Abstract

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.

Keywords (separated by “ - “)

Culture - Social structure - Social action
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6.1 Introduction

Long abandoned by anthropologists as a foundational concept (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991), the last two decades have seen a virtual explosion of interest in culture among sociologists, not only as a “topic” of analysis (the “sociology of culture”) but most importantly as a “resource” for general sociological explanation (“cultural sociology”). This is exemplified by the fact that, while beginning as a relatively small and largely peripheral intellectual movement in the mid 1980s, today the American Sociological Association’s “Section on Culture” is decidedly central, boasting one of the largest rates of membership especially graduate student members. Intellectually, cultural sociologists (or sociologists of culture for that matter) can proclaim with confidence that their work stands “at the crossroads of the discipline” (Jacobs and Spillman 2005), helping to inform the work of social scientists working across essentially every substantive field of research. This includes social science history (e.g. Bonnell and Hunt 1999), cognitive sociology (e.g. DiMaggio 1997), the sociology of religion (e.g. Smilde 2007), organizational studies (e.g. Weber and Dacin 2011), social movement theory (e.g. Polletta 2008), economic sociology (e.g. Bandelj et al. 2015), culture and inequality studies (e.g. Small et al. 2010), and even traditionally “positivist” subfields such as demography (Bachrach 2014). Articles and books dealing with cultural analysis have become field-wide citation classics (e.g. Swidler 1986; Bellah et al. 1985; Lamont 1992; Sewell 1992; DiMaggio 1997; Lareau 2011), handbooks on cultural sociology continue to be published at a rapid pace (e.g. Bennett and Frow 2008; Hall et al. 2010; Alexander et al. 2012), and contemporary debates on foundational issues on the theory of action, the basic parameters of social explanation, and the foundations of social order take place largely under the umbrella of “cultural theory” and “cultural analysis” (e.g. Reed 2011; Vaisey 2009; Swidler 2001; Patterson 2014; Alexander 2003).

Given this, it is uncontroversial to propose that the “concept of culture” has joined the couplet of “structure” and “agency” as one of contemporary sociology’s foundational notions. Yet, just like those other foundational ideas, the concept is beset with ambiguity and vagueness (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Stocking 1966), as well as lingering doubts as to its analytical import and exact relation to other foundational notions in social theory such as “social structure” and “agency” (Alexander 2003; Sewell 2005; Patterson 2014; Archer 1995). As a result, while both “culture and structure” and “culture in action” debates continue to rage, there does not seem to be any immediate resolution to these

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perennial problems in sight (e.g. Vaisey 2009; Alexander 2003; Sewell 2005). This unsatisfactory détentect acquires more importance, when we consider the fact that the basic theoretical debates in the discipline in the American scene—e.g. those inaugurated by Parsons’s (1937) problematic interpretation of a selection of European thinkers—now take place largely under the auspices of “cultural theory” and not “theory” in its unqualified form (Swidler 1995).

Whether the culture concept or cultural sociology as a general analytic approach is up to this task remains to be seen. What is not in doubt is that continuing progress (or possible resolutions) to contemporary theoretical impasses will depend on whether “culture” has the potential to serve as such a unifying meta-concept. The basic argument in this chapter is that the contemporary version of the culture concept in sociology is simply not the sort of analytic resource that is up to this task and that “cultural theory” as currently configured will not make headway on the relevant analytical issues. The reason for this is that the concept of culture in contemporary sociology melds (in somewhat anachronistic ways) both basic concerns inherited from the classics and post-classical issues inherited from the incorporation of the modern (“analytical”) concept of culture developed in anthropology into this classical tradition by Talcott Parsons. As such, the status of cultural sociology as a meta-field unifying other areas of substantive inquiry in the discipline will remain problematic, even as “cultural theory” will continue to serve as a stand in for “theory” in the general sense.

An important, if often unremarked issue, is that the “modern” culture concept had no strict conceptual analogue among the sociological classics (here I restrict my definition of “classics” to the standard canon of Marx, Weber, Durkheim). This means that many of the issues that preoccupy contemporary cultural theorists only have superficial similarity to those that preoccupied Marx, Weber, and Durkheim; this also means that the retroactive recasting of the sociological classics as budding cultural theorists (e.g. Parsons 1951; Swidler 1995) is an anachronism of consequential import. In this sense, contemporary cultural theory inherits a post-classical problematic which has no strict analogue in the classics. Given this, my argument is that it makes little exegetical or analytical sense to project a “concept of culture” to such pre-cultural theorists Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (or even the early Parsons!). Instead, we should go back to the drawing board and dissociate the classics from the contemporary culture concept. All the same, they may also provide a model for how to do social theory without relying on that concept as a central line of support.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. In the next section I outline the conceptual armamentarium deployed by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim to deal with theoretical issues that have now been retroactively (and anachronistically) remapped as central problems in cultural theory. The basic argument is that none of the classics had anything close to what can be called a “concept of culture” because they did not need one to deal with the analytical issues that preoccupied them. I will then argue that it is the figure that marks the transition from “classical” to “contemporary” sociological theory namely, Talcott Parsons, who recasts the classics as “cultural theorists” status nascendi thus retroactively recruiting them to deal with basic problems that emerge from his own (failed) attempt to link his own version of the anthropological concept of culture to theoretical issues in action theory and normativist functionalism. We will see that Parsons’s primary analytic concern in regards to cultural theory has to do mainly with the mechanisms of how persons become “enculturated,” which for Parsons is essentially a resolution to an unfinished chapter in his own interpretation of Durkheim. Parsons coupled his solution

1By 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).
(enculturation as “internalization”) with a conception of the “cultural system” as a systematic ensemble of ideal elements. Clifford Geertz for his part, takes up the remnants of Weber’s “meaning” problematic, but does so from within the constraints of a Parsonian (via Kroeber and Kluckhohn) conceptualization of culture as (external) “system” or “pattern.” This is the way in which this particular problem continues to be formulated in contemporary cultural analysis.

In the fourth section, I will review some of the basic issues in contemporary cultural analysis. We will see that contemporary cultural theorists essentially divide themselves into analytic camps depending on their stance vis a vis the Parsonian model of enculturation, such that acceptance or rejection of a conception of culture as either “internal” to the actor or as part of the external environment becomes correlative to acceptance or rejection of a conception of the nature of culture as either systematic or fragmented (respectively). A third group of contemporary cultural sociologists abandons the Parsonian problematic of enculturation and internalization in favor of a return to the “problem of meaning” as a defining issue for sociological explanation more generally. This group however, remains wedded to a Parsonian conception of culture as systematic, although reinforced with a more contemporary formulation of systematicity taken from structural linguistics. I close by outlining the implications of this situation for the future of the “concept of culture” as a central analytic resource in sociology.

6.2 The Sociological Classics as Pre-cultural Theorists

Given its current status as a central analytic construct, it might seem impossible to imagine how one can get a conceptual bearing on the central analytic issues of social theory, such as understanding the nature of action or explicating the nature and origins of social change and reproduction without a culture concept. Yet, it is well known that the contemporary analytic “concept of culture” did not exist until well into the twentieth 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). That means that none of the sociological classics operated with anything like the modern culture concept yet they undoubtably 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 discipline from which sociologists got the concept in the first place (Anthropology) continues to plug along after having renounced it as essentialist 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). 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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2See Stocking (1966) for the definitive historical treatment 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.

3For more details on Bourdieu as a “non-cultural” or at least “post-cultural” theorist see Lizardo (2011).
action (Warner 1978) was largely thought of in terms of “ideas.” The German tradition came in two brands; the first one came from the Hegelian obsession with the “motor forces” of history and basically dealt with a controversy in the so-called Philosophy of History as to which one of the two set of forces was most important in accounting patterns of historical and social change usually conceptualized in teleological “evolutionary” (in the pre-Darwinian “telos of history” sense) terms.

The second flavor is (Neo)Kantian and has a more direct concern with the battle between ideal and material forces within the individual in determining conduct and not as macro-social “forces” or “factors” in historical societies. In the (neo)Kantian version of the tradition, ideas are thought of as subjective conceptions of the world held by actors, which may or may not accurately reflect its objective features. Accordingly, ideas are seen as the creative, “active” elements determining action via relations of non-Newtonian, intentional (final) causality, counterposed against external “deterministic” elements that push people around via relations of physical (inclusive of the bodily instincts), efficient causation. Ideas were thus thought of as a possible driver of action along with other forces, most importantly instinctual (biological) and environmental determinants (which we may refer to as “material” for short).

In this respect, this tradition linked “cultural analysis” (with this term being used in an admittedly anachronistic way) with the problematic of “action theory” (another anachronism as this term does not become prevalent until after Parsons).

The distinction between the “societal” and “individual” version of the German “idealist” tradition is important because these two debates tend to be run together and continue to be conflated in contemporary “cultural” analysis. Conceptually however, they are thoroughly independent and rely on very different premises. The Hegelian debate deals with (to use a modern term) “emergent” factors at the level of “societies” conceived in quasi-organismic terms as coherent wholes. The Kantian debate deals with action at the level of the individual. Most of the arguments regarding the Hegelian debate over ideas operated with either no or very rudimentary references to a theory of action; the Kantian version, on the other hand, operated from an a priori methodological presumption (somewhat muddily articulated by Max Weber) that there were no emergent macro-social “forces” (either “material” or “ideal”), that “society” as an organismic whole was a spurious analytic unit, and that the Hegelian “debate” in the Philosophy of History (of which Marx and Engels’s historical materialism was viewed as an entry) was just a useless conceptual muddle. It was only in the twentieth century recuperation of this debate by Parsons that problems of action theory were again linked up to “macrosocial” issues, in so-called structural-functionalism.

6.2.2 Marx and Engels’s “Big” Idea

The problematic that was most poignant in the early nineteenth century and that was thus the one inherited by Marx and dealt with primarily in the collaborative writings with Engels from the mid 1840s to the late 1850s was the Hegelian “macrosocial” one (essentially the middle “sociological” period between the philosophical anthropology of the early 1840s and the “political economy” writings of the 1860s). The so-called “materialist conception of history” of Marx and Engels essentially boils down, in between withering satire of the so-called Young Hegelians, Proudhon, utopian socialists or whoever stood in their way, to arguing that at the macrosocial level “ideal” factors as conceptualized by philosophers of history up to that stage did not matter for explaining historical change as much as the “material” factors of classical political economy (essentially land, labor, and capital, which “technology” being the most important part of the latter). Note that what counts as “ideal factors” in this tradition is essentially mostly the intellectual outputs of symbol producing elites, inclusive of political theory, theology and popu-

4These 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).
lar religious doctrines, but also “philosophies of history” or even the “philosophies” peddled by the “Young Hegelians.”

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

6.2.3 Max Weber’s Little Ideas

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

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.
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. 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 motives 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 These are the “Social Psychology of the World Religions” (1946a, serving as the “introduction” or Eilautung) to the collection and the interlude or “intermediate reflections” (zwischenbrachtungen) known in English as “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions” (1946b).

7 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 (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

6.2.4 Emile Durkheim’s Représentations

One of the most disastrous bits of classical exegetes enacted by Parsons (1937) concerns his classification of Durkheim as an (inconsistent) member of a tradition of (German?) “idealism.”

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.
Durkheim, confused good old fashioned Aristotelian naturalism with the German bugaboos of “materialism”). Contra the German tradition, French thinkers did not see the causality pertaining to représentations as different from material or efficient causality (Turner 1982), thought that persons became epistemically acquainted with concrete (e.g. “perceptual”) représentations in the same way that they became acquainted with “abstract” (e.g. “categorical”) ones (Schmaus 2004), and asserted that représentations in this sense could fail (unless under pathological conditions) to match reality, since representations (like persons and their consciousness) were natural objects and thus an integral part of that very same reality (Stedman-Jones 2001; see the essays collected in Pickering 2000).

This representationalist ontology is adopted wholesale by Durkheim who sees in this concept the key to the founding of a new “special” science (actually a “special psychology”) of a particular kind of object. Because représentations were a natural object (as opposed to “ideas” which Kantians held to be non-naturalistic), they could form the foundation of a plain-old science (in the same sense as Physics and Biology) and there was no need to go through all of the tortured hand-wringing (productive of mostly unreadable texts) that German neo-Kantians participating in the methodenstreit had to go through in questioning whether scientific methods were proper or not for such non-naturalistic entities as ideas. Instead, having travelled to the laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt as a young representative of the best that the French intelligentsia had to offer after the national humiliation suffered during the Franco-Prussian war, Durkheim had seen concrete institutional proof that représentations could be studied scientifically, naturally, and objectively.

From the point of view of the nascent science of sociology, the issue had nothing to do with scientific method (as with the German neo-Kantian constipation) and everything to do with scientific object. Durkheim noted that what sociologists were lacking was not a special method but a special “thing” to study. Durkheim “solved” the problem as follows: While Wundt and the nascent science of German scientific psychology (and even German “social psychology”) would be concerned with “individual representations” (représentations individuelles) as their natural object, the “new” French science of Sociology was going to re-direct the same scientific bravado to a set of natural objects that had yet to be dealt with in the same vein: collective representations (représentations collectives). The only thing left to do (e.g. Durkheim 1892) was to write an anti-philosophical manifesto proclaiming the existence and causal preponderance (in relation to représentations individuelles) of this novel scientific object, and their analytic resistance to armchair (read classical philosophical) introspective methods. Collective representations are “things” (and thus a “natural kind” in modern parlance) just like chairs, pains, atoms, and chickens, and can be studied with the same methods and using the same old concepts of causation.

It is hard to overstate, in light of recent discoveries in Durkheim scholarship, how incredibly alien is Durkheim’s original conceptual apparatus (Rawls 2005), methodological approach (Schmaus 1994), and set of epistemic and ontological commitments (Stedman-Jones 2001) from contemporary “germanic” cultural sociology in the United States. Most importantly, how alien is the naturalistic conception of représentations (Pickering 2000) from the (germanic!) Boasian-Parsonian “concept of culture” that continues (to paraphrase a germanic theorist) to weigh heavily upon the brains of living American sociologists.

For instance, it is clear that neither the standard “culture versus structure” nor “culture in action” debate fit the Durkheimian problematic because the notion of représentations is not commensurable (once again in the Kuhnian sense) with any modern conception of the culture concept. To wit, (the “early”) Durkheim was a “monist” organicist for whom the issue was not,
6.3 Enter “Culture”: Talcott Parsons

As alluded to above, the biggest theoretical disaster in modern social theory consists of Parsons’s shoeorning of Durkheim into a German “ideal/materialist” frame. All modern Durkheim scholars now reject this formulation along with associated non-problems such as the (non-materialist) meaning of “thing” in Durkheim’s definition of social facts, along with the related non-shift from “materialism” to “idealism” (Schmaus 2004). In the 1970s there was an entire anti-functionalist movement designed to free Max Weber from the cage of normativist functionalism (e.g. “de-Parsonizing Weber”). Yet a movement to “de-Parsonize Durkheim” (e.g. Stedman-Jones 2001) has only been enacted recently among a small cadre of specialty Durkheim scholars having little impact on social and cultural theory writ large.

But this matters, because it is my contention that modern cultural theory is the unholy offspring of Parsons’s conceptual mixture of German neo-Kantian and post-Hegelian hangups concerning “the role of ideas in social action” and the balance between “cultural” and “material” forces at the social level with Durkheim’s (as we saw above absolutely incommensurable) conceptual apparatus. The result is a “Germanized Durkheim”; an analytically incoherent conceptual “monster” (in Douglas’s 1966 sense) that continues to play havoc on the theoretical imagination of modern cultural theorists.

Parsons’s conceptual monster emerges in two steps. From the point of view of modern cultural theory the key conceptual moves occur in two distinct periods; the “action-theoretic” period of the early essays” and Structure (1935–1938) where Parsons still operates with a pre-cultural vocabulary steeped in the nineteenth century German neo-Kantian tradition (e.g. voluntarism, ideas, materialism, positivism). At this stage, the “anthropological” (analytic) concept of culture is absent; what we have instead are the twin Germanic concepts of “ideas” (Parsons 1938) and “values” (1935; including ultimate values). The second period is the so-called “middle period” of normativist functionalism proper culminating in the publication of The Social System (1951), and most importantly for cultural theorists the book co-authored with Parsons and Shils (Towards a General Theory of Action (1951)) and the collection of essays, mostly written from the late 1940s...
to the late 1950s, known as Social Structure and Personality (1964). This period is key because it is here that Parsons becomes acquainted with various fledgling versions of the “analytical” culture concept floating around in American anthropology since at least 1911 (Stocking 1966; Binney 1967) and uses them to develop his own, and ultimately decisive for us, version of the culture concept (Parsons 1972; Kroeber and Parsons 1958).

6.3.1 Parsons Invents “Culture”

We have seen that the classics, in particular Weber and Durkheim, did not have a concept that maps onto the “modern” (anthropological) concept of culture; as such, it is an analytical and exegetical mistake (as well as an embarrassing anachronism) to treat the classics as budding “cultural theorists.” However, this is done regularly by both cultural analysts (e.g. Swidler 1995) and by everybody who has been tasked with writing a “classics” question for a qualifying exam on “culture” in a contemporary graduate program in sociology (myself) in the United States. How did we get to this sad point? The answer is that the classics became “cultural theorists” because Talcott Parsons re-read them as such. The story of how this happened is messy, because everybody focuses on the “rewriting” of the classics that Parsons enacted in Structure of Social Action (1937) when Parsons still did not have access to the modern culture concept. Everybody forgets, however, that Parsons kept rewriting and re-interpreting the classics throughout his entire career. This was especially true during the highly active (both theoretically and in terms of institution building) middle period that saw the publication of The Social System (1951) and various mid-career theoretical essays (1964), when Parsons was fully equipped with a modern (analytic) culture concept (Kuper 1999).

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

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9As 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.”

10Of 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.
It is also clear that at that time the disciplinary identity and intellectual coherence of the sociological and anthropological projects hung on the balance of this definitional contest, which was precisely what lay behind the famous Kroeber/Parsons “truce” (Kroeber and Parsons 1958), one that was no truce at all but essentially the capitulation on the part of Kroeber to give “society” the sociologists (something that would have been, and was, unthinkable for a Malinowski or a Radcliffe-Brown) and keep the desiccated Parsonian version of “culture” as an idealist symbol system made up of “patterns” for the anthropologists. The culture concept is thus as American as apple pie and an inherent (not accidental) outgrowth of normativist functionalism.

The career of the analytic concept of culture within anthropology has been written on extensively both during the heyday of functionalism (e.g. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Binney 1967) during the immediate post-functionalist period (e.g. Stocking 1966) and more recently (e.g. Kuper 1999) and as such it is relatively not very obscure, although it is clear that most cultural sociologists are blissfully ignorant about it. However, there is no doubt that there had been an “analytic” concept of culture available to anthropologists since at least the 1870s, when Tylor defined the concept in a sufficiently “value-free” way as to serve the relevant scientific purposes. Yet, Tylor’s formulation remained inherently tied to ethnocentric views of cultural evolution that saw something like Victorian era England as the pinnacle of civilization (with “Australians” at the bottom and the “Chinese” in between). As such Tylor’s famous “complex whole” rendering of the culture concept, in spite of the largely inaccurate hagiography enacted by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) remained indelibly tied to nineteenth century (racist) version concept. It was in fact Kroeber’s teacher Franz Boas, himself drawing on his upbringing in a liberal, not racist version of the Germanic tradition, who developed something like the modern (fully relativist) culture concept and who used it to vanquish the last remnants of ethnocentric evolutionism and racialism still extant in the American field. This begat the American version of (what later came to be known as) cultural anthropology and then known as “ethnology” (Stocking 1966). In Boas, culture becomes equivalent to the “social heritage” essentially everything from beliefs, values, morals, and technology that is not given by the human biological constitution is learned by novices and is preserved and transmitted from generation to generation.

But the funny thing is that even though Boas developed this concept in early writings before 1920, most anthropologists did not take notice. Instead, a variety of definitions, counter-declarations, and redefinitions of culture began to accrete during the 40 separating Boas’s early writings from Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s emergency intervention as a reaction to the Parsonian incursion (so much so that the latter were able to collect about 164 of these in 1952). It is obvious that no anthropologist during this period thought that anything big for the professional status of anthropology actually rode on coming up with a “crisp” consensual definition of the culture concept and that was an entirely correct perception. For once Boas vanquished the bugaboo of racialist biologism, his particular version of the culture concept seem to have done its knowledge-political job and people felt free to ignore and develop their own twists on the idea. Accordingly, other anthropological writers with their own partial and concrete interests began to propose other ideas about what culture might or might not be some (like Sapir and the early Kroeber) even harking back to “normative” or “humanistic” notions of culture. Lines of division (and here I rely on Binney 1967) began to form those who remained loyal to Boas’s more naturalistic “social heritage” notion (which includes artifacts, buildings, habits, techniques, mores, and essentially everything that is learned and “man-made”) from those who thought of culture as more restrictive terms as referring exclusively to non-material, non-naturalistic ideal or conceptual elements.

Most importantly, there were those who thought of culture not as a set of contents (either material or ideal) but as a pattern (later on referred to as cybernetic “program” by both Parsons and Geertz) abstracted out from the social behavior of persons (importantly
Kluckhohn was of this persuasion, but both Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead provide popular versions of this story. This “pattern” was akin to a set of general recipes or abstract guidelines for how to behave but did not reduce to particular bits of behavior or even the symbols via which they are expressed. Patterns could be typed and classified, and therefore the job of the cultural anthropologist was to uncover these and possibly come up with exhaustive list of variants across the world’s “cultures.” At the time, most anthropologists linked their definitions of culture to the Kroeberian (1917) notion of the “superorganic” (even if they were critical of the details Kroeber’s particular formulation they all liked the autonomist implications) in which “culture” was thought to constitute its own emergent level analytically and ontological separate from the biological individual and acting back on persons to constrain their behavior.

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

Working analytical definitions of society and personality were already there, but Parsons noted that no such neat definition existed for “culture” and that meant that he needed to provide one. To construct his definition, Parsons combined the notion that the elements of “culture” were ideal (cultural) objects linked to one another to form a system (Parsons 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951); this system contained both the content via which persons expressed their values and constructed their beliefs and the (following Kluckhohn) more generalized “patterns” via which they organized their actions. The cultural system was thus a Kroeberian superorganic addendum to both persons and society, hovering above them while at the same time serving as the storehouse of the system of ultimate values that gave persons their motivations and provided the necessary order to systems of social interaction.11

In this way, what was for the anthropologists a substantive proposal used for the pragmatic purpose of arguing against racialist and “primitive mentality” theories (e.g. Boas 1911) became for Parsons a full-fledged analytic abstraction used— for the first time—as a macro-level repository for all of the Germanic elements that had received separate treatment previously (ideas, values, beliefs). It is at this point that Parsons first develops the essentializing assumption (Biernacki 2000) with respect to culture as an analytic category installing it as a fundamental component of the full functionalist systems ontology. In Parsons’s hands, culture thus goes from a relatively non-committal concept used to refer to certain habitual modes of acting, feeling, and believing along with the requisite set of material objects and know how used by persons to get by in the world (as in the Boasian/Malinowskian tradition) to a set of “substantialized ideal objects” (cultural objects) existing in their own ideal world (in a cultural realm?), expressed in cultural symbols, communicated via symbolic media, and towards which persons may be “oriented” in the same way that they orient themselves in relation to tables, cats, and other people. Culture (while still “expressive” of underlying

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11The 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).
sentiments and value patterns) is now part of the “furniture” of the world.

6.3.2 Culturalizing the Classics

Parsons basic conceit was that while this particular concept “culture” could of course not be found in any of the classics, they somehow had intuited something pretty close to it except that they did not have the right words for it. In Parsons’s (fantastic) proposal, “Comte and Spencer, and Weber and Durkheim spoke of society as meaning essentially the same thing Tylor meant by culture” (Kroeber and Parsons 1958: 583). This is a statement radically ludicrous in its brazen anachronism and completely inaccurate in every word. We know now for a fact that what Tylor meant by culture had little to do with what Boas meant by culture, which had even less to do with what Parsons meant by culture. Regardless, for Parsons, given that the classics had a concept of culture (except that it was “society” and except that they really did not) then it was perfectly fine to simply project, his own invented notion of culture as behaviorally relevant symbolic patterns transmitted from generation to generation to Durkheim and Weber without remainder. By culturalizing the classics, Parsons is able to “demonstrate” that Durkheim and Weber “converge” once again (but the 1950s convergence argument is not quite the same as the 1930s one) because it turns out that they were talking about two sides of the same coin: objective culture (existing as “patterns” in a superorganic system) and subjective culture (existing as internalized norms, values, and ideas about the world inside the person).

The key move in this “middle” period is therefore the integration of Parsons twist on the anthropological concept of culture into the early action-theoretical problematic (essentially swapping the nineteenth century germanic notion of “ideas” for the his notion of culture), the incorporation of Kroeber’s (1917) notion of “superorganic” culture pattern into the functionalist macro-sociology, and the proposal that the (Weberian) action-theoretical level could be joined to the (Durkheimian) macro-social level via the theory of “internalization,” a pseudo-Freudian concept that Parsons not only devised whole cloth but which he later went on to claim Durkheim had also come up with independently from “Freud.” Parsons goes on to propose the implausible notion that because Durkheim and Freud had “converged” on the same (bizarre) notion that therefore the convergence spoke (in a perfect circle) to the scientific validity of the notion. The foundational Parsonian moves (essentially defining the basic set of problems of modern cultural theory) have had disastrous conceptual consequences.

In essence, middle-period Parsons replaces Weber’s nineteenth century focus on “ideas” (even if he earlier endorsed it; see Parsons 1938) and Durkheim’s focus on “representations” in favor of a hyper-inflated and hypostatized version of the culture concept. But we have also seen that Parsons’s concept was not the anthropologist’s concept; it was an idealist abstraction that separated culture from “society” (or social structure) as a sui generis entity. Not even Kluckhohn was ready to go that far for it implied that anthropology was no longer in the business of studying society (although clearly Kroeber was willing to play). Finally we have also seen that while basic elements from which Parsons cobbled together his version of the concept seems deceptively harmless and all were available in Parsons’s milieu; but together they generate a powerful conceptual monster. In the Parsonian recasting of the modern anthropological concept, culture becomes a “superorganic” system of ideal elements (but most importantly beliefs, norms, and values) expressed in significant symbols and communicated via symbolic media (e.g. language) that act to constrain (following Parsons favorite recourse to cybernetic metaphors) via a top-down “pattern maintaining” process both action (for agents) and patterns of interaction (for social systems) (Parsons 1951).\textsuperscript{12} Under the middle-period...
scheme, Durkheim’s concern with “collective representations” now comes to be recast as a concern with (institutionalized) elements of the “cultural system,” thus taking care of culture’s public, external side. Weber’s concern with subjective “ideas” then gets recast into a concern with the subjective (internalized) elements of the same pseudo-Durkheimian cultural system.

Durkheim fixes Weber by providing him with a theory explaining why cultural worldviews come to acquire validity and authority, and Weber fixes Durkheim by providing him with a theory explaining how external culture comes to acquire subjectively binding forms for the actor and comes to be directly implicated in driving and motivating action. Properly anthropologized, the classics now provide justification for a “culturalist functionalism” that is “cultural” through and through, in which “culture” had an external order (in terms of the patterning of symbolic elements in the cultural system) and an internal order (in terms of the patterning of internalized norms and value orientations in the personality). The Parsonian problem of external patterning is taken up by Geertz and yields the modern problematic of “interpretation” around the (fuzzy) notion of “cultural system” (Geertz 1973). The problem of internal patterning was taken up by Parsons’s more directly (in the middle period work) and resulted in the unwieldy edifice of “socialization theory” in normativist functionalism. Let us take a closer look at this mess, as it is important for the overall story.

6.3.3 Classical Socialization Theory

Textbook introductions to normativist functionalism usually propose that Parsons thought that social order was accomplished via “socialization” whereby this process reduces to the “internalization of values.” This account, while correct in spirit, is actually summarily incorrect in the most consequential details. The problem is that by focusing on “values” as the central element that is allegedly internalized, it ignores a fundamental shift in Parsons’s thinking, one that is crucially involved in his incorporation of the anthropological theory of culture into the normativist-functionalist scheme.

As we saw above, the Parsons of the 1930s (up an including the so-called “early essays” (esp. 1935, 1938) and the uber-classic Structure of Social Action, is still operating with a “pre-cultural” vocabulary one that still tethers him more or less directly to two nineteenth century germanic sources, one the germanic cultural vocabulary of “ideas” (e.g. 1938) and the Americanized neo-Kantian vocabulary of “values” (e.g. 1935). Both of these terms appear in Structure, and provide the first attempt to “update” the nineteenth century classics for Parsons’s twentieth century theoretical concerns. Because the Germanic language of ideas and values was already closer to Weber (and Parsons for biographical and intellectual reasons was at this point just an American broker for the transatlantic importation of the Germanic tradition into sociology) Weber does not come off too badly in Structure. As we have already seen, the theorist that gets absolutely mangled is Durkheim, because Parsons has to retrofit the awkward vocabulary of “ideas” to a theorist for whom this was a meaningless concept.

However, the more important point is that there is a fundamental shift in Parsons’s vocabulary post-structure, so that the classical theory of internalization does not reduce to a “value internalization” account. Instead, the little-discussed Freud/Durkheim convergence (that it was even more exegetically preposterous as the Weber/ Durkheim convergence at the center of Structure is not important) comes to play a key role. In this respect, few contemporary theorists actually comprehend the radicality of Parsons’s proposal at this “middle period” stage, because they still confuse the Parsonian model of enculturation with the value internalization account and dismiss it as a “special” and not a “general” pro-

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13 As Parsons acknowledges in his last published statement 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).
posal. The key is to realize that Parsons came to realize that both “values” and the broader “con-
ceptual schemes” through which social actors come to know and classify the entire world of objects, agents, and situations (essentially what we moderns use the term “culture” to refer to) have to be internalized. Thus, any theory that pre-
supposes that persons internalize the basic cate-
gories with which they make sense of the world from the external environment is still essentially consonant with a “Parsonian” model.

Parsons only tweak on Freud consists in his chiding him for not having a (“Durkheimian”) theory of cognitive socialization. According to Parsons Freud’s mistake was precisely to think that only normative standards externally (e.g. culturally) specified and thus internalized within the personality as the “Superego” but that the organism does need to internalize a cognitive apparatus with which to make sense of the object-
environment, relying instead on a pre-social, naturally given (and thus always veridical) sys-
tem of perception and cognition. For Parsons, (as for most sociologists of culture) this is mistake.

In Parsonese, Freud, “failed to take explicitly into account the fact that the frame of reference in terms of which objects are cognized, and therefore adapted to, is cultural and thus cannot be taken for granted as given, but must be internal-
ized” (Parsons 1964: 23).

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

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

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

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6.4 Contemporary Cultural Theory: Fighting the Parsonian Ghost in the Machine

From this account, it is easy to see that the cultur-
alized functionalism of the middle-period Parsons provides a skeleton key to understand contempo-
rary cultural theory. The classic text is Swidler
(1986) who essentially uses sound pragmatist sensibilities to develop a “negative” (in the old fashioned photographic sense) theoretical system in which the two basic premises of culturalized functionalism are denied. In Swidler there is no “internal” cultural order (because actors don’t “deeply internalize” any culture) nor is there any “external” cultural order because culture does not exist outside of people’s heads in the form of tightly structured systems. Instead, actors are only lightly touched by culture (learning what they need ignoring the rest) and draw on disorganized external cultural elements in expedient ways. We may refer to this “negative” of culturalized functionalism as the “cultural fragmentation” model. This account is essentially hegemonic in contemporary cultural analysis and heterodox positions today (e.g. Vaisey 2009; Alexander 2003) can only be understood within the context of this hegemony. A good entry into this debate thus is the quasi-functionalist problematic of “cultural depth” opened up by Swidler (1986) and repeatedly revisited by subsequent cultural theorists (e.g. Sewell 1992; Patterson 2014).

### 6.4.1 The Problem of “cultural depth”

As we have seen, Between the 1930s and 1950s, it was the synthetic work of Parsons (Parsons 1937, 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951) that provided the first fully developed account of how some cultural elements acquire the capacity to become significant in their capacity to direct action. Parsons’s centerpiece proposal was that some cultural elements come to play a more significant role in action because they are subject to an internalization process whereby they come to form an integral part of the cognitive and motivational makeup of the actor. This internalization mechanism, as a particularly powerful variant of the learning process, arranges cultural elements according to a gradient of “cultural depth.” Cultural elements that are deeply internalized are more crucial in determining an actor’s subjective 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 individuals do not seem to possess the highly coherent, overly complex and elaborately structured codes, ideologies or value systems that the classical theory expects they should possess (Martin 2010). Instead of regular demonstrations of the possession of coherent cultural systems on the part of “socialized” agents what these newer “toolkit” theories suggest (and what the empirical evidence appears to support) is that persons do not (and cognitively cannot) internalize highly structured 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, objectified cultural codes and current relational commitments. 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
1996), the latter of whom have thoroughly rejected the “myth of cultural integration” (Archer 1985) inherited from culturalist functionalism. Contemporary cultural theory thus relies primarily on an unquestioned conception of cultural fragmentation. What is distinctive about the cultural fragmentation model in relation to its Parsonian counterpart is (a) its primary empirical motivation (the failure of persons to display highly structured ideologies), (b) its rejection of any form of a positive account of subjective modification of the actor via cultural transmission, and (c) its theorization of the “power” of culture as located “outside of the head” of the actor. As Swidler noted in her classic paper, “[p]eople do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links” (1986: 276, italics added). This implies a critique of socialization models that operate via the “psychological modification” of actors: “[c]ulture does not influence how groups organize action via enduring psychological proclivities implanted in individuals by their socialization. Instead, publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others” (Swidler 1986: 283). What is appealing about the fragmentation formulation is that we get to keep the phenomenon of interest (e.g. systematic patterns of human social behavior) without relying on the suddenly doubtful assumption than an entire model of the social world or a whole system of values or logically organized conceptual scheme has to be internalized by social agent (Martin 2010).

Contemporary cultural theorists are thus nearly unanimous in proposing a common mechanism that accounts for how “coherence is possible” when the norm is that culture tends toward incoherence; cultural coherence is possible through external structuration. The specific form in which external structuration mechanisms are theorized is less important than the agreement on this basic point. For instance, Sewell (2005: 172–174) points to mechanisms of power and constraint as the source of external structuration. Through the systematic “organization of difference” by powerful institutional actors (and counter-movements) cultures can become (quasi) coherent. DiMaggio (1997: 274), drawing on research from the cognitive sciences (broadly defined), argues that the “sources of stability in our beliefs and representations” should not be sought in the structure of our minds but rather in “cues embedded in the physical and social environment” (see also Shepherd 2011).

The point to keep in mind is that coherence does not exist “inside of people’s heads” but instead is offloaded towards “the efforts of central institutions and the acts of organized resistance to such institutions” (Sewell 2005: 174). From this perspective, persons do not need to internalize highly coherent sets of classificatory structures and “value systems” in order for their action to be “systematic” since a lot of the “systematicity” and regularity in human action actually lies outside, in the world of objectified institutions and situational contexts (Swidler 2001). In the contemporary conception, culture is not possessed in a “deep” way, but rather in a “shallow,” disorganized fashion that requires structuring and support from the external social environment to produce coherent judgments.

6.4.2 Reactions to the (Over)reaction

If the cultural fragmentation reaction against culturalist functionalism is the contemporary orthodoxy, then it is easy to predict the shape that the heterodoxy has to take (Patterson 2014). Either one tries to bring back some semblance of theorizing the “internal” order of culture as embodied in actors (Vaisey 2009) or one tries to bring back a conception of the strong external patterning of culture. This first route has been followed by contemporary cultural theorists who draw on post (or non)functionalist theoretical traditions (e.g. practice theory) to develop a conception of internalization that is not subject to Swidlerian objections.
The rising appeal of Vaisey’s (2009) appropriation of the discursive/practical consciousness distinction (Giddens 1979), and his importation of “dual process” models from moral psychology, in order to suggest that culture can be internalized in both weakly and strongly patterned ways can be traced to this. In the same way, revivals of “strong external patterning” of the “super-organic” element of culture such as Alexander (2003) or Reed (2011) attempt to conceptualize this patterning without relying on the problematic (quasi-organicist) conception of culture as a “system.” Instead, these analysts have attempted to revive neo-Saussurean conceptions of patterning as systems of binary codes, which license strong theoretical proclamations as to the coherence of culture, and justify an “interpretative” (textualist) approach to cultural explanation. This is of course a methodological approach that was advocated by Geertz (1973) but which was not quite compatible with the Parsonian notion of the “cultural system” that he was conceptually stuck with (at least in the core essays written in the 1960s). Today these heterodox conceptions of both the internal and external order of culture compete against still hegemonic fragmentation ideas for explanatory prevalence.

6.4.3 Whatever Happened to the Cultural System?

A rather unremarked aspect of contemporary cultural theory in American sociology is that while some version of the fragmentation model is usually the first thing cultural sociologists trot out of their toolkit when trying to explain something there has been a simultaneous movement to see strong patterning in cultural systems at a “deep level” and to see cultural fragmentation as a surface mirage. These “strong program” sociologists, tend point to culture as the fundamental dimension of social reality and link a methodological interpretivism to a substantive conception of culture as a “system of signs.” This approach, seemingly antithetical to the fragmentation idea, is actually a close cousin of it and emerges from the same set of problematics inherited from Parsons.

Recall that Parsons’s main contribution was to develop a culture concept that made robust assumptions about the makeup, nature, of culture as a macro-level ontological category. These were ideas that a lot of anthropologists had played around with (inclusive of the more brilliant Boas students such as Sapir and Kroeber) but which none had systematically laid out (Kuper 1999). It is Parsons that comes clean and offers the notion of the “cultural system” as a scientific object of study. However, it was an upstart student in the department of social relations, Clifford Geertz, who runs away with the culture notion of “cultural system” and actually cashes in on the analytic potential of Parsons revolutionary notion. In a series of essays written primarily in the 1960s (collected in 1973 in the classic Interpretation of Cultures), Geertz is able to formulate both an evolutionary/naturalistic foundation for the culture concept and a non-naturalistic, “interpretative” methodological manifesto that Geertz seduced everybody into thinking that it followed from that foundation. Geertz’s approach was masterful in the knowledge political sense; for Geertz sees Parsons “gift” of culture to anthropology and ups the ante by taking this gift and using it to argue into irrelevance the other two denizens of the Parsonian systems ontology (personality and society).

Geertz thus squares the Germanic circle by separating ontology from methodology or more accurately by using ontology to justify methodology. Not surprisingly, this “methodology” is nothing but good old fashioned “interpretation” (verstehen) updated with nods to (for Geertz) contemporary anti-naturalistic arguments in the philosophy of action (Gilbert Ryle) and hermeneutics (Ricoeur). In this way, Geertz becomes the conduit via which a host of Parsonian problematics (and associated issues from the Kantian/ Hegelian Germanic legacy that Parsons only provide pseudo-solutions to) have been passed along to modern cultural theorists in essentially pristine forms. How did he do it?

Geertz basically used a loophole in the Parsonian charter. For while Parsons was content
to define a new object of study for anthropology and even give clues as to its ontological constitution, he said little about how to study. The hint, left hanging by Parsons for Geertz to take, was that while an ontology of systems emphasizing the cold scientific language of homeostasis, prerequisites, cybernetic control, and so on was appropriate for the more “physical,” or “material” (or biological) of the three systems (society and personality) given the symbolic nature of culture its “systemness” was not to be conceived in the same physicalist terms. Instead, the cultural system was held together by meaningful links and its mysteries could only be cracked by mixing a scientific language that conceived of the cultural system as a sort of “program” or “code” (similar to the genetic code; Parsons 1973) with a humanistic language that cracked that code by relying on the deep interpretation of meaningful action.

The classic text here is the early essay on the “Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” (Geertz 1973: 33–54; originally published in 1965). Here Geertz takes on Parsons indirectly by attacking Kluckhohn’s attempt to pursue a sort of Parsonian “psychological anthropology” aimed at uncovering and typologizing universal cultural patterns across societies. Geertz’s point is simple: culture does not exist in desiccated cross-cultural generalities tied to the empty generalizations of psychological science, but in the irreducibly unique configuration that produce the uniqueness of each cultural display in explicit symbolism. These configurations (which may include the shaping of a person’s most intimate desires and worldviews) can only be described not catalogued and it is in the sum total of these time and place specific configurations of cultural elements that “generality” will be found in the anthropological project. While it is true that in theory nature of culture can be described as a Parsonian/Kluckhohnian “pattern,” “program,” or “code,” culture does not present itself to the analyst in this form; its concrete reality can only be ascertained in the specific symbolic manifestations by which it shapes even the most exotic patterns of behavior and action.

This attempt to bring together the most abstract of naturalistic generalities (e.g. the notion that culture is a program, like a computer program or a code like the genetic code) with the most specific of humanistic particularities is the key to Geertz’s charter; and in this sense the nod to culture as a naturalistic phenomenon that emerges in evolution as an external control system (in the form of programs or models) for human behavior is only a sideshow (as in the much overhyped essay “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind”; see e.g. Sewell 1997). For what Geertz was after was the foundations for an analytic approach to cultural analysis that justified a purely non-naturalistic understanding of the sources of human action. The naturalistic fact that persons are born incomplete and depend on cultural programming to become “fully formed,” leads to an anti-naturalistic conclusion: that these foundational meanings can only be grasped via hermeneutic methods not psychological needs, biological underpinnings, or appeals to the functional prerequisites of social systems (Kuper 1999).

For Geertz, the most important thing is that people necessarily become entangled in and external “web of meanings” to give pattern and meaning to their actions; both the social and personality system are just the formless clay upon which the form giving powers of the cultural system work to produce the phenomena available for analytic inspection (see Reed 2011 for an update on this argument). While cultural theorists tend to read the Geertzian “web of meanings” aphorism as a nod to Weber, it is important to understand that this is actually a nod to Parsons’s “culturalized” Weber and that Geertz understood both the ontological existence of this cultural web and people’s entanglement in it in a quite substantive (rather than a heuristic) sense. In this last respect, if Geertz’s is supposed to have provided an early preview of the “strong program” in cultural analysis (Alexander 2008), then it is clear that contemporary versions of this approach are a direct outgrowth of the Parsonian notion of culture. It is thus no wonder that is precisely such “recovering functionalists” (e.g. Alexander 2003) who have gone farthest in reviving a neo-
Parsonian notion of culture as both an autonomous (substantive) “realm” with an internal structure modelled after language (replacing talk about “programs” with neo-Saussurean talk of “semiotic codes” but keeping the underlying Parsonian definition essentially the same) designed to give “order and meaning” to individual and collective action.

All of this is of much more than purely historical interest; for the Parsonian ghost continue to haunt the sociological appropriation of the cultural concept via the massive influence that the Geertzian inflection has had on practitioners of this approach especially in sociological “cultural studies” (Alexander 2003; Reed 2011) and “cultural history” (Sewell 1997). As Biernacki (2000) notes, two foundational assumptions of Parsons idiosyncratic rendering of the culture concept (which he blames Geertz for) continue to haunt us to this very day. The first assumption (“the essentializing premise”) is the ontological rendering of the cultural system as an addendum to the social and material world manifested as an assemblage of signs and signifying objects and actions. The second assumption (“the formalizing premise”) is the endowment of this hypostatized cultural system with an endogenous capacity to generate “meaning” and signification via the internal interplay of signs only in isolation from action, cognition, and social structure. Both of these Biernacki traces to Geertz but as we have seen, Geertz only clarified features of the culture concept that were already explicit in Parsons’s radical rendering. Accordingly, when “[c]ultural historians and sociologists followed Geertz in reifying the concept of a sign system as a naturally given dimension of…reality” (Biernacki 2000: 294) they were actually following Parsons without realizing it.

In addition, contemporary attempts to bring culture as a robust dimension of reality and as key in the explanation of social action are unwitting prey of Geertz’s radicalization of the Parsonian rendering and his (successful) knowledge-political attempt to undercut the Parsons-Kroeber compromise by making what would have been only one element of the culture-personality-society triad the overarching factor that swallowed up the other two. Analysts peddling hermeneutic approaches to cultural analysis are unwitting scions of Geertz’s radical move to remove naturalism from cultural theory by acknowledging the naturalist essence of culture but disallowing access to cultural explanation via naturalist methods in the same breath (Geertz 1973). In all, every single one of the problems of contemporary cultural theory, from those related to enculturation, to the relationship of culture and action, to those of analytical method and the ontological nature of “culture” as a dimension of social reality are iatrogenic problems generated by the mid-twentieth century Parsonian intervention.

Insofar as middle-period functionalism became the model for what “theory” and “theoretical discourse” looks like for sociologists, and insofar as it is Parsons who first formulates and subsequently defines the “hard” problems in social theory, it is no wonder that “cultural theory” has essentially become the stand-in for theory in general in the discipline, at least among young sociologists who do empirical research. But what if the “theoretical” problems that cultural theorists are grappling with are “iatrogenic.”

6.5 Conclusion

Contemporary cultural theory is, in its essential aspects, an offshoot of culturalist functionalism. Because of this lineage, it is also ineluctably tethered conceptually, thematically, and ideologically to Parsons’s (long known to be misleading) appropriation of the classics and his idiosyncratic but ultimately agenda setting rendering of the anthropological culture concept. The fragmentation model that has become standard in contemporary cultural theory is for all intents and purposes a “negative image” of the mid-twentieth century Parsonian concoction and more recent reactions to the (over)reaction boil down to trying to “bring back” some of the Parsonian goodies unfairly dismissed by the hegemonic model (e.g. values, internalized culture, strong external structuration) (Patterson 2014).

*Parsons himself (1972) was quite open to conceptualization the structure of the cultural system using methods from linguistics.*
self-generated by the (anachronistic) Parsonian “culturalization” of the classics in the first place? We have seen that there is little exegetical warrant to consider the classics as “cultural theorists” as neither Marx, Weber, nor Durkheim trafficked in notions that have a one to one match with the modern “culture concept.” Surprisingly (to some), this implies that it is possible to do social theory and attend to its various conundra without a culture concept as we conceive of it. In fact, it can be argued that the reason why we seem to go around and around the same Parsonian issues is that, in spite of their self-perceptions, most cultural theorists have not actually moved that far away from culturalist functionalism (as we saw above in the case of cognitive internalization). In fact, it is even more surprising (given the intellectual history) that the culture concept itself is seldom tagged by sociologists as an inherently functionalist concept (even though the intellectual history in anthropology says it is; see Kuper 1999). Regardless, there is no question that the culture concept is as closely tied to functionalism as such now “dead” notions such as “latent pattern maintenance,” “need dispositions,” and “functional prerequisites.” It is also very likely that the culture concept, due to its indelible link to functionalism, currently functions as a theoretical trojan horse smuggling other Parsonian (pseudo) issues into the contemporary scene. These “problems” then become the core dividing lines of theoretical argumentation and position takings among cultural theorists.

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

But it is clear that the most neglected classic in this regard Durkheim (because he was the one most mangled by the Parsonian germanization). I am not talking about the “culturalized” Durkheim of those who want to recruit him for a project of (germanic, and now obsolete) “cultural studies” (e.g. Alexander 1990). I am talking about the real Durkheim that has been unearthed and saved from intellectual oblivion in the recent exegetical and historical intellectual work alluded to above. This Durkheim sees what people now call cultural phenomena from a naturalistic perspective and avoids the germanic imbroglio of conceptualizing culture in non-naturalistic terms (thus leading the “method battles”). In fact, this Durkheim points to a coherent post-cultural landscape in which most of the so-called “cultural” phenomena that are thought to be only accessible via non-naturalistic methods (e.g. textual analysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc.) may yield to naturalistic approaches.

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

In spite of what the future may hold, it is becoming increasingly clear that “cultural theory” is the only intellectual site in which this future will be resolved if only for the simple reason that it is the only subfield in contemporary sociology within which the “big questions” get asked by empirically oriented scholars. These analysts however, must begin to seriously grapple with the spotty intellectual genealogy of their favorite conceptual tools, since it may be time for us, as Weick (1996) once noted in a different context, to drop those tools and try to run to the safest space.
References


Martin, J. L. (2010). Life’s a beach but you’re an ant, and other unmelved news for the sociology of culture. Poetics, 38, 229–244.


## Author Queries

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