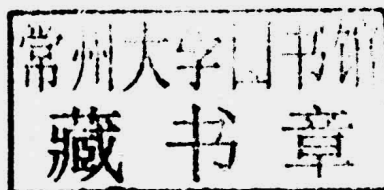# Contemporary Sociological Thinkers and Theories

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ASHGATE

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THINKERS
AND THEORIES

Foreword

This work aims to introduce to a public of scholars and doctoral students some authors and theoretical perspectives, which are apparently among the most influential on contemporary social theory. The definition of the concept of theory and social theory in particular is debatable, possibly because of its "enormous diverse and multifaceted" aspects (Calhoun et al. 2002: 19). Students of social theory have often stressed both similarities and differences between the conceptions of theory in the natural and the social sciences. The conception of theory and of social theory in particular, as will be here abided by, will accord with a conventional one. Theories, both in the social and the natural sciences, if conventionally defined aim to formulate systematic, abstract and general statements that are induced from empirical reality. All theoretical statements "transcend the particular and the time bound" and attempt to explain empirical events for the present times in abstract, non-evaluative and formal terms (Turner 1998: 2).

Theory, in this sense, purposes to be scientific in that statements aim at prediction and explanation of phenomena, and generating new research hypotheses (Ritzer 2000: 4). Emphasis has also been given here, as other authors have done, to the conflicting and incompatible views on its nature and presuppositions, which characterize social theory and sociology in particular (cf. Alexander 1982: 1–5; 1987: 1–21; Joas and Knöbl 2009: 5–12; Baert and Carreira da Silva 2010: 1; Seidman 2013: 2–5). Social theory should have a wide range of applications to important social issues. This work, like other works on contemporary social theory, aims to convey essential information on prominent authors and theories, with an emphasis on general theories which may be applied, at least in principle, to several fields of inquiry. It differs from other works on the same subject in many ways, however.

The work, first of all, focuses on contemporary theory only, in keeping to its title. In this respect, it is unlike works on social theory that provide information also on the classical sociological tradition, as especially represented by Marx, Durkheim and Weber (see for example Baert and Carreira da Silva 2010; Seidman 2013). As a further difference, this work gives a conventional definition of social theory in this very foreword, but does not devote a chapter to this theme, as other authors have done (cf. Joas and Knöbl 2009). It does not seek, moreover, to derive from theoretical principles, such as they may be found in past or contemporary sociological theorists, an abstract structure of sociological theory (see Turner 1982, 1998). It also makes no attempt to distinguish between micro and macro theoretical approaches, as this distinction has been variously interpreted, and has been found controversial (Collins 1988: ch. 11).

Given the present limitations of space and time, finally, this work does not deal with some directions, both old and new, of contemporary sociological theory. It does not deal, in particular, with Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, Expectations States Theory, Feminist Social Theory, Globalization, Theories of Consumption, and World System Analysis. Also, major contemporary authors such as Bauman and Elias have not been considered here, while the presentation of actor-network theory has been confined to a brief note at the end of the chapter on network theory. It is hoped that these lacunae will be remedied in the future. The work has been given a modular structure, to the effect that readers may choose those chapters and perspectives they find most proximate to their interests. Each chapter contains a rather detailed introduction to a perspective or author. The chapters are of different lengths, but there are no book-length chapters. All of them are divided in several sub-chapters according to the particular themes, in which a particular perspective or the thought of a given author are articulated.

Each chapter, furthermore, contains in its final part information on the current reception of that perspective or author. Any selection of the relevant contributions to social theory is inevitably affected by the author's orientations and preferences; still, an effort has been made keep to a presentation unbiased by pre-conceived ideological orientations. Several selection criteria of the secondary literature have been used, such as the reviewers' scholarly reputation; the notoriety of their evaluation, whether positive or negative; and the extent to which they cover different aspects of a perspective or of the constitutive elements of an author's thought.

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Contents

Chapter 1
The Neofunctionalism of Jeffrey Alexander

Preliminary Remarks

Jeffrey Alexander's (1947–) reputation as a sociology theoretician is considerable both in the United States and in Europe. Alexander received his university education in the United States, first at Harvard, where, during the 1960s, he had the opportunity to study Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons in depth. Then he continued his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he graduated with a thesis on Parsons. After a first teaching period spent in Los Angeles at the University of California, he is currently teaching at Yale University (Alexander 1998a: 8–10). Alexander is an outstanding representative of the neofunctionalist perspective he personally contributed to formulate, and is well known among sociology theoreticians for his epistemological orientation, which he calls "strong program."[1]

The Neofunctionalist Perspective and the "Strong Program"

The neofunctionalist perspective ensues from the discredit of the functionalist approach, especially in Parsons' formulation, which the neofunctionalist perspective intends to reformulate. This perspective draws on several elements of Parsons' theory: the distinction among personality, culture and society; a systematic analysis of the relations existing between culture and society; and differentiation as an essential characteristic of social change (see Joas and Knöbl 2008: 336). Alexander and other representatives of this perspective have charged functionalism with several criticisms, as follows: it contains conservatively oriented and unverifiable ideological assumptions; it presents the social actors as culturally determined, and consequently, not introducing the element of contingency in their theory of social order; it underestimates the relevance of social conflict and change; and it does not sufficiently distinguish between an abstract notion of equilibrium, which may prove useful as an analytical concept, and equilibrium as a condition of really existing societies.

The neofunctionalist program, in the formulation given by Alexander (who mentions in this regard also some other authors, especially Luhmann), has tried to make up for these deficiencies in different ways. The voluntaristic, symbolic and contingent aspects of action, as enunciated by Parsons but not sufficiently considered in his theory, have been taken into greater account. Greater importance has been attached to elements of strain and conflict, considered inherent in society, rather than to equilibrium and social integration factors. Different interpretations of Weber and Durkheim from those formulated by Parsons have been proposed. Greater attention has been paid to Marx's epistemological teachings and to the micro-sociological theoretical schools of thought. The neofunctionalist program of studies and research includes, in Alexander's opinion, a new definition and conceptualization of the relations between culture and society, in which no integration is assumed (as Parsons does). Instead, the elements of tension existing both among subcultures, and between the social and the cultural system, are carefully considered.

Furthermore, the neofunctionalist program involves a critical reinterpretation of Parsons' contributions which does not intend to reiterate Parsons' fundamental error. According to Parsons (in Alexander's opinion), the normative elements of social reality have ultimately greater importance than instrumental elements (Alexander 1983b: 272). This critical reinterpretation is focused on social change (the contingent aspects and the possible dysfunctional consequences of which are particularly stressed), political sociology (Parsons' arguments about the stability of the democratic system are questioned) and profession sociology (the conflicting relations existing within single professions and among different professions, and the importance of

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particular interests in professionals' behaviors are highlighted) (Alexander 1984: 21–3; 1985a, 1998a: 216–28; Alexander and Colomy 1990: 44–55; 1998: 65–76; 2004: 207–208). This neofunctionalist program of studies is "multidimensional," in the sense that it intends to provide non-reductionist descriptions, explanations and interpretations of social life in relation to the problems of action and social order.

Conversely a reductionist program explains these problems, whether referring to conditions that are external to the actors and cannot be changed by them, or only to internal conditions, such as interiorized social norms, but not to both kinds of conditions at the same time. The "strong program" claims the autonomy of culture from any social determination, and involves consequently a new way to carry out sociological investigations. It conceives action as the product of actors' voluntary commitment to achieve goals or put moral norms into effect; but at the same time, action is constrained or affected by an external environment. This epistemological program concerns social sciences as a whole, without making distinctions among different disciplines, and demands to be systematically referred to the subjective meanings, which the actors, whether individually or collectively, give to reality, and to pay attention to the constraints the actors meet with in their social life.

Cultural products, which originate from the scientific community a scholar belongs to, are included in this program of studies. Investigations conforming to the "strong program" move from the epistemological assumption that knowledge produced within the sphere of social sciences – in the sense of understanding and explaining social reality – requires a particular interpretation of cultural phenomena. This interpretation should highlight that cultural phenomena are socially produced; they are, however, not determined by the social structure and, in general, by the contents and the meanings of social life. Cultural phenomena have therefore their own autonomy toward such meanings and contents. It is assumed that culture itself shapes social life, and forms an environment that is internal to the actor, and analytically distinguished from it.

The "strong program" attaches great relevance to meanings, symbols, narratives, beliefs and ideologies, collective representations, and in general, to the cultural aspects of social life. The "strong program" seeks to interpret and reconstruct the details of the constitutive elements of culture by identifying its individual and collective actors, and taking into account the hierarchies and the social institutions that mediate the relation between actors and culture. A methodology conforming to the "strong" program involves a set of procedural practices. There is, in the first place, an identification of the relevant social actors. A careful and thick description, a reconstruction and interpretation of the meanings to be attributed to a particular set of relations, and an investigation of the social consequences that directly come from those meanings, are also necessary.

In other words, a causal investigation seeks to highlight the immediate cultural causes of events that occur in the social world, based on a careful and detailed reconstruction of the culturally mediated meanings the actors give to their actions and experiences in those particular circumstances. Social causes, or causes relating to the social structure, which are emphasized by weak programs, have only an indirect relevance for the "strong program," in the sense of subjecting the symbolic-cultural structures to continuous pressures and changes with particular and historically contingent results (Alexander 1982a: 65–7; 1987: 11–15; 1988b: 36; 1990: 25–6; 1998a: 214–18; 2005; Alexander and Smith 2003: 12–14; Cordero et al. 2008). We shall focus in this chapter on this multidimensional orientation, and on the theoretical and empirical research which Alexander has conducted in keeping with this approach. The theme of collective representations, on which the author has dwelt in his latest works, will be also considered (Alexander 2004, 2009). Finally, we shall provide some information on the reception of his work.[2]

"Strong Program," Cultural Sociology, and Post-Positivism

If by culture is meant a system of significant symbols, its sociological study, called "Cultural Sociology" has been pursued by Alexander keeping to the "strong" program. An effort is made to keep explicit the distinction between analyses placed at different levels of generality or abstraction. Alexander makes a distinction between these different levels. Presuppositions are placed at the highest generality level. They

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2 Introductions to Alexander's sociological thought can be found in Camarda 1992; Cisneros and Pérez Fernández del Castello 2000; Colomy 2005; Colomy and Turner 1998; Donati 1990.

are assumptions concerning the nature and the meanings of social reality as regards the nature of action and social order, and consequently the opportunities and the constraints actors (whether individuals or communities) meet with by relating with others. Presuppositions are of a metaphysical nature, and therefore cannot be empirically validated, but they contribute to produce theories by inspiring and guiding the notions drawn from the empirical world. They are useful in sociology and in social sciences in general, because they establish their epistemological foundations, in the sense that they point out the general standards of validity for these sciences, and provide them with general principles able to subsume principles deriving from lower analytical levels.

In addition, presuppositions produce in the sphere of social sciences the traditions and the research programs that connote each discipline. To this end, they avail themselves of discourses, or arguments, which establish the standards of truth and validity for each discipline, suggest specific research programs, and aim at persuasion. Presuppositions are relevant for dealing with matters of sociological interest placed at all the different analytical levels. The debate on metaphysical presuppositions is recurring in the social sciences, and distinguishes them from natural sciences. The usefulness of debate consists in pointing out these presuppositions, and in showing the opportunity of changing them, if necessary. Progress in social sciences consists in this, according to Alexander. Social changes involve a theoretical change only if they contribute to produce a reformulation of the metaphysical presuppositions. If shared, metaphysical presuppositions also imply sharing the positions that are situated at a lower analytical level, and therefore close to the empirical world. In contrast to the positivist or empiricist conception, according to which theories are based on objectively verifiable facts (and scientific progress is of a cumulative nature, as it involves the elimination of theories not conforming to empirical results), Alexander recalls the results of the post-positivist reflection on the foundations of knowledge.

Theories are generalized discourses which establish the typical validity standards of a social science. Sociological traditions, ideologies, arguments, explanations and debates, which refer back to disciplinary presuppositions, converge in theories. Therefore, theories have unavoidably a non-empirical origin and nature, though they refer to the empirical world, and claim an objective validity for their propositions. "Facts" – or empirical results – are interpreted according to existing theoretical orientations; theories are often preserved, though there are empirical results incompatible with them, through ancillary hypotheses and the formulation of additional analytical categories. Finally, theoretical changes take place not because of new empirical evidences, but because of the scientists' new epistemological and theoretical orientations.

Differently from positivist epistemology, the post-positivist epistemological approach states the impossibility of any knowledge of the natural or social reality that is not oriented by non-empirical presuppositions. Therefore, it is not sufficient to observe the empirical reality, but it is also necessary to interpret it making use of theoretical knowledge, and to reformulate it taking not only these remarks, but also alternative theories and traditions of thought into account. In the social sciences, the members of the same scientific community must make a "hermeneutic" interpretation, and an effort in mutual understanding, in order to conduct a theoretical investigation. Indeed, only in this way is it possible to make a comparison and establish a dialogue between different research programs and alternative presuppositions. Furthermore, only so does it become possible to explain structures of meaning which escape the control of particular actors (individuals and communities), though they are at the core of power structures. According to Alexander, who adopts a post-positivist epistemological approach, the empirical material highlighted by investigations carried out within the sphere of social sciences not only requires to be understood – it also requires to be interpreted for the public of the members of the same scientific community.

What is empirical takes therefore a symbolic nature, which is essential for its creation, presentation and persuasive capacity before a public of fellow scholars. In general, a symbolic communication made by any actor (whether an individual or a community) in front of any kind of public demands an effective performance and a representation capable of seeming convincing for the public that from time to time is relevant, considering that in modern societies there are a variety of publics for each actor. The success of a collective presentation/performance depends on actors' (i.e. journalists, leaders of social movements, experts) ability to "merge" – so to say – with the texts they perform and with the public with which they communicate. The successful outcome of a presentation/performance, which is proved by the way this public receives and evaluates it, has political consequences because it strengthens or changes actors' power and legitimacy

(Alexander 1982a: 30–33; 1987a: 1–21, 291–301; 1995: 110–23; 2004b; Reed and Alexander 2009: 38, note 8; Cordero et al. 2008: 532–3).

Ideological orientations are situated at a lower and more specific analytical level than presuppositions. Ideological orientations are, in turn, more generalized (in a decreasing order of abstraction and distance from the empirical world) than models, concepts, definitions, classifications, laws, complex and simple theoretical propositions, methodological assumptions, and finally empirical observational statements, which are therefore influenced in their contents by research programs and scientific traditions. The intention is manifold: firstly, to avoid both their conflation, from which overlapping and confusion would result; secondly, to avoid the reductionism, which would derive from using only a single analytical level; and finally to formulate theories, the presuppositions of which are different and incompatible. This incompatibility is illustrated by the theories that adopt individualistic presuppositions, according to which social order is the result of interactions among individuals.

Collectivistic presuppositions, which state that social order pre-exists to individuals, provide a further illustration. In the first case, it is assumed that action involves a double element of interpretation, through which we aim at understanding the world, and strategization, through which we seek to transform it. Meanwhile, we neglect the constraints the actor encounters in the social and cultural system, which build the environments external to action. In the second case, a material or normative coercive character is imputed to this external environment. Individual action would therefore have no autonomy. In either case, theoretical analysis would not be able to include a different analytical level, and consequently, to formulate a general theory of society. Briefly stated, the result is a reduced explanatory capacity. The deficiencies resulting from the influence of the positivist and empiricist epistemology are recurring in natural and social sciences, and have been a hindrance to their progress.

To this epistemological orientation which he considers wrong and misleading, Alexander counters with his approach called "theoretical logic." "Theoretical logic" is connoted not only by an explicit reference to the key presuppositions for carrying out an empirical research but also by the persuasion that scientific progress develops in virtue of changes occurring in the empirical and the non-empirical world. The latter is connoted by metaphysical and dogmatic presuppositions – which therefore are not subject to assessment – characterizing any scientific thought. "Theoretical logic" deals with the key sociological themes of action and social order considering all the aforementioned levels of abstraction, and keeping to the "multi-dimensional" approach and to the "strong program" of Alexander's neofunctionalist perspective. The distinction between sociological theories placed at micro and macro analytical levels becomes therefore irrelevant.

Action is conceived at the same time as a micro-action, in the sense of resulting from the contingent meanings the actors attribute to their experiences, and as a macro-action, in the sense that there are structures which emerge from micro social processes and influence them. A distinction between micro and macro investigation levels is only made for study purposes (which are called "analytical" by Alexander). This theoretical approach is called "multi-dimensional," as it considers action both normative (i.e. guided by norms) and instrumental (i.e. aimed at pursuing objectives), and ordered by means of structures internal and external to the actor. In virtue of its multidimensional nature, this approach does not involve the inconveniences of one-dimensional approaches, which conceive action as merely instrumental or merely normative. In the first case, action is determined or limited by external economic and political control sources, and the individuals' possibility of controlling their own actions is not recognized.

In the second case, action is considered only normative, and therefore it is determined or limited by interiorized moral structures, which are an actor's inner sources. This second point of view is unacceptable, as the first one, but for different reasons. In fact, in this case, the possibility that social order depends on external structures is ignored, regardless of individuals' participation and consensus. In this connection, Alexander proposes a distinction between "action" and "agency," which are both analytical categories, and consequently do not concretely exist. Action is defined by Alexander as the movement of persons, intended as actors, in time and space. Agency means actors' freedom to move among the three structured environments of the social, the cultural, and the personality system. Action means, therefore, the exercise of this freedom – freedom of "agency," in this case – by persons who act insofar as they are actors (Alexander 1998; 214–18).

Alexander argues that it is unacceptable to make use of an exclusively micro- or macro-sociological point of view. Both points of view do not sufficiently consider, in his opinion, the relevance of culture for a theory of

action. Like personality, culture should be intended, in this case, as an internal structure of action itself and as an actor's inner environment. On the contrary, society – intended as a system of roles, and hence, of norms and sanctions – forms the external environment to action (Alexander 1982, 1987a: 1–21, 281–5, 330–32; 1987b, 1988a, 1988b: 11–45, 304, 316–26; 1990b: 25–6; 1995: 119–23; 2003: 13–14; 1998a, 2009: 34–5; Alexander and Giesen 1987; Alexander and Colomy 1990; see also Turner and Colomy 1998).

A "thick" – that is to say, detailed and careful – description of contents and meanings, considered as unitary texts, which form an environment internal to action, and are socially shared and placed in their historical perspective characterizes the strong program of "cultural sociology." A historical perspective has an interpretative or hermeneutic nature. This sociological research program assumes the autonomy of culture from any different determination (as classes or social structure). The strong program assumes, in addition, the capacity symbolic structures, which form the internal environment of action, have to provide non-cultural structures with meanings capable of giving individual and collective actors' actions a sense. Alexander aims at clearly distinguishing "cultural sociology" from the "weak" program, which belongs instead to the sphere of the sociology of culture. The weak program understands culture, and in particular the production of symbolic apparatuses, as a result, or an effect, of social structures or forces. These social structures and forces become therefore decisive, instead of being merely binding, for the social actors (Alexander 1984: 23; 1998: 216–17; 2005).

The Weak Program

Differently from the "strong" program, the "weak" program does not seek to make a sociological study of culture. Therefore it neither dwells on the environment internal to action (using Alexander's words), that is to say on the meanings actors attribute to their social life, nor does it explain which are the specific actors and the causal mechanisms, from which an alleged effect on culture results. It rather seeks to study culture as an environment external to action and as a dependent variable devoid of autonomy, and of an influence of its own. The social and institutional structure, social classes, and capitalism in general, can become the independent variable (Cordero et al. 2008: 529, 535). For those who pursue the "weak" program – like Parsons and the neo-institutionalist school – culture represents an external environment to action, rather than a context of meanings experienced and interpreted by the actors. In contrast with the "strong" program of cultural sociology, neither the independence of culture from social life, nor the dependence of its meanings on the local contexts in which it is produced are recognized (Alexander 1998: 216–21; 2003: 23).

Different sources have inspired the "weak" program, and each of them identifies a specific version of the "weak" program. Among these sources, Alexander points to some classic authors as Marx, Durkheim in his early works; Weber for some aspects of his thought; and Parsons. Classic are, in Alexander's opinion, those non-contemporary authors – especially the aforementioned ones – whose works receive particular consideration because contemporary sociologists – without any need of evidence – consider them as useful and illuminating as some more recent works, and even fundamental in particular social disciplines. Their importance for social sciences results from this general positive evaluation. Classic authors are able to make discussions easier as they focus them on questions considered relevant, provide the same standards of relevance, give legitimacy to new theoretical orientations, and formulate generalized theoretical discourses (Alexander 1987b).

This kind of discourse, in Alexander's terminology, involves a discussion made for interpretative or expository, rather than for explanatory, purposes. In this meaning of the word, discourse concerns the foundations of a discipline, that is to say, the epistemological presuppositions, the ideological and metaphysical implications, the conceptions of the world and the historical grounds of sociological argumentations, for the purpose of shedding light on the origins and the theoretical consequences of their disagreement. These discussions highlight cognitive and evaluative disagreements, which are recurring and unavoidable in the major perspectives of social sciences. In contrast with natural sciences, social sciences are interpretative disciplines. Each of them is oriented by different and competing fundamental presuppositions. Therefore, empirical validations do not put an end to these discussions (Alexander 1987b: 25–9; 1995: 122–3). Concerning in particular neofunctionalism, a "general discourse" highlights the problematic aspects of the

functionalism of Parsons and other theoreticians, whether individually considered or compared to each other. In the case of Parsons, in particular, the purpose consists in reconstructing, reviewing and reprocessing the conceptual apparatus and the theoretical nucleus of functionalist formulations, taking also the critical literature on Parsons, and functionalism in general, into account.

An Appraisal of Classic and Contemporary Authors According to the "Strong" Program

Alexander has devoted several monographic research works to an examination of the epistemological presuppositions, which have been adopted implicitly or explicitly by some outstanding authors. These authors are both classic (as Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons) (Alexander 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 2013), and contemporary (as Giddens and Habermas). For each of them, Alexander keeps to his personal epistemological approach, stressing on a number of occasions the overlapping and conflation of different analytical levels, and the theoretical reductionism resulting from them. Concerning Marx, Alexander remarks that this author proposed a merely instrumental solution to the problem of social order, as he made it depend on the power of the ruling classes, which rationally act for this purpose; but at the same time formulated a voluntaristic theory of change, according to which the revolution and the socialist society were the consequence of individual and non-instrumental actions.

However – Alexander argues – Marx has put the stress on external conditions as those determining individuals' action and therefore not subject to their control. In this case too – as in the case of capitalism – individual action is subject to a coercive social order. Durkheim, as Marx, would have wavered in his work between an instrumental, determinist and individualistic vision of social order, and an opposite idealistic vision, according to which social order results from a general commitment to collective morality. The latter conception of order is produced by circumstances that are external to individuals, as it can be found in individual consciences. Both Marx and Durkheim have not made a sufficiently clear distinction between normative and instrumental actions, and between separate levels of analysis (Alexander 1982b: 61–77, 154–7, 203–10, 212–14, 292–6, 301–306, 461 note 202).

Weber is – according to Alexander – ambivalent in his evaluation of the consequences of modernity. For, on the one hand, his sociology is pervaded by "disillusionment and existential despair that psychological maturity and cultural integrity cannot be sustained"; but on the other, it points to the "increasing autonomy and strength of the individual," which modernity has made possible (Alexander 2013: 31). These individual qualities are subservient to the person's goal of self-control, but also to the mastery of a disenchanted and rational world. This mastering spirit, a consequence of this-worldly asceticism, is embodied in modern bureaucracy and politics. In turn, they have concurred to producing individuation, but also "the desire for voluntary subjection" and "a constant tendency for cynical adaptation to the demands of the day," of which the "soullessness of modern politics" is a manifestation. Yielding to modernity's "destructive, depersonalizing forces," or confronting this tendency which represents modernity's dark side, is a person's "existential choice."

Weber, however, does not explain how modernity's "destructive moments can be overcome" (Alexander 2013: 43, 46, 50, 52). As to Parsons, his functionalism had the merit of reformulating Weber's, Durkheim's and Freud's contribution in virtue of a merely analytical distinction among the personality, the society and the culture systems, but it neither shed light on the nature of values, nor did it aim at interpreting them. Furthermore, by identifying culture with consensus, and by viewing order as culturally guided, Parsons showed a normative reductionism. He also disregarded the "endemic strain" (Alexander 2013: 65) that follows from disregarding the value of justice. This hindered a broader conception of order (concerning the "reductionism" Alexander attributes to Parsons, see Camarda 1992: 403–406). Alexander's neofunctionalist program of studies involves reconstructing and revising Parsons' functionalism from different points of view.

First of all, any variance from a tendency to institutional differentiation has been considered. In addition, it has been avoided explaining change only in terms of strict systemic explanation, giving instead theoretical room to accidental factors, conflicts and social movements. Then, different effects of differentiation from those pointed out by Parsons have been considered, and it has not been maintained that such effects are necessarily beneficial to the single actors and to the social systems. Finally, Alexander has not followed

Parsons in the latter's conception that conceptual patterns reflect an objective reality, and values are the expression of institutionalized functional needs in particular roles that exist in the social world. Values have been understood, instead, as the result of an interpretation and analysis process of the meanings and the discourses produced by the social actors. Likewise, Alexander has not understood culture as a simple institutional regulating and control mechanism, as – according to Alexander – Parsons and other followers of the weak program have understood in the sociology of culture.

Based on the strong program, culture is instead considered as consisting of interconnected symbolic meanings resulting from typifications. During this process, the actors bring back the contingent aspects to structured forms of meanings, making use of the experiences they have achieved. Therefore, the actors do not limit themselves to passively responding to a pre-existing social order, but they define it symbolically, and acting in this way, they produce and reproduce it throughout their social life; they turn it into actions, and stabilize it. A sociological explanation implies a preliminary investigation on the interpretation of the meanings the actors give to what they do, to their collective representations, narrations and conceptual categories, and to the social consequences of those interpretations. Alexander also dwells on Parsons' evolutionary theory of modernity and societal community. He calls this theory Parsons' utopia, which is in keeping with Parsons' "ambivalence about order and normativity" (Alexander 2013: 66), according to Alexander.

By societal community, Parsons designates a society that has succeeded in connecting integration and justice, while refraining from following a non-normative orientation. A theory of social order, able to interpret and explain such a society, cannot include rationalistic utilitarianism or radical positivism. Alexander objects that there is a tension between integration and justice, as Parsons sees them. The evolutionary process of the social systems – "Parsons' major strategy for maintaining evolutionary optimism" (Alexander 2013: 72) – provides no solution to this tension. His notion of societal community is therefore ambiguous and unsatisfactory insofar as it sheds no light on contemporary major fears and dangers, such as the possibility of total destruction following a thermonuclear war. A more satisfactory theory of societal community would involve understanding and inquiring into the factors conducive to the dark side of modernity, and into the possibilities of civil repair (see Alexander 1983b: 51–4, 211, 272–6; 1984: 17–23; 1988b: 194–5, 281; 1990b: 4–6, 25–6; 1995: 120; 1998a: 61–73, 157–8, 165–74, 219–21; 2013: 62–77; Alexander and Colomy 1990: 44–55; 1994: 207; Alexander and Smith 2003. See also Reed 2009: 3).

Alexander affirms that, among these authors, only Max Weber has come close to a "multidimensional" conception of action and social order, making use in his historical sociological works, of causal explanations along with a sympathetic understanding of empirical phenomena, such as historical change and conflicts between social classes. A full acceptance of this conception has been hindered – in Alexander's opinion – by the lack in Weber of an explicit framework – at an analytical level of general presuppositions – that a "multidimensional" conception could be based on. Furthermore, Alexander thinks he sees ambivalence in this conception, as Weber supports from time to time either a materialist and instrumental epistemological position, or an idealist and normative stance in his works. Some passages in Weber's works seem to show discontinuity between his analysis of pre-modern societies, in which normative and instrumental elements are considered, and that of contemporary society, in which instead an instrumental and reductionist epistemological position prevails. This position would be illustrated by a number of examples in Weber's works.

If we consider, in particular, Weber's democratic theory, democracy is only a way – more effective than others – to assert the power of a nation state in a Darwinian struggle for ruling the world, rather than universal values and ideals. Similarly, a democratic competition among political leaders is simply a more effective instrument – compared to bureaucratic selection – for the task of leading a nation, because a leader's interest consists in meeting the needs of the electorate. According to Alexander, Weber's analysis of democracy suffers from reductionism. Alexander thinks he can identify the same kind of reductionism in other works of Weber, such as the essays on modern bureaucratic and judicial administrations, which Weber considers oppressive and effective instruments of power and regimentation, or in the treatment of inequality in status, which rests on the interest of the privileged social strata in preserving their privilege (Alexander 1983a: 16–19, 55–7, 98–127, 175–6; 1987).

Alexander makes an appraisal of contemporary authors as Blumer, Bourdieu, Coleman, Collins, Foucault, Garfinkel, Giddens, Goffman, Habermas and Mead, and of classic authors as Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons, based on his epistemological presuppositions. He includes among the representatives of the "weak"

program, as well as Parsons and the contemporary authors we shall mention, also the ethnographic school of Birmingham, some institutionalist economy scientists as Commons and Veblen, some contemporary sociologists who focus on the cultural meanings contained in social networks, as Granovetter and other representatives of the new economic sociology, and finally, some non-Marxist structuralist authors, as Foucault in France, and Blau in the United States. All these authors, who can be considered representatives of the "weak" program, have not provided – in Alexander's opinion – a satisfactory theoretical contribution.

We shall briefly mention in the following pages Alexander's critical remarks in this regard. Focusing first our attention on Alexander's reception of authors considered close to structuralism, the extremely critical nature of his essay on Bourdieu's work is well known. In Alexander's treatment, symbolic order (particularly referred to the concept of "habitus," the vagueness of which is stressed), social order, and consequently actors' practices are not placed by Bourdieu at the same level of theoretical importance, despite the author's statement of intent. According to Bourdieu (in Alexander's interpretation), social and cultural formations are external and pre-existing to social actors, but capable of determining their internal dispositions, and hence their habitus, regardless of the symbolic processes through which their identities are formed.

As illustrated by Bourdieu's empirical studies on the French educational system or those on consumer choices and aesthetic preferences, the field of social forces the competition of which the habitus derives from, reflects, reproduces and is homologous to the capitalist social and economic environment in which it is situated, though not coinciding with it. Therefore these studies do not shed light on the specificities of the actors, the institutions and the social environments in general in which the actors act. In other words, they do not fully explain how decisions are made and the reproduction of society is kept in real social environments described in detail. Notwithstanding Alexander's appreciation for the thick descriptions of some social and cultural environments provided by Bourdieu, these gaps turn into theoretical deficiencies. For example, Bourdieu does not consider it relevant whether political institutions are authoritative or democratic, as they all concur to the reproduction of power and inequality (Alexander 1995: 128–217; 2003: 18–19).

Alexander identifies the same epistemological and theoretical reductionism in Foucault's work. He appreciates Foucault's analyses of the ways in which discourses (as the author means this term) act to form knowledge and become power instruments, since knowledge and power, in his opinion, are closely connected to one another and to the social structure. However, Foucault does not consider culture according to Alexander's strong program, that is to say, as an independent symbolic apparatus subject to actors' interpretations and connected in different and contingent ways to the institutional apparatus. Foucault, on the contrary, considers culture, according to the weak program, as depending on the power structure. Alexander objects that the "discursive fields" do not have the internal homogeneity Foucault attributes to them, and they cannot be used to legitimize power to the extent affirmed by this author (Alexander 1995: 103; 1998a: 169; 2003: 19). Alexander formulates similar objections also to Giddens' and Habermas' work. In Giddens' structuration theory, as in other works, this author neglects mentioning the cultural conditions through which the meaning structures actors learn and keep in their interaction are formed (Alexander 1987a: 378–9; 1988b: 311–12; 1998a: 213, 222; Reed and Alexander 2009: 37–8, note 8).

As to Habermas, communicative rationality, which is the key concept of his work, is, in Alexander's opinion, culturally and institutionally connoted, since in modern societies, rationality requires a cultural mediation to become a relevant guide to action in any particular concrete case. The external moral and cultural order, according to Habermas, destroys interpersonal relations, which can no longer be informal and based on trust, due to the predominance of instrumental action over communicative action. Still, as Alexander remarks, the distinction between these two kinds of action can only be made for analysis purposes, because they concretely compenetrate each other. However, Alexander shares Habermas' thesis that communicative rationality (overestimated by Habermas, according to Alexander) can and must be exerted by actors who mean to rationally control their communication, which is subject to being systematically twisted by the strains embedded in capitalism. In that case, the actors, insofar as they share the same life world, can consciously commit themselves to reducing the probability that communication is distorted without their fully realizing it (Habermas 1985, 1987a: 372; 1995: 118–19; 1998a: 169, 222).

The major representatives of symbolic interactionism have been closely examined, too. Mead, in particular, who is considered one of the founders of this perspective, has focused his analysis on the creation and interpretation of the meanings that take shape during or through interactive processes. These meanings

are contingent and are not predetermined, since they depend on a variety of actors' interpretations and answers to other actors' attitudes and significant gestures. All actors are bound by institutional constraints, which are both external and internal at the same time. Alexander argues that Mead presents sometimes the genesis of meanings as the joint result of the attitudes of some actors, and of the answers given by others, showing an empirical difference as if it were relevant to a theory of social order. This is not possible, because in that case meanings would depend on contingent and specific interactions. Therefore, in general, nothing could be said about the meanings, the cultural and material constraints, and the institutional and macro-sociological sources of social order (Alexander 1987a: 205–14; 1988b: 245–50; Alexander and Giesen 1987: 9–10).

Blumer's symbolic interactionism overemphasizes – according to Alexander – the position of a single social actor as an interpreter and creator of contingent meanings and attitudes, which are experienced and tested in the social world. In this case, though the existence of an order and of social structures, and consequently, of structured meanings is recognized, its origin and its revealing itself are not explained, as in general happens in the case of the individualistic theories of action. Blumer neither has, nor is consequently able to propose, a theory of society (Alexander 1987a: 215–27; 1988b: 250–53). As a further example of individualistic theory, and the problems resulting from it, Alexander mentions Homans' exchange theory (Alexander 1987a: 172–91, 216). Partly similar critical remarks are also formulated in the case of Goffman, who is considered the most outstanding representative of symbolic interactionism after Blumer (Alexander 1987a: 230). Goffman – Alexander argues – resumes Blumer's individualistic approach, and changes it by stressing its dramaturgical aspect. An insincere and manipulative actor, alienated from the social system and from cultural life, is placed at the center of the action. Alexander wonders whether social order is possible in such conditions, which seem instead to lead to disintegration.

Together with an individualistic conception of social order, Goffman introduces a completely opposite theory inspired by Durkheim and Parsons. According to this conception, the actors strive to keep a "front," that is to say, a collective image and representation socially and culturally prescribed according to standards of propriety, dignity, opportunity, and so on. Goffman shows therefore a dualism and ambivalence between these two different conceptions of order. Empirical and theoretical strains result from them in all his works. In Alexander's opinion, this problem is entirely shared with the perspective of symbolic interactionism and results from its individualistic assumptions. Collins' work is an example of this approach. Collins, who is one of the most well-known contemporary representatives of symbolic interactionism, shows in his work an unresolved strain between a conception of the actor as a subject who willingly adopts a non-rational behavior, and a conception, in which, on the contrary, the actor rationally acts within predetermined situations to obtain unequally distributed material resources (Alexander 1988b: 35).

Though more favorable, his appraisal of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is also critical. Alexander identifies a first and second period in Garfinkel's production. In the first period, Garfinkel conceives social order as the product of mutual adjustment processes between actors who have interiorized the rules that make it possible. Rules are the ways in which a system of activities is organized, and in this regard, Alexander quotes a passage of Garfinkel (Alexander 1988b: 237). However, already in this period, there is a basic ambivalence, since the products issuing from individual interactions cannot result at the same time from rules or other structural elements external to the actors. In the second period, this ambivalence is solved by a theoretical renunciation. Order is a consequence of actors' practices situated in specific organizational contexts. Actors' practices themselves form the rules, without making reference to rules or meanings external to these contexts any longer (Alexander 1987a: 259–61; 1988b: 233–45).

Finally, we would like to briefly mention the reception on Alexander's part of Coleman's work *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990). As Alexander notes, Coleman – and in general the Rational Choice Theory, which is fully enunciated in this work – shows a utilitarian – and consequently, reductive and reified – conception of the human beings and the social world, as if individual and collective action could be exhaustively explained by the single individuals' hedonistic calculation. An attempt to explain the meanings individuals give to their actions is deliberately lacking. This lack involves consequences of considerable theoretical relevance since, in Coleman's opinion, social order, and the mutual trust supporting it, result from rational calculations based on one's advantage, considering that only thus could actors meet their interests. Alexander objects that this individualistic solution to the problem of order is unacceptable, because collective interests are long-term interests, while the rationality of each actor is limited in time. As a consequence, it is not plausible

postulating that actors find some advantage in transferring their rights to collective structures in exchange for future benefits, and the existence of social norms and democratic institutions cannot be explained in this way (Alexander 1992b).

The Theory of Civil Society and Related Empirical Research

The empirical research carried out by Alexander, whether on his own or with collaborators, has conformed to his "strong" program. Therefore it has kept the distinction between different analytical levels, has identified the relevant actors, and has dwelt on the meanings and the social consequences of their actions, focusing in particular on civil society. This is a peculiar social sphere, limited in space and time, which in democratic societies penetrates and is interpenetrated by non-social spheres (or worlds), such as market, politics (as for example, democratic institutions like political parties, lobbies and associations), family, and cultural institutions as religion and science. Civil society is, at the same time, a utopian project and promise of integration and participation, as well as a normative idea of society. In the last two centuries, a large variety of interests and rights have made reference to the stock of meanings and practices that form civil society. This variety may be prejudicial to the compactness of civil society when the production of partial solidarities affects its overall solidarity.

This happens, in particular, when a tragic event of any origin permanently marks the collective conscience and memory of the group that has experienced it, because it creates or emphasizes the internal solidarity of the group, but prevents it from sympathetically participating in the sufferings experienced by other groups. While the common notion of trauma makes it directly result from particular tragic events experienced by individuals or collectivities, the sociological notion proposed by Alexander insists on assuming there is a cultural mediation among an event, the carrier group of those who have been affected by it, and a plurality of other subjects. In order to talk about a strictly "cultural trauma" not only must the group be persuaded that it has been traumatized by that event, but also others must be able to identify themselves with the group and symbolically and emotionally participate in the event in virtue of common linguistic, religious, legal codes, or codes of any other kind, to such an extent that the event loses a part of its emotional and identity call and finally becomes institutionalized (Alexander 2004a).

In civil society – thanks to the support provided by the public opinion and some institutions like press, associations, and legal institutions – as well as individual autonomy, cooperation and egalitarian spirit, trust and solidarity can assert and keep themselves. Solidarity is understood in a universalistic sense – without excluding particular individuals or collectivities – as widespread commitment in support of public interest. Public interest is defined so that it may have sense in the world of everyday life and among common persons. Nonetheless, a well-established civil society in its spirit and in its institutions is not sufficient to make the project of civil society be not merely utopian, as it must ensure, on the contrary, that democratic social life takes roots in individual consciences. A plurality of powers, separate and independent from each other, none of which should dominate the others, and a plurality of discourse communities and society projects, none of which should unconditionally prevail, are required for this purpose. In addition, free interactions among actors, who commit themselves to make up for conditions and circumstances incompatible with this utopian civil repair project, are also necessary (Alexander 2001: 587–9; 2006: 3–9, 31–6, 43–50, 194–5, 551; Cordero et al. 2008: 532).

Alexander argues there will always be exclusion towards some unwelcome social categories, such as particular ethnic and racial groups, religious minorities, criminals or psychopathic persons. Their exclusion, which may be institutionalized, is justified by the negative characteristics attributed to those who belong to these social categories. These characteristics, considered unbecoming or "polluting," counter the favorable characteristics many members of a society attribute to themselves and to the group they belong to. Excluded social categories are considered socially impure, not deserving solidarity, and therefore unfit to participate in civil society and democratic life. The persons who belong to these categories deserve exclusion since they have one or more negative connotations resulting from their belonging: they are irrational, passionate, non-autonomous, deceitful, greedy, without any sense of honor, and inclined to pursue only their own interests.