



---

False Connections: Systems and Action Theories in Neofunctionalism and in Jurgen Habermas

Author(s): Thomas Schwinn

Source: *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 1998), pp. 75-95

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/202215>

Accessed: 05/04/2011 07:36

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=asa>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*American Sociological Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sociological Theory*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# False Connections: Systems and Action Theories in Neofunctionalism and in Jürgen Habermas\*

THOMAS SCHWINN

*Institute of Sociology, University of Heidelberg*

*Recent theoretical discussions have served to bridge the gap separating systems- and action-theoretical approaches; however, the question of their basic compatibility has rarely been raised. This paper takes up two efforts at linking systems and action theory: those of neofunctionalists and those of Jürgen Habermas. Neofunctionalists start from the inadequacies of systems functionalism and seek to open it to the theory of action. Habermas, on the other hand, seeks to overcome the limits of the theory of action by widening its scope in systems-theoretical terms. Successful synthesis eludes both efforts: either the status of voluntaristic aspects is so enhanced that the systemic whole and its functional imperatives practically vanish, or too much emphasis is placed on the systemic aspect, reducing actors to the mere executing agents of systemic needs. The combination of theories of structure and action provides a way out of this dilemma.*

During the postwar period, an irreconcilable antagonism existed in sociology between action-theoretical and systems-theoretical approaches. There now exists greater readiness for discussion across this divide (Alexander, Giesen, Münch, and Smelser 1987). In moving from reduction to linkage, microsociological approaches seek connections to “higher-level” phenomena, and an actor-oriented perspective finds a place within systems-theoretical, functionalist approaches. As important as the macro-micro link may be, it should not be forgotten that fragments from theories originating in different sociological traditions cannot be combined arbitrarily. Two such efforts are subject to critical examination here. On the one hand, there is the attempt on the part of so-called neofunctionalists to open up Parsons’s systems functionalism to action theory. On the other, there is the effort undertaken by Jürgen Habermas to integrate elements of systems functionalism into action theory. The neofunctionalists start from the deficiencies of systems functionalism and seek to correct them by means of action theory; Habermas seeks to overcome the inadequacies of action theory by supplementing it with systems theory. The present study comes to the conclusion that neither succeeds in discovering a consistent way to link the two heterogeneous theoretical components. A successful micro-macro link can only be achieved by combining a theory of action and a theory of structure and not by combining action and systems theories, for this latter combination does not allow either of the two sides to be adequately conceptualized.

## I. THE NEOFUNCTIONAL DILEMMA

Neofunctionalists distinguish three ways of establishing links with a given theoretical tradition (Colomy 1990c:xvff.; Alexander and Colomy 1990b:41ff.). First, one can *revise, expand upon, and rework peripheral aspects of the theoretical tradition*; this leaves the theory’s theoretical core untouched. Second, insofar as the theoretical core is incorporated

\*Address correspondence to the author at Institut für Soziologie, Universität Heidelberg, Sandgasse 9, D-69117 Heidelberg, Germany.

into the revisionary process without, however, breaking with the theory's overarching framework, one speaks of the *reconstruction* of the theory. And, finally, the *destruction* of a given theoretical tradition represents a further way of "developing" upon it. Neofunctionalists understand their own work as a *reconstruction of Parsonsian theory*. Now it is admitted that neofunctionalism represents more a broad tendency in theory than a new theory (Alexander 1993:34; Colomy 1990c, xxi); the difficulties in defining the relation between functionalism and neofunctionalism are also recognized (Alexander and Colomy 1990b:35). The following aspects are stressed in characterizing the main features of the neofunctionalist program (Alexander 1985:9–10): it works with a model of society in which the parts are symbiotically interrelated but without this interaction being directed a priori in any specific direction by a controlling force. This model of society should be understood in a descriptive rather than an explanatory sense, since it provides only "a general picture of the interrelation of social parts" (Alexander 1985:9). The concept of equilibrium is taken as a point of reference for analyzing integrative processes, "though not for participants in actual social systems as such" (ibid.). The action-theoretical side of the model receives greater significance than in Parsons, though this is done without neglecting the structural and cultural framework conditions. Last, differentiation is viewed as the predominant trend of social development. This neofunctional line of approach, as worked out by Alexander, harbors contradictions and ambiguities that will be described below in terms of the differentiation theory that these authors prefer to take up.

Parsons worked with a "problem-solving model" (Smelser 1985:118; Alexander 1988:62; Colomy 1990a:480), in which society is treated as an instrumentally oriented, purpose-directed enterprise. After a certain sequence is gone through, systems tensions that emerge at a certain state of differentiation are resolved on a new level of differentiation. The driving force of the differentiation process is seen in the *systemic tendency* to escape from tensions by means of further differentiation. In the opinion of the neofunctionalists, the systems-theoretical model of differentiation is not tenable in this form; it has to be opened to the tradition of action theory (Alexander and Colomy 1985; Alexander 1988; Colomy 1990a). One has to avoid Parsons's conflation of general tendencies and causes by paying greater attention to the voluntaristic aspects of action that he neglected. Corresponding actors must be identified in all phases of the course of differentiation. This starts from the fact that tensions at a given level of differentiation are not independent of actors' perception and interests. It has to be specified which social groups are not content with an existing social order. Parsons's theory provides no way of explaining the causes of differentiation processes. It is not enough to talk of general systemic tensions. A structural framework does not transform itself, but must, instead, be used by specific actors (above all, by strategic groups). The process of differentiation is activated by factors that are much more specific than general systemic tensions. In this context, social groups are not simply altruistic agents of improved systemic adaptivity, but pursue, instead, value- and interest-oriented institutionalization strategies. There is neither an automatic process of differentiation nor a necessary correlation between a new structure on a higher level of differentiation and an increase in efficiency. Whether a structure "functions" better or worse has to be decided with regard to a specific group or groups. A new level of differentiation produces not only improved solutions to existing problems, but also new tensions and conflicts.

Neofunctionalists take seriously the critique of the way in which Parsons defined the link between action and systems theory. And they consider the opening to action theory the only chance of developing upon this legacy. The *systemic problem-solving model* has to be supplemented by an *actor-based model of interests* (Colomy 1990a:480). They see the beginnings of neofunctionalism in the works of Shmuel Eisenstadt, who took pains to make links between functional systemic needs and concrete group processes (Alexander

and Colomy 1985). They also derive their increased interest in historical-empirical studies from his works (Alexander 1988:68; Colomy 1990a:469ff.). Eisenstadt insisted upon avoiding the separation between the development of differentiation theory and the investigation of concrete, social processes. There is acceptance of the primary tendency toward differentiation, but there is recognition that Parsons largely neglected the wealth of historical variation in the forms and courses of differentiation. He assumed steady rates of differentiation and synchronized institutionalization among the various subsectors of society, although an uneven state of differentiation among the differentiated sectors of a society represents the historically more common variant. The notion of a complete break between tradition and modernity also does not hold up to historical analysis: many varieties of traditionalism survive, incorporated into modern forms. Uneven processes of differentiation entail a correspondingly incomplete integration of societal subsectors. The tensions, pathologies, countermovements, and counterreactions that this gives rise to within a circumscribed time period may be more decisive for societies than the general, evolutionary tendencies that Parsons was interested in (Alexander 1988:63ff.). This view is also accompanied by a more critical assessment of the developmental chances of modern societies. In contrast to Parsons's optimism about modernity, which is still found in Münch (Schwinn 1996), neofunctionalists are more sensitive to the costs of modernity (Colomy 1990a:486ff.).

Despite these important extensions and modifications of Parsons's theory, there are unresolved problems in the neofunctionalist combination of action and systems theory. There were earlier efforts, following Parsons, to introduce action-theoretical aspects into systems-theoretical explanations. Neil Smelser (1959) worked on a systems-functionalist theory of social change in his early writings. Systemic tensions at a given level of differentiation are seen as generating dissatisfaction in the specific populations affected by these tensions, and the latter are seen as leading, via a sequence of actions, to a new level of differentiation. Lewis Coser (1956) sought to link functionalism and the analysis of social conflicts by pointing out the positive functional significance of the latter. Conflicts can contribute to the functioning of social systems, since divisive elements may be uncovered in the course of conflict and the conflicting parties may be forced to establish certain rules of play that ultimately serve as a bond between them. The aim of these early works was to integrate aspects of other theoretical traditions into the systems-functionalist paradigm. By contrast, the intention of neofunctionalists is to make systems functionalism and the theory of action mutually accessible to one another and not simply to fill in the holes created in functionalism by criticism.<sup>1</sup> Thus, action should not simply be the executing organ of systemic processes, as it is, for example, in Smelser's early works. Instead, one has to reconstruct the repercussions on systems theory of giving serious attention to the perspective of the actor. This does not occur in a satisfactory manner.

A systems-theoretical model is explicitly held on to (Eisenstadt 1985; Colomy 1990a:491f.; Colomy 1990c:xxxi; Colomy and Rhoades 1994). What is involved here is not the replacement of the problem-solving model with an action-defined model of interests, but its supplementation. However, by holding on to the problem-solving model, the independent life and self-determination of systems, like those of an actor, must influence analyses as an explanatory component. But this is the very feature that neofunctionalists also criticize, especially in the German interpretations of Parsons found in Niklas Luhmann and Richard Münch. Alexander softens the core systems-functionalist idea: "Functionalism models society as an intelligible system. It views society as composed of elements

<sup>1</sup>Alexander and Colomy 1985:22. Camic (1986:693) has accused neofunctionalism of not having paid adequate attention to the preceding state of research on functionalism. This accusation is not unjustified. One searches in vain for a discussion, for instance, of Merton and Coser.

whose interaction forms a pattern that can be clearly differentiated from some surrounding environment. These parts are symbiotically connected to one another and interact without a priori direction from a governing force" (Alexander 1985:9; see also Alexander 1982:59). Models of equilibrium or homeostasis are useful points of reference for integrating these parts. However, and this is where the move away from Parsons begins, *the functionalist-systems model must not be used in an explanatory sense, only in a descriptive one*. It provides a picture of the relations between the parts of a society, but does not explain anything.

This distinction that Alexander (1985:9) makes between the explanatory and purely descriptive use of the systems model of society is not, however, convincing, as Becker notes:

For in his *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* his critique of Parsons does not concern the latter's functionalist construction as such, but only his "conflation" of empirical reality with models. Parsons's critics are also blamed for this conflation. So, although Alexander never discusses the questions of whether and where functional explanations are possible—his non-methodological definition of (neo-)functionalism is indifferent with respect to this issue—one has to conclude from his treatment of Parsons's social theory that he does not object to functionalist constructions at the level of models. This impression is affirmed elsewhere when Alexander states that neofunctionalism "models society as an intelligible system." Apparently, according to Alexander, models are not necessarily related to social reality. . . . But aiming at analytic relevance should at least imply that models pretend to say something about reality. And this is only possible when these models are not fictitious but consciously idealized constructions of reality. In any event this means that elements that are neither present in, nor inferable from, social reality do not belong in a model. And this is especially true of objective functions. (Becker 1988:869)

For Parsons (Schwinn 1993a) and for Luhmann (Schwinn 1995b), system models are more than just description. They believe in the independent life of systemic processes and traits that can define the selection criteria of courses of differentiation on their own (Alexander 1983:173; Colomy 1990a:491–92). The idea of the problem-solving model would also have to be maintained in neofunctional argumentation and the systems model would have to be ascribed explanatory rather than just purely descriptive abilities. This, though, is directly at odds with an opening toward action theory.

Neofunctionalists have not adequately followed up on the ramifications that an actor's perspective has on systems-theoretical logic. A theory of action can only be consistently combined with a structural theory, not with a systems theory. For in the latter, action can have only a residual status. There is a relation of mutual presupposition between the concepts of "function" and "system" (Giddens 1977:110). An event or an institution can only be characterized as functional with regard to a system, and a system survives only if its functional needs are satisfied. Niklas Luhmann holds to this functionalist idea: the particular can only be determined by the continuous reduction of possibilities in a network of relations.<sup>2</sup> Several authors have accused neofunctionalists of dodging this basic problem of systems functionalism. "Most neofunctionalists tip-toe around questions of needs; and in so doing, they abandon what is distinctive about functional analysis. Thus, much neo-

<sup>2</sup>Luhmann 1982, 1990. On the problematic status of this idea in Parsons, see Schwinn 1993a. On Luhmann, see Schwinn 1995b.

functionalism is not functional at all, since needs and requisites do not appear as part of the theoretical explanation of events" (Turner and Maryanski 1988:117f. See also Turner 1991:236, 247; Barber 1992:37ff., 52; Joas 1992:105, Ritzer 1992:605).

Thus neofunctionalism is confronted by the following unresolved dilemma: One can hold on to the functionalist problem-solving model; then an actor's action is reduced to the mere execution of the logic of the system. On the other hand, one can take the actor's perspective seriously; then, however, it is no longer possible to speak of the self-active problem-solving of systems. Alexander's distinction between a subjective and an objective perspective does not offer a way out. "Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functionalist systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such" (Alexander 1985:9). Merton (1968:9) had already emphasized that the concept of "function" presupposes the standpoint of the observer and not necessarily that of the participant; that social functions are related to objectively observable consequences and not to the actor's subjective motives and goals. Many social practices fulfill a "function," even though this is not the conscious intention of participants. But this consideration does not open any way out of the dilemma, since in the strict distinction between functional consequences and subjective intentions the latter are functionalized in terms of the former. Giddens stressed this in his criticism of Merton's idea of latent functions: "the decisive error in functionalism is to regard the identification of the (unintended or unanticipated) consequences of action as an explanation of the existence (and the persistence) of that action. The fact that a given social item or social practice plays a part in the reproduction of a wider social system, where this is unintended by, and unknown to, the actors who engage in that practice, or to any others, *cannot explain why it plays the part it does*: why it persists as a recurrent social practice" (Giddens 1979:211).

In a combination of action theory and systems theory, one side always has to be ascribed a residual status. The only way out of this neofunctional dilemma is to combine action theory and structural theory. Structures here are not understood—in the sense of orthodox structuralism from Lévi-Strauss via Althusser to Foucault—as self-active agencies. Systems necessarily imply homeostatic tendencies of a boundary-setting entity (Eisenstadt 1985:110) in terms of which functions are defined; structures, by contrast, solely present action with frame-setting conditions that are not conceived of in the terms of a unity (Luhmann 1984:52). A closer look at the way in which neofunctionalists discuss objective social aspects shows their vacillation between a systemic and a structural utilization of these elements. Especially in their theoretical discussions, they tend to propagate a synthesis between systems theory and action theory. By contrast, in their more concrete investigations, the concept of structure predominates. Even though the concept of system continues to be used, they no longer resort to the idea of a self-active problem-solving unit. In this context, neofunctionalists understand "systems" to represent "configurations of conditions" that first have to be used in a specific fashion by actors in the course of their actions. There is no direct path from "system" to action; instead, it is first necessary to direct attention to the complicated interaction of frame-setting conditions and the actors who act.

Primarily in the empirical writings of neofunctionalists, *the concept of system mutates into a concept of structure*. "That which is objective" no longer appears as an independent, systemic process, but as the conditions of action (Alexander and Colomy 1985:15ff.; Colomy 1985:135ff.; Colomy 1990a:474ff.; Colomy 1990b:223ff.). In contrast to systems, structures are not self-activating. The establishment of the conditions of action is accordingly only the first step in understanding social processes. A specific allocation of material resources, existing cultural interpretive schemas, and existing institutions set certain starting conditions. However, for the resulting "tensions" to translate into differentiation processes, a whole catalogue of further premises are necessary. And it is in this context that

recourse is made above all to the action-theoretical tradition. "If strain is to precipitate collective action it must be transmuted into a 'sense of justice.' The simple recognition of systemic problems or perceived threats to a group interest is rarely sufficient to generate sustained collective mobilization oriented to institutional change" (Alexander and Colomy 1985:17). Thus, tensions need first to be recognized as such, thematized by elites and intellectuals, and interpreted. In order for these interpretive schemas to take hold, there has to be a certain degree of communicative interlinkage among those affected. Special mobilization gains are achieved by identifying an "oppressor" or party responsible for or profiting from the existing and criticized conditions. Furthermore, the counterstrategies and reactions of established elites and other groups also have to be considered (Colomy 1985, 1990b).

Especially in their empirical writings, the neofunctionalists' adherence to their own theoretical principles is limited. Theoretically, the problem-solving model is not to be thrown overboard, but merely corrected by means of the actor-based model. However, in their concrete studies, all references to society as an entity with functional needs that have systemic impact disappear, and only structural framing conditions are made use of. This can be illustrated by Smelser's (1985) study of the differentiation of educational institutions in the nineteenth century. These institutions do not prevail because they represent objectively functional needs. Instead, this process was initially set off by a dissatisfaction with existing institutions—or the lack thereof—for the growing masses of workers, especially in urban areas. "Dissatisfaction" presupposes *values* that provide the criteria for assessing a situation. Smelser (1985:119f.) emphasizes that there was no unified value system that could serve as the basis for clearly evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of existing or planned institutions. In England, a feudal/aristocratic value pattern stood opposed to a utilitarian/performance-oriented one. In the United States, tension existed between a widely held democratic value pattern and aristocratic thinking, with their relative strength varying from state to state.

Aside from values, in Smelser's view (*ibid.*:120ff.) the *groups* that participated in this process also have to be identified. In England, these were religious and religious-ethnic groups as well as new groups emerging from the process of industrialization; in the United States, religious, ethnic-racial, and regional groups were involved, as well as newly emergent "industrial" groups. Moreover, in both countries these groups formed in various mixtures and with various degrees of overlapping. According to value background, group basis, and degree of organization, these groups expressed their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current or strived-for state of school institutions in the relevant debates and discussions. These "groups served as a kind of political maze through which proposed reforms, legislation, and expenditures affecting primary education would pass, with the various groups—insofar as they were politically organized and articulate—ultimately taking political stands according to their perceived values and interests" (*ibid.*:121).

The ultimate shape that school institutions took was the result of these group conflicts in the process of institutional formation. In England it was not possible to implement school-formation measures without paying considerable attention to the interests of the strong religious groups and institutions (such as the Church of England). Moreover, the conjunction of a rigidly hierarchical class structure with an aristocratic-feudal value orientation enabled the concomitant interest groups to institute a school system that reproduced class differences. Every class was supposed to be provided with the level of education it "required." But even in the upper classes, there was no agreement about the impact of school-based education for the masses. Some were of the opinion that education among the lower classes would incite dangerous ideas; others hoped that it would lead to obedient and responsible citizens. In the United States, with its more open class structure and its

stricter separation between Church and State, those group strategies prevailed that advocated an open school system relatively untouched by religious interests (*ibid.*:125ff.).

In the problem-solving model, an initially inefficient state of affairs is replaced by a subsequent efficient one. The actors here are nothing more than the executing agents of the functional needs of the system. Nowhere does Smelser have recourse to these model assumptions; the same holds true for other studies by neofunctionalists. The starting point is the identification of the problem of inadequate schooling, which only becomes a problem for specific groups, and dissatisfaction with it is not universally shared. Analysis then moves to the process of institutionalization, which is the expression of conflicting group strategies with winners and losers. It ends with the established school system, whose “efficiency” or “inefficiency” is assessed differently, according to one’s interests and values. Through all of this, the analysis works with a conception of actors in the framework of structural conditions, and not with the assumptions of the systems functionalist model.

The structural network of relations is not sufficient for determining individual social events or the existence of institutions. Actors have a certain degree of leeway within this network and, in fact, actually more: the very way in which this network is interconnected is heavily affected by these actors. By breaking with and undermining the importance of this conditioning network of relations, the concept of system is turned into a concept of structure. There is a basic openness and underdetermination of the subjects of action vis-à-vis the conditions under which and the relations in which they exist. Each new state is not derivable from its preceding state. Strengthening the status of the theory of action means that even the most comprehensive combination of partial aspects cannot yield a systemic whole; the “gaps” cannot be closed in a systemic manner. And this has ramifications for the question of system: the concepts “system maintenance,” “functional needs,” and “systemic whole” presuppose a *complete*, that is, systemic set of interrelations.<sup>3</sup> However, this is exactly what a structural concept does not provide:

Because systemic criteria are often subject to change, inconsistent with one another, internally ambiguous, and susceptible to diverse interpretations, the problem of specification is chronic and paramount. It is precisely because the connection between “selective criteria” and institutional patterns is tenuous and loose that the “contributions” of concrete actors to the process of structural differentiation must be assessed. This approach maintains, then, that within the broad limits established by systemic parameters, corporate action and group conflict specify the pattern of differentiation that ultimately obtains. (Colomy 1990a:492)

Even though Colomy makes use of the concept of systems—in contrast to Parsons’s AGIL schema, which was able to indicate clear functional needs with corresponding relations of exchange—the sum of partial effects and interactions in the social sphere cannot be calculated into a systemic whole.<sup>4</sup> Every new state of differentiation brings with it, like an inescapable shadow, new dimensions of conflict (Smelser 1985:119, 122; Colomy 1990a:470ff., 483ff.; Schwinn 1995a). One must also discard the assumption, as Smelser (see also Rueschemeyer 1986:181ff.) convincingly showed, of an overarching value system in terms of which the effectiveness of differing institutional arrangements could be

<sup>3</sup>This is a sensible assumption for mechanical and organic systems.

<sup>4</sup>Even Eisenstadt (1964:381) had already loosened these interconnections: “The level of differentiation in any one sphere necessarily constitutes, within broad limits, a pre-condition for the effective institutionalization of certain levels of differentiation in other social spheres. But within these broad limits of mutual preconditioning a great deal of structural variety is possible.” See also Eisenstadt 1987:9.



measured and compared. A more realistic assumption is that of differing value positions that argue about the “appropriateness” of social institutions. Neofunctionalists have yet to provide an explanation of why they continue to adhere to a concept of system. “Neofunctionalists have not resurrected functionalism, but killed it off” (Turner and Maryanski 1988:118; see also Joas 1992:105).<sup>5</sup>

## II. THE “FAILED MARRIAGE” OF SYSTEMS AND ACTION THEORY: JÜRGEN HABERMAS

A further effort to link systems functionalism and the theory of action is found in the work of Jürgen Habermas, who has been involved in a dialogue with systems theory from the time of his earliest writings (1970:176ff.; 1971; 1973; 1981; 1985:417ff.; 1992:67ff., 415ff.). Whereas neofunctionalists start from systems functionalism and seek to open it up to and reformulate it in terms of the theory of action, Habermas proceeds from the theory of action and believes it necessary to incorporate systems functionalism within his theory. How is this incorporation justified? Habermas ascribes fundamental limits to what a theory of action can provide. In this context, Niklas Luhmann’s theoretical approach holds a certain degree of persuasive force for Habermas, Luhmann’s early works develop the basic concepts of systems theory in close conjunction with the sociology of organizations. Habermas refers to Luhmann’s critique of Weber’s purposive model of the organization (Habermas 1987:306ff.). The purposive model cannot explain why organizations are unable to resolve their system-maintenance problems chiefly by means of the purposive-rational (i.e., rational, means-ends based) conduct of its members. There is no linear dependence between the means-ends or purposive rationality of action of the individual and the rationality of the organization. And this consideration, in Habermas’s view, is all the more applicable on the level of overall societal analysis. As complexity increases, a rupture occurs between the rationality of action and the functional rationality of social systems (Habermas 1981, II:347ff., 447, 461; 1991:253–54). On the level of simple interactions, the temporal, spatial, material, and social conditions of action and the intermeshing of the consequences of action are comprehensible for the actors taking part. Thus, in simple, archaic societies, there is no break, no rupture, between the intentions of action and functional constellations (Habermas 1987:156, 164). As the complexity of the aggregate effects of cooperative actions increases, the consequences of action escape their underlying intentions. This is the point at which action theory reaches its limits. The consequences of aggregate action, which attain a functional stability, can no longer be encompassed by means of categories of subjectively meaningful action. They are only accessible by means of a systems-theoretical explanation.

This is a radical step, and it has sparked much of the criticism found in the secondary literature. The transition to systems theory does more than just postulate that the consequences of action can no longer be comprehended by actors from a certain level of complexity onwards. The claim underlying the genuinely systems-theoretical argument is *that the consequences of action intermesh to form an objectively meaningful functional constellation, a functional rationality, in a self-activating way without the incorporation of intentions.*

<sup>5</sup>For a long time the critique of systems functionalism came “from without” and functionalism was able to muster its counterarguments on the basis of a broad internal consensus. Now, though, the functionalist legacy of Parsons is in the midst of grinding itself down from within. The differences among Luhmann, Münch, and the neofunctionalists with regard to model assumptions and historical explanatory claims cannot be overlooked, and they also cannot be bridged (Schwinn 1995a).

What Habermas refers to as the contribution made by the consequences of patterns of action to the maintenance of the social system cannot of themselves explain why these patterns exist. If the functional consequences are manifest (intended), the explanation presents no particular problems; but if they are latent (unintended, unrecognized), we still have to wonder why such a useful pattern of activity ever arose and why it continues to exist. The systems theorist has an answer ready: Like any cybernetic process, social processes have their “feedback loops,” through which the results of each stage of a cycle are the causes of the next. (McCarthy 1991:135f.)

By adopting systems theory, Habermas subjects himself to its objectivism.<sup>6</sup> System integration does not require “that participants be responsible actors” or any reference to action orientations, since it “reaches right through them” (Habermas 1987:150, 184, 263, 311). In this way, Habermas demonstrates his conviction that one cannot dispense with precisely those aspects of systems theory that neofunctionalists expressly noted as the weak points of Parsons’s theory: Differentiation processes are not self-regulating processes of system creation; rather, the relevant actors have to be identified in all of their phases and on all of their levels. Systemic processes are not self-activating and they do not reach right through action orientations; rather, one has to make recourse to responsibly acting participants. The systems-theoretical problem-solving model has to be opened up by means of an actor-theoretical model of interests. By contrast, Habermas would like to extend the action-theoretical model by means of a systems-theoretical model of problem-solving.

The outcome of this is the system-lifeworld conception that dichotomizes Habermas’s entire categorial and conceptual apparatus. Functional analysis, of aggregated consequences of action that can no longer be comprehended by the actors themselves, is not valid for all types of actions; it is applicable only to that type involved in the societal task of material reproduction (Habermas 1981, II:226, 347ff., 447). In order to analyze this task field, a change from the perspective of the participant to that of the observer is also necessary.

*Social integration* presents itself as part of the symbolic reproduction of a lifeworld that, besides the reproduction of memberships (or solidarities), is dependent upon cultural traditions and socialization processes; by contrast, *functional integration* is equivalent to a material reproduction of the lifeworld that is conceived as system maintenance. The transition from one problem area to the other is tied to a change of methodological attitude and conceptual apparatus. Functional integration cannot be adequately dealt with by way of lifeworld analysis undertaken from an internal perspective; it only comes into view when the lifeworld is objectified, that is to say, represented in an objectivating attitude as a boundary-maintaining system. (Habermas 1987:232–33)

The terms involved in several conceptual oppositions are dichotomized and grouped together here: on the one hand, the unintended consequences of action, material reproduction, and the observer perspective are equated with systems analysis; on the other, intentions, symbolic reproduction, and the participant perspective are equated with lifeworld analysis. Habermas has since rejected this strict dichotomization (1991:253f.). All phenomena can

<sup>6</sup>Habermas 1987:232: “these complexes of action can be stabilized functionally, that is, through feedback from functional side effects.” Giddens (1977; 1979:210ff.) provides telling criticism of Merton’s use of this form of argument.

be described in systems- and action-theoretical terms, though there is a difference in their respective “depth of field.” Thus, lifeworld actions stand in a relation of exchange with their material environment. For the actors, material conditions appear as situational limits and restrictions on their effort to realize their plans of action. In simple social relations, material reproduction occurs in terms of comprehensible dimensions, allowing it to be presented as the intended outcome of collective cooperation (Habermas 1981, II:244ff., 347f.). As a society becomes increasingly differentiated, these processes become so complex and incomprehensible that the way they are perceived becomes “illegitimately narrowed” when seen from a participant perspective. The systems-environment model allows for a more adequate explanation of these processes from the perspective of the observer. “With regard to the aspect of system, societies as a whole constitute what Marx termed materialistically society’s ‘metabolic processes’ with nature. This metaphor suggests that we should conceive of society in terms analogous to one large organism which reproduces itself via interchange with its organic and inorganic environment” (Habermas 1991:255).

Let us take a close look at what is being claimed here. In the *methodological change in perspective* from participant to observer, the *quality of the object studied* also changes. It is one thing to determine that from a certain level of complexity onwards, the consequences and interdependencies of actions can no longer be comprehended by participants; it is quite another thing to claim that these more complex consequences of action obey self-regulating system dynamics. The latter claim, a presumption about the quality of social phenomena, has been slipped in along with the change in perspective, but it has not been demonstrated. “The systems model is no mere artifact in this context” (Habermas 1987:233). In contrast to the universality claim of systems theory in Luhmann—in which every social contact has to be understood as system, from the smallest all the way to the society as a whole (Luhmann 1984:33; Schwinn 1995b)—Habermas reserves the systemic for complex social interconnections, where action theory presumably reaches the upper end of its reach. This presents a genetic problem: it has to be shown that, starting from comprehensible intentional actions, these gradually turn into systemically self-regulating processes as the degree of complexity increases. Only if Habermas can demonstrate the systemic in terms of the object itself will he be able to avoid the accusation that he simply slipped it into analysis along with the change in perspective.

This leads to Habermas’s central problem: How can the two conceptual strategies of action and systems theory be linked? The adoption of systems theory is justified in terms of the limits of what action theory can provide. Conversely, there are fundamental weaknesses in systems theory that do not allow it to emancipate itself completely from action theory. Even in his earlier writings, the positive response to systems theory was always accompanied by a critical discussion of its merits. This involves the definition of the maintenance of social systems (Habermas 1970:175ff., 306; 1971:151ff., 163–64; 1973:12ff.). In distinction to biological systems, social systems do not have a clearly marked date of death. The preconditions of their existence (or maintenance) cannot be descriptively grasped from the observer perspective. Social systems do not reproduce objectively observable naked life, but rather culturally defined life. States of equilibrium and target values for the maintenance of social systems are thus secondary problems, contingent upon cultural patterns that vary historically and from society to society. And these latter patterns can only be accessed via an understanding of the actors’ own interpretations. This accounts for the methodological primacy of the theory of action or of the analysis of the lifeworld (Habermas 1981, II:223ff.; 1991:251ff.). Systems analysis cannot yield definitions of the maintenance of social systems from within the framework of its own theory; instead, it has to allow them to be provided by an analysis that takes up the perceptual and interpretive processes of social participants.

However, the conceptualization of societies cannot be so smoothly linked with that of organic societies, for, unlike structural patterns in biology, the structural patterns of action systems are not accessible to [purely external] observation; they have to be gotten at hermeneutically, that is, from the internal perspective of participants. The entities that are to be subsumed under systems-theoretical concepts from the external perspective of an observer must be identified *beforehand* as the lifeworlds of social groups and understood in their symbolic structures. The inner logic of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld, which we discussed from the standpoints of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, results in *internal limitations* on the reproduction of the societies we view from the outside as boundary-maintaining systems. Because they are structures of the lifeworld, the structures important for the maintenance of a [social] system, those with which the identity of a society stands or falls, are accessible only to a reconstructive analysis that begins with the members' intuitive knowledge. (Habermas 1987:151)

Here, the imperatives of system maintenance are bound to criteria posited by the lifeworld; these imperatives have to "fulfill conditions for the maintenance of sociocultural lifeworlds" (Habermas 1987:152). Habermas attempts to demonstrate this methodological primacy of the lifeworld by means of evolutionary theory. The definitions of the maintenance of social systems are dependent upon the structural transformation of patterns of interpretation (1971:164; 1973:18ff.; 1976:12ff., 160ff., 228ff.; 1981, II:223ff.). Variation among the ideal values of social systems are limited by the developmental logic of worldviews (*Weltbilder*), that is, collectively shared structures of consciousness. The imperatives of system integration themselves have no influence on this developmental logic. The lifeworld establishes the structural possibilities and limitations within which systemic processes can run their course.

Evolutionary theory is supposed to provide a genesis for systemic processes. Society first differentiates itself in the course of its evolution as lifeworld and as system (Habermas 1987:152–54). In this context, Habermas seeks to give an account of the methodological dualism of participant and observer perspectives in terms of the factual dualism of system and social integration (Honneth 1985:324). The rationalization of action in the lifeworld gradually permits an increase in the complexity of systemic processes. In the early phases of social evolution, in tribe-based societies, system and social integration are still interlinked (Habermas 1987:163). Or more precisely: at the beginning there was only a lifeworld. Thus, for instance, economic transactions have no system-formative effects at this stage. At the same time, the exchange of objects fulfills important tasks of social integration. The exchange mechanism remains bound to normative contexts; there is no clear separation between economic and noneconomic values. The quality of the object of analysis is reflected on the methodological level. There is no need to shift from the participant perspective to the observer perspective, since functional interconnections or interdependencies remain transparent for participants, being accessible from the perspective of everyday practice (*ibid.*:164). It is neither possible nor necessary in this context to present the intermediate stages of evolution that lead to modern society (Habermas 1976:150ff.); just the basic idea is important for us.

Habermas conceives of the rationalization of the structures of consciousness of the lifeworld as a collective learning process in analogy to the ontological developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. Weber's sociology of religion is taken as the historical illustration of this abstract model. Development in Weber as in Piaget is an increasing process of generalization and differentiation of structures of consciousness and of worldviews according to various criteria of rationality. By means of this process of generalization,

systemic mechanisms gradually free themselves from their lifeworld contexts. Value generalization allows action to free itself from particular, traditional, normative patterns of conduct. This is accompanied by a differentiation of culture according to various criteria of rationality. The separation of purposive-rational (or means-ends rational) and normative aspects is seen by Habermas as the most consequential evolutionary process for the course of future development. It was the process that first provided the freedom of movement required for system formation.

This polarization reflects an uncoupling of system integration from social integration, which presupposes a differentiation on the plane of interaction not only between action oriented to success and to mutual understanding, but between the corresponding mechanisms of action coordination—the ways in which ego brings alter to continue interaction, and the bases upon which alter forms generalized action orientations. On the basis of increasingly generalized action orientations, there arises an ever denser network of interactions that do without directly normative steering and have to be *coordinated in another way*. (Habermas 1987:180–81; emphasis added)

Steering media represent the “other way.” Habermas attempts to make autonomic systemic processes plausible by means of media theory (Honneth 1985:326). In the “unhappy marriage” (Joas 1991) of action and systems theory, these media represent the means by which the theory of action says “I do” to systems theory. With advancing generalization of motivations and values, the realms of the unproblematic shrink. The pressure of rationality on the now problematic lifeworld increases and thus brings about the need for intersubjective agreement (Habermas 1987:183). The increased need for interpretation heightens the risk of dissent. These dangers can be brought under control by means of the communications media. Media make it possible to simplify complex situations of interaction and to reduce them to stereotypes. In this way, they become accessible to action as simple orientation patterns, without necessitating fundamental acts of reflection or the working through of all of the preconditions and consequences of a possible course of action. These special codes deviate from normal language by removing specific action-coordinating mechanisms from the lifeworld’s totality to which communicative action remains bound up. These codes are tailored to standard situations and “on the basis of a built-in structure of preferences, condition action decisions without resort having to be made to the resources of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1991:258). How does this process of systemic conditioning work? The basic problem for media theory is why alter should adopt the selections of ego (Jensen 1980). What is the basis for the regularity or chance of repetition of specific selections? Habermas answers this question in terms of the prototype for all media, money. Money encodes a means-ends rational (purposive rational) treatment of calculable amounts of value and enables one to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other interactional participants while bypassing prolonged processes of consensus-building.

Habermas attempts to provide a microsociological or action-theoretical derivation and grounding of systems theory by means of media theory. All of the components of the conceptual fusion with which the system is characterized can also be found on the level of media: unintended, norm-free, means-ends (purposive) rational. Organizations, as the cores of systems, are also assimilated into the media conception (Habermas 1981, II:230–31, 257, 455ff.). In this context, Habermas finds plausible Luhmann’s organizational model, which shunts the motives of actors into the organizational environment. The decisive question is: Does he succeed in providing a genetic derivation of systemic processes from the categories of action with which the media theory continues to work in a certain sense? One

can accept his thoughts on media theory up until the point at which he allows media-mediated actions to turn into systems, at which this un- and decoupling process is supposed to occur. In the media process, it comes to “an objective inversion of the ends set and the means chosen, for the medium itself is now the transmitter of the respective subsystem’s system-maintaining imperatives” (Habermas 1991:258).

Though it is correct that the medium of money can bring about a reversal of means and ends in subjects in which money is transformed from a means to an end in itself, this still does not substantiate the claim that money has now turned into a medium of a system’s self-maintenance motives. There is no argumentative support for the step from a *medium of interaction*, which strengthens the likelihood (Jensen 1980:33) of the adoption and repetition of specific selections by actors, to an *objective medium* that is supposed to transmit the selections of a given system. This is supposed to be the way in which the accountability (responsibility) of interactional participants comes to disappear by means of “relieving interaction from yes/no positions on criticizable validity claims—which actors themselves have to defend and for which they hold one another accountable” (Habermas 1987:263; also *idem.*:184).

It is necessary here to indicate exactly *what* interaction is being relieved *from*. System formation refers to the release of specific domains of action from “*the lifeworld’s totality*” (Habermas 1991:258, *emphasis added*). This release from the diffuse pressure of the normative sanctions of the contexts of everyday life certainly means that an interactional participant who acts in this field cannot be held “accountable” for many aspects of his or her actions. Economic action within the framework of a business operation attains its specific rationality precisely from the fact that it is released from many of the “validity claims” of other rationality criteria. However, this does not mean that “accountability” *per se* disappears—quite the contrary. Habermas himself emphasizes that the transfer of action over to steering media produces “both . . . a relief from the expenditures and risks of communication and . . . a conditioning of decisions in expanded fields of contingency” (Habermas 1987:281; *idem.*:183), which increases the degrees of freedom of success-oriented action (*ibid.*:263). The expansion of the freedom and scope of action produced by releasing it from diffuse normative pressures has to be accompanied by the increased accountability of actors with regard to the specific criterion of action applicable. For precisely this reason, money or economic rationality has become one of the most important steering media in modern societies not of systems but of the actors and agencies involved in planning, since one can reckon with a high degree of specific action rationality among any population targeted by steering media.

Habermas is certainly correct in observing that the release from manifold validity claims makes interactional processes in certain limited areas more permeable, making it possible to interlink interactions into increasingly complex networks (Habermas 1987:181, 263). At the same time, though, he suppresses the fact that this is only possible on the basis of a parallel increase in actor rationality and is anything but equatable with objective, systemic dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Action rationality and the ability to establish social order are mutually conditioning (Schwinn 1993a:63ff.; 1993b). The more complexly woven interactional network certainly can and will evade the intentions of those involved. Unintended consequences, though, are not the same thing as the transition to systemic processes based on functional rationality. Only partial domains or aspects of structure and the consequences of action go beyond the horizon of intentions, and this process can assume various degrees of indepen-

<sup>7</sup>Jensen (1984:155ff.) also emphasizes the sanctioning aspect of media. The two media components of sanctioning and motivation lend support to the claim that media-mediated selections cannot be understood without the calculating weighing of possibilities on the part of those involved. In Weber’s terms: they only possess a probable character (and thus not one independent of the calculations of subjects).

dence. Thus, some things can be integrated into one's intentions once a new cycle of actions begins. These complex interconnections and interdependencies are accessible to a combination of action and structural theory, but not to the "unhappy marriage" of action and systems theory.

The distinction between the concepts of system and lifeworld is gradual rather than strict. The economy, which differentiated itself on the basis of the medium of money, is the only sphere that Habermas conceives of as a system in the strict sense of the word. Power and especially the media of influence and value commitment remain dependent upon consensus-building processes within the lifeworld and thus upon accountable (responsible) actors (Habermas 1981, II:269ff., 404ff., 412–13, 418–19). Whereas money and power replace language-based understanding, they only "condense" and simplify the other media. Moreover, there is a fundamental asymmetry between money and power. Power needs legitimation and thus has to be more deeply anchored in the lifeworld than money. The domains of action that have devolved (or become differentiated) on the basis of these media thus attain different degrees of systemic autonomy (Habermas 1991:293, n. 89). However, all share the need to anchor systemic mechanisms in the lifeworld by means of institutionalization (Habermas 1981, II:230, 249, 258–59, 536ff.). In social-theoretical terms, the methodological primacy of the lifeworld is secured by means of law. Law serves to join or articulate system and lifeworld. It guarantees intentional and normative input in relations of systemic interdependency. Lifeworld materials can be effectively operationalized to affect behavior by being translated via law into systemic media codes:

Law functions, as it were, as a transformer that first guarantees that the network of social-integrative, overall societal communication does not break down. Only in the language of law can normatively substantial messages be circulated through the society as a whole; if they were not translated into the complex legal code, which is equally open to both lifeworld and system, they would fall upon deaf ears in the media-steered domains of action. (Habermas 1992:78)

In his more recent theory of law, Habermas summons up motifs from his early critique of systems functionalism. The existence and reproduction of the system is not a self-purposive, objective process, but is dependent upon instructions provided by actors and their participation. Habermas rejects the claim of more recent autopoietic systems theory to comprehend functional systems as institutions that exist for their own sake and that have to be granted the same constitutional rights of autonomy as individuals themselves.

For this reason, damage is done to the idea of a state ruled by laws when the functional systems of society are released, in terms of constitutional law, from their instrumental role and are promoted to "ends in themselves." For then the "autonomy and differentiatedness" of citizens has to compete with those of the systems for legal protection even within the "official" realm of power. The political system can only maintain its constituted character under the rule of law if authorities assert their asymmetric position vis-à-vis incorporated negotiating partners that results from their obligation to represent the crystallized will of the currently nonparticipating citizens found in their legal mandate. The bond of delegated decision-making powers must also not be broken in voting procedures. Only in this way can the link to the public made up of citizens of the state be maintained, who are both entitled and *in the position* to perceive, identify, and publicly discuss the social unacceptability of func-

tional systems. These systems, however, first need to learn in their corporatist arrangements to overcome their specific forms of blindness and to view themselves as subsystems of a larger system. For this reason they are dependent upon the instruction provided by affected clients, in their role as citizens of the state, with regard to the costs they cause their external surroundings and to the consequences of their internal failures. (Habermas 1992:425–26)

Habermas would like to trim back the excesses of systems theory, manifest in its universality claim, leaving untouched the relative legitimacy of systems theory. It is apparent, though, that the reasons that Habermas gives for adopting the systems model are rescinded by those that he employs in criticizing this theory. The upper limits of the theory of action (its “reach”) are supposed to result from the complexity of the consequences of action, which form networks of systemic, self-regulating processes that no longer require accountable actors. This would mean, however, that the definition of system maintenance could be grasped from the perspective of the observer, without any longer needing to understand the interpretations of those involved and without being accessible any longer to these persons (Habermas 1981, II:232, 240, 258, 277). The methodological primacy of lifeworld analysis cannot allow for this, however, because, as has been seen, systems analysis is not autarkic in the determination of the conditions of self-maintenance of subsystems (Habermas 1981, II:223, 258, 293). If systems are unable to emancipate themselves from the cultural understandings/interpretations of their participants, it has to remain Habermas’s riddle as to how they can nonetheless be systems, that is, be processes that are unaffected and delinked from the intentions of their participants.

His critique of Parsons’s conception of system can be turned against himself. He criticizes the fact that Parsons’s systems draw their controlling force and central parameters from an ideal, nonempirical *environment*.

But this latter concept is foreign to systems theory, which conceives of *self*-regulated system maintenance in such a way that the boundary of the system is threatened in basically *the same way* on *all* fronts, and has *everywhere* to be defended against invasions from hypercomplex environments. Processes of system maintenance are controlled exclusively by values intrinsic to the system itself; *outside* of the system’s boundaries there are only conditioning—not steering—variables. (Habermas 1987:249)

However, in Habermas himself, the lifeworld is a similar alien entity for systems theory, since it also represents environment for the system and is nevertheless supposed to be the origin for the central definitions of system maintenance. Whereas Parsons understood the ideal-nonempirical sphere and its link to other areas as a universal, systemic context (Schwinn 1993a:269ff.; 1995c), the linkage problematic becomes all the more aggravated in Habermas, since the systemic only ekes out an enclavelike existence in the midst of a fundamentally differently conceived environment.

This social-theoretical confusion has a methodological counterpart. Instead of a methodologically regulated change in perspective, a confusion of perspectives emerges. The complexity of consequences of action that form systemic networks demands a change from the perspective of the participant to that of the observer; on the other hand, the fundamental parameters of this “systemic process” are supposedly only accessible via the perspective of the participant, due to the methodological primacy of the lifeworld. These claims are not mutually compatible.



Habermas is unable and unwilling to maintain system and lifeworld as strictly divisible concepts. The basic problem that arises for his linkage of action and systems theory manifests itself in various ways: in the definition of the relation between the intentions and consequences of action and between the perspective of the participant and that of the observer, in the *gradual* system-building abilities of various media, and in the articulatory function of law. At none of these theoretical “construction sites” has Habermas succeeded in consistently linking systems and action theory. We run into the same problem here as with the neofunctionalists. Intention-based additions and interventions in the “systemic process” allow the concept of system to be turned into the concept of structure.

Habermas was certainly right that, starting from a certain level of complexity, the consequences of action become more difficult to comprehend and it becomes necessary to shift to the perspective of the observer. It is, though, an *empirical question* whether a form of order emerges from the unintended consequences of action and to what extent, for how long, and for which actors these interconnections remain inaccessible. The processes that are comprehensible only to a given observer at point of time  $t_1$  may have already been incorporated into the intentions of at least some participants by point of time  $t_2$ , after a new cycle of action has already run its course (Schwinn 1993a:90ff.; 1993b). Moments that play a role in such a model of structuration, that is, intentions and unintended courses of development, are torn from their context by Habermas and reified in the form of independent conceptual strategies. In this way, neither of these two moments can be consistently conceived of any longer.

This is also the basic drift of the critique of the two-level model of society (Honneth 1985:321ff.; Joas 1991; McCarthy 1991). The symbolic reproduction of society cannot be grasped in purely intentional terms by means of comprehensible interrelations of action; nor can its material reproduction be grasped exclusively in terms of systemically networked, unintended consequences of action. Thus, organizations, for example, which Habermas conceives of as the cores of societal systems, are not as independent of the orientations and motives of their participants as the adoption of the systems-theoretical sociology of organizations implies.<sup>8</sup> One runs into such mixed forms in all social phenomena. A conception of structuration has to take the place of lifeworld and system. The conclusion to this paper will provide a brief sketch of this notion.

### III. FROM ACTION-SYSTEMS THEORY TO ACTION-STRUCTURE THEORY

The works of the neofunctionalists and Jürgen Habermas represent interesting attempts to combine theories of action and order. Both agree that systems theory is unable to answer one of its own core questions: that of the definition of the maintenance of social systems. Smelser demonstrated in terms of the differentiation of educational institutions in the nineteenth century that the efficiency or inefficiency of these institutions cannot be defined with reference to any abstract systemic entity, but only on the basis of the values and interests of the groups involved. Habermas has also repeatedly emphasized, starting with his early critique of functionalism, that system maintenance is not a matter of objectively stateable parameters, but is instead established in processes of cultural definition by actors in the lifeworld. These important insights must be kept in mind in all future work on the micro-macro problem.

“Functional imperatives” and tensions are not independent of perceptions and interests, and actors, groups, and organizations are not altruistic agents of improved systems adap-

<sup>8</sup>The works of Wolfgang Streeck (1981, 1987) put special emphasis on the degree to which the maintenance of an organization today is dependent upon the constant adaptive and redesigning efforts of its actors.

tivity. They pursue value- and interest-oriented institutionalization strategies. On the other hand, social processes cannot be reduced to actors' intentions. What is decisive here is how one grasps these objective, nonintentionalist, social aspects. Habermas believes that it is impossible to leave systems theory completely out of the picture, and he resorts to the idea of self-regulating social processes. But it is exactly this conception that is incommensurable with his insight that "systems"—with regard to their maintenance and their functions—are dependent upon the definitions of participating actors, and for this very reason cannot be self-regulating. The neofunctionalists are more cautious in this regard. Though they still make use of the concept of system, especially in their theoretical writings, the model of a self-regulating process of differentiation is no longer dominant in their concrete studies. Nonetheless, they still hold firm to a systemically characterized problem-solving model, which is only supposed to be supplemented and corrected by means of the actor perspective and not replaced by it. In this way both theories maneuver themselves into what I call the neofunctionalist dilemma: either the status of voluntaristic aspects is so enhanced that the systemic whole and its functional imperatives practically vanish, or too much emphasis is placed on the systemic aspect, reducing actors to the mere executing agents of systemic needs. When systems and action theories are combined, one or the other always winds up with a residual status.

Action and systems theories conceptualize social reality in different ways: in one case ascribing it to actors and in the other to self-regulating systems. By making use of both theories, Habermas and the neofunctionalists break social reality apart, opposing system to lifeworld, the problem-solving model to the model of interests, without being able to recombine them coherently. The combination of action and structural theory provides the only way out of this dilemma. Here it is important not to equate the distinction between action and structural theory with the micro-macro distinction. The understanding of any micro situation presupposes cooperation between action and structural theories, which Alexander (1988:301ff.) showed in "Actions and Environments." As the title indicates, it has to do with frame-setting, that is, structural, conditions within which actors define the course of action by means of their abilities to develop situational definitions and strategies. Alexander conceives of a different explanatory model for the macrolevel: "My concern here, however, is not with the *macroscopic question of how these system function in their own right* but with their impact on action" (Alexander 1988:317; emphasis added). Here social reality is treated according to two different models: the self-regulating or problem-solving systems model is recommended for macro phenomena and the action-structure model for micro phenomena. This is not very convincing. The explanatory model that Alexander uses for the microlevel must also hold for the macrolevel, since the latter also has to be explained in terms of the interaction of action and its structural conditions.

I would like to provide a brief sketch of this in terms of differentiation theory. Smelser's study of the school system explains the establishment of new institutions in terms of the action-structure model: the introduction of schools in the United States and England was elucidated in terms of the limitation and facilitation of the action of specific groups within the framework of structural conditions. The same explanatory model must also hold for the interaction of several differentiated social macro orders. Such social orders do not run their course in a functionally, reciprocally determining process "in their own right," which is regulated in terms of a societal system. Instead, the individual social orders mutually set limiting and facilitating structural framework conditions for one another, which the actors specific to each order have to take into account in their actions. Thus, politicians—in their efforts to bring about their programs and measures—have to bear in mind the financiability (the tax issue) and that means the economic conditions of their actions; entrepreneurs are dependent—in the manufacture of a new product—upon political and legal conditions

and upon scientific knowledge; a scientist who would like to carry out an experiment has to bear in mind whether this is permitted by the political and legal framework and whether it can be financed; and so on. Via this combination of action-based and structure-based components, social orders are constituted and reproduced in their interaction. There is no more need for another level, a systemic problem-solving model (such as Alexander suggests) for the macrolevel than there is for the microlevel.

One possible reason why neofunctionalists hold fast to the concept of system may be that, like Parsons, they posit differentiation to be the primary tendency of social evolution (Alexander 1985:10; 1990:10; Colomy 1990a:469; Colomy and Rhoades 1994:575). At first glance, this appears to be an area in which action theory possesses little power of persuasion. Differentiation as the central tendency of development seems to suggest a problem-solving model, since this process as a whole is neither planned nor intended, but appears rather to be systemically determined. Upon closer analysis, however, this assumption also proves to be unsound. Just as in the *synchronic* interaction of social orders, for the *diachronic* analysis of the differentiation process, the action-structure model has to be taken into account. If one breaks down the process of differentiation into sequential historical phases, it becomes clear that every subsequent phase must be explained in terms of the interaction of structural and cultural starting conditions and in terms of the corresponding actors' strategies in the preceding phase. Events and processes relevant to differentiation can be assigned relatively precise times, places, conditions, and actors. One could take, for example, the investiture conflict in the eleventh century, which played a decisive role in the separation of Church and State in the West. Where the systems theoretician generously finds systemic tendencies *ex post facto*, a more precise historical analysis uncovers a series of historical phases that follow one another in a nondeterministic fashion (Schulchter 1996:179–243). We prefer not to see our future as already systematically determined by the present, which would leave us disempowered as actors. In the same way, the process of differentiation that has preceded us did not run a systemically independent course, but arose instead in successive historical phases of interaction between structures and actors. Differentiation studies that compare countries and proceed historically increase our sensibility in this regard. For the same analytic model must hold for both synchronic and diachronic macro processes of the differentiation phenomenon as holds for each and every micro situation. Neither can be reduced either to intentions or to a systemically determined course of events. Systemic processes take place, by definition, behind the backs of the actors involved and cannot be reconstructed in terms of the intentions and actions they incorporate. The advantage of the concept of structure is that it allows precisely this reconstruction without being reduced to voluntaristic aspects. This insight is undoubtedly present in neofunctionalist writings; however, it is repeatedly blurred by unnecessarily dragging along the concept of system.

Neofunctionalists understand their own writings as a reconstruction of Parsonsian theory: revising its basic core while maintaining its overarching framework. The blueprint for this theoretical renovation exhibits inconsistencies. If this article has helped trigger a reconsideration of the basic coordinates of this rebuilding effort, to move from action and system to action and structure, then it has served its purpose.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1982. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, Vol. I: Positivism, Presuppositions, and Current Controversies*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 1983. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, Vol. IV: The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

- . 1984a. "Three Models of Culture and Society Relations: Toward an Analysis of Watergate." Pp. 290–314 in *Sociological Theory*, edited by Randall Collins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- . 1984b. "The Parsons Revival in German Sociology." Pp. 394–412 in *Sociological Theory*, edited by Randall Collins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- (ed.). 1985. *Neofunctionalism*. Beverly Hills, New Delhi, London: Sage Publications.
- . 1988. *Action and Its Environments*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1990. "Differentiation Theory: Problems and Prospects." Pp. 1–15 in *Differentiation Theory and Social Change: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1993. *Soziale Differenzierung und kultureller Wandel*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Paul Colomy. 1985. "Toward Neofunctionalism: Eisenstadt's Change Theory and Symbolic Interactionism." *Sociological Theory* 3:1:11–23.
- (eds.). 1990a. *Differentiation Theory and Social Change: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1990b. "Neofunctionalism Today: Reconstructing a Theoretical Tradition." Pp. 33–67 in *Frontiers of Social Theory*, edited by George Ritzer. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Bernhard Giesen. 1987. "From Reduction to Linkage: The Long View of the Micro-Macro-Link." Pp. 1–42 in *The Micro-Macro Link*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Richard Münch, and Neil J. Smelser. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen, Richard Münch, and Neil J. Smelser (eds.). 1987. *The Micro-Macro Link*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Archer, Margaret S. 1988. *Culture and Agency. The Place of Culture in Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barber, Bernard. 1992. "Neofunctionalism and the Theory of the Social System." Pp. 36–55 in *The Dynamics of Social Systems*, edited by Paul Colomy. London: Sage Publications.
- Becker, Uwe. 1988. "From Social Scientific Functionalism to Open Functional Logic." *Theory and Society* 17:4:865–83.
- Camic, Charles. 1986. "The Return of the Functionalists." *Contemporary Sociology* 15:5:692–95.
- Colomy, Paul. 1985. "Uneven Structural Differentiation: Toward a Comparative Approach." Pp. 131–56 in *Neofunctionalism*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Beverly Hills, New Delhi, London: Sage Publications.
- . 1990a. "Revisions and Progress in Differentiation Theory." Pp. 465–95 in *Differentiation Theory and Social Change*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul Colomy. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1990b. "Strategic Groups and Political Differentiation in the Antebellum United States." Pp. 222–64 in *Differentiation Theory and Social Change*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul Colomy. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1990c. "Introduction: 'The Neofunctionalist Movement'." Pp. xi–xli in *Neofunctionalist Sociology*, edited by Paul Colomy. Aldershot, Brookfield: Elgar Reference Collection.
- Colomy, Paul and Gary Rhoades. 1994. "Toward a Micro Corrective of Structural Differentiation Theory." *Sociological Perspectives* 37:4:547–83.
- Coser, Lewis A. 1956. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. Glencoe, New York: Free Press.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 1964. "Social Change, Differentiation and Evolution." *American Sociological Review* 29:3:375–86.
- . 1985. "Systemic Qualities and Boundaries of Societies: Some Theoretical Considerations." Pp. 99–112 in *Neofunctionalism*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Beverly Hills, New Delhi, London: Sage Publications.
- . 1987. *European Civilization in a Comparative Perspective. A Study in the Relations between Culture and Social Structure*. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.
- . 1990. "Modes of Structural Differentiation, Elite Structure, and Cultural Visions." Pp. 19–51 in *Differentiation Theory and Social Change*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul Colomy. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1977. "Functionalism: après la lutte." Pp. 96–134 in *Studies in Social and Political Theory*. London: Hutchinson & Co.
- . 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1970. *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1971. "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Niklas Luhmann." Pp. 142–290 in *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1973. *Legitimationsprobleme in Spätkapitalismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1976. *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1981. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 Bde. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1985. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

- . 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1991. "A Reply." Pp. 214–64 in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's "The Theory of Communicative Action"*, edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- . 1992. *Faktizität und Geltung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen and Niklas Luhmann. 1971. *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Honneth, Axel. 1985. *Kritik der Macht*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Jensen, Stefan. 1980. "Einleitung." Pp. 7–55 in Talcott Parsons. *Zur Theorie sozialer Interaktionsmedien*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- . 1984. "Aspekte der Medien-Theorie. Welche Funktion haben Medien in Handlungssystemen?" *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 13:2:145–64.
- Joas, Hans. 1991. "The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism." Pp. 97–118 in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's "The Theory of Communicative Action"*, edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- . 1992. "Jenseits von Funktionalismus. Perspektiven einer nichtfunktionalistischen Gesellschaftstheorie." Pp. 95–109 in *Soziologie in Deutschland und die Transformation großer gesellschaftlicher Systeme*, edited by Hans-Günter Meyer. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1982. *The Differentiation of Society*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1984. *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- . 1990. "The Paradox of System Differentiation and the Evolution of Society." Pp. 409–40 in *Differentiation Theory and Social Change*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul Colomy. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McCarthy, Thomas. 1991. "Complexity and Democracy: Or the Seductions of Systems Theory." Pp. 119–39 in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's "The Theory of Communicative Action"*, edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Merton, Robert K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York, London: The Free Press.
- Münch, Richard. 1985. "Commentary: Differentiation, Consensus, and Conflict: Some Comments on Smelser, Colomy, Lechner, and Barber." Pp. 225–35 in *Neofunctionalism*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Beverly Hills, New Delhi, London: Sage Publications.
- Ritzer, George. 1992. *Sociological Theory*, third ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rueschemeyer, Dietrich. 1986. *Power and the Division of Labor*. Cambridge/Oxford: Polity Press.
- Schimank, Uwe. 1985. "Der mangelnde Akteurbezug systemtheoretischer Erklärungen gesellschaftlicher Differenzierung." *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14:6:421–34.
- Schluchter, Wolfgang. 1988. *Rationalism, religion, and domination: A Weberian Perspective*, translated by Neil Solomon. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1996. *Paradoxes of Modernity. Culture and Conduct in the Theory of Max Weber*, translated by Neil Solomon. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press.
- Schwinn, Thomas. 1993a. *Jenseits von Subjektivismus und Objektivismus. Max Weber, Alfred Schütz und Talcott Parsons*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- . 1993b. "Max Webers Konzeption des Mikro-Makro-Problems." *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 45:2:220–37.
- . 1995a. "Funktionale Differenzierung—wohin? Eine aktualisierte Bestandsaufnahme." *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 4:1:25–39.
- . 1995b. "Funktion und Gesellschaft. Konstante Probleme trotz Paradigmenwechsel in Niklas Luhmanns Systemtheorie." *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 24:3:196–214.
- . 1995c. "Wieviel Subjekt benötigt die Handlungstheorie? Zur Weber-Rezeption von Alfred Schütz und Talcott Parsons." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 45:2:187–220.
- . 1996. "Zum Integrationsmodus moderner Ordnungen. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Richard Münch." *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22:2:253–83.
- Smelser, Neil S. 1959. *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . 1985. "Evaluating the Model of Structural Differentiation in Relation to Educational Change in the Nineteenth Century." Pp. 113–29 in *Neofunctionalism*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Beverly Hills, New Delhi, London: Sage Publications.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 1981. *Gewerkschaftliche Organisationsprobleme in der sozialstaatlichen Demokratie*. Königstein/Ts.: Athenäum.

- . 1987. "Vielfalt und Interdependenz. Überlegungen zur Rolle von intermediären Organisationen in sich verändernden Umwelten." *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 39:3:471–95.
- Turner, Bryan S. 1991. "Neofunctionalism and the 'New Theoretical Movement': the Post-Parsonsian Rapprochement between Germany and America." Pp. 234–49 in *Talcott Parsons. Theorist of Modernity*, edited by Roland Robertson and Bryan S. Turner. London: Sage Publications.
- Turner, Jonathan H. and Alexandra Maryanski. 1979. *Functionalism*. Menlo Park, Cal.: The Benjamin Cummings Publishing Company.
- . 1988. "Is 'Neofunctionalism' Really Functional?" *Sociological Theory* 6:1:110–21.