# Agency and Freedom in Neofunctionalist Action Theory: A Critique

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T HE recent resurgence of interest in Parsonian functionalist theory in what is called neofunctionalism has created contradictory responses. For some theorists, neofunctionalism represents an ultimate and foundational discovery of the transcendental presuppositions of the problems of order and rationality in action theory. In contrast, for most conflict theorists neofunctionalism is merely a restatement of the conservative and idealist political standpoint which cannot make any serious claim to theoretical novelty and complexity. An alternative strategy is to compare and contrast neofunctionalism with neo-Marxism and try to come up with a new and nondeterministic synthesis. The author believes that neo-Marxism can learn from neofunctionalist emphasis on the concept of multidimensional determination of human actions. In this sense neofunctionalism can provide a further challenge against the reductionistic and economistic stances of orthodox Marxist and neo-Marxist theories. It is true that neo-Marxism has usually criticized the economistic and unidimensional interpretations of Marxism, and in various forms has emphasized the relative autonomy of cultural and ideological structures and processes from economic institutions. But the ghost of materialism in the last analysis has been so overwhelming in the neo-Marxist tradition that the concept of multidimensionality has remained largely a negative and residual category.

From Lukács[1] and Gramsci[2] to Althusser[3] and Poulantzas[4] the tension between historical materialism and economism has remained problematic and unresolved. The only major exception to this dominant reductionistic discourse of neo-Marxism is probably to be found in the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas.[5]

But just as neo-Marxism can learn from neofunctionalist theory of multidimensionality, similarly neofunctionalism can attain a higher level of theoretical self-consciousness and complexity by incorporating the notions of domination and ideology which are central to Marxist and neo-Marxist theories. This paper concentrates on neofunctionalist action theory and its account of the problems of agency and autonomy of human actors. It will be argued throughout the paper that neofunctionalism, and the functionalism of Parsons alike, reduce the issue of freedom and agency to the category of order and equate autonomy with normative commitment and internal persuasion. Such a theory suffers two fundamental theoretical problems: First, it cannot explicate the reality and the role of domination and ideological manipulation in human actions. Second, it cannot fully recognize the actual freedom and active autonomy of individual actors. In other words, neofunctionalist theory is too deterministic and does not leave adequate space for individual freedom.

*From Parsonian Functionalism to the Emergent Neofunctionalism*

In the analysis of Parsonian action theory I concentrate on

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[1] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).
[2] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1977).
[3] Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (New York: Pantheon, 1971).
[4] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: NLB, 1975).
[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

Parsons's early work, *The Structure of Social Action.*[6] In this way I am departing from the prevalent emphasis on the later writings of Parsons, which include the theoretical concepts of functional prerequisites and pattern variables of the social system and the network of exchanges among different subsystems. This is a reflection of my preference for *The Structure of Social Action* over Parsons's later writings, a preference contrary to that of some neofunctionalists. This early work of Parsons is the first systematic formulation of his voluntaristic theory of action, which influenced and inspired recent neofunctionalism. This classic work is, undoubtedly, a masterpiece in sociological theory. Influenced by Whitehead's analytical realism[7] and Halévy's interpretation[8] of nineteenth-century British utilitarianism (what is commonly called philosophical radicalism), Parsons proposed an action theory which analyzes the structure of unit acts and the dynamics of the aggregation of the unit acts into various emergent levels of complexity. According to Parsons, a unit act is composed of four analytical elements. In his words:

> By a theory of action is here meant any theory the empirical reference of which is to a concrete system which may be considered to be composed of the units here referred to as "unit acts." In a unit act there are identifiable as minimum characteristics the following: (1) an end, (2) a situation, analyzable in turn into (a) means and (b) conditions, and (3) at least one selective standard in terms of which the end is related to the situation.[9]

As Parsons points out, alternative social theories can be classified in terms of their concept of the unit act and the interrelationships among the elements of the unit act. In this way Parsons distinguishes two grand action theories in the history of modern social and political thought which he calls

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[6] Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1949).
[7] Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
[8] Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928).
[9] Parsons, *Structure*, p. 77.

positivistic and idealistic perspectives. For Parsons, both theories are inadequate formulations of action theory because they both overlook significant elements of action in their theoretical models. More specifically, for positivism the only significant logic of means-ends selection is rationalistic and cognitive. For idealist theory, however, normative orientation and commitment to ultimate ends and values constitute the only significant and empirically real criterion of selection. According to Parsons, however, both these contradictory theories inevitably deny the possibility of agency and freedom to the human actor. In the positivist framework the dominance of rationalistic adaptation implies the denial of the subjective and internal component of action and/or the reduction of ends to the level of conditions. On the contrary, idealist theory conceives of action as a process of "emanation," of "self-expression" of ideal or normative factors. In this case the spatiotemporal phenomena are perceived only as symbolic modes of expression or embodiments of meanings. Idealist theory denies the reality of the tension between the normative and conditional factors and leaves no space for the "effort" of individual agent. As against both positivist and idealist theories, Parsons suggests a voluntaristic action theory according to which both rationalistic and normative factors determine action. Consequently ends are not reduced to the level of conditions, and the tension between the conditional and normative factors is recognized. Parsons maintains:

> While the voluntaristic type of theory involves a process of interaction between normative and conditional elements, at the idealistic pole the role of the conditional elements disappears, as correspondingly at the positivistic pole that of the normative disappears.[10]

Parsons's arrival at voluntaristic theory is primarily based

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

upon his critique of positivist action theory. According to Parsons, positivist action theory is trapped within an unsolvable dilemma. Positivism emphasizes the rationalistic determination of human actions. Rationality, however, deals with the choice of the most efficient means for the attainment of the end. Consequently positivist action theory cannot provide a positive account for the determination of ends themselves. The absence of an autonomous normative factor in the determination of action limits the positivist framework to only two options. Either the ends are randomly distributed among the actors, or the ends are determined by the conditions of the situation. Utilitarianism follows the thesis of the randomness of ends, whereas theories emphasizing heredity and environment reduce ends to the level of conditions. But, Parsons suggests, both these strategies are unacceptable. The utilitarian theory of random distribution of ends confronts the Hobbesian problem of order. In other words order is assumed by utilitarianism to be based upon coercion. Evidently, however, coercion cannot adequately explain the existence of order in society. On the other hand, the reduction of ends to the level of conditions removes any possibility of agency and freedom for the actors.[11]

It is partly due to the immanent contradictions of both positivism and idealism, Parsons claims, that a progressive movement toward a voluntaristic theory of action can be witnessed in modern political theory. Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber are representatives of this march toward voluntarism. According to voluntaristic theory, the normative selection of ends and means is not a negative or residual aspect of human actions. On the contrary, individual ends are primarily based upon a common normative culture and value system. Consequently ends are not randomly distributed, but instead are harmoniously defined by a common cultural consensus. Identity of the interests of

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 47–89.

individuals is, therefore, based upon a shared cultural framework. For Parsons voluntaristic theory emphasizes the autonomy of ends while it adequately solves the problem of order. Order becomes equivalent to agency and freedom.

The insightful framework of the Parsonian voluntaristic action theory is reinterpreted and developed by recent neofunctionalist writers including Alexander and Munch. In his four-volume work, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, Alexander searches for the presuppositional categories of action theory. To borrow Kantian terminology, Alexander looks for the transcendental and universal conditions of the possibility of action. Rejecting positivist epistemology, Alexander emphasizes the autonomy of presuppositional categories from empirical and observational statements. According to Alexander, the general logic of action theory should not be equated with more specific and particular debates at the levels of political commitment, methodological choice, empirical propositions, and model selection.[12] On the contrary, for Alexander the most general features and the structural grammar of action theory are located in two distinct presuppositional categories of actions and order. Alexander claims that Parsons confounded the problem of action with the problem of order. The question of action represents the problem of rationality, which leads to two alternative forms of rationalistic and nonrationalistic conceptions of action. It is clear that Alexander's rationalistic theory is the same as Parsonian positivist theory while his nonrationalism represents Parsons's normative action determination. However, Alexander further refines the concept of rationality and the rationalistic definition of action. In his words:

> To presuppose that action is instrumentally rational is to assume
> that action is guided by ends of pure efficiency. In terms of the
> more differentiated terminology of goals and norms, it assumes

[12] Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 1, *Positivism, Presuppositions, and Current Controversies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 36–64.

that goals are calculated to achieve broader normative purposes in the most efficient manner possible, given constraining external conditions.[13]

Similarly, the question of order represents the problem of the aggregation of actions/individuals, which can take the form of sociological nominalism or sociological realism. Influenced by the Parsonian theory of voluntarism, Alexander defends a multidimensional theory of action which is based upon the reciprocal interaction and interpenetration of the rational and nonrational orientations which can reconcile order with the agency and freedom of individual actors. Alexander's ultimate solution to the question of freedom is similar to the Parsonian solution: normative commitments guarantee freedom because they are internal orientations and not external impositions. Applying his theoretical logic to the history of classical sociological theory, Alexander analyzes the antinomies of rationalism and nonrationalism in Marxist and Durkheimian traditions,[14] and arrives at a theoretical synthesis of Marx and Durkheim in Weberian thought.[15] Weber's multidimensional theory of action and rationality is further developed in Parsons's voluntaristic theory of action, which represents a truly multidimensional action theory.[16]

Richard Munch, another advocate of neofunctionalism, has explicated the Kantian premises of Parsons's voluntaristic theory. Like Alexander, Munch insists upon the interpenetration of rational and normative factors in Parsonian theory of action. According to Munch, Parsonian theory is ultimately a sociological Kantianism because it is in Kant's theory that the interpenetration of empirical and structural (transcendental)

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[14] Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 2, *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[15] Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 3, *The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[16] Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 4, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

factors constitutes the possibility of knowledge, morality and aesthetic experience. Munch writes:

> A correct understanding of Talcott Parsons' writings must begin from the assumption of a fundamental congruence of basic structure and method between the theory of action and Kant's critical philosophy . . . . The Parsonian solution to the central problem of social order . . . lies instead in the notion of the interpenetration of distinct subsystems of action. This notion of interpenetration is a derivative of Kantian transcendental philosophy.[17]

According to Kant, the manifold chaos of empirical sense impressions can turn into orderly and articulated objective knowledge through the mediation of transcendental forms of intuition and categories of understanding. Similarly, the condition of the possibility of moral and practical action is the interpenetration of the transcendental categorical imperatives (law of duty) and the utilitarian concern with inclinations and the empirical consequences of action. Just as Kant rejected philosophical utilitarianism, Munch maintains, Parsons rejected sociological utilitarianism. Order requires the existence of a common normative system as the structural and constraining space for the rational pursuit of instrumental action. Consequently, specific means and ends which may agree with the logic of efficiency are excluded from the realm of the legitimate possible alternatives open to the actors in their choice of both means and ends of the action.[18]

### The Conservative Cast: The Reduction of Freedom to Order

The foregoing analysis made it clear that Parsons's explication of multidimensional theory of action and rationality

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[17] Richard Munch, "Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action I," *American Journal of Sociology* 86 (1981): 709.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 709–739.

constitutes a fundamental and significant contribution to sociological thought. However, the basic contribution of Parsonian functionalism and recent neofunctionalism, I believe, lies more in the type of questions they have posed rather than the answers they have provided. Voluntaristic theory, in other words, is intended to be a critique of reductionistic, materialistic or rationalistic action theory. The theory, however, fails to demonstrate either the concept of multidimensionality or the notion of agency and freedom of the actors. Before attempting a substantive critique of neofunctionalistic action theory it may be appropriate to pose, briefly, a historical criticism. According to Parsons, eighteenth-century philosophy and social theory is characterized by an undifferentiated and inconsistent combination of positivist and idealist theories. However, due to increasing theoretical differentiation it is in the nineteenth century that pure positivist theories are articulated and contrasted with idealist theories. As Parsons says:

> In the eighteenth century the elements which go to make up this positivistic current were often and to a large extent synthesized with others so that it would scarcely be proper to call the system as a whole positivistic . . . with the course of the nineteenth century the two have become increasingly distinct, and that in the countries of western civilization the positivistic has, until lately, become increasing predominant.[19]

However, it seems to the author that this characterization of the chronological order of the theories of positivism and idealism is mistaken. On the contrary, any serious investigation of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment easily demonstrates the dominance of an extreme positivistic, rationalistic, and utilitarian action theory. One need only remember the most systematic expression of the French Enlightenment, Holbach's *The System of Nature*.[20] However, the significant point in

[19] Parsons, *Structure*, p. 61.
[20] Paul-Henri T. Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature* (New York: Bergman, 1970).

nineteenth-century social theory and political philosophy is the
fact that after the romantic idealistic reaction to the rationalis-
tic theory of the Enlightenment,[21] subsequent systems of
social theory have been characterized by different forms of
combination and integration of the rationalistic and idealistic
theories.[22] With the exception of Jeremy Bentham[23] one can
hardly find a positivist like the eighteenth-century Enlighten-
ment philosophers in nineteenth-century social theory. Al-
though a historical critique may also pose questions about the
novelty of Parsons's voluntaristic and multidimensional action
theory, this paper does not aim at an historical analysis.

Neofunctionalism in Alexander's sense deals with the
general and transcendental presuppositional categories of
action theory and for that reason does not imply any specific
political standpoint. That is why Alexander finds the debate
between conflict and consensus theorists with their correspond-
ing politics outside the realm of a general action theory[24] This
implies that the analysis of power and domination is
considered to be a negative and residual issue in neofunction-
alism. However, neofunctionalism talks about instrumental
and physical coercion in its theoretical framework. In fact, as I
noted, it is precisely the inadequacy of basing order upon
coercion which leads voluntaristic theory to the affirmation of
a collective and normative foundation of social order. One
might ask why the analysis of physical domination belongs to
the general level of action theory while the question of
ideological domination is explicitly defined as lacking the
generality of the categories of action theory. This is particu-
larly surprising when we find the question of freedom and
agency of actors the heart of both Parsonian voluntaristic

[21] A representative work of romantic political theory is Friedrich von Schlegel, *The Philosophy of History* (London: Bohn, 1852).

[22] Examples of the syntheses are Marxism, positivism, liberalism, and nihilism.

[23] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: Methuen, 1982).

[24] Alexander, *Positivism*, pp. 50–55.

theory and Alexander's neofunctionalism. Indeed, voluntarism is intended to rescue the individual's freedom from the deterministic cast of both idealist and positivist persuasions. The problem with this approach, however, is that it does not extend the analysis of power to the level of normative commitment. In a purely arbitrary manner, neofunctionalism excludes the category of ideological and normative domination from its analytical framework. It is through negation and silence rather than any positive indication that neofunctionalism, like Parsonian functionalism, joins the conservative standpoint.

An explicit analysis of the problem of freedom in Alexander's theoretical logic can be found in his defense of Parsonian voluntarism in his fourth volume. According to Alexander, there are two attempted solutions to the problem of freedom in Parsonian theory. The first solution founds individual freedom upon the unity of subject and object. The fact that normative culture is created by individuals implies both freedom of individuals and the necessity of social order. According to Alexander, this is a fundamentally false solution:

> The passage in which Parsons first sought to resolve this early ambiguity and move toward a more consistently collectivist stance reveals the difficulty of his early position. While it is his insight into the importance of supra-individual order that leads him to discard the individualistic positions, the reasons he offers for the collective status of normative elements indicate that he may, in fact, consider them external, or conditional, to the acting individual.[25]

What is here considered by Alexander as an external and conditional solution to the problem of freedom in Parsons is the fact that an individual is born within an already existing and objective normative order (social fact as exterior). This means that the collective normative order can be ideally considered as an element of condition. But Parsons's theory is

[25] Alexander, *Antinomies,* p. 36.

in fact an attempt to rescue the category of ends from the category of condition. In resolving this paradox, Parsons insists upon the unity of subject and object in cultural phenomena. According to Parsons, although external to particular actors, the normative system is not external to the social collectivity. Parsons writes:

> . . . for what are, to one actor, non-normative means and conditions, are explicable in part, at least, only in terms of the action of others in the system.[26]

But for Alexander, this is a fallacious argument. He argues that all collective elements, both material and ideal ones, at some point originated from the activities of individual human beings. The second attempt of the resolution of the problems of freedom in Parsons is fully approved by Alexander. This is the ultimate solution of voluntarism in Alexander's words:

> Although any ideal element may be external to the individual, in the sense that it is part of the extra individual environment, it is not external in the concrete sense. For the concrete empirical actor, the location of determinate ideal elements is within: they are internal to action. This is the reason norms can affect action in a non-instrumental, non-coercive manner.[27]

At this point, the problem of freedom is solved for neofunctionalism. Normative elements are internal, they are internalized by the individual actor so that the individual performs his roles willingly and not through external coercion. Freedom is defined as internal commitment and lack of external coercion.

But this is by no means a satisfactory solution to the problem of agency and freedom. The fact that order is partly based upon the internal commitments and normative beliefs of the actor does not preclude the existence of domination, power, and manipulation. The so-called debate between consensus

[26] Parsons, *Structure*, p. 50.
[27] Alexander, *Modern Reconstruction*, p. 37.

and conflict models is based upon this implicit equation of normative persuasion with autonomy, self-consciousness, and freedom. For conflict theory, the primary basis of power is repression and coercion. For consensus theory, the fact that order cannot be entirely explained in terms of coercion leads to the affirmation of freedom and the denial of domination as the basis of order. But both perspectives miss the important fact that the highest form of domination, influence, and power can be found in the control and manipulation of ideology, cultural beliefs, and educational institutions.[28] A genuine multidimensional theory of action which asserts the interpenetration of instrumental action and symbolic interactions must analyze the significance of strategic action in cultural formations. In other words, the reality of dominated normative commitment is a logical possibility of the interpenetration of instrumental logic of domination and the normative system of communication. In this way a general theory of social action should deal with the bearings of distorted communication upon the question of agency, freedom, and voluntarism.[29] Naturally, if the possibility and reality of symbolic domination and ideological violence is excluded, the equation of freedom and order will seem theoretically plausible. That is why neofunctionalism reduces the question of the actor's freedom to the problem of social order and identifies conformity and internal commitment to the collective norms with freedom and agency.

Functionalist and neofunctionalist theory of freedom and agency follows the early-nineteenth-century conservative romantic political philosophy. According to this theory, no abstract definition of freedom is possible. Instead, concrete freedom is defined in terms of the historical condition of culture and the spirit of the nation. In other words, tradition and collective normative order represent freedom and agency.

[28] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).
[29] See Habermas, *Knowledge*.

Order requires common moral commitments. Consequently, freedom is identified with order, just as tyranny is equated with chaos, normlessness, and revolution.[30] One can easily trace the influence of this romantic heritage in the writings of Durkheim. The critique of anomie, for Durkheim, is an affirmation of the romantic theory of the identity of order and freedom.[31] However, nineteenth-century social thought and political philosophy have offered at least three other possible theories of freedom and agency. The first alternative to the conservative identification of freedom with normative internalization is the utilitarian theory of freedom and liberty. This liberalist standpoint, which historically precedes the romantic tradition, was originated in the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers.[32] British liberalism and utilitarianism in the nineteenth century merely reaffirmed the basic propositions of the theory. According to this theory, freedom is applicable only to the realm of means and not to the realm of ends. In other words, humans are absolutely devoid of freedom of will. On the contrary, will is always predetermined. However, given the will, the individual may or may not be able to realize his or her will. It is at this point that the concept of liberty becomes significant. Liberty refers to a specific social condition in which the arbitrary social barriers to the realization of the individual's will are eliminated. A constraint on this state of liberty is considered to be justified if it is intended to limit the realization of a will harmful to others. Contrary to the conservative rejection of the possibility of domination, the liberalist theory systematically presents the possibility of domination at the level of means and founds its critical politics on the twin premises of the sacredness of individual subjective

[30] An example of the classic conservative theory of freedom is Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955).

[31] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976).

[32] See, for example, Claude A. Helvetius, *A Treatise on Man: His Intellectual Faculties and Education* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969).

interests and the necessity of laissez faire economy, morality, and politics.[33] The second alternative theory of freedom can be found in the scientistic and technocratic theories. According to this standpoint, reflected in the theories of Saint Simon and August Comte, freedom and domination are applicable to the realms of both means and ends. However, technocratic theory reduces the ends to the level of the means and finds the same logic applicable to both of them. Freedom is defined by the technocratic theory as the type of action which is based upon scientific knowledge and scientific principles.[34] Authority becomes an authority over things and not over humans. A free act is based upon universal principles of science and consequently lacks any discretionary or arbitrary element. That is why industrial society is defined as the realm of freedom, whereas military society is identified as domination of humans over humans. Naturally, in the context of technocratic theory domination is defined as any deviation from the norm of scientism. Strangely enough, a structure of decision-making monopolized by the professional scientists and experts which excludes the rest of the society is conceived by technocratic theorists as perfectly free.

As opposed to conservative romantic-functionalist, liberalist, and technocratic theories, there is an entirely different theoretical tradition which bases the concepts of freedom and agency upon the notion of autonomy. It is this approach to the question of agency and freedom which can provide the missing critical link to neofunctionalist action theory. Marxist and particularly neo-Marxist theories to a large extent follow the critical tradition of freedom as autonomy. That is another reason for the utility of a theoretical synthesis of neofunctionalist multidimensionality with the neo-Marxist concepts of ideology, fetishism, and alienation.

[33] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (New York: Dutton, 1951).
[34] Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy* (London: Bell, 1853), 2: 139–194.

The first systematic formulation of freedom as autonomy was presented by Immanuel Kant. It is paradoxical that neo-functionalism traces its own origin to Kantian theory and yet fails to note the Kantian insights on the issue of freedom. One should remember that in the context of the concept of autonomy, the idea of normative freedom and normative domination is not primarily a question of the nature and type of the norms, but instead is a question of the modality of norm-formation and the modes of relation between the actor and the ends of the action. Consequently, the idea of freedom as autonomy should be considered and specified as a significant component of a general theory of action.

Munch's emphasis on the Kantian premises of Parsonian multidimensional voluntaristic theory is very much to the point. One should not think, however, that Kant's interpenetration of utilitarian and moral orientations is only a philosophical practice unaccompanied by parallel sociological insights. Kant as a point of transition between Enlightenment and romanticism combines both orientations in his sociological writings, including *The Idea for a Universal History*[35] and *Perpetual Peace*.[36]

In his epoch-creating masterpiece, *The Critique of Practical Reason*,[37] Kant attempts a radical analysis of human freedom and morality. Criticizing the utilitarian reduction of ethics and morality to the instrumental rationality of individual inclinations and interests, and rejecting the constitution of ethical laws on the basis of the idea of sympathy, Kant differentiates between natural causation (conditional causation) and the causation of freedom.[38] According to Kant, the principle and the reality of freedom is the transcendental condition of the possibility of morality. What distinguishes natural causation

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[35] Immanuel Kant, "The Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).
[36] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).
[37] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956).
[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 43–51.

from the causation of freedom is not the material and the content but the form of moral laws. Morality is based upon the causation of freedom because it is constituted by the principle of autonomy.[39] Autonomy implies that the moral law which shapes the actor's will is the product of the moral subject himself. In other words, practical reason is the author of its own principle, the principle of freedom. In basing morality and freedom on the principle of autonomy, Kant transcends and criticizes the definition of freedom and morality on the basis of its internal specification. Nearly two centuries ago, Kant criticized the later neofunctionalist equation of freedom with "internal motivation" in the following words:

> In the question of freedom which lies at the foundation of all moral laws and accountability to them, it is really not at all a question of whether the causality determined by a natural law is necessary through determining grounds lying within or without the subject, or whether, if they lie within him, they are in instinct or in grounds of determination thought by reason. If their determining conceptions themselves have the ground of their existence in time, and more particularly, in the antecedent state and there again in a preceding state . . ., and if they are without exception internal, and if they do not have mechanical causality but a psychological causality . . . as such, their being is under necessitating conditions of the past time which are no longer in his power when he acts . . . and if the freedom of our will were nothing else than . . . psychological . . . it would in essence be no better than the freedom of a turnspit, which once wound up also carries out the motion of itself.[40]

Kant's critique of the neofunctionalist theory of freedom as internal motivation is profound and directly relevant. In fact, the norms of instrumental rationality, efficiency, and scientific knowledge are also internal to the individual actors. One should not forget that the situation of the action is very different from the rational orientation or rational criterion of selection. For neofunctionalism, however, the internal orientation of

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 52–85.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 99–101.

instrumental rationality reduces the ends to the means and eliminates the realm of freedom and agency. But regardless of this inconsistency in the neofunctionalist approach to the question of freedom, the fundamental fact of ordinary human action is not the identity of order (normative order in functionalism) and freedom, but the tension between order and freedom. This implies that we have shifted the locus of the definition of freedom from internality to autonomy. However, such a conclusion is based upon a social and historical, and not a transcendental, approach to the question of autonomy. In order to clarify the antinomy of freedom and normative order we should follow Durkheimian interpretation of Kant's moral theory. According to Kant, the empiricist theories of knowledge and morality fail to explain the necessary and universal character of both objective knowledge and moral maxims. If both human knowledge and morality are based upon the individual's experience of the world and the utilitarian consequences of practical action, the necessity of propositions and the imperative nature of moral obligations cannot be explained. Consequently, for Kant the source of our knowledge of the world and moral duties is an a priori and transcendental structure of mind which is not derived from the individual's experience or inclinations.[41] However, as Durkheim emphasized, Kantian theory failed to see (a) the historical variety of systems of knowledge and morality and (b) the similarity and commonality of the ideas and values of the members of the same society or cultural group.[42] In Durkheim's theory, therefore, the necessity and universality of human norms and values are due to the fact that they are shared by the members of the society. In other words, the necessity of normative beliefs is derived from the cultural system and tradition of the society. In this theory, internalization of norms and values is precisely due to the fact that the

[41] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Modern Library, 1958).
[42] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1951), pp. 152–297.

individual is not the author of his or her ultimate ends.[43] Normative order, in other words, contradicts the assumption of the autonomy of the individual actor. Order requires commonality of values and the internalization of the social values by the individual. Therefore, neofunctionalist action theory leads to an assertion of the antinomy of order and freedom.

We can see that both the Kantian transcendental theory of freedom and the Durkheimian version of Kant's moral theory provide a different picture of the neofunctionalist theory of freedom and agency. If we define agency and freedom in terms of the Kantian concept of autonomy, then neofunctionalism leaves no space for agency and freedom in general, or for symbolic violence and ideological domination in particular. Posing the question of freedom and agency in terms of autonomy, therefore, confronts us with three sets of questions. The first relates to the distribution of resources and strategic power in terms of the conditions of social action for different groups of actors. Naturally, issues like inequality of opportunity and alternative courses of action open to the actors are directly relevant to the question of freedom. Both direct coercion (forcing individuals against their will) and situational coercion (leaving no option to the actor but to subjugate) belong to the instrumental level of domination.[44] The second question relates to the issue of hegemony, cultural violence of various groups, and ideological manipulations. In this case the question of domination relates to the internalized ends of the actors.[45] Ideological domination represents a situation of control of the means of theoretical and ideological practice by the members of the dominant groups (class, gender, religious or social groups, etc.). Contrary to the methodology of pluralist political theory or what is called behaviorism, one can

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[43] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1938).
[44] Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modern Library, 1936).
[45] An example of this line of analysis is Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

legitimately and rationally talk about the existence of domination even in a situation of consensus over policy issues.[46]

One way of deciphering domination is to look at the structure of discourse, including political discourse in the society. If, for example, specific relevant political and normative alternatives are systematically excluded from the public discourse while others enjoy a privileged access to the public, cultural violence and ideological manipulation is a reality.[47] Obviously, an important issue in the analysis of this type of domination is the relation of instrumental interests to the normative propositions. Lastly, the third question is the existence of domination and symbolic violence at the general level of socialization of individuals, which begins at the moment of the birth. This final issue transcends the particular levels of domination. As Bourdieu would say, all educational ideals and alternatives are arbitrary by nature. Consequently, imposing an arbitrary principle upon any human being constitutes symbolic violence.[48] It is clear that internalization of culture and tradition through the process of socialization, which is a universal precondition of action systems, is not readily compatible with the norm of autonomy. These three levels of problems are not even touched by neofunctionalism. On the contrary, neofunctionalism announces actors to be free when they are, indeed, systematically determined and conditioned.

### Deterministic Tendency in Neofunctionalism

Surprisingly, however, functionalism and neofunctionalism are too deterministic in their outlook on human actions. It is true that functionalism tries to affirm and save the actor's

[46] Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).
[47] Habermas, *Knowledge*.
[48] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977), pp. 1–69.

freedom in its analytical framework. In reality, however, the functionalist argument for freedom is evidence for bondage and passivity. If we accept the functionalist theoretical framework, we are led to deny freedom for human actors. The fact, however, is that humans are not as determined as the functionalist model actually implies. According to functionalist and neofunctionalist theories human actors are free because they have internalized the social and cultural norms and values of the society. In this perspective, humans play their roles on the basis of recognized mutual norms and follow the rules of society. These rules are structural forces which determine the actions of human individuals. We should remember that deviation from social rules and cultural norms are interpreted by functionalists as indications of disorder and unfreedom. It is clear that this deterministic tendency has been present in diverse forms of functionalist theory. Needless to say, the most common definition of functionalism identifies it with sociological realism, according to which the individual is shaped and formed by an already existing social structure and tradition. In this case the individual is merely an embodiment of social relations and cultural norms. Individuals simply internalize the norms and follow them.

It is one of the basic premises of this article that such a deterministic account of individual actions cannot be accepted. On the contrary, individuals are left with a wide range of options, ambiguities, and choices within the social and cultural framework. Instead of simply following the rules of social interaction, they play with the rules, use them against other rules, redefine the norms, and exploit the ambiguities of the rules in the context of conflict and dialogue with other members of the society. Tradition, rules, and norms, consequently, are not just constraints to obey but also resources to utilize. Such an approach rejects both individualist, nominalist, and liberalist reduction of society to individuals, and the structuralist, realist, reificatory, and functionalist reduction of individual to society. Conflict and power struggle over both

material and ideal interests are the basic logic of human interactions.[49] Societal norms constrain individuals and are used by them in their ongoing conflict and power relations. Such a theoretical framework implies that actors are engaged in defining the norms and values of the society for their own material and ideal advantages. Consequently, the logic of the internalization of values is not free from the distortion of the categories of strategic and ideological domination. Furthermore, actors are not automatons who simply follow the rules and norms of the society. Both ideological domination and freedom from social norms are flexible realities in the fluid spaces of material and symbolic conflicts of individuals with changing boundaries and maneuvers in between. It is probably in this paradoxical ambiguity of rules and norms that we should search for both autonomy and domination of individual actors.

To better clarify this issue, it may be useful to refer back to the neofunctionalist theory of action and freedom. As we noted for neofunctionalism, both historical materialism and historical idealism are false theoretical statements. Instead, neofunctionalism insists upon a multidimensional action theory in which normative institutions cannot be reduced to the instrumental and material structures of society. However, the arguments used by both functionalism and neofunctionalism do not justify their claim. In fact, as claimed in the beginning of this paper, neofunctionalist theory is not a serious multidimensional theory. The reason for this inadequacy is to be found in the confusion between the relation of the individual to social structure and the relation of instrumental and normative structures of the society. I believe Parsonian voluntaristic action theory demonstrates that for an individual there are some normative concerns which limit and defy their utilitarian logic of purposive rational action. Consequently, for

[49] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

any individual the norms and values are relatively autonomous from instrumental interests. However, from this statement at the level of the individual we cannot infer any conclusion about the relation between the cultural system and, for instance, the economic system of the society. It is possible to think of a situation in which the general normative structure is shaped and determined by the economic and material conditions of society. But even in such a situation, the action of each individual is shaped by the interaction of a logic of purposive (instrumental) rationality of interests and the logic of culturally defined ultimate normative constraints.[50] It is clear that the individual's action is not purely motivated by instrumental interests and selfish desires. However, the fact that belief in some moral categories constrain the range of legitimate means and ends perceived by individuals does not indicate, necessarily, the autonomy of the cultural system from the economic structure of the society. In other words, neofunctionalism demonstrates the autonomy of the norm of legitimacy within the level of an individual choice of action. What it fails to show, however, is the autonomy of cultural structures from the material system of society. Neofunctionalism is therefore not a serious defense of a multidimensional action theory.

Contrary to both functionalism and neofunctionalism, some of the variants of the structuralist tradition directly address the question of the autonomy of cultural system from the logic of instrumental structures. One of the most effective presentations of this structuralist problematics, I believe, can be found in the recent works of Marshal Sahlins. Influenced by Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology[51] and Sassure's structural linguistics,[52] Sahlins emphasizes the autonomy of culture from the realm of practical reason. In *Culture and Practical Reason,* Sahlins criticizes both historical idealism and historical

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[50] One example of this alternative is Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

[51] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Anchor, 1963).

[52] Ferdinande Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974).

materialism. Contrary to both theories, he suggests the idea that all social facts are necessarily symbolic. Distinguishing between sign and symbol, Sahlins suggests that they follow their own internal logic and structure. Consequently, symbols are to some extent arbitrary and cannot be reduced to the level of social conditions. For instance, Lévi Strauss's emphasis on the binary structures of mind and symbolic structures is interpreted to be a strategy to locate the dynamics and meanings of symbols in their internal structure and to refute the reduction of symbols to the level of their objective, natural, and material content. However, for Sahlins, every social fact is characterized by the existence of their relatively arbitrary symbolic schema and the objective content of the instrumental dimension of social action. One can see here that the question of multidimensionality applies to both the level of individual choice and social institutions.[53]

In spite of the difference of structuralist and neofunctionalist formulations of multidimensionality, both theories are excessively deterministic. What is shared by both the structuralist and neofunctionalist theories is the passive reduction of the individual to the cultural rules of the society. It should be noted that Sahlins's emphasis on the autonomy of culture from the realm of material structures is a statement at the level of social structures and does not pertain to the relation between the individual and social structures. For both functionalism and structuralism, the individual is ultimately an embodiment of social relations and social rules. Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity clearly formulates this theoretical premise. According to Althusser, human individuals are subject in the double sense of the term. They are in reality subject to the social conditions and culture of the society. In other words, humans are passive embodiments of social structures. However, in order to perform their roles effectively

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[53] Marshal Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

and properly, human subjects should have an illusion of being
the subject of their actions. In this second sense of the term,
subjectivity refers to the assumption of freedom and
autonomy.[54] In agreement with the general problematics of
structuralism, Althusser emphasizes the idea that individuals,
while determined by social structures, falsely assume that they
are the authors of their actions. Ideology, Althusser maintains,
is precisely this illusion of the centrality of the subject among
the decentered subjects. As we can see, structuralist theory is
very much aware of the fact that internalization of the norms
and values of society by individuals does not constitute
freedom for those individuals. On the contrary, what is an
indication of freedom in neofunctionalist action theory is
explicitly the necessary requirement of bondage, passivity, and
external determination. In other words, both neofunctionalism
and structuralism emphasizes the social and cultural determi-
nation of the internalized norms of the individuals. However,
for neofunctionalism the assumption of a rule-following,
rule-believing individual is an argument for agency and
freedom, whereas for structuralism the same assumption is the
evidence for rejection of the concepts of agency and freedom
of individual actors.

Basing the concept of agency and freedom upon the
principle of autonomy, we can locate the common theoretical
error of structuralist and functionalist action theories. It is the
reificatory and excessively deterministic common premise of
both structuralism and functionalism which should be criti-
cized. Individuals are not passive embodiments of social roles
and the followers of clearly defined and determining rules. On
the contrary, rule-following is accompanied by rule-defining,
rule-redefining, and rule-exploiting practices of individuals in
their concrete conflictual interactions.[55] One of the best

[54] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1971), pp.
121–177.
[55] One of the first systematic critiques of role theory can be found in Alain
Touraine, *Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Random House, 1971).

formulations of such a nondeterministic formulations of action theory can be found in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu.

In his brilliant work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* Bourdieu tries to combine multidimensionality (with some materialistic tendency) with a nonreductionistic conception of the individual-culture relationship. In addition to his insistence upon the interchangeability of symbolic and material capitals,[56] Bourdieu provides two fundamental clues for a new theory of practice. The first is the principle of the ambiguity of rules and the possibility of alternative definitions and interpretations of the rules by individuals. Consequently, individuals, instead of passively and predictably following the cultural rules, are engaged in a strategic act of playing different rules against each other and using the ambiguities of cultural norms to choose among alternative courses of possible actions. The second issue is the category of temporality. According to Bourdieu, the mere fact of the structure of the epistemology of action theory is a distortion of the structure of the concrete acts of individuals. The gaze of the theorist upon the actions of individuals is predicated upon the completion of action. Consequently, the entire structure, process, and uncertainty of the effect of temporality of action is overlooked and a deterministic after-the-fact reconstruction of action is emphasized. One of the most interesting parts of the book is Bourdieu's combination of the issues of rule ambiguity and temporality where he criticizes the deterministic theory of gift exchange in Marcel Mauss's functionalism.[57] Bourdieu's great insights, however, are partly lost in his excessive emphasis on the concept of habitus. In fact, his notion of habitus paves the way for a return to the reductionistic framework he himself has so brilliantly criticized.

It is in the new conception of cultural rules and tradition

[56] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 159–198.
[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 1–30.

that the possibility of a partial resolution of the contradiction between tradition and autonomy can be sought. If we take tradition as merely a factor of constraint and determination of the individual, we will be left with a deterministic framework. On the other hand, if we take tradition to be an ambiguous and contradictory structure of both constraint and strategic exploitation, we can transcend the dichotomy of agency and tradition. We owe a fundamental advance toward this new conception of tradition to the writings of Martin Heidegger. It was the transformation of Dilthey's epistemological hermeneutics into the foundational hermeneutics of Heidegger which provided a reorientation of the concept of tradition. Contrary to the Enlightenment's rejection of tradition and its call for a total rule of reason, and opposed to the conservative romantic glorification of the closed unity of tradition in the concept of the "spirit of the nation," Heidegger's analysis of hermeneutics as the basic logic of the individual's encounter with the world and the unveiling of human forethought and planning implied a dialogical relation between tradition and the world.[58]

Unfortunately, Heidegger's insights were never systematically pursued in the tradition of action theory. However, Heidegger's ontological reinterpretation of the idea of the hermeneutical circle was used by Gadamer and Ricoeur in their analysis of the interpretation of the actor's action by other actors/observers. The central question of both Gadamer's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics is the problem of the meaning of cultural artifacts and, by implication, of human action. Although the primary object of analysis in their writings is the reality of the text, it is assumed that, following Schleiermacher, any social action can be analyzed as a text. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur emphasize the autonomy of the text from the subjectivity of the author and the conditions of its genesis. Consequently, instead of expressing one real meaning—that is,

[58] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 424–456.

the subjectively intended meaning of the author—the text
becomes an independent reality which comprises diverse
possibilities of meaning. These possible meanings, however,
are realized through the fusion of the horizon of the text with
alternative horizons of different observers. Each observer
represents his or her own historicity and tradition which opens
him or her to the text and provides new meanings. It is clear
that in such a situation the aim of hermeneutics is not the
reproduction but the production of meaning. Furthermore,
the individual's tradition and historicity provide the condition
of the possibility of meanings, and not an obstacle to the act of
interpretation.[59] Although Gadamer's theory has usually been
interpreted as an unconditional defense of tradition and a
return to the conservative romantic fascination with the
normative culture, nevertheless his dialogical reinterpretation
of tradition is extremely powerful.[60] Gadamer's insights are
further developed by Ricoeur's attempt to reconcile interpre-
tation and explanation, or hermeneutics and structuralism.
According to Ricoeur, Frege's differentiation of sense from
referent can be used to affirm the autonomy of the text from
the mere act of saying. Contrary to the act of saying in which
the situations of both speaker and audience are the same (or
the same referent), in the case of the written text the audience
can understand an infinite number of situations differently
from the situation of the speaker. Consequently, the meaning
of the text in terms of its referent is purely metaphorical.
Metaphor becomes the model of text par excellence. It implies
an open space for discourse and meanings for the same text by
different observers.[61]

It should not be forgotten that the conservative reading of

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[59] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
[60] A nonconservative interpretation of Gadamer can be found in Richard J.
Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
Press, 1983).
[61] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1981).

Gadamer's and Ricoeur's theories of tradition, one that emphasizes the closedness of the world of tradition and the deterministic relation between culture and individual, resembles functionalist and structuralist role theory.[62] Such a deterministic standpoint is legitimately subject to the criticisms of the neo-Marxists' theories of ideology. Habermas's concept of depth-hermeneutics and critical theory is one of the best examples of this line of criticism. However, the conservative conception of tradition is as theoretically objectionable as the naive assumption of the possibility of total liberation from tradition and the rule of rationalism. While functionalist theory equates autonomy with a deterministic concept of tradition, and while Habermas's theory bases autonomy upon absolute liberation from tradition,[63] it is the position of this paper that the concept of autonomy requires a dialogical and open interpretation of tradition. However, a reinterpretation of the concept of agency and freedom in the context of action theory requires a return to Heidegger's extension of the hermeneutical question to the realm of praxis and the life world situation. In other words, the issue of the possibilities of meaning should not be confined to the level of the relation between the observer and the actor's act. On the contrary, the principle of the hermeneutical circle should be affirmed at the level of the relation of the actor (agent) to his or her situation and tradition.

Consequently, instead of conceiving of the individual actor as a passive follower of social rules, we find the actor engaged in a perpetual dialogue with the societal norms and values, actively creating alternative interpretations of the situation and the normative system within the context of a power-oriented space of social interaction. Tradition, in other words, simultaneously constrains the individual and opens the actor to

[62] The best critique of a conservative theory of freedom can be found in Foucault, *Discipline*.
[63] Habermas, *Knowledge*.

alternative possibilities and definitions of the situation. Ricoeur's concept of distanciation of text from the author can be extended to include the distanciation of self from tradition.[64]

However, this reorientation of the relation between social structures and the individual actor implies a reinterpretation of both concepts of unconscious and meaning. Giddens is using a similar strategy when he applies his notion of structuration to the issue of meaning generation:

> The sense of words and the sense of actions do not derive solely from the differences created by sign codes or, more generically, by language. They derive in a more basic way from the methods which speakers and agents use in the course of practical action to reach interpretations of what they and others do.[65]

One can easily see the significant implication of the idea of tradition as the locus of the possibilities of action-orientation space for the question of agency and freedom. In general, social tradition and normative structures do constrain human actions. But they also open up possibilities for redefinition and reorientation in a situation of conflict and power struggles. Consequently, tradition represents both symbolic violence and partial autonomy and transcendence for individual actors. An analysis of normative structures requires the explication of the levels and forms of distorted discourse and repression of metaphorical orientation. Such an analysis presupposes a constant investigation of the reciprocal conversion of material and symbolic capitals and resources.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, words like functionalism and positivism have

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[64] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 147–149.
[65] Anthony Giddens, "Actions, Subjectivity, and the Constitution of Meaning," *Social Research* 53 (Autumn 1986): 538.

been used to imply different, and sometimes contradictory, meanings. In social-science discourse, functionalism has connoted a theory of sociological realism, a consensus model, a teleological logic of explanation, a conservative standpoint, a theory of historical idealism, and a multidimensional action theory. Neofunctionalists have usually emphasized the multidimensional reference of the functionalist tradition. However, the other traditional implications of functionalist discourse continue to influence the neofunctionalist standpoint. This is explicitly clear in the neofunctionalist definition of freedom as the individual's internal commitment to the common norms and values of the society. It can be argued, however, that neofunctionalism (like functionalism) has not adequately addressed the question of multidimensionality. Both the reality of order and the existence of restraining moral commitments for individuals can be compatible with a materialist theory of culture which tries to explain the cultural imperatives of the normative system in terms of the material structures of the society. The neofunctionalist emphasis on multidimensionality, therefore, should be extended to the collective and societal level of theoretical explication. Furthermore, the neofunctionalist's identification of order with freedom overlooks the centrality of power relations at the level of cultural discourse.

Finally, neofunctionalist action theory portrays a deterministic picture of the form of the individual's relation to the normative culture. Contrary to the neofunctionalist concept of rule-following individuals, a conflict-oriented action theory emphasizes the contingent, ambiguous, and uncertain character of cultural rules which are used and exploited as a significant resource in the ideal and material power struggles by the individual actors. Tradition, in other words, both constrains and opens up new horizons. An autonomy-based conception of agency and freedom requires a radical reinterpretation of the social-contract theory. In this new interpretation, individuals are bound to their historicity and tradition. However, this guiding tradition has a metaphorical structure

which allows autonomy and redefinitions for the individual actors. This implies that an agency-affirming theory is simultaneously a critique of the conditions and forms of symbolic repression and distorted communication.