

THEORETICAL SOCIOLOGY

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SUMMARY

What is a system? A system is anything that has parts which are connected to each other. The parts can be of any sort: metal machinery, biological organisms, molecules, information, ideas, emotions, behaviors—anything at all that can be described as being in some condition at some time. The system can be material or ideal, living or inorganic, imaginary or actual; it can also be a combination of different sorts of elements, such as an ecological system which involves both living species and geological features. Connections between parts can be physical ties or flows (pipes, electrical currents, chemicals); communications, signs, or acts of meaning; or even purely abstract mathematical or conceptual connections.

A system, in short, is a very general conception. What makes it useful is that its relationships can be represented by certain techniques. We can make a diagram of a system since it has an implicit architecture which can often be visually described. For most systems a computer program can be written, and the system can be simulated. Computerization of systems is relatively recent in sociology, and we are just beginning to see what can be done with it. Systems have been expounded in sociology since long before computers existed, and many of them do not immediately take the form that more recent system models of the computer era do. Nevertheless, there is an affinity between the older system models and the more general conception of systems which has become clearer now that computer modeling, especially by personal computer, has become relatively easy.

A system can be social, cultural, or mental; or it can exist merely as the set of elements in a computer program—in fact, this may be the common denominator of all systems. There is a system on any of these levels if there are elements which are related to each other. That having been said, a caveat is immediately in order. To say that there is such a thing as “a social system” does not specify anything about what kind of system it is. It does not mean, for instance, a functionally self-equilibrating system, or Talcott Parsons’ particular theory which he called “*the* social system.” These are particular kinds of theories about systems in society, and the validity of each construction has to be assessed on its own merits. The evolutionary conception of society described in the previous chapter is a type of system theory. In its strong version, as we have seen, it is very probably wrong. In its weak version, it may be accurate but it is extremely vague in what it specifies. It needs to be supplemented with other system models in order to explain what actually happens under what conditions.

There is probably no such thing as “the” social system, since there is not just one system but a series of systems defined by different theories about society. Numerous different systems can be going on at the same time: a geopolitical system among states, as well as a world economic system of global capitalism; political and organizational systems within each state, as well as systems made up of networks among them; systems of intellectual specialists and religious memberships; as well as other culture carriers which cut across national boundaries. On the micro level, a system takes place within each conversational ritual, in addition to the somewhat larger system of the interaction ritual network that links conversational encounters

together. A system is an analytical device: it is a set of entities and connections that we pick out from all the possible systems to be found in the world.

Systems can be "open" or "closed"; tightly or loosely coupled; stable or unstable; rigidly deterministic or open-ended; conscious, self-conscious, or unconscious. Our theoretical problem is to find out what kind of systems exist in the world and how they operate.

GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

One line of inquiry has been the search for panscientific laws, for principles that apply to systems found in all areas of science. This approach is called "general systems theory." Its principal advocate, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, draws on intellectual traditions in engineering, biology, gestalt psychology, and especially cybernetics. But the basic idea that there are principles underlying all the sciences can be traced back further than these theories of the 1920s through the 1960s. Herbert Spencer, whom we have treated in the previous chapter as an evolutionist, may also be described, in Turner's words (1985a), as the first general systems theorist. Spencer's sociology was merely a late volume in his series, *Synthetic Philosophy*, which also included treatments of the astronomical cosmos, biology, and psychology. Across all of these areas, Spencer proposed that the same basic principle rules: entities evolve from "an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity" (Spencer 1862:396)—in other words, from a homogeneous, chaotic mass of identical particles into differentiated structures. For Spencer, this particular kind of evolutionary "law" (which we have seen is not so generally true) is the key to every kind of system.¹

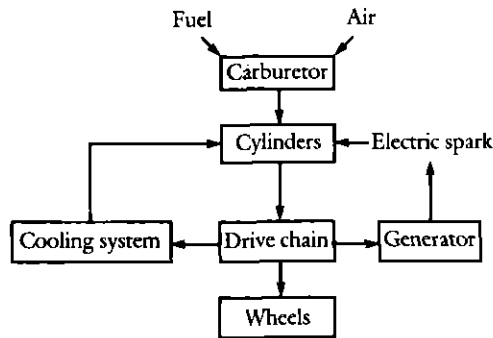
Von Bertalanffy (1968) aimed to broaden the basic principles of systems so that they would apply not merely to the physical sciences but to the social and cultural world as well. Hence, the panscientific principles must be not merely the mechanical principles of physics but should allow humanistic applications, including applications to consciousness and goal-seeking. This would be possible, he believed, by taking these basic principles from cybernetics. *Cybernetics* is the theory of control systems, first developed during World War II in research on missile guidance systems, which gave rise not only to systems engineering but also to information science and the development of computers. This approach allowed systems to be conceived as operating with information as well as with physical materials and forces, in particular, by making use of the concepts of *feedback* and *feedforward*.

MECHANISTIC OR "DUMB" SYSTEMS

Various kinds of systems can be put together out of different combinations of these elements. A mechanistic system is made out of dead matter, like the combination of gears in a clock (the old-fashioned clockworks, not the digital electronic

¹In fairness to Spencer, it should be added that evolution is only one part of the overall cosmic process. There is a phase of the evolutionary development of matter, but also eventually a parallel phase of dissolution, as the universe runs down in accordance with the law of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics (see Turner, 1985a). This principle of dissolution of systems has been little applied to social systems, however.

timepieces which are popular today). Take, for example, a car engine, which may be crudely diagrammed as follows:



The basic system is a set of feedforwards. Fuel and air come into the system and are mixed together in a certain proportion (which is what the carburetor does); then electricity flows in from the spark plugs, setting off combustion. This results in power, which is transmitted through the gears and the drive chain to turn the wheels of the car. These physical entities and forces flow from one place to another in a chain, each part of which can be called a feedforward.

There are also some *feedbacks* in the system. Part of the motion of the drivetrain is used to turn the generator, which recharges the batteries, providing further electricity to be used in igniting combustion. Another part of the motion turns the cooling system, which keeps the temperature of the engine at a level at which the other processes will operate; another portion operates the fuel pump, and so forth. Thus, parts of the system operate in a circle; producing electricity and other necessities which are repeatedly used up as the system repeats. This is a self-reproducing system, but only in a mechanical sense. If something goes wrong, there is no way that the system itself can correct it. If any one component breaks, the car engine will simply stop. This example reminds us that *feedback by itself is not necessarily "intelligent" or "goal-directed."* We have here a case of what Hanneman (1987) calls "dumb feedback" or "mechanical feedback."

OPEN AND CLOSED SYSTEMS

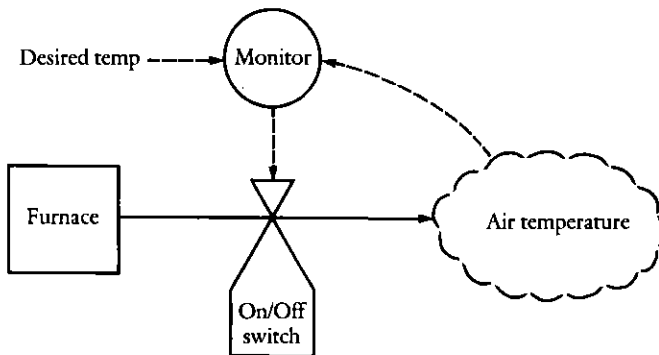
The car engine is, for the most part, a "closed system." The components operate simply with reference to each other. An "open system," by contrast, interacts with the environment. The car engine is not completely closed however; fuel and air come in from outside the system, and if you neglect to fill the gas tank, the system will eventually run down and stop. One of the basic principles of physics (the second law of thermodynamics) implies that no system is completely closed, and since there are no perpetual motion machines, any system will eventually run down unless new energy is poured into it from the environment. Also, there is an output from the system into the environment in the form of exhaust from the burned fuel, as well as whatever you do with the motion of the car wheels (that is, where you drive your

car). But from the point of view of systems theory, these contacts with the environment are episodic or random; once you have filled up the gas tank and turned on the engine, what happens under the hood is for the time being a closed system.

By contrast, we can conceive of such a thing as an "open systems theory," that is, a theory of systems which interact continuously with their environments so that inputs and outputs are themselves understandable and predictable as part of the system pattern. The theory of open systems, however, is not very advanced. Organizational theorists such as Katz and Kahn (1966) have proposed that organizations are really open systems; but beyond stating their general characteristics as interacting with their environments, no general "laws" have been developed. What has been done, instead, has been to broaden the scope of what are considered to be the borders of the system, so that a set of organizations are treated as a system in relation to each other. To speak of an "open system," is really to point to the areas of indeterminism, the factors which arbitrarily come into our model but which are not part of the model itself (for instance, whether you fill up the gas tank of the car). As soon as we try to include a causal connection to explain this, we have made the "closed" part of the system a little broader. For this reason, we may never have a complete theory of "open systems."

"SMART" OR GOAL-SEEKING FEEDBACK

A "higher-level" kind of feedback is one that involves flows, not of physical materials, but of information. Interestingly enough, we do not have to deal with consciousness, or even with living creatures, to find informational feedback systems. An ordinary thermostat found in most homes, for example, may be diagrammed as follows:



Here we have a heater connected to a monitoring device. This device consists of three parts: a reading of the actual temperature, a goal set at the temperature desired, and a control mechanism. If you set the goal at 70 degrees, whenever the actual temperature falls below that (say to 66) the heater will switch on. When the temperature rises to 70 or above, the heater will switch off. The only thing that flows between the thermostat and the heater is information: in one direction a reading, in the other direction, instructions to turn on or off.

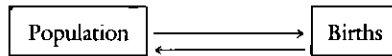
Fundamental theory of the physiology of the human body, or of any biological organism, centers on this kind of feedback loop. The medical scientist Walter Cannon referred to the process as *homeostasis*. Any living organism has certain goal-states programmed in. When we become too hot, certain mechanisms, such as sweating or panting, are automatically turned on to bring the body temperature down. When we are too cold, other mechanisms kick into action, such as shivering, which is a mechanical action of the muscles to generate local heat. When the level of energy fuel for the body cells falls below a certain level, the organism feels hungry and goes into action to find food, which in turn will bring the body's energy "thermostat" back to the desired level and turn off the food-seeking behavior. The body's reaction to diseases is essentially the releasing of a number of these homeostatic mechanisms designed to restore health. The fever we feel when we have an infection is the body's reaction of raising the temperature in order to destroy the invading bacteria. Living organisms appear to be set at the juncture between a large number of such physiological homeostatic mechanisms working in pairs: some operate to bring a bodily process up if it is too low, while their opposites kick in at the appropriate point to bring the bodily process down if it is too high.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FEEDBACK: EQUILIBRIUM OR EXPLOSION

All of the feedback mechanisms described in the preceding section are *negative* feedback. That is, they involve a process of comparison to a goal. If there is a discrepancy between the current state and the goal state (if temperature is too high, if blood sugar level is too low), a corrective action is turned on; once the goal is reached, the action is turned off. *Negative feedback, in other words, is related to establishing and re-establishing states of equilibrium.* It evokes an image of systems as essentially passive, reacting rather than acting, with their "preferred" state one in which nothing has to be done, until they are disturbed again.

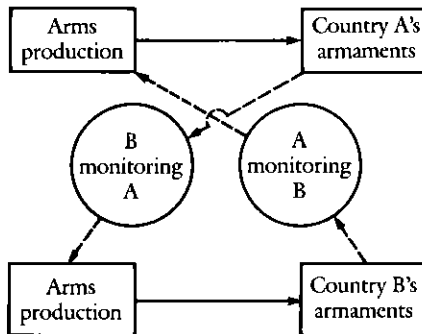
Whether this is an appropriate model for a society (or even for an individual personality) has been questioned: do societies (and individuals) merely react to disturbances, rather than seek out their own goals and activities? And are such systems always seeking equilibrium? Notice that the homeostatic model does not say that systems always *are* in equilibrium, but only that they are tuned to some equilibrium point, around which they are constantly varying and being corrected by negative feedback. I will not attempt to answer these questions here. A good deal of theorizing about systems, though, has assumed that the homeostatic model is the appropriate one. Parsons' functionalism endorses this model (although it contains other elements as well); and so does von Bertalanffy and a number of other advocates of a biological systems model (for instance, J. G. Miller, 1978). Neoclassical economic theory similarly uses an equilibrium concept as a kind of centerpoint around which the elements of an economic system continually fluctuate. On the other hand, in psychology, there has been a tendency recently to reject "drive-reduction" models which assume the organism is essentially quiescent unless some equilibrium level has been disturbed.

It is possible, using the system model itself, to show that there are systems which are not equilibrating. One simple example of this is a population growth model. It has only two elements:



The population gives rise to a number of births at some constant rate, and these births feed back into and augment the population. As this system flows through its cycle again and again, the sheer number of births grows larger and larger, and so does the population as a whole. The result is a population explosion. This is because the feedback loop is positive, not negative. Whereas if negative feedback is equilibrating, *positive feedback is explosive*. If this were a completely closed system, the population would grow to infinity. In reality, there is an environment whose resources are needed to keep the population alive. Hence, when such positive feedback loops occur (and they are frequently observed in the propagation of bacteria, fruit flies, and many other organisms, as well in some social analogies, such as the growth of organizations and the spread of innovations), they usually take the shape of a so-called "S-shaped curve": a period of accelerating (or exponential) growth, followed by a slowing down as the environmental limits are asymptotically approached.

The population example does not involve informational feedback but a sheer physical flow which we have called "dumb" feedback. But the same explosive pattern occurs whenever there is a positive feedback loop, even in informational form. A good example of this is an arms race model.



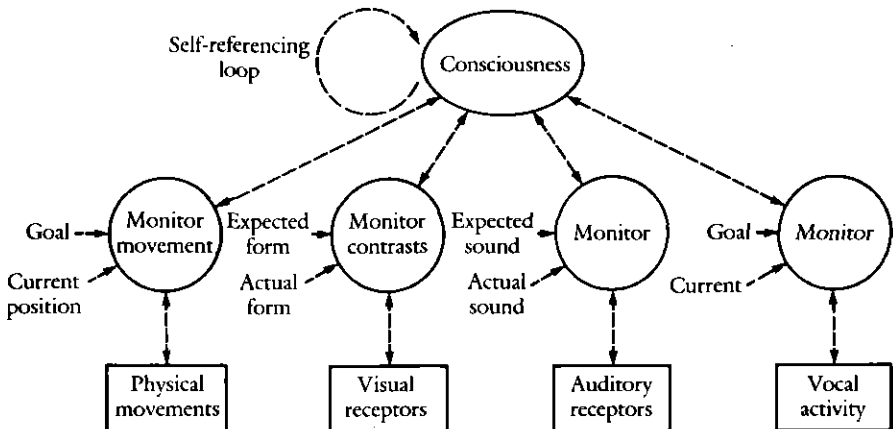
In this system, Country A, the United States, is monitoring the arms level of its opponent, the USSR; and Country B, the USSR, does the same for the arms level of its opponent, the United States. All that it takes for this to be an explosive arms race is for each to set its goal level at slightly above the level of its opponent's arms (say 101 percent, though 110 percent is probably more realistic). As the cycle runs through each repetition, each side's arms will grow exponentially. In reality, again, there are environmental constraints, such as how much of its resources a country can afford to put into arms. But taken purely as a positive feedback system, its results are not equilibrating but explosive.

SELF-REFERENTIAL SYSTEMS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

We have now seen examples of systems which are lifeless machines (car engines or Newton's system of planets revolving around the sun), living organisms (the homeostatic mechanisms of physiological functioning, hunger, and response to dis-

ease), as well as social entities (populations or arms races). None of these, properly speaking, can be said to include consciousness—at least, not in its higher forms. Although the actors in the arms race might be said to be operating via conscious goals of keeping their armaments above the level of their opponent, their behavior has a “mechanical” quality that keeps them trapped by the system. Consciousness, at least in the human forms which we value most, has the quality of being able to reflect and especially of being conscious of itself and what it is doing, so as to reset its own goals. For the arms race system to be truly conscious, it would have to include some mechanism by which it could reflect on the fact that it is locked into an explosive situation and by which it could reset its own goals. It would also involve communications by which the two opponents could point out their mutually destructive behavior and negotiate ways to control their competitive system.

How can systems theory model something of this sort? Von Bertalanffy follows a strategy which implies that consciousness emerges as informational feedback loops become more complicated. Although this model is not well worked out in any detail, the general hypothesis seems to be that the human brain itself is a kind of super-feedback loop, a place where various other goal-monitoring mechanisms are themselves monitored. The bodily organism includes various feedback systems, most of them unconscious (such as the autonomic system for regulating body temperature, breathing rate, and so forth), but some of them (such as the feedback loops involving hunger or reaction to dangerous things in the environment) involving choices of actions to make in relation to the world outside. One can imagine the brain having to decide which goals take immediate priority over others: if one is hungry and the food-seeking mechanism is set off, but one is also getting parched by the sun, and hence ready to move into the shade, and also being threatened by a snarling dog, one must set the various goals in some sequence in order to decide which action is to be taken first. The system then becomes *self-referential*, examining its own loops and goals as if they were part of the environment to be taken account of. Presumably consciousness can be explained as a higher level system that emerges to deal with this nexus among various goal-seeking loops.



No doubt, the process is more complicated than this; consciousness presumably involves the nesting of several levels of such goal-coordinating systems, one above the other. Thus, there is no absolute dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious, but an increase in consciousness as the number of such meta-feedback loops grows.

There are some attractive parts in this model of consciousness, and we will make further uses of it in Chapters 7 and 9 as we deal with sociological theories of mind and language. At this point, however, it should be borne in mind that the model is merely a very general hypothesis, not well worked out in general systems theory. It does have the weakness, from the sociological point of view, that it derives human consciousness somewhat mysteriously from some unexplained complication which occurs in feedback loops within the individual human organism. By contrast, sociological theory explains consciousness as intrinsically social, involving language and symbols generated by interaction itself, which are then available for use inside the individual mind.

IS SOCIETY A "SMART" FEEDBACK SYSTEM?

There is a tendency to assume that systems are arranged in a hierarchy, from lifeless mechanical systems, up through living organisms, to the human mind, with society and culture as still "higher" levels (for example, von Bertalanffy, 1968: 28–29; Boulding 1978; Miller, 1978). If there is an increasing complexity of feedback, a shift from the physical to the informational and the goal-directed, as we "ascend" up to the human level, there is a natural inclination to continue the "series" to still higher levels and to portray society itself as an even "smarter," more "self-referential" system than any of these. (The neo-Parsonian Niklas Luhman, as we shall see, explicitly regards society as a self-referential system.)

But this may be a mistake. Societies are larger than individual persons, but are they thereby "higher"? And are cultures any more than abstractions, which exist only as lodged in the brains of particular individuals? Actually, I believe this question can be settled more concretely than by philosophical discussion. We can actually model societies and particular social forms (such as organizations) and see what kinds of feedback links these actually involve. We have already seen two brief social examples: a population explosion model, which is a "dumb" feedback system, and an arms race, which involves "smart" or informational, goal-seeking feedback but is nevertheless distinctly lacking an effective self-referential component—exactly the reason why arms races are so dangerous. These do not settle the question, since there are many other models of society, which we will meet throughout this book. But in fact, most of these turn out to be mechanical and "dumb" rather than displaying any higher degrees of self-referentiality. The Marxian model in Chapter 3—except for one significant, hypothetical moment (at the time of the socialist revolution)—is essentially a mechanical feedforward and feedback system. In fact, we can say that the reason why large-scale society is alienating for the human individuals who are in it is that the system itself is mechanical rather than self-referential. Individual human beings are "smart" self-referential systems, but at the size levels "beyond" the individual, the systems are mostly mechanical—population explosions, arms races, and the like—and are frustrating precisely because they are not intelligent. Even systems

that include culture as one of their components, like that of Parsons which we will consider, are not necessarily conscious or intelligent *as an overall system*. One of their components may be intelligence, but they are locked into a larger, nonintelligent aggregate in much the same way that your own capacities for self-reflection do little good when you are inside your car alongside thousands of other self-reflective human beings in a freeway traffic jam.

The major problem that most prescriptive, action-oriented political philosophies face is precisely the fact that the macro world is a system that we are caught in, but it is not a goal-seeking system. Alienation may be the condition of teleological individual human beings making up a social system which is by no means as self-reflexive as themselves.²

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism is a particular subtype of system theory. Functionalist theory was prominent in sociology in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, but has subsequently been discredited as a genuine model of explanation and is now no longer widely used. The method of functionalism is to explain any particular social institution by the role it plays in maintaining the larger society. As Jonathan Turner (1985: 55) points out, functionalism is an analysis of the relationship between wholes and their parts; it explains the parts by their place in a larger system.

What causes any particular social pattern to exist—the modern family, the institution of love, the restrictive licensing and high pay of the medical profession, the democratic state, or anything else? The functionalist answer in general is that these institutions are explained by the functions that they serve for society (for example, see Merton, 1968; Davis and Moore, 1945; Parsons 1951). The typical family pattern, with the husband the breadwinner and the wife caring for home and children, is explained by the need of society to efficiently socialize children; the licensing which restricts the practice of medicine to a relatively small number of doctors is explained by the need to protect society against incompetent practitioners; and the high pay of doctors is explained by the need to attract the most competent individuals to train themselves for this specialty. Functionalism thus tends to give the most favorable interpretation to everything. One reason it has come under attack is because these explanations ignore any self-interest or advantage and any resulting inequality. Economic and sexual advantages and disadvantages between men and women would hardly enter the mind of a functionalist theorist of the family, nor would it occur to such a theorist that the reason medical doctors receive such high pay is because they have restricted or monopolized the supply of medical services relative to the demand. In the eyes of feminists, conflict theorists, and advocates of greater social equalities, functionalism looks like an ideological justification for the interests of dominant groups.

²As we shall see in examining Goffman's theory (Chapter 7), even the individual human self may be more of a "mechanical" concatenation of social episodes than we would like to believe. Modern culture glorifies the human self, but this turns out to be more like self-congratulatory ideology than a realistic social science.

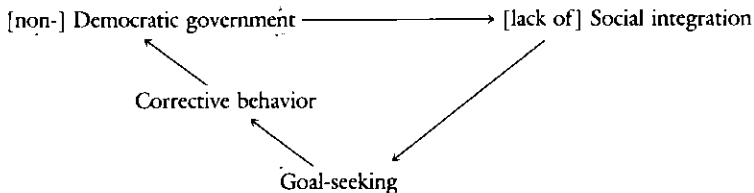
However, there is a more formal criticism of functionalism as a mode of explanation. When we ask for the causes of a given phenomenon, the functionalist answer points to its consequences, the functions it serves for society. This appears to be an illogical mode of causation, since an event happening at one time is explained by consequences happening at a later time. How can causality flow backwards in time?

STINCHCOMBE'S FUNCTIONALIST FEEDBACK LOOPS

Arthur Stinchcombe (1968) has attempted to solve this problem by formally diagramming functional relationships in systems terminology. For example, the argument is sometimes made that modern societies have democratic governments because democracy is necessary for social integration (Parsons, 1971). Modern societies are highly differentiated and require a good deal of personal initiative for their roles to be carried out effectively; hence, individuals cannot be controlled in an authoritarian manner, and the state must be relatively participatory and democratic to keep up favorable motivation. Stinchcombe would diagram this argument roughly as follows:

Democratic government \longrightarrow Social integration of modern society

There is a feedback loop from the consequences to the cause, like the thermostat illustrated under general systems theory. Now the causal sequence can be explained by some device which monitors the level of social integration of society. If that level is too low, a corrective process is set in motion which increases the amount of democratic government, thereby increasing social integration.



If the level of social integration is high enough, corrective behavior stops, and the existing state of affairs is merely repeated or reproduced.

In theory this seems to be an elegant solution. However, it should be borne in mind that the feedback mechanism is hypothetical and vague. What does it actually consist of in reality (if it really exists at all)? It is doubtful that there really is a "social integration thermostat" somewhere which turns on corrective processes leading to more democracy when the level gets too low. Or if such a mechanism exists, it is still to be specified. We could argue that it is purposive human beings who provide the feedback mechanism; they consciously feel a problem and seek means of achieving their goal. But this does not seem very satisfactory theoretically, since it cannot be assumed that just because people feel dissatisfied they will actually be able to change the larger system to reach their goals. One kind of solution, of course, would

be to fall back on the natural selection process described under evolutionary theory (Chapter 1): governments vary, and some of them are more democratic than others; those which are more democratic contribute to greater social solidarity, and hence are selected, while nondemocratic governments and their societies are less likely to survive. But this does not specify why democracy should emerge in the first place. As we have seen in the previous chapter, natural selection models are themselves rather vague, merely "umbrellas" for causal explanations still to be supplied, rather than explanations themselves.

The major problem with functionalist theory from a strictly scientific viewpoint is that it jumps too quickly to conclusions. It tends to justify whatever exists. Since the United States, Britain, and other highly industrialized countries have had democratic governments, it is assumed that democracy is functionally needed for the social integration of modern society. But what about industrial societies which are not democracies, such as most communist states, the Union of South Africa, or Germany in the Nazi period? Here functionalist theory can go two routes. One argument simply plunges ahead with functionalist reasoning: if a society has a dictatorship, it must be because there is a functional need for it. Perhaps one could claim that South Africa functionally needs to be integrated by minority force, or that the USSR's functional need is for dictatorship (as Parsons [1951: 194] claimed by suggesting that its basic system values are collective rather than individualistic).

This kind of argument is not very satisfying. When confronted with a democracy, we are told that it exists because it is functionally necessary; when we are confronted with a dictatorship, we are told that it, too, happens to be functionally necessary. Such a theory obviously lacks predictive power. Under what conditions should we expect to find democracy, and when do we find dictatorship? Functionalism of this sort is only a speculation offered without any proof, or indeed, any evidence except for each single instance itself. Functionalism as a method generally ignores the basic method of scientific research, which is to make comparisons among different conditions in order to show which are associated with different outcomes. Part of the reason functionalism has been abandoned is that we have become better at doing comparative research and now apply more rigorous criteria to explanations before we accept them as true, or at least, plausible.

The other path open to functionalist theory is to claim that all advanced industrial societies need to be democracies; hence nondemocracies are either in societies which are not really advanced, or else they are on their way to becoming democracies. Russia, Nazi Germany, and South Africa would all thus be described as not truly modern societies. To assert this, however, seems to be a distortion of the facts. Parsons (1949: 104-41) once explained the period of Nazi government as a transitional phase resulting from Germany's relatively late industrialization; but in fact, Germany in the early twentieth century was one of the three great industrial powers of the world, on an equal footing with Britain and the United States and ahead of France. It was no more a "late industrializer" than was the United States. Another functionalist approach might argue that modern dictatorships are on their way to becoming democracies. But this seems an over optimistic conclusion. The party dictatorship in the USSR has been in place for about 70 years now and shows no major signs of change; nor would I bet any large sum of money on the assurance that South Africa will soon become democratic. To be realistic, I do not believe that

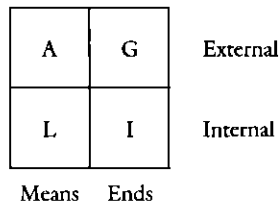
it is *functionally necessary* that democracy will continue in the United States, Britain, or other countries which are now democracies. Functional theory lulls one into a sense of false security; to truly understand the conditions which support democracy or threaten it, we need to move to a stronger mode of theorizing.

TALCOTT PARSONS' FUNCTIONALIST ACTION SYSTEM

Writing principally between the 1930s and 1960s, Talcott Parsons (1949, 1951, 1967) produced a theory which claims to be extremely general and is sometimes referred to as his "Grand Theory." Whereas functionalism, especially in the "middle-range" form advocated by Robert Merton, has a tendency to produce *ad hoc* explanations of whatever happens to exist at a particular time, Parsons aimed at a general statement of how all social systems function. Parsons' theory achieved a certain amount of popularity for a while, especially in the 1950s; then it was severely attacked, by both neo-Marxism and conflict theory, and by microsociologies such as symbolic interactionism and social phenomenology. Yet while Parsonian functionalism was fading in the United States in the 1970s, it was nevertheless acquiring some popularity among German theorists, most notably, Niklas Luhman, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Munch. And in recent years, even some American theorists, led by Jeffrey Alexander, have called for a revival of Parsonian "Grand Theory" in a revised form, eliminating Parsons' errors and ideological distortions.

THE FOUR-FUNCTION MODEL

Parsons' system is extremely abstract, since it intends to supply basic components for the analysis of any society that has ever existed or might exist, as well as any subsystem within society. We might interpret Parsons as answering the question: what are the basic functions that must be fulfilled in any social system? Presumably, if we knew these functions in advance, we could then classify any existing institution according to the functions it served, and could predict that certain institutions would come into being. Parsons answers with the following diagram:



This is called the *L-I-G-A* or *A-G-I-L* scheme (depending on the direction in which we read the boxes). *L* stands for *latent pattern maintenance*; it refers to the necessity for any system of action to have some basic pattern. Metaphorically speaking, it is a guiding script. *I* stands for *integration*, and refers to a system's need to

actively keep its parts together. *G* stands for *goal attainment*, and refers to the fact that every system has some output, or goal, that it achieves in relation to its environment. *A* stands for *adaptation*, and refers to the way the system supports itself as a physical entity in relation to the material environment.

The scheme is generated very abstractly by the two dichotomous dimensions, *Internal/External* and *Means/Ends*. Everything in a system may be regarded as operating in either internal or external directions, and can be either a means or an end. By cross-cutting these two dimensions, we create four boxes, which Parsons labels *L-I-G-A*.³

Parsons' scheme is easiest to understand when it is applied to the functional subsystems of society, which we can set out thus:

		External			
		Economy	Polity		
A		Family Education Religion	Community Law Norms		G
Means	L			I	Ends
		Internal			

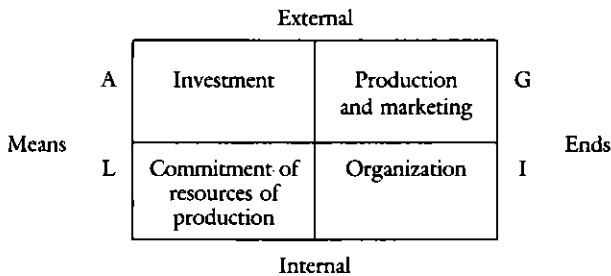
In the *L* box we find all those institutions which are regarded as producing the basic cultural pattern and inculcating it into individuals (hence, the inclusion of the family—an agency for socializing children). Under *I* we find institutions which actively promote social integration, both the actual community—the personal associations which people have with one another—and also the laws and norms which supply the rules by which members behave. These are both *internal* to the system, dealing only with inner relationships within society. In this sphere, the basic cultural patterns are laid down by the items in box *L* (hence, they are *means*), while the actual integration is worked out by the items in box *I* (hence, they are *ends*). The top row is the *external* side. The economy (*A*) is regarded as means; the system deals with the external world, adapting to it by taking material inputs and transforming them economically to serve the system's physical needs. Finally, the ends of the system, as it acts externally (either in relation to the physical world, or towards other systems) is *G* (goal attainment). Parsons regards *polity* (state) as this sector, in which all the other functional components and inputs culminate in some output or action on behalf of the whole system.

Parsons believed his *L-I-G-A* scheme gives the basic dimensions of any system of action and at one time called his whole scheme "The General Theory of Action."

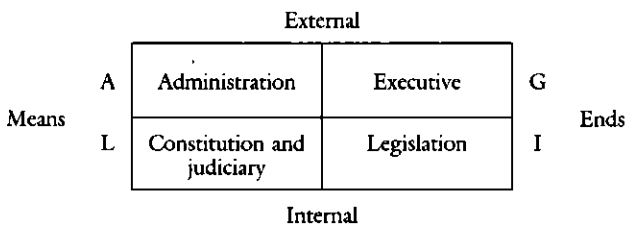
³We might ask why the first box is called *latent pattern maintenance* rather than merely *pattern maintenance*. *Latent* implies that the pattern is implicitly rather than explicitly upheld, although this is not always the case in Parsons' empirical examples of what goes in this box. Personally, I believe that he avoided calling it "pattern maintenance" or *P* because he did not think *P-I-G-A* was as euphonious as *L-I-G-A*.

This was at a time when he was trying to integrate the psychology, anthropology, and sociology departments at Harvard University into a single Department of Social Relations.⁴ "Action" could be in any system, including an individual personality (the province of psychology) or any collectivity (such as an organization) or society as a whole. Culture, although not precisely a system of action itself, since culture is not alive and does not act (Parsons and Shils, 1951: 7), is nevertheless yet another component level of the system, and is capable of being analyzed in the same terms as any other component. Parsons assigned culture to anthropology as a research area; the other social sciences, economics and political science, Parsons treated as merely specialties dealing with particular subsystems within the social system. He was not, however, successful in drawing them into his grand coalition of the Social Relations Department at Harvard; although he did produce a book (Parsons and Smelser, 1956) showing how economics integrated with, and was generally subordinate to, sociology.

Parsons' four-function scheme was meant to be applied *analytically*, that is, abstractly, rather than confined to any particular empirical level of analysis. Thus, the social system could be divided into four boxes, as in the preceding diagram. But each one of these boxes, in turn, could be subdivided into its own set of boxes. Treated in its own right as a system, the economy, for example, had to fulfill its own internal *L-I-G-A* functions:



Similarly, the polity subdivides into:



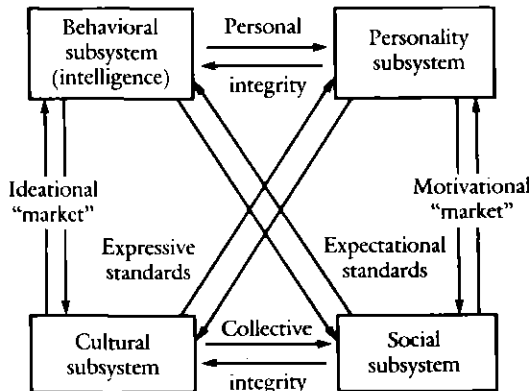
⁴For the statement of the "committee" which legitimated this maneuver intellectually, see Parsons and Shils (1951). In his autobiography (1984: 293-307), George Homans, who was a junior member of the department at this time, reminisces critically about this maneuver, which he saw as a power play on Parsons' part.

In principle, the subdivision of boxes within boxes could be endless. We could take the legislative function within the polity, for example, and show that any actual legislative body would itself have to meet its own *L-I-G-A* functions.

Or we could go in the other direction, towards the larger system rather than the smaller. Thus, the social system itself is merely part of a larger complex. We have already seen that Parsons believed the General Theory of Action would include personality, society, and culture. When he comes to put this into his *L-I-G-A* boxes, however, he feels impelled to add a fourth component, which he calls the *behavioral system* (labeled *A*), alongside *personality* (labeled *G*). Personally, I think that this is an artificial distinction, introduced because of Parsons' propensity for putting things into symmetrical boxes—he could not of, course, leave a box empty! This having been done, each of these boxes (*personality*, *behavioral system*, *cultural system*) can then be further subdivided into its own functional subsectors, and so on (see Figure 2-1).

We may begin to conclude that Parsonian theory, at least this part of it, is only a kind of parlor game in which one invents puzzle-boxes and then solves them, with each solution making possible a whole further set of puzzles. I think this is often the case, although Parsons also tries to make use of these boxes for his theory of media or interchanges (see pages 67–69). In defense of Parsons, though, we could say that at least his basic claim may be right: that in fact any social organization at all will have to take care of the four basic functions if it is to survive. Any organization must have some basic culture, must have a community of personal relationships to integrate things, must take care of its economic side, and will have its own politics. All four functions are necessary: an idealistic social movement will never last if it forgets about economic resources, and a business cannot be economically successful if it does not provide enough social integration among its members. And every organization, like it or not, will have some kind of politics. Treated in this way, Parsons' model provides at least a baseline of what any organization must

FIGURE 2-1
PARSONS' GENERAL THEORY OF ACTION

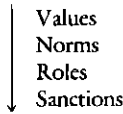


realistically have; and he stresses that "realistic" means not merely focusing on material things, since an organization can fail by ignoring the equally important side of social integration.

THE HIERARCHY OF CONTROL

What holds the system together? For Parsons the process is multidimensional, so that different aspects of the system work together to ensure that people will properly play their parts. However, he gives special emphasis to socialization, the process by which individuals learn the basic values and norms of the system.

There is a hierarchy of control within the system:



At the most general level, the system lays down certain values. In American society, for example, one of the most basic values is supposed to be achievement. This is a basic cultural pattern (thus, belonging in the *latent pattern maintenance* square). In more specific situations of interaction (*I*) this general value is specified into particular norms—rules which state how actors should behave. In the school setting, for example, it is striving for good grades; in an athletic contest, scoring points; in business, making money; and so forth. These rules become patterned into roles, according to the individuals' "position" in an organization; for instance, the role of student or teacher, employee or manager or customer, and so forth. (This process is part of the *G* sector, considered as output of the system.) People enforce the norms for particular roles by applying sanctions (*A*), rewarding those who conform and punishing those who violate the norms.

From an abstract point of view, all of these elements go together to ensure conformity with the system. Parsons, however, places particular emphasis upon the basic values, since these are believed to set the basis for norms and roles (which merely specify how the values will operate in particular situations and for particular persons). But what about the sanctions? Couldn't we say that people conform basically because they are externally controlled, rewarded for compliance (say, by being paid for their work) and threatened with punishment for violations (such as being fired if they don't work)? Parsons places sanctions far down on the list of control elements, however. That is part of his general rejection of a utilitarian or economic determinism of behavior.

DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF PRECONTRACTUAL SOLIDARITY

Parsons takes his argument from Durkheim's theory, which demonstrates that society could not be held together simply by rational agreement or exchange of rewards (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1937: 343–50). Durkheim pointed out that

society could not have been created by an original "social contract," since any agreement—say, to exchange the products of one's labor on a market—could not be undertaken without some assurance that no one would cheat or violate the contract in order to get something for nothing. Any contract, therefore, requires an enforcer. It might seem as if the state, with its police and law courts, acts as an enforcer for contracts. Yet people would first have to agree to set up the state and law courts, and there is always the possibility that someone would cheat on *that* agreement as well. Durkheim concluded that no contract or *merely* utilitarian exchange is possible without a prior "agreement" or understanding that the contract—the rules of the exchange—will be upheld. Any contract requires *precontractual solidarity*, a basic feeling of trust between the persons involved. Thus, economics cannot be the fundamental basis of society; economic relationships themselves are only possible on the foundation of an already existing social solidarity.

What causes this social solidarity to exist? We cannot assume that it is always there, or be certain which people it will include. Special conditions are necessary to produce it. In Durkheim's theory, the mechanism that produces social solidarity consists of what I have called *interaction rituals*, in a model presented and developed in Chapter 6. There, we will see that the Durkheimian theory of solidarity is compatible with a conflict theory in which material resources, rewards, and punishments are also important. Solidarity is a variable and characterizes particular groups in their struggle for power over each other, rather than a harmonious social system as a whole. Parsons uses Durkheim's general argument that sanctions must be based on prior social solidarity, but in a very different fashion from conflict theory.

SOCIALIZATION AND DEVIANCE

For Parsons, solidarity is produced primarily at the level of values, which are shared by more or less everyone in a society. His answer to how precontractual solidarity is produced is to say that children are socialized by their parents so that the basic values of society are "internalized" as parts of their personalities. In Parsons' terms, the need-dispositions of their personalities become shaped by the basic values of society, with the result that individuals need and want to do what society demands of them. If society places a basic value upon achievement, then children grow up with a personality need to achieve. If society's basic values emphasize group conformity, children are produced whose personality is most strongly oriented towards belonging to the group. In general, early childhood is the time at which children internalize the general social values. As they grow older, they become oriented towards particular spheres of activities and their norms, and in doing so, take on certain roles: boys learn to achieve in sports and go on to identify with the role of professional athlete or insurance salesman; girls learn to be nurturant and go on to identify with being housewives and mothers. (Some readers may find the sexist examples offensive, but this is the typical mode of analysis of Parsonian theory, which is oriented towards the most conventional version of society.)

During the 1940s and 1950s, when Parsons was formulating this model, Freudian psychoanalysis was very popular among American intellectuals. Parsons himself underwent psychoanalysis, and devoted considerable effort to integrating the Freud-

ian theory into his own system. For Freud, the infant begins as *id*, the raw biological impulses of hunger, aggression, and sexual drives. Eventually, these impulses are controlled and partially repressed into the unconscious, while a reality-oriented conscious self, or *ego*, appears. Most importantly, the child comes to identify with his or her parent, and internalizes the parent in the form of a *superego*. This is a psychic representation of the parent, no longer in the external world but operating as an internalized conscience and ideal. The parent is no longer outside telling the child what to do, but is inside the psyche, invisibly overseeing the child's thoughts and actions, praising what is right and making the child feel guilty for wrongdoing (or even thinking of wrongdoing). This fantasy parent also serves as an ideal, holding up the image of what the child is trying to emulate.

For Parsons, the Freudian superego is the key device by which society's values are transmitted to the child. They become part of his or her personality, so that the well-socialized individual does not have to be controlled from outside; instead, he or she obeys society's rules because of an internal need to do so. Society passes along its values from generation to generation in this way; children internalize basic values from their parents and pass them along to *their* children.

Parsons regarded Freudian theory as a solution to the problem of what holds society together. His system may be described as a combination of Durkheim's and Freud's theories (or at least, of certain aspects of these theories). This is not to say that Freudian theory is necessarily very accurate as an explanation of the individual self; differing sociological approaches will be met in Chapter 7. Parsons, however, assumes that it is accurate and incorporates it into his model in a fundamental position.

Parsons thus makes use of a psychological theory to explain how values operate as the center of the social system. But his theory does not reduce society, or culture, to psychology. The values themselves are not generated by psychology but by the autonomous pattern of culture, and especially by the history of its religions. Parsons was not sympathetic to anthropologists of the "culture-and-personality" school, who tried to show that the values of a society depended upon its methods of rearing small children (the claim, for instance, that early toilet-training would result in a drive to control the environment). Parsons was more inclined to turn this the other way around: how children are brought up depends on their society's values.

For example, deviance from society's preferred pattern could occur because of strains at any level of the system. One way that deviance can occur, of course, is through faulty socialization. Because parents are not available, or otherwise fail to bring up a child properly, the child may fail to develop the value of achievement and may become a thief, a delinquent, unemployed, a drop-out, and so forth. But deviance could also be caused at some other level. Individuals may simply not have learned the norms of the particular situation they are in: perhaps they are immigrants from a different culture. Or the roles themselves may be responsible; there may be a conflict between different roles—say, between being a loyal family member looking out for relatives' economic welfare and being an employee of an organization whose property is supposed to be protected. And finally there may be a breakdown at the level of sanctions: if white-collar crime is not being controlled in an organization, individuals may be punished by fellow workers if they don't go along

with it and rewarded if they do. Parsons thus leaves room for the system to become unhinged at various points. Although the central tendency of the system is towards conformity and harmonious operation, there is the possibility of deviance and conflict. In the long run, though, Parsons expects that conformity and control always reassert themselves.

THE PATTERN VARIABLES

The *L-I-G-A* model and the hierarchy of control describe what all social systems have in common. The differences among systems Parsons accounts for in two ways: (1) the pattern variables, or fundamental choices in the realm of culture and (2) the level of differentiation.

In the abstract, any actor's behavior can be seen as guided by certain basic choices. Parsons derived these dimensions by analyzing certain theories of social evolution, particularly the *dichotomous stage theories* already described in Chapter 1. Toennies had distinguished between traditional societies or *Gemeinschaft* (community) and modern commercial societies or *Gesellschaft* (society, formal association); Durkheim, between the *mechanical solidarity* of small, homogenous tribes and rural communities and the *organic solidarity* of the large-scale division of labor. Parsons elaborated these distinctions into five dimensions. As we have already seen, the distinctions are intended to be treated analytically rather than historically; that is, they should not be seen as either/or characterizations of two different phases of history, but as continuous variables, different values, both of which might be found within different parts of the same society.

Ascription vs. achievement: (This was Linton's dichotomy in Chapter 1. Are individuals born into their positions in society? Is their position "ascribed" to them by virtue of their age, sex, race, and family membership? Or must they achieve their own positions by their own merits?)

Particularism vs. universalism: Does one judge people and situations by who they are in relation to oneself—for example, giving preference to one's friends and relatives over strangers—or does one apply abstract, universal standards, such as "hire the person with the highest test scores"?)

Diffuseness vs. specificity: Does one make a global judgment about the kind of person one is dealing with? For instance, if dealing with a high-ranking official, does one assume that he or she is right about everything, or does one deal with him or her very specifically in terms of the task at hand ("I don't care who you are, in this office all we are concerned about is getting the job done"?)

Affectivity vs. affective neutrality: Does one allow one's emotional attitude (warmth or hostility) to influence one's behavior, or does one just concentrate on "getting the job done"? Parsons has in mind the distinction between tribal societies with their pervasive religious taboos and spiritual influences that are constantly being placated, and the attitudes of detachment and cool calculation that go along with modern technology.

Collectivity orientation vs. individualism: Is one basically concerned with the group, one's place in it, and maintaining one's group loyalty, or is one concerned with following one's own path, making up one's own mind?

In general, Parsons' ethical sympathies are always with the latter of these pairs of elements. Ascription and particularism indicate lack of individual opportunity, unfairness, and prejudice; while achievement and universalism are the "modern" values of equal opportunity and equal treatment according to the rules. Looking at these as analytical elements, though, Parsons believes that no society can move completely to the poles of achievement and universalism; for families must always ascribe the status of the husband to his children and wife (at least during the time when children are young), and that always creates the inequities of personal relationships and inherited advantages. Similarly, Parsons believes that specificity and affective neutrality are better than their opposites, since they are fairer, less irrational, more scientific, and more efficient. Again, Parsons does not believe that any society can survive without some general emotions (since the core values themselves must always underlie any merely instrumental, rational calculations). But he does not agree with the criticism of modern society that it is too specialized, impersonal, and calculating. It is only because we have an *underlying commitment* to these characteristics as values that our society does have this much rationality and calculation; we have a kind of fundamental emotional commitment to being unemotional, so to speak. Apart from this analytical reason, Parsons is, as usual, a vigorous apologist for modern society, which he sees as superior to earlier forms of society.

Contrary to some of the critiques of modernity which see us as trapped in a mass society, ordered around by bureaucracies, and coerced by economic markets and governmental controls, Parsons believes that the modern trend is towards individualism, not collectivism. This, of course, is an analytical dimension, too, and not all aspects of modern society are necessarily individualistic. An entire modern society, such as the Soviet Union (or, in another sense, Japan), can be characterized as emphasizing the collectivity value rather than the individualism value stressed in the United States (Parsons, 1951: 180-200). (This is part of Parsons' solution to the need for a functional explanation of nondemocratic government, already discussed.) But in general, Parsons also believes that the long-term evolutionary trend is towards individualism rather than collectivism. He derives this from Durkheim's theory that the division of labor produces greater specialization of roles and hence greater emphasis on individuals following their own unique trajectories through the complexities of the social system.

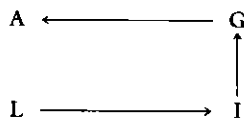
There is a certain amount of inconsistency in the way that Parsons uses the pattern variables scheme. On one hand, they are indeed analytical variables, and presumably any combination of partial values along any continuum is possible. Thus, industrial societies can have both achievement- and individualism-oriented values, as does the United States; yet also collectivity- and universalism-oriented systems, as does the USSR; or collectivity- and achievement-oriented systems, as does Japan; as well as greater elements of ascription (allegedly) in modern Germany and England, and so on. The values in some sense are arbitrary, and since they are seen as controlling the system once they are plugged into the *L* box, they give different flavors to different societies. Yet another strand of Parsons' theory regards some of the values (the right hand of each pattern variable) as evolutionarily more "modern" than those on the left hand; hence, there is a trend towards these values, and societies which represent them more fully (such as the United States) are regarded as evolutionarily more advanced.

THE DIFFERENTIATION MODEL

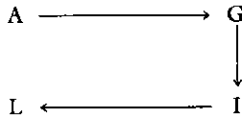
Parsons uses the differentiation model in his understanding of social change. As we have already seen, in this type of theory change is viewed as a process of differentiation which upgrades the capacity of the system, making it more efficient. Differentiation also may cause strains, bringing about a need for integration. This integration of the system is provided in several ways: in part by the creation of new agencies of regulation (especially governmental agencies), which themselves are an additional differentiation, and also at the level of norms and values. In the latter case, the norms of interaction are widened towards greater inclusion; whereas the previous, less differentiated system operated with only specific kinds of behaviors and persons allowed (for example, the hiring of white males only), the more differentiated system widens its norms to accommodate other kinds of persons. At the level of values, Parsons sees social systems as tending towards greater universalism; for instance, early Western industrial society, which demanded adherence to doctrinal Christianity, has now (allegedly) moved towards greater tolerance, admitting all religions as long as they adhere to a general ethical code.

PARSONS' TWO THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Again, we see Parsons as a liberal optimist, convinced that the direction of social change is toward greater equality of opportunity, greater tolerance, more universal laws, and greater efficiency of the system, to boot. It is worth noticing that two components of his theory work in opposite directions. One aspect of the theory stresses values (the pattern variables) in that it sees society's basic pattern as laid down by its values (which are instilled into individuals by the socialization process). Here Parsons follows a version of Max Weber's theory (1904–1905/1980) which suggested that the Protestant version of Christianity produced an emphasis on hard work and economic achievement, resulting in the spirit of modern capitalism. In his later works, Weber (1916/1951, 1916–17/1958, 1917–19/1952) broadened his argument from Protestantism to Christianity in general, contrasting the Christian emphasis on working out one's salvation by ethical conduct in the world, with the mystical salvation of Hindu or Buddhist religion, and the ethical adjustment to the world, without an other-worldly salvation, in Chinese Confucianism. Parsons (1966) interpreted this to mean that the great religious prophets and innovators—Jesus and Paul, Confucius, the Buddha, Mohammed, and a few others—laid down the basic religious values of their civilizations. With this explanation of change, a new value is placed in the *L* box of the *L-I-G-A* model, which in turn establishes new norms, organizational roles, and economic structures. Here change can be diagrammed as creating a causal sequence around the box from *L* up through *A*:



In the differentiation model, however, change generally proceeds in the opposite direction. Typically there is differentiation in the economic sphere (*A*), resulting in upgrading of system output (*G*), as well as governmental regulation (*G*), with pressures for greater inclusiveness in the normative sphere (*I*), and the final result of a greater universalism in the basic values (*L*).



In this model values are no longer autonomous determinants of the system. Differentiation itself pushes towards greater universalism, and (as we have seen) also greater emphasis on achievement, individualism, specificity, and affective neutrality.

Can the two versions of causality in Parsons' system be reconciled? Perhaps, but I doubt whether it is worth the effort. For both sides of the model are essentially speculative, and in fact, it is not clear that values really do determine the rest of the social system. Religion may well have been important in the different directions taken by Western and Eastern societies in world history, but there are other ways to interpret Weber's model than the one Parsons has chosen. We do not have to accept a model in which religious values are mysteriously given from "on high"; religious prophets themselves may be predictable, because of certain things happening in the social structure. For that matter, values themselves can be the response to certain structural forms. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the direction of causality may be from society to culture, rather than vice versa.

We have already seen some of the weaknesses of the differentiation model in Chapter 1. It is only worth noting here that the differentiation theory does not specify in which part of the system it must start. Parsons' main empirical examples of change start with the economy, giving rise to the need for government regulation, and so forth; but more abstractly, differentiation may presumably happen among any elements in the whole system or in various subsystems, with no particular way of predicting which will happen when or where. Parsons' differentiation model is more about the consequences of differentiation than about its causes; and even the theory of the consequences appears too optimistically functionalist to be realistic or predictive.

MEDIA AND INTERCHANGE: NIKLAS LUHMAN

The differentiation model and the four-fold functional boxes have yet another use in Parsonian theory. As societies differentiate, the different functions become carried out by separate organizations. In a small tribal society the family not only provided cultural pattern maintenance, it was also the locus of economic production, political organization, and social interaction. As all these activities become localized in different organizations and then are further split as these organizational

spheres become internally differentiated, there arises a need to coordinate the different organizations. This is done in two ways.

First, there is an actual exchange of the "products" of each sector. The political sphere needs material inputs from the economy in the form of money, weapons and other material resources to support the state and its personnel. In return, the political sector provides support for economic property, tax policies, and other governmental actions which favor economic production. There is a similar exchange between each pair of functional sectors. We might notice, incidentally, that Parsons developed this argument in a debate against C. Wright Mills, who had charged (1956) that there is a "power elite" in the United States, consisting of a structured exchange of favors between big business executives and the heads of the federal government and the military. Mills saw this as undermining democracy; Parsons, with his usual optimistic defense of the status quo, saw it merely as an instance of a much more abstract process which goes on in *all* social systems: a coordination by way of exchange between political and economic sectors. In an abstract sense, Parsons is probably right that politics cannot exist without economic resources, and vice versa. But Parsons automatically assumed that exchanges among sectors were equal and balanced, and that they benefited the whole system. The idea that private business corporations might be unduly favoring their interests by their political influence at the expense of the population at large seems never to have occurred to him.⁵

Parsons (1967) went on to analyze the interchanges between sectors in a more abstract way. That is, he observed that there are not only physical flows from one institution to another, but there are media of exchange which operate on a symbolic level. The basic analogy here is money. Money emerged to facilitate economic exchanges in a *differentiated* society; instead of having to barter one's goods or labor for some immediate physical substitute—grain for fish, wagon wheels for wedding dresses—the system gains much more flexibility by using money, which is acceptable for all of these things, as a token of exchange. Parsons thus points out that money actually has a moral quality; rather than being the root of all evil, it indicates a higher level of trust between people. Whereas barter implies a hard-nosed attitude—not giving up anything until one has the goods in return—money indicates an implicit promise to pay in the future. Thus, the acceptance of money (and of high-order financial instruments, such as checks, stocks, credit cards) actually indicates the spread of trust throughout society.

Money is one medium of exchange, both within and among different functional spheres. (In this sense, media of exchange are more abstract than the actual flows of output of each functional sector.) Another medium of exchange is power. Within the political sphere—or, more generally, between the leaders of the state and the members of society—power operates as a medium analogous to money. It, too, is a form of trusting future promises. Citizens vote for a leader because they expect him

⁵ It is easy to produce a computer simulation of the abstract model of system interchanges in Figure 2-1 or any of the analogous subsystem diagrams. In doing so, we are forced to recognize how vague and abstract these models actually are. There is nothing in Parsons' theory to tell us how much of any quantity ought to be flowing from one sector to another; the general implication seems to be that the flows in each direction are proportional to each other. Parsons does not deal with the possibility that the economy might get more from the state than vice versa. He assumes the system is balanced, by theoretical fiat.

to fulfill certain purposes for them; putting this more abstractly, we can say that they are giving him power as a kind of long-term loan to be invested. Using the analogy of money, Parsons distinguishes between inflationary and deflationary periods in political power. In an inflationary period, citizens have increasing confidence in government and are willing to give general support for relatively long terms without expecting immediate payoffs. On the other hand, governments may not be very effective, or voters become more suspicious; then political deflation sets in, and voters do not trust leaders except for very short periods and only if they produce very concrete results for them.

The German theorist Niklas Luhman, who was a graduate student of Parsons' in the early 1960s, has greatly expanded this part of the theory. Luhman (1979, 1980, 1982) sees society as a system in the formal sense, which he declares is "self-referential" and has purposes of its own. Individuals are necessarily subject to the demands of the system. Nevertheless, the system must work with human materials. Luhman uses the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger to describe the individual human situation of ordinary life as one in which the world is merely taken for granted as natural and familiar. But because modern society is highly differentiated, the individual is always experiencing contingencies: new people that one encounters, new situations, unpredictable futures, and remote institutional sectors (when one's life is intruded upon by new bureaucratic agencies or new business ventures that are always proliferating). The modern world is depersonalized and complex, and this arouses anxiety in the individual. The way this anxiety is allayed is by the rise of "media of communication."

These media include money and power, as well as two more that Luhman adds, *love* and *truth*. These four each operate within a particular cell of Parsons' four-fold table of social subsystems. All of them provide standardized symbols which cut across situations and enable individuals to trust in the system even though it is far too complex for them to grasp all its contingencies. Money provides this trust in bringing together the far-flung exchanges of the economic sphere, just as power does in the political sphere. In personal interaction, love is a symbolic ideal which people use in order to establish favorable personal relationships with others whom they have not known all their lives: the possibility of romance, or more generally, of human charity and sympathy, is what holds together the huge number of social interactions among strangers in modern society. And in the cultural sphere, truth is a general mechanism allowing people to accept on faith that the unfamiliar institutional sectors they encounter each have their own experts and forms of knowledge, so that what happens there, too, can be regularized and normalized.

Luhman (1982, 1986) includes historical treatments of how each of these media of communication has gradually developed. One reason for his popularity in German sociology is the way in which he provides erudite histories of these various aspects of culture, enlivening the bare abstractions of Parsons' system with vignettes of the development of courtly love in post-Renaissance Europe and the development of the concept of truth, as well as the phenomena of politics and economics. A more critical observer would say that Luhman illustrates his points rather than proves them. (For instance, a conflict theory of sexual property and male/female domination would explain the history of courtly love in a different way from Luhman's purely system-function analysis.) Luhman is actually more conservative than Parsons, who

comes across as an optimistic, somewhat naive, liberal. Luhman, on the other hand, makes little room for individual preferences or freedoms in modern society; rather, he observes that there is an inevitable force of differentiation at the level of social institutions, which reduces the freedom of individual choices and requires individuals simply to take the system on trust. More consistent than Parsons, he does not see culture as an autonomous source of social change; instead, culture (including such cultural phenomena as truth and love) is forced to take certain forms because of the differentiation of the system.

Luhman argues that each medium is relevant only to its own differentiated subsystem: love holds value in personal relationships (sphere of social interaction), truth in science and intellectual life (sphere of culture), while neither is appropriate for the political sphere. In the latter, politicians are necessarily guided by the bargaining and coalitions that make up the exercise of power. Luhman's theory thus has a somewhat cynical outlook. Luhman stresses the fact that social systems at the macro level are not usually very stable or well integrated. That is because individual actors can select from a huge variety of possible communications and actions, and hence there is often little real consensus among individuals. Normative order is largely a myth. Individuals are able to operate socially because they *assume* the existence of order even when it is lacking. This is what the symbolic media do for the system; they give individuals a feeling of confidence in dealing with situations beyond their personal experience, even when their assumptions are inaccurate.⁶

CRITICISM OF THE PARSONIAN SYSTEM

Perhaps the basic flaw of Parsonian theory is that it has relatively little explanatory content, and does little to identify the cause of any particular social arrangement. Functionalism in general tends to take whatever exists and explain it as serving the needs of the system; but as we have seen, even if quite different social phenomena existed, they, too, would be explained as serving system needs—or else as a strain that will be resolved by future social change. Most of this is extremely vague, and tells us nothing about whether there will be democracy or dictatorship, capitalism or socialism, traditionalist sexism or women's liberation.

We might describe this as a typically functionalist lack of vision regarding stratification. Parsons was a traditional, unconscious sexist, who described the "division of labor by age and sex" as a functional way of specializing social roles of males and females (1949: 89–103). No doubt, Parsons' system could be revised and made compatible with a more liberated, egalitarian view of women's position in society, but Parsons himself would never have cut through the ideology, nor led the way to any liberation. My main point is not an ideological one, however, but simply to point out that Parsons' scheme does not give us any leverage on these questions because it does not really contain a causal model of what happens when and under what conditions. Parsons' underlying strategy is very close to the philosophy "whatever is, is right" (that is, functional): This operates well enough at the level of op-

⁶In this respect, Luhman's theory is like Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, as Luhman (1984: 157–65) explicitly recognized. See also Fuchs (1986).

timistic justifications of social arrangements, but it is not very penetrating or useful as explanation.

To the extent that Parsons has explanations, they are weak or wrong: evolutionism as a theory of social change; the differentiation model (without any good causes, and with inaccurate views of its effects); and the socialization model taken over from Freud to explain individual development. Parsons' theory consists largely of a category scheme, a device for dividing everything into four boxes and then drawing arrows between them. Substantively, the most important part of the theory may concern some of the media of exchange. But even here we find vagueness and unresolved questions. Luhman regards love as a medium of exchange, but surely it is not comparable to money in all respects. We cannot collect love, or invest it for a future return. And truth seems even less like a monetary currency circulating from one situation to another. We might ask why he calls it "truth," with that word's connotation of what is accurately known, when he is really describing the mere acceptance of information from strange experts in unfamiliar situations? Even the most solidly based analogy, between money and power, tends to make power more of an equal exchange than it usually is. Power, as the ability to coerce others, may well have a symbolic and emotional side (as we shall see in conflict theory and in the interactional ritual model), but this is not well captured by declaring that it flows like a nicely equilibrating economic marketplace. Still, insofar as exchange models are now being developed in the sphere of emotions and cultural capital (Chapter 10), Parsons deserves some credit for preparing the way with his initial model, however crude.

Finally, something may be said in defense of Parsons' functionalist vision. Any social system has to include ways of overriding sheer self-interest. A purely Hobbesian conflict situation cannot exist (at least, not very extensively). As soon as there is any kind of social organization at all, no matter how coercive, there must be some elements of integration of the sort Parsons (and Durkheim) speak about. There must be honor among thieves, for instance, if they are to be successful as thieves. This is one of the reasons why there is less crime than we might imagine: even the most extreme, exploitative self-interest, if it is to survive, must make these "functional" concessions. Burglars cannot survive economically without an organizational network of "fences" (illegal businesses) to dispose of their stolen goods, and these businesses must fulfill basic organizational requirements if they are to survive. At minimum, crime becomes the rivalry of opposing "societies," each with its own morality, enforcement, and so forth. "Organized crime" is considered so dangerous, in fact, because it operates as a little private government. The same phenomena can be seen in the history of the state. Historical states (the Mongol Empire, for instance) may actually have begun as marauding conquerors; but bands of raiders or robber-barons, no matter how cruel, must create solutions to these organizational problems. Of course, this cooperation may take place only within the organization of the coercers themselves and need not extend to their victims. The conquering army or the ruling class needs internal solidarity, even as it applies brute force to controlling the lower class, and this always introduces at least a partial element of functional integration into the system.

This issue can be put in terms of a theological analogy. (Theology, according to Durkheimian theory, is actually about social issues and in fact we can use its

metaphors readily.) Evil always includes an element of good insofar as there is a social element in evil. But lest we get carried away with the Pollyannaish tone common to functionalism, we should remember that the opposite is also true: good always includes an element of evil. Analytically, there is always an element of self-interest—and usually of coercion—in society, along with the elements of value integration. These combinations of what is useful and necessary with what is coercive give a dramatic and even tragic tone to many theories. Marxism, as we shall see in the next chapter, can be regarded as the functionalism of evil.

JEFFREY ALEXANDER'S DEFENSE OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL ACTION THEORY

Recently, Jeffrey Alexander (1980–83) has argued that the Parsonian system is the most important advance in fundamental sociological theory since the era of the classics—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. According to Alexander, each of these theories was one-sided: Marx in his mature work erred on the side of materialism and economic determinism, and took account mainly of utilitarian, instrumentalist motivational factors, while Durkheim went too far in relying on subjective ideals and moral factors. Neither of these positions is seen as completely erroneous, but both need to be taken together to achieve a fully rounded theory. Although Weber attempted to be multidimensional, in Alexander's judgment, he was merely inconsistent: in some parts of his works (especially the sociology of religion) he stressed the independent power of religious ideas and values; elsewhere (especially in his politics) he dealt with mere material conditions and Machiavellian self-interest. The two sides of Weber never fitted together into a single system.

In Alexander's view, Parsons alone saw the need for full multidimensionality. We can see this in the *L-I-G-A* boxes, which include the material, cultural, political, and interactional worlds as equal components of what was truly a "general theory of action." The model also gives full scope to both individual actors and to the macro level of the social system, and yet another macro level of values. The bare outlines of Parsons' model, then, give the dimensions of a truly general sociology.

Alexander argues that the theories which criticized Parsons in the 1960s and 1970s, conflict theory and subjectivist/phenomenological theories, are actually on weaker grounds *as general theories*. Conflict theory, especially from the Marxian side, reduces society to one or two boxes of the system—economics and politics. The phenomenological theories, on the other hand, miss the entire level of macro structure, of patterned interaction above the level of the individual. For however insightful they may be about individual action and consciousness, they make the error of reducing society to portions of the bottom boxes, culture and interaction. Only on the grounds of a general action theory, such as Parsons provided, can the insights of these theories be properly integrated.

At the same time, however, Alexander is critical of Parsons for falling back from his *insight into multidimensionality*. Alongside Parsons' exposition of this general theory, there is a more particular Parsonianism: the side which is functionalist, all

too ready to adopt Pollyannaish complacency about the working of present institutions and a facile optimism about the future. Alexander wants to strip away the functionalism from the system; he prefers to call it the *theory of action* rather than *structural functionalism*. Further, he criticizes Parsons for stressing values and value socialization as the guiding element in the system (see "Parsons' Two Theories of Social Change," pages 66–67), rather than making values merely one element interacting on an equal par with the others. Alexander stresses the aspect of Parsons which focuses on conflict, especially as the process of differentiation produces imbalances. Alexander currently points out that a system theory does not have to be in equilibrium and criticizes Parsons for his tendency to assume that, empirically, a social system (such as the modern United States) will generally be in equilibrium, or that interchanges among the sectors will always be equal.

Alexander has been treated by unsympathetic commentators as simply an effort to revive Parsonian theory with all its idealism, its abstractions, and its conservative biases. This is inaccurate. Alexander's theory is a criticism of Parsons from the left, an effort to purify it in the light of modern postpositivist philosophy, and to introduce the insights of conflict theory and phenomenology. Alexander's massive four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1980–83) is patterned after Parsons' first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Both are efforts to induct and accumulate the main theoretical accomplishments of the past. But there is a significant difference in the classics they choose to build upon. Both Parsons and Alexander select Durkheim for his major insight that common values underlie any utilitarian, self-interested social action (the nonrational or precontractual basis of solidarity). Both take Weber, although Parsons essentially assimilates him in to Durkheim, by interpreting his emphasis on religion and status groups as converging with the fundamental importance of values; Alexander, on the other hand, sees Weber as an attempt to be more fully multidimensional, especially on the materialist and conflict side.

For an economic sociology, though, Parsons used primarily the work of Vilfredo Pareto (as well as that of the economist Alfred Marshall). It was Pareto who made Parsons into a systems theorist—but of the conservative type that Alexander critiques—by being the source of the idea of an abstract analytical system whose self-equilibration might be worked in terms of simultaneous differential equations. Alexander throws out Pareto and includes instead the obviously "missing" classic: Marx. It is Marx's hard-boiled economics of conflict and domination and his dialectical drive towards human liberation that Alexander wishes to incorporate into his fully multidimensional system of action.

It must be admitted that Alexander has not worked out a full system. He has barely even sketched where the Marxian side will enter the overall model. The concluding volume of his argument is taken up with Parsons' theory itself, with demonstrating the validity of the basic multidimensional scheme and disentangling it from the more one-sided and conservative version of Parsons which has attracted most commentators. In this sense, Alexander should be regarded as a beginning, as a very general program, rather than a specific theory. His abstract multidimensional model is a challenge to other theorists to produce a system doing justice to both micro and macro; to values and ideas, as well as material resources and interests; and to solidarity as well as conflict. However, Alexander may not realize how far

afield such a theory might take us from the Parsonian system he uses as his home base. I will claim in Chapters 4 and 5, for example, that a multidimensional conflict theory may in fact be closer to filling the specifications.

THE ANALYTICAL AND THE CONCRETE

One of the major lessons in both Parsons and Alexander is the distinction between the analytical elements of a theory, on one side, and the concrete empirical phenomena and lower-level explanatory principles on the other. Parsons' four-function table is conceived at the level of the most abstract theoretical concepts necessary for any system,, just as his pattern variables are abstracted from the more concrete historical models of Toennies, Durkheim, and Linton. Alexander stresses this distinction even more strongly, and polemicizes against naive "positivist" philosophies or methodologies which believe they can immediately test all theory against raw "facts." Alexander particularly needs the distinction because it enables him to separate the analytical elements of Parsons' approach—the stress on multidimensionality itself—from Parsons' more concrete theories about value integration, functionalism, and so forth, where his ideology betrays him into theoretical errors.

The distinction is valuable. It is what enables me to suggest that a version of conflict theory may fit the bill on the general multidimensional level better than Parsons' theory itself could. Both Parsons and I would agree with Durkheim's fundamental point, that there is always some "precontractual solidarity" underlying any group action. But Parsons confuses this analytical primacy of "values" with the empirical notion that it applies to the level of society as a whole, missing the point that "societies" which are well integrated may exist only at the level of local groups, and that the value solidarity they have may be fluctuating and temporary. The analytical importance of values should be to point us towards the mechanisms that produce them in each situation, so that we may examine the extent to which they are produced and see how they may fit into situations of class conflict, political domination and other less-than-ideal phenomena of real life. Seen analytically rather than concretely, values become a tool in a social conflict analysis.

The same distinction between the analytical and the concrete is characteristic of a number of other recent approaches to theory. This is particularly so of the range of theories grouped under such labels as "structuralism," "rationalism," or "new social realism." These tend to be system theories in the sense that they are structures of relationships among very general elements. Often these are opposed to positivist, empiricist theories, as well as to subjectivistic, individualistic ones. They are antipositivist because they regard the structure as a set of logical elements or possibilities transcending the merely factual level; and they oppose the interpretive, situationalist social psychologies because they see the structure as transcending the merely individual and making it possible. We will meet various versions in subsequent chapters: the Marxian form in Chapter 3 (Althusser, Bhaskar), and the French structuralist, semiotic, or linguistic versions in Chapter 9 (Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Chomsky). Other structural theories, however, such as the network theories in Chapter 12, are anti-

individualistic but not antiempiricist, stressing interactional structures rather than cultural ones. "Systems" theory is itself an analytical construct. As such, we must expect it to appear again in different guises and various locations.

SUMMARY

1. A system is anything which has parts connected by processes or relationships. A system may be open or closed, stable or unstable; there are many types of systems.

2. *Feedforward* is a flow from one part of a system to another. *Feedback* is a set of flows linking parts in a loop. "Smart," or goal-seeking, feedback regulates flows with information about whether the system is approaching or maintaining a goal state. *Negative feedback* reacts to deviations from goals and results in reestablishing equilibrium. *Positive feedback*, in which flows accumulate through a loop, is explosive and results in an unstable system.

3. Systems may be mechanical or self-referential. Consciousness in human individuals may be regarded as a complex, multilevel self-referential system. The macrostructure of a society, however, is not itself conscious, and large-scale social processes (such as arms races or population growth) are often mechanical, containing explosive positive feedback loops.

4. Functionalism is a particular type of system theory which attempts to explain the existence of parts of society by their contribution to maintaining the whole society. Functionalism has been criticized for ignoring the effects of self-interested domination of some members of society by others.

5. Another criticism of functionalism is that its models explain present structures by their future consequences. Stinchcombe proposes to solve this by postulating a negative feedback mechanism: the presence or absence of social integration feeds back to produce corrective behavior, creating or sustaining functional institutions. It remains questionable whether societies have a goal-seeking mechanism to guide this process towards equilibrium. Functionalism also lacks predictive power to explain which structures are selected in which situations.

6. Parsons theorized that any social system must satisfy four functions: *latent pattern maintenance* (a cultural blueprint), *social integration*, *goal attainment* (output towards the environment), and *adaptation* (resource inputs from the environment). The functions are *analytical* (that is, abstract) and apply to any level of analysis: the individual personality, particular organizations, institutions, communities, nations, or the entire world.

7. Parsons proposed that a social system is held together through a hierarchy of control. *Values* are the most basic element, which are specified into *norms*, patterned into *roles*, and reinforced by *sanctions*. Basic values are inculcated in the individual by socialization. Deviance is the result of strain at any level: faulty socialization of values in individuals, failure to specify norms, conflict of roles, or failure of sanctions.

8. Durkheim argued that society could not be held together fundamentally by rational agreement or exchange of rewards. Any utilitarian contract requires "pre-

contractual solidarity," feelings of trust that other people will uphold agreements. Parsons used Durkheim's argument as a basis for his own theory that societies are rooted in common values. However, it is also possible to interpret Durkheim's theory on a micro level, which allows for conflict between solidarity groups.

9. Parsons proposes two mechanisms of change: (1) the injection of new values into the system, especially by charismatic religious leaders; (2) differentiation taking place among parts of the system, which pushes values towards universalism, achievement, individualism, specificity, and affective neutrality.

10. As societies differentiate, functions become carried out by specialized organizations. Interchanges among subunits are carried out via *media of exchange*. Parsons emphasized the importance of *symbolic* media which facilitate transactions: *money* in the economic realm, and *power* in the political realm. Luhman adds *love* as a medium of exchange in personal relations and *truth* as a generalized medium for dealing with situations in the cultural sphere which are remote from personal experience. For Luhman, societies at the macro level are usually not very well integrated; these media do not produce normative consensus but only allow individuals to act with confidence in the absence of consensus.

11. Alexander argues that the most important contribution of Parsonian theory is not its functionalism but the insight that any theory of society must be *multidimensional*. It must interpret both individual and structural levels, material conditions, self-interest, and also ideas and collective moral values. Another crucial distinction is between the *analytical level* of basic theoretical concepts and principles, and the *concrete empirical phenomena* to which they may be applied. A system model is itself analytical rather than concrete, and hence may be applied at many different levels.