

# Governing through conflict on Adorno's critique of postwar sociology

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## 1 | THE POSTWAR WESTERN SOCIOLOGY

The institutionalization of sociology emerged alongside the birth of a new world order at the end of the Second World War. The military defeat of fascism and the configuration of a bipolar power shaped sociology in the fifties. The social sciences were urged to provide a comprehensive understanding of recent catastrophic events, as well as skills and techniques to prevent further disorders: the social order was considered to be fragile, as the threat of war and social convulsions remained on the horizon. As Christopher Lasch remembers:

*The mass media have tried to idealize the fifties, in retrospect, as an age of innocence. They did not seem that way to me or to most of my contemporaries. A chronic state of international emergency led to the erosion of civil liberties at home and the militarization of American life. (Lasch, 1991, p. 25)*

The “chronic state of international emergency,” the result of increasing tension between the USA and the USSR, and intensified by the revolutionary events in China in the late 1940s and the proclamation of the Truman doctrine and McCarthyism in the USA, led to an increasing militarization of everyday life worldwide. One of the opening scenes of *Europa 51*, directed by Roberto Rossellini, deals with this belligerent atmosphere: after hearing that Andrea Casati (Ettore Giannini) is a journalist, one of the guests at a dinner party asks him if there will be war or peace and then adds that she thinks another war will begin. This scene was shot six years after the end of the war, and it is indicative of how fears concerning a new war prevalent among Europeans.

The trauma of the war and the fear of its recommencement resulted in the repositioning of sociology within universities and governments. After being institutionalized during the 1920s, academic sociology was in fact consolidated during the 1950s (Gouldner, 1972, p. 157), with the expansion of social sciences departments, institutes of research, and, most importantly, because of an increase in financial resources. In the West as much as in the East, sociology came to be used as an instrument of state policy, both in relation to domestic problems and as an instrument for international influence and prestige (p. 158). According to Gouldner, the rise of the welfare state was followed by the development of a scientific and technical apparatus, in which sociology was included:

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*The modern Welfare State and its accelerated support of academic sociology are the responses of a modern middle class which is both entrenched and threatened. No longer living under the shadow of restorationism, it is a middle class that has great influence on the society and state apparatus. At the same time, this middle class is threatened by the development of international communism and by the collapse of its influence abroad. It is threatened also by growing internal crises at home, by the demands of dissident social strata, like the racially subjugated, the students, the welfare dependents. (Gouldner, 1972, p. 161)*

This postwar middle class believed that it was possible to solve the “social problem” (i.e., the “demands of dissident social strata” and “the welfare dependents”) through expert administration and the development of social engineering. This configuration was an answer to the fears of another war and to the rise of Communism. The main agenda, then, both the United States and in Europe was the maintenance of the new social pact. In this context, the development of academic sociology was also driven by the need of contain social struggles and conflicts.

Whereas social sciences in USSR were based a certain interpretation of Engels and Lenin’s dialectical materialism, western sociology—namely, the one that emerged at the University of Chicago and later at Harvard—was predominantly functionalist (Gouldner, 1972, p. 157). The centrality of Talcott Parsons’ ideas corresponded to the political demand for order, since functionalism conceived of society as an increasingly stable totality, with its own mechanisms that re-establish equilibrium. Robin Celikates includes Parsons’ approach under the general term “consensus theory,” in opposition to “conflict theory,” which will be discussed later. According to Celikates, the consensus theory is based on four basic assumptions:

*(1) Societies are relatively stable social orders; (2) The elements of these orders—individuals and social groups—are in a kind of state of equilibrium or balance. (3) All elements within the whole contribute to its functioning. (4) Societies integrate themselves through consensus on common values and norms. (Celikates, 2007, p. 214–215)*

Understood in this way, Parsons’ social system is a totality in relative equilibrium, where its elements contribute for its maintenance, and it expressed the image of stability that was desired by the postwar middle classes referred to by Gouldner.

In 1951, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils wrote *Towards a General Theory of Action* (Parsons & Shils, 1951), a paradigmatic work for functionalist sociology. It described society as composed of institutions, in which individuals were inserted through functions. In these systems, individuals had “institutionalized roles” and, as a consequence, “conformity expectations.” Thus understood, institutions are a set of roles graded in authority and based on “moral consensus.” Parsons and Shils claimed that social order is not the result of coercion or power, but is primarily brought about through shared values, which “bind a society together, for what is socially expected becomes individually needed” (Mills, 1968, p. 31). The institutionalization of these values ensures the standards of commitment of individuals and the internalization of norms. From the consensus-theoretical perspective, institutions are moral or symbolic spheres. Social pathologies emerge from the inadequacy of institutional mechanisms of integration and the undermining of moral disposition for consensus. For this reason, Parsons and Shils argued that the economic dimension of society is not the decisive determination. Gouldner points this out:

*Functional sociology conceives itself as a science of purely “social” relationships, which premises that social order can be maintained regardless of the level and distribution of economic gratifications, and thus treats economic arrangements as “givens.” (Gouldner, 1972, p. 343)*

In this sense, for Parsons, society is made up of pure “social relationships,” and integration is a matter of moral motivation, of social actors’ “value-orientation,” and has little to do with economic reparations. But this theoretical model soon seemed inadequate to the demands of its time, since economic compensations were in the core of the welfare state. Whereas functionalism considers moral commitment as the crucial condition for social stability, social integration was being guaranteed in reality through progressive income taxation, democratic accountability, and social

leveling. But before analyzing the decline of the functionalist paradigm, it is important to examine one of its most influential outcomes in Western sociology: the modernization theory.

Parsons and other sociologists considered “modernization” the general tendency to a harmonic state of affairs, to in which all humanity converged. He describes it as a “wide consensus,” as it follows:

*... Underneath the ideological conflicts [between capitalism and communism] that have been so prominent, there has been emerging an important element of wide consensus at the level of values, centering in the complex we often refer to as “modernization.” (Parsons apud Gilman, 2003, p. 103)*

Modernization was thus understood as an automatic and broad process, regardless of the prevalent economic system (communism or capitalism). According to its theorists, “impersonal features”—such as urbanization, instruction, and mass communication—would systemically lead archaic ways of life to homogeneous and equalitarian situations (Lasch, 1991, p. 158). Ultimately, it would provide traditional societies with the resources for what Parsons would later call in the 1960s “a general process of adaptive ‘upgrading’, including economic takeoff to industrialization, democratization via law, and secularization and science via education” (Parsons apud Alexander, 1995, p. 11). That is what, in this context, came to be known as the “convergence thesis.”

According to this view, replacing old standards and habits by “better ones” would result in a situation of homogeneity worldwide, which would finally lead to *progress*. This “systemic” process was to be replicated in various areas of life and territories of the world by experts and technicians from several fields. Modernization was broadly used as a theoretical framework to understand post-war changes in impoverished parts of the world—and, eventually, intervene in these areas (Gilman, 2003, p. 94). In spite of being sometimes characterized as a “spontaneous” development, it consisted in a highly stratified process, guided by a scientific elite. Parsons, for example, assumed that an increasing complex system supposed greater differentiation and stratification of its elements. In this sense, he argues that “systems of stratification in certain respects are seen to have positive functions in the stabilization of social systems” (Parsons, 1949, p. 26). In other words, the good functioning of the social machinery supposed that each element has a certain function within the hierarchical gradation of the system.<sup>1</sup> Due to this sharp elitist perspective, the communication specialist Ithiel de Sola Pool had called the modernization theorists “mandarins of the future” (Gilman, 2003, p. 8).

In a speech given in 1959, in New York, Shils defined “modernization” with remarkable comprehensiveness:

*In the new states “modern” means democratic and equalitarian, scientific, economically advanced and sovereign. “Modern” states are “welfare states,” proclaiming the welfare of all the people and especially the lower classes as their primary concern. (...) Modernity entails democracy, and democracy in the new states is, above all, equalitarian. (...) It believes the progress of the country rests on rational technology, and ultimately on scientific knowledge. (...) All this requires planning and the employment of economists and statisticians, conducting surveys to control the rates of savings and investments, the construction of new factories, the building of roads and harbors, the development of railways, irrigation schemes, (...). “Modernization” means being western without the onus of following the West. It is the model of the West detached in some way from its geographical origins and locus. (Shils, apud Gilman, 2003, p. 2)*

According to Shils, the historical trajectory towards modernity is based on democratic mechanisms, the expertise of technicians, and policies that aim for equalization. This would lead the entire world to western standards without the “onus of following the West.” At this point, one can understand why “modernization” was frequently used as a synonym for “westernization” or “Americanization” in opposition to “Sovietization” (Lerner apud Alexander, 1995, p. 49). After all, this early post-war concept cannot be detached from the international ideological conflict. As Nils Gilman puts it:

*Understood on its own terms, modernization theory was the fruit of American social scientists’ effort to build a comprehensive theory not only for understanding what was happening in postcolonial regions, but also for*

*promoting change that would make these regions become more like “us”—and less like the Russians or the Chinese. (Gilman, 2003, p. 3)*

Interestingly, by the 1950s, a significant number of western sociologists considered that the modernization process was the clear demonstration for the fact that the differences between capitalism and communism were being increasingly dissolved. They believed that by implementing planning policies, western nations were not pure forms of capitalism any longer. According to Howard Brick, a kind of “post-capitalist” (or even “post-economic”) perspective was widespread among sociologists at the time. In 1954, Raymond Aron claimed that “socialism ceased to be a myth in the West since it had become part of reality” (apud Brick, 2006, p. 6) and Parsons stated that the dichotomy between capitalism and communism was no longer applicable because American society was not simply capitalist any more (Brick, 2006, p. 20).

## 2 | THE CRITIC’S (ALMOST) LONELY VOICE

Nevertheless, some critical theorists such as Theodor W. Adorno never subscribed to these interpretations. His criticisms of modernization theory and of functionalism in general converged with the moment when this theory was being increasingly questioned. The protest movements against the Vietnam war that took place during 1968, as well as the civil rights struggles in the USA and the liberation wars in the colonies had an important impact on the postwar consensus among the middle classes. Adorno became a leading theoretical reference for the protesting youth in Germany due to his permanent skepticism and critical attitude towards the promises of welfare and modernization.

Indeed, Adorno never considered capitalism to be on the brink of being overcome, nor had capitalism ceased to be the central concept for a theory of society. On the opening address to the 16th German Sociological Congress (1968), he stated very clearly that at no point in the history of capitalism did the market operate without bonds, as the liberal doctrines always supposed (or dreamed about). According to him, capitalism was not being transformed by state interventions, nor was it being transcended, on the contrary:

*Economic intervention is not, as the older liberal school believed, an alien element grafted on from outside, but an intrinsic part of the system, the epitome of self-defense. Nothing could provide a more significant illustration of the concept of dialectic. (Adorno, 2003, p. 122)*

Adorno did not perceive social protection and free market as two separated poles, an insight that he shared with his contemporary, Karl Polanyi.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Adorno considered that these two social forces reinforced one another dialectically, in such a way that state intervention and large-scale planning rescued the capitalist order countless times from the anarchy of commodity production. It is sufficient to remember that the thirty “golden years” in the 20th century Europe were the longest period of sustained growth in capitalist history. In the same sense, Habermas pointed out that the Welfare State pact consisted in successfully combining capitalistic expansion and state intervention:

*Welfare-state mass democracy is an arrangement that renders the class antagonism still built into the economic system innocuous, under the condition, however, that the capitalist dynamics of growth, protected by measures of state intervention, do not grow weak. (Habermas, 1985, p. 350)*

Thus, state intervention was not responsible for transcending capitalism, but for saving it. The generalized idea that capitalism would be overcome gradually, as Jean Jaurès had suggested, in the early 20th century, with his maritime metaphor that described the advent of socialism—suggesting that capitalism would be overcome in the long run through successive reforms in such a way that one would not notice when socialism will already be a reality<sup>3</sup>—would be nothing more than wishful thinking.

For modernization was supposed to be the main analytical character of social reality, its features, such as industrialization, were also elevated into predominant concepts. Nevertheless, by contrast in the 16th German Sociological Congress, whose subject was “Late capitalism or industrial society?,” Adorno argued that capitalism, however modified, continued to be the central determining factor in society, against those who argued that the concept of capitalism had been rendered obsolete (Adorno, 2003, p. 111). Furthermore, he emphasized the centrality of the concept due to the fact that “exchange society” still has an objective reality and a universal coercive force (p. 113). In Adorno’s words

*Without making use of capitalism as a key concept, these weighty facts could only be interpreted at the cost of violent and arbitrary distortions. Human beings continue to be subject to domination by economic process. Its objects have long since ceased to be just the masses; they now include those in charge and their agents. (Adorno, 2003, p. 116)*

In other words, whereas some sociologists continued to utilize concepts such as “modernization” or “industrialization,” Adorno believed that capitalism is still the mainline for any analysis of the social totality. This is precisely the reason why the promises of the modernization thesis cannot be fulfilled: capitalistic contradictions hinder technological developments that could lead humanity to a situation of widespread abundance. Adorno emphasizes that the end of basic deprivation is only possible through a structural change in social order. In that sense, he says in the article “Progress” (1969):

*Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have been potentially eliminated; thanks to the present state of the technical forces of production no one on the planet needs to suffer deprivation anymore. Whether there will be further want and oppression—which are the same thing—will be decided solely by the avoidance of catastrophe through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity. (Adorno, 2005, p. 144)*

Adorno did not deny that the general material conditions were sharply better for the lower classes than 20 years before—at least in central Europe, but he did not interpret this fact as an indication that capitalism was providing the improvement of general material conditions. According to Adorno, the fact that millions of people still starve, despite the most advanced technological condition, indicated that “modernization” was not as uniform or rational process as it seemed. As a consequence, the common claim that modernization is a “systemically convergent” process, according to which every country would gradually progress towards one and the same point of homogeneity was, again, wishful thinking. In “Society” (1965), Adorno argues that: “Within the exchange society, the pre-capitalist remnants and enclaves are by no means something alien, mere relics of the past: they are vital necessities for the market system” (Adorno, 1970, p. 149). The fact that modernization was a highly selective kind of development was gradually becoming clear, something which was first acknowledged by the student movements.

### 3 | GOVERNING THROUGH CONFLICT

As mentioned before, Celikates opposes the consensus theory, which includes Parsons’ functionalism to conflict theory, associated with theorists of different traditions such as Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. To differentiate conflict theory, the author names its four basic assumptions:

*(1) Social orders are constantly being altered and can therefore only be understood from a historical perspective; they do not correspond to an ideal type and do not develop towards one; (2) Societies consist of elements—individuals and social groups—that have a conflictive relationship to one another; (3) This relationship generates permanent social change; (4) Social integration is always also dependent on domination, coercion and symbolic violence and therefore cannot take place alone or only primarily by consensus. (Celikates, 2007, p. 215)*

In this outline, it is possible to see how emphatically conflictive society is characterized. Whereas for Parsons,' social systems tended towards equilibrium, conflict theorists conceptualized them as inevitably agonistic, since coercion and domination are not eliminated from the system. They are, on the contrary, dynamic elements inherent to historical development. Nonetheless, these two strands have common principles, such as the methodological primacy of partial structures (groups) instead of large-scale structures (society) and the emphasis on system structures. The crucial difference is that one stresses the possibility of consensus and the other the latency of conflict.

Conflict theory emerged during the 1950s as an attempt to find ways to solve internal conflicts in a governmental context. Parsonianism had become partially obsolete because it theorized that social system does not need a centralized power, because it is self-sustainable. "The infrastructure of Parsonianism remains pre-Keynesian, insofar as it conceives of the relations among institutions, or actors on the tacit model of a spontaneously equilibrated laissez-faire economy rather than of a state-managed welfare economy" (Gouldner, 1972, p. 162). Moreover, by conceptualizing social structure idealistically as highly stable and immutable complexes, Parsons could not provide a convincing account of disruptions that eventually occur within the system. In this sense, early functionalism was inadequate for administrative proposals, as it was evident that social reality was not tending spontaneously towards harmony. A static model had only poor analytical capacity to guide government actions and to give it legitimation.

In an article of 1950, that was considered to be inaugural (Krysmanski, 1971, p. 15) Jessie Bernard stated that her colleagues, the American sociologists, had neglected the conflict theory to avoid being confused with Marxists or "apologists for the conflict." Making explicit the highly political character of the new sociological field, she claims that: "If we learn about conflict, we disarm the conflicting parties; they are exposed, vulnerable. Until people knew about Communist tactics, the latter worked effectively; when exposed, they lost much of their potency" (Bernard, 1950, p. 16). Interestingly, the first text of the modern conflict theory uses a militaristic terminology: it discusses "disarming" conflict parties, making them "exposed" and "vulnerable." Hence the idea of *neutralizing conflicts*, which would be widespread in the theorisations of the welfare state, derived from the *battlefields*.

Thus it can be argued that "the policy-oriented use of social science by governments both for welfare and warfare purposes" (Gouldner, 1972, p. 345). The conflict theory, in turn, had a strong empirical perspective, being conceived of as an instrument to manage groups with opposite interests. In the article "On the present state of German sociology" (1959), Adorno analyzes the state of affairs of various fields of the sociology in his country, and already criticizes the "practical function for administrative purposes" that characterized modern sociology, taking as a paradigm the sociology of industry (*Betriebssoziologie*). This strand also arose in the postwar years and was very similar to conflict theory, although more focused on the tension between employers and employees. According to Adorno, the "social question" was reduced to the pure problem of "human relations" of a company (*Gesammelte Schriften* [GS] 8, p. 514). During the industrial-boom of the 1950s, this theory thus gave conceptual means by which labor conflicts within a factory could be minimized.

Like conflict theorists, industry sociologists refused to see social conflict as an accident to be prevented; instead, they considered it as constitutive of the labor world. By doing so, they emulated and transfigured the Marxist idea of struggle. On this matter, Adorno argued that, as an empirical field, it had taken advantage of "the tacit dissociation from Marx's theory, which had resulted, on the one hand, from the history of German social democracy, and, on the other, from the confiscation and demagogic falsification of dialectical materialism by the Russian permanent dictatorship" (GS 8, p. 518). The vacuum promoted by the "falsification" of Marxist theory and the dissociation between the Social Democratic Party and the workers gave way to a "worthless empirical sociology," which instead of criticizing the contradiction between social classes, naturalized it as an unavoidable social feature.

According to Adorno, the "empiristic-positivistic turn of the German sociology" is characterized by a "resignative classification under the superiority of existing conditions." In this sense, he held that a great part of predominant sociology, including Parsons' functionalism, was an apology for existing conditions. Adorno expressed his bitterness about the great influence American sociology had in Germany<sup>4</sup>:

*It [the consciousness] enchants itself from the point of view of the better functioning of the social machinery into something desirable. It is not for nothing that the dichotomy of functional and dysfunctional is the highest to which the work of Talcott Parsons rises, which is beginning to have an effect in many places in Germany today. (GS 8, p. 508)*

The pernicious influence of functionalist sociology could be seen, among other things, in the idea that the good functioning of the “social machinery” is something to be achieved. Although Adorno had criticized functionalism, he recognized a common ground with his own thought: that is, in the positing of the primacy of structures over positive facts. But on a closer examination, this resemblance becomes problematic. According to Adorno, the functionalist theory had a fetishized perspective about these structures, treating them as a necessity. Dialectics, on the contrary, is “overborne by the painful dominance of these laws does not glorify them but criticizes them” (Adorno, 2003, p. 113). When Marx discovered “structural laws,” such as the law of value and the law of accumulation, he showed how they embody their own negation, that is, its potential of crisis—something that the functionalist theory could not admit.

Finally, in dialectics, social structures are not patterns in which sociological findings can be applied free from contradiction. On Adorno’s view, dialectics does not consist in projecting its own categories into the world, constituting a coherent whole. That is to say that the dialectics does not “dismiss contradictions as errors in logic and attempt to eliminate them by ensuring the coherence of the scientific framework” (p. 114). It is therefore more capable of capturing the contradictions and antagonisms that constitute its object. But because functionalism—and positivism in general—impute certain continuity between principles of knowledge (such as the law of noncontradiction) and reality (antagonistic totality) it is incapable of grasping the antagonistic core of social order.

In “Sociology and Psychology,” Adorno addresses the problem of antagonism between individual and society and criticizes Parsons’ *Psychoanalysis and the Social Structure*: while Parsons’ methodological scheme supposes a harmonic continuity between the particular and the general structures, in a progressive movement, Adorno recognizes an essential antagonism (Adorno, 1967, p. 69). “Parsons has to pay a price for his conceptual harmony: his notion of integration, a positivist version of the (idealist) identity of subject and object, leaves room for an irrational society powerful enough to shape its subjects from the outset” (p. 70). In other words, the positivist belief that the categories of knowledge correspond perfectly to reality results in a compromise with the current unfair state of society.

The same kind of criticism is developed in a different approach in the article *Remarks on social conflict today* (1968), written by Adorno and Ursula Jaerisch. They carry out a critique of ideology on modern conflict theory, which tried to differentiate itself from consensus theory, that had characterized the conceptions of modernization until then. The most prominent representatives of this relatively new field were Lewis Coser (in the United States) and Ralf Dahrendorf (in Germany). They interpreted the conflict between the so-called “interest groups” from a functionalist perspective, as a motor for structural changes in society. According to Coser, modern conflict theory emerged from Georg Simmel’s essay “Conflict” (*Streit*), whose central thesis suggests that conflict is a form of socialization:

*This means essentially that, to paraphrase the opening pages of Simmel’s essay, no group can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association; and conflicts within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. (Coser, 1964, p. 31)*

In this way, Coser wanted to distinguish conflict theory from Parson’s theory, which assumed that conflicts were always caused by some dysfunctionality that could be remediated. Following Simmel, Coser, as well as Dahrendorf, interpreted social conflicts as necessary factors in development and integration. For Adorno, these theorists gave continuity to Simmel’s formal sociology, understanding conflict as an unquestionable attribute of society.<sup>5</sup> This hypostasis was even expressed ontologically: “wherever there is human life in society, there is conflict,” thus societies are regarded as not differing by the presence or absence of conflicts, but only “in the violence and intensity of conflicts” (Dahrendorf, 1965, p. 171).

Unlike those sociologists referred to by Jessie Bernard who never engaged in conflict research, due to fears of being confused with Marxists, theorists of conflict focused on conflicts in order to make them relatively less threatening to system maintenance. "An open society that allows internal conflicts on many fronts protects itself from the danger of a single conflict calling into question the basic consensus" (Coser apud Krysmanski, 1971 p. 127). With these militaristic words, Coser argues that, by inserting an aspect of chronic (though manageable) instability into the functionalist equilibrium, the system could become less susceptible to a sudden, single, profound, and potentially drastic rupture. That is why an "open society" would be safer than a closed one.<sup>6</sup>

Although Adorno also pointed out the conflictive character of sociability, he has made serious criticisms of conflict theory in the last few years of his life. He argues that, from a critical standpoint, the antagonistic social structure leads to the possibility of society tearing itself apart and, for that reason, must be overcome. That is to say that the antagonistic character is not essential to sociability *in general*. In contrast to Coser and Dahrendorf Adorno does not hypostatize the conflict as a fixed or ontological category with which society can be understood. In his 1965 article "Society":

*The process of socialization [Vergesellschaftungsprozeß, Y. A.] is not something that takes place beyond social conflicts and antagonisms, or in spite of them. It works through those antagonisms themselves, the latter, at the same time tearing society apart in the process. For in the institution of exchange there is created and reproduced that antagonism which could at any time bring organized society to ultimate catastrophe and destroy it. (Adorno, 1970, p. 149, modified translation)*

Integration and adaptation were central social values for functionalist theories, both for consensus and for conflict theories. For both, ultimately, the importance of the "good functioning of the social machinery" prevails. Adorno, for his part, claimed that the process of integration was *potentially disintegrative*: "... total socialization objectively hatches its opposite, and there is no telling yet whether it will be a disaster or a liberation" (Adorno, 2004, p. 346). Therefore, so-called social progress can have both a catastrophic unfolding, like fascism, or an emancipatory one.<sup>7</sup> Dialectically speaking, the "totally administered world" carries its opposite term, which sooner or later will break through.

These predictions regarding the development of late capitalism are striking insofar as they are both counterintuitive for their time and revealing for our own. Adorno did not experience the economic crises of the 1970s, nor the neoliberal offensive of the 1980s, but he did, in a sense, foresee the decline of social pacification mechanisms. In this sense, one could say that this is not merely a "pessimistic diagnosis" in a context of (apparent) social peace, but rather a rare comprehension of social determinants. Only some years after Adorno wrote could the "disintegrative character" of the "total administrative world" be clearly seen.

By overlooking the structural antagonism in society, the very cause of potential disintegration is disregarded. "But objective antagonism has not disappeared with integration. Only its manifestation in struggle has been neutralized" (GS 8, p. 154). After all, it is not because the objective class struggle "became virtually invisible"—in Bertolt Brecht's expression which is referred to by Adorno and Jaerisch—that it ceased to exist. In Adorno's words: "All society is still class society as it was in the times when its concept came up; the excessive pressure in the Eastern states indicates that it is no different there" (GS 8, p. 14). However, Adorno and Jaerisch admitted that the integration process of the labor classes in central Europe and in the United States expressed conflict theory's true content. For Adorno, the disruptive forces in society were effectively captured and neutralized by the fully administered world (*Nachgelassene Schriften* [NS] IV.15, 80). This diagnosis is very similar to Jürgen Habermas' in *Technology and Science as "Ideology"* (1968):

*State-regulated capitalism, which has emerged from a reaction to the systemic dangers created by open class antagonism, puts the class conflict at a standstill. The system of late capitalism is defined by a policy of compensation, i.e. conflict avoidance, which secures the loyalty of the wage-dependent masses, to such an extent that the conflict built into the structure of society with the exploitation of private capital is the one that remains latent with the greatest probability. (Habermas apud Krysmanski, 1971, p. 107)*

Conflicts were successfully internalized by the welfare state through its policies of compensation and its juridical capacity to mediate any tension. As Habermas very accurately observed, it was a reaction to the threat that open class antagonism still posed, and in this sense, social conflict theory expressed the necessity of social integration for a well-functioning machinery.<sup>8</sup> As Adorno and Jaerisch noted:

*The integration of the class struggle by the institutionalization of associations and parties, competing with each other establishes the scheme of conflict theories that, at the same time, affirms and minimizes [entschärfende] the conflict. (GS 8, p. 181)*

Thus, conflict theories express an objective aspect of reality: the institutionalization of the conflict and its neutralization. Even if its descriptive capacity is remarkable, it is an ideological expression, since it serves the maintenance of this pacified reality, and not its rupture. Revolution is not on the horizon any longer, only *conflict management*. Unlike the Marxist theory of social conflict, modern conflict theory does not aim to elaborate a theory of revolution, but a *theory of government*. Dahrendorf, perhaps the most representative theorist of the conflict theory, stated: “Liberal democracy is the government through conflict” (Dahrendorf, 1965, p. 174). According to this conception, conflict is the condition of possibility of the social system, as well as the very condition of progress. Progress, structure, and conflict are interdependent elements: without the structural basis, conflicts cannot be productive; likewise, a social structure without conflict become paralyzed and cannot progress.

Because Parsons longed to preserve structures, he overlooked processes. As Charles Mills put it: “The magical elimination of conflict, and the wondrous achievement of harmony, remove from this ‘systematic’ and ‘general’ theory the possibilities of dealing with social change, with history” (Mills, 1968, p. 42). Conflict theory, in its turn, is the attempt to push functionalism to a dynamic conception of conflict: no longer understanding it as dysfunctional or undesirable, but as an impulse for *progressive movement*. During a lecture in 1968 in his course *Introduction to Sociology*, Adorno commented on the connection between conflict and progress in relation to conflict theory as follows:

*... the core of this theory is that without conflict, namely without the antagonism of interests, something like progress does not take place, social stagnation takes place. Therefore the dispute itself, the conflict of interests itself, is to be affirmed as the constituent, so to speak, of living social life. (Nachgelassene Schriften [NS IV.15], p. 115)*

Finally, for Adorno, the conflict within the liberal democracy leads to the simple reproduction of the same (*immer gleich*), since it always expresses and reproduces the fundamental antagonism in the capitalist society. “Reality produces the semblance of developing upward and remains au fond what it was” (Adorno, 2005, p. 156). “Progress” is thus confined to the same totality, from which true progress would be able to come out. “In this experience of terror, the terror of the system forcibly coalesces into appearance; the more the system expands, the more it hardens into what it has always been” (Adorno, 2005, p. 160). Because neutralized conflict can be managed, it constitutes the condition for progress: a progress that is merely the repetition of the same.

#### 4 | CLAUSTROPHOBIA OF THE WORLD

In addition to having sensed the decline of the system of the pacification of conflicts, Adorno and Jaerisch provided a new element of analysis: the subjective dimension of the phenomenon of social disintegration. After all, the antagonism mediates all social phenomena and leave traces in subjectivity, in which it can come up as a symptom. In other words, social antagonism constitutes subjectivity and can find different means of expression. It can appear as anguish, coldness or “a claustrophobia of the world”—psychological states that are eventually hypostatized by philosophy into

“existentials,” as it occurs in the work of Heidegger. These symptoms are thus viewed as a result of the social integration process:

*The conflict, invisible beneath the surface of the partnership [Partnertums], is expressed in marginal social phenomena: sometimes where integration has not yet been fully realized, sometimes in the 'dregs of the world of phenomena' [Abhub der Erscheinungswelt], from which the antagonistic process distances us; sometimes in the irrational explosions of those who are entirely immanent to society, either as workers or consumers. (GS 8, p. 188)*

Despite the positivity of conflict brought about by the idea of “social partnership,” contradictions can erupt through “marginal social phenomena,” described here by the Freudian expression “dregs of the world of phenomena”<sup>9</sup> and “irrational explosions.” In these elements, social antagonism seems to be able to break through the ideology of pacification by manifesting itself in psychic life. This eruption can occur in those for whom “integration has not been fully realized” as much as in those who are “entirely immanent with society.”

In “Society,” Adorno points to the sacrificial element of integration and its affective consequences: “The whole business keeps creaking and groaning on, with unspeakable sacrifices [mit unsäglichem Opfern, Y. A.], only on account of the profit motive and the interiorization by individuals of the breach torn in society as a whole” (Adorno, 1970, p. 149, modified translation). In addition to sacrifice, individuals are constantly afraid of being ejected from the social system. In the article “Sociology and Psychology,” Adorno suggests that the fear of being “déclassé” (*Deklassierung*)—that is, of falling in class and social status—generates social resentment towards those who could not integrate “optimally” and are relegated down the social ladder:

*Today anyone who fails to comply with the economic rules will seldom go under straight away. But the fate of the déclassé looms on the horizon. Ahead lies the road to an asocial, criminal existence: the refusal to play the game arouses suspicions and exposes offenders to the vengeance of society even though they may not yet be reduced to going hungry and sleeping under bridges. But the fear of being cast out, the social sanctions behind economic behavior, have long been internalized along with other taboos, and have left their mark on the individual. In the course of history this fear has become second nature; it is not for nothing that the word 'existence' in usage uncontaminated by philosophy means equally the fact of being alive and the possibility of self-preservation in the economic process. (Adorno, 1968, p. 71)*

In other words, the subject who submits to “unspeakable sacrifices” for the sake of integration perceives the non-integrated as a threat to his own situation. Thus, integration is not perceived as a desirable alternative, but rather as an injunction. The individual is constrained to internalize moral expectations of conformity as if they were his own. According to Adorno, what prevails in the process of sociability is not the defense of one’s own interests, but the fear of perishing, of social sanction and of physical coercion. He connects this with the rationalization of economy:

*A firm belief in the transparent rationality of the economy is, no less than the presumption that psychology is the sufficient ground of men's actions, a typical piece of bourgeois self-deception. This rationality is based on physical coercion, on bodily torment, a material moment that transcends both immanently economic “material incentives” and the intrapsychic instinctual economy. (Adorno, 1968, p. 71–72)*

Unlike the functionalist conception that holds integration to take place through a rational and peaceful consensus, Adorno states that it does not cease to act on individual behaviors in the form of suffering. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno affirms that “suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively mediated [vermittelt, Y.A.]” (Adorno, 2004, pp. 16–17, modified translation). Social objectivity is the set of relations that both mediates subjectivity and is external to the spontaneity of the subjects. It can be described

as “system” and implies something that individuals should only react to, something that they simply suffer and not something on which they are able to act. The objectivity of the system appears, thus, as destiny. But the suffering that underpins the functionality of social roles can cause its own collapse.

#### 4.1 | Final remarks: The open society and its enemies

Compensation mechanisms and better bargaining conditions for the workers movement have been implemented as a contentious policy. By institutionalizing conflicts, the structure of the welfare state developed a managerial way of dealing with social contradictions, which turned out to be extremely successful in carrying this out. Academic sociology was largely used as instrument for social engineering during the 1950s and 1960s, the period in which conflict theory emerged. Its fundamental goal was to assist governments and bureaucracies in order to deactivate tensions among workers and other social groups. However, during the past three decades, this political model came to be exhausted and Adorno’s statement about the potential disintegrative character of late capitalist societies seems to be pertinent today. Integration bonds such as the internalization of norms and conformity expectations are in crisis. “Anti-establishment” movements in the last years express the fact that managerial solutions for social conflicts are innocuous. In some cases, this crisis is being experienced as a strong disintegration tendency of society, or as a “great regression” (Geiselberger, 2017). The idea of progress, a constitutive element of both the experience of postwar “golden years” and the postwar sociology, is also in decline. Confidence in the future has been shattered, and the idea of regression is looming in its place.

Axel Honneth (2012) described the decline of the Parsonian structures as the *brutalization of social conflict*, in which the spheres of mutual recognition (law, economy, and family) cannot provide the same compensation as before. According to Honneth, Parsons assumed that the legal system would secure more extensive rights for a large segment of the population, which showed itself to be an illusion (p. 12). On a second level, the performance principle, which would guarantee fair competition for professional recognition ended up being deformed by the deregulation of labor and unemployment (p. 13). Finally, the transformation of the role of genders within the family and the alteration of their functions on the division of labor had an impact on the moral expectations within this sphere.

*On the whole, the network of institutionalized spheres of recognition simply looks nothing like what Parsons predicted. If one were to resort to generalized developmental patterns to describe the new state, then it would seem obvious to speak of a process of growing exclusion from the systems of recognition and the simultaneous loss of the principles on which they rest. (Honneth, 2012, p. 15)*

For Honneth, this new state of affairs expresses an anomic situation, as normatively justified satisfaction for recognition strivings is no longer possible in the “spheres of action.” In other words, the “brutalization of social conflict” ends up in the exclusion of an increasing number of people from the standard Parsonian spheres of mutual recognition. This *tendency to anomy* is due to the exhaustion of the compensation mechanisms that supported the previous social pact. Phenomena such as structural unemployment, which have resulted in the increasing superfluity of parts of the work force, need to be placed at the center of this discussion. In 1967, during a lecture on the new extreme right movements, Adorno presents the thesis which “he developed in all of his works of the last 8 years”:

*... despite full employment and despite all these symptoms of prosperity, the spectre of technological unemployment continues to haunt us to such an extent that in the age of automation, (...) even those people who are involved in the production process already feel themselves to be potentially superfluous—but I put it in very extreme terms—to be potentially unemployed. (Adorno, 2019, p. 12).*

The new fear of being “*deklasiert*” is something that Adorno discusses several times in the late 1960s but in this conference he explicitly describes it as the soil for the resurgence of fascism. This disintegrative process may be understood

socially—as crisis—but also subjectively—as suffering. Objectively, however, it is no longer possible to go back to the system of compensations of the postwar period. As Habermas pointed out, the postwar social pact was only possible as long as economic growth was sustainable. Besides, because the system already contained its disintegration potentiality, it seems to be impossible to restore the social order of the welfare state.

Finally, postponing the confrontation with the capitalistic fission means to deepen it. As Adorno pointed out, even if the combination of maximal efficiency and minimal social conflict proved to have a successful outcome, the structural wounds of society would not be healed; they would merely be plastered over. The threat of disintegration, each day sharper in our societies, cannot be responded to with the neutralization of structural contradictions anymore.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In fact, Parsons had a significantly different position on this matter after 1937. At that time, he considered differentiation and rationalization features for destabilizing, polarizing, and antidemocratic effects of social systems. By that time, he repeatedly took Germany as a model. In his later works, however, his perspective changed. “After 1947, Parsons took the United States as the type case for his studies of social change, relegation Nazi Germany to the status of deviant case” (Alexander, 1995, p. 50). In other words, in the late 1940s, Parsons started to perceive stratification and differentiation as natural consequences of the system’s complexification.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the fundamental theses of *The great transformation* (1944) is that capitalism has never been realized as a total freedom of markets. Polanyi argues that impulses for “social protection” since the 19th century have been fundamental to contain the self-destructive fury of monopolistic capitalism. “There was nothing natural about laissez-faire; free markets could never have come into being merely by allowing things to take their course. Just as cotton manufactures—the leading free trade industry—were created by the help of protective tariffs, export bounties, and indirect wage subsidies, laissez-faire itself was enforced by the state” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 145).
- <sup>3</sup> “Aware of having crossed the line of a hemisphere—not that they have been able to see as they crossed it a cord stretched over the ocean warning them of their passage, but that little by little they have been led into a new hemisphere by the progress of their ship” (Jaurès [1903] apud Rodgers, 1998, p. 17).
- <sup>4</sup> The background for this diffusion is the so-called “Re-education Program,” implemented between 1946 and 1947, during the American occupation. Helmut Schelsky referred to it in 1959 as the “upswing of empirical sociology after 1945 in West Germany” and described it as a “mission success of the sociology” from the USA (Schelsky 1959), p. 55 apud Weyer, 1986).
- <sup>5</sup> Adorno addressed Simmel’s formalism and its influence over the “sociology of conflict” in a lecture in May 1968 during the course *Introduction to Sociology* (Nachgelassene Schriften [NS IV.15], pp. 113–118).
- <sup>6</sup> It is worth remembering that Karl Popper’s *The open society and its enemies* was published in 1945 and claimed a liberal and flexible conception of society, perfectly compatible with the managerial model of Coser’s conflict theory.
- <sup>7</sup> Karl Polanyi makes a similar argument. He claims that the double movement—produced by the opposition between the pressure for the liberalization of the market and the efforts for social protection—can lead to socialism or to fascism. “Fascism, like socialism, was rooted in a market society that refused to function” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 248).
- <sup>8</sup> Moreover, the concept of conflict is well way far from Hegel’s battle to the death between master and slave. “It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance, is not its mere absorption in the expanse of life” (Hegel, 1949, p. 233). Here the opponents struggle for their lives, in such a way that only one can prevail, whereas in modern conflict theory the outcome of the confrontation can only be *accommodation*.
- <sup>9</sup> This expression appears in the lecture given by Freud in 1915 on parapraxes (*Fehlleistungen*, faulty acts). “It is true that psychoanalysis cannot boast that it has never concerned itself with trivialities. On the contrary, the material for its observations is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by other sciences as being too unimportant—the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenomena” (Freud, 1981, p. 27).

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