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| Corresponding Author          | Family Name  | <b>Lizardo</b>           |
|                               | Particle   |                          |
|                               | Given Name   | <b>Omar</b>              |
|                               | Suffix   |                          |
|                               | Division   |                          |
|                               | Organization/University  | University of Notre Dame |
|                               | City   | Notre Dame               |
|                               | State  | IN                       |
|                               | Country  | USA                      |
|                               | Email  | olizardo@nd.edu          |
| Abstract                      | <p>Contemporary cultural theory has acquired discipline-wide status as the only “subfield” within which quintessentially “theoretical” issues are widely discussed, while at the same time forming core parts of the research agenda. Cultural theory is also one of the few strands of modern theorizing that boasts having a “straight line” of succession stemming from the programmatic concerns that preoccupied the sociological classics. Cultural theory carries this status in spite of the fact that its central concept is a twentieth century anthropological importation made prominent in Parsons’s functionalism. This an odd situation because culture seems to be an inherently functionalist concept, and yet functionalism is the theory that is both accused with providing a misleading interpretation of the classics and, accordingly, the theory that contemporary “cultural” approaches use to define themselves against. In this chapter I argue that, in spite of the aforementioned pretensions, there is no straightforward conceptual link between modern cultural analysis and the work of the classics, precisely because the contention that the classics were budding cultural theorists is a convenient invention of functionalism in the first place. I close by suggesting that the “problems” of contemporary cultural theory, being problems inherited from functionalism, may only be soluble by abandoning the culture concept. Ironically enough the nineteenth century classics, especially Durkheim, and one twentieth century “classic,” namely Bourdieu, provide a model of how to do social theory without a culture concept.</p> |                          |
| Keywords (separated by “ - “) | Culture - Social structure - Social action   |                          |

**AUTHOR QUERIES**

Q1 Please provide department name for author.

Omar Lizardo

[A01]

3 **6.1 Introduction**

4 Long abandoned by anthropologists as a founda-  
 5 tional concept (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991), the last  
 6 two decades have seen a virtual explosion of  
 7 interest in culture among sociologists, not only as  
 8 a “topic” of analysis (the “sociology of culture”)  
 9 but most importantly as a “resource” for general  
 10 sociological explanation (“cultural sociology”).  
 11 This is exemplified by the fact that, while begin-  
 12 ning as a relatively small and largely peripheral  
 13 intellectual movement in the mid 1980s, today  
 14 the American Sociological Association’s  
 15 “Section on Culture” is decidedly central, boast-  
 16 ing one of the largest rates of membership espe-  
 17 cially graduate student members. Intellectually,  
 18 cultural sociologists (or sociologists of culture  
 19 for that matter) can proclaim with confidence that  
 20 their work stands “at the crossroads of the disci-  
 21 pline” (Jacobs and Spillman 2005), helping to  
 22 inform the work of social scientists working  
 23 across essentially every substantive field of  
 24 research. This includes social science history  
 25 (e.g. Bonnell and Hunt 1999), cognitive sociol-  
 26 ogy (e.g. DiMaggio 1997), the sociology of reli-  
 27 gion (e.g. Smilde 2007), organizational studies  
 28 (e.g. Weber and Dacin 2011), social movement  
 29 theory (e.g. Polletta 2008), economic sociology

(e.g. Bandelj et al. 2015), culture and inequality 30  
 studies (e.g. Small et al. 2010), and even tradi- 31  
 tionally “positivist” subfields such as demogra- 32  
 phy (Bachrach 2014). Articles and books dealing 33  
 with cultural analysis have become field-wide 34  
 citation classics (e.g. Swidler 1986; Bellah et al. 35  
 1985; Lamont 1992; Sewell 1992; DiMaggio 36  
 1997; Lareau 2011), handbooks on cultural soci- 37  
 ology continue to be published at a rapid pace 38  
 (e.g. Bennett and Frow 2008; Hall et al. 2010; 39  
 Alexander et al. 2012), and contemporary debates 40 U3]  
 on foundational issues on the theory of action, 41  
 the basic parameters of social explanation, and 42  
 the foundations of social order take place largely 43  
 under the umbrella of “cultural theory” and “cul- 44  
 tural analysis” (e.g. Reed 2011; Vaisey 2009; 45  
 Swidler 2001; Patterson 2014; Alexander 2003). 46  
 Given this, it is uncontroversial to propose 47  
 that the “concept of culture” has joined the cou- 48  
 plet of “structure” and “agency” as one of con- 49  
 temporary sociology’s foundational notions. Yet, 50  
 just like those other foundational ideas, the con- 51  
 cept is beset with ambiguity and vagueness 52  
 (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Stocking 1966), 53  
 as well as lingering doubts as to its analytical 54  
 import and exact relation to other foundational 55  
 notions in social theory such as “social structure” 56  
 and “agency” (Alexander 2003; Sewell 2005; 57  
 Patterson 2014; Archer 1995). As a result, while 58  
 both “culture and structure” and “culture in 59  
 action” debates continue to rage, there does not 60  
 seem to be any immediate resolution to these 61

O. Lizardo (✉)  
 University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA  
 e-mail: olizardo@nd.edu

62 perennial problems in sight (e.g. Vaisey 2009;  
63 Alexander 2003; Sewell 2005). This unsatisfac-  
64 tory *détente* acquires more importance, when we  
65 consider the fact that the basic theoretical debates  
66 in the discipline in the American scene—e.g.  
67 those inaugurated by Parsons's (1937) problem-  
68 atic interpretation of a selection of European  
69 thinkers—now take place largely under the aus-  
70 pices of “cultural theory” and not “theory” in its  
71 unqualified form (Swidler 1995).

72 Whether the culture concept or cultural soci-  
73 ology as a general analytic approach is up to this  
74 task remains to be seen. What is not in doubt is  
75 that continuing progress (or possible resolutions)  
76 to contemporary theoretical impasses will depend  
77 on whether “culture” has the potential to serve as  
78 such a unifying meta-concept. The basic argu-  
79 ment in this chapter is that the contemporary ver-  
80 sion of the culture concept in sociology is simply  
81 not the sort of analytic resource that is up to this  
82 task and that “cultural theory” *as currently con-*  
83 *figured* will not make headway on the relevant  
84 analytical issues. The reason for this is that the  
85 concept of culture in contemporary sociology  
86 melds (in somewhat anachronistic ways) both  
87 basic concerns inherited from the classics and  
88 post-classical issues inherited from the incorpora-  
89 tion of the modern (“analytical”) concept of  
90 culture developed in anthropology into this clas-  
91 sical tradition by Talcott Parsons.<sup>1</sup> As such, the  
92 status of cultural sociology as a meta-field unifying  
93 other areas of substantive inquiry in the disci-  
94 pline will remain problematic, even as “cultural  
95 theory” will continue to serve as a stand in for  
96 “theory” in the general sense.

97 An important, if often unremarked issue, is  
98 that the “modern” culture concept had no strict  
99 conceptual analogue among the sociological

<sup>1</sup> By the “analytical” concept of culture I mean what used to be called the “anthropological” concept (when that discipline had full ownership of it) and like that concept it should be contrasted with the “classical” or “humanist” (Arnoldian) culture concept along the usual dimensions of the denial of absolutism in favor of relativism, the denial of “progressivism” in favor of homeostatic functionalism, the denial of a hierarchy among “cultures,” and the emphasis on the determinism of inherited traditions over conscious reasoning in the shaping of conduct (see Stocking 1966: 868).

100 classics (here I restrict my definition of “classics”  
101 to the standard canon of Marx, Weber, Durkheim).  
102 This means that many of the issues that preoc-  
103 cupy contemporary cultural theorists only have  
104 superficial similarity to those that preoccupied  
105 Marx, Weber, and Durkheim; this also means that  
106 the retroactive recasting of the sociological clas-  
107 sics as budding cultural theorists (e.g. Parsons  
108 1951; Swidler 1995) is an anachronism of conse-  
109 quential import. In this sense, contemporary cul-  
110 tural theory inherits a post-classical problematic  
111 which has no strict analogue in the classics.  
112 Given this, my argument is that it makes little  
113 exegetical or analytical sense to project a “con-  
114 cept of culture” to such pre-cultural theorists  
115 Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (or even the early  
116 Parsons!). Instead, we should go back to the  
117 drawing board and dissociate the classics from  
118 the contemporary culture concept. All the same,  
119 they may also provide a model for how to do  
120 social theory without relying on that concept as a  
121 central line of support.

122 The rest of the chapter is organized as follows.  
123 In the next section I outline the conceptual arma-  
124 mentarium deployed by Marx, Weber, and  
125 Durkheim to deal with theoretical issues that  
126 have now been retroactively (and anachronisti-  
127 cally) remapped as central problems in cultural  
128 theory. The basic argument is that none of the  
129 classics had anything close to what can be called  
130 a “concept of culture” because they did not need  
131 one to deal with the analytical issues that preoc-  
132 cupied them. I will then argue that it is the figure  
133 that marks the transition from “classical” to  
134 “contemporary” sociological theory namely,  
135 Talcott Parsons, who recasts the classics as “cul-  
136 tural theorists” *status nascendi* thus retroactively  
137 recruiting them to deal with basic problems that  
138 emerge from his own (failed) attempt to link his  
139 own version of the anthropological concept of  
140 culture to theoretical issues in action theory and  
141 normativist functionalism. We will see that  
142 Parsons's primary analytic concern in regards to  
143 cultural theory has to do mainly with the mecha-  
144 nisms of how persons become “encultured,”  
145 which for Parsons is essentially a resolution to an  
146 unfinished chapter in his own interpretation of  
147 Durkheim. Parsons coupled his solution

148 (enculturation as “internalization”) with a concep- 193  
 149 ception of the “cultural system” as a systematic 194  
 150 ensemble of ideal elements. Clifford Geertz for 195  
 151 his part, takes up the remnants of Weber’s “mean- 196  
 152 ing” problematic, but does so from within the 197  
 153 constraints of a Parsonian (via Kroeber and 198  
 154 Kluckhohn) conceptualization of culture as 199  
 155 (external) “system” or “pattern.” This is the way 200  
 156 in which this particular problem continues to be 201  
 157 formulated in contemporary cultural analysis. 202

158 In the fourth section, I will review some of the 203  
 159 basic issues in contemporary cultural analysis. 204  
 160 We will see that contemporary cultural theorists 205  
 161 essentially divide themselves into analytic camps 206  
 162 depending on their stance vis a vis the Parsonian 207  
 163 model of enculturation, such that acceptance or 208  
 164 rejection of a conception of culture as either 209  
 165 “internal” to the actor or as part of the external 210  
 166 environment becomes correlative to acceptance 211  
 167 or rejection of a conception of the *nature* of culture 212  
 168 as either systematic or fragmented (respec- 213  
 169 tively). A third group of contemporary cultural 214  
 170 sociologists abandons the Parsonian problematic 215  
 171 of enculturation and internalization in favor of a 216  
 172 return to the “problem of meaning” as a defining 217  
 173 issue for sociological explanation more gener- 218  
 174 ally. This group however, remains wedded to a 219  
 175 Parsonian conception of culture as systematic, 220  
 176 although reinforced with a more contemporary 221  
 177 formulation of systematicity taken from struc- 222  
 178 tural linguistics. I close by outlining the implica- 223  
 179 tions of this situation for the future of the “concept 224  
 180 of culture” as a central analytic resource in 225  
 181 sociology. 226

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182 **6.2 The Sociological Classics**  
 183 **as Pre-cultural Theorists**

184 Given its current status as a central analytic con-  
 185 struct, it might seem impossible to imagine how  
 186 one can get a conceptual bearing on the central  
 187 analytic issues of social theory, such as under-  
 188 standing the nature of action or explicating the  
 189 nature and origins of social change and reproduc-  
 190 tion *without* a culture concept. Yet, it is well  
 191 known that the contemporary *analytic* “concept  
 192 of culture” did not exist until well into the twen-

tieth century, itself being an invention of  
 American anthropologists (themselves reacting  
 against what they saw as an unduly austere  
 British functionalism); most centrally Franz Boas  
 (the innovator), his student Alfred Kroeber (the  
 systematizer), and later on Margaret Mead (the  
 popularizer).<sup>2</sup> That means that none of the socio-  
 logical classics operated with anything like the  
 modern culture concept yet they undoubtedly  
 dealt with the “central problems in social theory”  
 (Giddens 1979). Accordingly, we may conclude  
 that the culture concept is not necessary for such  
 a task, a claim supported by the fact that the dis-  
 cipline from which sociologists got the concept  
 in the first place (Anthropology) continues to  
 plug along after having renounced it as essential-  
 ist and reductive (Abu-Lughod 1991), and one of  
 the major thinkers in twentieth century Sociology,  
 Pierre Bourdieu, largely conducted his work  
 without ever making *analytic* use of the notion  
 (although of course he took it up as “topic” of  
 analysis).<sup>3</sup> How then were the classics ever able  
 to manage without a modern culture concept?  
 The answer is that both used cognate notions  
 available from their native intellectual traditions  
 (Levine 1995). What were these?

**6.2.1 The Germanic Tradition**

In the case of Marx and Weber, the concept that  
 performed the analytic task is that of ideas (*idee*,  
*vorstellung*) inherited from the Kantian-Fichtean-  
 Hegelian tradition of German Idealism in  
 Philosophy. Marx and Weber thus drew on a  
 “German” (in Levine’s 1995 sense) sociological  
 tradition in which the “cognitive element” of

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<sup>2</sup>See Stocking (1966) for the definitive historical treat-  
 ment of the central role of Boas in crafting the modern  
 analytical culture concept; see Kuper (1999) for a wider  
 ranging study linking the culture concept to interacting  
 but analytically autonomous traditions in England,  
 France, and Germany; for a lexicographic analysis of the  
 concept as used in standard (non-academic) discourse see  
 Goddard (2005) and Sewell (1999) does a masterly job of  
 disambiguating the folk and analytic conceptions of  
 culture.

<sup>3</sup>For more details on Bourdieu as a “non-cultural” or at  
 least “post-cultural” theorist see Lizardo (2011).

227 action (Warner 1978) was largely thought of in  
 228 terms of “ideas.” The German tradition came in  
 229 two brands; the first one came from the Hegelian  
 230 obsession with the “motor forces” of history and  
 231 basically dealt with a controversy in the so-called  
 232 Philosophy of History as to which one of the two  
 233 set of forces was most important in accounting  
 234 patterns of historical and social change usually  
 235 conceptualized in teleological “evolutionary” (in  
 236 the pre-Darwinian “telos of history” sense) terms.

237 The second flavor is (Neo)Kantian and has a  
 238 more direct concern with the battle between ideal  
 239 and material forces *within* the individual in deter-  
 240 mining conduct and not as macro-social “forces”  
 241 or “factors” in historical societies. In the (neo)  
 242 Kantian version of the tradition, ideas are thought  
 243 of as subjective conceptions of the world held by  
 244 actors, which may or may not accurately reflect  
 245 its objective features. Accordingly, ideas are seen  
 246 as the creative, “active” elements determining  
 247 action via relations of non-Newtonian, *intentional*  
 248 (final) causality, counterposed against  
 249 external “deterministic” elements that push peo-  
 250 ple around via relations of physical (inclusive of  
 251 the bodily instincts), efficient causation. Ideas  
 252 were thus thought of as a possible *driver* of action  
 253 along with other forces, most importantly instinc-  
 254 tual (biological) and environmental determinants  
 255 (which we may refer to as “material” for short).  
 256 In this respect, this tradition linked “cultural  
 257 analysis” (with this term being used in an admit-  
 258 tedly anachronistic way) with the problematic of  
 259 “action theory” (another anachronism as this  
 260 term does not become prevalent until after  
 261 Parsons).

262 The distinction between the “societal” and  
 263 “individual” version of the German “idealist” tra-  
 264 dition is important because these two debates  
 265 tend to be run together and continue to be con-  
 266 flated in contemporary “cultural” analysis.  
 267 Conceptually however, they are thoroughly inde-  
 268 pendent and rely on very different premises. The  
 269 Hegelian debate deals with (to use a modern  
 270 term) “emergent” factors at the level of “societ-  
 271 ies” conceived in quasi-organismic terms as  
 272 coherent wholes. The Kantian debate deals with  
 273 action at the level of the individual. Most of the  
 274 arguments regarding the Hegelian debate over  
 275 ideas operated with either no or very rudimentary

276 references to a theory of action; the Kantian ver- 276  
 277 sion, on the other hand, operated from an *a priori* 277  
 278 methodological presumption (somewhat muddily 278  
 279 articulated by Max Weber) that there were *no* 279  
 280 emergent macro-social “forces” (either “mate- 280  
 281 rial” or “ideal”), that “society” as an organismic 281  
 282 whole was a spurious analytic unit, and that the 282  
 283 the Hegelian “debate” in the Philosophy of 283AU4]  
 284 History (of which Marx and Engels’s historical 284  
 285 materialism was viewed as an entry) was just a 285  
 286 useless conceptual muddle. It was only in the 286  
 287 twentieth century recuperation of this debate by 287  
 288 Parsons that problems of action theory were 288  
 289 again linked up to “macrosocial” issues, in so- 289  
 290 called structural-functionalism. 290

6.2.2 Marx and Engels’s “Big” Idea 291

292 The problematic that was most poignant in the 292  
 293 early nineteenth century and that was thus the 293  
 294 one inherited by Marx and dealt with primarily in 294  
 295 the collaborative writings with Engels from the 295  
 296 mid 1840s to the late 1850s<sup>4</sup> was the Hegelian 296  
 297 “macrosocial” one (essentially the middle “soci- 297  
 298 ological” period between the philosophical 298  
 299 anthropology of the early 1840s and the “politi- 299  
 300 cal economy” writings of the 1860s). The so- 300  
 301 called “materialist conception of history” of 301  
 302 Marx and Engels essentially boils down, in 302  
 303 between withering satire of the so-called Young 303  
 304 Hegelians, Proudhon, utopian socialists or who- 304  
 305 ever stood in their way, to arguing that *at the* 305  
 306 *macrosocial level* “ideal” factors as conceptual- 306  
 307 ized by *philosophers of history* up to that stage 307  
 308 did not matter for explaining historical change as 308  
 309 much as the “material” factors of classical politi- 309  
 310 cal economy (essentially land, labor, and capital, 310  
 311 which “technology” being the most important 311  
 312 part of the latter). Note that what counts as “ideal 312  
 313 factors” in this tradition is essentially mostly the 313  
 314 intellectual outputs of symbol producing elites, 314  
 315 inclusive of political theory, theology and popu- 315

<sup>4</sup>These include, most importantly, the set of notes that came to be known as “The German Ideology” (finished approx. 1846) but also the first part of the “Communist Manifesto” (1848) and the programmatic “Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859).

316 lar religious doctrines, but also “philosophies of  
317 history” or even the “philosophies” peddled by  
318 the “Young Hegelians.”<sup>5</sup>

319 However, Marx and Engels *also counted*  
320 “technical” ideas such as the ideas produced by  
321 the classical political economists (e.g. Malthus,  
322 Smith and Ricardo) and even radical movement  
323 actors (such as syndicalists like Proudhon and  
324 anarchists such as Bakunin) as “ideas.” Note that  
325 from the point of view of modern “cultural theory”  
326 this conception of “ideas” would be considered  
327 *radically* limited as it ignores the schemas,  
328 practices, beliefs and normative commitments of  
329 the folk and essentially everything that is not  
330 ordered into some expert “system” either “scientific”  
331 or “political.” Yet, this makes perfect sense  
332 for Marx and Engels, as their primary goal had  
333 nothing to do with culture as some generic  
334 “dimension” of society but with the role of certain  
335 “ideological” (meaning systematized and  
336 possibly distorting) belief systems in directing  
337 social change. Their point was that rather than  
338 directing change, transformations at the level of  
339 the “infrastructure” (*unterbau*) happen first, and  
340 the “ideologues” emerge at the level of the super-  
341 structure (*überbau*) to justify those changes by  
342 crafting ideas into ideology. The key issue is that  
343 Marx and Engels never talk about anything that  
344 would be recognized as “culture” today at the  
345 level of individual action.

### 346 6.2.3 Max Weber's Little Ideas

347 The theorist who would move the German debate  
348 over ideas to the level of the individual was Max  
349 Weber. Rivers of ink have been spilled on the  
350 issue of whether there is a direct line of continu-

<sup>5</sup>Sometimes this distinction is lost because Marx and Engels's historical materialism is interpreted as making statements about the balance between ideal and material “forces” at the level of group of individuals or even individual themselves and not historical societies. Yet, there is little evidence that Marx or Engels cared about classes (or individuals) in this sense or predicated theories taken standalone “classes” or “groups” as their referent. It was in fact Max Weber (especially in the writings on religion) who moved the debate to this level. Most of the ideal versus material interest debate in sociology is thus a purely Weberian and not a Marxian debate.

351 ity between the theoretical tradition initiated by  
352 Marx and Engels and that of Max Weber. The  
353 position taken here is that the preponderance of  
354 evidence suggests a radical incommensurability  
355 (in the Kuhnian sense) between Weber and the  
356 Marx/Engels's project. In essence, while the latter  
357 were radical “reverse-Hegelians” concerned  
358 primarily with evolutionist issues that began in  
359 the philosophy of history and which they  
360 attempted to move to the empirical terrain of  
361 “science,” (understood main as classical political  
362 economy) the former is a neo-Kantian concerned  
363 with proto-phenomenological issues of the existential  
364 determinants of human action as it pertains  
365 to the generation of unique historical  
366 complexes at given conjunctures (Weber 1946a,  
367 b). While the solution of these neo-Kantian concerns  
368 had *implications* for our understandings of  
369 the origins and trajectory of these unique historical  
370 complexes (such as “rational capitalism”).  
371 These had no real ontological status (existing  
372 only as nominal “ideal types”), and Weber never  
373 saw himself theorizing about them as such at a  
374 macrosocial level.

375 Attempts to recast Weber as a macrosocial  
376 theorist in the realist mode hinge on extremely  
377 partial (and exegetically indefensible) readings  
378 of some of the least reliable of his “writings” in  
379 English (such as the lectures known as *General  
380 Economic History* or excerpts from *Economy and  
381 Society*) that downplay the bulk of the work that  
382 was actually published in Weber's lifetime and  
383 that he gave his living editorial approval to  
384 (essentially the writings known as *The Economic  
385 Ethics of the World Religions [EEWR]*). They  
386 also ignore Weber's explicit pronouncements in  
387 the methodological writings that pure holistic  
388 analysis was a non-starter both substantively and  
389 theoretically. As such, there is nothing wrong  
390 with Weberian *inspired* macrosociology (e.g.  
391 Collins 1986) as long as it is understood to be a  
392 fundamental deviation from Weber's own line of  
393 thinking. This has implication for modern debates  
394 in cultural theory. For instance, while it is perfectly  
395 legitimate to claim Weber as a pre-Parsonian  
396 forerunner of “culture in action” debates  
397 (Swidler 1986), it is madness to think  
398 that Weber prefigured (macro) debates about  
399 “culture and structure” at the “societal” level.

As first noted by Parsons, Weber's fundamental concern was precisely with "the role of ideas in social action" (Parsons 1938) and this approach is distilled in the two "theoretical" essays in *EEWR*.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Weber targets the historical materialists only secondarily. More directly located in his line of fire were all sort of instinctual psychologies (such as Nietzsche's proto-Freudianism), environmentalism, generic motive theories of the origins of historical complexes (such as Sombart's "acquisitive motive" account), and other assorted brain-dead biologisms prominent at the time. Because he was working at the level of individual action, Weber is thus able to develop something pretty close to a modern action-theoretic perspective on the role of "culture" in social action as long as we understand that the Weberian notion of "ideas" is semantically much more restrictive than the modern concept of culture. Weber does this by arguing that "ideas" as *historically constructed conceptions characteristic of given persons* (or in the aggregate groups) have an independent effect on conduct, and that this was noted precisely in those historical cases in which we see persons essentially override, instincts, biology, generic motives and environmental pressures (all swept under the rug of "material interests") in order to fulfill an "ideal interest" (Weber 1946a).

#### 6.2.4 Emile Durkheim's Representations

One of the most disastrous bits of classical exegeses enacted by Parsons (1937) concerns his classification of Durkheim as an (inconsistent) member of a tradition of (German?) "idealism."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>These are the "Social Psychology of the World Religions" (1946a, serving as the "introduction" or *Eileitung*) to the collection and the interlude or "intermediate reflections" (*zwischenbrachtungen*) known in English as "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions" (1946b).

<sup>7</sup>Durkheim was an inconsistent member of the idealist category because, according to the now thoroughly discredited "two Durkheims" argument in *Structure*, he begins his career as an idealist (in *Division*) but ends it by going "clean over" into "idealism" in *Elementary Forms*.

We know now, especially after the efflorescence of Durkheimian studies in the 1990s, that this characterization—still repeated as late as Alexander (1982)—is patently non-sensical as there is an even deeper Kuhnian incommensurability gulf separating Durkheim from any representative of the German idealist tradition (properly called because it derives its preoccupations from German Idealism). We also know thanks to the pioneering (and painstaking) work of such scholars as Stephen Turner, W. F. Pickering, Warren Schmaus, Sue Stedman-Jones, Anne Rawls, Robert Alun-Jones and others, that Durkheim actually belonged to a non-German-idealist tradition of *French Neo-Kantianism*, which combined a set of problematics that while derived from *the French reception of Kant* in the early to mid nineteenth century, featured a set of solutions actually derived from Aristotelian, Thomist, and personalist conceptions autochthonous to the French tradition (Schmaus 2004). These conceptual approaches have little if nothing to do (in a substantive sense if not in allusive sense) with German neo-Kantianism.

The French Neo-Kantian tradition, systematized by such thinkers as Renouvier, Maine De Biran, and Victor Cousin rejected the Kantian problematic of ideas, derided Kant's departure from the Humean skeptical argument as to the problematic origin of general categories as a non-starter, and even questioned the whole notion that "ideas" could be different from or "independent" from a "non-ideal" objective reality. Instead, these thinkers, beginning with Renouvier, developed an ontology of representations (*représentations*) in which the dualistic tendencies typical of the German tradition (in which ideas and material forces fight it out to determine action or history) is renounced in favor of a "naturalistic" conception in which *représentations* exist in the same natural plane as objects in the world (thus Parsons, in his mangled interpretation of

These claims can only be made sense of by accepting Parsons's idiopathic (and exegetically obsolete) understanding of the term "idealism" to encompass any human being who considers the mental component important for explaining action.



477 Durkheim, confused good old fashioned  
 478 Aristotelian naturalism with the German buga-  
 479 boo of “materialism”).<sup>8</sup> Contra the German tradi-  
 480 tion, French thinkers did not see the causality  
 481 pertaining to *représentations* as different from  
 482 material or efficient causality (Turner 1982),  
 483 thought that persons became epistemically  
 484 acquainted with concrete (e.g. “perceptual”)  
 485 *représentations* in the same way that they became  
 486 acquainted with “abstract” (e.g. “categorical”)  
 487 ones (Schmaus 2004), and asserted that *représen-*  
 488 *tations* in this sense could fail (unless under patho-
 489 logical conditions) to match reality, since  
 490 *représentations* (like persons and their conscious-
 491 ness) were natural objects and thus an integral  
 492 part of that very same reality (Stedman-Jones  
 493 2001; see the essays collected in Pickering 2000).

494 This representationalist ontology is adopted  
 495 wholesale by Durkheim who sees in this concept  
 496 the key to the founding of a new “special” sci-  
 497 ence (actually a “special psychology”) of a par-  
 498 ticular kind of object. Because *représentations*  
 499 were a natural object (as opposed to “ideas”  
 500 which Kantians held to be non-naturalistic), they  
 501 could form the foundation of a plain-old science  
 502 (in the same sense as Physics and Biology) and  
 503 there was no need to go through all of the tortured  
 504 hand-wringing (productive of mostly unreadable  
 505 texts) that German neo-Kantians participating in  
 506 the *methodenstreit* had to go through in question-  
 507 ing whether scientific methods were proper or  
 508 not for such non-naturalistic entities as ideas.  
 509 Instead, having travelled to the laboratories of  
 510 Wilhelm Wundt as a young representative of the  
 511 best that the French intelligentsia had to offer  
 512 after the national humiliation suffered during the  
 513 Franco-Prussian war, Durkheim had seen con-  
 514 crete institutional proof that *représentations*  
 515 could be studied scientifically, naturalistically,  
 516 and objectively.

517 From the point of view of the nascent science  
 518 of sociology, the issue had nothing to do with sci-

519 entific *method* (as with the German neo-Kantian  
 520 constipation) and everything to do with scientific  
 521 *object*. Durkheim noted that what sociologists  
 522 were lacking was not a special method but a spe-  
 523 cial “thing” to study. Durkheim “solved” the  
 524 problem as follows: While Wundt and the nascent  
 525 science of German scientific psychology (and  
 526 even German “social psychology”) would be  
 527 concerned with “individual representations”  
 528 (*représentations individuelles*) as their natural  
 529 object, the “new” French science of Sociology  
 530 was going to re-direct the same scientific bravado  
 531 to a set of natural objects that had yet to be dealt  
 532 with in the same vein: collective representations  
 533 (*représentations collectives*). The only thing left  
 534 to do (e.g. Durkheim 1892) was to write an anti-  
 535 philosophical manifesto proclaiming the exist-  
 536 ence and causal preponderance (in relation to  
 537 *représentations individuelles*) of this novel sci-  
 538 entific object, and their analytic resistance to arm-  
 539 chair (read classical philosophical) introspective  
 540 methods. Collective representations are “things”  
 541 (and thus a “natural kind” in modern parlance)  
 542 just like chairs, pains, atoms, and chickens, and  
 543 can be studied with the same methods and using  
 544 the same old concepts of causation.

545 It is hard to overstate, in light of recent discov-  
 546 eries in Durkheim scholarship, how incredibly  
 547 alien is Durkheim’s original conceptual apparatus  
 548 (Rawls 2005), methodological approach  
 549 (Schmaus 1994), and set of epistemic and onto-  
 550 logical commitments (Stedman-Jones 2001)  
 551 from contemporary “germanic” cultural sociol-  
 552 ogy in the United States. Most importantly, how  
 553 alien is the *naturalistic* conception of *représenta-*  
 554 *tions* (Pickering 2000) from the (germanic!)  
 555 Boasian-Parsonian “concept of culture” that  
 556 continues (to paraphrase a germanic theorist) to  
 557 weigh heavily upon the brains of living American  
 558 sociologists.

559 For instance, it is clear that neither the stan-  
 560 dard “culture versus structure” nor “culture in  
 561 action” debate fit the Durkheimian problematic  
 562 because the notion of *représentations* is not com-  
 563 mensurable (once again in the Kuhnian sense)  
 564 with any modern conception of the culture con-  
 565 cept. To wit, (the “early”) Durkheim was a  
 566 “monist” organicist for whom the issue was not,

<sup>8</sup>In what follows, I use the conventional tactic in modern Durkheimian studies of using the untranslated term *représentations* to refer to the original French notion, as the term is not semantically equivalent to the English word “representation” which is beset by Germanic (e.g. Kantian) hangups not applicable to the French notion.

567 as it was for the dualist organicism of the middle- 612  
 568 period Marx or modern “culture and structure” 613  
 569 theorists (e.g. Archer 1995), whether there was 614  
 570 one “factor” (e.g. the material or “social”) that 615  
 571 was preponderant upon another factor (the ideal). 616  
 572 Interpreting Durkheim in a “germanic” mode (as 617  
 573 do Parsons and Alexander) leads to bizarre 618  
 574 notions such as “Durkheimian materialism” or 619  
 575 the even crazier idea of the “paradigm shift” from 620  
 576 the “materialism” of *Division* to the “idealism” 621  
 577 of *Elementary Forms* (Schmaus 1994). 622

578 For Durkheim, the primary analytic issue was 623  
 579 whether the whole “social” organism composed 624  
 580 primarily of social facts (inclusive of person to 625  
 581 person bonds, institutional facts, traditions, and 626  
 582 mores) conceived as *représentations collectives*, 627  
 583 held together as a unity or not. This is the sort of 628  
 584 formulation that Weber would have rejected as 629  
 585 non-sensical mysticism. At this level, the issue 630  
 586 was whether different sets of collective represen- 631  
 587 tations fit together or not. At the level of the indi- 632  
 588 vidual Durkheim does not face the 633  
 589 action-theoretical problematic of whether “ideal” 634  
 590 factors were most important than “material” fac- 635  
 591 tors in determining conduct. For Durkheim *all* 636  
 592 action had to be driven by *représentations*, (the 637  
 593 notion of action without representations is 638  
 594 patently non-sensical from the point of view of 639  
 595 the Aristotelian neo-Kantianism under which 640  
 596 Durkheim was reared). The key issue is thus, 641  
 597 *which* kind of representation is preponderant in 642  
 598 determining action; *représentations individuelles* 643  
 599 or *représentations collectives*. According to 644  
 600 Durkheim’s “dualist” conception of the individ- 645  
 601 ual, when the social organism is whole and 646  
 602 healthy action is driven (unproblematically) by 647  
 603 the appropriate (for that social type) set of collec- 648  
 604 tive representations although these must be of 649  
 605 sufficient strength and carry enough authority to 650  
 606 subjugate the dissipative force of individual (and 651  
 607 thus egotistic, evanescent) representations. 652

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608 **6.3 Enter “Culture”: Talcott**  
 609 **Parsons**

610 As alluded to above, the biggest theoretical disas- 658  
 611 ter in modern social theory consists of Parsons’s 659

shoehorning of Durkheim into a German “ideal/ 612  
 materialist” frame. All modern Durkheim schol- 613  
 ars now reject this formulation along with associ- 614  
 ated non-problems such as the (non-materialist) 615  
 meaning of “thing” in Durkheim’s definition of 616  
 social facts, along with the related non-shift from 617  
 “materialism” to “idealism” (Schmaus 2004). In 618  
 the 1970s there was an entire anti-functional- 619  
 ist movement designed to free Max Weber from the 620  
 cage of normativist functionalism (e.g. “de- 621  
 Parsonizing Weber”). Yet a movement to “de- 622  
 Parsonize Durkheim” (e.g. Stedman-Jones 2001) 623  
 has only been enacted recently among a small 624  
 cadre of specialty Durkheim scholars having lit- 625  
 tle impact on social and cultural theory writ large. 626  
 But this matters, because it is my contention that 627  
 modern cultural theory is the unholy offspring of 628  
 Parsons’s conceptual mixture of German neo- 629  
 Kantian and post-Hegelian hangups concerning 630  
 “the role of ideas in social action” and the “bal- 631  
 ance” between “cultural” and “material” forces at 632  
 the social level with Durkheim’s (as we saw 633  
 above absolutely incommensurable) conceptual 634  
 apparatus. The result is a “Germanized 635  
 Durkheim”; an analytically incoherent concep- 636  
 tual “monster” (in Douglas’s 1966 sense) that 637  
 continues to play havoc on the theoretical imagi- 638  
 nation of modern cultural theorists. 639

Parsons’s conceptual monster emerges in two 640  
 steps. From the point of view of modern cultural 641  
 theory the key conceptual moves occur in two 642  
 distinct periods; the “action-theoretic” period of 643  
 “the early essays” and *Structure* (1935–1938) 644  
 where Parsons still operates with a pre-cultural 645  
 vocabulary steeped in the nineteenth century ger- 646  
 manic neo-Kantian tradition (e.g. voluntarism, 647  
 ideas, materialism, positivism). At this stage, the 648  
 “anthropological” (analytic) concept of culture is 649  
 absent; what we have instead are the twin ger- 650  
 manic concepts of “ideas” (Parsons 1938) and 651  
 “values” (1935; including ultimate values). The 652  
 second period is the so-called “middle period” of 653  
 normativist functionalism proper culminating in 654  
 the publication of *The Social System* (1951), and 655  
 most importantly for cultural theorists the book 656  
 co-authored with Parsons and Shils (*Towards a* 657  
*General Theory of Action* (1951)) and the collec- 658  
 tion of essays, mostly written from the late 1940s 659

660 to the late 1950s, known as *Social Structure and*  
 661 *Personality* (1964). This period is key because it  
 662 is here that Parsons becomes acquainted with  
 663 various fledgling versions of the “analytical” culture  
 664 concept floating around in American anthropology  
 665 since at least 1911 (Stocking 1966;  
 666 Bidney 1967) and uses them to develop his own,  
 667 and ultimately decisive for us, version of the culture  
 668 concept (Parsons 1972; Kroeber and Parsons  
 669 1958).

### 670 6.3.1 Parsons Invents “Culture”

671 We have seen that the classics, in particular  
 672 Weber and Durkheim, did not have a concept that  
 673 maps onto the “modern” (anthropological) concept  
 674 of culture; as such, it is an analytical and  
 675 exegetical mistake (as well as an embarrassing  
 676 anachronism) to treat the classics as budding  
 677 “cultural theorists.” However, this is done regularly  
 678 by both cultural analysts (e.g. Swidler 1995)  
 679 and by everybody who has been tasked with writing  
 680 a “classics” question for a qualifying exam on  
 681 “culture” in a contemporary graduate program in  
 682 sociology (myself) in the United States. How did  
 683 we get to this sad point? The answer is that the  
 684 classics became “cultural theorists” because  
 685 Talcott Parsons re-read them as such. The story  
 686 of how this happened is messy, because everybody  
 687 focuses on the “rewriting” of the classics that  
 688 Parsons enacted in *Structure of Social Action*  
 689 (1937) when Parsons still did not have access to  
 690 the modern culture concept. Everybody forgets,  
 691 however, that Parsons kept rewriting and re-  
 692 interpreting the classics throughout his entire  
 693 career.<sup>9</sup> This was especially true during the highly  
 694 active (both theoretically and in terms of institution  
 695 building) middle period that saw the publication  
 696 of *The Social System* (1951) and various  
 697 mid-career theoretical essays (1964), when

698 Parsons was fully equipped with a modern (analytical) culture concept (Kuper 1999).<sup>10</sup> 699

700 Where did Parsons get an *analytic* version of  
 701 the culture concept? The short answer, is that he  
 702 got it from the anthropologists in particular via  
 703 the influence of Clyde Kluckhohn (the leading,  
 704 because he was the only, cultural anthropologist  
 705 at Harvard) and the professional link to one of  
 706 Franz Boas’s most influential student: Alfred  
 707 Kroeber. The influence of Clyde Kluckhohn’s  
 708 notion of culture as “pattern” and Alfred  
 709 Kroeber’s neo-Spencerian conceptualization of  
 710 culture as “superorganic” on Parsons’s thinking  
 711 on this score, the equally important influence that  
 712 Talcott Parsons had on anthropological definitions  
 713 of the culture concept, as well as the famous  
 714 disciplinary turf-splitting “deal” enacted by the  
 715 two *doyens* of American social science—such  
 716 that Anthropology got to keep the “cultural system”  
 717 and sociology got “the social system” (e.g.  
 718 Parsons and Kroeber 1958)—is an unwritten  
 719 chapter in the history of sociology (but see Kuper  
 720 1999 coming to bat for anthropology). For  
 721 instance, it is clear that Kroeber and Kluckhohn  
 722 (1952) were spurred to clarify systematize, and  
 723 update the Tylor-Boas analytic culture concept  
 724 right after Parsons began to make use of his own  
 725 (ultimately decisive) twist on this very notion  
 726 (e.g. Parsons 1951) as one of the central concepts  
 727 of the middle-period functionalist scheme (with  
 728 the other two being the “social” and “personality”  
 729 systems). As Kuper has noted, this is hugely  
 730 important because the culture concept did not  
 731 emerge from anthropology as a result of an internal  
 732 conceptual need within the discipline. Instead,  
 733 “it was Parsons who created the need for a modern,  
 734 social scientific conception of culture, and  
 735 who persuaded the leading anthropologists of the  
 736 United States that their discipline could flourish  
 737 only if they took culture in his sense as their  
 738 particular specialty” (1999: 68). 739

<sup>9</sup>As we have seen, it is important to note that Parsons kept trying to demonstrate the existence of various “convergence theses” after 1937, including the even more fantastic (and ridiculous) “Freud/Durkheim” convergence thesis around the issue of “cultural internalization.”

<sup>10</sup>Of most immediate direct influence was Clyde Kluckhohn the leading anthropologist at Harvard, and via Kluckhohn, Berkeley’s Alfred Kroeber who received the first PhD in anthropology awarded at Columbia by Franz Boas.

739 It is also clear that at that time the disciplinary  
 740 identity and intellectual coherence of the socio-  
 741 logical and anthropological projects hung of the  
 742 balance of this definitional contest, which was  
 743 precisely what lay behind the famous Kroeber/  
 744 Parsons “truce” (Kroeber and Parsons 1958), one  
 745 that was no truce at all but essentially the capitu-  
 746 lation on the part of Kroeber to give “society” the  
 747 sociologists (something that would have been,  
 748 and was, unthinkable for a Malinowski or a  
 749 Radcliffe-Brown) and keep the desiccated  
 750 Parsonian version of “culture” as an idealist sym-  
 751 bol system made up of “patterns” for the anthro-  
 752 pologists. The culture concept is thus as American  
 753 as apple pie and an inherent (not accidental) out-  
 754 growth of normativist functionalism.

755 The career of the analytic concept of culture  
 756 within anthropology has been written on exten-  
 757 sively both during the heyday of functionalism  
 758 (e.g. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Bidney 1967)  
 759 during the immediate post-functionalist period  
 760 (e.g. Stocking 1966) and more recently (e.g.  
 761 Kuper 1999) and as such it is relatively not very  
 762 obscure, although it is clear that most cultural  
 763 sociologists are blissfully ignorant about it.  
 764 However, there is no doubt that there had been an  
 765 “analytic” concept of culture available to anthro-  
 766 pologists since at least the 1870s, when Tylor  
 767 defined the concept in a sufficiently “value-free”  
 768 way as to serve the relevant scientific purposes.  
 769 Yet, Tylor’s formulation remained inherently tied  
 770 to ethnocentric views of cultural evolution that  
 771 saw something like Victorian era England as the  
 772 pinnacle of civilization (with “Australians” at the  
 773 bottom and the “Chinese” in between). As such  
 774 Tylor’s famous “complex whole” rendering of  
 775 the culture concept, in spite of the largely inac-  
 776 curate hagiography enacted by Kroeber and  
 777 Kluckhohn (1952) remained indelibly tied to  
 778 nineteenth century (racist) version concept. It  
 779 was in fact Kroeber’s teacher Franz Boas, him-  
 780 self drawing on his upbringing in a (liberal, not  
 781 racist) version of the germanic tradition, who  
 782 developed something like the modern (fully rela-  
 783 tivist) culture concept and who used it to van-  
 784 quish the last remnants of ethnocentric  
 785 evolutionism and racialism still extant in the  
 786 American field. This begat the American version

787 of (what later came to be known as) cultural  
 788 anthropology and then known as “ethnology”  
 789 (Stocking 1966). In Boas, culture becomes equiv-  
 790 alent to the “social heritage” essentially every-  
 791 thing from beliefs, values, morals, and technology  
 792 that is not given by the human biological consti-  
 793 tution is learned by novices and is preserved and  
 794 transmitted from generation to generation.

795 But the funny thing is that even though Boas  
 796 developed this concept in early writings before  
 797 1920, most anthropologists did not take notice.  
 798 Instead, a variety of definitions, counter-  
 799 definitions, and redefinitions of culture began to  
 800 accrete during the 40 separating Boas’s early  
 801 writings from Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s emer-  
 802 gency intervention as a reaction to the Parsonian  
 803 incursion (so much so that the latter were able to  
 804 collect about 164 of these in 1952). It is obvious  
 805 that no anthropologist during this period thought  
 806 that anything big for the professional status of  
 807 anthropology actually rode on coming up with a  
 808 “crisp” consensual definition of the culture con-  
 809 cept and that was an entirely correct perception.  
 810 For once Boas vanquished the bugaboo of racial-  
 811 ist biologism, his particular version of the culture  
 812 concept seem to have done its knowledge-  
 813 political job and people felt free to ignore and  
 814 develop their own twists on the idea. Accordingly,  
 815 other anthropological writers with their own par-  
 816 tial and concrete interests began to propose other  
 817 ideas about what culture might or might not be  
 818 some (like Sapir and the early Kroeber) even  
 819 harking back to “normative” or “humanistic”  
 820 notions of culture. Lines of division (and here I  
 821 rely on Bidney 1967) began to form those who  
 822 remained loyal to Boas’s more naturalistic “social  
 823 heritage” notion (which includes artifacts, build-  
 824 ings, habits, techniques, mores, and essentially  
 825 everything that is learned and “man-made”) from  
 826 those who thought of culture as more restrictive  
 827 terms as referring exclusively to non-material,  
 828 non-naturalistic *ideal* or *conceptual* elements.

829 Most importantly, there were those who  
 830 thought of culture not as a set of contents (either  
 831 material or ideal) but as a *pattern* (later on  
 832 referred to as cybernetic “program” by both  
 833 Parsons and Geertz) abstracted out from the  
 834 social behavior of persons (importantly

835 Kluckhohn was of this persuasion, but both Ruth  
836 Benedict and Margaret Mead provide popular  
837 versions of this story). This “pattern” was akin to  
838 a set of general recipes or abstract guidelines for  
839 how to behave but did not reduce to particular  
840 bits of behavior or even the symbols via which  
841 they are expressed. Patterns could be typed and  
842 classified, and therefore the job of the cultural  
843 anthropologist was to uncover these and possibly  
844 come up with exhaustive list of variants across  
845 the world’s “cultures.” At the time, most anthro-  
846 pologists linked their definitions of culture to the  
847 Kroeberian (1917) notion of the “superorganic”  
848 (even if they were critical of the details Kroeber’s  
849 particular formulation they all liked the autono-  
850 mist implications) in which “culture” was thought  
851 to constitute its own emergent level analytically  
852 and ontological separate from the biological indi-  
853 vidual and acting back on persons to constrain  
854 their behavior.

855 It is from these idea bits that Parsons built up  
856 his own version of the concept of culture in the  
857 1940s and 1950s. In contrast to the anthropolo-  
858 gists, Parsons understood full well the knowledge-  
859 political implications of nailing down a culture  
860 concept, for he was engaged in his own bit of  
861 empire making at Harvard at the time. These  
862 were the years (1946 to be exact) when Parsons  
863 leveraged an outside offer to finally take down  
864 rug down from under Sorokin in Sociology. This  
865 would be done by agreeing to lead the formation  
866 of the “Social Relations” department that would  
867 include a group of like-minded psychologists and  
868 sociologists along with Clyde Kluckhohn in  
869 anthropology. Because the department was to be  
870 a combination of sociology, anthropology, and  
871 psychology, each of the branches (in good  
872 Durkheimian fashion) was to have its own  
873 “object.” To sociology would go “the social sys-  
874 tem” to psychology “the personality system” and  
875 to anthropology “the cultural system” (Parsons  
876 1951).

877 Working analytical definitions of society and  
878 personality were already there, but Parsons noted  
879 that no such neat definition existed for “culture”  
880 and that meant that he needed to provide one. To  
881 construct his definition, Parsons combined the  
882 notion that the elements of “culture” were ideal

883 (cultural) objects linked to one another to form a 883  
884 system (Parsons 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951); 884  
885 this system contained both the content via which 885  
886 persons expressed their values and constructed 886  
887 their beliefs and the (following Kluckhohn) more 887  
888 generalized “patterns” via which they organized 888  
889 their actions. The cultural system was thus a 889  
890 Kroeberian superorganic addendum to both per- 890  
891 sons and society, hovering above them while at 891  
892 the same time serving as the storehouse of the 892  
893 system of ultimate values that gave persons their 893  
894 motivations and provided the necessary order to 894  
895 systems of social interaction.<sup>11</sup> 895

896 In this way, what was for the anthropologists a 896  
897 substantive proposal used for the pragmatic pur- 897  
898 pose of arguing against racialist and “primitive 898  
899 mentality” theories (e.g. Boas 1911) became for 899  
900 Parsons a full-fledged analytic abstraction used— 900  
901 for the first time—as a macro-level repository for 901  
902 all of the Germanic elements that had received 902  
903 separate treatment previously (ideas, values, 903  
904 beliefs). It is at this point that Parsons first devel- 904  
905 ops the *essentializing* assumption (Biernacki 905  
906 2000) with respect to culture as an analytic cate- 906  
907 gory installing it as a fundamental component of 907  
908 the full functionalist systems ontology. In 908  
909 Parsons’s hands, culture thus goes from a rela- 909  
910 tively non-committal concept used to refer to cer- 910  
911 tain habitual modes of acting, feeling, and 911  
912 believing along with the requisite set of material 912  
913 objects and know how used by persons to get by 913  
914 in the world (as in the Boasian/Malinowskian 914  
915 tradition) to a set of “substantialized ideal 915  
916 objects” (cultural objects) existing in their own 916  
917 ideal world (in a cultural realm?), expressed in 917  
918 cultural symbols, communicated via symbolic 918  
919 media, and towards which persons may be “ori- 919  
920 ented” in the same way that they orient them- 920  
921 selves in relation to tables, cats, and other people. 921  
922 Culture (while still “expressive” of underlying 922

<sup>11</sup>The full definition, first previewed in *The Social System* and then fully brought out to the world in the famous “truce” paper with Kroeber is “transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas and other symbolic-meaningful systems.” Culture in this sense serves as a “factor” in the “shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior” (Kroeber and Parsons 1958: 583).

923 sentiments and value patterns) is now part of the  
 924 “furniture” of the world.

925 **6.3.2 Culturalizing the Classics**

926 Parsons basic conceit was that while this particu-  
 927 lar concept “culture” could of course not be  
 928 found in any of the classics, they somehow had  
 929 intuited something pretty close to it except that  
 930 they did not have the right words for it. In  
 931 Parsons’s (fantastic) proposal, “Comte and  
 932 Spencer, and Weber and Durkheim spoke of soci-  
 933 ety as meaning essentially the same thing Tylor  
 934 meant by culture” (Kroeber and Parsons 1958:  
 935 583). This is a statement radically ludicrous in its  
 936 brazen anachronism and completely inaccurate in  
 937 every word. We know now for a fact that what  
 938 Tylor meant by culture had little to do with what  
 939 Boas meant by culture, which had even less to do  
 940 with what Parsons meant by culture. Regardless,  
 941 for Parsons, given that the classics had a concept  
 942 of culture (except that it was “society” and except  
 943 that they really did not) then it was perfectly fine  
 944 to simply project, his own *invented* notion of cul-  
 945 ture as behaviorally relevant symbolic patterns  
 946 transmitted from generation to generation to  
 947 Durkheim and Weber without remainder. By cul-  
 948 turalizing the classics, Parsons is able to “demon-  
 949 strate” that Durkheim and Weber “converge”  
 950 once again (but the 1950s convergence argument  
 951 is not quite the same as the 1930s one) because it  
 952 turns out that they were talking about two sides of  
 953 the same coin: objective culture (existing as “pat-  
 954 terns” in a superorganic system) and subjective  
 955 culture (existing as internalized norms, values,  
 956 and ideas about the world inside the person).

957 The key move in this “middle” period is there-  
 958 fore the integration of Parsons twist on the  
 959 anthropological concept of culture into the early  
 960 action-theoretical problematic (essentially swap-  
 961 ping the nineteenth century germanic notion of  
 962 “ideas” for the his notion of culture), the incorpo-  
 963 ration of Kroeber’s (1917) notion of “superor-  
 964 ganic” culture pattern into the functionalist  
 965 macro-sociology, and the proposal that the  
 966 (Weberian) action-theoretical level could be  
 967 joined to the (Durkheimian) macro-social level

968 via the theory of “internalization,” a pseudo-  
 969 Freudian concept that Parsons not only devised  
 970 whole cloth but which he later went on to claim  
 971 *Durkheim* had also come up with *independently*  
 972 from “Freud.” Parsons goes on to propose the  
 973 implausible notion that because Durkheim and  
 974 Freud had “converged” on the same (bizarre)  
 975 notion that therefore the convergence spoke (in a  
 976 perfect circle) to the scientific validity of the  
 977 notion. The foundational Parsonian moves  
 978 (essentially defining the basic set of problems of  
 979 modern cultural theory) have had disastrous con-  
 980 ceptual consequences.

981 In essence, middle-period Parsons replaces  
 982 Weber’s nineteenth century focus on “ideas”  
 983 (even if he earlier endorsed it; see Parsons 1938)  
 984 and Durkheim’s focus on “representations” in  
 985 favor of a hyper-inflated and hypostatized version  
 986 of the culture concept. But we have also seen that  
 987 Parsons’s concept was not the anthropologists’s  
 988 concept; it was an idealist abstraction that sepa-  
 989 rated culture from “society” (or social structure)  
 990 as a *sui generis* entity. Not even Kluckhohn was  
 991 ready to go that far for it implied that anthropol-  
 992 ogy was no longer in the business of studying  
 993 society (although clearly Kroeber was willing to  
 994 play).

995 Finally we have also seen that while basic ele-  
 996 ments from which Parsons cobbled together his  
 997 version of the concept seems deceptively harm-  
 998 less and all were available in Parsons’s *milieu*;  
 999 but together they generate a powerful conceptual  
 1000 monster. In the Parsonian recasting of the modern  
 1001 anthropological concept, culture becomes a  
 1002 “superorganic” *system* of ideal elements (but  
 1003 most importantly beliefs, norms, and values)  
 1004 expressed in significant symbols and communi-  
 1005 cated via symbolic media (e.g. language) that act  
 1006 to *constrain* (following Parsons favorite recourse  
 1007 to cybernetic metaphors) via a top-down “pattern  
 1008 maintaining” process both action (for agents) and  
 1009 patterns of interaction (for social systems)  
 1010 (Parsons 1951).<sup>12</sup> Under the middle-period

<sup>12</sup>On the quite non-sensical—in Wittgenstein’s sense—  
 status of the very idea that something like “culture” as  
 conceived in the analytic sense can “constrain” see Martin  
 (2015, Chap. 2).

1011 scheme, Durkheim's concern with "collective  
1012 representations" now comes to be recast as a con-  
1013 cern with (institutionalized) elements of the "cul-  
1014 tural system," thus taking care of culture's public,  
1015 external side. Weber's concern with subjective  
1016 "ideas" then gets recast into a concern with the  
1017 subjective (internalized) elements of the same  
1018 pseudo-Durkheimian cultural system.

1019 Durkheim fixes Weber by providing him with  
1020 a theory explaining why cultural worldviews  
1021 come to acquire validity and authority, and Weber  
1022 fixes Durkheim by providing him with a theory  
1023 explaining how external culture comes to acquire  
1024 subjectively binding forms for the actor and  
1025 comes to be directly implicated in driving and  
1026 motivating action.<sup>13</sup> Properly anthropologized,  
1027 the classics now provide justification for a "cul-  
1028 turalist functionalism" that is "cultural" through  
1029 and through, in which "culture" had an external  
1030 order (in terms of the patterning of symbolic ele-  
1031 ments in the cultural system) and an internal  
1032 order (in terms of the patterning of internalized  
1033 norms and value orientations in the personality).  
1034 The Parsonian problem of external patterning is  
1035 taken up by Geertz and yields the modern prob-  
1036 lematic of "interpretation" around the (fuzzy)  
1037 notion of "cultural system" (Geertz 1973). The  
1038 problem of internal patterning was taken up by  
1039 Parsons's more directly (in the middle period  
1040 work) and resulted in the unwieldy edifice of  
1041 "socialization theory" in normativist function-  
1042 ism. Let us take a closer look at this mess, as it is  
1043 important for the overall story.

### 1044 6.3.3 Classical Socialization Theory

1045 Textbook introductions to normativist function-  
1046 ism usually propose that Parsons thought that  
1047 social order was accomplished via "socializa-  
1048 tion" whereby this process reduces to the "inter-

1049 nalization of values." This account, while correct  
1050 in spirit, is actually summarily incorrect in the  
1051 most consequential details. The problem is that  
1052 by focusing on "values" as the central element  
1053 that is allegedly internalized, it ignores a funda-  
1054 mental shift in Parsons's thinking, one that is cru-  
1055 cially involved in his incorporation of the  
1056 anthropological theory of culture into the  
1057 normativist-functionalist scheme.

1058 As we saw above, the Parsons of the 1930s (up  
1059 an including the so-called "early essays" (esp.  
1060 1935, 1938) and the uber-classic *Structure of*  
1061 *Social Action*, is still operating with a "pre-  
1062 cultural" vocabulary one that still tethers him  
1063 more or less directly to two nineteenth century  
1064 germanic sources, one the germanic cultural  
1065 vocabulary of "ideas" (e.g. 1938) and the  
1066 Americanized neo-Kantian vocabulary of "val-  
1067 ues" (e.g. 1935). Both of these terms appear in  
1068 *Structure*, and provide the first attempt to  
1069 "update" the nineteenth century classics for  
1070 Parsons's twentieth century theoretical concerns.  
1071 Because the Germanic language of ideas and val-  
1072 ues was already closer to Weber (and Parsons for  
1073 biographical and intellectual reasons was at this  
1074 point just an American broker for the transatlan-  
1075 tic importation of the Germanic tradition into  
1076 sociology) Weber does not come off too badly in  
1077 *Structure*. As we have already seen, the theorist  
1078 that gets absolutely mangled is Durkheim,  
1079 because Parsons has to retrofit the awkward  
1080 vocabulary of "ideas" to a theorist for whom this  
1081 was a meaningless concept.

1082 However, the more important point is that  
1083 there is a fundamental shift in Parsons's vocabu-  
1084 lary post-structure, so that the classical theory of  
1085 internalization does not reduce to a "value inter-  
1086 nalization" account. Instead, the little-discussed  
1087 Freud/Durkheim convergence (that it was even  
1088 more exegetically preposterous as the Weber/  
1089 Durkheim convergence at the center of *Structure*  
1090 is not important) comes to play a key role. In this  
1091 respect, few contemporary theorists actually  
1092 comprehend the radicality of Parsons's proposal  
1093 at this "middle period" stage, because they still  
1094 confuse the Parsonian model of enculturation  
1095 with the value internalization account and dis-  
1096 miss it as a "special" and not a "general" pro-

<sup>13</sup>As Parsons acknowledges in his last published state-  
ment in this regard, "Durkheim did not work out a  
Weberian analysis of the various steps between religious  
commitment and obligations in the field of social action,  
especially in what he called the profane sphere, but the  
congruence with Weber's analysis is quite clear" (Parsons  
1972: 259).

1097 posal. The key is to realize that Parsons came to  
 1098 realize that both “values” and the broader “con-  
 1099 ceptual schemes” through which social actors  
 1100 come to *know* and *classify* the entire world of  
 1101 objects, agents, and situations (essentially what  
 1102 we moderns use the term “culture” to refer to)  
 1103 have to be internalized. Thus, any theory that pre-  
 1104 supposes that persons internalize the basic cate-  
 1105 gories with which they make sense of the world  
 1106 from the external environment is still essentially  
 1107 consonant with a “Parsonian” model.

1108 Parsons only tweak on Freud consists in his  
 1109 chiding him for not having a (“Durkheimian”)  
 1110 theory of cognitive socialization. According to  
 1111 Parsons Freud’s mistake was precisely to think  
 1112 that only normative standards externally (e.g.  
 1113 culturally) specified and thus internalized within  
 1114 the personality as the “Superego” but that the  
 1115 organism does need to internalize a cognitive  
 1116 apparatus with which to make sense of the object-  
 1117 environment, relying instead on a pre-social,  
 1118 naturally given (and thus always veridical) sys-  
 1119 tem of perception and cognition. For Parsons, (as  
 1120 for most sociologists of culture) this is mistake.  
 1121 In Parsonese, Freud, “failed to take explicitly into  
 1122 account the fact that the frame of reference in  
 1123 terms of which objects are cognized, and there-  
 1124 fore adapted to, is cultural and thus cannot be  
 1125 taken for granted as given, but must be internal-  
 1126 ized” (Parsons 1964: 23).

1127 One ironic consequence of not recognizing  
 1128 that Parsons’s theory changes dramatically once  
 1129 the early language of “ideas” and “values” is  
 1130 junked and the theory goes “full cultural” is that  
 1131 even though contemporary cultural sociologists  
 1132 are quick to reject the Parsonian value-  
 1133 internalization account, they continue to abide by  
 1134 the Parsonian model of cognitive socialization. In  
 1135 essence, most sociologists continue to believe  
 1136 that people share cultural contents (e.g. world-  
 1137 views and beliefs) because they *internalize* those  
 1138 contents from the larger culture. Any theory that  
 1139 presupposes that persons introject the basic cate-  
 1140 gories with which they make sense of the world  
 1141 from the external environment is still essentially  
 1142 a “Parsonian” theory of enculturation even if the  
 1143 adjective Parsonian has come to (wrongly) be  
 1144 limited to the “value internalization” account.

1145 Accordingly, the Parsonian theory of culture  
 1146 and cognition is (discouragingly) hard to distin-  
 1147 guish from contemporary approaches, especially  
 1148 in presuming the wholesale internalization of  
 1149 entire conceptual schemes by socialized actors.  
 1150 For instance, Jeffrey Alexander chides post-  
 1151 functionalist conflict theory for failing to empha-  
 1152 size “...the power of the symbolic to shape  
 1153 interactions from within, as normative precepts  
 1154 or narratives that carry *internalized moral force*”  
 1155 (Alexander 2003: 16; italics added; see also  
 1156 pp. 152–153 of the same book on the internaliza-  
 1157 tion of cultural codes). Eviatar Zerubavel for his  
 1158 part notes, that when it comes to the “logic of  
 1159 classification,” by the age of three a child has  
 1160 already “*internalized* conventional outlines of the  
 1161 category ‘birthday present’ enough to know that,  
 1162 if someone suggests that she bring lima beans as  
 1163 a present he must be kidding” (1999: 77, our  
 1164 italics).

1165 These so-called “contemporary” accounts are  
 1166 simply not conceptually distinguishable in any  
 1167 way from the culturalized Parsonianism of the  
 1168 middle period (which goes to tell you that just  
 1169 because somebody writes something today it  
 1170 does not make contemporary). Thus, rather than  
 1171 being some sort of ancient holdover from func-  
 1172 tionalism, a model pretty close to Parsons’s  
 1173 Durkheimian Freudianism continues to be used  
 1174 by contemporary theorists, *whenever* those theo-  
 1175 rists wish to make a case for enculturation as a  
 1176 form of mental modification via experience.  
 1177 There do exist a family of contemporary propos-  
 1178 als that is truly “post-functionalist” in the sense  
 1179 of recasting the question of culture in action away  
 1180 from issues of “internalization,” this leads us to a  
 1181 consideration of “contemporary” cultural theory.

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6.4 **Contemporary Cultural Theory: Fighting the Parsonian Ghost in the Machine** 1182  
 1183  
 1184  
 1185

1186 From this account, it is easy to see that the cultur-  
 1187 alized functionalism of the middle-period Parsons  
 1188 provides a skeleton key to understand contempo-  
 1189 rary cultural theory. The classic text is Swidler 1189



1190 (1986) who essentially uses sound pragmatist  
 1191 sensibilities to develop a “negative” (in the old  
 1192 fashioned photographic sense) theoretical system  
 1193 in which the two basic premises of culturalized  
 1194 functionalism are denied. In Swidler there is no  
 1195 “internal” cultural order (because actors don’t  
 1196 “deeply internalize” any culture) nor is there any  
 1197 “external” cultural order because culture does *not*  
 1198 exist outside of people’s heads in the form of  
 1199 tightly structured systems. Instead, actors are  
 1200 only lightly touched by culture (learning what  
 1201 they need ignoring the rest) and draw on disorga-  
 1202 nized external cultural elements in expedient  
 1203 ways. We may refer to this “negative” of cultural-  
 1204 ized functionalism as the “cultural fragmenta-  
 1205 tion” model. This account is essentially  
 1206 hegemonic in contemporary cultural analysis and  
 1207 heterodox positions today (e.g. Vaisey 2009;  
 1208 Alexander 2003) can only be understood within  
 1209 the context of this hegemony. A good entry into  
 1210 this debate thus is the quasi-functionalist prob-  
 1211 lematic of “cultural depth” opened up by Swidler  
 1212 (1986) and repeatedly revisited by subsequent  
 1213 cultural theorists (e.g. Sewell 1992; Patterson  
 1214 2014).

1215 **6.4.1 The Problem of “cultural**  
 1216 **depth”**

1217 As we have seen, Between the 1930s and 1950s,  
 1218 it was the synthetic work of Parsons (Parsons  
 1219 1937, 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951) that pro-  
 1220 vided the first fully developed account of how  
 1221 some cultural elements acquire the capacity to  
 1222 become significant in their capacity to direct  
 1223 action. Parsons’s centerpiece proposal was that  
 1224 some cultural elements come to play a more sig-  
 1225 nificant role in action because they are subject to  
 1226 an internalization process whereby they come to  
 1227 form an integral part of the cognitive and motiva-  
 1228 tional makeup of the actor. This internalization  
 1229 mechanism, as a particularly powerful variant of  
 1230 the learning process, arranges cultural elements  
 1231 according to a gradient of “cultural depth.”  
 1232 Cultural elements that are deeply internalized are  
 1233 more crucial in determining an actor’s subjective  
 1234 stances towards a wide range of objects across an

equally wide range of settings and situations than  
 elements towards which the actor only owes  
 “shallow” allegiance.

We have also seen that contemporary cultural  
 theory can be read as a repeated attempt to relax  
 the stipulation that cultural power derives from  
 “deep internalization” (Swidler 1986; Sewell  
 1992). The guiding observation is that individu-  
 als do not seem to possess the highly coherent,  
 overly complex and elaborately structured codes,  
 ideologies or value systems that the classical the-  
 ory expects they should possess (Martin 2010).  
 Instead of regular demonstrations of the posses-  
 sion of coherent cultural systems on the part of  
 “socialized” agents what these newer “toolkit”  
 theories suggest (and what the empirical evi-  
 dence appears to support) is that persons do not  
 (and cognitively cannot) internalize highly struc-  
 tured symbolic systems in the ways that classical  
 socialization accounts portray. These cultural  
 systems are simply too “cognitively complex” to  
 be deeply internalized; people simply wouldn’t  
 be able to remember or keep straight all of the  
 relevant (logical or socio-logical) linkages  
 (Martin 2010).

Instead, as Swidler (2001) has pointed out,  
 much coherence is actually offloaded outside of  
 the social agent and into the external world of  
 established institutional arrangements, objecti-  
 fied cultural codes and current relational commit-  
 ments. That is, “cultural meanings are organized  
 and brought to bear at the collective and social,  
 not the individual level” (Swidler 2008: 279), and  
 gain whatever minimal coherence they can obtain  
 “out of our minds” through concrete contextual  
 mechanisms-instead of “inside” them. However,  
 this is not a return to functionalism because  
 external culture is also unstructured, acquiring  
 whatever “coherence” it has via extra-cultural  
 (political, economic, institutional) means (Sewell  
 2005).

This view of internal *and* external culture as  
 “fragmented,” “contradictory,” “weakly  
 bounded” and “contested” has become the de  
 facto standard in contemporary discussions in  
 cultural sociology (e.g. Sewell 2005: 169–172),  
 cognitive sociology (e.g. DiMaggio 1997) and  
 “post-cultural” anthropology (e.g. Hannerz

1283 1996), the latter of whom have thoroughly  
 1284 rejected the “myth of cultural integration”  
 1285 (Archer 1985) inherited from culturalist func-  
 1286 tionalism. Contemporary cultural theory thus  
 1287 relies primarily on an unquestioned conception  
 1288 of cultural fragmentation. What is distinctive  
 1289 about the cultural fragmentation model in rela-  
 1290 tion to its Parsonian counterpart is (a) its primary  
 1291 empirical motivation (the failure of persons to  
 1292 display highly structured ideologies), (b) its  
 1293 rejection of any form of a positive account of  
 1294 subjective modification of the actor via cultural  
 1295 transmission, and (c) its theorization of the  
 1296 “power” of culture as located “outside of the  
 1297 head” of the actor.

1298 As Swidler noted in her classic paper, “[p]  
 1299 eople do not build lines of action from scratch,  
 1300 choosing actions one at a time as efficient means  
 1301 to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of  
 1302 action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated  
 1303 links” (1986: 276, italics added). This implies a  
 1304 critique of socialization models that operate via  
 1305 the “psychological modification” of actors: “[c]  
 1306 ulture does not influence how groups organize  
 1307 action via enduring psychological proclivities  
 1308 implanted in individuals by their socialization.  
 1309 Instead, publicly available meanings facilitate  
 1310 certain patterns of action, making them readily  
 1311 available, while discouraging others” (Swidler  
 1312 1986: 283). What is appealing about the frag-  
 1313 mentation formulation is that we get to keep the  
 1314 phenomenon of interest (e.g. systematic patterns  
 1315 of human social behavior) without relying on the  
 1316 suddenly doubtful assumption than an entire  
 1317 model of the social world or a whole system of  
 1318 values or logically organized conceptual scheme  
 1319 has to be internalized by social agent (Martin  
 1320 2010).

1321 Contemporary cultural theorists are thus  
 1322 nearly unanimous in proposing a common mech-  
 1323 anism that accounts for how “coherence is possi-  
 1324 ble” when the norm is that culture tends toward  
 1325 incoherence; cultural coherence is possible  
 1326 through external structuration. The specific form  
 1327 in which external structuration mechanisms are  
 1328 theorized is less important than the agreement on  
 1329 this basic point. For instance, Sewell (2005: 172–  
 1330 174) points to mechanisms of power and con-

straint as the source of external structuration. 1331  
 Through the systematic “organization of differ- 1332  
 ence” by powerful institutional actors (and 1333  
 counter-movements) cultures can become (quasi) 1334  
 coherent. DiMaggio (1997: 274), drawing on 1335  
 research from the cognitive sciences (broadly 1336  
 defined), argues that the “sources of stability in 1337  
 our beliefs and representations” should not be 1338  
 sought in the structure of our minds but rather in 1339  
 “cues embedded in the physical and social envi- 1340  
 ronment” (see also Shepherd 2011). 1341

1342 The point to keep in mind is that coherence  
 1343 does not exist “inside of people’s heads” but  
 1344 instead is offloaded towards “the efforts of cen-  
 1345 tral institutions and the acts of organized resis-  
 1346 tance to such institutions” (Sewell 2005: 174).  
 1347 From this perspective, persons do not need to  
 1348 internalize highly coherent sets of classificatory  
 1349 structures and “value systems” in order for their  
 1350 action to be “systematic” since a lot of the “syste-  
 1351 maticity” and regularity in human action actually  
 1352 lies outside, in the world of objectified institu-  
 1353 tions and situational contexts (Swidler 2001). In  
 1354 the contemporary conception, culture is not pos-  
 1355 sessed in a “deep” way, but rather in a “shallow,”  
 1356 disorganized fashion that requires structuring and  
 1357 support from the external social environment to  
 1358 produce coherent judgments.

**6.4.2 Reactions to the (Over) 1359  
 reaction 1360**

1361 If the cultural fragmentation reaction against cul-  
 1362 turalist functionalism is the contemporary ortho-  
 1363 doxy, then it is easy to predict the shape that the  
 1364 heterodoxy has to take (Patterson 2014). Either  
 1365 one tries to bring back some semblance of theo-  
 1366 rizing the “internal” order of culture as embodied  
 1367 in actors (Vaisey 2009) or one tries to bring back  
 1368 a conception of the strong external patterning of  
 1369 culture. This first route has been followed by con-  
 1370 temporary cultural theorists who draw on post (or  
 1371 non)functionalist theoretical traditions (e.g. prac-  
 1372 tice theory) to develop a conception of internal-  
 1373 ization that is not subject to Swidlerian  
 1374 objections.

1375 The rising appeal of Vaisey’s (2009) appro- 1419  
 1376 priation of the discursive/practical consciousness 1420  
 1377 distinction (Giddens 1979), and his importation 1421  
 1378 of “dual process” models from moral psychol- 1422  
 1379 ogy, in order to suggest that culture can be inter- 1423  
 1380 nalized in both weakly and strongly patterned 1424  
 1381 ways can be traced to this. In the same way, reviv- 1425  
 1382 als of “strong external patterning” of the “super- 1426  
 1383 organic” element of culture such as Alexander 1427  
 1384 (2003) or Reed (2011) attempt to conceptualize 1428  
 1385 this patterning without relying on the problem- 1429  
 1386 atic (quasi-organicist) conception of culture as a 1430  
 1387 “system.” Instead, these analysts have attempted 1431  
 1388 to revive neo-Saussurean conceptions of pattern- 1432  
 1389 ing as systems of binary codes, which license 1433  
 1390 strong theoretical proclamations as to the coher- 1434  
 1391 ence of culture, and justify an “interpretative” 1435  
 1392 (textualist) approach to cultural explanation. This 1436  
 1393 is of course a methodological approach that was 1437  
 1394 advocated by Geertz (1973) but which was not 1438  
 1395 quite compatible with the Parsonian notion of the 1439  
 1396 “cultural system” that he was conceptually stuck 1440  
 1397 with (at least in the core essays written in the 1441  
 1398 1960s). Today these heterodox conceptions of 1442  
 1399 both the internal and external order of culture 1443  
 1400 compete against still hegemonic fragmentation 1444  
 1401 ideas for explanatory prevalence. 1445

1402 **6.4.3 Whatever Happened** 1450  
 1403 **to the Cultural System?** 1451

1404 A rather unremarked aspect of contemporary cul- 1452  
 1405 tural theory in American sociology is that while 1453  
 1406 some version of the fragmentation model is usu- 1454  
 1407 ally the first thing cultural sociologists trot out of 1455  
 1408 their toolkit when trying to explain something 1456  
 1409 there has been a simultaneous movement to see 1457  
 1410 strong patterning in cultural systems at a “deep 1458  
 1411 level” and to see cultural fragmentation as a sur- 1459  
 1412 face mirage. These “strong program” sociolo- 1460  
 1413 gists, tend point to culture as the fundamental 1461  
 1414 dimension of social reality and link a method- 1462  
 1415 ological interpretivism to a substantive concep- 1463  
 1416 tion of culture as a “system of signs.” This 1464  
 1417 approach, seemingly antithetical to the fragmen- 1465  
 1418 tation idea, is actually a close cousin of it and 1466

emerges from the same set of problematics inher- 1419  
 1420 ited from Parsons.

1421 Recall that Parsons’s main contribution was to 1422  
 1423 develop a culture concept that made robust 1424  
 1425 assumptions about the makeup, nature, of culture 1426  
 1427 as a macro-level ontological category. These 1427  
 1428 were ideas that a lot of anthropologists had 1428  
 1429 played around with (inclusive of the more bril- 1429  
 1430 liant Boas students such as Sapir and Kroeber) 1430  
 1431 but which none had systematically laid out 1431  
 1432 (Kuper 1999). It is Parsons that comes clean and 1432  
 1433 offers the notion of the “cultural system” as a *sci-* 1433  
 1434 *entific* object of study. However, it was an upstart 1434  
 1435 student in the department of social relations, 1435  
 1436 Clifford Geertz, who runs away with the culture 1436  
 1437 notion of “cultural system” and actually cashes in 1437  
 1438 on the analytic potential of Parsons revolutionary 1438  
 1439 notion. In a series of essays written primarily in 1439  
 1440 the 1960s (collected in 1973 in the classic 1440  
 1441 *Interpretation of Cultures*), Geertz is able to for- 1441  
 1442 mulate both an evolutionary/naturalistic founda- 1442  
 1443 tion for the culture concept and a non-naturalistic, 1443  
 1444 “interpretative” methodological manifesto that 1444  
 1445 Geertz seduced everybody into thinking that it 1445  
 1446 followed from that foundation. Geertz’s approach 1446  
 1447 was masterful in the knowledge political sense; 1447  
 1448 for Geertz sees Parsons “gift” of culture to 1448  
 1449 anthropology and ups the ante by taking this gift 1449  
 1450 and using it to argue into irrelevance the other 1450  
 1451 two denizens of the Parsonian systems ontology 1451  
 1452 (personality and society). 1452

1453 Geertz thus squares the Germanic circle by 1453  
 1454 separating ontology from methodology or more 1454  
 1455 accurately by using ontology to justify methodol- 1455  
 1456 ogy. Not surprisingly, this “methodology” is 1456  
 1457 nothing but good old fashioned “interpretation” 1457  
 1458 (*verstehen*) updated with nods to (for Geertz) 1458  
 1459 contemporary anti-naturalistic arguments in the 1459  
 1460 philosophy of action (Gilbert Ryle) and herme- 1460  
 1461 neutics (Ricoeur). In this way, Geertz becomes 1461  
 1462 the conduit via which a host of Parsonian prob- 1462  
 1463 lematies (and associated issues from the Kantian/ 1463  
 1464 Hegelian Germanic legacy that Parsons only 1464  
 1465 provide pseudo-solutions to) have been passed 1465  
 1466 along to modern cultural theorists in essentially 1466  
 1467 pristine forms. How did he do it? 1467

1468 Geertz basically used a loophole in the 1468  
 1469 Parsonian charter. For while Parsons was content 1469  
 1470 1470

1467 to define a new object of study for anthropology  
1468 and even give clues as to its ontological constitu-  
1469 tion, he said little about *how* to study. The hint,  
1470 left hanging by Parsons for Geertz to take, was  
1471 that while an ontology of systems emphasizing  
1472 the cold scientific language of homeostasis, pre-  
1473 requisites, cybernetic control, and so on was  
1474 appropriate for the more “physical,” or “mate-  
1475 rial” (or biological) of the three systems (society  
1476 and personality) given the symbolic nature of  
1477 culture its “systemness” was not to be conceived  
1478 in the same physicalist terms. Instead, the cul-  
1479 tural system was held together by *meaningful*  
1480 links and its mysteries could only be cracked by  
1481 mixing a scientific language that conceived of  
1482 the cultural system as a sort of “program” or  
1483 “code” (similar to the genetic code; Parsons  
1484 1973) with a humanistic language that cracked  
1485 that code by relying on the deep interpretation of  
1486 meaningful action.

1487 The classic text here is the early essay on the  
1488 “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the  
1489 Concept of Man” (Geertz 1973: 33–54; origi-  
1490 nally published in 1965). Here Geertz takes on  
1491 Parsons indirectly by attacking Kluckhohn’s  
1492 attempt to pursue a sort of Parsonian “psycho-  
1493 logical anthropology” aimed at uncovering and  
1494 typologizing universal cultural patterns across  
1495 societies. Geertz’s point is simple: culture does  
1496 not exist in desiccated cross-cultural generalities  
1497 tied to the empty generalizations of psychologi-  
1498 cal science, but in the irreducibly unique configu-  
1499 ration that produce the uniqueness of each  
1500 cultural display in explicit symbolism. These  
1501 configurations (which may include the shaping of  
1502 a person’s most intimate desires and worldviews)  
1503 can only be *described* not catalogued and it is in  
1504 the sum total of these time and place specific con-  
1505 figurations of cultural elements that “generality”  
1506 will be found in the anthropological project.  
1507 While it is true that in *theory* nature of culture can  
1508 be described as a Parsonian/Kluckhohnian “pat-  
1509 tern,” “program,” or “code,” culture does not  
1510 present itself to the analyst in this form; its con-  
1511 crete reality can only be ascertained in the spe-  
1512 cific symbolic manifestations by which it shapes  
1513 even the most exotic patterns of behavior and  
1514 action.

1515 This attempt to bring together the most  
1516 abstract of naturalistic generalities (e.g. the  
1517 notion that culture is a program, like a computer  
1518 program or a code like the genetic code) with the  
1519 most specific of humanistic particularities is the  
1520 key to Geertz’s charter; and in this sense the nod  
1521 to culture as a naturalistic phenomenon that  
1522 emerges in evolution as an external control sys-  
1523 tem (in the form of programs or models) for  
1524 human behavior is only a sideshow (as in the  
1525 much overhyped essay “The Growth of Culture  
1526 and the Evolution of Mind”; see e.g. Sewell  
1527 1997). For what Geertz was after was the founda-  
1528 tions for an analytic approach to cultural analysis  
1529 that justified a purely non-naturalistic under-  
1530 standing of the sources of human action. The  
1531 naturalistic fact that persons are born incomplete  
1532 and depend on cultural programming to become  
1533 “fully formed,” leads to an anti-naturalistic con-  
1534 clusion: that these foundational meanings can  
1535 only be grasped via hermeneutic methods not  
1536 psychological needs, biological underpinnings,  
1537 or appeals to the functional prerequisites of social  
1538 systems (Kuper 1999).

1539 For Geertz, the most important thing is that  
1540 people *necessarily* become entangled in and  
1541 external “web of meanings” to give pattern and  
1542 meaning to their actions; both the social and per-  
1543 sonality system are just the formless clay upon  
1544 which the form giving powers of the cultural sys-  
1545 tem work to produce the phenomena available for  
1546 analytic inspection (see Reed 2011 for an update  
1547 on this argument). While cultural theorists tend  
1548 to read the Geertzian “web of meanings” apho-  
1549 rism as a nod to Weber, it is important to under-  
1550 stand that this is actually a nod to *Parsons’s*  
1551 “culturalized” Weber and that Geertz understood  
1552 both the ontological existence of this cultural  
1553 web and people’s entanglement in it in a quite  
1554 substantive (rather than a heuristic) sense. In this  
1555 last respect, if Geertz’s is supposed to have pro-  
1556 vided an early preview of the “strong program” in  
1557 cultural analysis (Alexander 2008), then it is  
1558 clear that contemporary versions of this approach  
1559 are a direct outgrowth of the Parsonian notion of  
1560 culture. It is thus no wonder that is precisely such  
1561 “recovering functionalists” (e.g. Alexander 2003)  
1562 who have gone farthest in reviving a neo-

1563 Parsonian notion of culture as both an autono- 1606  
 1564 mous (substantive) “realm” with an internal 1607  
 1565 structure modelled after language (replacing talk 1608  
 1566 about “programs” with neo-Saussurean talk of 1609  
 1567 “semiotic codes” but keeping the underlying 1610  
 1568 Parsonian definition essentially the same) 1611  
 1569 designed to give “order and meaning” to individ- 1612  
 1570 ual and collective action. 1613

1571 All of this is of much more than purely histori- 1614  
 1572 cal interest; for the Parsonian ghost continue to 1615  
 1573 haunt the sociological appropriation of the cul- 1616  
 1574 tural concept via the massive influence that the 1617  
 1575 Geertzian inflection has had on practitioners of 1618  
 1576 this approach especially in sociological “cultural 1619  
 1577 studies” (Alexander 2003; Reed 2011) and “cul- 1620  
 1578 tural history” (Sewell 1997). As Biernacki (2000) 1621  
 1579 notes, two foundational assumptions of Parsons 1622  
 1580 idiosyncratic rendering of the culture concept 1623  
 1581 (which he blames Geertz for) continue to haunt 1624  
 1582 us to this very day. The first assumption (“the 1625  
 1583 essentializing premise”) is the ontological ren- 1626  
 1584 dering of the cultural system as an addendum to 1627  
 1585 the social and material world manifested as an 1628  
 1586 assemblage of signs and signifying objects and 1629  
 1587 actions. The second assumption (“the formaliz- 1630  
 1588 ing premise”) is the endowment of this hyposta- 1631  
 1589 tized cultural system with an endogenous 1632  
 1590 capacity to generate “meaning” and signification 1633  
 1591 via the internal interplay of signs only in isolation 1634  
 1592 from action, cognition, and social structure. Both 1635  
 1593 of these Biernacki traces to Geertz but as we have 1636  
 1594 seen, Geertz only clarified features of the culture 1637  
 1595 concept that were already explicit in Parsons’s 1638  
 1596 radical rendering.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, when “[c] 1639  
 1597 ultural historians and sociologists followed 1640  
 1598 Geertz in reifying the concept of a sign system as 1641  
 1599 a naturally given dimension of...reality” 1642  
 1600 (Biernacki 2000: 294) they were actually follow- 1643  
 1601 ing Parsons without realizing it. 1644

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1602 **6.5 Conclusion**

1603 Contemporary cultural theory is, in its essential 1645  
 1604 aspects, an offshoot of culturalist functionalism. 1646  
 1605 Because of this lineage, it is also ineluctably teth- 1647

ered conceptually, thematically, and ideologi- 1606  
 cally to Parsons’s (long known to be misleading) 1607  
 appropriation of the classics and his idiosyncratic 1608  
 but ultimately agenda setting rendering of the 1609  
 anthropological culture concept. The fragmenta- 1610  
 tion model that has become standard in contem- 1611  
 porary cultural theory is for all intents and 1612  
 purposes a “negative image” of the mid-twentieth 1613  
 century Parsonian concoction and more recent 1614  
 reactions to the (over)reaction boil down to try- 1615  
 ing to “bring back” some of the Parsonian good- 1616  
 ies unfairly dismissed by the hegemonic model 1617  
 (e.g. values, internalized culture, strong external 1618  
 structuration) (Patterson 2014). 1619

In addition, contemporary attempts to bring 1620  
 culture as a robust dimension of reality and as 1621  
 key in the explanation of social action are unwit- 1622  
 ting prey of Geertz’s radicalization of the 1623  
 Parsonian rendering and his (successful) 1624  
 knowledge-political attempt to undercut the 1625  
 Parsons-Kroeber compromise by making what 1626  
 would be only one element of the culture- 1627  
 personality-society triad the overarching factor 1628  
 that swallowed up the other two. Analysts ped- 1629  
 dling hermeneutic approaches to cultural analysis 1630  
 are unwitting scions of Geertz’s radical move to 1631  
 remove naturalism from cultural theory by 1632  
 acknowledging the naturalist essence of culture 1633  
 but disallowing access to cultural explanation via 1634  
 naturalist methods in the same breath (Geertz 1635  
 1973). In all, every single one of the problems of 1636  
 contemporary cultural theory, from those related 1637  
 to enculturation, to the relationship of culture and 1638  
 action, to those of analytical method and the 1639  
 ontological nature of “culture” as a dimension of 1640  
 social reality are iatrogenic problems generated 1641  
 by the mid-twentieth century Parsonian 1642  
 intervention. 1643

Insofar as middle-period functionalism 1644  
 became the model for what “theory” and “theo- 1645  
 retical discourse” looks like for sociologists, and 1646  
 insofar as it is Parsons who first formulates and 1647  
 subsequently defines the “hard” problems in 1648  
 social theory, it is no wonder that “cultural the- 1649  
 ory” has essentially become the stand-in for the- 1650  
 ory in general in the discipline, at least among 1651  
 young sociologists who do empirical research. 1652  
 But what if the “theoretical” problems that cul- 1653  
 tural theorists are grappling with are “iatrogenic,” 1654

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<sup>14</sup>Parsons himself (1972) was quite open to conceptualiza-  
 tion the structure of the cultural system using methods  
 from linguistics.

1655 self-generated by the (anachronistic) Parsonian  
 1656 “culturalization” of the classics in the first place?  
 1657 We have seen that there is little exegetical war-  
 1658 rant to consider the classics as “cultural theorists”  
 1659 as neither Marx, Weber, nor Durkheim trafficked  
 1660 in notions that have a one to one match with the  
 1661 modern “culture concept.” Surprisingly (to  
 1662 some), this implies that it is possible to do social  
 1663 theory and attend to its various conundra *without*  
 1664 *a culture concept* as we conceive of it. In fact, it  
 1665 can be argued that the reason why we seem to go  
 1666 around and around the same Parsonian issues is  
 1667 that, in spite of their self-perceptions, most cul-  
 1668 tural theorists have not actually moved that far  
 1669 away from culturalist functionalism (as we saw  
 1670 above in the case of cognitive internalization). In  
 1671 fact, it is even more surprising (given the intel-  
 1672 lectual history) that the culture concept itself is  
 1673 seldom tagged by sociologists as an inherently  
 1674 *functionalist* concept (even though the intellec-  
 1675 tual history in anthropology says it is; see Kuper  
 1676 1999). Regardless, there is no question that the  
 1677 culture concept is as closely tied to functionalism  
 1678 as such now “dead” notions such as “latent pat-  
 1679 tern maintenance,” “need dispositions,” and  
 1680 “functional prerequisites.” It is also very likely  
 1681 that the culture concept, due to its indelible link  
 1682 to functionalism, currently functions as a theo-  
 1683 retical trojan horse smuggling other Parsonian  
 1684 (pseudo) issues into the contemporary scene.  
 1685 These “problems” then become the core dividing  
 1686 lines of theoretical argumentation and position-  
 1687 takings among cultural theorists.

1688 Ironically, the classics provide models of how  
 1689 one may be able to have a post-cultural social the-  
 1690 ory. For instance, Warner (1970), in a now largely  
 1691 forgotten paper, convincingly argued that the  
 1692 whole of Weberian sociology can be made sense  
 1693 of using (a properly refurbished version of) the  
 1694 germanic notion of “ideas” and the new fangled  
 1695 notion of “models” (a notion that ironically has  
 1696 been revived in current “post-cultural” cognitive  
 1697 anthropology (c.f. Shore 1996)). Recent calls to  
 1698 treat “ideas” seriously are consistent with a post-  
 1699 cultural revival of the notion (e.g. Campbell 1998).

1700 But it is clear that the most neglected classic in  
 1701 this regard Durkheim (because he was the one

1702 most mangled by the Parsonian germanization). I  
 1703 am not talking about the “culturalized” Durkheim  
 1704 of those who want to recruit him for a project of  
 1705 (germanic, and now obsolete) “cultural studies”  
 1706 (e.g. Alexander 1990). I am talking about the *real*  
 1707 Durkheim that has been unearthed and saved  
 1708 from intellectual oblivion in the recent exegetical  
 1709 and historical intellectual work alluded to above.  
 1710 This Durkheim sees what people now call cul-  
 1711 tural phenomena from a *naturalistic* perspective  
 1712 and avoids the germanic imbroglio of conceptu-  
 1713 alizing culture in non-naturalistic terms (thus  
 1714 leading the “method battles”). In fact, this  
 1715 Durkheim points to a coherent post-cultural land-  
 1716 scape in which most of the so-called “cultural”  
 1717 phenomena that are thought to be only accessible  
 1718 via non-naturalistic methods (e.g. textual analy-  
 1719 sis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc.) may  
 1720 yield to naturalistic approaches.

1721 Furthermore, this “new” old Durkheim, as  
 1722 some perspicacious analysts have noted (e.g.  
 1723 Schmaus 2004; Turner 2007), is closer to the  
 1724 naturalistic spirit of what has been called “cogni-  
 1725 tive science” while avoiding the sort of tail-  
 1726 chasing neo-Kantian problematics that come  
 1727 from banishing the cultural and the mental to an  
 1728 incoherent nether-region outside of the natural  
 1729 world (Sperber 1995). It is no wonder that it is  
 1730 the most recent sociological heir of the French  
 1731 strand of naturalistic rationalism (Pierre  
 1732 Bourdieu) who has provided us with the only  
 1733 other coherent theoretical program in sociology  
 1734 that does not make use of the “culture” concept  
 1735 for analytic purposes (Lizardo 2011).

1736 In spite of what the future may hold, it is  
 1737 becoming increasingly clear that “cultural the-  
 1738 ory” is the only intellectual site in which this  
 1739 future will be resolved if only for the simple rea-  
 1740 son that it is the only subfield in contemporary  
 1741 sociology within which the “big questions” get  
 1742 asked by empirically oriented scholars. These  
 1743 analysts however, must begin to seriously grapple  
 1744 with the spotty intellectual genealogy of their  
 1745 favorite conceptual tools, since it may be time for  
 1746 us, as Weick (1996) once noted in a different con-  
 1747 text, to drop those tools and try to run to the safest  
 1748 space.

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Chapter No.: 6      0002712188

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