

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Brutalization of the social conflict: struggles for recognition in the early 21st century

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In several of his analyses, Talcott Parsons describes the establishment of modern societies as a differentiation process across spheres of mutual recognition. In this paper, I use Parsons' social theory of recognition to examine features of recent social conflicts. I begin with Parsons' description of the struggles for recognition that took place during his lifetime in the highly industrialized societies of the West (I). I then use Parsons' view of normatively ordered recognition conflicts to point out societal trends that led, in the final third of the twentieth century, to a gradual undermining of the pacification structures postulated by Parsons (II). An initial outcome of this apparent disintegration I describe as a 'brutalization' of social conflict. By this I mean a state of society where struggles for social recognition escalate and become anomic because resolution can no longer be found in the existing systemic spheres of negotiation (III). This paper shows the importance of the term recognition to social theory by following Parsons' theory in analyzing structural transformations that are currently emerging in response to social conflicts.

Keywords: brutalization of social conflict; spheres of recognition; struggles for recognition; Talcott Parsons

In some of his more empirical analyses Talcott Parsons describes, as if he were Hegel's sociological descendant, the establishment of modern societies as a process of differentiation of different spheres of mutual recognition. The category of 'recognition' that plays a crucial role in these essays is meant, following William I. Thomas and George H. Mead, to designate the motivations that prompt the members of a society to assume social obligations. Every person is, as Parsons says, primarily interested in preserving a sense of 'self-respect', which relies on recognition by partners in interaction, whom he or she in turn recognizes. To this extent, he continues, it is 'one of the severest possible blows' for the individual to lose 'the respect on the part of those from whom it is expected' (Parsons 1954a, 72; 1954c, 58). Because members of society simply fear nothing more than the loss of recognition by their respective counterparts, they are, so Parsons suggests, highly motivated to focus on norms that have been made socially binding, for only the fulfillment of the

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obligations and expectations internally connected with these will secure them the social respect of their partners in interaction in the long run.

This angle on the human motivation system (and it departs sharply from Parsons' usual alignment to the Freudian theory of personality¹) results in far more than Parsons adopting a different explanation of individual willingness to fulfill social duties. It also leads in those parts of his oeuvre that are more strongly influenced by symbolic interactionism along with the shift in the theory of motivation to a change in his thinking on the character of institutionalized spheres of action and the description of social conflicts. As regards the normatively integrated functional areas of society, in such a context the idea that the values and norms that serve as the moral source of inspiration also have to provide standards gains the upper hand in Parsons' approach. And it is in the light of those standards that the participants can mutually recognize each other. We must therefore construe the sub-systems of socially organized action as differentiated spheres of action that crystallize around norms of reciprocal respect as the duties and responsibilities innate to them have to be met, above all, because they are motivated by a desire for social recognition. Parsons puts his shoulder to the tough task of having to interpret all those functional areas that he otherwise only treats as institutional embodiments of socially shared value patterns also as sub-systems of mutual recognition; and some of his more empirical analyses can, I would submit, be grasped as steps towards implementing such an agenda, because they set out to study the modern economic system, the sphere of modern law, and the sub-system of the family as relationships of reciprocal recognition shored up in legitimate orders. I would propose that in these unorthodox parts of his theory Parsons finds himself on the path back from Weber via Durkheim to Hegel; like the author of the *Philosophy of right*, he would like to construe the normative order of modern societies in terms of a system of morally integrated spheres of recognition, functionally structured by the division of labor.

What is actually notable about this unofficial strand in Parson's work is the fact that he is almost imperceptibly forced to correct his otherwise more harmonious view of modern society by more strongly considering enduring social conflicts. Above all, his essay on Marx's theory of class conflict published in 1949 (Parsons 1964b, 323–35) clearly shows how in his thought the growing attention paid to how society's members need recognition leads to a greater feel for how social sub-systems are prone to conflict. In Parsons' opinion, they must now, as we have seen, always also receive standards with their socially integrating norms that enable the members to be able reciprocally to show one another respect and recognition; such standards are only rarely formulated such that they are above political divides and, as it were, are neutral as to be resistant over time against doubts and critical feedback by the participants. As soon as such moods of normative uncertainty switch into feelings of moral indignation, at any point social conflicts can easily be triggered in which persons hitherto disadvantaged by the dominant value system seek to push through an interpretation of the underlying norms that is more advantageous to them. To this extent, the moment Parsons discerns the personal striving for recognition as the motivational source of all willingness to assume a role, conflict becomes an endemic element of each and every normatively institutionalized sphere of action. I certainly do not mean this to signify that systems theorist Parsons had on the periphery of his official theory gained an insight into the spheres-specific dynamism of a battle for recognition; but many of his substantive considerations and remarks do point in

a direction at the end of which lies the conviction that in no normatively integrated sphere of action can social conflict ever be brought to a standstill, as its members are repeatedly prompted by new occasions to seek an improved and more just interpretation of the norms of recognition.

If we take our cue from this less-known, more peripheral strand in Parsons' systems theory, then what we see is the first fragment of a sociological version of a theory of recognition based on Hegel. Such an analysis of society based on the concept of recognition takes as its starting-point the notion that the members of a society will only have the motivation to fulfill socially necessary tasks and responsibilities if complying with the relevant norms of action also offers the prospect of satisfying their self-respect; for this reason all social functional areas must embody the overarching, generally accepted values in a way that enables the members reciprocally to accord one another recognition and respect while duly discharging their duties in light of the established standards. Such institutionalized, functionally specialized spheres of recognition only always give cause for social conflict if some of the participants think that they can discern cause for the assumption that those normative standards disadvantage their own contributions or afford them no chance at all of acquiring respect. In such cases, as Parsons says, a kind of 'moral indignation' must spread that is fueled by the disappointment that the promise of recognition innate in the corresponding system of action was socially violated (Parsons 1964a, 60). The consequence of the resulting opposition is a social conflict that can be grasped firmly in line with Hegel as a struggle for recognition.

I wish to rely on the above concept of society as based on the concept of 'recognition' when setting out below to outline some traits of social conflict in the most recent past. I intend to start here with the picture that Parsons gave of the struggles for recognition that occurred in his day in the highly industrialized societies of the West; in his opinion, these normative conflicts remained within the bounds of the differentiated system of order, because society managed to compensate for mass disappointment in one sphere of action by indemnifying their respect in another sphere (I). This diagnosis of normatively ordered conflicts over recognition will then serve me in a second step as the foil against which to elaborate on some of the social trends that led in the last third of the twentieth century to a covert undermining of such pacifying regulation of indemnifying acts; the growth in the generalization of sphere-specific norms for recognition goes hand in hand here with its simultaneous devaluation and desymbolization, meaning that in broad swathes of the population there is increasing uncertainty over how normatively justified forms of social respect can be achieved per se (II). In the final part of my deliberations, I will present the preliminary form these phenomena of dissolution have taken by describing the phenomena of a 'brutalization' ('Verwilderung') of social conflict; what I mean is a social state in which the strivings for social recognition expand excessively and become anomic as normatively justified satisfaction for them is no longer possible in the spheres of action envisaged for them in the system (III). It is only appropriate to use the expression 'brutalization' here until sufficient light has been shed on the current lack of clarity that new forms of a collectively organized struggle emerge.

I

When giving a brief account below of how Parsons analyzed the normatively regulated conflicts of the 'industrial capitalism' of his day, I shall completely abstract

from the larger framework of systems theory in which he embedded his later studies (Parsons 1951). What interests me exclusively in his writings is the way mechanisms of socially constraining latent social conflicts can be described if these are observed from the for him somewhat peripheral perspective of an aspiration for social recognition. From this viewpoint, in Parsons' opinion, we can discern four institutional complexes in modern social systems, namely the economy, parliamentary democracy, law, and the family, that all assume dual functions of serving to maintain the system while also enabling the normatively regulated satisfaction of expectations of recognition. Each of the aforementioned institutions simply has to embody the values generally accepted in modernity in a way that allows the individual members of society to perform the duties expected of them in terms of the division of labor in a manner that offers the normatively guaranteed prospect of a specific, institutionally specific form of recognition. In the ideal case, and this is Parsons' initial starting-point, this would mean that all four institutional complexes are integrated by norms that in as transparent and symbolically articulated a way as possible forge a systematic link between individual fulfillment of duties and the acquisition of social recognition: the interaction between members in such institutions are normatively regulated in such a way that they reciprocally approve the normative status conferred on the individual when duly discharging his function thanks to a generalized medium of recognition. For Parsons, from the viewpoint of social integration by reciprocal recognition, three components are of special significance as regards the institutional orders: First, these must rest on norms derived from general values that build a comprehensible bridge between adhering to an individual role and social recognition. Second, such links must be rendered durable in a generalized medium of recognition. Third, the corresponding medium should, if possible, be expressed in a clearly recognizable generalized symbol. As we shall see, to Parsons' mind all three elements create entry-points for social conflict should they fail or not develop appropriately.

In his analysis of modern, industrial capitalism, for Parsons the institutional complex of modern law to a certain extent constitutes the least problematic sphere of recognition and that least subject to conflict. Modern legal systems redeem their innate promise of moral universalism by a successive generalization and concretization of the status of citizen, one that is perhaps prompted by social struggle, but not permanently accompanied by it. If a hitherto excluded group is included into the positive, state-guaranteed legal relationship, then a discriminating factor is offset by legal compensation, and in this sphere reciprocal relations of equal respect can blossom with a credible claim to legitimation, and, moreover, these possess a striking symbolic expression thanks to the assignment of subjective rights (Parsons 1971, 79f.). In this respect, the modern legal system constitutes a relatively robust, 'relational' institutional structure into which individuals are gradually included owing to the generalization of its underlying norms; this occurs by their accepting the symbolically articulated principle and learning to respect as free and equal persons. Because the normatively enabled reciprocity of respect here is strictly symmetrical or egalitarian, meaning that no staggering of social rank is possible in the first place, conflict or tension can only arise where inclusion is refused or disadvantaging is not identified as such in an individual case. Things are different in the second institutional structure of modern society, which Parsons sets out to analyze as a legitimate order of reciprocal recognition. In his opinion, the capitalist economic system is also a relational institution in which the fulfillment of the functionally

required tasks is tied to the normatively regulated acquisition of social recognition. The difference from the legal system is that there is both an intrinsic uncertainty about the underlying recognition medium and a necessary staggering of respect as a result of its application; both lead, or so Parsons suggests in the aforementioned points in his writings, to this institution being structurally prone to social conflict and tension.

For Parsons, the economic system is initially defined by the same process of generalization and differentiation of its constitutive norms that drove the evolution of the modern legal system (Parsons 1971, 74–5). As a whole, the system of the capitalist economy with the market as its intermediary relies in motivational terms on the members being shown that respective degree of recognition that corresponds to the intensity of the contribution they individually perform on behalf of production based on the division of labor; in light of such a performance principle, which for Parsons, alongside the principle of equal rights, constitutes the second norm of recognition in modern societies, every adult, initially only the male individual, intrinsically feels obliged to contribute to material reproduction in line with his own abilities and talents (Parsons 1971, 55–6). The process of continually evolving differentiation and subdivision of professional roles now makes it necessary ever more to generalize the normative performance principle. Only if the latter is couched in terms that are as abstract and general as possible (such that it judgmentally compares not individual work activities but entire functional clusters) can each member discern in it the approximate measure of recognition that will be accorded his highly specialized activity. Parsons suggests that the coinage in which the staggered respect granted the individual in the economic system is to be paid consisted of the ascription of a specific status determined above all by the scale of a person's income; to this extent, for him 'money' plays the same role of a symbolic means of public visualization of acquired recognition as is assumed by 'subjective rights' in the institutional setting of modern justice.²

Now, in the sections of his writings that hinge more on a theory of interaction, Parsons is realistic enough not to deny that the causes for permanent tension and conflict are to be located in this recognition sphere of modernity. He identifies two circumstances, and he treats them separately as sources of potential dispute between the groups involved. First, from his viewpoint duly to practice the performance principle established in the economic system requires that the educational prospects for all involved are more or less equally good from the outset so that each of them has the opportunity to relatively unlimited development of their faculties and talents. However, for all his optimism as regards post-war educational reform (Parsons 1971, 94ff.), Parsons believes such an equalization of initial conditions is highly improbable, because in his opinion the strata-specific differences in educational styles will repeatedly reflect in children from the lower strata being disadvantaged. To this extent, the fact that initial opportunities are unequal remains for him a permanent thorn in the side of the recognition system of the performance principle in a market system. That said, Parsons has the same doubts as regards the possibilities for institutionalization of 'genuine standards of fair competition' (Parsons 1964b, 330). The ever more pronounced differentiation of professional roles and the simultaneous emptying of individual fields of activity of meaning make it ever harder, Parsons claims, to establish an 'objective' yardstick in the sense of the performance principle that offers all involved comprehensible reasons for how they are rated and thus the degree of recognition they receive in the economic domain;

Parsons therefore expects processes of increasing uncertainty in this sphere, which he believes can be offset by symbolic measures, of which he writes, somewhat enigmatically, that they ‘cushion’ the impact of the uncertainty ‘on certain “human factors”’ (Parsons 1964b, 332). Be that as it may, Parsons bases his remarks on the empirical prediction that within the economic sphere of recognition, owing to the inequalities in initial opportunities and the growing uncertainty as to the thrust of the performance principle, there will be no putting social conflicts to rest in the foreseeable future. After all, the sphere offers sufficient reasons that could repeatedly motivate social groups to enter into dispute over the appropriate interpretation of the underlying norms of recognition.

However, Parsons does precisely not believe that such a view of the economic sphere in isolation will generate an appropriate image of the conflicts bubbling over there; to that end, other social sub-systems have to be considered as these can serve to offset the impact on the flash-points of competition based on the performance principle and the uncertainty it fosters. Although it would have seemed obvious at this juncture to have resorted to the balancing effect of the modern, egalitarian legal system, in his analysis Parsons focuses on such cushioning almost exclusively as regards the modern family as a sphere of recognition. As the last refuge of direct solidarity in our societies, it still has impacts, he assumes, that are suitable to compensate for the regular violations of respect in the economic sphere by other forms of recognition.

Parsons avers that the modern nuclear family, as the residue which has survived in current industrial capitalism of institutionalized relationships of kinship, is a normatively integrated sphere of reciprocal recognition. As in the legal and economic systems, here interpersonal relationships are regulated by norms that enable people to offer each other reciprocal esteem if the functionally defined tasks and duties are fulfilled. However, unlike the sphere of economic action (where the individual contributions are hierarchically rated in line with the performance principle), in the modern family the reciprocity is at first strictly symmetrical: the members owe each other exactly the same ‘mutual aid and support’ (Parsons 1954a, 77), as long as they duly perform the roles that the family functions as structured by the division of labor call for. On the other hand, the institution of the family differs from the legal system (where norms of equality also prevail) by the fact that here the precept of equal recognition goes hand in hand with the structurally unequal distribution of authority and ownership. Only the husband, owing to his money-earning activity outside the home, possesses an income of his own, so that for all the symmetry in solidary respect he has a higher degree of decision-making power in central processes. For Parsons, this microphysics of a recognition framework, that superficially rests on symmetrical respect but that permits an authority gap to enter through the backdoor, is the key to explaining the compensatory achievements that the family assumes as regards the notorious loss of respect in the economic sphere.

For Parsons, in his role as the father within the modern family the husband fulfills a very powerful socially constitutive function as is otherwise only accorded him in the past by Jacques Lacan. This astonishing similarity between the two theorists can actually only be explained if one bears in mind that they agree in defining the ‘father’ not primarily in terms of his actual role in the family, but in terms of his generalized role as the bearer of symbolic tasks of social integration. According to Parsons, who proves to be the more productive sociologist, in the father’s standardized activities within the family so many social meanings jell at

a generally, intersubjectively comprehensible level that we can talk here of the formation of a further symbolic object: like the 'subjective rights' in the modern legal system and 'money' in the competitive frame of the capitalist economy, the father represents at a supra-personal level visible to all the integrating norms of recognition patterns as arise within the family (Parsons 1964c, 34). This symbolic function, and it is not connected to his actual identity, is something the individual family father accomplishes by applying the authority he possesses qua his professional income vis-à-vis his children to bring the values of other social institutional complexes to bear. By adopting the role-specific behavioral patterns of the father, the child gradually interiorizes the extra-domestic performance standards of the economic system and the sanction-reinforced norms of equality that prevail in civil society; thus, at the end of family socialization, the child emerges as a rule-conscious member of society.

For the present enquiry into the compensatory function of the family, the crucial thing about Parsons' deliberations is the way he pegs the realization of the father's symbolic role to the recognition the latter receives from all the other members of the family. The father receives a form of admiring recognition from his children and wife for the professional and socializing achievements that he makes on behalf of the family, and it goes far beyond what he can acquire outside the family (Parsons 1964c, 49). To this extent, for Parsons, or so we can safely say, the potential for constraining social conflict in industrial capitalism depended almost completely on the successful institutionalization of the father symbol. As long as men as the family heads have the opportunity within their families successfully to exercise the function associated with this symbol, they are compensated by the recognition thus accorded them for the loss of respect they are repeatedly forced to see owing to inevitable disadvantaging in the competition in the economic world. The conflicts constantly bubbling up in the economic sphere are not contained and their explosion is prevented by the financial offsets afforded by the welfare state (as a materialization of modern law), and not by state guarantees of living conditions that secure a personal existence. Instead, Parsons does in fact believe that the feelings of moral indignation smoldering here can be channeled and appeased by the fact that in the private sphere of their homes male professionals are rewarded in the coin of direct interpersonal recognition for their order-engendering functions. The balance (indeed, the harmonization) of the relationship between the institutionalized spheres of recognition Parsons distinguishes in the developed societies of his day presumes a complicated system of offsets for social recognition: while women, as he tersely puts it, satisfy their striving for social respect and estimation above all in spheres 'which are not in direct competition for status with those of men', namely with 'personal adornment and the related qualities of personal charm' (Parsons 1954a, 80) and with performing household duties, men's striving for a recognition that is often dashed in the professional competitive world is satisfied via an embodiment of the all-integrating father figure. No great empirical effort is required to show that the social framework of recognition at the beginning of the twenty-first century could hardly be further removed from the conditions as outlined by Parsons.

II

Irrespective of which of the different spheres of recognition Parsons identified we look at today, they have substantially changed compared with the conditions he

described. With the political, cultural, and economic upheavals of the last third of the twentieth century largely unnoticed, the normative interpretations also shifted that within the three institutional complexes (of law, the economy, and the family) imbue the constitutive principles with their respective current meaning as impacts on their application. What 50 years ago could be considered a quite self-evident explanation of these underlying rules of recognition has since ceased to be convincing as regards a description of society and is only resorted to by intellectuals who crave media attention and seek to amuse.³ In the above studies, Parsons already indicated here and there that under certain conditions there was no excluding social development that could considerably impair the structure of social recognition as a balance. He was not thinking of class struggle being strengthened by the structural disadvantages of competition in keeping with the performance principle, which he considered an 'endemic' but essentially latent phenomenon of industrial capitalism. Instead, he had in mind the emergence of new needs to seek social recognition that he associated with the loss of paternal authority in the family, with the growing isolation of the housewife from civil society, and with the increase in the importance of ethnic identities.⁴ None of these trends, and Parsons always only briefly outlines them, primarily occurring within the family system, have in recent decades failed to eventuate, as we know today; but they were each only minor cogs in a far more comprehensive process of changes he did not suspect and which has now given a new face to the entire network of institutionalized relationships of recognition. I shall cursorily mention the key changes to all three institutions of reciprocal recognition he addresses in order then to discuss what consequences this has for the shape and matter of social struggle:

(1) Parsons assumes that the legal system as anchored in the principle of equal civil rights will by and large progress linearly, securing for an ever growing circle of persons ever more extensive rights of access to and participation in an ever increasing number of sub-systems (Parsons 1971, 114–5). In this way, it gradually becomes possible for as good as all adult members of modern societies to enjoy rudimentary self-respect in light of the rights of liberty and participation they are granted, and this has its roots in an awareness of the reciprocally accorded private autonomy that the state comprehensively protects. What Parsons did not expect with his relatively optimistic view of the course things would take are two, perhaps not contradictory, but certainly intervening, developments that make it seem far harder today to construe the legal relationship with its egalitarian thrust as the still effervescent font of self-respect for all citizens. Firstly, thanks to the successful struggle of cultural minorities for equal rights, the active, empowering meaning of civil rights has largely been worn down such that these are largely no longer read as a symbol of reciprocal respect but privatistically as instruments of securing personal performance. This creeping change of meaning has been reinforced over the last two decades by the fact that, secondly, on the inner and outer edges of the European and North American legal communities the circle of those has steadily grown who seek or fight for legal admission as immigrants, refugees, or illegal immigrants, without themselves having a legal status duly protected by the state. The more obvious the need of such excluded groups becomes to the inhabitants of affluent societies secured by fundamental rights, the less the latter can close their eyes to this distress and the moral desire, the stronger they seem now to reinterpret what once served them as a source of reciprocal recognition, as a mere means of warding off what they feel are unacceptable claims by third parties. The legal system in the highly developed

societies of the West today offers a highly disturbing picture that Parsons certainly did not imagine. Its center is held by a large group of legally well-to-satisfactorily secured citizens, who, however, draw their awareness of their social inclusion to an ever lower degree from the rights granted them. They face an ever growing number of excluded persons who desire and fight for nothing more strongly than inclusion in this relationship of legal recognition. While the one group increasingly seems to seek the conditions for its self-respect outside the sphere of law (which actually was intended to grant them an initial, elementary form of social recognition), the other seeks with growing desperation to be included in this sphere in the first place.

(2) The trend in the second sub-system he construed as a recognition sphere has also been unlike what Parsons assumed in his analyses. He presumed a long-term structural change in the realm of the achievement-oriented competition in the labor market that would move toward increasing inclusion of society's members, a constant differentiation in professional roles and an incessant rise in qualifications: an ever greater number of male members of the employable population would, in his opinion, be able to pursue ever more differentiated jobs at an ever higher level of education (Parsons 1964d). In what was again a decidedly optimistic picture, Parsons did not count on a series of trends that have gone right the other way and now make it seem dubious whether in the sphere of economic activity there is any scope or opportunities to gain personal self-respect. Not only did Parsons in his analyses manifestly overlook all the early signals that could have shown him that women would in the future, owing to a changed role image, increasingly seek to enter the labor market. He likewise failed to perceive that, as the production and service sector are forced to accumulate capital swiftly, extensive fields of activity would repeatedly arise that can be performed without any professional qualifications, or at best with a few. If we add to these trends, which Parsons should in principle have taken into account, those that he could not have imagined, then the social relationship of reciprocal recognition in the economic sphere is now quite unlike his confident forecasts: the performance principle, which he considered the normative guarantee of fair competition for professional recognition and social status, has been ideologically deformed to the point of being unrecognizable by its usurpation by strata that have in the short term been successful in the capital market; owing to processes of deregulation and deprofessionalization, societal labor has even in the lower, less qualified areas lost its character as a contractually secured, reliable source of income; the number of the permanently unemployed seems to be growing to an even higher level following the cyclical easing in economic conditions. As a result, the circle of those who can participate in normatively regulated competition on the basis of their performance will become ever smaller in the long run. Because none of these developments evidently led to the demise of the wish for social recognition through socially appreciated labor, or even to it lessening, a growing mass of members of society faces the daily challenge of even finding access to the regulated opportunities for such self-respect; the struggle for professional reputation and recognition based on performance, such as Parsons had in mind, largely no longer takes place within the economic sphere and instead in completely different, compensatory forms before its gates, most of which are closed.

(3) Finally, in the modern nuclear family, the third sphere of recognition, which Parsons discerned in his analyses, some of the developments he anticipated have actually happened, albeit in circumstances that mean a simultaneous change of shape that he would not have imagined in his wildest dreams. In recent decades, what

Parsons outlined in his forecast as a process of the growing functional loss of the family and its simultaneous concentration on its emotional/caring role has largely come about. The more the family spins off economic tasks and socialization to external agencies and the more strongly it relies on other institutions for its members' care, education, and financial security, so he felt, the faster more exclusively the relationships between the members would assume a purely emotional character responding to needs (Parsons 1964d). Parsons believed that the formation of such a 'pure' recognition milieu, borne solely by reciprocal love and care, was clear progress and would result above all in a changed attitude towards children. The degree to which children would be subjected to the pressure of expectations that they merely conform in their behavior would ebb, while the indulgence of their respectively special needs would steadily grow, such that they could at an early date be treated as independent 'persons' in families as a whole (Parsons 1964d). What Parsons did not count on in this doubtless not incorrect prediction of further 'democratization' of the intra-family relationships and education was that in the course of concentration purely on the emotional, along with the role of the woman, the understanding of marriage and family would fundamentally change. The moment the women's tasks within the family started to be emptied by the support they get from external agencies of socialization and care, they started more or less across the board to enter the labor market, were able to achieve a new, historically unprecedented independence, and this in turn enabled them to take their first steps toward questioning the established forms of a gender-specific division of labor. The consequences of this process of transformation, which had only started very tentatively in Parsons' day, are now, however, quite irreversible, for the undermining of the traditional division of labor within the nuclear family was accompanied by changes in its traditional image of itself. The confined, ethically buttressed motivational linkage that had obtained only 50 years earlier – between sexual affection and marriage, marriage and cohabitation, cohabitation and producing children – has since disintegrated into its individual elements such that we can speak of a 'post-modern' multiplication of family forms.⁵ In this process, and Hartmut Tyrell has called it the 'deinstitutionalization of the nuclear family', what has undoubtedly been lost along the way has been what Parsons in his analyses still considered the institutional core of its anchoring in society. What has been forfeited is the 'symbolic' function of the father, who quite independently of his respective specific behavior was supposed to have the objective task of representing and asserting the extra-domestic values within the family. Even if, as is repeatedly claimed, such an authoritative intermediation is indispensable for the child's socialization, it is today provided by no means exclusively by men, but increasingly by women, too. In this way, the difference in authority between the genders within the symmetrical relationship of recognition of the family, which Parsons discussed, has finally disappeared and its place been taken throughout by the principal norm of gender equality. These shifts in power manifestly impact on the compensatory function that the family is supposed to have as regards the failures and slights suffered in the world of work. Men today can no longer count on receiving added estimation and respect at home for their role as fathers, although this was supposed to make up for all the losses in recognition that they had to tolerate owing to the injustices of competition based on the performance principle. The finely woven compensatory system of social recognition, on which Parsons based his analyses, has also been torn apart at this point. When the 'father symbol' is uncoupled from

the male gender, men lose the opportunity to acquire a surfeit of intersubjective recognition within the family, something that hitherto had compensated them for their experiences of failure in the economic 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. In the capitalism of today, an ever greater portion of the population seems to be cut off from any chance of gaining any sort of access to the respect-providing spheres of gainful employment and the legal system, while the other sphere where rewards could be granted in this regard delivers social recognition to an ever lower degree as the underlying principles have become more or less unclear or murky. This rough and ready picture is first complete if we also remember that the kind of recognition transfer that Parsons assumed in his day is no longer possible between the family and the economic sphere. As regards the male portion of the employable population, recognition losses in the competition based on the performance principle can no longer be offset by a surplus in estimation granted them within the family. In my last section I shall now focus on what consequence these overarching changes have on the state of social conflict in the present; I shall attempt tentatively to use the term 'brutalization' to describe what is still a very unclear situation.

III

Parsons always believed social conflicts were more than mere disputes within the political public sphere in the form of thematically focused debates and controversies. Such disputes, conducted discursively, may reflect what moves and informs the members of that society in moral terms, but given their diverse restrictions rarely do they provide reliable information on the actual arenas and front lines. Parsons was of the opinion that social conflicts actually arise where people believe that they have been disadvantaged as regards their rightful claims or feel these have been curbed, claims they think are justified in terms of generally accepted principles. As soon as such disappointments exceed a certain threshold and can be articulated along with other fellow sufferers, they can assume the guise of initially loosely co-ordinated attempts to give the claims greater weight either by repeating them or by reinterpreting the dominant principles. Even if Parsons does not explicitly use the expression, it would seem obvious to term such social disputes 'struggles for recognition', quite irrespective of their assertive powers and visible public profile. The spectrum ranges from those micro confrontations in everyday life in which a person insists vis-à-vis another on the unredeemed claims within their reciprocally binding social relationship right through to militant uprisings by entire collectives who feel they have been deprived of rights that should on the basis of implicitly applicable norms be rightfully theirs. These different forms of social conflict have a common ignition: moral indignation sourced by the experience of not being recognized in the way that institutionally enshrined principles seem to justify in the opinion of those who feel disadvantaged. The struggle for recognition therefore tends to take the shape of disputes over the interpretation and assertion of an historical promise of recognition that has not yet been redeemed; it is not arbitrary claims that are brought, not some demand or other for recognition raised,

but only those which can be considered justifiable in light of jointly shared convictions and norms.

Now, Parsons assumed as regards his own day that, owing to the successfully established compensatory system, such struggles for recognition always only took place within pacified limits set by the differentiation of the different spheres. Since as good as all members of society were included in the foreseen manner in the corresponding systems of action, and could if necessary hope to receive recognition from the other sub-systems, he felt they were sufficiently provided for in terms of socially sourced self-respect and there was thus only a very minor danger of larger disputes that could threaten the overall order. Parsons did not, of course, fail to see that within the economic sphere the meaning of the performance principle and the way it could be applied remained a matter of controversy, that within the modern nuclear family paternal authority continued to come under legitimizing pressure, and that in the legal system there was a bitter struggle on use of and definition of subjective rights. Yet, in his view none of these internal conflicts could surpass the threshold of moral indignation let alone public outcry, as the population's basic provision with institutionally conveyed recognition was, he felt, in principle assured. As we have seen, we are now far removed from that state of affairs: a growing circle of persons as an 'underclass' (consisting of the under-employed, school drop-outs, and 'illegal' aliens) have no access whatsoever to the legal system or the economic sphere, and in a worst case both spheres of recognition are blocked at once. Another equally growing group of members of society, consisting above all of those in precarious employment relationships and single mothers, has opportunities to participate in all three institutionalized spheres of recognition, but can no longer draw any stable form of self-respect from them, as the employment relationships are too porous and fragmented, the family relations too divided or lacking in substance. Only a third ever smaller group of persons has unlimited access to the sub-systems of law, the economy, and the family, without, however, construing the recognition thus received as an inclusion in society, as the corresponding means of status are increasingly deployed to reinforce the barriers erected against other groups of people.⁶ Yet, despite all these profound changes, as a result of which the established spheres of reciprocal recognition have become highly permeable at the edges and exclude ever more people from the benefits of socially justified self-respect, what Parsons' analyses suggested would then happen has not. There has not been moral indignation in the face of mass denial of social recognition, there are no signs to be seen of an increase in public outcries; instead, the struggle for recognition seems essentially frozen on the outside and to have essentially been interiorized, be it in the form of greater fears of failure or in the form of cold, impotent rage. So, what has happened to the conflicts over social self-respect in the midst of all this oppressive silence, interrupted as it is only on occasion superficially by journalistic coverage? What shapes has the struggle for recognition since assumed?

The striving for self-respect in and through society does not simply die out once historically no normatively regulated spheres remain for its reliable preservation and satisfaction. What it does lose is, we might say, any chance of an intersubjectively understandable codification, meaning it can no longer rely on a legitimizing principle, rendering it strangely homeless, and forcing it to seek alternative forms of expression. Durkheim would have called such a social state, in which the institutionalized moral principles increasingly lose their function of

offering society's members legitimate chances of reciprocal recognition, one of 'anomie'. We could today just as well speak of a social pathology: for those who are cut off from access to the established spheres of recognition such a situation means no longer having an avenue down which to gain self-respect by participating in the life of society. One part of the struggle for recognition, namely that conducted from below by the members of the so-called 'underclass', therefore now takes place in the brutalized form of merely battling for public visibility or compensatory respect: because one is no longer included in the official, societally sanctioned arenas where respect can be acquired, the focus is on wresting social recognition outside the entrance gates by non-normed means. From the perspective of the observer, bereft of any social justification, stripped of any shared symbolization, such forms of the struggle for recognition often assume the most bizarre guises; they are to be discerned in the now mass attempts to shed one's own invisibility in moments of obscene presence in the media, are embodied in counter-cultures of respect in which idiosyncratic rules of recognition prevail that are not linked back to society, and can even be assumed to exist where youths seek to gain social attention by acts of violence in the banlieues. To a certain extent, it may be misleading even to describe such compensatory efforts to acquire respect as forms of a struggle for recognition, as they lack any normative thrust let alone a moral addressee. However, if we concur with Parsons that the members of society rely on socially certified forms of social recognition, we must also take that next step and soberly concede that they try to resort to quite different, desymbolized means of battling for self-respect if they are excluded from socially institutionalized spheres of recognition.

Not only in the strata of the 'superfluous' and the excluded have the forms by which social conflict is expressed changed considerably compared to the societal conditions Parsons analyzed; in the two major groups, which are still more or less integrated into the socially established spheres of recognition, today a certain propensity to brutalize now prevails, stripping the previously morally channeled struggle for respect and recognition of its normative status. The 'winners' of the neo-liberal structural change in capitalism have in recent decades successfully managed semantically to recoin the central standards of the spheres of law and the economy so that their normative meaning is almost exclusively customized to their own respective prospects of employment. The principle of subjective rights has thus lost its inclusive sense, such as grants reciprocal recognition, and has largely become an instrument for warding off claims that threaten the status; possessing rights means ever less a reciprocally conferred authorization to individual liberties, and initially and primarily means being able to use legitimate means to parry other persons' wishes (Neckel and Dröge 2002, 93–116). Something similar has happened to the performance principle, which continues to form the normative basis for the competition for respect and status in capitalist economic life. While it was originally erected by the bourgeois strata as a moral bastion against the undeserved wealth of the aristocracy, which had been acquired without any performance being rendered, and was successfully used by the labor movement to gain better wages and social security for its members, and was lastly deployed by the women's movement to enhance the social status of housework, this principle of recognition has in recent years been so recoined by ideological campaigns that it no longer seems to reward abilities or actual effort, but only professional success as measured monetarily and the actual scale of a person's income (Garland 2008; Günther 2002, 117–39). Here,

too, in the sphere of economic competition for status, the core principle has now lost any meaning as a moral precept and is no longer the social guarantee of a claim in principle to recognition for one's own achievements; instead it has become a wall with which to defend against demands made from below. When the institutionally enshrined principles of recognition are emptied of semantic content in this way, it spells various things for those who possess all the civil rights, but whose employment situation has already become precarious, as can best be outlined by once again comparing the status with that analyzed by Parsons: while those groups previously (given conditions of an orderly structure of spheres of reciprocal recognition) had the chance to make good status claims by resorting to jointly accepted norms, today they have largely been robbed of such a tool of moral justification for their demands. What remains is only a stubbornly recalcitrant championing of one's own interests without having a legitimate means of reshaping these as claims that are publicly actionable.

The tendency toward a brutalization of social conflict is starting to spread wherever we look, and to whatever sectors of social life we survey. The institutionalized spheres of reciprocal recognition seem to be as good as battered down at their edges and intrinsically bereft of any general principle that can secure respect. An increasing number of society's members depend on compensatory, non-public paths for acquiring self-respect, and ever fewer of them can lay claim to intersubjectively shared recognition for their aspirations and accomplishments. Social conflict has thus been barbarized in the sense that the struggle for recognition in past decades has so emphatically lost its moral basis that it has been turned into an arena of decidedly rampant self-assertion.

Notes

1. Parson's classic theory of motivation stems from his middle period and is strongly geared to Freud's theory of the instincts (Parsons 1964a).
2. See Parsons (1954a, 50–68) on the symbolic role of money.
3. A particularly embarrassing version is Norbert Bolz's (2006) *Die Helden der Familie*.
4. On the first and second trend, see Parsons (and Winston White), 'The link between character and society' (Parsons 1964d, 183–235); on the third trend see his 'Certain primary source and patterns of aggression in the social structure of the Western world' (Parsons 1954b, 319ff.).
5. See Lüscher, Schultheis, and Wehrspau (1990); see also the overview I have tried to offer (Honneth 1994, 90–9).
6. On this tripartite division of 'winners', 'losers', and 'those not authorized to take part', see the superb essay by Claus Offe (1996) *Moderne 'Barbarei': Der Naturzustand im Kleinformat?*

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