is important to emphasize the way Durkheim dealt with the organizing problems of the theoretical logic in sociology, that is, those related to the nature of social action and order. Unlike Weber, who starts from action and moves towards order, Durkheim begins his sociological reflection starting from order to only later reach an adequate understanding of action and its multidimensional nature. This passage will be mediated, as mentioned, by the theory of representations.

The initial concern with the problem of order is already clearly expressed in Durkheim's first empirical work, *The Division of Social Labor* (1893). It appears, at this first moment, in the midst of a larger discussion concerning the passage from the so-called "primitive" to the "modern" societies, characterized by an increasing specialization of human activities and their functions – economic, political, legal, moral, scientific, etc. Durkheim wondered how could it be possible for modern societies to maintain then social integration in such a way that social bonds would not simply break down.

Part of Durkheim's answer, at least at this moment, was that the bonds of solidarity in modernity did not disappear, but changed in type, at least to a certain extent. Thus, his argument

consisted in showing how and to what extent these bonds present in specialized societies differed from those found in societies with a low degree of specialization. In this first moment of his work, Durkheim identifies then two fundamental modes of connection and relationship among social beings, to be expressed by the concepts of "mechanical solidarity" and "organic solidarity": the first mode of relationship, characterized by the similarity of functions and the identification between individuals, was accompanied by a kind of general consciousness, which Durkheim called "collective consciousness", which would be guiding the constitution of the so-called individual consciousnesses; the second mode of relationship, found of societies whose bonds were based on the differentiation and complementarity of functions, was characterized by the increase of individual autonomy and the plasticity of the forms of consciousness, now more abstract and therefore more apt to answer the requirement posed by differentiation. (cf. 1893: book I: ch. 2 and 3)

At first sight, this solution found by Durkheim seemed to emphasize that a social order at once stable and non-deterministic would be made possible by the positive articulation of individual interests and differential functions. As if in this space of openness, characterized by both differentiation and diversity of available courses of action (at least in "normal" situations), the conditions would be given for the flourishing of individuals capable of rationally formulating and pursuing their goals and projects. In making this point, Durkheim is certainly emphasizing that autonomy and personal individuality increase with the widening of the sphere of individual interests and rational calculus based on hypothetical imperatives, something made possible by modern social differentiation. But this vision is just one part of the more general picture visualized by him.

Durkheim's general position becomes clear throughout his argument concerning the so-called "non-contractual elements of the contract" (cf. 1893: book I, ch.7). He insists that the typically utilitarian image according to which the positive articulation of actions guided by hypothetical imperatives could be understood both as the most elementary and rational expression of free social relations would be grounded in an inadequate and ultimately untenable understanding of the social order. This is because according to Durkheim, the ordering of action patterns requires a body of rules that precedes, to some degree, the establishment of any social relations and which has a nature not immediately reducible to that of interests, namely, a moral nature. Even the contract – supposed to be rooted in intentionalities of individuals capable of calculating their own interests so as to maximize them by establishing such a formal contractual relationship with others – must contain certain normative-type elements whose content precedes

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the interests of the parties. Thus, Durkheim insisted that the contract, rather than referring to any particular interest, must rely on certain rules capable of regulating it by means recognizing what may or may not be considered as valid within the contract itself: which types of contracts are possible, which means are allowed and which are not, and which consequences or obligations are entailed by it. Were it merely a set of rules established ad hoc and re-established in each interaction as a matter of individual bargaining, the contract could only establish a fortuitous and precarious bond between individuals. Like Kant, then, Durkheim does not subscribe to an instrumental vision of the social order, nor to a hypostatized individualism. His synthetic spirit emphasizes the regulation of the sphere of hypothetical imperatives by imperatives of categorical type, translated into normative standards.

Durkheim's general argument presented, however, some difficulties: if the possibility of a social order capable of giving rise to an increase of individual freedom was given by the intersection between a growing sphere of individual interests, on the one hand, and a sphere of regulating normative standards, on the other, from where would the latter sphere draw its strength in societies characterized by an increasing differentiation? In less differentiated societies this force was linked to the prevalence of collective consciousness over individual consciousness, but this seemed to entail, precisely because of that, a kind of coercive force incompatible with voluntaristic social orders. Moreover, how could this normative force, hitherto understood in external and coercive terms, be understood from the point of view of its internal reference? Faced with this difficulty, it would become clear to Durkheim that part of the semantic referential so far dealt with under the concept of collective consciousness should be recovered under a new conceptual frame.[30] Durkheim realized that the social forces he had

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[30] The consequences of this change in perception are remarkable and end up having a considerable impact on Durkheim's conceptual scheme. There are at least two changes worth mentioning in this regard. The first is that the old opposition between the two types of solidarity could no longer be sustained, at least not in the terms proposed by Durkheim's initial typology. In this sense, Némedi emphasizes, for example, that "after the publication of The Division of Labor, he [Durkheim] abandons his typology and it will not appear again in a significant way in his theoretical writings" (Némedi, 1995: 83). The second consequence is that the original meaning of the term "collective consciousness" is partially abandoned and begins to operate less rigidly than before (cf. Lukes, 1973: 229-230). The concept of collective consciousness begins to include new contents not necessarily linked to those social conditions in which identity would be a simple function of equality or similarity among occupations. In this sense, in the years following the publication of The Division of Labor, the concept of collective consciousness comes to be used also in the case of groups in which the value identity would be a function of highly differentiated structures. Parsons points out that Durkheim's analysis of altruistic suicide is illustrative in this regard. In modern societies, this type of suicide - characterized by the imperatives of collective consciousness - would be typical of military groups. But the army, as is well known, is a highly differentiated and hierarchical group in terms of ranks and functions. The content of collective consciousness would be, in this case, that of discipline and hierarchy learned within a differentiated group. However, by making this point, Durkheim would show how collective consciousness could extend to groups in which identity would not be a necessary function of equality of occupations, but of functional differentiation. (Parsons, 1937, p. 328-30)

characterized until then in terms of their exteriority demanded to be reformulated in order to be apprehended as forces at the same time internalized by subjectivity and constitutive of it. That is, normative standards should be understood not only as modes of regulation of ends but also, to some extent, as ends themselves desired by the subject. This is how Durkheim provides sociological coloring to the hitherto pale necessity of the Kantian categorical imperatives.

It was the perception of such a need of conceiving the twofold dimension (exterior-interior) of social forces that led Durkheim to the aforementioned passage towards a sociology of representations. In the previous section, the formal aspects of this concept (i.e. "representations") were pointed out, as well as its apparent suitability to deal with the problems that Durkheim looked at, but its content has not been mentioned so far. In order to understand its role within Durkheim's substantive theory and how this concept helps him to solve the problems encountered in the passage from order to actions, it is important to point out what are, in the end, the empirical references lying under the scope of Durkheim representational sociology. In other words: what sorts of entities fall under the concept of representation? Schmaus aptly pointed out that the term representation is usually used to refer to three distinct types of entities: ideas, sentiments, and images. (cf. 1994: 48ff) Contrary to the argument put forward by Schmaus, according to which ideas would be collective while images and sentiments would be individual, I have argued elsewhere that the proper way of understanding Durkheim's theory of representation is by articulating each one of these terms to both individual and collective levels: at the level of individual representations, one might find subjective ideas, images, and sentiments; at the level of collective representations, one might count collective ideas (concepts/beliefs), collective images (symbols), and collective sentiments (moral sentiments/values) (cf. Gomes Neto, 2020). In view of that, one may immediately realize how collective representations subsume the old definition of social facts as "ways of thinking, feeling, and acting". Once this triadic division is understood against the background of those formal remarks concerning the two-fold structure of the concept, it may also become clear that beliefs (ways of thinking) and collective sentiments (ways of feeling) falls under the internal part of representation while collective images or symbols (not only ways of acting, including both instrumental-evaluative and symbolic-expressive actions/performances but also objects of all sorts) falls under the external part of representations.

I would like to argue that the potential of this kind of statement, if well understood, was not only enunciated but methodically pursued by Durkheim in his last major work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). In this case, one might find an articulation – which

is expressed in the very structure of the work, divided into three books – between a sociology of collective ideas (referring to totemic concepts and beliefs), a sociology of collective feelings (related to sacred and profane totemic values), and a sociology of collective images, split into the study of spatial images (totemic emblems and symbols) and temporal images (totemic rituals and performances). The dialectics of these representational systems seems to have been well synthesized in a paper published two years later, on which occasion Durkheim thought it was important to clarify his argument in face of the misunderstanding of critics. The quotes are long, but they illustrate the central thesis of the book:

> "It was precisely this explanation that we attempted in the above-mentioned work, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. We were concerned to show that sacred things are simply collective ideals that have been fixed in material objects. The ideas and sentiments elaborated by a collectivity, whatever it may be, are invested, by reason of their origin, with an ascendancy and an authority which cause the particular subjects who think and believe in them to represent them under the form of moral forces that dominate and sustain them. (...) And these sui generis virtues do not derive from some mysterious action; they are simply the effects of that psychic operation, scientifically analyzable, but singularly creative and fruitful, that we call by the name of fusion, the communion of a plurality of individual consciousnesses into a common consciousness. But, on the other hand, collective representations can only be constituted by their incarnation in material objects, things, beings of all kinds, figures, movements, sounds, words, etc., which appear to them exteriorly and symbolize them; for it is only by expressing their feelings, translating them by means of signs and symbolizing them exteriorly, that individual consciousnesses, naturally closed in relation to each other, can feel that they communicate and are in unison. The things that play this part necessarily participate in the same feelings as the mental states which they, so to speak, represent and materialize.".(Durkheim, 1914: 329-30)

From this it becomes clear the correlation between a theory of beliefs and a theory of ritual practices:

> "These ideals, the product of group life, cannot constitute themselves, nor above all subsist, without penetrating individual consciences and without organizing themselves there in a lasting way. These great religious, moral, intellectual conceptions that societies draw from their heart during periods of creative effervescence, individuals carry them with them once the group has dissolved and the social communion has been realized. No doubt, once the period of effervescence is over, when each one, returning to his private existence, distances himself from the source from which this warmth and life came to him, it does not continue in the same degree of intensity. However, it does not cease, for the action of the group does not stop completely; on the contrary, it perpetually supplies these great ideals with a little of the strength which can attenuate their selfish passions and the personal concerns of daily life: this is what public festivals, ceremonies, the various types of rituals are for." (Durkheim, 1914: 330-31)

Once these considerations are made, it is necessary to insist, however, on an additional point: although Durkheim still seems to refer to different types of representation - as if they were ontologically distinct entities -, I believe that the autonomy of representational systems

can be (re) interpreted as a mark of the irreducibility of different analytical dimensions within a general theory of representations (capable of mediating the relationship between action and order). In this way, one would have distinct dimensions of every representation – cognitive, value-affective, expressive dimensions –, whose accent would mark the peculiarity of the different representational systems: conceptual systems and their respective articulation in beliefs; value systems and their articulation in norms and moral imperatives; symbolic systems articulated through temporal images (ritual performances and expressive practices) and spatial images (figurations, emblems, and all sort of objects endowed social meaning). With Durkheim, one would have then a multidimensional theory of representations.

Departing from this sort of interpretation one would find, at the core of Durkheim's thought, a fundamental articulation between the ideal dimension of representational meanings and the material dimension of social practices and objects – which, until then, has always been part of the so-called social morphology. Thus, far from being carried away by a kind of idealistic temptation, Durkheim's representationism would not point to a determinate system of meanings waiting for being deposited in material vehicles. In his studies on totemism, he pointed out on several occasions not only how ritual practices and symbols possessed the capacity to represent and even (re)create meanings (cf. Durkheim, 1912, p. 240ff; Weiss: 2012, 2013a, 2013b), but also drew attention to the relations between the various sets of collective representations and their underlying social structure. In this regard, Schmaus rightly stress that the morphological typology established in The Rules of Sociological Method, one of Durkheim's earliest texts, underlies the entire analysis of The Elementary Forms: such typology is what makes it possible or not, for example, to compare totemic beliefs between groups situated at certain points on the Durkheim's morphological scale (Schmaus, 1994, p. 232; 237-8). It is worth remembering that even the most elementary cognitive representations, the "categories of thought", were not free from processes of remission and correspondence with the materiality of natural phenomena (Schmaus, 1994, p. 76; Gomes Neto, 2018, p. 291-309).

2.3. SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS (II): MAX WEBER

Like Durkheim, Weber also tries to provide sociology with an object and a proper methodology for dealing with it if adequate scientific knowledge is to be achieved. In its now classical formulation, in "Basic Sociological Terms" (1920), Weber says that:

> Sociology (…) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (1978 [1920]: 4)

Such formulation is important for two things. The first and most obvious point is that it leaves no doubt about the place Weber occupies within the so-called "theory of action". Social action is for him, from the very beginning, the crucial analytical unit of sociological theory, which does not mean, of course, that sociology is reduced to action analysis but solely that if finds in action its starting point – one might note here that, according to weber's definition sociology is concerned not only with the explanation of action "course" (taking place at the level of micro-interaction) but with its (structural) "consequences". The second aspect to be noted is that such a unit, like Durkheim's "social representations", also entails both causal and meaningful/semantic properties requiring, therefore, adequate explanation and interpretation. Contrary to what was usual in France, though, such two-fold task underlying Weber's compatibilist epistemological commitment is not taken as being independent of methodological issues. In his intellectual context, as we will see, these two cognitive goals (explanation and understanding) were taken as requiring proper methodological procedures. It is not by accident after all that Weber, while probably less systematic, felt much more compelled to dedicate his effort to reflect on methodological issues and build up a more detailed solution to the problem of articulating both interpretive and positive moments in explanation.

When compared to Durkheim, Weber is not only more widely recognized as a key thinker within the "theory of action" tradition but he also seems to be more widely acknowledged as drawing on a Kantian/neo-Kantian basis. While it might be argued that the relationship between Durkheim and the French neo-Kantianism of Renouvier and others is still not fully explored in the secondary literature, the affinities between the Weber and the neo-Kantianism of the "southwest" school of Windelband and Rickert are acknowledged at least since the first serious analysis of Weber's methodology carried out by Alexander von Schellting during the 1930s. Even though such affinities are widely accepted nowadays, like almost everything in human sciences, they are not beyond dispute and there are certainly authoritative sources that tend to see Weber more as a sort of original and independent thinker whose relations with such a neo-Kantian school are not so strong after all.[31] To be sure, the fine-grained

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[31] Among the competent interpreters that tend to see the Kantian influences as weak or virtually absent as Weber matured his thought one may find, for instance, Cohn (1979) and Ringer (1997): while dedicating a significant part of his book to the reconstruction of Rickert and Windelband, the first of these interpreters tend to see Weber

details and the exact extension of such Kantianism in Weber's thought is not really the point at stake here and I will not take part in the specifics of such dispute. On a general level, though, there are very good reasons to interpret Weber as taking part in this broad intellectual tradition and it seems that most of the sophisticated interpreters of Weber's sociology have done so. In the next subsections (2.3.1 and 2.3.2), I will argue in parallel with my previous analysis of Durkheim that such connection can be appreciated in both metatheoretical and theoretical fronts of Weber's sociology.

2.3.1 – Weber's neo-Kantian Metatheory

As Fritz Ringer (1969) carefully described in his classical work on "the decline of german mandarins", the human and cultural sciences in Germany were becoming, by the end of the nineteenth century, increasingly defensive against the triumphant self-confidence of natural sciences. To be sure, this was not only a historical but also a (meta)theoretical challenge posed by the self-reflexiveness of modern philosophical discourse. As it was previously mentioned, the transcendental reflection about the conditions of possibility of knowledge necessarily gave birth to a set of specif challenges to be faced by those inquiring about the status of scientific knowledge in human affairs. In this philosophical context, authors such Dilthey, Windelband, and Rickert were all of them dealing with this fundamental problem.[32] Weber's

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as more of an independent thinker; the second comes to say that the "interest in the problems raised by Rickert declined sharply after 1906 and played virtually no role in his later work" (1997: 122). On the side of those who (over)emphasize the neo-Kantian role (specially Rickert's) in Weber's thought one may find the representative interpretations of Burger (1976), to whom "it is possible to find in Weber's essays [on methodology] a parallel statement to almost every important step in Rickert's argument" (1976: 58) and Oakes (1988, 1990), to whom the epistemological problems faced by Weber can be framed in terms of Ricket's theory of values and, ultimately, they can only be solved in reference his doctrine of objective values. In recent Weberian studies, a more sober or middle-ground position has been sustained by scholars like Schluchter (1997), that tends to explore more directly the role of Kant (rather than overemphasizing that of Rickert or Windelband) in Weber's thought (cf. 1997:ch 2), and Brunn (2007, 2010), to whom the neo-Kantian influence is acknowledged in broad terms but the regular "'Kantianizing' or 'neo-Kantianizing' interpretations [are found to be not] *wholly* convincing (2010: 52, emphasis added).

[32] It is widely known, in this context, that the problem of the distinction between natural and cultural or historical sciences was firstly addressed by the young Dilthey in ontological terms: such sciences would deal with fundamental distinct matters, i.e., objects with different natures which would require, in their turn, distinct methods. For him: "The human studies are distinguished from the sciences of nature first of all in that the latter have for their objects facts which are presented to consciousness as from outside, as phenomena and given in isolation, while the objects of the former are given originaliter from within as real and as a living continuum [Zusammenhang]. As a consequence there exists a system of nature for the physical and natural sciences only thanks to inferential arguments which supplement the data of experience by means of a combination of hypotheses. In the human studies, to the contrary, the nexus of psychic life constitutes originally a primitive and fundamental datum. We explain nature, we understand psychic life". (Dilthey [1894] 1977: 27). In view of the recent developments of the positive psychology of Wundt and others, however, it became clear that what was at stake

attempt to deal with such questions takes place, therefore, in this broad context where social or cultural sciences were to prove themselves against the positive standards of natural sciences. Within this general discussion, as we will see, Weber takes the side of the neo-Kantians but not without further developing his own line of reasoning in this very process.

At a first general level, Weber's Kantian allegiance is expressed throughout his methodological essays in terms of a two-fold critique (oriented to a wide variety of authors) that might be ultimately traced back to the fundamental assumption according to which knowledge would transcendentally require a positive connection between concepts of intuitions in the realm of phenomena: on the one hand, one may find in Weber's methodological essays an attempt to escape the abuses of the objectivist use of concepts made by both positivists and certain sorts of historicists (materialist/Marxist and idealist/neo-Hegelian types)[33] to whom concrete reality would be somehow exhausted or one-dimensionally explained by certain sets of concepts and key principles; on the other hand, along his essays Weber is also highly critical of what might be called an intuitionist strategy, i.e. the methodological attempt to dispensing the use of abstract concepts and circumscribing the human and cultural sciences to the register of the subjective meanings of the inner life through the expedience of divination, empathy, and intuitive awareness. Underlying this double critique one may find two crucial aspects of Weber's thought: firstly, there is as a radical subscription – in fact, too radical, as one might

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was not exactly a distinction of object matters; at least, it would be possible to build up models of explanation to human matters similar to those ones employed by natural sciences. Neo-Kantians like Windelband then came up with an alternative, apparently more promising way of addressing the distinction at stake. In a famous speech, addressed in 1894, Windelband thematized such distinction in terms of the methodologies of what he called "idiographic" sciences, concerned with the singularity of phenomena, and "nomothetic" sciences, concerned with law-like relations taking place among phenomena (cf. [1894] 1998: 15ff). While Windelband's argument became central to the debates taking place in the German context, he neither draw all the methodological consequences relevant for a proper defense of historical sciences (generally taken as idiographic) nor analyzed in further detail its underpinning assumptions. It was incumbent on Rickert, his pupil, to pursue this path. In his book, *The Limits of Concept Formation in the Natural Sciences* (1902), Rickert draws on this same sort of distinction – which appers sometimes in terms of "invididualizing" and "generalizing" sciences – but goes further and addresses, among other things, the fundamental problem of how cultural sciences could achieve valid knowledge in view of both intensive and extensive multiplicity (and, in a sense, the infinitude) of the historical objects. What Rickert realizes is that the process of concept formation necessary for the achievement of knowledge would require a selection in reference to (theoretical) values whose validity would be due to the fact that they are shared by a certain community at a certain moment. This "value-relation" on which historical knowledge is dependent would be then a fundamental characteristic of cultural sciences (cf. [1902] 1986: ch. 4, esp. 61-66). Weber, as it is widely known, would accept this fundamental characterization according to which value-relation are a crucial aspect to be acknowledged in concept formation.

[33] In Weber's first methodological essays, this sort of position is already clear, for instance, in the reconstructive critiques found in the articles dedicated to Rocher and Knies (1903-6). Both of these authors, despite their alleged opposition to Hegelian metaphysics, would share, according to Weber, the same "emanationist" metaphysical assumptions concerning the historical development, taken by them as being organized by hidden yet fundamental principles. (cf. [1903-6] 2013: 12ff; 89ff)

note – to the critical Kantian distinction between the conceptual knowledge of phenomena and the incognoscibility of things in themselves, a distinction preventing the empiricist temptation (coming from both materialist and idealist metaphysics) to hypostatize concepts as exhaustive representations of concrete reality; secondly, one may find also a subscription to the idea of the impossibility of a non-discursive, immediate *knowledge* about the objects, even when situated in the subjective sphere. Such point is radically spelled out under the image of an insurmountable gulf, which Weber usually calls – following Emil Lask's terminology – a "hiatus irrationalis" between theoretical concepts and reality.[34]

Once one passes from these general considerations about the status and the nature of knowledge to the more specif position regarding the alluded problem of the differentiation between natural and cultural sciences, Weber's allegiance with the Kantian lineage, specially with the southwest school of Windelband and Rickert, can be appreciated in further detail. Weber follows such authors in their insistence that such a difference would be fundamentally given at the (epistemological) level of the cognitive aims and methods rather than at the (ontological) level of the nature of objects at stake. According to the Weberian language, natural and cultural sciences follows distinct sorts of intellectual "interests": natural sciences are not focused on the concrete, qualitative flow of empirical reality but they seek to exhaust a certain set of analytical concepts and general laws which are usually highly abstract and tend to assume a more quantitative character; cultural sciences, on the other hand, are not primarily concerned with such theoretical systems but with historical qualitative objects taken in their individuality and their meaning relations.

One shall note here that once the Weberian synthetic ambition is properly formulated and the neo-Kantian approach regarding the distinct interests of natural and cultural sciences is connected with the doctrine of the infinitude/irrationality of reality, the result is that an obvious yet crucial problem emerges: while natural sciences can evade the problem of the irrationality of the concrete and its infinite complexity – since they seek its very abstraction by means of a system of general concepts – cultural sciences cannot pass over this problem. In order to deal with it, however, such sciences can neither simply abstain from using concepts and decide to engage in non-conceptual, non-discursive, ultimately irrational orientation towards the

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[34] One might note here that Weber adopts a position that goes further than that one sustained by Kant himself, which remained open to the possibility of bridging such gulf. Moreover, it seems important to point out that the Kantian noumenal realm is not characterized by its irrationality, unless by the term "rationality" one understands merely theoretical rationality. For Kant, as we have seen, this was not the case. Practical rationality operates, indeed, in close reference to the noumenal realm. As we will see, at this point Weber diverges not only from Kant but also from other neo-Kantians of his intellectual milieu such as Windelband and Rickert.

infinitude of the concrete, nor simply resort to concepts in the same sense as natural sciences. Their particular interest must require a distinct use of concepts. At this point, then, the crucial problems concerning the possibility of knowledge in cultural sciences undertake a representative shift. The problem ceases to appear, as in Durkheim's case, for instance, as that one concerning the logic of representations and its external-internal dimensions; rather, it starts to appear as the fundamental problem of concepts formation in their relation to the concreteness of a fundamentally non-conceptual, qualitative, singular, and ultimately irrational reality.

Weber's attempt to solve this problem can be found in the classical "Objectivity of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" (1904). The solution provided follows, in part, that one anticipated by Heinrik Rickert: concepts in cultural sciences are distinguished by their "value-relation".[35] The possibility of cultural sciences depends on the employment of concepts that do not result from mere inductive abstraction but which are constructed, instead, by reference to objects whose individuality is grasped in terms of their relation to given cultural values. The objects to be at once conceptualized and intellectually dealt with by cultural sciences are significant therefore by their reference to value-ideas, which means that values are not only matters of analysis but they constitute the very condition of knowledge responding to the peculiarity of concept formation in cultural sciences. Weber's theory of ideal types is, in a sense, an ingenious way of attempting to operationalize this sort of solution to the problem of concept formation in human sciences. To deal with both the extensive and intensive infinitude of historical phenomena, Weber argues, the cultural scientist must select some significant trait (or some set of traits) to which a variety of phenomena is supposed to be in conformity with and then accentuate it in order to build up a pure mental image, an "ideal type", whose contrast with concrete reality may serve the process of hypothesis construction necessary to the understanding of its meaningful nexus and its adequate explanation.[36] (cf. Weber, [1904] 2013: 125ff)

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[35] The general argument concerning the value-relation character of cultural sciences is articulated by Weber in the following passage: "We have used the term 'cultural sciences' to designate disciplines whose aim is to acquire knowledge about the culturally *significant* aspects of the manifestations of life. However, neither the *significance* of the configuration of cultural phenomena nor the *basis* [of that significance] can be deduced, explained, and made comprehensible by any system of law concepts, however perfect, since that significance presupposes the relation of cultural phenomena *to value ideas*. The concept of culture is a *value concept*. Empirical reality *is* 'culture' for us because, and to the extent that, we relate it to value ideas; it comprises those, and *only* those, elements of reality that acquire *significance* for us because of that relation. (…) Only for this reason, and to this extent, is it worth knowing for us in its distinctive individual character. And it is obvious that *what* has significance for us cannot be ascertained by some 'presuppositionless' inquiry into the given empirical [reality]; on the contrary: the precondition of something becoming an *object* of inquiry is that we have already determined [that it has significance for us]". (Weber, [1904] 2013: 116)

[36] The establishment of conceptual types is inseparable from a process of abstraction: its hermeneutic potential lies precisely in the fact that this abstraction makes it possible to clearly visualize the establishment of the meaningful

A proper connection between Weber's synthetic ambition leading to this methodological formulation of ideal types, on the one hand, and the achievement of adequate explanations of meaningful historical phenomena, on the other, is more clearly systematized in a later classical text, the "basic sociological terms" (1920). What one may see here is the straight connection between an operative *methodology* (of hypothesis construction through the use of types) and the cognitive *goals* of cultural sciences (adequate explanation and understanding) taking place against the most elementary concepts of the theory of action. Weber argues here that the interpretation of a given course of action – seeking the clarity of its meaningful connections – is hermeneutically "adequate" to the extent that the established meaningful nexuses are "typical", that is, they conform to average customary ways of thinking and feeling. But however clear and plausible the interpretation may be, it is not an adequate causal explanation and must remain, at this initial moment, only as a hypothesis.[37] To become an explanation, the interpretation must be "verified" by comparison with the course of events: a) in the case of the meaning interpretation of the actions of a concrete subject, the comparison is made in view of the course of events played by other actors endowed with similar meanings in similar contexts; b) in the case of the interpretation of an average meaning attributed to a group or mass of concrete subjects, the comparison is made by means of statistical analysis of the actions – this is the case in which the explanation tends to reach a higher degree of probability; c) in the case of the meaning attributed to ideal-typical subjects the comparison can be made by means of mental experiments (counterfactual reasoning). This interpretation concerning a certain connection or sequence of events will be taken as causally adequate, therefore, "(…) insofar as, according to established generalizations from experience, there is a probability that it will always actually occur in the same way." ([1920] 1978: 11). The point, for Weber, is that

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nexus between pure types. The same historical phenomenon (concrete) or a significant complex of actions may have distinct dimensions capable of conceptual translation (typical-ideal): a phenomenon may be at the same time "feudal", "patrimonial", "charismatic", etc. A certain ideal type allows not only the highlighting of one (or more than one) of these dimensions through its assertion, but, above all, it allows the assessment of its respective impact on the phenomenon. The ideal type allows us to think, for example, how a certain complex of actions would develop if it were entirely driven by a "charismatic domination" (ideal type) and, from this projection, to measure how much this element, in fact, had an impact on the course of actions contemplated in the concrete phenomenon. The causality or impact established is then always partial: one measures the impact of one (charismatic) element on the general course of actions within the phenomenon. In the same way, economics highlights the rational component of economic action in order to measure, counterfactually, the impact of rationality on the concrete action of economic agents.

[37] The interpretation is not sufficient for several reasons: a) the interpretation, even the one made by the subject himself, can hide causes, motives, and repressions that are not clear to consciousness; b) no matter how plausible the interpretation, there is always the possibility of other possible interpretations for the same action, since it may be based on very different motivations and connections of meaning; c) moreover, actions are usually the result of conflicting motivations and impulses.

only when an interpretation of a course of events is both adequate with reference to meaning and likely from a statistical point of view do we have a correct causal explanation. While Weber himself recognizes that such sort of solution is not free from difficulties, the point of this sketchy presentation is more or less clear. It illustrates yet briefly how the synthetic assumptions in Weber's metatheory are translated into a theory of explanation seeking a sort of compatibilism capable of overcoming one-sided explanations from both positivistic and hermeneutic fronts.

2.3.2 – Weber's neo-Kantian Social Theory

Weber's sociology is strikingly extensive and complex so that a reconstruction of his thought, even in abbreviated form, would far exceed the purposes of the present chapter. Thus, the present subsection will be limited to highlighting some aspect of the connection taking place between Weber's theoretical approach and the general Kantian framework in what concerns two key reference points: his conception of action and his sociological approach to order. In doing so, my purpose here is to bring attention to a continuity going on at the presuppositional level dealing with the fundamental problems of social theory, which makes it possible, from this point of view, to place Weber's sociology within the tradition of thought here analyzed. Moreover, his sociological thinking is crucial here for an extra yet closely connected reason: even in the moments it does not completely succeed, Weber's thought on these issues points quite clearly toward the synthetic spirit that drives the "theory of action" in its attempt to elaborate a multidimensional theory of action and order, especially in what concerns the positive articulation of the sectors of instrumental rationality and interests, on the one hand, and that of normative patterns and value-integration, on the other. While Weber does not seek to build up a comprehensive and integrative *system* of concepts, his sociology is concerned, from its logical starting point, with both the tensions and the positive possibilities of interpenetration between these two main sectors.

Let's start with the first of these points of reference: action. Weber is clear from the beginning that adequate explanation of action has as its starting point not only the search for objective patterns, but also a reference to subjective elements of meaning, purpose, and so on. Weber shares with Kant the assumption about what is the nature of action, how action operates, and about the (transcendental) conditions for autonomous action to be possible. Action is fundamentally understood beyond its external aspect, that is, as something more than a set of

physical movements given in space and time; it implies the inner theoretical representation (that can be more or less clear) of certain connections (between certain means and certain ends anticipated by the agent) given under a directive rule, so that autonomous action would be characterized, on the one hand, by the clarity of the theoretical representation concerning such connections and, on the other hand, by the agent's subjective recognition of a rule he/she set for him/herself. In a passage in one of his first methodological writings this overall understanding is quite clearly stated:

> The more "freely" the acting person "decides" – that is to say: the more [the "decision"] is based on [that person's] "own" "*deliberations*", which have not been blurred by "external" constraint[s] or irresistible "affects", the more completely (other things being equal) will the motivation fit into the categories of "end" and "means"; the more successfully can it therefore be analysed rationally and, in a given instance, be made to fit into a model of rational action; consequently, the greater will be the role played by the nomological knowledge possessed both by the acting person and by the scholar who performs the analysis, and the more "constrained" will the acting person be with respect to the "means" [to be used]. And not only that. The more "freely", in the sense used here, [the person] "acts" – that is to say: the *less* [the action] has the character of a "natural occurrence", the greater the effect will be, in the last resort, of a concept of "personality" whose "essence" is to be found in a constant inner relationship to certain ultimate "values" and "meanings" of life – "values" and "meanings" that in the actions [of the "personality"] are translated into goals, and are thereby converted into teleological–rational action. And, to the same extent, this implies a fading away of the romantic–naturalistic version of the idea of "personality", which seeks the real inner sanctum of the personal in the opposite direction: in the vague, indistinct, vegetative "underground" of personal life, that is to say: in an "irrationality" based on a tangled infinity of psychophysical conditions for the development of temperaments and moods – an "irrationality" that the "person" in actual fact completely *shares with* the animal. ([1903-6] 2013: 85)

According to his conception, freedom is to be equated neither with the realm of nature – whether it is externally given as objective conditions or internally supplied by agent's urges, desires, and affects – nor with the forms of spirit (ideas, values) lying outside to the subjective deliberations. Autonomy resides rather in a "constant *inner* relationship" to "values" and "meanings" and it has to do with subjective purposes agent set itself against both external objects (whether material or ideal) and affects. It must be noted, however, that such a way of drawing the fundamental conditions for autonomous action in opposition to heteronomous behavior does not ignore objective categories as a constitutive part of the equation. (The purely romantic personality detached from all objectivity is equally outside the sphere of autonomy!) The insistence on the role of the "nomological knowledge possessed by the acting person" testify to Weber's recognition that, in concrete terms, freedom can only be achieved as the product of positive interaction between theoretical and practical aspects of reasoning, resulting

from the tension between the constraints posed by experience and the requirements presented by values and meanings made by agents their own.

Such understanding of the fundamental aspects of action present in Weber's first methodological writings is also expressed in his later writings. In the Weberian famous action typology, in the first chapter of *Economy and Society*, one may see that such instrumental, evaluative, and affective/psychological elements which characterize action condition are organized under ideal-typical constructions: the *instrumentally rational* action points toward the positive knowledge of the external conditions of action by the actor; *value rational* action points toward the evaluative judgments regarding values and meanings; *affective action* brings attention to the psychological conditions the actor; traditional action, determined by "ingrained habits", would represent to the borderline of heteronomous behavior. (cf. Weber [1920] 1978: 22-26). Despite Weber's refusal to draw strong systematic inferences from such sort of ideal construction procedure, such typology opens up, as we will see in the next chapter, the possibility for the theory of action to positively articulate such fundamental elements in overarching frames of interconnected analytical dimensions to be found in each concrete case and systematically dealt with by general theory.

Beyond this fundamental opening to a multidimensional theory of action concerned with the synthesis of diverse elements in terms of which it takes place, it is possible to note that the conception advanced by Weber also reaffirms the affiliation to the Kantian lineage in what regard its inquiry about the conditions of freedom. Autonomy is based on the emancipation from both external and internal nature through the use of practical reason in an intimate connection with theoretical reason. However, the passage from actions characterized by its traditional aspect to action in its rational forms – which represents the enlightenment ideal of the passage from traditionalism to rational self-reflection – does not take place in a straight line towards instrumental action, as the typology might suggest at first sight. This is so because Weber understands that purely theoretical rationality expressed in the nomological knowledge articulated in instrumental action cannot by itself lead to autonomy. The Kantian thesis that hypothetical imperatives taken in isolation cannot lead to any figuration of freedom is, in fact, endorsed by Weber. The sphere of freedom is that of meaning-constitution and ultimate-values choosing rather than that of cognitive knowledge and adaptation. It is enough to recall here the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of the Capitalism*, in which the one-sided dominance of instrumental imperatives of economic utility calculus is understood as a fundamental threat to the realization of autonomy in modern societies. (cf. [1904-5/1920] 2012:

122-125) Autonomy presupposes, therefore, that the hypothetical imperatives of theoretical reason are connected with categorical imperatives provided by practical reason in its evaluative exercise. This point leads us directly to the problem of order.

As mentioned, actions appear as the fundamental units of Weberian theory, but his sociology is not exhausted there. Social actions are intersubjectively referred to through certain patterns of expectations that allow agents to orient themselves in relation to each other. In the Weberian edifice, the plurality of elements within his typology of action is translated into the recognition of a multiplicity of interests that make up social relations and, subsequently, the various forces underlying social orders. One thus moves from material and ideal interests to the underlying forces of the multiple spheres of social life (economic, political, legal, and religious) through a multidimensional approach. The point becomes clear when connected with Weber's methodology.

> Roughly speaking, the basic circumstance that all the phenomena that we describe as belonging to "social economics" (in the widest sense) are bound up with is the following: in our physical existence, as well as when we satisfy our most ideal needs, we everywhere find that the external means necessary for those purposes are limited in quantity and insufficient in quality, and that, in order to satisfy those needs, we must make planned provision, labour, struggle with nature and establish social relations with other human beings. However, the quality of an event as a "social-economic" phenomenon is not something that is "objectively" inherent in it. Instead, it is determined by the direction of our cognitive *interest* resulting from the specific cultural significance that we, in each case, attach to the event in question. ([1904]2013: 108)

In pointing out this pervasive character of the economic element, of course, Weber is not subscribing to one-sided materialism in historical matters, a position which he criticizes in the following paragraphs of the quote. His argument is simply that the economic dimension can be studied, in principle, even in the case of phenomena apparently extrinsic to the economy, like those related to "our most ideal needs". The same may be true, of course, for other dimensions, such as ethics and religion, with their impact on economic behavior and so on – a point that Weber systematically demonstrates in his studies on religions.

Aside from this multidimensional aspect, Weber's reflection on order also subscribes to the Kantian approach in what concerns the problem of the conditions for social order. Although Weber is sensitive to the inescapable role of coercive forces in social arrangments he insists, from the start, that the most stable sort of order is that which enjoys the "(…) prestige of being considered binding, or, as it may be expressed, of 'legitimacy'" ([1920] 1978: 31). The argument concerning the possibility of a stable social order is, in this case, convergent with that one focused on the possibility for the achievement of a certain sort of order capable of retaining

a subjective reference, crucial to what is here called voluntarism. Weber's argument here is that if such order it to take place, then the "maxims" organizing a certain complex of actions must be subjectively acknowledged as legitimate by agents and "domination" which characterizes every social order must be somehow not only externally given by coercion, but inwardly operated by the agent in view of the validity of an accepted duty; the agent must not only stick to order "(…) because disobedience would be disadvantageous to him but also because its violation would be abhorrent to his sense of duty" ([1920] 1978: 31). Following this typology, one might say, in sum, that an autonomous social order might be achieved to the extent that the sector containing coercive elements of enforcement in social arrangments – represented here not only by the crude material and economic forces alluded before but also by external sanctions coming from "convention" and "law" – is ultimately penetrated by the sector of ultimate values and categorical duty.

To be sure, the acknowledgment of both the possibility of multiple concurring factors in the social order (a theoretical possibility opened up by our cognitive interest) and the transcendental requirement of their interpenetration for the achievement of a voluntary sort of order (pointed out by our practical reflection) does not amount to say anything about the concrete paths followed by given historical orders. This is a task of empirical research. Richard Münch, who has probably dealt with the concept of interpenetration in more detail than anyone, draws on Weber's sociology of religion to make this point (cf. [1982]1987: 12, 24ff). Weberian analysis of religion would show that the tension between the spheres of self-interest and categorical obligation – represented under the tension between 'world' and 'religious ethics' – could follow at least four different paths: accommodation to the world (a path followed by Confucianism), reconciliation (followed by Hinduism), world flight (followed by Buddhism), and mutual penetration (more completely realized by ascetic Protestantism). In sum, interpenetration would be then just one possibility, a possibility that has taken place, according to this interpretation, only in the western European societies at a certain moment.

In the end, the general sorts of consideration put forward in the present subsection may be enough for the purpose of situating Weber within the intellectual lineage here analyzed – since they reveal a convergence concerning the substantive answers given to the fundamental problems in sociological discourse – but it seems quite clear that they can only be preliminary to the concrete analysis revolving around the empirical paths followed by action and order. Yet to follow Weber here would far exceed the scope of the present thesis. In the next chapter, I will keep the track of metatheory/(social)theory distinction in order to advance a thorough

reconstruction of the first comprehensive synthesis in the theory of action, in which the alluded issue of interpenetration will be systematically addressed.

CHAPTER 3

The First Synthesis: The Voluntarist Theory of Action

The next step in this long history concerning the emergence of the theory of action is taken in a book that is not by accident also considered the first great synthesis of the classical sociological thought, *The Structure of Social Action*. In his first major work, Parsons (1937) reconstructs in detail the theoretical logic behind the most significant developments in modern political and social thought. The core of his substantive argument concerns the historical development of a theoretical convergence between the two main traditions in sociological thinking, namely, positivism and idealism. Through a dialectical process of theoretical systematic changes, on the one hand, and the acknowledgment of new factual insights, on the other, these antagonistic currents of sociological thinking would have achieved, by the end of the 19th century, the conditions of a true positive synthesis capable of articulating their old theoretical antinomies in more adequate and comprehensive terms. According to Parsons, this positive synthesis − partially anticipated in the works of authors like Marshal, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber and whose final elaboration would be incumbent on himself − would lead to the emergence of a new and encompassing theory of action, which he calls the "voluntarist theory of action".

Following the same structure of the previous chapter, this one will be dedicated to a further detailed analysis of the underlying metatheoretical assumptions (3.1) and the key presuppositional problems addressed in Parsons' new version of the theory of action (3.2 and 3.3). However, before engaging in this kind of reconstructive effort, it would be useful to make a few preliminary remarks that serve here as a starting point to the assessment of Parsons' general enterprise as well as its proper Kantian background.[38]

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[38] In this regard, it is worth noting that some of the most sophisticated Parsonian scholars have insisted on the existence of a Kantian background in Parsons' social thought: Harold Bershady (1973) pointed out the analogy between Parsons's analytical categories of the action frame of reference and Kant's categories of understanding − both of them occupying a transcendental position vis a vis their fields of validity (respectively sociology and physics); Richard Münch (1981; 1982; 1987) has persuasively insisted on the existence of a 'Kantian core' underlying the whole development of Parsons's theory of action. In emphasizing the importance of Kant we do not pretend to suggest that he was the only philosophical influence underlying Parsons' social thought. The importance of authors like Henderson and especially Whitehead to Parsons's metatheory as well as his methodology is noteworthy. (cf. Fararo 2001; Lidz and Bershady 2006). We would like to sustain, however, that once properly understood, this broad Kantian core is coherent with those other influences. This seems to be also the position of Parsons himself (cf. Parsons 1978b:1353–4; 1979)

The first observation concerns the very nature of Parsons' intellectual strategy: it is characterized by a sort of transcendental approach where empirical social phenomena are not only analyzed through a framework of intellectual categories but inquired in terms of their "conditions of possibility". Following this perspective, the experience itself − that within the philosophical discourse represents, on the one hand, the touchstone of scientific knowledge and, on the other hand, the substantive matter of the problems faced by morality and aesthetics − is only made possible as an object of valid (intellectual, moral, or aesthetic) judgment when organized or "synthesized" by a prior normative (intellectual, moral or aesthetic) pattern. This transcendental strategy, elaborated by Kant during his attempt to overcome the antinomies of rationalism and empiricism in philosophy, serve as a model for Parsons' positive synthesis between positivism and idealism in sociological thinking.

A second remark concerns the normative and the historical basis of this whole transcendental project. The philosophical discourse thematizing the transcendental aspects of valid empirical knowledge − as well as those concerning the moral action and so on − is itself a product of specific social conditions, whose particularism, instead of undermining its universalist aspirations, articulates the conditions to potentialize it. Making use of Parsonian vocabulary, Richard Münch points out the historical relevance of the process of social 'interpenetration' − which took place in Western Europe during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries − of distinct subsystems of action that were previously dedicated either to theoretical or practical activities (Münch 1982: 10). What is at stake here is the historical process analyzed in great detail by Max Weber's sociology of religion where the fields of (religious) theoretical speculation and (economic) practical interest became embedded, giving rise to a rationalization process in western societies. It is through this large social process of interpenetration between theory and practice, logic and experience − so characteristic of modern science and morality − that we can understand both the historical emergence and the normative basis of Parsons' project. From its very beginnings, his sociology was attached to the idea of modernity and some of its fundamental value patterns, especially those underlying the possibility of modern science and humanistic ethics.[39] In what concerns his general sociological

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[39] In fact, the Parsonian engagement to "modernity" has been analyzed from a large variety of perspectives. His most radical critics − like Mills (1959) or Gouldner (1970) − tended to portray this relationship as characterized by some kind of naive optimism or even a distorted ideological defense of *the status quo*. Conversely, more sympathetic interpreters − like Alexander (1978, 2001), Bourricaud (1981), Münch (1982), Mayew (1984), Robertson and Turner (1991), Lencher (1991), Gerhardt (2002, 2011), Best (2015) − has emphasized, though in different ways, the more sound and fruitful aspects of Parsons' modernism: on one hand, he is praised for his theoretical and normative commitments to central values of the contemporary societies − e.g. his strong support for political democracies, his defense of individual liberties and his insistence on the fundamental role of social

discourse, as we will see, this engagement with modernity value patterns takes the form of an inquiry into the (transcendental) conditions that make possible both autonomous social action and voluntaristic social order. These two inquiries are of fundamental and strategic relevance since they condense and articulate at the same time both the central questions in "theoretical logic" (Alexander, 1982) and the main ethical concerns in the sociological discourse.

3.1 METATHEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS IN PARSONS' FIRST SYNTHESIS

Although one can easily identify the general lines of Parsons' metatheoretical orientation throughout the whole book, most of his technical arguments are developed in chapters dedicated to the methodological debates. In fact, it is mainly because of these special chapters that SSA seems to be a promising starting point for accessing Parsons' metatheoretical and even meta-methodological positions.[40] Parsons presents, in this case, a series of technical arguments concerning his views on the nature of scientific theories − i.e., their structure, their general grounds of validity, their distinct types of concepts, and the way they operate in relation to empirical experience − and the nature of scientific explanation.

3.1.1 - The General Metatheoretical Orientation

Contrary to all empiricist − or even fictionalist − versions of positivism and idealism, Parsons always insisted that a possible scientific knowledge of reality depends on a proper and reflexive articulation between intellectual frameworks and sense manifold. Nowhere else this relationship between theory and experience, concepts and intuitions, is more evident than in his first major work. From the very beginning of the book, Parsons is very clear in stating that "there is no empirical knowledge which is not in some sense and to some degree conceptually formed", and that "all talk of 'pure sense data', 'raw experience' (...)" and so is ruled out as an adequate description of "actual experience" (1937: 28). By putting things this way, of course, Parsons is not neglecting the centrality of empirical references for the scientific theory, but emphasizing a sort of non-reductionist position according to which knowledge is always

solidarity −; on the other hand, he is celebrated as a great interpreter of modernity who thematized its central aspects and developed sophisticated analysis to deal with its main problems.
[40] See: Münch, 1982; Alexander, 1983: 9; Fararo, 2001; Lidz & Bershady, 2006.

dependent on a balanced interplay between two interrelated yet analytically distinct sectors of scientific activity: theoretical structures and factual insights.

According to Parsons, although scattered knowledge is possible, science can only take place when knowledge is brought together and "(...) becomes integrated with reference to fairly clear-cut theoretical systems". (1937: 16). A scientific theory is understood then as a *system* of statements − about empirical facts or modes of relations between empirical facts − presenting certain logical relations so that a significant change in one statement has significant logical consequences for one or more statements within the theoretical body. While empirical reference is central to this whole process − since it is precisely the changes in our factual knowledge that leads to the aforementioned changes in the theoretical statements concerning our interpretation about these and other "facts" − it is important to note that the theoretical structures intervene and give the ordering conditions of our knowledge in its distinctive logical steps. Firstly, it tells us what changes are really significant: the relevant discoveries or changes in our factual knowledge are not those that present practical or technological consequences, but those presenting a significant impact on the theoretical structures in question. In other words, theory tells us what are the *significant problems to solve*:

> The importance of certain problems concerning the facts will be inherent in the structure of the system. Empirical interest will be in the facts so far as they are relevant to the solution of these problems. Theory not only formulates what we know but also tells us what we want to know, that is, the questions to which an answer is needed. (1937: 9)

Secondly, Parsons argues that theoretical structure will not only tell us where to look but what to expect while looking: theoretical structures "(...) tell us what empirical facts it should be possible to observe in a given set of circumstances" (1937: 8). In other words, empirical verification will only take place in face of *theoretical expectations concerning observation*.

When applied to the analysis of scientific development − or scientific "progress" − this general perspective concerning theoretical structures and factual insights leads, once again, to the recognition of two series of interrelated questions in theoretical logic: the problems concerning what Parsons calls "logical closure" and those concerning what he calls "residual categories" in theoretical systems. The first one of these problems has to do with the fact that theoretical structures, once properly understood, not only inform us what problems to solve or what to expect throughout our investigation but also the logical grid of its future developments. These structures reveal, in a sense, the logically open paths and the general lines of logical

change that a theory can follow within a given frame of reference.[41] Going even further, Parsons also came to identify a sort of rational telos underlying these developments in theoretical systems: insofar as the systems are submitted to "logical criticism" − in order to achieve higher levels of clarity, consistency, and so − they tend to become, in Parsons words, more "logically closed"[42], i.e., their assumptions became explicitly stated and "(...) each of the logical implications which can be derived from any one proposition within the system finds its statement in another proposition in the same system" (1937: 9-10). In formulating things this way, of course, Parsons is not saying that in the end all statements in a system will be subsumed into a single one − in this case, the theory would be reduced to a mere tautology − but that theoretical changes, once resulting from proper logical criticism, will be done according to consistency patterns.

The second problem, concerning "residual categories", has also to do with the systematic nature of scientific theories but, in this case, more with their external references than with their internal logical connections. According to Parsons, it follows from the very nature of theoretical structures − whose statements are understood in terms of positively defined schemes of concepts and variables − that they must present a limited extension: concepts define, in principle, what (and to what extent) lies under its definitional scope and their intellectual power consists precisely in drawing up these lines. Therefore it is the nature of the case that in a given field of facts − investigated by a specific theory or a specific disciplinary field − it is almost inevitable that there will be at least some facts lying "outside" the theoretical scheme.[43] If

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[41] Although Parsons seems to sustain the idea that the scope of possible changes, as well as the main varying lines, are both given, to a great extent, by the very logical structure of the theoretical scheme at stake, this does not mean that significant changes are not possible in the theoretical scheme itself. It means simply that if exceeding certain limits the changes at stake tend to lead to a situation where some fundamental assumptions in the scheme must be reinterpreted and reformulated in face of these new changes so that their apprehension observes some logical patterns. If this is possible, then the changes, insofar as they are significant, can give rise to a new theoretical variant. If, on the other hand, even these internal reformulations cannot make sense of the new significant factual insight then the system may be abandoned in favor of a more comprehensive and consistent one.

[42] According to Parsons, it is important not to confuse this with "empirical closure", i.e., the idea common to classical empiricist methodology according to which all significant aspects of empirical reality can be, in principle, translated (without any significant loss) into a single theoretical scheme or the idea that the empirical findings of other schemes can all be, in principle, understood (or reified) as "constants" which make part of the "nature" of the phenomena at stake (cf. Parsons, 1937: 728-9).

[43] At this point, it seems necessary to distinguish such facts, which are given in a specif "field of investigation", from those taking place in other fields. In this last case, the facts at stake may be "outside" of a given theoretical schema to the very extent that they are objects of interest of another scheme or disciplinary field and, therefore, translatable into the categories of that second scheme. When this is the case, these facts appear merely as points of reference or necessary data to the first scheme but not as positively defined by it. For instance, certain "facts" concerning the human organism, which are positively defined by the conceptual schemes of biology, are outside the scope of any economical or sociological explanation. The conceptual schemes of the latter disciplinary field take the facts positively defined by biological theory as points of reference or necessary data, but not as positive objects defined in terms of their conceptual scheme. That being said, something quite different takes place when

observable facts within a certain field are known to exist, but they cannot be subsumed under any positively defined categories provided by the theoretical scheme at stake, then they will receive a vague or negative definition. In this case, we have what Parsons calls a "residual category":

> "(...) [categories] of facts known to exist, which are even more or less adequately described, but are defined theoretically by their failure to fit into the positively defined categories of the system. The only theoretically significant statements that can be made about these facts are negative statements − they are not so and so" (1937:17-18)

The discussion about residual categories is of crucial importance since it points out not only the extension but the limits of theoretical systems in their relation to the experience. Moreover, the growing interest in such categories at certain moments may anticipate the directions of an upcoming theoretical change. In pointing this out, Parsons is arguing that theoretical systems do not change, after all, only in order to achieve higher levels of logical consistency, but also to eliminate residual categories in favor of positively defined ones. These two ideas − concerning the paths through which theoretical systems can increase both their logical consistency and their empirical scope −, when taken together, are what make possible, at least from Parsons' perspective, all the talk about "progress" in science.

Bearing these considerations in mind it is possible to understand how Parsons' general metatheoretical orientation is articulated with his main substantive thesis. Throughout the whole book, a series of tensions and reformulations resulting from this alluded interplay between theoretical and empirical logics are pictured on the canvas of Parsons' historical argument. When one follows this historical reconstruction all the way, what becomes clear is that behind the intellectual developments experienced by a myriad of significant sociological figures − coming from different countries, social classes, religious orientations, academic training, intellectual backgrounds, and so on − one can find, in the end, a sort "immanent development of the logic of theoretical systems in relation to empirical fact" (1937:14). Indeed, the main substantive thesis in the book, the "convergence thesis", draws a significant part of its intellectual persuasion to the fact that it condenses and expresses in an elegant manner this very type of metatheoretical orientation toward a balanced and non-reductionist position. The convergence thesis is, so to speak, a way of articulating both the most sophisticated bodies of

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the facts standing "outside" a theoretical scheme are not "out there" because they are objects of a distinct theoretical field but because they are ignored, neglected, or even misunderstood.

theoretical thinking available at the time and the wide variety of *empirical* knowledge addressed by them − ranging from ritual actions in Australian totemic clans to instrumental actions in modern bureaucratic societies. An articulation that is carried out by a two-sided process where theoretical consistency and empirical correspondence are increased by logical criticism of theoretical systems and positive reformulation of residual categories.

3.1.2 - Specifying the General Metatheoretical Orientation (I): Frames of Reference and Analytical Realism

Although Parsons' general view about the nature and the development of scientific theory seems clear when one looks at his historical argument, some of the important aspects that characterize his position are still in need of further clarification. Moreover, at this general level, the deep connection between the problems concerning the nature of theoretical bodies and the nature of explanation is not at all clear. In order to fully appreciate both the nuances of his epistemology and his contribution to the discussion concerning the types and the validity of explanation in human sciences, one must engage in his detailed discussion about the types of concepts and descriptive frames of reference. In this context, as we will see, not only the general talk about "theoretical schemes" will be better qualified in terms of distinct levels and uses of concepts but the whole transcendental strategy that characterizes Parsons' general approach will be then specified into a sophisticated metatheoretical position which he calls "analytical realism" (cf. Parsons, 1937: 730).

As above mentioned, Parsons' departing point is the idea that scientific knowledge is only possible when the experience is intellectually organized by a prior set of categories or theoretical schemes. But in order to be capable of breaking down the experience and valuing its distinctive dimensions, this very set of descriptive and analytical categories must be themselves organized by a higher-order framework of relations in terms of which they can assume a positive meaning in face of each other and in terms of which it is possible to distinguish the relevant "facts" addressed by them. These frameworks of relations are called "frames of reference". One main example of this type of framework, according to Parsons, is that provided by the spatiotemporal schema in classical mechanics. Such a scheme provides the rules for organizing the categories in terms of which a physical event can be described and known: it asserts that in order to be relevant to physical theory a phenomenon must be broken down into concrete parts, like bodies or even particles − understood as complexes of structural elements,

like the external conditions, the internal properties, the forces underlying its behavior and so −
that has to present certain variable qualities like extension, duration, mass, from which one can
also deduce other ones like density and velocity and so. These categories, of course, can only
make sense in face of other assumptions provided by that frame of reference concerning the
nature of relations between the concrete concepts and between variables: that the elements must
be organized in terms of spatial and temporal coordinate; that the connections between its parts
must be conceived as freed from any value reference; that their behavior is to be understood in
non-teleological terms, etc.

What really interests Parsons throughout his book, however, is the investigation of the
frame of reference of action theory, understood here as a kind of general scheme employed in
human sciences, a scheme logically homologous but distinct from the aforementioned
spatiotemporal one, operated in natural sciences. The departing point is the idea that the
concrete phenomena addressed by human sciences can always be described in terms of action
systems that may be divided into smaller systems or parts. The minimum system of elements
capable of still making sense in terms of the action frame of reference is what parsons calls
"unit-act". This unit contains the minimum *structural elements* without which the very notion
of action cannot take place:

> In this sense then, an "act" involves logically the following: (1) It implies an agent, an "actor."
> (2) For purposes of definition the act must have an "end," a future state of affairs toward which
> the process of action is oriented. (3) It must be initiated in a "situation" of which the trends of
> development differ in one or more important respects from the state of affairs to which the action
> is oriented, the end. This situation is in turn analyzable into two elements: those over which the
> actor has no control, that is which he cannot alter, or prevent from being altered, in conformity
> with his end, and those over which he has such control. The former may be termed the
> *"conditions"* of action, the latter the *"means"*. Finally (4) there is inherent in the conception of
> this unit, in its analytical uses, a certain mode of relationship between these elements. That is,
> in the choice of alternative means to the end, in so far as the situation allows alternatives, there
> is a "normative orientation" of action. Within the area of control of the actor, the means
> employed cannot, in general, be conceived either as chosen at random or as dependent
> exclusively on the conditions of action, but must in some sense be subject to the influence of an
> independent, determinate selective factor, a knowledge of which is necessary to the
> understanding of the concrete course of action. What is essential to the concept of action is that
> there should be a normative orientation, not that this should be of any particular type. (1937:44-
> 5)

The idea is that these elementary units of action systems, the unit-acts, can only assume positive
meaning in so far as they are valued in terms of certain qualities, like their rationality, their
expressiveness, and so, − which correspond, in this case, to that set of physical variables like

mass, velocity, etc., without which a physical body cannot be properly described, at least from the point of view of the spatiotemporal frame of reference.

According to Parsons, aside from the structural elements, the action frame of reference also operates through some fundamental assumptions which organize its categories. While admitting the possibility of a more extensive and exhaustive description of the action frame, Parsons identifies another three distinctive organizing features that, in a sense, make possible the articulation of action elements in systems.[44] The *first* one is that implied in the relations according to which the elements are organized one can identify a "teleological character": action is here conceived as an expenditure of energy that modifies the conditions toward a certain end according to nonrandom selective standards. The *second* assumption is that action is a process and its elements are logically organized according to a "temporal reference": the motivations of the actor, for instance, must precede the employment of means. The *third* assumption is that the action must present a "subjective aspect", in the sense that part of its elements, like normative patterns and future ends, cannot be found "out there" − except through their external realization − but must be conceived, in a sense, as being in the "mind" of the actor. Parsons stresses that these assumptions are not to be taken in any sense as concrete "components", but "(...) the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action"; they "have what many, following Husserl, have called a 'phenomenological' status".[45] (cf. Parsons, 1937: 45-6, 732-733).

From an epistemological point of view, Parsons' general argument is characterized by a two-fold orientation. Regarding the relationship between concepts and reality, the argument developed by Parsons may be understood in opposition to both empiricist and fictionalist approaches. On the one hand, he argues against the empiricist thesis according to which knowledge depends on a sort of fundamental connection with concrete reality.[46] For Parsons, theoretical knowledge cannot be given by any direct reflection of concrete experience, but only by distinctive sets of analytical abstractions. On the other hand, from this fundamental distinction between concrete reality and analytical abstraction he does not deduce, like

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[44] In working out the Parsons' "tacit metatheory", Bershady and Lidz (2006) analyze in detail four fundamental ideas − "meaning", "voluntarism", "social milieu", and "endeavor" − that organize Parsons' general image of action and that could be taken, in a sense, as a sort of extension of his own description of action frame of reference.

[45] An interesting appreciation concerning to role of Husserl's phenomenoly and the way it was read by Parsons throughout the delineation of his analytical realism can be found in Tada (2013).

[46] Throughout the book (cf 1937: chs 2, 3, 13, 16) Parsons distinguishes the positivist and the idealist variants of empiricism: while for positivist variant this connection would be carried out by a set of concepts capable of reflecting the concreteness of experience, for the idealist variants the connection with concreteness would override the use of general concepts in favor of an even more direct sort of access grounded on particular representations of historical individuals or the intuitive grasp of historical wholes.

fictionalists, the unreality of the latter. Although not mirroring the richness of the concrete, analytical concepts unravel behind the value variation of individual types certain persistent dimensions of experience that happen to be more than mere "useful fictions". These are the main lines of Parsons' alleged "analytical realism". (1937:728-731)

An important consequence of Parsons' argument is that the same phenomena can be described by means of distinct frames of reference oriented to distinct aspects of the experience: whereas its physical aspects would be more adequately described by the spatio-temporal framework, its social and historical aspects would be better addressed by a sort of symbolic-temporal one.[47] Parsons also adds that each general frame of reference can be, in turn, specified into distinctive subschemata applied to even more particular features of reality. In fact, he does not provide an exhaustive analysis or any list of possible frames of reference and their respective subschemas.[48] His main argument, however, is clear: the concrete phenomena cannot be reduced to any specific frame of reference. To execute this reduction would be to incur into "(...) that fallacy so beautifully exposed [by Whitehead] under the name of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'" (1937: 29). This way of formulating things makes it clear that although still in line with the transcendental tradition − whose inquiry is directed toward the conditions of possibility of knowledge about the experience − Parsons proceeds, in part, at a distinct level. This is so because he is not only (or even primarily) concerned with the conditions of discursive thought *in general* − with their modes of connecting representations according to logical functions of judgment − but with the multiplicity of frames of reference that specifies the transcendental forms provided sensibility and understanding in order to apprehend distinct dimensions of reality.[49]* In this sense, Whitehead's organicism − whose historical critique of

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[47] Although it is obvious that concrete actions take place in space, Parsons argues that unlike the temporal reference, which is inherent to the logical organization of action elements, the "spatial coordinates are not inherent in the frame of reference concerned" (1937: 31; cf. 45 n.1). From the point of view of the analytical elements that qualify the means-ends relations in action systems, for instance, it is necessary that some of the elements must occur "before" and others "after", but it is nonsense to say that some of them are "at left", "at right", "under", "behind" and so in relation to each other. Although not formulating things in these terms it is easy to see why "space", from a logical point of view, is not at the same level as "time": the subjective aspect of action systems gives priority to what could be called − following Kantian aesthetic distinction − the "internal" or immediate form of sensibility (time) over its "external" or mediate form (space). This distinction is, indeed, important to the whole phenomenological tradition, and considering Parsons' reference to Husserl, he seems to be aware of it.

[48] While he clearly says that the supply-demand scheme − that states that a good or service, in order to be properly described, must be qualified in terms of its demand and its scarcity − used by orthodox economics can be taken as a subschemata of action frame of reference, he is not totally clear, for instance, if chemical and biological aspects of reality can be properly described by schemes capable of being subsumed under the of spatiotemporal frame of reference or if they must be adressesed by distinct frames of reference.

[49] The apriori forms of space and time as given by pure sensibility are, in this sense, on a distinct level than space and time *representations* operated by frames of reference of classical mechanics as well as those operated in action theory. (Cassirer argued in the same direction when he sustained, in a famous text, that Kant's philosophy could be also considered compatible with Einstein's theory of general relativity). In the same way, the apriori concepts

classical materialist metaphysics relies on the recognition of the multiple and irreducible layers of concrete reality − is strategically operated by Parsons as a way of specifying transcendental philosophy and extending it into domains which it was not initially designed for.

3.1.3 - Specifying the General Metatheoretical Orientation (II): Types of concepts, types explanation, and the problem of the Human Sciences

The argument concerning the frames of reference is crucial, however, not just because it specifies Parsons' position about the nature of scientific theories, but because it connects this discussion with that one about the nature of scientific explanation. This is so because it is only when the facts have been properly identified and described in terms of a specific frame of reference that an adequate explanation can take place. Frames of reference open up the possibility for the concrete phenomena to be broken down and analyzed according to two logical procedures operating at distinct levels: the structural and the analytical ones. According to Parsons, these procedures are not inconsistent with each other − and, in fact, an adequate explanation should connect them both − but they lead to distinct types of concepts (structural concepts and analytical variables) and give rise to two distinct forms of explanation (based on empirical generalization and analytical laws).

In the first of these logical procedures − operating at the *structural* level − the concrete phenomena or object under analysis may be broken down with the help of categories provided by the frame of reference so that it is divided in terms of (a) smaller concrete parts or units and (b) a set of relations among them: a functioning machine can be analyzed, in this sense, in terms of its pieces and their disposition in space and time relations; a social institution can be analyzed, for instance, in terms its prescribed types of actions, and their respective connections in broader means-ends chains. The parts and their relations constitute, in this case, what might be called − at least from the point of view of the frame of reference − a certain type of "structure"

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of understanding concerning, for example, the relations of "inherence and subsistence" or "cause and effect" (Kant, 1787: B 106) also do not coincide with neither those specifications provided by classical mechanics nor those provided by action theory: in classical mechanics, the connections between necessary and accidental elements are specified in terms of nonsubjective and nonsymbolic empirical reference while in action theory, as we will see, the significant connections between elements always make reference to a symbolic or value systems; the connections between cause and effect, in its turn, are freed from teleological assumptions and reduced to efficient causes in classical mechanics, while in action theory, as we will see, they can assume voluntary traits. The failure to see this sort of distinction of levels as well as the connection between them is common among the readers. This is why even sophisticated interpreters, like Stephen Savage, when dealing with this sort of question ends up stating, for example, that: "The notion of a 'functional' relationship between categories and the empirical world as in Parsons' thesis would effectively destroy the strictly *a priori* nature of the categories in Kantian epistemology, and open it to the problems of scepticism" (Savage, 1981: 85)

that characterizes either the phenomena or the objects of investigation in the face to the other ones.[50] This structural description of the phenomena is crucial because explanation can only begin where the parts described happen to be identified as certain "types" common to a multiplicity of distinct phenomena. At this level, the empirical investigation can lead to what Parsons calls "empirical generalization", i.e. " general statements about the possible or probable behavior of such concrete or hypothetically concrete 'parts' of concrete phenomena, or various combinations of them, under given typical circumstances". A sort of generalization that is of "(...) high explanatory value, and, within limits, perfectly valid" (1937: 33). The idea is that departing from this empirical generalized knowledge about the behavior of "type-parts" − at least under certain circumstances where their dispositions in relations to each other are known or can be calculated and their external conditions are controlled −, one could be able, in this case, to deduce the effects and preview their consequences in certain situations.

According to Parsons, the main difficulty with this kind of logical procedure resides in the fact that some phenomena happen to present what might be called an "organic" character. In this kind of phenomenon, the properties of the whole cannot be directly deduced from the properties of its elementary parts and their "elementary relations". Organic phenomena − whether they are relative to the living body, the human "mind", or the society − are all those where the relations between the parts, when taken beyond its most elementary level, starts to give rise to "emergent relations" or "emergent properties", whose empirical value happens to vary independently from both the values of elementary parts and the values of its elementary relations and which, moreover, has an impact on this elementary structural level (cf. 1937: 32-3, 734, 738-9). In this case, the concrete parts or units cannot be isolated from each other and

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[50] In principle, the parts of the structure − whose main characteristics and the behavior are significant to explain the phenomena at stake − can be, in turn, subdivided into smaller (structural) parts and their (structural) relations. The limits to this process of division (or abstraction) are given, according to Parsons, by the frame of reference in questions: it happens when one arrives at the smallest unit capable of still "making sense" when conceived as concretely existing by itself, i.e., in isolation from the other units or parts. For instance, an interaction can be divided, from the point of view of the action frame of reference, into distinct unit-acts, but these units cannot be divided into sub-parts in the same way. It is true that the unit-act can be divided in terms of concrete "elements" − that may refer to the situation, the means, the norm, and the ends − but these "elements", although "concrete", are not concrete *units* in the same sense, i.e., they cannot be conceived as making sense by themselves: they can only become meaningful, in this context, within an articulation whose unity resides in the act they operate; each of this element is then, to use parsons expression, "defined functionally by its relation to action". What Parsons suggests is that when a certain limit is achieved, the only way to proceed with the abstraction process is through the use of another frame of reference: certain objects of the concrete "situation" or certain tools used as concrete "means" to action can be then described as aggregates of molecules or atoms if they are to be subdivided into smaller parts. In this case, however, it is important to note that the parts from which the analysis started in the first place (which now appear as big aggregates of smaller units) assume a different meaning from that initially assigned by the action frame of reference. Parsons remember, in this respect, that "a chair is, for instance, in a physical context a complex of molecules and atoms; in an action context it is a means, 'something to sit on'". (1937:731; cf. 737-8.)

still retain the same concrete properties. The isolation of concrete parts or types assumes, therefore, a "fictional" (or hypothetical) character − as opposed to the "actual" character of the parts of mechanic phenomena − in the same sense as Weber's ideal type. (cf. 1937: 601ff)

The second logical procedure identified by Parsons − operating at the *analytical* level − is the one where the concrete phenomena or their structural parts are valued in terms of several "analytical concepts". This procedure is justified because if a concrete phenomenon is to be capable of description in terms of a certain number of facts relevant to a given frame of reference, it is logically necessary that its parts are not merely identified but qualified or valued in relation to certain general properties: as above mentioned, a body may be described as presenting a certain particular *location*, *mass*, *velocity*, etc.; an action, in its turn, may be described as presenting a certain degree of *rationality*, *affectivity*, *altruism*, etc. [51] Although Parsons does not put things in these exact terms the underlying idea is very simple and can be traced back to the structure of (descriptive) judgments: a judgment is formed, in this case, by the connection between a subject (a structural unit) and a predicate (a particular "value" of a general analytical element). Since "facts" are understood − following Henderson's expression − not as concrete phenomena but as "empirically verifiable *statements* about phenomena", they suppose (consciously or not) both types of concepts (structural and analytical) occupying these two fundamental syntactic functions of any statement (cf. 1937:41). Unlike the structural terms, which can be concretely described, these other concepts − such as "velocity", "mass", "rationality", "expressiveness", etc. −, in their analytical use, cannot be conceived in the same way: they are, in a logical sense, "universals"; their particular values can be assigned to concrete units, but they cannot be thought of as concrete units themselves.[52]* From a methodological

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[51] The technical definition is provided by Parsons in a footnote: "An analytical element is any universal (or combination of universals) of which the corresponding values (or combination of values) may be stated as facts which in part determine a class of concrete phenomena. "Determine" here means that a change in these values within the framework of the same universal (s) involves a corresponding change in the concrete phenomena in respects important to the theoretical system." (1937:35)

[52] It is important to note that although the concepts mentioned (such as rationality, expressiveness, etc) seem to be always analytical, it does not mean that every concept used in an analytical sense has to be always used at this level. In the action frame of reference, one can find concepts that may be used both as analytical and concrete depending on the case. This is the case of those of concepts like "conditions", "means", "norms", and "ends" as well as some "emergent properties". From a descriptive point of view, these categories may be used in reference to concrete objects or groups of objects, whether they are material or ideal objects: "means", for instance, may refer to certain concrete tools available to the actor while "end" may refer to the concrete representation in the mind of actor concerning a future state of affair. When used as analytical concepts, however, "conditions", "means", "norms", and "ends" become dimensions of action whose "values" can be stated as facts about it and whose variation is supposed to present significant consequences to its character and its course. Variation in these values gives rise to what may be called, in structural terms, a different "type" of action. What Parsons seems to have in mind is a distinction between, on the one hand, those analytical elements found in advanced analytical systems (that are used only at the analytical level and are usually quantitative, like mass, velocity, etc) and, on the other hand, those concepts that can be used in both directions (analytical and concrete), that are usually more

point of view, it is also important to point out that it is not strictly necessary for the values of a certain analytical element to be organized into a clear single scale − as when they are measured in metrical terms or arranged in terms of their order of magnitude. What is necessary is that these values can be identified and somehow organized (or classified) as instantiations of the same general element. They are arrived at by the same intellectual "operation", which is, in the end, what characterizes the analytical elements at stake.[53]

Parsons argues that the investigation of these analytical elements is of crucial importance to scientific enterprise since "it is the universal experience of science that such 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". To these uniform modes of relation Parsons refers as "analytical laws" (1937: 36). The general idea here follows the same logic of that one underlying the explanations based on "empirical generalizations": a scientific explanation can be achieved, in this case, when from (a) the knowledge of certain conditions − where it is possible to identify *some* particular "values" in terms of which the parts of phenomena are positively described − plus (b) the knowledge of these uniform modes of relation between analytical elements (analytical laws) one can deduce or assume (c) the (past or future) occurrence of a particular state of affairs − where one can find new particular "values" regarding other analytical elements − that happen to be empirically verifiable.[54]

The considerations about the analytical elements, however, are not only instructive of Parsons' position about the scientific explanation but also about his arguments concerning one of the fundamental problems of neo-Kantian tradition: the distinction between natural and cultural sciences. To Parsons, this distinction is not necessarily given by any fundamental logical or epistemological difference but by the particular character of the object descriptions

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qualitative. The analytical elements of the first group, when valued, lead to a single and clear factual statement − such as "the body (structural unit) has a mass (analytical element) of *x* (specific value)" − that describes a particular aspect of the concrete phenomena. In the case of the analytical elements of the second group, it takes more than one factual statement to properly explicit their "value". (cf. 1937: 35 n.1, 731-2)

[53] Parsons argues that the idea according to which variables might be traced back to some fundamental "operations" would have become commonly stated in this way after the publication of *The Logic of Modern Physics* by professor Bridgment (1927).

[54] Of crucial importance to this whole discussion concerning the logic of explanation is, of course, that one about the adequate general procedures through which one can isolate (and then organize) the varying values of analytical elements. To this sort of question, Parsons tends to have one main answer: "comparative method". He comes to say, in this regard, that "experiment is, in fact, nothing but the comparative method where the cases to be compared are produced to order and under controlled conditions" and that "Weber's insistence on comparative study, (...), was thus deeply symptomatic" since "without the comparative method there can be no empirical demonstration of the independent variation of the values of analytical elements. (1937:743)

in their relation to theoretical systems.[55] While in physics, for instance, a significant object description is given − from the point of its frame of reference − mostly by quantitative variables, in sociology and other human sciences, this sort of description is rare. The orderliness among the particular "values" in terms of which phenomena (and their structural units) are described is achieved in human sciences usually by another sort of procedure, such as classification and hermeneutic interpretation. In this case, they are not only (or even primarily) arranged according to their varying magnitude but to their varying quality (cf. 36-8; 750-1). In order to make sense of all distinct "values" related to the analytical dimension of, say, "expressivity" in action systems it is necessary to take into account not only their intensity but also their very content: expressions, for instance, may refer to emotions, aesthetic inclinations, existential beliefs, moral standards, etc. One cannot fail to notice that these variations of values, ultimately responsible for the establishment of causal relations in all analytical sciences, always make reference to interpretive codes that connect a certain set of symbols to a certain set of meanings which, in the case of those elements relevant to action description, happen to be also of a *subjective* sort. This is one of the ways through which Parsons seems to connect causal explanation to hermeneutic understanding.

3.2 - PARSONS' MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORY OF ACTION

Departing from the previous considerations, it is clear that the "structure of social action" should be composed of at least two sorts of terms: structural units and structural relations. Moreover, once the human sciences are taken to deal with more than mechanistic systems, to these two crucial terms it should be added a third one: the "emergent properties".

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[55]In stressing that the fundamental distinction between natural and human science is primarily given by the character of facts and their description in theoretical schemes Parsons is not saying, however, that all sciences operate under the same methodological and epistemological assumptions and differ only in matters of fact. His argument is that epistemological differences refer to another sort of distinction, namely between "analytical" and "historical" orientation − a distinction that clearly echoes the neo-Kantian traditional division between nomological and ideographical sciences. This sort of distinction would not coincide but cross-cut the first one. According to Parsons: "There are, rather, examples of both [natural and sociocultural sciences] in each field. The first group may be called the *historical sciences*, which concentrate their attention on particular concrete phenomena, attempting as full an understanding of their causes and consequences as is possible. In doing this they seek conceptual aid wherever it may be found. Examples in the natural science field are geology and meteorology; in the social field, history, above all, but also anthropology as it has generally been conceived. The other group, the *'analytical,' sciences*, is concerned primarily with building up systems of general theory verifiable in terms of and applicable to a wide range of concrete phenomena. To them the individual phenomenon is a 'case.' In the natural science field theoretical physics is the leading example, but chemistry and general biology may also be included; in the social sciences theoretical economics is by far the most highly developed, but it is to be hoped that theoretical sociology and certain others will find a place by its side. These two types of sciences cut across each other in their application to fields of concrete phenomena." (1937: 598, emphasis added)

As Parsons advances toward a detailed analytical approach of the structure of action systems all of these categories come to be at once sub-divided and better qualified in terms of their dimensions and possible values. In the following paragraphs, we will reconstruct the general argument provided by Parsons about the logical structure of theory with an emphasis on the distinct possible values assumed by unit-acts and their modes of relations which happen to be relevant to the sort of analysis of action systems proposed by him. While closely following Parsons' general argument (cf.1937: 77-82), we make use of slightly different terminology and carry out some minor corrections − something we take the liberty of doing so in order to avoid some difficulties that will later become clear as well as to do justice to the systematicity intended by Parsons himself.

It was already pointed out that the structural units, represented by the unit-act, might be broken down into some fundamental "structural elements": conditions, means, norms, and ends. In fact, the transcendental argument operated by Parsons was that these elements or dimensions would represent the conditions for the possibility of any action. Where they cannot take place or where their analytical autonomy is not observed − e.g. if one of these categories is subsumed or directly determined by some of the others − one cannot really talk about "action". Here lies the basis of what authors such as Williams (1961), Alexander (1978, 1983b), Adriaansens (1979), Münch ([1982]1987) and many others since them have referred to as the "synthetic", "comprehensive" or "multidimensional" character of Parsons' theory of action. The argument is simple and elegant: a comprehensive action theory, in its analytical use, must take "conditions" (C), "means" (M), "norms" (N), and "ends" (E) as distinct dimensions of every unit-act (A), dimensions whose values may vary independently of each other; this analytical autonomy of elements or dimensions, operated at metatheoretical level, is what guarantees, at the substantive level of theory, the very possibility of an *autonomous* action (in contrast to heteronomous figures of behavior such as mechanic action, imitation, traditionalism, emanationism, etc.) and a *voluntaristic* order (in opposition to both chaotic/random and deterministic models of all sorts). From a formal point of view, this general argument could be expressed by the following equation:

$$A = C + M + N + E.$$

But once these structural elements are established as fundamental dimensions of every action whose varying values may give rise to their distinct concrete (hypothetical-ideal) types, the next

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step of analysis is to inquiry the ways through which each one of these dimensions − represented by the symbols "C", "M", "N", and "E" − may be valued, i.e., which sort of objects may fall into these categories and, more importantly, in which sense they can be significant from the point of view of the theory of action. It is at this analytical level that the distinct traditions in the theory of action, from positivism to idealism, find their most important differences and it is here that the main antinomies in theoretical logic start to be faced by them.

The multiple elements that can be found to be relevant to action's explanation (or understanding) might be divided, following these main traditions, in terms of material and ideal elements. From the point of view of the theory of action, which implies not only patterns of behavior but also the existence of a "subjective" reference − i.e., reference to an actor capable of perception, evaluation, and action − these distinct sorts of elements may be addressed by two different processes which, in fact, cross-cut the material-ideal divide: the cognition of their properties (or their effects) and the interpretation of their meaning. Departing from Parsons general argument (cf. 77-82) yet in slightly different terms it is possible to say that the spatiotemporal objects (like buildings, tools, the actor's body, etc) and ideal objects (like beliefs, symbols, expressive patterns, etc) that happen to be relevant to action are subjectively manifested therefore according to two sorts of perspectives.

(1) From the point of view of the knowledge of their properties and their possible consequences to the courses of action these material and ideal objects may assume the following values relevant to action theory:

(F_m) - formulations held by the actor about material objects and their empirical properties that happen to be scientifically valid;

(F_i) - formulations held by the actor about the ideal objects, their rational properties, their cognitive nexus, and their possible empirical effects that happen to be rationally or scientifically valid

(f_m) - formulations held by the actor that pretend to be valid knowledge about material objects but which, in fact, are not;

(f_i) - formulations held by the actor that pretend to be valid knowledge about ideal objects but which, in fact, are not

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(x_f) - formulations held about material and ideal elements (or characteristics of elements) whose variation of properties are taken to exist but happen to vary at random in relation to the problems of knowledge, i.e., elements whose knowledge is irrelevant to action or that are simply out of the sphere science and rationality.

(2) From the point of view of the hermeneutic understanding of their internal content they can present the following values relevant to action theory:

(B_i) - ideal representation whose subjective meaning is positively given to the actor as taking place within the very representation by its semantic definition.

(B_m) - material representation whose subjective meaning is positively given to the actor as immanent to the very representation because of its evident or consummatory character.

(b_i) - ideal representation that symbolically expresses a meaning connected to it;

(b_m) - material representation that symbolically expresses a meaning connected to it;

(x_b) - elements (or characteristics of elements) whose variations of content are taken to be random in relation to the previous values, i.e., elements that may have a constituted meaning but whose interpretation is irrelevant to the understanding of action or elements that are simply out of the sphere of constituted meanings.

We will see how each of these elements is specified into variants of both positivism and idealist traditions. For now, the logical possibilities opened by Parsons for a general theory of action could be formalized as follows:

$$A = C (F, f, x_f, B, b, x_b) + M (F, f, x_f, B, b, x_b) + N (F, f, x_f, B, b, x_b) + E (F, f, x_f, B, b, x_b).$$

From the point of view of a general theory of action, however, the structure of action systems are not only made of structural units (A) but it happens to present also the structural relations (R) among them. The distinct answers about the nature and types of structural relations in action systems are what characterize the differences between individualist and collectivist

orientations in action theory. Following Parsons' argument, three distinctive sorts of relations must be distinguished:

R_{el} - elementary relations that are logically implied in the very idea of any action system, i.e, relations that can be deduced by the very non-random arrangement of unit-acts as soon as they are conceived in terms of action frame of reference. What Parsons seems to have in mind here is the idea that once units are articulated in terms of either means-ends chains or meaning−representation nexus it necessarily follows that some relations of coordination and subordination will take place among them: some units may lead to others (as when the "end" of an act may serve as "mean" to another one); some may take place together without being subordinated, i.e., as equally open possibilities to the actor, etc.

R_I - relations that emerge in systems of action insofar the of units reach such level of complexity that they must be weighted and coordinated with reference to a higher unit called "actor" or "individual". Parsons' idea is that when there is a plurality of open courses of action demanding multiple amounts of distinct resources (such as time, energy, affective engagement, etc) capable of leading to different paths, there emerge some relations that must be dealt with − e.g., some acts may imply the exclusion of others, some may require to be coordinated, etc. − and whose solution can only make sense in reference to a higher unit of control, namely, the actor.[56]

R_C - Relations that cannot be identified either at unit-act or individual-actor level but happen to emerge in systems of action insofar as units reach a certain level of complexity where there are a multiplicity of individuals or collectivities. What is at stake, in this case, is the whole set of relations concerning economical utility, political power, societal norms, and symbolic value patterns, i.e., relations whose problems of distribution, allocation, coordination, can only appear as soon as one considers the existence of a plurality of individuals in relations to each other.[57]

Therefore, if a structural analysis of an action system (Z) takes into account a series of structural units (A) and their relations (R), then the theory of action might be formalized as follows:

$$Z = (A_{1,} + A_2, + A_3 + ... A_n) + R_{el} + R_I + R_C$$

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[56] This sort of emergent relation will be better developed by Parsons later as refering to what he calls "personality system".

[57] As we will see, Parsons is not saying that individualist traditions ignore these problems concerning concerning economical, political and social life. The questions is that they tend to consider theses problems as functions (or products) of the other two sorts of relations " R_{el}" and "R_I".

Before embarking on further detailed analysis of the multiple variants of action theory, it seems appropriate to remark something that is not always completely understood by the readers but should be evident in the view of the above: the "theory of action" is not to be misinterpreted as a theory whose emphasis rely on the level of the particular sets of conduct of human beings. It pretends to be instead a sort of general theory whose logical structure may be found to be, to a certain extent, pervasive to all discourse about human action. As we will see in the next sections, all social theories can be understood as presenting some transcendental assumptions about the nature of action and its distinct arranging patterns. In making use of his action frame of reference, Parsons was able to identify the distinct presuppositional decisions regarding the ways of valuing the structural elements of action (as well as the explanatory emphasis on some of them) responsible for leading the diverse theories into distinct logical paths. We will see that positivists tend to focus on material elements of the conditions (C) and the strategic selections of means (M) of action as main significant variables in social explanation: the collectivist oriented positivists are inclined to emphasize structural elements of the situation while individualists acknowledge a prominent role to the subjective choice of means. The idealists, on the other hand, will present the tendency to stress the ideational and meaningful elements of "ends" (E) and normative patterns of selection (N): collectively oriented idealists will tend to bring attention to shared normative and ideational patterns of orientation as a determinant to the proper understanding of action courses while the individualist oriented idealists will usually insist on the subjective selection of ultimate ends and the individual interpretive effort toward the constitution of meaning.

This sort of general reasoning is what Alexander seems to have in mind when he insists that for Parsons, in a sense, "(…) all social theories are theories of action" (1983b: 13). Although making use of a more historical-universalistic tone, Parsons himself expressed this sort of understanding about the nature of theory of action:

> The origin of the mode of thinking in terms of the action schema in general is so old and so obscure that it is fruitless to inquire into it here. It is sufficient to point out that, just like the schema of the classical physics, it is deeply rooted in the commonsense experience of everyday life, and it is of a range of such experience that it may be regarded as universal to all human beings. (1937: 51)

The whole point for Parsons is that once this mode of thinking is inquired from a systematic and historical perspective in a self-conscious manner, it may pave the way to the emergence of

an integrative and multidimensional synthesis whose main distinctive trait lies precisely in the attempt to shed light on the analytical multiplicity of explanatory and meaningful factors within the various action systems as well as their different logical possibilities of analysis. Also, it may lead to a sort of understanding which is not restricted to any side of the micro-macro divide insofar as it moves from the most elementary units within the frame of reference to the higher emerging structural levels without resorting to any analytical reductionism.

3.2.1 - The Positivistic Theory of Action

Although usually associated with Auguste Comte and other intellectual figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term "positivism" is used by Parsons in a technical sense that allows it to be traced back to at least two centuries earlier, to a historical context where modern science was taking place as a significant trend in western thought. This so because the term "positivism" is employed, at least in what concerns the theory of action, to all theoretical systems which "(...) involves explicitly or implicitly (more often the latter) the view that positive science constitutes man's sole possible significant cognitive relation to external (nonego) reality, man as actor, that is." (1937: 61).

Once one takes a closer look at Parsons' treatment of positivism, it becomes clear that two key interconnected ideas underpin this whole intellectual tradition: the first is a strong emphasis on the role of *rationality* and the other is a sort of *materialist-empiricism orientation*. Although Parsons sometimes deals with this connection as self-evident − as if rationality was, by definition, the scientific rationality oriented to empirical phenomena − the two ideas refer to distinct problems.[58] The first idea assumes that the actor presents a certain stock of knowledge in terms of which he/she may evaluate his/her conditions (C) and the available means (M) − both in terms of their possible consequences, their risks, their opportunities in short and/or long run, etc. − in view of his/her ends (E) and motives in order to select the most intrinsically adequate paths of action. But rationality alone is yet vague if not properly specified and this is precisely where materialist-empiricist orientation takes place. Because the positive knowledge at stake, from which actor departs and in reference to which rationality of action can be judged,

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[58]According to Alexander (1983b: 16), Parsons tends to commit a conflation between the presuppositional level (rationalism) and the methodological level (positivism) along his book. It is important to note, however, that this tendency pointed out by Alexander is not always there. In the first chapter of the book for instance − where much of the epistemological and methodological assumptions of Parsons' book are worked out − this does not seem to be the case. In this chapter Parsons clearly concedes a broad meaning to rationality as property of both (empirical) science and (nonempirical) philosophical discourse. (cf. 1937: 16-20)

is taken to be the *empirical* knowledge of phenomena grounded on spatiotemporal experience. Parsons says in this regard the following: "Knowledge, as here used is by definition knowledge of the situation, past, present or predicted future. (...) The situation is by definition that part of the 'external world' of the actor of which he can have valid *empirical* knowledge." (1937: 79, emphasis added) What he seems to have in mind, in this case, is the positive knowledge of properties of the material elements that constitute the conditions and the means of the actor. The knowledge of ideal elements − such as beliefs, normative expectations, ultimate values − that may constitute part of the situation or the external world, on the other hand, seems to be either not properly reached as "positive knowledge" or just indirectly relevant to action explanation. From the point of view of action theory, according to positivist reasoning, it would not be necessary, for instance, to have any *rational* knowledge about ideal entities and mental representation in the sense of, say, the platonic knowledge of ideal forms or the cartesian knowledge of first principles. What matters is the empirical knowledge of its material effects − for instance, the knowledge of the probable behavior of a person who claims to follow certain ideas − but not any cognitive relation with the ideas as essences or first causes.[59]

Once these two main ideas − rationalism and empirical orientation − are articulated by positivism, the theoretical scheme is lead to face the following questions: if the only significant relation of the actor with his/her external reality is that of the cognitive apprehension of objective elements of the "past, present or future conceived situation", how can the positivist make sense of the other analytical dimensions of action, namely, norms and ends? This general question gives rise to two distinct problems whose answers characterize the distinct logical paths opened within the positivist matrix.

The problem regarding the nature and the status of "ends" leads to a division inside the positivist tradition between its nuanced and radical variants. In the first case, the ends (E) are taken to retain a certain analytical autonomy vis-à-vis the other categories in the sense that they cannot be a mere function of either the empirical knowledge of the given conditions (C) or the empirical and technological qualities of the available means (M). This is the position taken by the utilitarian tradition, understood by Parsons as a sort of non-radical variant within the

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[59] By putting things in this way, it becomes clear that the rationalist tradition is only partially explored by Parsons during the book since all non-empirically oriented versions of rationalism remain untouched. Nevertheless, Parsons believed he had good reasons for focusing on this rationalist-empiricist variant called "positivism" since it would be, from a historical point of view, the tradition that tended to dominate, with the exception of Germany, the western social thought during the period analyzed by him. From the point of view of idealism, also, we will see that the main orientations emphasized by Parsons do not refer to this rationalist or cognitivist variant. For the sake of systematicity, however, it seems appropriate to point out this blindspot.

positivist family. However, since the empirical knowledge is still the only positive relation acknowledged inside the positivist matrix, the ends, in so far as they are not explained in terms of science, remain partially inaccessible and are pushed out of the theoretical system, i.e., they become a sort of residual category. For classical utilitarianists − who were still under a certain influence of the voluntarism of the Christian legacy − the ultimate ends and human motives are taken to be ultimately unfathomable. Even though the positive empirical knowledge (F) of ends may be relevant in certain circumstances to make sense of action, their positive understanding extrapolates this sort of consideration and cannot be fully achieved. From the point of view of the logical structure of the theory, they are conceived (at least to some extent) as varying at random in relation to cognitive knowledge (x_t). A sphere of subjectivism and voluntarism is therefore preserved at the cost of introducing a residual category into the scheme. We will see later the consequences of this theoretical instability introduced by utilitarianism in action theory. The other logical path opened within positivism is the radicalization of its basic assumptions. "Ends", if not random, are to be inquired in terms of objective categories whose knowledge can be positively stated so that the residual categories can be eliminated and a scientific explanation of action can be finally achieved. But for the positivist, Parsons says, "the only possible basis of empirical knowledge of a future state of affairs [i.e., the ends] is prediction on the basis of knowledge of present and past states". The result is that "action becomes determined entirely by its conditions, (...) [it] becomes a process of rational adaptation to these conditions. The active role of the actor is reduced to one of the understanding of his situation and forecasting of its future course of development". (1937:64). In this case, the residual categories and the randomness are eliminated at the price of eliminating voluntarism and all subjective dimensions of action explanation altogether.

The second problem faced by positivism, regarding the status of the norm, follows the same general logic of the first one: in the end, the only significant normative pattern acknowledge by positivism is the norm of instrumental rationality and all deviations from it are understood under the sign of negative or residual categories. Specifically, the deviations of action from a rational connection between means and ends are understood under two negative categories: "ignorance" and "error". Either the actor does not have enough knowledge about his situation and the intrinsic positive relations between available means and pretended ends or the action is based on a certain set of statements that he/she believed to constitute a logically and empirically adequate knowledge but was not. When positivism is radicalized and these residual categories are positively inquired, once again, what becomes clear is that the subjective

reference to knowledge − understood as a set of formulations held by actors − gives place to a sort of objectivist reduction. This is so, according to Parsons, because "(...) the only possible course for the scientific investigator is to 'get behind' the actor's subjective experience, that is to abandon the subjective categories of the schema of action in favor of objective processes which may be thought of as influencing action by acting upon the actor without his knowledge or awareness of what is 'really' happening." (1937:66). The role of subjective consciousness and the subjective formulations about the external world taking place in the mind of the actor may be viewed then either as that of a medium through which he/she arrives at adequate objective knowledge or as something completely irrelevant to action's explanation in face of an automatic process of selection. In the first case, positivism is radicalized toward a rationalist variant; in the second, it assumes a radical anti-intellectualist orientation. In this last case, the action courses are not explained in terms of positive adequate knowledge (F) that happen to be held by the actor but by the mistakes and the inadequate knowledge (f) which eliminate the distinct courses of action in long run. In both cases, however, the logical consequence is the same: the subjective elements of norms and ends are subsumed under the empirical knowledge of the situation.

> Thus, remarkable as it may seem, departure from the utilitarian position, so long as it remains within the positivistic framework leads in both the major problems, that of the status of ends and that of the norm of rationality, to the same analytical result: explanation of action in terms of the ultimate nonsubjective conditions, conveniently designated as heredity and environment". (...) "Then in so far as they or other nonsubjective categories prove adequate to the task of understanding the concrete facts of human action, the scientific status of the action schema itself must be called into question. It may be a convenient heuristic tool, a scaffolding to use in building up a theory, but no more. It can be torn down and dispensed with at the end to the general benefit of the scientific virtues of simplicity and elegance." (1937:67, 68)

In sum, positivism is not only blind to nonrational aspects of action but also limited to the empirical properties of the objects and the effective processes taking place in spatiotemporal experience. When acknowledging the existence of ideal elements whose knowledge is not possible but which are significant to action explanation (x_f), positivists retain in their theory some space to voluntarism, but they are led to a situation where they have to stop their inquiry in face of the irrationality and randomness of such element. This sort of position, supported by classical utilitarian thinkers, seems to be unsatisfactory from the point of view of a radical scientific perspective. The problem is that when radicalized positivists can still count solely on positive adequate formulations held by the actor about the world (F) and inadequate formulations held by him (f) as sources of explanation to the empirical action courses and their

structural patterns. From a formal point of view, the main significant positivist variants can be formalized as follows:

$$\text{Utilitarianism: } A = C\ (F, x_f,) + M\ (F, x_f,) + N\ (F, x_f,) + E\ (F, x_f,).$$

$$\text{Radical Rationalist Positivism: } A = C\ (F, x_f,) + M\ (F, x_f,) + N\ (F) + E\ (F).$$

$$\text{Radical Anti-intellectual Positivism: } A = C\ (f, x_f,) + M\ (f, x_f,) + N\ (f) + E\ (f).$$

The consequence of the search for the elimination of residual categories and randomness leads, in the case of positivism, to the elimination of all subjective categories. Multidimensionality gives place to one-dimensional determination and voluntary action fades away

3.2.2 - The Idealistic Theory of Action

Parsons' analysis of the idealist tradition is less extensive and, to a certain extent, less detailed than the one done in the case of positivism. The reasons for this will be tentatively pointed out later.[60] What becomes clear during Parsons' reconstruction though is that idealism is used in a particular sense. Unlike its current usage by philosophical discourse, the term is not primarily understood by Parsons as a sort of metaphysical doctrine that emphasizes the reality of ideal rather than physical entities, although this may be an underlying assumption. It is noteworthy that "idealism", at least in this context, is firstly opposed to "positivism" rather than to "materialism". This is so because Parsons is concerned with the problem of action. For him, the key problem is not exactly that concerning the status of reality and the distinct forms assumed by the entities − be it material or ideal − that may take place in it but the distinct ways they may enter into the equation of human action and the role they may assume in its explanation. What Parsons seems to have in mind is that, from the point of view of a subjective action frame, those who look primarily at the material entities will tend to assume that the main relevant relations taking place in the mind of the actor are the cognitive and knowledge relations − in fact, this is the reason why he uses the term "positivism" instead of materialism in the context of action theory. Those looking primarily to the ideal and symbolic representations, on the other hand, will tend to consider the meaningful and interpretative relations as the truly

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[60] See the subsection 3.3.3 of this chapter.

relevant ones to the actor's orientation.[61] What seems to be at stake, in this case, is a broad hermeneutical approach rather than a sort of metaphysical idealism. In opposition to positivism, this sort of position − which one might call "interpretivism" in order to avoid misunderstandings − could be defined by the sustenance that the only significant relations of the actor to reality is, in this case, those of meaning understanding and their symbolic interpretation. Parsons argues in this direction when he says the following:

> Positivistic thought has always directed its efforts to the uncovering of intrinsic causal relationships in the phenomena; idealistic thought to the discovery of relations of meaning, of *Sinnzusammenhang*. With this difference has gone that of method—on the one hand, causal theoretical explanation, on the other, interpretation of meaning, *Sinndeutung*, which has seen in the concrete facts of its field symbols, the meanings of which are to be interpreted. The order and system of social phenomena has been a meaningful, not a causal order at all. (1937: 485-6)

To understand the meaning of something - be it a material object, an event, or an idea - means to refer its representation, initially dispersed, to a broader unity within which it acquires a place. It means to confer to the manifold of the representation a positive value - attributing to it, for example, certain characteristics, certain functions, certain semantic content - and, in this same movement, also a set of relations that it establishes with other values of other representations. The passage from the manifold of the representation to the unity of its relations, that is, its meaning, is accomplished in at least two distinct ways, and there may be intermediate modes. On the one hand, this passage can be apprehended in the very structure of the representation in question and, therefore, in a direct manner: the meaning (as well as the set of possible references) of a concept or proposition, for example, is envisioned in the very act of its representation in the mind of the actor during the movement of synthesis of its predicates in the logical space of the understanding. On the other hand, when there is nothing in the structure of the representation that clarifies its meaning, the passage to the unity of its meaning is accomplished by means of a symbolic interpretation. In this case, the interpreter must know the connection between symbol and meaning, that is, he must have access to a specific linguistic repertoire, a code that allows him to make the passage. From the point of view of the action frame of reference, the idealist tradition analyzed by Parsons tends to value the analytical dimensions of action in terms of intrinsic-meaningful representations (B) and symbols or symbolic patterns (b). The general formalization of Idealism could be the following:

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[61] This connection is pointed out by Parsons, for instance, in the following passage: "An 'ideal reality' (...) implies a complex of elements mutually related to one another (...) but this mode of relationship is of a radically different character from the causal − it is a 'complex of meanings'." (1937: 482)

$$A = C\ (B,\ b,\ x_b) + M\ (B,\ b,\ x_b) + N\ (B,\ b,\ x_b) + E\ (B,\ b,\ x_b).$$

From the point of view of the relations between the meaningful elements in action, it is important to note that the significant distinctions among them are not limited to those concerning the adequate and inadequate values of each element in face of a certain type of norm − as in the case of positivism where variations of values would refer to one and the same norm, namely, the norm of instrumental efficiency. An even more fundamental distinction, at least within idealism, is that one concerning the distinct types of norms. The very emphasis on a category as broad as meaning − which underlies at once questions of knowledge, morality, art expression, etc. − can only make sense in light of a multiplicity of significant norms. The opposition to positivism in this regard is clear:

> As has been shown at great length, causal relations are relevant to rational action in the role of conditions and means. In so far as causal relations subsist between elements of his situation the actor is thereby "conditioned" in the sense that attainment of an end in the given situation depends on his "taking account of" these relations. Meaningful relations, on the other hand, condition action in one sense, but not in the same sense. Their role is normative—they express relations between various elements and aspects of an ideal toward which action is oriented. In elaborating a theory for instance, there is nothing in the conditions of his situation to prevent the theorist from making a logical error—what prevents him is, rather, his effort to conform his action to the norm of logical correctness. Similarly, in playing a musical theme it is perfectly "possible" objectively for a pianist to strike a "wrong" note. He avoids doing it because it would contravene the normative requiredness of the musical form. (1937:483)

The main argument is clear: the whole variety of meaningful elements taking place in the means-ends chains of social action can only make sense in reference to certain types of normative standards. By putting things this way, however, idealism assumes a sort of normativist position in relation to action that tends to exhaust all its relevant elements. Whereas positivism was characterized by narrowing the role of norms so as to reduce action to the field of its conditions, idealism ends up making the opposite mistake. In this case, even the material properties and causal relations inquired by the positive sciences would be "absorbed" under meaningful relations. They would appear either as propositions whose meaning is interpreted as a function of a cognitive ideal (such as empirical adequacy, logical correctness, and so) or as material expressions of another kind of meaning. (cf. 1937:486).

      That being said, it is important to stress that the mere idea of meaning interpretation is not enough to properly characterize those idealist variants analyzed by Parsons. Just as the rationalist matrix was narrowed by positivism in terms of an empirical scientific orientation,

the interpretivist argument, at least in the context of idealist theories of action, was also specified – even though Parsons himself does not put things this way. Of crucial importance in this context is the idea that the relevant meanings to be interpreted − i.e. those concerning human action and culture − are always given under singular historical contexts. The consequence of this assumption is that interpretivism, when directed to human affairs, necessarily turns into a sort of historicism. It is important to stress, however, that this move toward historicism, described by Parsons as characteristic of the post-Kantian period, is neither obvious nor necessary. Although it seems evident for those concerned with the meanings underpinning cultural patterns and human action that they are hardly exhausted by any atomistic sort of analyses, the idealist variants analyzed by Parsons seem to go a step further. To this sound methodological idea that acknowledges the organic character of human action systems, they connect a second one that has to do with the irrationality of the meaning. What really matters for human action, they say, are precisely those elements that cannot be conceived either as cases of certain general categories or even as following general laws. A man does not love and take care of general children but of his particular children; he does not find beauty in general works of art but in particular ones with certain singular elements; he does not pray for an anonymous general spirit but to his God. In sum, he orients himself toward unique representations given in singular contexts. The underlying argument here is that meaningful elements are not subsumed to the meaningful wholes through the mediation of general analytical concepts.

Once general concepts were not available as valid intellectual tools for the understanding of the meaningful elements shaping human action, the consequence was that the idealist tradition ended up being pushed toward two alternative paths. The first one was to record every human act as well as their immediate effects in the concrete historical context as unique occurrences incapable of being repeated. Knowledge can only be achieved, according to this argument, as a history of discrete singularities. This sort intellectual strand would have possibly achieved its main methodological formulation in the works of Ranke, to whom "(...) the business of the historian is to render the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, that is, in all its concrete detail." (1937: 477). For the romantics following this same path, the meanings would not only be singularly given in terms of a posteriori historical knowledge but singularly constituted by each actor which, at least in special cases − namely, that of genius −, could be considered as a sort of free and active source of meaning creation and expression. It is evident that this sort of theory does not lead to the development of any general knowledge. It is an anti-

theoretical position par excellence and could hardly be sustained in the long run as a dominant position

The second path open to idealists was to speculate about the concrete events and their meanings in terms of their significance to the whole cultural development of mankind. In this case, the concrete data was reunited under a singular cultural and historical whole (or a *Geist*) which was to provide coherence and unit to them. But this whole could not be grasped except by a "(...) a source of knowledge with little place in the repertoire of science as generally understood − a kind of 'intuition' for the peculiar structures of wholes which could neither be 'observed' in the usual operational sense, nor constructed by the ordinary theoretical processes. (1937: 481). This intuitionist variant of idealism could be, in turn, broken down into two subvariants. The first one, Hegelianism, would be characterized by a monist approach according to which the differences of cultural and epochal geists could all be dialectically arranged as self-realizations of one and the same principle, the *weltgeist*. The second one, the historical relativism of Dilthey and others, tended to replace the speculative monism with a sort of empirically oriented relativism where the distinct cultural and epochal geists would be taken to be self-referential. From the point of view of human action, however, these two approaches seem to lead to the same sort of result. The concrete action and events end up being conceived as a sort of expression or emanation of the geist to which they belong.

3.2.3 - The Voluntaristic Theory of Action

In the end, Parsons' analytical reconstruction reveals a strong diagnosis about the history of ideas: positivist and idealist matrix of thought would not have observed the transcendental conditions for the proper addressing of human action and in doing so they were not able to reach a general theory of action. What is at stake in this sort of claim is, of course, not the ability displayed by idealists and positivists in eventually thematizing the multiple elements of social action or even their alleged intentions of doing so but the extent to which they are able to deal with these distinctive dimensions of human action within a non-reductionist and coherent theoretical scheme. What the logical analysis of these traditions and their intellectual developments shows, however, is the emergence of a series of residual categories as well as the almost inevitability of one-dimensional dead ends. From Parsons' epistemological perspective, there are indeed several reasons why they failed to achieve a truly general synthetic theory. The most important is the empiricist orientation underlying both positivist and idealist variants

according to which the knowledge conveyed by the theoretical schemes (or historical descriptions) would be taken somehow as exhausting the significant elements of the reality under scrutiny: in positivism, this orientation would lead to the idea that general concepts could in a way "reflect" natural reality; in idealism, it would lead to the belief that intuitive and concrete experience recorded by historical sciences could fully communicate the uniqueness of the human reality.

Even though the deep roots of the problem might still not be entirely clear by the end of the nineteenth century, the residual categories and shortcomings resulting from this way of approaching phenomena would have become increasingly evident. The result was the emergence of theories more inclined to bridging the gaps left by one-dimensional positions of all sorts. Within the positivistic front, the positive role of "non-logical action", to use Pareto's term, as well as the expressive, symbolic, and normative aspects of action would have increasingly come to the center of sociological analysis. On the idealist-historicist front, the rationalist and strategic aspects of action, as well as the subjective interests, would start to display also a prominent role in sociological explanation. This is precisely where Parsons' preferred classics take place. Unlike the generation of Comte, Spence, and Marx, whose struggle to set social sciences free from the speculative thought ended up leading to the opposite pole − namely, that of positivist and materialist versions of the philosophy of history −, it was the next generation of sociologist led by Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber who first felt compelled toward a more balanced position in which instrumental and normative dimensions of social action (and social order) could be positively articulated toward a sort of synthetic position.

At this point, however, one might ask the following question: since that generation of authors pointed by Parsons had already glimpsed the synthetic nature of any sound sociological theory, what kind of task has remained unfinished that called for such a herculean effort like that one proposed in *The Structure of Social Action*? In fact, although praising the works of Pareto, Durkheim, and especially Weber for their synthetic inclinations, Parsons sustains that their attempts were not free from substantive and methodological errors that prevented them to achieve and keep on track of the multidimensionality all way long. In these cases, the synthetic attempts would give way to eclectic overlappings of positivist and idealist trends without solving their antinomies.

Durkheim, for instance, would have arrived during the transition from *Le Suicide* (1897) to *Les Formes* (1912) at a positive understanding of moral phenomena where the normative and meaningful factor of social action would have been taken as *analytical* dimensions rather than

concrete entities. This analytical understanding capable of leading Durkheim to a true voluntaristic approach, however, could not be fully sustained in the long run due to another tendency which he never freed himself completely: the conflation between a (sound) realist orientation and an empiricist (flawed) position. Because of his tendency of searching for concrete rather than analytical entities, his flight away from positivism could not be stabilized in a firmly multidimensional position but would be forced to swing to the opposite pole, sometimes juxtaposing empiricist and idealist arguments. According to Parsons, this unsolved conflict sweeps his sociology of religion. On the one hand, underpinning all the beliefs, symbols, and ritual practices that constitute the religious phenomena, Durkheim finds the empirical reality of society, often conflated with the concrete social group and its concrete social practices, a reality capable of being known by the empirical science called sociology; on the other, society is also conceived in terms of discrete ideal entities and forces in the mind of individuals. What is at stake in both cases is the cognition of discrete concrete elements (either material or ideal) rather than clear, distinct analytical dimensions of the phenomena (cf. 1937:409-450).

Among the classical figures, at least according to Parsons, Weber was the one who understood the tension between instrumental and normative aspects of social action more acutely. He was also aware of the problems underlying the traditional empiricist methodology in both its positivist and its idealist variants. However, in his urge to keep a clear distinction between the discursive knowledge and the concreteness of experience Weber ended up falling into a fictionalist approach that although justified in his polemical context led him to lay too much stress on the unreality of concepts. His justified anti-empiricism turns into unjustified anti-realism. The problem, once again, is that analytical understanding of theory is not put forward far enough. The fictional or ideal types led Weber to conceive phenomena in terms of hypothetical concrete units of action rather than in terms of a set of analytical dimensions with multiple values. A true general theory, according to Parsons, would require the passage from distinct units − like rational action, affective action, traditional action and so − to a system of relations between varying values − of rationality, affectiveness, traditionalism − virtually present in every single action. According to Parsons, it is only in this last case, where the combinations of distinct values of analytical dimensions are reached within one comprehensive scheme, that the theory can truly overcome all the one-dimensional temptations which have haunted the mansion of sociological theory for so long. Weber's pluralism of types, on the other hand, tends ultimately

"(...) to break up, in a sense not inherent in analysis as such, the organic unity both of concrete historical individuals and of the historic process. In its reification phase it issues in what may be called a "mosaic" theory of culture and society, conceiving them to be made up of disparate atoms". (1937: 607)

In the end, what we see is that empiricist and fictionalist orientations are closely connected with concrete and typological rather than analytical use of the categories of action frame of reference. Nevertheless, it is only from an analytical perspective that the problems concerning the subsumption of dimensions by one another become clear and the intellectual consequences coming from it can be fully and systematically addressed. Ironically as it may seem, among the classics analyzed in detail by Parsons it is Pareto, to whom the future would bequeath less recognition, that seems to have better understood the centrality of an analytical methodology − although sometimes not reaching so far as his other fellows in developing the substantive categories of analysis. Parsons, in his turn, sustain that it is only through the articulation of such methodological perception − worked out in its epistemological terms, as previously seen, by reference to both Kant and Whitehead − and all the substantive advancements brought out by Durkheim and Weber for the overcoming of both positivist and idealist traditions that sociological theory can be lead to its next step.

The crucial role of this distinction appears, for example, in the following passage to which some remarks might be added:

It is essential to distinguish from the concrete use of the theory of action, in this sense, the analytical. An end, in the latter sense, is not the concrete anticipated future state of affairs but only the difference from what it would be, if the actor should refrain from acting. The ultimate conditions are not all those concrete features of the situation of a given concrete actor which are outside his control but are those abstracted elements of the situation which cannot be imputed to action in general. Means are not concrete tools or instruments but the aspects or properties of things which actors by virtue of their knowledge of them and their control are able to alter as desired. (1937: 731-732)

When Parsons points out that an "end", in its analytical use, is not the whole concrete future state of affairs but only "the difference from what it would be if the actor should refrain from acting" he is saying that the voluntarist factor counts as only one dimension of the concrete state of affairs at stake. What is implicit here is the assumption that the other dimensions are those related to coercive and conditional factors that compose this concrete whole. Although this future state of affairs may be descriptively called an "end", the analytical use of categories prevents the absorption of the concrete whole into the ideal reference suggested by the use of

the category "end". With this subtle but crucial change of perspective, voluntarism avoids falling into the spectrum of idealist emanationism. By the same token, when Parsons stresses that means, in their analytical use, are the properties of things, what he is really saying is that given empirical and technological aspects of means are just one dimension of the concrete object at stake. In concrete cases, this aspect is always counterbalanced by a normative reference that responds to the standards of meaningful employment of these same properties in distinct situational contexts. In sum, the analytical understanding of the categories of action frame of reference − or, in other words, a multidimensional theory of action − is what allows Parsons to conceive the interpenetration of conditional and normative spheres in concrete cases without falling back into any sort of materialist or idealist conflation.

> Action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms. Elimination of the normative aspect altogether eliminates the concept of action itself and leads to the radical positivistic position. Elimination of conditions, of the tension from that side, equally eliminates action and results in idealistic emanationism. Thus conditions may be conceived at one pole, ends and normative rules at the other, means and effort as the connecting links between them. (1937: 732)

3.3 - PARSONS' MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORY OF ORDER

The scientific study of phenomena implies, as previously mentioned, not only an approach of the structural parts but also an approach of the structural (and possibly the organic-emergent) relations that take place among them. The main assumption here is that there must be some regularities and some patterns to be known among the analytical units of the phenomena (as well as among phenomena themselves), otherwise, they could not be taken as a matter of any possible knowledge. After all, knowledge is nothing but the enlightening of the connections and, therefore, the "order" underlying the phenomena at stake. This fundamental or, one might also say, this "transcendental" assumption of the theoretical and scientific enterprise is, in part, what Parsons seems to have in mind when he lays stress on the centrality of the "problem of order". From this perspective, the problem assumes a generalized character that was not always properly recognized by Parsons' interpreters and general critics.[62]

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[62] The argument according to which the Parsonian emphasis on the problem of order is intrinsically connected with certain substantive orientations at the methodological, ideological, and empirical levels is widely spread in sociological literature. For most of his critics – Dahrendorf (1959), Mills (1959), and Gouldner (1970) being arguably the most representative ones – the centrality of order in Parsons' work is usually taken as indicating distinctive sorts of commitments: to ideological conservatism; to an empirical orientation toward equilibrium

According to him, as soon as some orderliness is acknowledged, whether consciously or not, by every theorizing activity – otherwise, scientific knowledge would be without any objects and ultimately impossible – it follows that the crucial theoretical question is not *if* order takes place but *how* it takes place or, at least, how it must be theoretically conceived once it is to take place. As Richard Münch correctly pointed out, the Parsonian approach to this problem follows Kant's transcendental strategy (see [1982]1987:12-20). The problem of knowledge is therefore posed in the following terms: what fundamental conditions are to be fulfilled so that *some* orderliness may be positively grasped as taking place among the phenomena at stake and, in this case, which kind of theoretical framework makes it possible to render this order intelligible? Once the problem is addressed in this manner and order is understood as a generalized assumption underlying all theories, there are two distinct but connected series of considerations that shall be pointed out. This is so because, in a sense, the transcendental strategy has to do with both formal and substantive aspects of theory construction.[63]

At the *formal* level, Parsons seems to draw at least two consequences from this transcendental approach to order – both of which can only be understood in reference to meta-methodological ideas that have been previously pointed out. The first one is that a truly general theory must be a *systematic* one. The "order", transcendentally required by rational and scientific knowledge if it is to present some cognitive meaning, can only be achieved once our symbolic representations are organized into systems. This is why Parsons conceptualizes even the smallest action units (unit-acts), from the very beginning, as *systems* of structural elements – whose order and meaning lie on the action frame of reference. The second implication drawn by Parsons is probably less evident at first glance but equally crucial to his theoretical strategy. It has to do with the analytical rather than concrete character of systems in action theory. If all action units are to be conceived as small systems that are already ordered, at least to some

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instead of conflict; to the adoption of functionalist models and functional explanation; to a sort of metaphysical monism. If these commitments can be, to a greater or lesser extent, found in Parsons' work is not really the point in this case since the transcendental assumption of order acknowledged by him as something crucial to sociology as a science is clearly operating in a distinct and more general level of theoretical activity. In failing to realize this transcendental content thematized by Parsons, his critics usually conflate distinct levels of theoretical activity. There are, of course, more sophisticated readers that seem to acknowledge the generalized or presuppositional character of the problem at stake – most of them coming from the following generations, when the radical antagonism toward Parsons' work, so characteristic of the 1960s, started to fade and give place to more balanced approaches. To a greater or lesser extent, this is the case of the interpretations provided by authors such as Schwanenberg (1971), Bershady (1973), Rocher (1974), Alexander (1978, 1982a, 1983b), Adriaansens (1980), Savage (1981), Lidz (1981), Münch (1987), Gould (1991) and others.

[63] Although not stressing the transcendental character of Parsons' enterprise, Schwanenberg (1971) seems to have understood this point with quite striking clarity when he drew his distinction between the "two problems of order", namely the methodological and the empirical one. Despite its condensed form, this article remains one of the most sophisticated available reconstructions of Parsons' theory of order.

extent, then it becomes clear that the whole distinction between what has been commonly labeled as "action-oriented" and "order-oriented" social theories – as well as other usual distinctions between individual and society, agency and structure, action and systems and so on – is not to be taken as primarily referring to discrete concrete entities capable of being coordinated or opposed to each other but, on the contrary, to distinct levels of scientific analysis. Once again, the nuance of Parsons' analytical approach was not always properly perceived by both his famous critics and the main sociological audience.[64] A crucial consequence of this way of reasoning is that ultimately all social theories are to be thought of as being able to change their analytical levels toward both micro and macro directions. Accordingly, all of them would be virtually able to provide *some* answers about what is going on in each of these analytical levels.[65] As we will see, the fundamental opposition between collectivist and individualist theories has very little to do with the scale of the phenomena they address. It refers rather to the distinctive sorts of answers they provide to the (same) fundamental problems organizing the theoretical logic.

At the *substantive* level, the transcendental strategy operated by Parsons leads not to meta-methodological inferences about the systematic and analytic character of the *theory* of action but to an inquiry about the conditions of an empirical order among (social) *actions* – i.e., an order that necessarily implies a sort of subjective reference to actors. It is important to note though that even at this substantive level Parsons still addresses the issue in generalized and presuppositional terms. "Order" has simply to do with patterns taking place among units of action so that actors can be connected by some sets of expectations towards the behavior of the others. The antithesis to order, in this context, is not social conflict or social revolution, as many might think, but sheer "chaos" or "randomness". The inquiry concerning the transcendental conditions of empirical order, understood in this substantive but still generalized sense, can be broken down, in turn, into two connected problems to which distinct intellectual traditions have given different sorts of answers: (a) what are the main variables or elementary aspects in terms of which ordered actions patterns can be explained and (b) what is nature of the nexus between them. Following Parsons' historical reconstruction, it becomes clear that the "problem of

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[64] In fact, the tendency of taking these dichotomies as concrete rather than analytical is something that plagues even sophisticated strands of contemporary sociological theory.

[65] Needless to say that the degree of adequacy and the consistency of each answer is a whole different matter. The main point, however, is that even when a theory is built in reference to a specific level within the micro-macro continuum, certain inferences referring to the other levels of analysis can always be drawn from the presuppositional orientations taken by the author while dealing with the problems to which the theory was built for. Moreover, theoretical or methodological tools can always be refined in order to cover those levels of analysis not initially addressed by a certain theory without necessarily deforming its core assumptions.

(social) order" can be properly solved – i.e. through a systematic-analytical theory capable of retaining a subjective (and symbolic) reference – only when these two issues are correctly dealt with.

An appropriate answer to these questions and, as a consequence, to the very problem of order is formulated by Parsons, once again, as the result of both a historical convergence and a theoretical synthesis. In order to fully appreciate the whole argument, it is clear that one shall engage in a further detailed reconstruction of the specific historical answers provided by both positivist and idealist traditions as well as the dilemmas faced by each of them in dealing with these two issues. This task will be carried out in the following sections. But before doing that, it is necessary to take a further step back and clarify what is really at stake in each one of the questions underlying the "problem of order" since the very meanings of the elementary terms on which the answers rely – "order", "chaos", and "randomness" – are not unequivocal and tend to vary depending on the intellectual traditions at stake.

The first question – concerning the variables explaining the order – was partially discussed in the previous section, although at a more fundamental level. We saw that the distinct emphasis on either more cognitive/objective or more hermeneutic/subjective categories was crucial to the whole characterization of positivist and idealist theories of action. From the point of view of the theory of order, this same distinction leads to what Parsons labeled "factual" and "normative" meanings of order. For him:

> The antithesis of the (...) [factual order] is randomness or chance in the strict sense of phenomena conforming to the statistical laws of probability. Factual order (...) connotes essentially accessibility to understanding in terms of logical theory, especially of science. Chance variations are in these terms impossible to understand or to reduce to law. Chance or randomness is the name for that which is incomprehensible, not capable of intelligible analysis. Normative order, on the other hand, is always relative to a given system of norms or normative elements, whether ends, rules or other norms. Order in this sense means that process takes place in conformity with the paths laid down in the normative system. (...) the breakdown of any given normative order, that is a state of chaos from a normative point of view, may well result in an order in the factual sense, that is a state of affairs susceptible of scientific analysis. (1937:91-92)

In pointing out these two meanings of order, Parsons makes it clear that even though assuming the occurrence of some "order" among the phenomena, the distinct intellectual traditions in social thought are not necessarily assuming the same thing. There is a crucial analytical distinction between what might be metaphorically called the *external* (factual) and the *internal* (normative) aspects of the order. The first one, usually emphasized by positivism, has to do with the positive regularities among the empirical elements of both the situation and the means-

ends chain. The second one, emphasized by idealists, has to do with the internal meaningful nexus taking place among both ends and normative patterns. These two meanings are, in fact, clearly distinct and can be analytically conceived as varying independently from each other. Indeed, Parsons' historical reconstruction shows, as we will see, that in the absence of a multidimensional theory both factual and normative order can only be coherently conceived in alienation from – or, in the best scenario, as overlapping – each other. The very problem of order, however, is that *social* order, as soon as it is to be subjected to scientific knowledge and it is to keep a subjective reference, can only take place as a sort of integration of these two aspects of order. Without both of these transcendental conditions being met, the problem remains unsolved.

The second question – concerning the analytical status of the order's variables – was previously mentioned yet not systematically analyzed. It has to do more with the nature and types of relations (R_{el}, R_I, R_C) within action systems than with the fundamental units (A_1, A_2, A_3, … A_n) and its structural elements (C, M, N, E). The above-mentioned opposition between individualist and collectivist approaches lies precisely at this point. Whereas the formers assume that structural relations among units are primarily determined by variables located at the individual level (such as the organic/material, psychological, affective, and meaningful/telic needs of the individuals and their disposition toward them) the latter tend to emphasize the determining role of variables emerging at the collective level (e.g., macro-economic forces, political power, communal/group solidarity, cultural discourse). This does not mean, of course, that individualist theories do not acknowledge the existence of collective structures and social forces. It means, rather, that for them such structures and forces could, in principle, be explained by or translated into more elementary and individual categories without significant loss. Conversely, collectivist approaches do not ignore the empirical existence of individual needs and interests. The point, however, is that in more radical variants of collectivism these individual elements are considered either as irrelevant to general explanations in social life or as a sort of epiphenomena whose ultimate meaning relies on the collective level. Once the differences are formulated in such terms, it becomes clear why the individualist-collectivist dilemma is independent, as pointed above, of the scale of the phenomena analyzed: actions and small scale interactions can be explained, to a significant extent, in reference to collective emergent forces; collective forces, in their turn, can be taken as a mere extension of individual categories. As we will see in the next pages, depending on the assumptions taken by positivists and idealists on both the individual-collective nature of relations and what emergent properties

among them are relevant to the explanation of distinct phenomena, the images of order at stake will vary toward either greater openness (tending ultimately to full indeterminacy) or toward greater closeness (tending ultimately to strict determinism). Parsons, once again, aims to reach a balanced position capable of transcending the antinomies faced by the distinct approaches at hand. In this case, it will be held that the only way to avoid, on the one hand, ultimate mechanic/teleological determinism and, on the other, the pervasion of residual categories leading to either systemic randomness or normative chaos is through the adoption of a multidimensional theory of order in which the distinct emergent properties and relations are not overlapped or subsumed by one another but interwoven as objective internalized forces under the guise of the individual, understood as a subjective point of reference capable of judgment, reflection, and voluntary engagement. In the following sections, we will see how positivist and idealist traditions dealt with this dilemma.

3.3.1 - The Positivist Theories of Order (I): Toward the "Utilitarian Dilemma"

Throughout the previous sections, we have mentioned that utilitarian social thought would suffer from a sort of theoretical instability in dealing with complex action systems, a problem resulting from the assumption of certain residual categories into its logical scheme and which would lead to the so-called "utilitarian dilemma". To be sure, the problem was not so evident at the level of action unit analysis, and this is certainly one of the reasons why many individualist-oriented theorists seem to have neglected its true scope. Within modern social thought, however, this instability inherent to utilitarianism was realized by one of its prominent predecessors, Thomas Hobbes. According to Parsons, "Hobbes saw the problem with a clarity which has never been surpassed, and his statement of it remains valid today." (1937: 93) For this very reason, the British philosopher serves as a sound starting point to a deeper theoretical analysis.

In a way that anticipates the classical utilitarian core in action theory, Hobbes departed from an intellectual scheme characterized by four distinguished features: a) atomism; b) rationalism; c) empiricism; d) randomness of individual ends. The starting point of his social thought is that of individual actors with multiple ends and capable of rationally calculating their actions according to scientific-positive knowledge. When the unit acts are taken together and arranged into complex systems of multiple actors, it becomes clear that within this train of thought all the actions coming from other subjects, like everything else in the system, can be

positively grasped by the actor only as empirically cognizable elements of his situation, that is, as part of conditions (C), obstacles or means (M), that would be more or less adequate to his ends (E) – according to a rational efficiency norm (N). The problem begins when one takes a look at the status of individual ends. In so far as the individual ultimate ends are not positively measurable by empirical science – since they are not preestablished by or deduced from the empirical situation – they can only appear within this scheme under a sort of negative sign, i.e. that of residual categories: ultimate ends rely on human passions, which appear as non-rational elements or as elements which may vary randomly from a statistical point of view. But when these random statuses of individual ends are systematically dealt with, they lead to a crucial theoretical problem.

Hobbes realized this while drawing the logical and systematic consequences from his (proto-utilitarian) theoretical scheme: if all actors are to rationally pursue certain randomly distributed ends, and if the only positive criterion of orientation is the selection of the most adequate means for the attainment of those ends, it follows that the most immediately rational orientation can only be that of the pursuit of power, understood as the crucial mean to carry out any ultimate end. In this case, all rational men, in foreseeing the possible obstacles of their situation (represented also by the actions of other men), would rationally resort as much as necessary to "force and fraud" as efficient means to neutralize others and enforce their own ends. These are the general conditions of the famous "war of all against all". What Hobbes' intellectual system reveals with quite striking clarity is that in the absence of a normative content other than that of efficient rationality, the normative system becomes devoided of any positive theoretical role. In the absence of such substantive norms, there can be no limitation to the use of means and coercive power emerges as the crucial explanatory factor in social action. Even though a collective *factual* order may result from a systematic struggle for power – the war of all against all is such an example of non-random factual order that can be a matter of knowledge and rational prediction – the idea of a collective *normative* order where the ends can be systematically organized and systematically attained simply cannot take place. Hobbes' state of war is, from a *normative* point of view, a chaotic state of affairs in which the life of man turns out to be, following the famous reference to Thucydides, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". (Hobbes, [1668] 1994: 76).

In view of these findings, Hobbes sought to solve the problem of (normative) order – in a way that the use of means and the pursuit of power could be limited – by means of a contractual theory. A solution that, according to Parsons:

(…) really involves stretching, at a critical point, the conception of rationality beyond its scope in the rest of the theory, to a point where the actors come to realize the situation as a whole instead of pursuing their own ends in terms of their immediate situation, and then take the action necessary to eliminate force and fraud, and, purchasing security at the sacrifice of the advantages to be gained by their future employment. (Parsons, 1937: 93)

It is through this sort of insight – whose reference still lies in individual interests – that the actors would give up the freedom to use any available means in the name of the security provided by an empowered and centralized State. The difficulty with the Hobbesian solution – which remains on a utilitarian basis – is, however, that it does not touch the heart of the problem. The actors do not have any rational motive to trust that others will subscribe to the contract and limit their pursuit of power, that is to say, that the adherence to norms will be a permanent end not submitted to further efficiency considerations. Moreover, this thrust can never be a result of the contract since, by its definition, it must precede it.[66] But what binds the actors to the contractual norms then if they cannot rationally trust that their fellows – in so far as sustaining a rationalist orientation – will do the same? The only available answer within a utilitarian basis is the threat to sanctions resulting from the differences of power. In this case, far from resulting from a spontaneous individual calculus, the collective order can only be sustained as long as the state, the sovereign, or any other actor can centralize enough power so that they are capable of enforcing political decisions. It becomes clear though that centralized power can only be an intermediate stage before a new state of war since the most rational path is still the pursuit of power and order can only be maintained as soon as there is no other actor capable of acquiring a bigger ability to impose coercive power on his fellows. Moreover, within a strict utilitarian armchair, it is difficult to provide consistent explanations – i.e. explanations that do not resort to ad hoc hypothesis and residual categories – for the multitude of empirical cases in social life where actors do have the opportunity to use force and fraud without being sanctioned but simply stick to norms and do not make use of this sort of expedient.

For Parsons, Hobbes leads the utilitarian core to its logical limits without breaking it down. What becomes clear in this case and which constitutes, in its turn, the touchstone of Parsons' Kantian approach to social order is that if adherence to norms is a matter of hypothetical imperatives and it can be weighted among other possible ends – i.e. if it is not to be taken, in any sense, either as a sort of categorical imperative or under the sign of "duty" – it

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[66] Hobbes was aware of this point, and precisely because of this he sustains that the right to revoke the contract must be withdrawn from actors, as soon as the sovereign is capable of maintaining the order. (cf. Hobbes, [1668] 1994: ch. 18).

follows that a normative order cannot really take place and we are doomed to get back where we started, namely, to a state of war. But if this is so, one may ask, how can it be that utilitarianism not only was not abandoned but also became a sort of dominant trend in social thought in the English-speaking countries during the following centuries? According to Parsons, this has to do with an intellectual shift that took place within Locke's system of thought, something which allowed subsequent generations of theorists to bypass the problem without running into the logical limits of the utilitarian scheme.

The comparison between Hobbes' and Locke's systems is revealing because while relying on the same sort of proto-utilitarian assumptions – atomism, rationalism, empiricism, and randomness of individual ends – their approaches to the problem of order diverge in some crucial respects which, in turn, give rise to far-reaching theoretical consequences. Unlike Hobbes, to whom the discrete ends of the individuals could not be related in any positive and necessary stable way, Locke assumes the existence of some intermediate ends – such as health, security, liberty, possessions – that are characterized by a sort of natural stability, in the sense that they are the necessary means that every rational agent should pursue in order to be able to attain his/her ultimate ends. The crucial point, in this case, is that the stability of this sort of assumption – which Halévy has called the "natural identity of [intermediary] interests" (1937: 97) – relies on a deeper assumption concerning the role of reason in the state of nature. In this case, reason would tell all those who sought to consult it the following: if men are equally endowed with interests and find themselves in the same conditions – where there is no reason at all for establishing any natural hierarchy among them – then it is rational that all individual interests can find their respective place insofar as they do not oppose the observance of the basic conditions for the attainment of the ends of others; that is, men are naturally allowed to pursue whatever ends they choose insofar as life, health, safety, and property are safeguarded. The general argument is clearly expressed in one of the famous passages of Locke's *Second Treatise*:

> The state of nature has a *law of nature* to govern it, which obliges every one: and *reason*, which is that *law*, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one *ought* to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions (…) Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, *ought* he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another (Locke, [1690] 1980: ch.2 §. 6, emphasis added).

According to this kind of perspective, the "reason" would naturally lead to both the stability of certain intermediate ends and the limitation of the use of certain means like force and fraud. What it is important to be noted, according to Parsons, is that even though Locke's recourse to "reason" may suggest that this reasonable attitude of man toward his fellows could be arrived at by a sort of *cognitive* process, what is at stake is that "(…) this limitation on utilitarian rationality is achieved by introducing a third *normative* component not indigenous to the utilitarian system as it has been defined" (Parsons, 1937: 96). It is clear that the "reason", described by Locke as a "law of nature", implies not a mere intellectual process where certain representations are inferred from others, but a normative content according to which some patterns of action are *forbidden* and others are *demanded* under the sign of an "ought".

With this ingenious move, Locke was able to stabilize the utilitarian system and minimize the problem of security, which had so severely afflicted Hobbes. In introducing this normative component into the utilitarian scheme, Locke paved the way for a whole series of reflections that could never flourish under the consistent utilitarian chains of Hobbesian reasoning. As we saw, in a normatively chaotic social space, the intersubjective relations would be permeated by fear and security would turn into the main rational concern of those involved in the social contract. If, on the other hand, the Lockean "reason" is made part of nature so that an empirical (normative) order based on converging interests can be "naturally" sustained, then the problem of interpersonal relations is radically transformed: it would no longer be the problem of how to avoid force and fraud, but the problem of how to conceive positive forms of cooperation and exchange in civil society where the agent's actions and purposes could be taken as conditions (C) and means (M) for other agents in the pursuit of their respective ends (E) and vice versa. At this point, the problem of the distribution of power and the forms of coercion, so crucial to *political* thought, gives way to a kind of discussion proper to classical *economics* where the problem of positive exchange is systematically articulated with a theory of specialization and division of labor.[67] (cf. 1937: 97ff)

To be sure, Locke's theoretical scheme had some relevant empirical difficulties, many of which he was aware of, and with which economic theory had to deal with during the following centuries.[68] Nevertheless, the main problem was not given at the empirical but at the

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[67] The problem concerning the positive forms of cooperation rather than exchange occupied for several historical reasons a minor role in the tradition. In the next section, it will be analyzed how this point was taken up and developed under the positivist tradition by some anarchist and utopic socialist variants.

[68] According to Parsons, an example of this kind of difficulty would be "the unrealistic premise that all men had equal access to the goods of nature with which they could mix their labors," since for Locke himself, "the doctrine

theoretical level. It had to do with what is clearly a metaphysical assumption not properly consistent with the rest of the theoretical scheme: the postulate of natural identity of interests. Even though this postulate was responsible for making sense of a crucial empirical fact – i.e. that "(…) in some societies to an important degree there does exist an order which makes possible an approximation to the conditions required by the assumptions of classical economic theory" (1937:101) – it became clear, according to Parsons, that its normative content could not be addressed in the naturalistic terms pretended by Locke. By putting things in this way, of course, Parsons is not denying the theoretical relevance of the sort of normative content aimed by Locke. What he has in mind is that the normative findings reached out through the exercise of *practical* reason are not carved in the phenomenal world: they cannot be found out by the actor through the mere use of *theoretical* reason while dealing with his empirical situation. What is at stake is rather a practical command that requires a special sort of attitude which appears, in its turn, as the ultimate condition for any normative order. For Parsons, this is precisely where the transcendental philosophy is connected with the sociological theory: the formal requirements of practical reason – understood here not as a law of nature but as a practical law of free rational action – are to a degree necessary but not sufficient if not shared as a sort of common value, a value endowed by the social community with a degree of self-evidence and subjectively experienced by the actors as legitimate.

Without a theoretical scheme capable of grasping both the philosophical and sociological dimensions of this normative-integrative element adumbrated by Locke and other natural law theorists there is no way of making sense of normative social order. Parsons is clear in his evaluation:

> There is a sense in which [Locke] was factually the more nearly right. But in terms of the utilitarian scheme there was no adequate way of formulating his correct insight that most societies would not dissolve into chaos on the breakdown of government, that hence there must be some other element of normative order than fear of governmental coercion. It often happens, in a state of scientific immaturity, that the thinker who comes nearest being factually right in his empirical views is the least theoretically penetrating. Hobbes' iron consistency in developing the consequences of utilitarian assumptions was, in spite of the fact that it led him to empirical errors, such as an exaggerated fear of the consequences of revolution, a greater scientific achievement than Locke's more "reasonable" attitude with its failure adequately to discriminate

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was valid only when 'there was enough and equally good in common for others'" (Parsons, 1937:99). Added to this there was the fact that the problem of positive exchange was understood in terms of individual subjects whose actions and interests were made possible to the extent that each of them could reciprocally serve as a suitable means to another subject and vice versa. In this case, the problem of the productive unit was understood in terms of individual subjects and not of more complex arrangements (for example, between capital and labor, in the form of a firm), which means that the possible conflict of interests within these broader economic structures was minimized.

his implicit normative assumptions from established fact. Locke, that is, was right but gave the wrong reasons. It must be remembered that scientific achievement is a matter of the combination of systematic theoretical analysis with empirical observation (…) factual correctness is not the sole aim of science; it must be combined with thoroughgoing theoretical understanding of the facts known and correctly stated. (1937: 97, n.1)

In due time, these inconsistencies would become more and more clear. Authors as distinct as Malthus (a declared conservative) and Marx (a radical revolutionary) would realize through diverse paths that the "reasonable" attitude prescribed by Locke's (substantive) "reason" – which constitutes the normative core of the whole liberal tradition – was far from being self-evident, at least as soon as one remains consistently oriented to the objective categories of actor's empirical situation: Malthus accidentally exposed this weakness by insisting, for example, that in a situation marked by scarcity and deprivation of goods – caused by "natural" factors such as population growth – there would be no rationality in following the Lockean precept; Marx, in turn, addresses the problem of mitigated forms of coercion taking place under the ideological discourse formation in order to unravel behind the normative assumption alluded not only a natural "opposition" of interests (between classes) but also an economic theory of labor exploitation. What is clear is that once the natural identity of interest is ruled out as "an untenable metaphysical assumption" (1937:101), the utilitarian and strategic-oriented theorists have no other option than to return, after almost two centuries of theoretical evasion, to the problem of order and the problem of forms of coercion as initially stated by Hobbes. The state of imminent war – which in due course will characterize the Malthusian and Darwinian "struggle for existence" as well as the Marxian "class struggle" – will turn out to be once again the core problem of social thought.

At this point, the positivist social thought is faced by what became known as the "utilitarian dilemma": without the ability to positively value the ideal and normative categories – since all positive relations among norms and subjective ends, being not part of the nature of things, can only be grasped within this tradition as mere metaphysical fictions – it follows that the only logical path open to those who want to explain the empirical fact of social order (with all its conflicts and struggles) in long run is to radicalize the positivist assumptions, which means, in this case, to bring stability to the system through resort to objective categories capable of turning all previous residual categories (such as the randomness of ultimate ends) into some sort of epiphenomena; but in this case, as we already saw, all subjective reference retained by utilitarian and liberal traditions fade out and action scheme evaporates. At the end of this logical process, what becomes clear, as we will see in the next section, is that when radicalized, "all

positivistic rivers ultimately flow into the same sea, that of mechanistic determinism". (1937: 120-1). We will also see that the only way out of these radical positivistic paths, as soon as the theory wants to remain partially consistent and seek to retain subjective reference in non-deterministic terms, is to swing back and give up the aim of positively explaining order through scientific standards. In this case, normative order, especially in large-scale arrangements, turns out to be not only devoid of any positive (scientific) reference but also suspicious of being artificially achieved by means of coercion and corruption. A non-coercive (non-normative) natural order can take place, in this case, only under special conditions and, once again, through a sort of spontaneous process not subdue to positive scientific analysis. If the cognitivist assumptions of positivism are not abandoned, the theory remains stuck to these two logical positions. The utilitarianism dilemma relies on the fact that the theory cannot be truly stabilized in the middle ground as tacitly pretended by the first utilitarians. It consistently tends to be pushed toward either mechanistic radical determinism or anti-deterministic (but also non-scientific) modalities of anarchism.

3.3.2 - The Positivist Theories of Order (II): between anarchism and radical mechanicism

It was mentioned that the conflation of normative and naturalist dimensions of social order opened the way, at least since Locke, to a thorough account of the positive forms of exchange and cooperation. Whereas classical economics was developed by laying stress on the first of these forms and the institutional arrangements that make it possible, the problem regarding positive forms of rational cooperation was taken up and developed by another logical variant of utilitarianism, a variant that tended to assume a more radical position regarding the role of political institutions. According to this line of thought, if relevant convergence of interests is assumed not only at the level of the exchange of goods and services in the market but also at the level of general activities requiring positive cooperation of individuals and if reason alone could lead each one, by the free exercise of his/her rational faculties, to this cognitive understanding, then one might conclude the following: that a sound and cooperative political order can be more "spontaneously" achieved the more the individual rationality and the private judgment are freed from all sorts of external constraints. In this case, of course, all sorts of political and institutional arrangements bequeathed by the tradition – especially those

which are not systematically submitted by rational criticism of individuals – turns out to be a focus of suspicion.

This anarchist variant of utilitarian thought was initially articulated in Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. In that context, the impact of the book did not lie exactly on the individualist-rationalist reasoning underlying it – i.e. the argument according to which a sound political order, characterized by principles of "justice" and "equality" (cf. 1793, book II), could only be achieved through the free exercise of individual rational faculties[69] – but on the analysis of political power and the radical conclusions drawn by the author. When applying the principles of "justice", "equality" and "private judgment" as a sort evaluative standards to judge the role of government and its institutions in matters involving toleration, punishment, property, and marriage the author went on to sustain that in each of these cases the governmental power was guilty of exercising a sort of corruptive and depriving effect on the development of human capacities. (cf. 1793, books V-VIII). Godwin's only possible conclusion was that individuals (and the whole society) would be better without these artificial forms of organization like marriage, property, and so on. By putting things this way, of course, he presented a challenge to the whole utilitarian tradition which up to that point had been characterized by a less radical and even conservative sort of political orientation. The situation got even worse because it soon became clear, as Parsons states it, that "the line between Locke and Godwinian anarchism was a distressingly thin one". (Parsons, 1937: 104)

What is relevant to the present discussion is that the problem of conflation between normative and rationalist aspects of social order, a problem which took place in Locke but remained largely unnoticed at that point, started to reach the surface of the theoretical system through the hands of Godwin. When a conservative answer to Godwin's radical position finally came up some years later in Malthus' *Principle of Population* (1798) the whole thing became evident and the system started to risk falling apart. Malthus' line of thought was the following one: let's suppose that Godwin's dream comes true and that all the pernicious institutions responsible for human oppression are abolished; let's suppose also that the immediate result is indeed the harmonious, safe, and fair state of affairs predicted by him instead of anomie, scarcity, deprivation, and war; what would happen then? in such a situation, it is evident that people, freed from the material and moral constrictions inflicted by previous political order, would be free to obey the dictates of their nature which means, among other things, that they

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[69] At the beginning of his discussion about "the right of private judgment", for instance, Godwin states that: "to a rational being there can be but one rule of conduct, justice, and one mode of ascertaining that rule, the exercise of his understanding" (Godwin, 1793: 163).

would reproduce and grow exponentially in number; after all, there is peace and enough resources to everyone; but as soon as the population starts to increase the natural limits to the harmonious state of affairs predicted by Godwin will inevitably take place; the food and all other material supplies will necessarily become scarce in due time since they cannot be increased in the same proportion of the population, whose limits can be, in principle, indefinitely extended; but what are the consequences of such a state of affairs where deprivation threatens to be once again the rule of social life?

> Alas! what becomes of the picture where men lived in the midst of plenty: where no man was obliged to provide with anxiety and pain for his restless wants: where the narrow principle of selfishness did not exist: where Mind was delivered from her perpetual anxiety about corporal support, and free to expatiate in the field of thought which is congenial to her. This beautiful fabric of imagination vanishes at the severe touch of truth. The spirit of benevolence, cherished and invigorated by plenty, is repressed by the chilling breath of want. The hateful passions that had vanished, reappear. The mighty law of self-preservation, expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul. (Malthus, [1798] 1966: 189-190)

The argument is clear: in scarcity, there is no reason at all to expect that man will continue to observe the rights and interests of their fellows nor that the harmonious conditions of Godwin's utopia can be sustained. In following Godwin's advice we would risk returning to a worse state of affairs than that one we used to have when the institutions denounced by him were working and the use of force and fraud were limited, at least to some extent. In fact, says Malthus, the only reason why the populations are kept under control and we do not return to the Hobbesian state of war is because of the "moral restrains" made possible by precisely those institutional arrangements condemned by Godwin – especially property and marriage, that stick the individuals with responsibilities regarding their family and their goods. Without them, the only alternative to solve the population growth and the instability following from it would be the "positive checks" of nature: the elimination of population by causes such as child mortality, misery, pestilence, and so on. (cf. Malthus, [1798] 1966: ch. 4 and 5)

Malthus's general argument ends up then clearly dissociating the normative and naturalistic aspects that were entangled up to that point in most political philosophers: with Malthus, the rational attitude prescribed by Locke`s law of nature turns out to be not so natural after all or, at least, it is taken as far from being self-evident when the prospects of man are the death and the starvation. In exposing this fragility, Malthus contributed to the opening of two sorts of paths to order`s account. The first one, which remained on the utilitarian strain, relied on the positive normative role of certain regulatory institutions without which rational

individuals would be led to an inevitable state of unlimited struggle for power and resources. According to Parsons, this acknowledgment "(…) is, perhaps, the first major step in the development of utilitarian thought in the advance beyond the mere assumption of the existence of order (1937: 106-7); a line of thinking that had to wait until the latter sociological developments to fully flourish in a non-individualistic basis. The second path opened by Malthus was not immediately realized by him but is of crucial interest here since it paves the way out of the traditional utilitarian scheme. By stressing the population surplus as an environmental factor capable of influencing and, in a way, determining – through processes of human elimination – the route to social order, Malthus ended up setting out a strategy that proved to be typical of another branch of the positivist tradition: the determination of courses of action by natural objective categories of "heredity" and "environment". The whole problem posed by Malthus, as we saw, had to do with the empirical fact that the reproductive powers of the species (a *hereditary* factor) could far exceed man's capacity for self-sustenance (given the scarcity of the physical *environment*). In the view of the value discrepancy between these two variables, the order would come to be determined, when systematically addressed, by that one whose value was less open, namely, the environment: ultimately, the population's volume, density, and organization could be positively explained, according to this line of thought, only in the view of environmental factors such as the "positive checks" (concerning degrees of scarcity, pestilence, and so on). The normative control provided by proper social institutions could mitigate the effects of these checks but it could not alter the situation as a whole.

Although Malthus' concern was primarily numerical, it has not taken so long before some theorists began to pay attention to the distinctive traits of those individuals who survive and those who are eliminated by the positive checks. At this point the static movement of elimination of individuals turns into a dynamic process of type selection: the "survivor" is no longer understood as an average type, but a selected modal type with certain distinct advantageous features that help him in the competition for limited resources. Through this slight change of perspective, positivism accomplished, according to Parsons, a fundamental passage toward "(…) one of the great movements of nineteenth century thought, Darwinism, which when developed into a closed system and applied to human action in society constituted the most important radically anti-intellectualistic positivistic system ever promulgated" (1937: 111).

While it is true that Darwin himself has never applied his theory to either society or the cultural objects, the fact is that the impact of his system on the enlightened minds of the 19th

century was enormous and there were always those who wanted to extend his thinking to other areas.[70] When applied to society, "social Darwinism" leads even more radically than Malthus (who remained a utilitarian) to an objectivist approach: the ultimate explanation of the various courses of action and the very orderliness of human life ends up dispensing with all subjective references. The whole action system can be completely reduced, from a logical point of view, to the alluded categories of "heredity" and "environment", especially the latter. The first of these categories, in this case, is taken not as more or less constant, as in Malthus' case of the instinctive powers of reproduction, but as a random category operated through a theory of genetic variability. It plays a logical role homologous to that one which "random ends" occupied within the utilitarian scheme of thought.[71] At the same time, the old "war of all against all" reappears under the name of "struggle for existence," no longer interpreted as a perpetual struggle for power, but as an "adaptation" that submits the evolution of modal types (and, in a way, the whole evolution of social-historical arrangements) to the objective category of "environment". This is how positivist evolutionism leads, by an anti-intellectualist route (i.e. independently of the cognitive processes of the actors) to a radical mechanistic determinism. As Parsons points out "in so far as the conditions of the environment are decisive it does not matter what ends men may think they pursue; in fact, the course of history is determined by an impersonal process over which they have no control" (1937: 113). In such a case, the subjective ends (E) and the norm of rationality (N) may empirically exist, but they are reduced to a sort of epiphenomena: they do not alter the system in any significant aspect. The natural selection continues to operate independently of any subjective consciousness. As a consequence, says Parsons:

> the problem of order in the sense in which it has been discussed above evaporates. Without the normative elements of action order in the normative sense becomes meaningless. The only order which concerns the scientist of human action is a factual order from both the subjective and the objective points of view. (1937:113)

According to Parsons, though, the Darwinian route was not the only available alternative to the utilitarian scheme. For him, there was another sort of radical attempt to deal with the problems raised by Malthus which is crucially relevant to the history of the problems here

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[70] It is worth remembering, in this context, that Spencer himself had already employed the ideas of "survival of the fittest" and "struggle for existence" some years before Darwin's publications. (cf. GERDHARDT, 2002: 15ff)

[71] Once taken from the point of view of the theoretical system, randomness means that the element at stake does not play an eminent positive role in the explanation, but only subdues itself to another "non-random" category as the system becomes more coherent. It has the role of putting this other (non-random) category in action. In the specific case analyzed, this other category is, of course, the category of "environment".

analyzed: a path that was not carried out through the insights coming from biology but by a series of developments taking place within the economic theory. For those interested in the economic problems of modern societies, it has not taken so long before the natural disharmony of interests as identified by Malthus turned into a social conflict concerning distinct economic and material interests. Within Ricardo's theoretical system, the inescapable tension between population needs and the scarcity of natural environment brought up by Malthus led to some technical developments pointing in this exact same direction.[72] Nevertheless, it was Marx who drew the most conspicuous conclusions from it so paving the way toward an alternative sort of objectivism distinct from that provided by the Darwinian approach.

For Marx, it was clear that the complex economic units stressed by the efficiency demands were far from operating without inner conflicts. In fact, the economic dynamics could be properly understood only if these differences of interest within productive units were fully acknowledged. As it is widely known, the analysis concerning this sort of relationship soon gave rise to a theory of exploitation of labor. At this point, however, the crucial of Marx's intervention is not the technicalities of his economic theory but the fact that he brought to light once again the problems revolving around the significant differences of power within action systems, something which was central to Hobbes but was somehow minimized in traditional liberal thought since then. But for Marx, the instability introduced by differences of the power does not result in any sort of permanent and always lurking state of chaos, as seems to be the case in Hobbesian state of war. Rather, it is understood in terms of a dynamic process of conflict between classes that take place within a definite historical array of social and economic institutions. In framing the problem like this, Marx paves the way for a thorough analysis of the mitigated forms of power coercion underlying certain institutional arrangements – such as law, family, and so on. From the point of view of the model worked out here, this sort of change means that the power relations taking place in complex systems start to be clearly addressed as emerging at the collective rather than individual level. From a substantive point of view, the unmasking of the specific interests on which rely these regulative institutions means another critical blow into the principle of "natural identity of interests": the normative contents attached to both the abstract "natural" reason and the regulative institutions praised by Locke and others

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[72] On the one hand, the Malthusian depiction of nature led to the clear acknowledgment of the limits of the economic production (and the limits of marginal output per unit) when economic factors are in such disproportion, an insight from which Ricardo could formulate his famous "law of diminishing returns". On the other hand, the Malthus principle of population led to the theorem according to which there was a constant supply of labor and that the constant competition among laborers for employment would in long run drive the wages down to a minimum level, which became known as the "law of iron wages".

would be not only in disagreement with the nature of things (as Malthus' mental experiments have inadvertently shown), but they would constitute of a sort of "false consciousness" responsible for advancing interests that are far from being "identical" among men. In the critique of ideology advanced by Marx and Engels, it becomes clear that social norms responsible for order stabilization in modern capitalist societies can only be a function of differences of power between the classes who possess certain means of material and intellectual production and those other classes who do not.

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. (Marx & Engels, 1846: 67)

With this critical move – homologous to that undertaken by Malthus – Marx opens the door for an objectivist strategy in theoretical construction that somehow parallels that one provided by radicalized positivists and which ends up providing once again a sort of deterministic approach to modern social order.[73] Nevertheless, Marx was not a mere positivist![74] By pointing out the crucial role of power relations in its historical connections with other elements within action systems, he undertakes a subtle move that avoids both the linear evolutionism and the natural determinism advanced by social Darwinism and other radical positivist variants in their approach to social order. This is so because for Marx while technological developments and economic efficiency, that are both part of the conditions (C) of action, may evolve in more or less linear terms, the rationality (N) connecting the use of certain means (M) and certain human interests (E) varies according to distinct historical moments which, in turn, are always characterized by specific class structures. In other words,

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[73] Some Marxists will later dispute the more deterministic readings of Marx's work. For the argument provided here this line of contention is not really relevant. As in the case of Darwin, after whom the intellectual lineage here focused is named, Marx appears as representing a scheme of thought that, if made coherent from the standpoint of its internal positive categories, leads to a kind of objectivist interpretation of social life. This is so because the subjective categories, being residual or negatively defined, find no adequate place in the scheme as soon as it becomes theoretically closed (which, of course, is to be distinguished from being empirically closed, as noted at the beginning of this chapter).

[74] Parsons is aware that Marx is not exactly a positivist and, in a way, pays him the homage of a double treatment – notice that Marx is the only author among those analyzed within the nineteen chapters of *The Structure* that receives a specific treatment both in the volume dedicated to the critique of positivism and in the one dedicated to the critique of idealism – in which Parsons recognizes the author's peculiar place: "(...) Marx forms an important bridge between the positivist and idealist traditions of thought " (1937: 110)

the rationality of action does not boil down to a mere "adaptation" process toward a more or less stable *natural* environment. It is primarily given in terms of a certain class structure, that is, in terms of a *social* environment characterized by certain varying power and economic relations. Marx' evolutionism is dialectical rather than linear precisely because of this sort of reasoning: in each stage of the process the systems succeeding one another – feudalism, capitalism, and so on – can be understood as totalities endowed with certain structural elements (i.e. certain class conflicts and certain power dynamics) that are radically distinct in each one and whose contradictions may ultimately lead to the next system. Action courses are rationally selected differently in distinct systems.

In view of the above, it is possible to say that the Marxist approach to order presents two peculiar characteristics when compared to the Darwinian variant of thought. In the first place, it does not resort to an anti-intellectualist approach: the evolutionary process is not automatic, since it still depends, to a certain extent, on the actors' ability to calculate and understand the situation; it is necessary that actors set the wheel of history in motion through concrete and strategically oriented actions according to their class interests. Second, the objective determination is given by a historical human environment, which implies, in Marx's case, a degree of multidimensionality in order's explanation. As Parsons points out:

> Marxian economic determinism is a matter not of economic causation alone in the specific sense arrived at in the previous discussion but of the total intermediate sector of the intrinsic means-end chain, a combination of *technological*, *economic,* and *political* determinism. (1937: 494; emphasis added)

This "materialist" multidimensional approach is also collectively oriented since the economic rationality and the coercive power are both understood in terms of broad structural arrangements that surpass the individual needs and their decisions. However, in spite of both this relative multidimensionality and certain advances toward a positive understanding of collectively emergent relations (R_C), one arrives, in the end, at results similar to that of other radical variants of positivism: the ends (E) and the norms (N) of action are subjected, in the course of history, to objective material categories, namely the structural conditions (C) of production and power distribution, and the means (M) that the actor strategically selects according to their class interests. Action in the broader multidimensional sense breaks down and normative order dissolves into teleology: the history of courses of action – as well as the history of normative arrangements and consciousness – becomes the history of the conflict underlying the production of life forms.

Insofar as one remains attached to positivist and broad materialist assumptions in order to develop them coherently and systematically there is no way out of this sort of solution. One may interchange the primary categories of the causal analysis in action systems – natural environment, population growth, biological instincts, psychological drives, economic forces, power distribution, and even social "facts" – but the result in each case is more or less the same: normative aspects of order give way to environmental constraints and the only sort of value human behavior can assume is those of "efficiency" or "adaptation" in relation to these objective categories. In anti-intellectualist variants, this efficiency or adaptation results from a selection that can dispense human consciousness and calculus as a relevant variable; in rationalist variants, a strategic component is assumed as necessary (yet not always sufficient) to make sense of action courses and its general patterns.

Within positivism, if systemic determinism from the external environment is to be avoided and a proper space to subjective references is to be analytically kept apart from objective reduction, the rationality has to be bound up with the individual interests and values rather than to *external* forces surrounding them. It does not really matter if these are natural forces, social forces, or a combination of both. But once rationality – taken here as the normative pattern *par excellence* within positivism – is detached from these objective stable forces, it follows that positivism cannot be stabilized in an intermediate position as utilitarians would pretend. This is so because these stabilizing objective forces become devoid of any positive values: nature is taken as providing nothing like a "natural law" but merely blind regularities and social institutions are reduced to artificial coercive constructs. The consequence of this line of thinking then is that the only normatively acceptable orderliness is that one resulting from the free interaction between rational individuals. Ultimately, as we saw, this individualistic approach leads back to distinct variants of anarchism: depending on the sort of individual interaction emphasized – those leaning to competition or those tending to cooperation – as being the most appropriate to achieve an optimal solution, the scheme may be developed toward either more libertarian or more socialist variants of anarchism. In both cases, however, there is a fundamental theoretical problem in the addressing of social order: as soon as the cognitivist standpoint is not abandoned it results that the subjective aspects of action responsible for retaining voluntarism against determinism cannot be grasped but negatively. The theoretical consequence of admitting these negative categories into the scheme is that the free order ceases to be a matter of systematic knowledge. In sum, the only way a positivist can avoid mechanistic

determinism is to swing back to a position where subjective reference turns into openness and indetermination regarding social order.

3.3.3 - The Idealist Theories of Order (I): toward the expressivist dilemma

The account on the questions of factual and normative order offered within the idealist tradition is explored by Parsons in considerably less detail if compared to the reconstruction he provides for the positivistic accounts. Indeed, it is possible to conjecture some contextual and historical reasons for this imbalance that have to do with the political crisis Western societies were facing during the moment Parson was writing his book and his special interest in analyzing its causes and remedies.[75] For whereas the problem of order is thematized within the positivist tradition primarily in terms of political (and economic) arrangements and conflicts, the idealists, especially in Germany, tilted to an approach to order whose emphasis lies in its cultural and symbolic aspects, an emphasis which tended to systematize it primarily in terms of a philosophy of law and customs. From this point of view, one may argue that the disputes and nuances concerning the distinct idealist variants would present a less direct connection with the concrete political conflicts that preoccupied Parsons so severely at that moment. In any case, it seems

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[75] Despite the theoretical-systematic character of SSA, it is worth remembering that the book was written during the 1930s, a period marked by the greatest crisis hitherto seen in capitalism, by the aftermath of a world war – and the escalation of tensions that would lead to a second one – and by the rise of totalitarian regimes across Europe. In this case, not only the so-called human sciences, but Western societies themselves, with respect to their political, economic, and civilizational models, seemed threatened and started to experience a generalized sense of crisis. (A sentiment that, by the way, seems to have been expressed in the various fields of the humanities: in philosophy, from Husserl's phenomenology to Popper's critical realism; in sociology, from Mannheim's criticism to Sorokin's cultural pessimism; in literature, from Steinbeck's realism to Huxley's dystopias). In an autobiographical text, written many years later, Parsons recalls this period and points out some of his concerns at the time of writing SSA:

> "The Structure of Social Action marked a major turning point in my professional career. Its major accomplishment, the demonstration of the convergence among the four authors with which it dealt, was accompanied by a clarification and development of my own thought about the problems of the state of Western society with which the authors were concerned. The state of Western society which might be designated as either capitalism or free enterprise – and on the political side as democracy – was clearly then in some kind of state of crisis. The Russian Revolution and the emergence of the first socialist state as controlled by the Communist party had been crucial to my thinking since undergraduate days. The Fascist movements affected friendships in Germany. Less than two years after the publication of the book the Second World War was to begin, and, finally, came the Great Depression with its ramifications throughout the world." (Parsons, 1970: 831).

In view of this, it seems clear that the main movements in the real politics of that moment and which were the primary interest of Parsons' critical diagnosis (individualist laissez-faire, fascism and Stalinism), all of them possess, at the core of their ideological-conceptual schemes, an affiliation to the matrix of thought that he broadly associates with the name of "positivism" (respectively, utilitarianism, social Darwinism, and orthodox Marxism). For this reason, it seems reasonable to state that the unveiling of the conceptual problems inherent in that matrix of thought, with its distinct variants, would possibly constitute a strategic procedure for Parsons.

possible and to some extent necessary for our theoretical and systematic purposes to amend this alluded imbalance by outlining, yet briefly, some developments in idealist theories of order.

The idealist social thought arises, from its very beginning, as a sort of resistance against the surrender, at least in the field of human affairs, to the mechanist and naturalist impulses underlying the early modern scientific thinking. In what concerns the analysis of action systems and their respective organizing patterns, this idealist resistance gives rise in due time to both phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to human objects which tended to render such objects intelligible under historicist rather than naturalist frames of reference. Although it is safe to say that idealist tradition does not boil down into historicism – transcendentalism being a sort of alternative path to be recovered later by neo-Kantians and by Husserlian phenomenology – it is important to point that at least during the period here analyzed historicism was the great driving force behind the development of idealistic social theory. From the point of view of its intellectual features, historicism departs from a very distinct scheme than that one employed for instance by the utilitarians – a scheme characterized, as we saw in previous sections, by atomism, rationalism, empiricism, and randomness of the ends. The differences have to do, in part, with the idealist focus being primarily not on the technical and rational aspects of the means-ends chains but rather on the symbolic and meaningful-expressive traits within this same sector of action. Even though most historicists continued to adopt a sort of *empiricist* orientation – understood here in opposition to an analytical approach to reality (cf. section 3.1) – and the ultimate ends were usually understood as being *free from strict natural determinism*, what becomes clear is that when symbolic patterns and cultural meanings are brought to the fore both the *atomism* and the *rationalism* that characterized most of the positivist approaches to action systems end up giving place to two very distinct and even opposing features: *organicism* and *individuation/intuitionism*.

The general idea that human and historical affairs would require a new sort of scientific paradigm distinct from that one underlying naturalist explanations is an idea that can be traced back, at least in the modern age, to Vico's classical work *The New Science* (1725/1744). Although Vico remained little noticed during his lifetime and his rescue by the authors of the idealist tradition has occurred with some delay, he serves as a solid starting point for our analysis since he at once condenses and anticipates key elements of the idealist-historicist variant. In his methodological treatment of historical phenomena in general and action systems in particular – which is put forward as opposed to the atomistic and the rationalist trends characterizing both Cartesianism and natural law theories – one may find adumbrated, yet

insipiently, both an organicist approach to historical objects (in opposition to atomism) and the acknowledgment of the central role of an individualized understanding of historical and expressive phenomena (rather than its mere subsumption to abstract rational concepts).

His anticipation of *organicism* has to do, in this case, with two fundamental ideas: that systems of beliefs, forms of expression, customs, and so on can only be understood as wholes (or parts of wholes) and that these wholes develop through different stages. For him, the full knowledge of historical phenomena implies the discovery of *how* the objects of the systems at stake came to be what they are rather than merely pointing out the general laws behind them (something which Vico does not ignore as we will see). Instead of looking to the past in hindsight from a presentist abstract perspective – something Vico blames natural theorists such as Grotius, Pufendorf, and Selden to have done – he argues that a sound scientific analysis should acknowledge the developmental patterns underlying the rise, the growth, the maturity, and the fall of the distinct systems of ideas, customs and deeds of humankind. The applying of this idea to the analysis of action systems leads, in the hands of Vico, to a large history where civil societies and political orders are traced back to their first origins in poetic wisdom and mythical forms of thought ([1744] 1948: book II). Vico's interpretive approach recovers thereby the myths, fables, ceremonies, and all poetic thinking from the prevalent prejudice of his day – according to which these symbolic forms would be nothing more than absurd beliefs and phantasies of the primitive man. By doing so, however, Vico pretends to disclose not only certain structural homologies and meaningful parallels but a sort of "common mental language".[76] At its apex, his project is to reconstruct an ideal universal history whose patterns and stages of development are deeply connected with the prevalence of certain symbolic forms and mental faculties:

> Our Science comes to describe at the same time an *ideal eternal* history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, progress, maturity, decline and fall. (…) the first indubitable principle above posited (…) is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. (Vico, [1744] 1948: §349, p. 93, emphasis added)

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[76] His argument is clear in the following passage: "There must in the nature of human things be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life, and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern. This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead" (Vico, [1744] 1948 §161-2, p.60).

Together with this genetic approach to historical wholes, one may find then another element of Vico's historical idealism that is of crucial importance to our present analysis since it anticipates, in a way, many of the idealist theories to come: the intuition that the achievement of positive knowledge of *individualized* forms assumed by historical objects in distinct moments is connected with a sort of interpretive inquiry directed toward the "modifications of our own human mind". In order to render intelligible such historical modifications, Vico points out the need for what he calls a "philological" approach capable of grasping the meanings and symbolic expressions instantiated in distinct nations at different contexts. What he has in mind is a clear distinction between the knowledge of law-like regularities in the physical world, dealt with by "philosophy" or metaphysics (in the search for "truth"), and the knowledge of the normative "authority" underlying "human choices", dealt with by "philology" (in the search for the origins of the "certainty" in "human consciousness") (Vico, [1744] 1948: §138, p.56). By putting things in this way, Vico also anticipates, in a sense, a path later followed by the hermeneutic tradition of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and others.[77]

But what this connection of a developmental history organized by general patterns, on the one hand, and an acute sensitivity to the individualized forms assumed by distinct modes of expression and symbolic systems, on the other, can tell us about the way the problem of order is addressed by idealist social theories? The first thing to note is that from its beginnings the distinct action courses can be fully understood – in their rationality, their rightness, their appropriateness, and so on – only in terms of historically given sets of norms. The problem of order appears, according to this line of thinking, not as the problem of how intrumenal rationality may normatively accommodate human ends, but rather as the problem concerning the distinct sources of meaning constitution underlying the systems of norms and its ultimate values. Although Vico does not formulate the problem in this way, when one takes a look at *The New Science* it is possible to find a sort of answer that is not without parallels to those of the generations to come: throughout the whole book Vico's "ideal eternal history" is depicted as a sort of incomplete (since never fully actualized) and, in a sense, not so linear (sometimes almost cyclical) passage where the power of poetic imagination and intuition gives way to

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[77] It is possible to argue that Vico anticipates not only the crucial distinction between the objects of natural and historical sciences so crucial to the whole hermeneutic tradition but also, in a sense, one of the crucial procedures of Scheleirmaher's hermeneutic, namely, the "divination". It appears in Vico as an antique procedure carried out by old poets in their attempt to read the signs of Gods: "The first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunder claps were signs made to them by Jove (…) They believed that Jove commanded by signs, that such signs were real words, and that nature was the language of Jove. The science of this language the gentiles universally believed to be divination, which by the Greeks was called theology, meaning the science of the language of the gods" (Vico, [1744] 1948: §379, p.106-7).

faculties of reflection. With this passage, the societies would undergo what he identifies as three distinct fundamental stages of humankind (the age of Gods, the age of heroes, and the age of man), to which he associates distinct forms of language (signs, metaphors, words) jurisprudence (mystic theology, heroic jurisprudence, natural equity in free commonwealths), and government (divine, aristocratic, and popular commonwealth and monarchy). Yet lurking behind all these passages, one may find not only the prospects of a "common mental language" but, in the end, what Vico identifies as the work of a "divine providence" in history of mankind whose cunning in guiding its unfolding recalls the Hegelian *weltgeist*. Thus, under Vico's auspices, the hermeneutics of the individualized symbolic systems seems to be absorbed into a more objectivist form of idealism.

A distinct sort of answer to this general problem is given by another forerunner of the historicist tradition, Herder. The comparison between Vico and Herder is informative because while departing from a similar intellectual scheme and converging in many significant aspects, their differences in what concerns the sources of the historical unfolding and the status of meaningful symbolic orders reveal some tensions internal to the whole idealist tradition. As we will see, Herder's attempt to reach a balanced position, like the utilitarian's attempt, points out in the right direction but is characterized by a series of tensions that will lead to a critical theoretical dilemma.

Herder is acknowledged by authoritative sources as a central figure to the genesis of the German historicist tradition.[78] This is so, among other things, because he develops the two principles we found adumbrated in Vico – and which would later prove to be crucial to the whole historicist tradition – in an exemplar and paradigmatic fashion throughout a wide range of works covering a variety of topics. In addition, he develops a quite sophisticated understanding of hermeneutics and an innovative theory of language. At the same time, it is also important to stress that Herder is usually taken as an ambivalent figure – absorbing influences from representatives of opposing intellectual lineages such as Kant (in its pre-critical phase) and Hamman and working these influences out in a singular fashion. Moreover, he is also known for experiencing an erratic intellectual development traversed by moments of personal crisis and religious upheavals. In view of all this, it is not possible to touch even briefly all the intricate corners of Herder's thought. Suffice for our initial purposes is to point out that he provides a vision of the historical development that shares much with Vico but is freed from

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[78] Among these authoritative sources, one may find not only Dilthey himself but also classical works in historicist scholarship such as those of Meinecke (1936) and Collingwood (1946). More recently, Beiser (2011) has also stressed the relevance of Herder as one of the fundamental forerunners of the historicist tradition.

the providential teleology characterizing his approach. This difference has to do with a fundamental connection, very relevant to our reconstruction, between Herder's anthropological assumptions and his particular understanding concerning the relation of language and meaning.

Herder's approach to the problem of the historical meaning constitution is critically connected with the problem of human nature and its ability to engage in symbolic communication. This is so because he assumes, since its first works in the mid-1760s, what could be called, broadly speaking, as an "expressivist" position: the main argument here is that thoughts (or meanings) are intrinsically bound to and dependent upon their symbolic forms of expression; sidelined with this first assumption is also the idea that these symbolic forms are not mere pale forms removed from all living process but parts of ongoing communication among individuals, which means that meanings themselves are ultimately constituted not by any providence but in human interaction. In Herder's case, this broad expressivist assumption is specified into a sort of linguistic expressivism: for Herder, both thoughts and meanings are nothing more than words or, more precisely, word-usages.[79] In his *Fragments on Recent German Literature* (1767-8), this sort of approach to the problem of meaning is quite clear. Although his discussion is initially centered on the domain of literature and his first emphasis lies on the way artistic ideas are constituted and articulated through their expressive linguistic forms, Herder soon extrapolates this type of argument in order to cover all sorts of thinking: "If it is true that we cannot think without thoughts, and learn to think through words, then language sets limits and outline for *the whole of human cognition*". (Herder, [1767-8] 2002: 49 emphasis added). He comes to state not only that language sets limits to our thought but that "in common life it is indeed obvious that thinking is almost nothing but speaking" ([1767-8] 2002: 50). A well-known consequence of this sort of expressivist argument, at least in the way Herder deals with it, is that it assumes a nationalist (and also a relativist) overtone. After all, if thoughts and meanings are fundamentally given only within the language and language is almost everywhere nationally formed then it follows that the whole spiritual life – including the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral values organizing our action systems – is ultimately national: "The three goddesses of human cognition – truth, beauty, and virtue – became as national as language" ([1767-8] 2002: 50).

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[79] In distinct moments during his aesthetic writings – when Herder engages in the analysis of (non-linguistic) forms of expression such as instrumental music, sculpture, and pictoric representation – this argument becomes clear. For him, even the meanings conveyed by these other (non-linguistic) forms of expression are ultimately dependent upon the linguistic ability and the linguistic thoughts of the artist.

But nothing is so simple with Herder! When he takes a step back in order to inquiry the very origin of human language what we see is that both the national-collectivism and the historical individualizing tendencies that emerge amid his *aesthetic* reflection – tendencies leading him toward a relativism of values grounded on individualized historical wholes – are counterbalanced by a sort of universally shared humanism thematized in his *anthropological* reflection. (This is where the opposing influences of Hamman and pre-critical Kant are positively articulated). In his *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), written some years later by the occasion of a prize competition set by the Academy of Sciences in Berlin, Herder investigates the sources of language – and then the very basis of the human ability to constitute, express, and interpret different meanings – and traces it back to certain peculiar traits found in the human nature.[80] The argument is more or less the following: Human beings would be characterized by weaker instincts and sharpless senses than animals, which is in principle a disadvantage, but precisely because of this, human beings can also experience a more broad and diffuse sphere of action; "Human being, says Herder, has *senses* which (…) *are inferior in sharpness* to the senses of the animal (…), then precisely because of this they receive an *advantage in freedom*"; moreover, the human being "can seek for himself a sphere for self-mirroring, can mirror himself within himself. No longer an infallible machine in the hands of nature, he becomes his own end and goal of refinement" ([1772] 2002: 82). In sum, what human beings lose in precision and determination of drives they gain in terms of freedom and self-awareness or "reflection". According to Herder's argument, these peculiar traits of human beings are connected with language because "reflection" involves, among other things, the power to stop, to pay attention, and to single out some traits among the complex mass of sensations so that soul turns out to be able to identify or recognize it in the future; but this very recognition, he says, is nothing but an act of signing, a way of tagging something within the flux of senses, and with this very act what one may see is the invention of a sort of "word" for the soul.

> What brought about this acknowledgment? A characteristic mark which he had to separate off and which as a characteristic mark of taking-awareness fell distinctly within him. Good! Let us shoutt o him the *heurêka*! This *first characteristic mark of taking awareness was a word of the soul! With it human language is invented*. ([1772] 2002: 89).

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[80] By formulating his argument in this way he seeks to scape, on the one hand, the naturalistic explanations of language advanced by authors such as Condillac and Maupertuis, according to which language could be ultimately explained on the basis of primitive cries and groans that humans share with animals, and, on the other hand, the supernatural explanation sustained by Süßmilch, for whom humans were incapable of discovering language through their meager rationality and therefore needed the instruction of a higher intelligence, namely, God. (cf. [1772] 2002: 75-77).

Aside from this general argument concerning the sources of language, Herder also provides an explanation for the *genesis* of words (at first via onomatopoeia and after by processes of association) and a *functional* explanation for its necessity (without language the human species would not compensate its weakness with a reservoir of knowledge and would risk extinction). (cf. [1772] 2002: part I section 3; part II). What is the most important for our purposes, however, is not the details of Herder's theses, but the way he connects language and human nature: although identifying the sources of language in abilities usually understood as above or outside the scope of natural laws (freedom and reflection) he proceeds without claiming any break with laws of nature. This counterintuitive move must be understood in the light of the fact that Herder is, at heart, a radical critic of the metaphysical distinction between nature and mind, as well as of the common philosophical divisions of human forces into autonomous faculties (e.g. the distinctions among reason, understanding, and sensibility). For him, the human being is a totality of integrated forces, and even "reflection" can only be a *mode of organization* of "the whole domestic economy [of human forces]", albeit sometimes a second-degree mode of organization. (cf. [1772] 2002: 83). With this refusal to engage in clear and stable divisions, Herder seeks to escape certain theoretical tensions that were always haunting philosophical discourse. His way of doing so is by bringing them to the same empirical human level and historicizing them.[81] What Herder's expressivist anthropology envisions lying underneath the surface of language is therefore a dynamic process of meaning constitution-expression that is traced back to certain modes of organization of inner forces constituting the human. This sort of perspective is certainly not without limits as we will see soon but when compared to Vico's general approach, it advances historicism into two fronts each of which with its consequences to the problem of the formation of meaningful symbolic orders.

(1) In the first place, it goes further in the acknowledgment of humanity (by itself, not through any providence) as the fundamental source of meaning constitution alongside history. The development of organicist historical wholes is, in Herder's hands, an outcome of the human forces. At the same time, there seems to be a tension running through his work concerning the appropriate level of analysis of this dynamic human core: on the one hand, Herder stresses the key role of national *collectivities* as the fundamental sources of historical value formation; on the other hand, one may also find throughout his aesthetic writings a prominent emphasis on

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[81] In so doing, it should also be noted, Herder ends up anticipating, albeit peculiarly, a certain way of viewing reason that will be typical of post-Kantian idealism, in which rationality is seen as a productive activity, a spontaneity, rather than a substance. We will devote some attention to this in the next section.

the *individuality* of artists, especially poets, as crucial sources of the meaning constitution. (Note that the example of the art expression serves as a model to all variety of actions since actions are also understood, according to this perspective, as symbolic expressions of human intentions and ultimate values)

From the point of view of the problem of *normative* order, this ambivalence points in the right direction – since it aims to positively grasp the meaningful aspects emerging at the level of collective relations (R_c) while retaining individual subjective references. Nevertheless, insofar as this is not articulated, at the metatheoretical level, by an analytical rather than empiricist frame of reference and, at a substantive level, by a theory of interpenetration that links processes of socialization/internalization and meaning constitution the tension is kept unsolved. In this case, expressivism is faced with a theoretical dilemma similar to that one faced by utilitarians. If these analytical dimensions do not interpenetrate the theory can develop in two main directions: either collective values assume a controlling position and individual subjective references are subsumed into a normative order that is externally given or individual meaning constitution adds an element of non-conformity that, if generalized (insofar as the theoretical system becomes theoretically closed), lead to a state of normative chaos where individual ends can not be positively and systematically organized in meaningful patterns. We will see in the next section how this dilemma unfolds within the post-kantian philosophy. Herder, as mentioned, does not follow any of these paths until the end. Yet his expressivist doctrine unveils what is to come if we look at it in hindsight.

(2) In the second place, his historical approach seems to delve deeper into the understanding of the singular character of historical totalities and the plastic character of human nature. Or, at least, Herder seems to draw more radical consequences from this. With Herder, after all, the developmental stages through which historical individuals (such as nations, communities, tribes, etc.) and their symbolic orders (language, religion, forms of government, etc.) undergo from their rise to their decline are not grasped as following any general universal pattern or sequence. On the contrary, they are, in principle, incommensurable like the whole variety of national languages. The resort to a shared human nature does not jeopardize this radical variability: in the first place, because this nature is dynamic and open rather than stable and substantive; in second place, because even the relation to external non-human nature is always mediated by human meanings that vary from place to place, from time to time, depending on the historical developments in the language. This way of addressing the issue of

historical development yields, for sure, some theoretical problems of which Herder was not unaware.

This last point leads to a second intricate aspect of the problem of order in idealist tradition that has to do with the role and the status of the *factual* order – i.e. the problem concerning the set of positive relations revolving around the technical, strategic, and coercive aspects emergent in action systems. Once again, as soon as an idealist approach is kept under an empiricist rather than an analytical framework, the positive meaning of the general regularities constituting factual order can be grasped only in two ways: either they are taken as an expression of more elevated ideal structures outside the human mind or they are understood, in more anthropological terms, as symbolic constructions of the human mind. In both cases, as we will see, the idealist tradition will face challenges that call for a series of deep reformulations. This problem will be dealt with in the next section when we will analyze to idealist theories of the post-Kantian period.

3.3.4 - The Idealist theories of order (II): between solipsism and emanationism

One of the turning points within the idealist tradition – which constitutes a departure from the historicism foreshadowed by Herder – is Kant's critical philosophy. Under Kant's auspices, the empiricism underlying the persistent conflations between natural and normative dimensions of order running through both positivist and idealist traditions is finally ruled out as a sort of inconsistent theoretical position. Kant's division of phenomenal and noumenal realms sets out not only a clear distinction between the domains of systematic positive knowledge, on the one hand, and of practical reason and meaning-constitution, on the other, but it also brings attention to the mutual irreducibility of both the spontaneous activity underlying reason (in its theoretical and practical fronts) and what is given as the unconditioned reality of objects-in-themselves. As we saw in the last chapter, with Kant neither phenomenical representations nor practical laws can pretend to reflect or exhaust ultimate reality in any significant sense. In other order: his system may seek a theoretical closure, but never an empirical closure. As we have argued, by formulating things in these terms – a result of his efforts to overcome both the empiricist attempt to "sensitize" of concepts of understanding and the rationalist attempt to intellectualize the appearances – Kant ends up taking a crucial step toward the achievement of a consistent multidimensional approach to scientific phenomena.

In Kant's philosophical aftermatch, however, this new theoretical program was not free from antagonism, and it is common to find those who considered the transcendental revolution reached by him to have come at a considerably high price.[82] Even followers, like Reinhold, seemed to believe that Kant's persistent and heterogeneous dualisms – manifested in a series of distinctions such as phenomena and noumena; theoretical and practical reason; understanding and sensibility; practical laws and empirical desires; analytic and synthetic; apriori and aposteriori; determining and reflexive judgment – would indicate some sort of methodological problem (suggested by the lack of connection between different poles) and ultimately the very incompleteness of Kant's system. As it is well-known, the post-Kantian period is largely characterized by the search for a fundamental root lying underneath Kant`s dualisms and, even further, the seek for a higher unit capable of being thematized in terms of an unconditioned whole or, simply, the "absolute". Kant, for his part, was completely aware of the alluring and almost inescapable tendency of human reason to ascend from the conditioned level of knowledge to the "unconditioned" one. Yet he dealt with this sort of attempt in terms of regulative ideals without asserting neither the completeness of any systematic series of relations nor the availability of such a thing as an "absolute". From the Kantian perspective, this way of putting things forward was just another way of stating what seemed to be a quite obvious fact: the finitude of the human standpoint. For him, theoretical reason would be limited to discursive knowledge (i.e. knowledge reached through the use of concepts within judgments) and our only path to science would be through their connection to sensory intuitions (in its pure or empirical forms). In other words, we would be definitely cut off from any sort of "intellectual intuition" (i.e. an immediate, non-conceptual sort of mental apprehension/construction capable of grasping/constituting in a single shot a certain meaningful whole in its integrality).

Yet precisely this idea – i.e. that intellectual intuitions may adequately lead to the achievement of absolute knowledge – lies at the basis of the idealist variants developed by post-Kantian thinkers such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Each one of them ended up pursuing in

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[82] Jacobi, one of the first radical critics of Kant, famously complained that it would be impossible to enter into his system without the untenable doctrine of things in themselves. This sort of criticism would denounce what some considered to be an unsustainable skepticism about the noumenal realm. Others, like Schulze, seem to have believed that the problem was the opposite and that Kant would not have been skeptical enough since even his transcendental requirements for phenomenic knowledge would rely on what could be counted as an arbitrary division between understanding and sensibility. According to this line of thinking, those forms that Kant singles out as being necessary for the achievement of objective knowledge would be ultimately nothing more than psychological requirements. In fact, right after the publication of the first *Critique*, it was not uncommon to find those who accused Kant's idealism of being, at heart, a radically subjectivist enterprise similar to that one espoused by Berkeley. (It is to clear up these misunderstandings that Kant added to the second edition of the book the new section dedicated to the "refutation of idealism")

their own way a sort of phenomenological path to which intuitions in general, and intellectual intuitions in particular, are taken to display a crucial theoretical role. This positive role of intuition has to do, as previously mentioned, with the common idealist assumption that organic phenomena are not adequately grasped by positive analytical concepts but must be rather apprehended by a distinct type of cognitive process.[83] On a deeper level, post-Kantian idealists believed that intellectual intuitions would provide a sort of first-hand access to the underlying dynamics of consciousness so emphasized – but not fully explored in all its consequences – by Kant so that it could enlighten the whole series of connections taking place between the process of self and objective constitution. Once this path is followed, as we will see, reality ceases to be conceived in terms of substances (matter and ideas) and starts to be apprehended as a fundamental dynamic activity that manifests itself and is understood as a set of operations (or representations) available to consciousness. With this peculiar move, these authors seek to overcome a fundamental distinction between what might be called – following Josiah Royce's famous classification (cf. 1892: xiv) – the "epistemological" and the "ontological" (or "metaphysical" in Royce's words) variants of idealism.

The first philosopher to openly engage in this intellectual project toward a dynamic idealism was Fichte. Like Kant before him, he departs from our common phenomenal experience in order to inquiry it's the transcendental conditions of possibility, but his findings are slightly different. In the first part of *Doctrine of Science* (1794-5), dedicated to the foundations of his philosophical system, Fichte famously argued that the structure of reality – including what was usually taken as material and ideal objects – would rely on three fundamental principles or moments of the subjective (self)consciousness accompanying its apprehension and without which its very constitution would be impossible: (1) the first and highest principle (thesis) would be that of pure self-consciousness capable of accompanying all representation without being itself conditioned by any of them; that is to say that there must be, according to Fichte, an unconditioned spontaneous activity that takes consciousness of itself in the very act of self-positing as an existing "I" behind all representations; (2) the second principle (antithesis) would be that this positing act of the pure "I" must find a necessary act of counter-positing, i.e. it must discover in its own positing act something other than itself, a "not-I", indicating a sort of otherness; (3) the third principle (synthesis) would be that these both activities – that of a self-posited I and that of a counter-positing discovered under the sign of

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[83] The struggle to grasp organic phenomena by distinct intellectual procedures than those of positive sciences was, indeed, a constant concern in the whole idealist tradition, which includes not only what is usually known as "German idealists" (Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) but also the Historicist, Hermeneutic and Romantic lineages.

"not-I"–, if they are to be actual at all, must be mediated by a reciprocal limitation responsible for the introduction of what can now be seen as a conditioned "I" and a conditioned "not-I" both taking place under an unconditioned first I. (cf. Fichte, [1794-5] 2021: §1-3, p.200-224).

To be sure, the whole argument is couched in highly abstract terms, but it is important to note that with these principles in his hands Fichte is able to lay the grounds for a radical subjectivist version of idealism which is full of theoretical and practical consequences. From a *theoretical* point of view, what is put forward is the idea that the only available insights on the fundamental structure of reality are those unveiled by the apprehension of the dynamic operations of subjectivity.[84] Metaphysically speaking, this set of subjective operations is, for Fichte, all that is. From a *practical* point of view, one main consequence is that although the I spontaneously posits itself as an unconditioned activity, its freedom always comes to be actualized as a sort of limited freedom. What is at first understood, on the theoretical level, as an abstract principle – according to which the apprehension of objects is made possible by an undetermined self-positing activity – becomes, on the practical level, the reflexive consciousness of the limits of subjective orientation toward the objects.[85] Our main interest, however, does not rely either on the *theoretical* doctrine concerning the object's intellectual apprehension by the I (Fichte's idealist philosophy of nature) or on the *practical* doctrine dealing with the possible transformation of objects by the I (Fichte's idealist ethics). It lies rather in between these two distinct realms of subjective activity. According to Fichte, when practical and theoretical doctrines are brought together, they can be articulated in two distinct fronts: on

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[84] It is symptomatic of this position that what grounds the subjective apprehension of what is placed outside the I (that is, the not-I) is not any extrinsic metaphysical reality, but a limit subjectively given within the I as a consequence of its own self-position. To posit itself as X would imply for the I the subjective need of recognizing the very limits (or boundaries) of X, that is to say, to recognize also what is not-X and thus not-I. The argument is better articulated in the second part of the book, as in the following passage:

> "The objective element that is supposed to be excluded [from the I] does not have to be present at all; all that needs to be present for the I is — if I may express myself in this way — a check or impulse [*Anstoß*]. That is to say, what is subjective must, for some reason [*Grund*] lying beyond the activity of the I, be unable to extend any further. (…); it would not limit the I, qua active; instead, it would assign it the task of limiting itself. But all limitation occurs by means of opposition; consequently, the I, precisely in order to satisfy this task, would have to posit something objective in opposition to the subjective factor that is supposed to be limited and then synthetically unite both [the objective and subjective factors], as was indicated above. It would be possible to derive the entire representation in this manner. It is immediately obvious that this mode of explanation is realistic, though it is based upon a kind of realism that is much more abstract than any of those considered hitherto. This is because this kind of realism does not assume that there is a Not-I present outside the I, nor does it assume that there is a determination present within the I, but only that the I has the task of undertaking a determination within itself; that is to say, all it assumes is the *sheer determinability* of the I." ([1794-5] 2021: 292)

[85] In the third and last part of the book, pure self-determination is then reformulated as a sort of striving ideal never fully actualized which appears to the human condition as a "categorical imperative". (cf. [1794-5] 2021: 329, footnote)

the one hand, the world of objects affecting subject can be thought of from the point of view of an unconditioned self-positing activity (an articulation pointing to Fichte's philosophy of religion); on the other hand, free individual subjects positing themselves may be positively understood from the point of view of a systematic knowledge concerning their normative relations (an articulation leading to Fichte's philosophy of right). It is precisely at this later front that the problem of social order is addressed.

In the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796-7), Fichte departs once again from the pure subjective activity (of finite rational beings) in order to address the problem of its social and political conditions of possibility. In doing so he arrives at the transcendental necessity of right, understood as a normative system of relations. In the first part of the book, Fichte argues that a pure subjectivity can only achieve self-consciousness of its "free efficacy"– i.e. it can only become aware of itself as capable of representing and pursuing its own ends – if it is able to realize two complementary moves: on the one hand, it has to posit itself a certain sphere of action; on the other hand, this very process can only take place once this sphere of action is given a certain scope and then limited by other forces, among which one may find other free rational beings equally claiming some sphere of action. The point here is that free efficacy and practical rationality can only be achieved by beings that are singled out as individual personalities but somehow also bound to others. In fact, Fichte seems to believe that the only way the efficacy power of the agent can become self-evident to him/her is when he/she is "summoned" to act by a distinct other (not-I).[86] This is one of the reasons why he insists that "(…) if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one" ([1796-7] 2000: 37). To put things like this is another way of saying that free efficacy can only be achieved in terms of *intersubjective* reference. Yet the main argument in the first part of the book goes a step further. Fichte sustains that the positive awareness of "the other" (not-I), which is a necessary condition to the achievement of self-consciousness by the agent (I), requires, in turn, another condition which is, for our purposes, crucial: the acknowledgment that freedom of limited beings depends on a series of relations of mutual *recognition* which forms a normative system among them. This normative system is what Fichte calls the "relation to right", whose fundamental principle is that "I must in all cases recognize the free being outside me as a free being, i. e. I must limit freedom through the concept of the possibility of his freedom" ([1796-

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[86] As Fichte states: "(…) the rational being cannot posit itself as such, except in response to a summons calling upon it to act freely. But if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general" (Fichte, [1796-7] 2000: 37).

7] 2000: 49). In other words, the expectations of recognition of the I can only be generalized under the condition of an intersubjective recognition expressed in certain necessary relations. This is how Fichte deduces the transcendental necessity of right from the subjective self-consciousness of finite rational beings:

> Therefore, in consequence of the deduction just carried out, it can be claimed that the concept of right is contained within the essence of reason, and that no finite rational being is possible if this concept is not present within it - and present not through experience, instruction, arbitrary human conventions, etc., but rather in consequence of the being's rational nature ([1796-7] 2000: 49).

In his approach, Fichte is one of the first thinkers to draw a clear distinction between right and morality (the latter being concerned with the sphere of internal will while the former with the rules regulating external actions). As we have already pointed out, this has to do with the theoretical (rather practical) aspect of his approach to social relations, at least while he is dealing with the problem of rights. For Fichte, the recognition of the "relation to right" is a matter of logical consistency of action systems rather than an ethical issue. For sure, one of the main consequences of addressing rights like this is the very acknowledgment of the hypothetical (rather than categorical) character of the normative system at stake: the observance of the right is necessary *if* the relationship taking place among subjects is so that they can be mutually recognized as free rational beings. This hypothetical formulation leads, however, to the old problems that have tormented the utilitarian thinkers since Hobbes: norms with a hypothetical character seem to be insufficient to stabilize empirical action systems. Fichte, of course, realizes this point. He goes on to claim that "it is not possible to provide an absolute reason why the rational being should be consistent and why it, in consequence of this, should adopt the law that has been established" ([1796-7] 2000: 80). In other words: when it is advantageous for a given subjectivity to contradict itself in what concerns its "rational nature" it can certainly do so. For this very reason, it becomes clear for Fichte that the actualization of a community of rational beings depends on the exercise of a coercive power capable of neutralizing those who treat their fellows in a manner contrary to the law of right. This coercive power is firstly thought of in terms of a "right to coercion" that the violated has over the violator but as the argument goes it soon becomes clear that the problem cannot be properly solved at this level. (cf. [1796-7] 2000: 88ff). Like many of his contemporaries, Fichte's solution (given still at a theoretical-hypothetical level) relies on the formula of social contract where "(…) both [partys] must

unconditionally subordinate their physical power and their right to pass a judgment, i.e. all their rights to that third party." ([1796-7] 2000: 93, emphasis added).

Still, throughout his whole argument, Fichte seems to be aware that a mere resort to the social contract – where a third party endowed with superior power emerges as a regulative instance – is not enough to solve the problem of normative order as such. In order to do so, the parts in relation need to be sincerely committed to it; even more, they must trust that others will stick to norms too. Otherwise, the adherence to norms can only be sustained until those sticking to them have not reached power enough to overthrow such norms. This voluntaristic aspect is clear when he says:

> to lay down all my rights and subject them to the opinion and authority of a stranger (…) is impossible and contradictory, unless (…) all the freedom that properly belongs to me in my sphere, in accordance with the law of right, is secured. Unless this condition is met, I cannot rationally subject myself to such an authority, and the law of right gives no one a right to demand that I do so. Thus I must be able to judge for myself whether this condition is met. My subjection of myself to the authority is conditional on the possibility of this judgment; such subjection is impossible and contrary to right if such a judgment is not made. Therefore, above all else, *I must subject myself with complete freedom*. ([1796-7] 2000: 94, emphasis added)

By stating things like this, it is clear that Fichte takes a significant step beyond the instrumental versions of contractual theory in order to retain the voluntaristic aspect of social order, an aspect which was clearly seen by Kant right before him and which in due time it was also to be clearly acknowledged albeit through a distinct path by liberal and utilitarian thinkers.

At this point, however, one might ask the following question: what may sustain this voluntary engagement underpinning social contract? This sort of problem, which is crucial to the voluntaristic social theory, reveals what might be seen as an internal tension inherent to the idealist tradition. Fichte seems to believe that what justifies this adherence is our "rational nature", whose expression is given in the subjective search for a free sphere of action. But it is evident that such a form of rational *justification* is not equivalent to the *empirical reasons* leading agents to adhere to norms: as Fichte fully realizes, agents can contradict their rational nature and become inconsistent with themselves.[87] To be sure, while discussing what he considers to be the three fundamental parts of social contract – property, protection, and union (cf. [1796-7] 2000: 170-179) – in the last part of the book, Fichte seems to point out in the direction of a "common will" with properties that surpass the individual ones, but it is nowhere

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[87] The rational nature does not imply for him any reference to a fundamental pre-contractual stage where human beings would behave rationally in relation to each other. It means merely that if they are to fully express their potential nature, human beings will reach rational conduct.

clear that the social spiritedness required by those subscribing to civil contract is what grounds their adherence to it in the first place.[88] In any case, the transcendental approach espoused by both Kant and Fichte does not seek to provide a systematic account for either the empirical genesis of order or the empirical process leading to agents' voluntary subscription to contractual norms. In this case, it would not be reasonable to ask any of them to provide such an answer without any additional theoretical inputs. In order to do so, as we have argued, the transcendental approach should be complemented by an empirical (social) theory.

Yet the limits of Fichte's version of the transcendental theory of order, unlike those faced by Kant's version, are not only due to a matter of scope. The main difficulty here has to do with the whole intuitionist orientation underlying the post-Kantian phenomenology. Once idealism is kept under such an intuitionist frame of reference – where not only the practical and theoretical reasons are unified under a single intellectual intuition (of the subjective spontaneous activity), but the factual experience is also couched solely in terms of subjective dynamics – what we have is the following problem: the whole sector of the substantive motives and interests underlying voluntaristic adherence to norms as well as that one concerning the instrumental aspects of action chains (including the technological, economic, and coercive dimensions of social relations) tend to be absorbed under the same subjective dynamics of self-consciousness informing practical and moral reflection. The risk here is not only that of the positive knowledge being inadequately differentiated in its analytical autonomy from the moral-evaluative aspects within action chains, but the danger of a sort of conflation between reason and experience that prevents the development of any theory of interpenetration capable of complementing, at the empirical level, the transcendental philosophy. Moreover, once collective elements (such as the common or social will) are added to the explanation of the order taking place through the civil-political contract, it is difficult to see how can they be conceived in a non-reductivist manner since they too are supposed to be retraced back to the subjective dynamics of self-conscience.

The attempt to grasp these non-subjective matters in their integrity will lead the idealist tradition to abandon the I-centered approach to reality as put forward by Fichte in favor of a monistic sort of ontology. In this process, not only the nature (previously reduced to a self-posited "not-I") is given a fuller account but the very distinction between "being" and

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[88] At some point, Fichte seems to believe that it is the subjective uncertainty about having its own freedom guaranteed in face of the others that lead individuals to unite: "This indeterminacy, this uncertainty as to which individual will first be transgressed against - therefore this oscillation in the imagination - is the real bond that unites the different individuals. It is by means of this that all merge together into one, no longer united in just an abstract concept (as a compositum), but rather in actuality (as a totum)." ([1796-7] 2000:176)

"thinking" is addressed differently. As we will see, they both become one-sided expressions of a higher single totality characterized by distinct series of opposites. The first one to develop idealism in this direction is certainly Schelling, whose emphasis on the problem of nature led his general approach to be labeled – somewhat misleadingly – as "objective idealism". Schelling's monist idealism has to do with the fact that he conceptualizes reality as a single unity where the parts are to be taken as one-sided expressions of fundamental dynamic principle consisting in an eternal cognitive act through which both objective and subjective objects recognize each other. It was Hegel, however, who seems to have developed this radical variant of the idealist thought until its end or, at least, to have drawn to most conspicuous consequences from it. Like his predecessors, he too adopts a dynamic concept of reality. For him, though, this reality does not rely on a mentalistic activity (be it subjective or objective-cognitive). To be sure, Hegel's idealism assumes a quite distinct character: unlike Schelling's, Hegel's approach does not rely primarily on mediating activity that, say, organize the reality but on an ontological acknowledgment of the "inseparability of being and thinking" in the objects. With this crucial shift, Hegel believes he can finally overcome the fundamental opposition between "thinking" and "being", an opposition whose assumption he considers to be the main source of inconsistencies and bewildering contradictions in the Western philosophical discourse.

In order to carry out his project, Hegel needs to insist from the outset that the real has an underlying rational structure, a sort of organized plan in terms of which what is given as finite can be couched as a particular moment that has its place in a larger process of development. At the level of objects, this assumption means that each one of them is to be understood as a "realized concept" whose "reality" has to do with the successful realization of its rational plan, i.e. its structural concept. Hegel's favorite metaphor here is that of the seed which already contains in itself the whole developmental plan with the distinct moments until it becomes a grown plant (with new seeds). The metaphor is interesting, among other things, because it spells out the radicality of Hegel's organicist approach to reality. Furthermore, it also makes explicit the historicism underlying his thinking. After all, to focus on the developmental plan contained in the seed is to point to the developmental process of the plant as its true being. Yet the seed metaphor may obscure some significant aspects of the Hegelian project. This is so because for Hegel the distinct concepts making up reality have to be taken themselves as partial expressions of a higher concept, which Hegel calls "the Idea" or "the Concept", a sort of masterplan structuring not only individuals kinds of objects but all that is. But while it makes sense to say that the plan of the plant is contained in its seed, in which sense one might say that

the structured plan to the development of all that is is already given in reality itself? To answer this sort of question and present such a master plan of all that is is the very point of Hegel's work.

The most complete presentation of Hegel's system is given in *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817). Here he tries to provide the idea in terms of which reality can be finally grasped as a self-actualizing process, just as the idea of the plant contained in the seed reveals it as a sort of self-actualizing object of a certain type. In the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, dealing with logic, this task is pursued in very abstract terms. Hegel's logic is supposed to describe the set of categories (such as finitude, quantity, substance, and causality) that are necessary if anything is to exist at all as having a rational structure. Throughout this volume, the reader is introduced to three doctrines concerning the *being*, the *essence*, and the *concept*. As in all other volumes of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel follows here a triadic structure that evolves so that the first two terms are discovered to be negated by but dependent on a third one in which they are sublated. It is in this part, which serves as a source of prolegomena to Hegel's project, that we discover – right after inquiring about the metaphysical categories of "being" and "essence" of objects – the aforementioned centrality of "the Concept", which characterizes Hegel's whole idealist system:

> It is a mistake to assume that, first of all, there are ob-jects which form the content of our representations, and then our subjective activity comes in afterwards to form concepts of them, through the operation of abstracting that we spoke of earlier, and by summarising what the ob-jects have in common. Instead, the Concept is what truly comes first, and things are what they are through the activity of the Concept that dwells in them and reveals itself in them. (…) This involves the recognition that thought, and, more precisely, the Concept, is the infinite form, or the free, creative activity that does not need a material at hand outside it in order to realise itself. (Hegel, [1817] 1991: §163)

Thus Hegel's logic culminates in the argument that the being is after all a self-actualizing process that freely determines itself by means of this infinite immanent activity called "the Concept".

The other parts of Hegel's system consist in descriptions (following once again a triadic form) of the conceptual structures underlying two concrete realms where "the Concept" manifests itself: nature and spirit. The point for Hegel is to show the systematic structure necessary for anything if it is to exist in each one of these realms. In the realm of nature, unlike that of logic, Hegel deals with the problem of what is to be given in a spatial-temporal framework; i.e. what is for being to be material. In the realm of spirit, the problem is to deal

with how the Concept can emerge from nature as self-conscious self-determination. Put this way, it all seems very ethereal and abstract. And in a way, it is indeed so. For our purposes, however, it is not necessary to go into detail about Hegel's descriptions except in that part where he deals with the spirit and, more precisely, the "objective spirit". This is so because it is while dealing with the problem of the objective conditions to the emergence of a self-consciousness spirit that Hegel addresses what we have here referred to as the "problem of order". Since the realm of spirit comprehends the whole variety of forms taken by human life, the inquiry about its possibilities of self-determination ends up being equivalent in a sense to that of the objective patterns and institutions capable of realizing a self-determining social order.

While the problem of order is certainly touched in the third volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, a more detailed account of how such self-determination develops logically in the context of objective forms of social life is provided by Hegel only some year later, in *The Philosophy of Right* (1821). The aim of the book is not to describe the historical development of self-determination in societies but to inquiry about the conditions that must be satisfied if this is to be achieved at all. To put it another way, the problem posed by Hegel is that of unveiling what forms of freedom are a necessary part of its conceptual development as such, and so logically required by it if it is to pass from the abstract to the concrete. The account is therefore a normative rather than a historical one. Hegel's starting point here is the individual freedom as it is conceived in its most abstract and elementary form: the "(…) absolute possibility of abstracting from every determination in which I find myself or which I have posited in myself, the flight from every content as a limitation" ([1821] 1991: §5). Just as the other categories worked out by Hegel's logic, what is shown to be here a simple form turns out to be determinate solely as a moment of a larger process or structure. What the dialectic of freedom shows is that this sort of "negative" freedom (the abstraction from external determination) requires a "positive" form of (internal) determination, i.e. a content willed by the subject in the form of choice. As the dialectic proceeds, the willed choice is also revealed to be limited in face of a higher form of freedom. This is so, according to Hegel, because implicit in the will that affirms itself through choice there is the very affirmation of the free will as something to be willed or, in Hegel's words "(…) the free will which wills the free will" ([1821] 1991: §27). Yet this sort of affirmation cannot be stated as a will among others but as a necessity, which means that it must not only be affirmed but *recognized* by others. It is through this line of thinking – which reveals the heavy influences of both Kant and Fichte on Hegel's way of reasoning – that the dialectic of freedom is led to the problem of right. For right is,

according to this perspective, nothing more than the freedom that requires intersubjective recognition.

The analysis of right proceeds by the same sort of dialectic in which the abstract is shown to be a limited image in face of a larger process toward the concrete. The abstract rights of individuals – such as the right of property, the right to not be violated, and so on – open the way to a variety of individual choices but if they are to be realized they also require a sort of recognition that extrapolates this abstract individual moment. The Hegelian analysis of punishment or "retribution" sheds light on this dialectic passage: the negation of right (the crime), leads to the necessity of a negation of the negation (punishment), which render explicit something hitherto merely implicit, namely, the priority of right over will, whose subjective recognition leads to the internalization of the norm and, consequently, to the domain of morality (cf. [1821] 1991: §101-104). Morality, of course, has its own dialectic: on the one hand, morality is a subjective matter *par excellence*, i.e., it is grounded on a judgment made by the conscience under the form of self-legislation; on the other hand, its recognition of what is good points in the direction of the universality (cf. §140-141). Implicit in morality one may discover then what Hegel calls an "ethical will": a subjective will that recognizes the willed good as *objectively* given. This is how the philosophy of right passes from the *abstract right* through *morality* to the realm of *ethical life*.

The domain of "ethical life" is where abstract freedom is finally understood as requiring being objectified in the world under the form of normative patterns and social institutions. Among these normative structures, Hegel emphasizes the critical role of three of them: the family, the civil society, and the state. Family is primarily understood as the sphere where the needs and particularities of each member are absorbed into a quasi-natural form of sociality whose intersubjective recognition is grounded on sentiment and feeling (love) (cf. §158-160). Civil society, on the other hand, is characterized as a distinctively modern way of relationship where singular persons face each other first as abstract discrete units endowed with self-interests to only then enter into interdependent (and normatively regulated) sorts of relationship (cf. §182-186). Hegel's idea is that these two opposite but complementary principles of the social organization operating in the family and the civil society must represent the basic structures to be articulated under the modern states. One of the key problems of the rational state is, therefore, to make sure that each of these principles is able to mitigate each other. (The state is supposed to ensure, for instance, that individual persons facing one another in the sphere of economic production also may have their subjectivity grounded on particularistic groups

such as professional corporations, whose structure displays in some respects family-like features). The whole argument culminates in showing that the rational state and its specific structures are necessary if the concept of freedom is to pass from abstraction to concreteness in human affairs, that is, if abstract freedom is to finally unfold into an ethical life. Hegel comes to say, in its usually ethereal jargon, that "the state is the actuality of the ethical idea – the ethical spirit as substantial will, *manifest* and clear to itself, which thinks and knows itself and implements what it knows in so far as it knows it" (cf. § 257). For this reason, ethical will – rather than moral will (grounded on subjective self-legislation) or abstract will (grounded on the individual choosing) – is that which present better conditions to feel at home amid the objective patterns and structures of the ethical life and is also that to whom the state and its institutions may more easily require allegiance and trust as a fundamental condition to the concretization of freedom.

When the problem of order is considered in very general terms, Hegel's argument points toward a two-fold aspect that is crucial to sociological thinking in general and the voluntarist theory of order in particular. On the one hand, he argues that human freedom requires concrete social conditions if it is to flourish and that individuals alienated from such social structures cannot fully achieve it. On the other hand, he is also aware that such a sort of social order requires more than instrumental reasoning: it requires voluntary engagement and trust in some sort of communal authority (of the state) by those who take part in it. While some have seen Hegel as representative of the authoritarian lineage in political thinking – and there are indeed certain passages in the book that once taken in isolation may suggest that – his argument in favor of the necessary trust in the state and other institutions is far from being a defense of any sort of blind conformism. For Hegel, the trust at stake should be accompanied by open space for criticism, observance of individual rights, and representative forms of power. It is also clear for Hegel that not all forms of state and not all sort of institutions may be counted as ethical ones, which means that not all of them may rationally claim allegiance from the individuals. The evident difficulty here is that the way of discerning what counts as an ethical institution may not be so *objective* as Hegel would suggest in his references to ethical will – considered as a form of objective consciousness that goes beyond moral will precisely because it is not limited to the inner considerations about the good, that is to say, because it is a will that is capable to trust in institutional structures without ultimately grounding this trust in subjective of consideration of the conscience. In practice, however, it seems difficult to see how this trust could be sustained without a necessary reference to judgments grounded in the inner conscience

and, to a certain extent, dependent on a subjective formulation. Nevertheless, if Hegel's framework is suspended in favor of a sociologically oriented approach focused on, say, the interpenetrating processes of action systems, one can glimpse an answer to this type of problem. In this case, however, the self-evidence of the legitimacy with which institutional structures appear, as well as the trust placed in them by individuals, will be given less in terms of the objectification of a concept, and more as a kind of multidimensional process of value-internalization/socialization based on certain need-dispositions, affections, cognitive distinctions, and discursive interpretations.

Although one might make the case for the compatibility of Hegel's framework and a sociologically oriented theory, the sort of consideration just mentioned points toward what may be seen more broadly as the internal limits faced by the idealist approaches of the post-Kantian period. While the idealist theories of order – in both the I-centered variant of Fichte and the objective/absolute variant represented by Schelling and Hegel – recognize the necessity of a voluntaristic moment as well as of the necessary emergence of integrative value patterns for the achievement of normative order, the empiricist trend underlying their attempt to exhaust the reality (whose fundamental dynamics is supposed to be graspable through an intuitionist frame of reference) leads to two interlocked theoretical problem in theory of order – concerning its normative and factual dimensions – both of which have been hinted at in the previous section as part of the "expressivist dilemma".

(1) The first of these problems, concerning the *normative order*, has to do with what has been previously formulated – in the context of our analysis of Vico and Herder – as the question of the appropriate level of analysis to deal with the process of value and meaning constitution. In the post-Kantian approaches to social order, this problem becomes the one concerning the fundamental grounds of freedom behind different value constitution/expression in modern societies and the rational conditions without which this could not be consistently achieved. In the I-centered variant of the idealist tradition, the values and the normative patterns required by it (if such values are to be freely/rationally pursued) are, in the end, grounded on the inner dynamics of the subjective activity in terms of which being may self-posit itself as determined. In the objective or absolute variant, the normative patterns of social order and the values underlying it are to be taken as expressing the objective process of freedom, understood as a concept striving to concreteness. The persistent conflation between rational activity toward self-determination (be it subjectively or objectively conceived) and being leads here to the immediate problem of the passage between individual and collective levels. This is so because

once the rational activity located on one pole is taken as exhaustive the result seems to be the following: either the passage between subjective and objective dimensions are illusory since they are both parts of the same being or it must take place in terms of (concrete) determination. In other words, a full theory of interpenetration is prevented to be pursued, which may be a consistent position from the point of view of a monist metaphysical doctrine but is certainly a loss for any attempt to establish sociological thinking on a multidimensional basis.

(2) the second problem is probably more dramatic and has to do, as mentioned before, with the problem of *factual order* and its positively given regularities. We have already mentioned some of the difficulties faced by Fichte's version of idealism and noted that Hegel's approach was supposed to be more objective and therefore more capable of dealing with the non-subjective aspects of reality that tended to remain in a sense a residual category for Fichte. But is Hegel's idealism really successful in this attempt? From the perspective of multidimensional theory where material variables are not to be subsumed into ideal ones, this can hardly be the case. While dealing with the problem of instrumental rationality in the sphere of economic production (and what seems to be, for Hegel, some of the distortions resulting from it in contemporary societies such as the problems of overproduction and the poverty (cf. [1821] 1991: § 244ff) – what one may see is the following: what counts as instrumental rationality and all the law-like patterns taking place into the economic sphere are to be grasped as a moment to be subsumed into a higher process or concept. Hegel's idea here is that as soon as this moment is subsumed in the next one, its givens may be surpassed or reformulated into a different level: crime, for instance, is given as a necessity when one considers solely the sphere of individual choosing and the abstract right, but when this sphere is framed in terms of moral sphere, and moral sphere, in turn, is framed in terms of ethical freedom this ceases to be the case; the same would happen with the coercive forces of civil society once the latter is set in the context of an ethical state. The radicality of Hegel's perspective becomes more pronounced if one considers, for instance, the last paragraphs, about the world history, where the state, the nations, and individuals are urged to be thought of not only in terms of "their own particular and determinate [constitutive] principle", but also as '(…) the unconscious instruments and organs of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage' ([1821] 1991: §344). It is not without reasons that Parsons tended to classify Hegel's perspective as a sort of "emanationism".

Thus, what is clear is that although the idealist tradition makes important advances for a theory of order, it is not without theoretical and methodological problems. In this case, what is clear is that a sound sociological theory should, so to speak, 'dialectically' overcome idealism, that is, to reframe its positive insights into a theoretical and methodological framework that is at once more comprehensive and methodologically precise. Now, this is precisely the task that Parsons set himself when he formulated his own solution to the problem of order.

3.3.5 - The Voluntaristic Theory of Order

After this long exposition of the internal variants and the main representatives of both positivistic and idealistic tradition, it is worthwhile to briefly schematize where we stand in order to fully appreciate the significance and the achievements of a voluntarist theory as proposed by Parsons. At the beginning of this section, we have argued that Parsons' approach to the problem of social order would follow a transcendental strategy that parallels that one employed by Kant in his inquiries about the conditions for the possibility of phenomenical knowledge. From this general standpoint, the problem of social order would appear as the following one: what conditions must be matched if some orderliness is to be observed and rendered intelligible in social life. At the *formal* level, we have seen that for Parsons a positive theory of order implies a systematic framework of analytical rather than concrete concepts (even though concrete concepts may present descriptive use in science); this was the reason why from the very outset of the study even the smallest concrete units in action systems, the unit-act, were conceived in systematic terms, that is, as 'systems' of analytical elements (represented here by the letters 'C', 'M', 'N', and 'E'). At the *substantive* level, this strategy would require that not only a theory of systems but a theory of systems of actions, which amounts to say that the order operating therein would imply an inescapable reference to subjects in terms of their inner life (their ability to think, to feel, to judge, and so on).

We have also mentioned that the observance of these two transcendental conditions for a sound scientific approach to order, in their turn, would depend on the answers the theory can provide for two interconnected sets of problems. What Parsons seems to claim here is that if these problems are not correctly answered, the consequence is that the social order cannot be *at the same time* grasped as being an intelligible 'order' (that is, an object of systematic knowledge) *and* understood as being truly 'social' (that is, humanly and subjectively

conceived). The two sorts of questions that have to be properly answered if these objective and subjective aspects of social order are to be adequately retained in a single theoretical scheme were, as we have also seen: (a) the problem concerning the main factors in terms of which one can make sense of social order, that is, what are the analytical variables that once varying may present a significant impact on the organization of action systems – here would lie the main divide between the positivistic and idealistic traditions; (b) the problems regarding the nature of the nexus taking place among the action patterns, which corresponds to the problem of mechanic and organic sorts of relations in action systems.

In analyzing the way that the distinct authors and intellectual traditions have dealt with the problem of social order – while they were thinking about a whole set of matters concerning the division of labor, the political organization of the community, the natural law and freedom – what one may realize is that the very meaning of 'order' would vary largely throughout their analysis. As we have mentioned, two meanings were crucial here: 'normative' order and 'factual' order, whose antithesis would be normative 'chaos' and 'randomness', respectively. What Parsons' reconstruction suggests is that within the positivistic-idealistic divide these two aspects of social order cannot be adequately addressed either because they just overlap without being integrated in a general theoretical scheme (this is the case of less radical variants of positivistic and idealistic thinking, both of them involved in theoretical dilemmas) or because as soon as the theories become theoretically coherent one of these aspects is ruled out in favor of the other (something that characterized the radicalized versions of both positivism and idealism). In part, the difficulties would be due to the empiricist strain underlying these two traditions (something leading to the persistent conflations between factual and normative dimensions of order). The consequence of this general logic was that the aforementioned problems regarding the explaining variables and the nature of nexus in action systems would be not properly solved. The answers would revolve around two main poles characterizing radical answers to the problem of order.

On the one side, social relations would be characterized by *openness and indetermination*, as if in the end they were not a matter of either positive scientific knowledge (positivism) or rational interpretation (idealism) but subjectively and spontaneously built up; as we have saw, within positivist tradition, this position was occupied by anarchist trends (no matter if presenting socialist or libertarian inclinations), to which cooperative or competitive arrangements could be achieved by the resort to individual reasoning alone without a necessary reference to external sources; a counterpart matching exactly this same sort of position is hard

to find in idealist tradition, at least in the context here analyzed, since German idealists were much more aware of the intersubjective character of rationality, but to a considerable extent the emphasis on the subjectivity as the ultimate exhaustive source for the meaning constitution of normative patterns can be find in both the Fichtean and romantic approaches.[89] What happens with these radical individualistic variants of both positivism and idealism is that objective symbolic frameworks and social institutions are boiled down to residual categories or subjectively deduced so that order, from a theoretical point of view, ends up being replaced in the long run by its antithesis, chaos and randomness when the theoretical system is taken as a whole. To put it differently, the very idea of achieving a *theory* of order is, for these traditions, a problematic assumption since it is, in principle, a sort of spontaneous, indeterminate process given by subjectivity.

On the other side, there are those theories to which the problem of order would be solved in terms of *closeness and determination*, which means that order would not be opened and undetermined by the introduction of subjective categories in the long term but, to the contrary, would be capable of being explained by objective categories. In the case of positivism, as we have seen, among these objective categories there were both natural factors (such as scarcity of resources, population growth, and so on) and social/collective factors (such as economic forces, political conflict) – the main representatives being here Darwinism and Marxism. On the idealist front, such a sort of non-individualist theoretical strategy would determine the order in reference to logical and socio-historical categories. Hegel is certainly the main representative of an abstract logical determinism where the order is understood in terms of conceptual development or 'emanation', to use Parsons' expression, but there is certainly another variant of historicism, represented by Dilthey and others, where the distinct orders are rendered intelligible more in terms of incommensurable symbolic patterns taking place in distinct collectivities than in terms of a single overarching process. The main consequence of these theories is that subjectivity is subsumed by objective categories.

In between these two logical poles, there is surely room for those who acknowledge somehow that subjective and objective categories, individual and collective forces, are not to be reduced to one another so that is possible to theoretically address order in terms of determinate factors without minimizing the importance of the subjective/individual categories. As we have seen, among the authors here analyzed this sort of middle ground was occupied by

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[89] Richard Münch seems to suggest that this sort of position would be more aptly represented in contemporary discourse by existentialism. (cf. 1987: 160ff)

figures such as Locke and other liberal thinkers, in the case of the positivistic tradition, as well as by people like Herder and, to some extent, Fichte, in the case of the idealist tradition. The spirit behind these authors would be, therefore, on the right track. From a theoretical point of view, however, this sort of intermediary position would not be capable of stabilizing itself in this middle ground due to the empiricist rather than the analytic character of the conceptual frameworks employed. For an empiricist approach, the subjective element to be preserved in the face of a totalizing order (in its both factual and normative versions) would be concretely rather than analytically taken, which means that its inclusion into the theory could only be given under the form of, say, the concrete individual of the liberal tradition, the concrete organism of Herder, or the exhaustive subjectivity of Fichte, but not as an analytical dimension to be penetrated by a multitude of 'extrinsic' factors in its very concrete constitution. In face to this impossibility, all that was left for these theories were to be pushed in one of the two poles mentioned above. This was the heart of the 'utilitarian' and the 'expressive' dilemmas faced by positivism and idealism, respectively.

To solve this sort of problem is the major goal of Parsons' voluntaristic approach to order. As we have also mentioned, the first steps in this direction would have been taken by that generation of authors identified as "classical sociologists", Durkheim and Weber being here the most important among them. Durkheim's latter understanding that normative patterns and values are not only external to action but may be internalized and take place as part of the very ends of actors during the socialization process was certainly one main step toward a theory of interpenetration to be later developed between social and personality systems, a development that is key to any voluntaristic account on social order. Weber, as previously mentioned, would also have developed a similar argument regarding the value-integrative elements through both his theory of legitimate political order and in his theory of charisma. Moreover, both of these authors, as we have also argued, were sensitive to the necessity of integrating instrumental/economic and normative/religious elements in a balanced conceptual framework – something that is certainly not equivalent to saying that in every empirical case this balance do takes place. Nevertheless, due to methodological difficulties faced by both Durkheim's persistent empiricism and Weber's anti-realist theory of ideal types, no one of them would be exempt from committing conflations and engaging in one-sided interpretations alongside their sociological writings. Indeed, this would be, to some extent, almost inevitable in view of their meta-methodological starting points. At least, this is what Parsons is inclined to sustain. According to him, only a self-conscious analytical frame or reference could avoid such traps in

favor of a truly multidimensional approach. After hundreds of pages of internal reconstruction and an extensive critique of a variety of theoretical systems, Parsons seems to believe that a case could finally be made in favor of such sort of analytical standpoint.

In any case, the merits of Parsons' voluntarist approach to social order do not lie in merely showing the epistemological need for such an analytic theory in view of the antinomies faced by the competing theories. A substantive part of Parsons' achievement is to provide a set of analytical concepts in terms of which the problem of order could be positively addressed in a balanced manner. To be sure, a significant part of these categories was already detailed during the analysis of the action frame of reference. At this level, much attention was given to the 'structural elements': condition (C), means (M), normative patterns (N), and ends (E). Besides that, it has also been mentioned that when taken together the action units would present distinct organizing sectors with some 'structural relations' and 'emergent properties'. Such notions, however, were less detailed or, at least, not properly systematized since they too present distinct values to be organized, but we have not seen exactly how. It is precisely here that lies the core of the problem of order. While most of these values assumed by structural relations and emergent properties can be found during Parsons' analysis of the competing theoretical systems, they are systematized by him only in the final chapters of the book (cf. 1937: chs.18, 19). From this outline, as we will see, one may have also a clear idea of what Parsons had in mind when he named his book since it finally provides the last part of building blocks making up the fundamental 'structure' of 'social action' systems.

When organized, the unit-acts making up a system present some elementary relations (R_{el}). As previously mentioned, one of the things that Parsons seems to have in mind when he points to this is the idea that some unit acts may be organized so that the end of a certain act is found to be means to another possible end in a distinct act. (For instance, to 'save some time' can be the 'end' of a certain act but it may also serve as means to other ends like 'to spend some time with my child' or 'to read a book', and so on. These latter ends are not connected with each other by relations of subordination, at least in that case, but by relations of coordination, i.e. one of them is not means to the other but they both are parallel paths to be weighted if there are not enough means to both). The idea is that as soon as unit-acts are meaningfully related to each other these elementary relations of subordination, coordination, selection, and so on, will necessarily take place. Without this, all the talk about systems is meaningless. A crucial aspect to be noted here is that the relations taking place within the means-ends chains may operate, as we have also seen, not only in terms of intrinsic relations (i.e. when the selection of certain

means are taken to be adequate to the pursuing of the end according to rational or scientific standards) but in terms of symbolic relations (i.e. when the selection of certain mean is employed not because of its empirical qualities but because the end pursued is interpreted as being connected to the symbolic or expressive traits attached to that sort of means in a certain context). This differentiation was clearly seen alongside the analysis of positivism and idealist traditions. A less explicitly stated assumption underlying Parsons understanding of the structural elementary relations to be mentioned here – since it is equally crucial to the problem of order – is the following: the idea that means-ends chains can be virtually endless, but they are limited to an intermediate sector within the action systems. The point here is that while means and ends can connect in act networks with countless nodes, there are also some of them that do not lead to any following node. In this case, the ends at stake are what Parsons calls ultimate ends. The same is true for means once it is not the end of any previous node: in this case, the means at hand are simply ultimate means. Systems of action would then comprise specific sectors of ultimate means and ultimate ends that would circumscribe the intermediate sector of the means-ends chains. Thomas Fararo (2001: 102) has aptly pointed out that this sort of division anticipates what Parsons will later call the cybernetic hierarchy of control. Figure 2, drawn from Fararo's book (2001: 92), illustrate this triadic division of action systems:

Figure 2:

ULTIMATE ENDS AND VALUES SECTOR

INTERMEDIATE
MEANS-ENDS
SECTOR

ULTIMATE MEANS AND CONDITIONS SECTOR
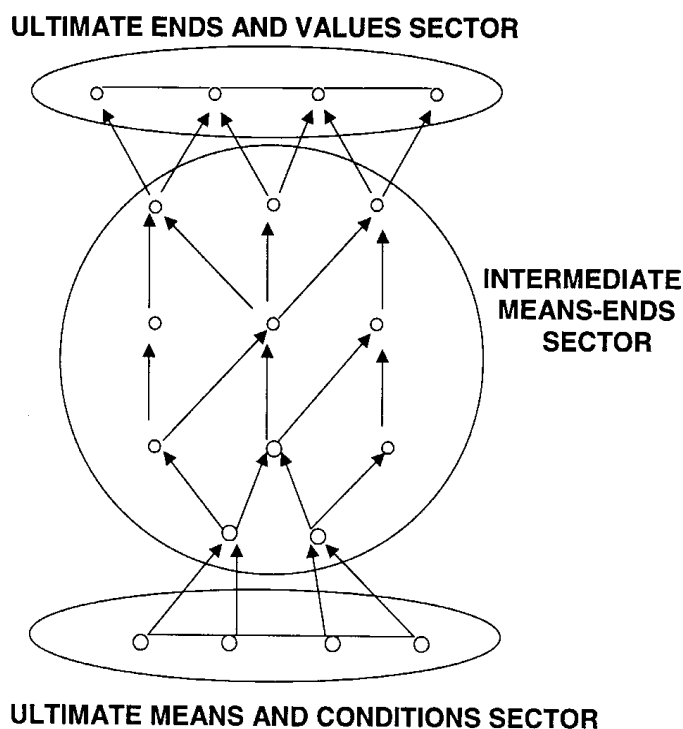
The importance of this to the problem of order has to do with the fact that order depends, according to the voluntaristic approach sustained by Parsons, not solely on the conditional sector and its properties but, to a considerable extent, on the relations taking place between ultimate ends. This clear understanding of the role of the non-random relations organizing ultimate ends and values according to normative patterns was, as mentioned, central to classical sociologists.

For systematic purposes, this division is relevant because in each one of the sectors one may find not only some elementary relations but distinct sets of relations and properties that emerge as soon as action systems become more complex, the so-colled "emergent properties". The first of these were hinted at by the example in the last paragraph: once two or more action courses are open, a non-random orientation toward them require some sort of evaluation and weighting, i.e. a decision must be made; but once a series of decision are taken together they also need second-order coordination that must be made in reference to standards and selective patterns that lies elsewhere. Here we start to enter the domain of the actor, understood as a higher unit of control capable of evaluating action courses in view of certain interests and values. Once one reaches this analytical level, according to Parsons, certain properties start to take place that could not be found on the mere analysis of several unit-acts. In general terms, the emergence of these properties is connected with the fact that actors, at least human actors, are finite beings endowed with certain sorts of needs and certain sorts of dispositions. Although Parsons does not provide further details in his first book about what these needs are and what are the main processes taking place here, one may anticipate that his theory will later emphasize the multidimensional aspect of this higher system, the so-called 'personality system', by focusing not only on the material and organic but also on the social-affective and the ideal-symbolic needs that must be matched if the system is to remain balanced and consistent.

For now, what is important to note is that some properties that proved to be relevant to distinct theories of order happen to emerge at this individual level rather than on that of unit-acts. For instance, Parsons argues that while two given means may be equally adequate, from the technological point of view, to the achievement of a certain end, they may not be equally rational from the point of view of the economic utility calculus. One of these means could require more resources that happen to be scarce for the human actor, resources that could be employed elsewhere if he/she is to maximize their use in view of certain needs he/she may have as a unit to be preserved. (cf. 1937: 742ff). In sum, *technological rationality* may be identified

at the very level of unit-act but this second property called *economic rationality* can only make sense at this new level of analysis of action systems where unit-acts are evaluated by a higher unit of control that is found to present a plurality of needs and where the means available happen to be scarce. This inference connecting the individual level, its needs, and its psychology with the rationality of certain action patterns is key to classical economic thinking. This does not amount to say that other elements relevant to the economic analysis (e.g: law of supply and demand) are to be found at this level. The point here is that economic rationality (understood as an analytical element) may be consistently applied to the individual action level.

As soon as action systems become more and more complex and not only certain acts are brought together under the individual control but a plurality of individuals is analyzed in terms of their interaction, a new series of problems come to the fore: matters usually dealt with by political and social thinking, such as the distribution of material and symbolic resources as well as the ways of organizing of human life. The first important element here is what Parsons calls *coercive power* (cf. 1937: 767). Once actors are put together, the rationality of action does not depend merely on technological and economic considerations but on the very ability of the actors to deal with the coercive dimension that is virtually present (although not always concretely given) in all human interaction. (Note that contrary to what many might think based on hearsay, Parsons' model is definitely not blind to the power and the coercive dimensions of action systems: if one takes his scheme seriously, what one may realize is that coercive power, as an analytical dimension, is virtually present in all *social* action). As we have seen, the possibility of coercion – represented by the use of 'force' and 'fraud' – opens up a new set of problems that were addressed by Hobbes under the assumption that rationality would lead to an unlimited struggle for power and, in the absence of superior regulative power, to the war among the actor themselves.

Once action systems are taken from an even broader perspective it becomes clear that ordered systems cannot last for long if the struggle for power is unlimited and if there is no other element responsible for its stability. Indeed, the need for such a regulative principle capable of organizing actions according to general frame of values and normative patterns was realized by almost all natural law theorists: on the positivist front, this insight was achieved by Locke and carried on by the liberal tradition; on the idealist front, such idea was systematically developed Kant, Fichte, and others. Yet in all these cases such regulative element was only partially grasped since it was framed either in metaphysical or transcendental terms. What was still to be understood was that stabilization of action systems is found to involve, in Parsons

words, a "(…) common reference to the fact of integration of individuals with reference to a common value system, manifested in the legitimacy of institutional norms, in the common ultimate ends of action, in ritual and in various modes of expression" (1937: 768). In the end, it was left to classical sociologists (Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber) to fully realize the emergent aspect of this stabilizing property that Parsons calls "*common value-integration*".

To be sure, as it is described in *The Structure*, this integrative element seems to partially comprise within its scope another analytical element that will be distinguished from it in Parsons' later writings. This is so because values and ultimate ends (whether they are clear principles or diffuse value attitudes) can only operate in the various spheres of social life once they are specified in normative patterns that while widely varying must be understood as referring to the same core of ultimate values. In other words, the (affective) engagement prompt and the respect inspired by such shared values and ultimate ends must be extended to its immediate specification (and vice-versa). This process forms the very basis of social solidarity. (As we will see in the next chapter, this dynamics will be refined by Parsons after he incorporates Freud's scheme and connects it with Durkheim's theory of socialization). But when things are stated like that, the problems concerning affective generalization and solidarity constitution lead us to another set of problems concerning symbolic communication and narrative constructions. This is so because the integrative quality of the normative patterns relies on processes of interpretation and communication that bind them to certain core values. To be sure, this integrative quality will be more effective the more the interpretations in question are perceived by the community as self-evident, that is, as being the only specifications consistent with such values. Here we have then another emergent property found in action systems with a certain complexity, a property concerning consistency patterns among symbolic expressions, something which we might call *symbolic pattern consistency*.[90] (Parsons will later refer to this as the function of "latent pattern-maintenance")

Since the main topic of this section is the problem of order, one more observation should be made before we proceed. The argument here put forward has been framed as a sort of regressive deduction: a) economic sphere is found to be organized in terms of political order; b) political order is discovered to rely on value-integration; c) social integration turns out to depend on consistent interpretations and symbolic communication. However, this line of

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[90] Something that must be understood here is that the term "consistency" does not refer in the first place to the internal elements of, say, a certain narrative construction but to the connection of this symbolic construction to the frame values which it is supposed to represent or express. It is this connection rather than internal language consistency that legitimate why a certain normative pattern is to be found the "right" specification of certain ultimate value.

reasoning may suggest an inaccurate idea: that symbolic domain is what guarantees order after all. In fact, this does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, the domain of symbolic communication – like that of coercive power and that of economic forces – may clearly destabilize normative order and group solidarity construction, at least in some cases. A case could be made here that the more open is the domain of the symbolic communication within a given community the less self-evident is the underlying force of values and the less self-evident is the claim that a certain normative pattern is the proper or the only possible specification for a given core of values. After all, the very fact that values and norms are given at distinct levels of abstraction implies that there is always room for more than one sort of specification capable of claiming consistency.[91]

After following the argument here put forward, it is possible to see that Parsons not only makes a case for the need for multidimensionality in more general epistemological terms (something made clear by his theoretical reconstruction of the competing theories and their respective blindspots) but he also provide a systematic set of analytical concepts relevant for a multidimensional approach to the social order at a more substantive level. The aforementioned emergent properties concerning *economic rationality*, *coercive directedness*, *value integration*, and *symbolic consistency* are key here. By spelling out their analytical-systematic character Parsons also opens the door for the investigation of their positive relations in terms of "analytical laws" (cf. section 3.1). A secondary consequence of this way of framing the argument is that Parsons is led to outline what could be understood here as a taxonomy of the human sciences since he envisions the possibility of certain specific sciences devoted to the investigation of concrete phenomena relevant to the understanding of each of the analytical systems in question. Thus Economics, Political Science, Sociology, and Cultural Anthropology would each find a place in his scheme insofar as they would be responsible for the close study of these analytical systems of concepts related to the emerging properties just mentioned.

While Parsons' theory of action is named "voluntaristic" and his solution to the problem of order became known as "normative", it becomes clear that what he is pursuing is not a one-dimensional or an idealist-leaning approach, as many have blamed him. Parsons' solution to the problem of order is indeed committed to the understanding of the positive role of norms and the common value-integration property in social life but the reason for that, according to him, would be given because such elements would not have been properly understood by most social theories prior to classical sociology. (Indeed, to have brought attention to them would have

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[91] Such sort of argument was detailed by Richard Münch ([1982]1987:65ff)

been one of the main achievements of classical sociologists). But despite this insistence, Parsons is above all committed to a sort of solution capable of overcoming onedimensional strands in both instrumental and normative thinking.[92] A proper theory of order is supposed to articulate then – aside from technological considerations and the individual needs-dispositions organized within the personality systems – all the emergent properties here analyzed as relevant to social interaction, which amounts to say, the economic, political, communitarian, and cultural dimensions of the relations taking place at the collective level.

To be sure, this multidimensionality of Parsons' theory must not be conflated with the interpenetration taking place at substantive levels. Multidimensionality requires, in theoretical terms, two things: on the one hand, the observance of the analytical autonomy between what could be named, broadly speaking, as the instrumental and normative dimensions of social forces; on the other, a non-reductionist connection between such collective dimensions of social forces and the dimension of needs and interests given at individual level. In view of that, what the theory can predict is the following: that a voluntaristic order can only be fully achieved once these analytical systems become interpenetrated without being completely subsumed to each other in concrete cases. But the multidimensionality of the analytical scheme does not guarantee substantive interpenetration in concrete phenomena. The example of the Weberian comparative analysis of religion, to which the distinct concrete solutions to the tension between the spheres of self-interest and categorical obligation (represented by the problem between "world" and "religious ethics") would be shown to follow at least four different paths, would be enough to illustrate this point. In concrete cases, interpenetration would be just one possibility among others.

While realizing the need for a substantive interpenetration – *if* voluntary order is to be achieved – Parsons goes no much further at this moment. Alexander emphasizes this when he insists that at the end of the book some "basic questions remained unanswered. What mechanisms allowed collective forces to achieve an 'internal' position? In what manner could factors be both social and constitutive of the concrete individual" (1983b:39). To be sure, the fine-grained mechanisms through which interpenetration may take place would have to wait to be fully detailed by Parsons. In a sense then, his approach to order falls a bit short when compared to the sharpness and the systematicity of his treatment of action (something that would drive Parsons during the next decades). Yet in view of what had been said, one might

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[92] This general aspect of Parsons' theory is widely recognized by its most competent interpreters, as mentioned in section 3.2 of the present chapter. In the case of Parsons' account on social order, such multidimensionality is emphasized, among others, by Alexander (cf. 1983b: 20-26) and Münch ([1982]1987: 19-20)

anticipate the sort of path to be followed here: the needs and drives of individual personality would have to be understood in a more complex frame of dimensions capable of matching the multiple dimensions identified by Parsons in *The Structure* as occupying the level of collective relations. In this case, one might find not only basic organic needs, but also those related to affective pleasure, social recognition, and meaning-constitution, all of them to be bound to collective symbolic patterns.

As mentioned, Parsons' first book provides then a defense of multidimensionality at epistemological and meta-methodological levels by means of a negative argument (the systematic critique of positivism and idealism) and a positive argument in which he outlines a system of analytical concepts for multidimensionality to be pursued in substantive terms. The interpenetration of these outlined dimensions is the answer at this substantive level. Throughout the extensive reconstruction leading to this, what the reader testify is that Parsons not only unveils what could be claimed the fundamental questions underlying the major developments in social theory during the modern age, but that he also shed light on its proper dialectics and renders intelligible the logical possibilities opened at each of these dialectical moments. In so doing, of course, he clears the way for their proper solution. And even at those points where he is not able to provide a full answer, one may find the categories in terms of which to pursue the path. In view of this, it seems no exaggeration to say that *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1937, provides what might be called, to use Kant's terms, as *the prolegomenon to any future social theory*. In a way, if one looks in hindsight at the main developments in sociological theory since then, as we did in chapter 1, there seems to be room for this sort of interpretation of Parsons' legacy. But Parsons did not stop here. As we will see in the next chapter, his task in the following years was to refine his scheme and move from prolegomena to substantive interpretations.

CHAPTER 4

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN THEORY OF ACTION *[93]

4.1 PARSONS' LATER DEVELOPMENTS (I): TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF ACTION SYSTEMS

After the publication of *SSA*, Parsons became more and more interested in the process of the institutionalization of social values.[94] In the essays published in the following years, 'action systems' began to be analyzed in terms of sets of institutional patterns structuring both the environment and the motives of action. The previous theoretical defense of social norms as an irreducible dimension of social life was then carried out through the empirical analysis of normative patterns underlying institutions such as professions, business occupation, government, religion, family, and kinship. (Parsons, 1949). But what Parsons came to realize was that his initial theoretical framework needed to be enlarged and specified. On the one hand, it became clear to him that classical sociological theory would be enriched if properly combined with the recent developments in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and even behavioral sciences. On the other, Parsons started to realize that this articulation had to be formalized in terms of a systematic language emphasizing the structural and functional aspects of social phenomena. (Parsons, 1945, 1950).

These new theoretical formulations were developed in detail in two great works, both of them published in 1951: *The Social System*, maybe the most famous of the Parsons' books, and *Toward a General Theory of Action*, a collective volume edited by Parsons and Edward Shils. The metatheoretical ambitions and the main achievements of the 'voluntaristic' theory of action were then transformed into a 'general theory of action.' Though the general definition of

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[93] The first two sections of the present chapter (4.1 and 4.2) appeared in a slightly modified version as part of a longer article that was co-written with the supervisor of the present thesis (cf. Weiss & Gomes Neto, 2020).

[94] In an interesting biographical account which grasps this movement, Bernard Barber remembers a two-semester course taught by Parsons on Comparative Social Institutions which he took during the academic year of 1937-1938: "Parsons (...) was assisted by a set of specialist Harvard colleagues whom he invited to lecture on various major social institutions in such very different societies around the world as China, India, the *ancien régime* in France, Navaho Indians in the United States, Antonine Rome, the Ottoman Empire, Victorian England, ancient Greece, and medieval Europe. Parsons's purpose in inviting these lectures was to provide expert demonstrations of both the constants and the great historical and societal variability in such social institutions as kinship, stratification, religion, law, education and politics. For it was 'social institutions', he said explicitly in his opening theoretical statement, that was the central concept necessary for the analysis of societal structure and variation. (Barber, 1998: 78).

action − as "(...) behavior oriented to the attainment of ends in situations, by means of the normatively regulated expenditure of energy" (Parsons, Shils, and Olds, 1951: 53) − still follows the categories of *SSA*, there are, however, at least three main developments worth noting.

(1) The first main development is that the old action frame of reference underlying the 'unit act' − i.e. the situation (subdivided into conditions and means), ends and norms − is now reformulated in terms of the actor's *situation* and *orientation*. According to this new scheme, the 'actor' can be conceived either individually or collectively. The 'situation', in turn, is not taken primarily in terms of physical and organic objects of orientation, but also comprehends, in a more positive way, both social and cultural objects. In this case, the other actors (alters), the symbolic codes underlying interaction, and even the traits of actor's (ego) personality might then be thought of as part of the 'situation' in which action takes place. The 'orientation,' previously equated to 'ends' and 'norms,' is now subdivided into motivational and value dimensions which, in turn, are broken down into three subdimensions each. In the motivational dimension of an actor's orientation, Parsons identifies cognitive, cathexis (affective), and evaluative moments through which actor is able to: (a) identify and discriminate objects; (b) to engage (emotionally) with or even desire some of them; (c) evaluate these objects as well as the open courses of orientation (and their consequences in the long-run) in terms of his or her goals and satisfactions. The value dimension of an actor's orientation matches the same kind of distinction: it comprises (a') the cognitive process of mapping the objects of the situation; (b') the appreciative process of judging these objects according to aesthetic and value standards; (c') a moral evaluation in which previous aspects of both objects and courses of action are brought together and integrated under normative standards in line with a general system of values. (Parsons, Shils, and Olds, 1951: 53-76).

(2) The second theoretical development is the formalization of 'pattern-variables,' which express and synthesize some fundamental questions underlying the frame of reference of the situation-orientation. At the core of Parsons' scheme are ultimately two distinctions: a) between the subject and the object of orientation, i.e. the differentiation of the evaluative beings and evaluated beings; b) the distinction between the form/scope and the underlying content/motif of evaluation. From this, it follows that all empirical action faces certain dilemmas whose answer is required if the orientation is to present a subjective meaning. According to Parsons, the subject's orientation can take place in terms of a *particularistic* or *universalistic* cognitive frame while its engagement can be more *affective* or *neutral*. The

objects of orientation, on the other hand, might be understood in more *diffuse* or more *specific* scope while their value or interest would be due to either inner *ascriptive* qualities or instrumental *achievements*.[95] (Parsons, Shils, and Olds, 1951, 76-91; cf. Parsons, 1960a) It seems important to note that in each of these pairs while the first term is more restrictive and 'elementary' from the point of view of normative regulation, the second opens the scope for ordered action in different areas of social life (Münch, [1982]1987: 41-45). In this sense, 'pattern variables' might be taken, not only as a fundamental tool for analyzing the meaning of actions, but also as a way of mapping and classifying the normative patterns underlying different action systems and subsystems:

- The *particularism* in social orientation usually means that the norms underlying action has its validity associated with a specific context or group morality, while *universalism* points to the possibility of a wide scope of validity where these norms and the moral solidarity in which it is grounded are not restricted to in-group values.

- The *affective* orientation of actor (ego) to the objects (alters) may give rise to strong binding morality under the limited scope of the close community, but these affective ties tend not to be enough to bind actor to outside groups; it is only when he/she learns to order his/her action according to more *affective-neutral* patterns that the ordered moral action can be extended to a wide range of spaces in the social system.

- When the object is taken in *diffuse* normative terms, like in family and friendship groups − in which responsibilities are not organized in terms of strict clear boundaries and objects (alters) are taken as a whole (integral personalities) − the scope of moral regulation is circumscribed. The spread of the normative codes through multiple action subsystems, on the other hand, tends to require *specification* of roles, expectations, and moral responsibilities in order to maintain the integrity of its value-patterns.

- When the objects are taken in terms of its *ascriptive* qualities (like in-born properties or membership), the moral solidarity tends to be conceived, once again, as in terms of traditional ties and circumscribed groups. Understanding the object in terms of its *achievements* and

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[95] There is a fifth pattern variable, concerning the dilemma between *individualistic* and *collectivistic* orientation. Throughout the development of Parsons' thought, especially after the formulation of the four-function paradigm in 1953, this fifth pattern loses its systematic role while the others are more directly assimillated in the new developments.

voluntarily acquired attributes, on the other hand, open the possibility to normatively regulated interaction on a more generalized basis.

With the help of the pattern variable, then, the distinct subsystems of action can be classified and compared in terms of their normative patterns of orientation. Some of them may express a more universalist or particularist morality, grounded in strong affective feelings of solidarity or sober (affective-neutral) standards of orientation, and so on. Moreover, Parsons was also interested, as we have mentioned, in the question of how normative order could be sustained if action is to retain autonomy. Among its many analytical gains, the pattern variables help us to understand the general direction value-patterns must take if voluntaristic social order is to be achieved. Parsons, however, was not only concerned with taxonomies and category analyses. As mentioned before, he was also interested in the social conditions under which these possibilities toward voluntarism could be accomplished. His answer to this kind of question is, once again, the 'interpenetration' of subsystems of action, which leads us to our third and last point.

(3) The third development of this period is that the previous distinction between normative and instrumental dimensions of the action system found in *SSA* becomes equated with a threefold model of personality, social, and culture systems[96] − to which Parsons will later add the behavioral system as a fourth dimension. The action system is then understood in terms of (degrees of) the interpenetration of these distinct subsystems and their corresponding elements or units − personality *need-dispositions*, social *role-expectations*, and cultural *value-standards* − whose patterns are supposed to be taken as independent factors in the explanation of action. According to this model, the achievement of voluntaristic ordered action depends on at least two homologous but distinct social processes of interpenetration: the *institutionalization* of cultural values in the social systems through their specification in distinct social norms and the *internalization* of these values (and norms) in an actor's personality during the process of socialization, (Parsons, Shils, and Olds, 1951: 146-158; 176-183).

In *The Social System*, it became clear why the sheer existence of shared value patterns is not enough to organize social action systems. According to Parsons, every social system is faced with some structural problems, such as allocation and integration, whose solution depends

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[96] Parsons was certainly not the only one to work out this sort of distinction at that time. Despite the distinct theoretical and ideological orientations it is important to note that Parsons's older college at Harvard, Pitirin Sorokin, also extensively dealt with the relations between of culture, society and personality a few years early (Sorokin, 1947).

on the concrete articulation of sets of social roles − through which people, resources, and rewards are distributed and which regulate social expectations during concrete interaction (cf. Parsons, 1951: ch.4). In order to be effective, the latent value patterns of the cultural system must be flexible enough − while maintaining their general consistency − to be fleshed out and institutionalized in distinct sets of norms underlying social interaction and the role-expectations of actors. It is only by their specification that social action systems can be organized, regulated, and integrated. A voluntarist order, however, requires not just 'order,' but also 'voluntarism' and autonomous action. This is precisely where the personality system becomes central to the discussion about interpenetration. Throughout his studies, especially his readings of Freud, Parsons came to realize that autonomous ordered action could only be achieved if value patterns were internalized by the actor as a constitutive and integrative part of his/her personality system during socialization − a central idea later explored in detail in *Family, Socialization, and Interaction Process* (Parsons and Bales, 1955). As the process is carried out in differentiated social spheres and institutional roles, the primarily affective ties binding actors to their family (and to the specific instantiation of cultural values in family roles) are expanded in other directions where value patterns are institutionalized in distinct ways. The more they internalize normative patterns from other social groups, such as peer groups, school classes, churches, professional groups, political parties, and so on, the more they transcend the particularities of social norms from each group. On the one hand, the actors become more attached to general value patterns of culture and, in this sense, more integrated with other parts of society which sustain these same patterns in their own way; on the other hand, they also become more autonomous from the tyranny of social groups since the internalized general values are precisely what enables them to interpret and criticize their (false, inappropriate or unfair) specification in concrete institutions.

We see then how Parsons develops his famous argument about 'institutionalized individualism' − explored in detail by authors such as Bourricaud (1977) − where individual autonomy is, after all, not a retreat from every social constraint but the very product of a differentiated institutional complex: "an institutionalized order in which individuals are expected to assume great responsibility and strive for high achievement, and in which they are rewarded through socially organized sanctions of such behavior [...]" (Parsons, 1960b: 146). Bearing this in mind, Parsons seeks to address in better terms the question about the social conditions under which voluntarism is fully achieved. (It is important to stress that he did not imply voluntarism is a characteristic exclusive of modern societies as, at least in some level, it

is a necessary requirement of every action, insofar as it implies a decision made by the actor). The question, for Parsons, is how we can expand it, allowing patterns of selective orientation (presupposed, to some degree, in every action) to turn into autonomous activity. From the simplest to the most complex social system, a certain degree of specification and institutionalization is always necessary for attaining moral integration and solidarity building vis-à-vis the necessary allocations of scarce material and symbolic resources. But the scope of ordered action is widened − through the increasing of universality, neutrality, specification, and achievement value patterns − and the space for voluntarism in action is increased only when the allocative and integrative functions of the group are fulfilled in a context of improved structural differentiation. It is through the positive interpenetration of differentiated subsystems of action that an actor is required to assume an autonomous engagement with values that, in turn, enable the transcendence of both the egoism of sheer utilitarian motivations and the historical limitations of social institutions that surround him/her. 'Differentiation' and 'Interpenetration' are, for Parsons, the general conditions which make it possible to enhance voluntarism and establish a kind of morality grounded in autonomy.

By putting things that way, of course, Parsons also opens the way for the sociological analysis of the conditions under which voluntarism does not fully occur, either because differentiation has not reached a level where the individual personality can emerge in its own terms or because the tensions of differentiation were not properly balanced by a process of interpenetration. Bearing this in mind, Parsons begins to try to understand the dynamics underlying the processes of differentiation and interpenetration in social life. This leads us directly into the discussion of the 'four-function paradigm' and the 'generalized symbolic media of interchange.'

4.2 - PARSONS' LATER DEVELOPMENTS (II): INQUIRING THE DYNAMICS OF ACTION SYSTEMS

The interest in grasping the dynamics of differentiation and interpenetration of the distinct subsystems of action led Parsons to refine his model in a more elegant and comprehensive way. The next step in this direction is taken in *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (1953), where some important insights from the study of interaction dynamics in task-oriented small groups, carried out by Robert F. Bales, are combined with a slightly new articulation of Parsons' and Shills' patterns variables. Resulting from this was the formulation

of the famous four-function paradigm (or A-G-I-L scheme), which became the cornerstone of Parsons' subsequent intellectual development. (Parsons, Bales and Shils, 1953: 63-109; 163-269).

According to this new model every action system − from the smallest (between ego and alter) to the largest (whole society) − is always faced by functional problems resulting from its relationship with the environment and in terms of which its structures and process might be exhaustively analyzed: the problem of *adaptation* (A) of the action system vis-à-vis the conditions of its environment, which usually involve the process of acquiring and distributing its resources; the problem of *goal-attainment* (G), concerning the process through which the action system formulates its goals and the ways it mobilizes its resources in order to achieve them; the problem of *integration* (I), referring to the internal coordination of the distinct parts of the system of action in such a way that their interaction does not lead to disruption; finally, the problem of *latent pattern maintenance* (L), which deals with the internal process by which the symbolic patterns informing the system can be consistently sustained.[97]

Through this new theoretical framework, the three system model is reformulated, expanded, and enhanced in its analytical ambition, and social 'order' finally receives an analytical treatment similar to that applied to social 'action' in *SSA*. In his first book, Parsons had claimed that voluntary and autonomous action would only be possible once the distinct analytical dimensions of unit-act (situation, means, ends, and norms) communicate and interpenetrate each other. What he points out now is that an ordered system of actions would only be in a position to transcend the sheer determinism of its environments − and then reach the conditions of voluntarism − through combined efforts of differentiated analytical subsystems dedicated to adaptation, goal-attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance. As Alexander puts it: "the four functional dimensions (...) represent increasing degrees of autonomy vis-a-vis the determinacy of external material conditions. (Alexander, 1983: 81).

Still, the four-function scheme is important in another significant respect. It not only presents a specific model for solving those dilemmas that haunted the main traditions of sociological thought – such as materialism-idealism and realism-nominalism − but also helps to clarify the misunderstandings that opposed micro and macro sociology. That is because the scheme is supposed to transverse all levels of analysis of social action. In Chapter 3 of the

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[97] It is important to note, following Adriaansens, that while still talking about 'functions,' Parsons' use of the term "(...) becomes less specific and lacks the typical structural-functional connotations of equilibrium and homeostasis. It could almost be equated with the term aspect." (Adriaansens, 1979: 17)

Working Papers, where the four-function model appears for the first time, Parsons and Bales assert that:

> The scheme (...) is in its fundamentals applicable all the way from the phenomena of 'behavior psychology'" on pre-symbolic animal and infantile levels, to the analyses of largest scale social systems. The main key to this scope of applicability lies in the fact that it is possible to treat what, on one level is a system, on the next 'higher' level as a point of reference, that is as 'particle' or system-unit in a larger system. (Parsons, Bales and Shils, 1953: 106-7).

This flexibility opens the way for a wide range of uses. In the last chapter of *Working Papers*, Parsons and his colleagues suggest that the four-function model might be used in the analysis of structural differentiated parts of society, such as occupational groups, the family, and so on. When applied to the social system over the following years, this model led Parsons to formulate a comprehensive approach where the four functions were conceived as the main focus of subsystems of the economy (function-A), the polity (function-G), the societal community (function-I), and the socio-cultural or fiduciary subsystem (function-L) – each of which containing, in principle, another four subsystems and so on. With this new model, it is possible to see through which paths and in which direction the structural differentiation – required as a condition for autonomous action – are supposed to follow if the problems posed by the environment are to be solved in the context of increasing autonomous order.

As sheer structural differentiation is not enough to accomplish this kind of task, it requires a respective movement of interpenetration between dynamizing and regulative aspects of systems (or subsystems) and their environments. Following Parsons' reasoning, this process may happen only when the system's answer to the environmental pressures taking place in its margins leads to the emergence of a border sub-system, through which the communication between them is enhanced, yet without dissolving either the environment or the system identity. Münch ([1982]1987, esp: 65-77), who dedicated a significant effort to detailing this dialectic between differentiation and interpenetration, argues that there are always some special conditions for the emergence of these borders.[98] Once they are fulfilled, however, they may

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[98] "The generation of marginal zones has a number of particular preconditions in the system's relationship to the respective dimensions of the environment. If we take society as the system, then in terms of the relationship to the material environment, it is *trial-and-error learning processes* which promote the development of the *instrumental, economic subsystem*. Quite different preconditions are required when it comes to the relationship between society and the goal-setting and power of other individual and collective actors. The more heterogeneous the goal, and the greater the tendency for the various individuals and collectives to have power at their disposal, the more the making and implementation of decisions by society requires a *monopolization of legitimate power* by the societal collective and the transfer of decision-making authority to particular councils and decision-making bodies. In this way a *political subsystem* develops, as an intermediary between the societal collective and the goal-setting of individuals and collectives. Yet another set of preconditions is called for by the interpenetration of the societal collective with

lead to a special kind of interaction where both the system and its environment may flourish in their potentials, seeing their scope of influence expanded to new areas by finer chains and becoming somehow 'stronger' than before.

But how exactly does this communication operate? By which mechanisms does the interpenetration take place? The answer to these questions appears in more detail in Parsons' next work, *Economy and Society* (1956), co-authored with Neil Smelser, where the thorough application of the four-function paradigm to the analysis of the economic action led to a new understanding of some of the mechanisms operating during the process of interpenetration. In that book, the relation between systems and their environments started to be conceived, for the first time, as a series of interchanges mediated by symbolic media − this is of central importance because although the mere interchange does not imply interpenetration, the latter may take place through the former. During the analysis of the economic subsystem carried out by Parsons and Smelser, the main factors of production in the economy (capital, organization, labor) are taken in terms of the interchange between: the *outputs* coming from the surrounding polity, societal community, and fiduciary subsystems − e.g., control over funds, entrepreneurial services, and labor services − and *inputs* returned to them by the economic subsystem − e.g., the right to intervene, profits, and wages. (Parsons and Smelser, 2005 [1956]: 70-84). Broadly speaking, what we see, in the end, is that *money* − under forms of credit, profit, wages, and so on − appears as a generalized symbolic media capable of being traded for proper *power* (determining opportunities for the effectiveness of capital flux), *norms* (organizing entrepreneurial activities), and *value-patterns* (underling labor commitment and worker skills).

In the following years, it became clear for Parsons that the political, societal, and, fiduciary subsystems also needed some sort of generalized media of interchange with analogous properties to those found in money, following the same dynamics of 'inflation' and 'deflation.' Parsons came to identify 'power,' 'influence,' and 'value-commitment' as symbolic media of interchange endowed with such analogous qualities (Parsons, 1963a; 1963b; 1968). Furthermore, the economic analogy opened the way for the media coming from non-economic subsystems to be freed from the straitjacket represented by the analysis under zero-sum

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the multiplicity of particularized collectives and individuals, so that society maintains its solidarity. In this case it is the *universalization of affective bond*, as supported by rites and symbols, which encourages the development of a societal *community system*, bringing together the particular groups in an all-encompassing community. Finally, the societal collective's interpenetration with the transcendental conditions for meaningful human existence poses its own special requirements: in this case *discursive processes* are the appropriate preconditions which help bring the *social-cultural (fiduciary)* subsystem into being, mediating between society and the transcendental conditions for the constitution of the meaning. Societal action is thus rooted in a further frame of reference concerned with the meaning of life." (Münch, [1982]1987: 67-9).

conditions. In other words, Parsons claims that the increase of the amount of certain media − money, power, influence, or commitment − in the hands of an actor would not necessarily lead to the decrease of its availability to others: the subsystems in question could also increase, by its own means, the general productivity of the values (utility, effectiveness, solidarity, integrity) symbolized by generalized media.

This new understanding concerning the dynamics of system interchange and their symbolic media turned out to be the main axis of subsequent Parsonian developments. It underlies his analysis of the political system in *Politics and Social Structure* (1969), the genesis of the modern societal system in *The System of Modern Society* (1971), and of important aspects of the fiduciary system in *The American University* (1973). In this last book, the model also came to be applied to the higher level of the theory of action, where the interchange between systems of behavior, personality, society, and culture is operated by symbolic media under the 'cognitive complex': intelligence, affect, collective affect, and collective representations.[99] This movement finally reached its highest point in Parsons' final work, *Theory of Action and the Human Condition* (1978), in which the theory extrapolates the general level of action toward the analysis of the interchange taking place between the ultimate physical and metaphysical environments of the 'human condition': the physicochemical, organic, action, and telic systems.

It is important to insist, however, that far from falling back into some kind of economicist reduction of social life, as some seem to believe, the interchange model specifies in an elegant manner the multidimensional ambitions expressed by Parsons since *SSA*. It points to the fact that every concrete institution in social life could be thought, at least from a theoretical point of view, as the outcome of symbolic interchanges between systems with distinct degrees of normative and instrumental pressures. Social causality, in other words, could not be reducible to any kind of one-dimensional explanation. Moreover, Parsons could enrich the understanding of how those apparent contradictory orientations toward integrative order and individual freedom − two conditions for social autonomy − might be improved at the same time under certain social arrangements: he demonstrates during his analysis that the increase of one does not imply the reduction of the other.

It is also important to realize that in detailing the mechanisms operating during the processes of system differentiation and interpenetration Parsons' model helps us to clarify the

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[99] We follow here the categories resulting from Parsons's reformulation during the mid-1970s, when he taught seminars on symbolic media in Chicago and Pennsylvania with help of Victor Lidz (Lidz, 1981). Two decades later, Lidz came to update and partially reframe the theory of symbolic media using 'language' instead of 'money' as an appropriate model to deal with some central questions of the theory of action (Lidz, 2001).

structural conditions under which we can find both the autonomous and the heteronomous forms of order in modernity. It shows us not only the positive requirements for social autonomy but a whole series of reasons why it may not take place in empirical cases: malintegration or disruption of the value system; its one-sided domination by economy, politics, family, religion, and so on; cultural (or social) determinism over the personality; the dedifferentiation between the value system and others systems of action; strong 'inflation' or 'deflation' of value-commitments during system interchange followed by withdrawal or even alienation from commitments, and so on.

4.3 - EXPLORING THE FRAME OF REFERENCE: NEO-FUNCTIONALISM AND BEYOND

It was previously mentioned that the action frame of reference, as described by Parsons, came to be considered as a sound starting point whose analytical character as well as its synthetic ambition should be preserved, or at least seriously taken into account, by all subsequent reformulations in action theory. When one looks to the contemporary reconstructive efforts in action theory it is possible to find two common ways of proceeding at two distinct levels, which one might call − adapting Alexander's (1978) terminology − as "formal" and "substantive" multidimensionality.

On the one hand, there are those who accept Parsons' voluntaristic model as being formally correct, at least in its main general lines. They agree that a sound social theory − i.e., a theory capable of addressing the fundamental problems of action and order in nonreductive terms − can only be achieved once strategic and normative dimensions of social action systems are balanced into a comprehensive analytical theory. The problems begin, according to these authors, when this formal orientation toward multidimensionality is articulated at more substantive theoretical levels – where one may find the problems concerning the connections between action frame, the action systems (personality, social structure, and culture), and their distinctive dynamic processes (differentiation, interpenetration, etc.). This diagnosis is sustained by authors such as Jeffrey Alexander (1983b, 1987d), Richard Münch ([1982] 1987, 1989), and other neo-functionalists to whom Parsons' theoretical edifice would benefit from several corrections and reformulations at this substantive level.[100] Such a general argument, one

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[100] In his *Theory of Action*, Münch (1982) proposes a "rational reconstruction" that preserves Parsons voluntarist core: actions are to be understood as a product of "dynamizing" (instrumental) and "controlling" (normative) forces and voluntarist order can only be extended by their very interpenetration. The proposed corrections do not take

might note, may also be found in other authors of the same period who although not following the Parsonian path still recognize, to a greater or lesser extent, both the centrality of the strategic-normative dilemma and the positive meaning of the voluntaristic insight.

On the other hand, one may find authors that although recognizing the voluntarist model as a good starting point to addressing the problems of action theory, consider it to be insufficient also at the formal or metatheoretical level. In this case, the usual strategic procedure is to point out some fundamental analytical dimension of human action that although virtually pervasive to all action systems would have been neither positively addressed by the voluntaristic model nor properly connected with its other categories at the substantive levels of theory. The underlying idea is that through the inquiry of the residual categories of Parsons' frame of reference it would be possible to find a way out of the instrumental-normative divide. This is the sort of strategy used, for instance, by Hans Joas in *The Creativity of Action* (1992). Following a path previously taken by Camic and Levine in opposition to that of Alexander and other neofunctionalists, Joas departs from an attempt to "rehistoricize" both Parsons' frame of reference and the convergence thesis. Throughout his reconstruction, Joas identifies a series of notions mobilized either by classical sociologists (such as "charisma", "effervescence", "effort") or by philosophical discourse (such as "expressiveness", "production", "revolution") that would refer, in a way or another, to the "creative" dimension of human action; a category which would not have been properly dealt with by both rationalist and normativist action theorists and whose profound meaning could only be grasped through the historical

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place at the formal metatheoretical level but at that of theoretical concepts and their operative language. The notion of four-dimensional action space (A-G-I-L), for instance, is reformulated so that action systems start to be organized in terms of complexity and contingency axis of both acts and symbolic codes. As a consequence of this change, of course, other theoretical changes follow. For instance, the integrative (I) rather than the latency (L) sector of action space becomes, in face of its higher degree of orderliness and predictability, the pole responsible for "controlling" the dynamizing effects of the other sectors, which means that the very order of cybernetic hierarchy proposed by Parsons is changed (cf. 57-65). By putting things this way, Münch is clearly trying to correct the theory in order to grasp the dynamizing effects of cultural symbols and socio-cultural discourses vis-à-vis the social roles and the normative consensus rooted in societal-community. In *Action and its Environments*, Alexander (1987d) proceeds by the same general logic. The corrections of Parsons' substantive voluntarism are carried out by means of the connection between the categories of action frame of reference and some empirical insights coming from sociological theories of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the concept of "effort" − whose meaning would have remained obscure in Parsons scheme − is clarified in its relations to categories of "means" and "ends" by reference to notions such a "typification", "invention", "calculation", and "stocks of knowledge", notions worked out by Blumer, Garfinkel, Homans, and others in their analysis of strategic and interpretive dimensions of action. The "effort" of the action, clarified in its means-ends relation by reference to such variable set of strategic-interpretative processes, could also be referred, following Alexander's argument, to the other two categories of the action scheme, "conditions" and "norms", to be understood, in this case, not as variables but as structural points of reference to action. With this sort of move, the voluntarist core would be preserved but the Parsonian subsequent theoretical divisions between personality, social, and cultural systems would gain a new understanding: such systems − and their sets objects, patterns, and processes − would be then taken, according to Alexander's model, as constituting the environment of strategic-interpretative action.

reconstruction of alternative intellectual traditions − usually underestimated or neglected by them − such as philosophy of life (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Berson) and the classical American pragmatism (Mead, Pierce, Dewey). In the end, this kind of procedure leads Joas to problematize not only the structural elements presented by Parsons' action frame but some of the tacit and underlying assumptions of general action theory concerning (a) the instrumentalist control over the body, (b) the teleological character of intentionality, and (c) the primary autonomy of individual actor.

Although the strategy adopted by Neofunctionalist and other authors from the "New Theoretical Movement" was certainly crucial to the development of the theoretical synthesis which took place during the 1980s and 1990s, from the point of view of those interested in engaging sociological theory in a dialogue with the more contemporary developments in the aforementioned "studies" − cultural, race, gender, etc. − and moral and political philosophy, this second sort of strategy exemplified by Joas seems more promising. Because a considerable part of these contemporary developments is also characterized by the focus on expressive, creative, affective, and aesthetic aspects of human experience as an attempt to escape from the great Kantian-Utilitarian divide, which would have informed both the rationalist and normative images of the man so criticized by Joas. It is not by accident also that in his attempt to overcome these two logical poles, Joas ends up recovering some of the intellectual traditions − such as philosophy of life and pragmatism − that are usually taken as central references to a significant part of postmodern thinkers. In doing so, he certainly contributes to the construction of positive connections between modern and postmodern thinking.

As mentioned in the first chapter, however, none of this has been enough to avoid the increasing fragmentation as well as the vivid feeling of crisis in contemporary sociological theory. Mouzelis, which is concerned with this same sort of problem, argues in his *Modern and Postmodern Social Theorizing* (2008) that despite the ingenious attempts toward the establishment of new theoretical synthesis provided by authors such Alexander and Joas, none of them would have succeeded in constructing a systematic and well-integrated set of o theoretical tools similar to that one provided by Parsons himself. During his analysis of Joas', book − which could also be transposed to Alexander's case − he says the following:

> (...) above strategies, although relevant and convincing, are by themselves not enough to provide an adequate alternative to Parsons' theory of action. Because if Parsons is weak on philosophy, he is very strong on sociological theory proper; on the construction, that is, of an interrelated set of conceptual tools (what Althusser called Generalities II) that enable the sociologist to link social action with such other fundamental dimensions of social organization as roles,

institutions, social structures, culture, personality, etc. in a theoretically and logically coherent manner. If Parsons' oeuvre is still relevant today; if (...) it is still used as the basic frame of reference in debates dealing with the fundamental dimensions of social life; if it is still used by sociologists as a conceptual guide that helps to raise interesting questions and to produce substantive theories (Generalities III) in numerous empirical fields, this is because it offers us not simply philosophical disquisitions about the nature of human action, but specific, theoretically developed concepts that an empirically oriented social scientist can use in his/her research. (2008: 91)

In view of these, one could ask the following questions: is it not possible to engage in that sort of strategy operated by Joas − characterized by a metatheoretical inquiry and the formal reformulation of the voluntarist model in favor of creative, expressive, and aesthetic dimensions of action − without imploding Parsons edifice and giving up its strong theoretical tools? Such a question seems to be not only relevant but crucial given the concerns of contemporary sociological theory. It represents, in a way, the main theoretical problem underlying the present thesis

Although the question can be quite clearly formulated, it seems evident that the theoretical problem it addresses cannot receive a simple answer. If advancements are to be made in this sort of matter, an investigation path must be specified and progressively approached. Fortunately, this sort of enterprise is not without precedent. Of crucial importance, in this regard, is to note that reformulations at the formal level of the voluntarist model were not only undertaken by those opposed to Parsonian tradition. Staubmann (1997) argues that Parsons himself ended up facing the necessity of reformulating the voluntarist scheme at its formal level. By the end of his first book − after analyzing Durkheim's theory of expressive rituals, Weber's treatment of customs and matters of taste, and Töonies' ideas concerning community-like relations −, Parsons came to realize the existence of a whole set of action patterns that could not be properly understood in terms of either instrumental-efficiency or moral-evaluative norms of orientation and which, therefore, could not be easily subsumed under the means-ends scheme. In this case, one would find not only certain symbols and modes of expression whose form would be determined by some alternative sort of normative pattern (like the standards of elegance and beauty in the artwork) but also some sorts of actions whose form would face an open area of indetermination and diffuseness in relation to its underlying content (like forms of affective and love expression). According to Staubmann, although "never free[ing] itself completely from this theoretical ambivalence between normativity and aesthetics" (1997: 52), Parsons would have paved the way to the recognition of what one might call the *aesthetic-expressive* dimension of action.

The endpoint of voluntaristic action theory is marked by the insight that there must be another structurally independent action component, which at first is to be found in the area of aesthetic norms, (...) and the area of ultimate values and expressive symbolism indicating them. Thus, it seems justified to say that the theoretical problems brought about by dealing with aesthetic phenomena urged an extension of the voluntaristic frame of reference and thereby had a significant influence upon the further elaboration of action theory. (1997: 53)

4.3.1 - Toward the aesthetic-expressive path

Before ending this chapter, a few words must be said about this aesthetic-expressive path pointed out by Staubmann since we recognize it as one of the most interesting and promising paths for those interested in connecting the main developments in modern and contemporary sociological discourse. Indeed, to pursue this path would constitute one of the next logical steps to be followed in view of the reconstruction here put forward. This is due to two main reasons.

The first one, as we mentioned, is that aesthetics may be seen as a strategic front to tackle if one is interested in connecting modern and postmodern modes of discourse. In fact, aesthetics were crucial to a wide variety of thinkers who tended to address modernity and modern experiences in critical terms. One of the reasons for that is because it points to a certain sort of fundamental human experience (the aesthetic experience) operating with distinct sorts of categories than those of positive knowledge and morality. Many critics of modernity tended to see in the aesthetic field the possibility to thematize philosophical ideas that otherwise would be captured by conceptual thinking and moral reflection. Moreover, in the aesthetic field, non-problematized metaphysical assumptions – such as unity, identity, and difference – operating in modern scientific and deontological discourses would find a way to be thematized in a distinct manner, either because music and plastic arts are not primarily discursive and would think them in a distinct way or because one may find in poetry and variants of vanguard literature certain use of language that is characterized by patterns that are radically distinct than those of regular discursive thinking. It is not a mere accident that some of the most famous critics of modernity – one might think here in figures as distinct as Heidegger, Adorno, and Foucault – ended up dedicating a significant part of their writings to aesthetic analysis, be it focused on poetry, classical music, or vanguard literature

The second reason to pursue this path is that it points to a certain dimension that was, in fact, not really explored in our reconstruction of both philosophical discourse and sociological thinking. Even though we have dealt with a good amount of European philosophers in the last

chapter, almost no reference was made to (social) thinkers who happened to be primarily known by their aesthetic reflection: on the British context of Hobbes, Locke, and others, no single word was dedicated to, say, Shaftesbury; on the German context of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, almost no space was given to romantics like Schlegel or Novalis. The only exception here is Herder – who entered into our reconstruction but is absent in Parsons' book. By pointing to this blindspot we are certainly not advocating that aesthetic reflection should be incorporated without further considerations. Along the lines of our reconstruction, we have tried to make a case for the positive role of the systematicity in knowledge and if aesthetic thought is be added to the picture we must ask ourselves which sort of aesthetic reflection are we talking about. This leads us to a crucial theoretical point.

We have argued here that theory of action understood as an integrative theoretical program in human sciences lays its foundation on a Kantian basis. It seems logical to us that if the aesthetic-expressive dimension is to be brought up and positively incorporated into the theory of action, the first place to start looking at is Kant's aesthetic reflection. This would be a way of addressing it without simply giving up the whole system and the progress achieved by it. This seems to make sense in view of the path followed here. In chapter 2, we have pointed out the relevance of Kant's first and second critiques for the epistemological and substantive problems in theory of action for both Durkheim and Weber. In chapter 3, we have emphasized this Kantian influence on Parsons theoretical enterprise. To be sure, if one takes a look at the best two works of scholarship dealing with such influence, one may find the same situation: Harold Bershady (1973) pointed out the homology between Parsons' strategy in delineating the analytical categories of action frame and Kant's deduction of categories of understanding in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. (cf. 1973: 69ff). What is at stake here, as we have seen, is a sort of transcendental strategy according to which the phenomena (social or physical) is inquired in terms of the conditions of its possible knowledge. Richard Münch ([1982]1987), in a comprehensive interpretive effort, sustains the existence of a "Kantian core" underlying the whole Parsonian enterprise from its first book, *The Structure of Social Action*, published, in 1937, until its last one, *Action Theory and the Human Condition*, published in 1978. Although acknowledging the crucial role of Kant's first critique to Parsons' metatheoretical orientation, Münch sustains that Parsons' substantive theory of action (and order) could only be properly addressed by reference to Kant's second critique: the interpenetration of "dynamizing" and "controlling" spheres of action systems can only lead to a voluntaristic order and an autonomous

action where "hypothetical" imperatives of action are embedded by a "categorical" imperative of (social) will, as described by Kant in *Critique of Practical Reason.* (cf. [1982]1987: 12ff)

Thus it seems clear that throughout all these interpretations there is a striking absence: the theoretical problems and the set of concepts worked out by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* are almost completely ignored. This is not at all surprising since even among Kantian scholars the problems addressed by the third critique were neglected for a long time. Not only because aesthetics and teleology, the main topics of the book, are usually considered less central than epistemology, metaphysics, or ethic among the philosophical ranks, but because the book raises one intricate underlying problem without parallel in the other two critiques: the attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical philosophy, nature and freedom. Despite the complexities of this book, it seems clear that if any comprehensive account of Kant's influence is to be achieved in the case of Parsons theoretical enterprise, then the third critique, understood as an attempt at systematizing critical philosophy, cannot be ignored. Also, there is an additional reason to turn to this book. The inquiry about the nature and types of judgment as carried out in the third critique paves the way for the aesthetic experience to be dealt with independently of those sorts of experience grounded on cognitive-instrumental and moral-evaluative judgments: while in cognitive and moral experiences one would face what Kant calls a "determining" judgment − where the form is determined by a concept or a universal already given −, the aesthetic experience (and all analysis of organic phenomena) would point, in its turn, to a "reflexive" activity of judgment − namely, that of "finding" a unity (or solving a tension) for a given form. (cf. Kant 1790: 66-68).

In the end, this sort of intellectual move that seeks to overcome the instrumental-normative divide in favor of a comprehensive analytical scheme is exactly what was at stake in Parsons' thematizing of the "aesthetic-expressive" dimension of action. In addressing these problems from the point of view of judgments, it would be possible, from a Kantian perspective, to preserve the systematic gains of his theoretical and practical philosophy while connecting it with the problems of aesthetics and teleology. By the same token, from a Parsonian perspective, it may represent a way of addressing this sort of problem without imploding the other parts of the Parsonian edifice. Thus, we have reasons to believe that Kant's third and last critique may be a source of insights and conceptual tools relevant to the purposes of the present research.

To follow this path right now would exceed, however, the scope of the present thesis. Our main purpose in this last chapter was to provide a brief sketch of some relevant developments in the theory of action in order to highlight some of the possibilities opened by

Parsons' work. We did so, however, without pretending to exhaust or even systematize any of these possibilities. If we have chosen to bring aesthetics to the fore at this final part is because it may represent a next logical step to be pursued. It also points to the fact that the present thesis is part of a hermeneutic exercise that, in principle, is endless. An idea that was rightly expressed by Parsons himself, when he was referring to the process that led him to write his first book:

> An earnest warning is given against such premature claims to finality. The author has been more or less intensively concerned with the major works of the men treated in this study over periods ranging from six to ten years. After considerable periods of occupation in other fields, he has come back to intensive reconsideration of their works. Every time this reconsideration brought to light fundamentally important things about them which had been missed before. The most important points, for the purposes of this study, were not understood at the first reading, but generally only after repeated reconsideration. The explanation of this fact seems to be that thinking on these matters had in the meantime been undergoing a process of development. Although the significant points had been read and, in one sense, "understood," they were not on earlier readings "important" in the sense in which they have since become because at first it was not possible to relate them to a theoretical system and the problems growing out of it. As there is no reason to believe that this process of development of thought has suddenly stopped, the only justification for publishing the results of such a study at this or any other time is the conviction that the process has reached a point where the results to date, while not definitive, are well enough integrated to be significant. (1937: 40-1)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the beginning of his first book, published in the 1930s, Parsons famously asked "who still reads Spencer?", in a reference to the breakdown of the intellectual system to which that author would have been affiliated. Ironically, we could ask ourselves, eight decades later: who still reads Parsons? Indeed, it seems that nowadays just a few sociologists are inclined to do so. The present thesis can be understood as a humble attempt to remedy this situation and to spell out the reasons why I believe that the social sciences, in a time of hurried reflections and intellectual fads, could draw important lessons from both Parsons' intellectual quest and the tradition of thought to which he belongs.

The return to Parsons and the theory of action thus presents not only an exegetical character, but a presentist interest, insofar as we can draw lessons from it to think about the present, to explore new avenues for future theoretical developments, and to avoid repeating persisting mistakes of the past. In the introduction to this thesis, the problem of investigation posed was that of clarifying the extension and limits of the theory of action as synthesized by Parsons. The general argument of the thesis was that this tradition goes back further than Parsons immediately pointed out and can be traced back to Kant's critical philosophy; from the point of view of its developments, it extends into contemporary sociology, but finds limits there to the extent that it focuses mainly on the instrumental-normative front, thus demanding reformulations. The support for this argument has been developed in four chapters, to which I will return here in a schematic way.

In Chapter 1, dealing more thoroughly with the problem of metatheoretical reconstructions and the problem of theoretical syntheses within the history of sociology, I argued in favor of this field of research. This chapter serves the purpose of this thesis insofar as it clarifies its place within a field of study, as well as its methodology, its goals, and its problems. In a way, though, this first chapter also goes beyond the scope of the present thesis and can be read even by those who are not concerned with the theory of action.

In chapter 2, whose focus lies on the problem of the intellectual origins of the theory of action, I argued that Kant plays a fundamental role within this tradition for two interconnected reasons: firstly, because the metatheoretical problems of the theory of action must be understood as problems whose roots go back to the problem of the conditions of possibility of knowledge as formulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; secondly, because the fundamental problems of theoretical logic (concerning the views on the nature of action and social order)

have their roots in the Kantian attempt to solve the problems of autonomy and moral order in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. I have argued that Durkheim and Weber converge on these two fundamental levels because of their constitutive link with strands of neo-Kantianism. They advance in areas that Kant had not engaged in and, in doing so, contribute to the formation of a multidimensional theory of action and order that will be later formalized by Parsons.

In chapter 3, I focused on the Parsonian first theoretical synthesis. I argued that at the metatheoretical level, his "analytic realism" can be understood within this tradition of Kantian thought that develops, via sociology, in the search for a multidimensional theory. I then engaged in an attempt to formalize Parsons' theory in order to clarify its scope and make some minor repairs to its terminology, so as to do justice to its systematicity. In the case of the problem of order, I claimed that the logical antinomies faced by the positivist approach from Hobbes to Darwin, as reconstructed by Parson, can be found within idealism. Although Parsons did not make a systematic reconstruction of the problem of order in idealism, I tried to show, by analyzing authors such as Vico, Herder, Fichte, and Hegel, that such antinomies persist in this tradition. I argued, finally, that the Parsonsian synthesis can be understood as a set of prolegomena to any future social theory, to use Kant's expression.

In chapter 4, devoted to the unfoldings of the Parsonsian synthesis, I argued that the later stages of Parsons' thought do not represent a break with the theory of action, as many might think at first sight, but a systematic set of theoretical refinements. Finally, I briefly analyzed some attempts to reformulate the theory of action at both substantive and presuppositional levels. In this case, I pointed to the aesthetic-expressive dimension of action as an aspect not sufficiently worked out within the theory of action, but which could be still addressed within a Kantian frame of reference. This movement seems strategic for all those concerned with the establishment of a fruitful dialogue with contemporary strands of social thought, as well as for those concerned with keeping "the spirit of the synthesis" going on.

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