

The Notion of System

The Notion of System as Applied to Contemporary Society

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## The Notion of System

Conclusions regarding social phenomena are often based on existing hypotheses that have informed a particular perspective (Simmons 2014). What comes before shapes the perception of social reality either as corroboration or as contrast. In this way, Talcott Parsons' theory of structural functionalism contributes to our understanding of the role of systems in our social experience, the needs systems fulfill and the essential qualities of a system (Simmons 2014). Parsons' views also present barriers to understanding social phenomena such as individual autonomy and the influence citizens have over the structures of society (Simmons 2014). However, this issue itself comes with barriers in explaining challenges like creating lasting social change in society. Niklas Luhmann's systems theory provides an alternative understanding of systems that speaks to this limitation by illuminating the self-referencing nature of systems (Allan 2006). Luhmann also provides a fundamental shift in how systems are defined and moves from inherently operating mechanisms to by-products of repeatedly created boundaries within the larger environment (Allan 2006). This understanding and application in the context of barriers to social change provides insights that Parsons' perspective can not. Still, Luhmann's contributions come with caveats as they fail to account for the intentional inequalities that exist within society (Allan 2006). Rather, Luhmann dismisses this important social phenomenon as a product of system neglect (Allan 2006). In contrast, Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems perspective places intentional inequalities at the centre of his theory (Marshall 2013; Wallerstein 1975). Wallerstein argues that economic inequalities stemming from colonial histories permeate all levels of social interaction (Marshall 2013). This economic analysis can be imposed on other features of society such as the inequitable

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socio-political experiences of nondominant groups. World systems theory also provides an alternative way to understand global immigration patterns, including those of Canada. Ultimately, Wallerstein's perspective contributes to our understanding but proves to have little tangible applicability as the system is deemed fixed. Furthermore, each of these theories presents a missing element when held up against the three domains of a social theory: polemic, dialogue, and guide to action (Simmons 2014). The contributions and limitations of Parsons' notion of system, Luhmann's systems theory and Wallerstein's world systems theory will be expanded on and applied to contemporary social phenomena below to determine if these ways of viewing social systems remain relevant to present-day society.

### PARSONS' STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Talcott Parsons championed a perspective called structural functionalism. As the name may suggest, the fundamental stance of this theory is that society is made up of structures that serve a particular function (Simmons 2014). These functions are motivated to maintain equilibrium and each social structure positively contributes to overall social order (Simmons 2014). Together these structures make up the social system, an interrelated network that positively functions to maintain an intact society. As social systems evolve, systems are created within systems to address new needs (Simmons 2014). These needs serve as the prerequisites for a new system to emerge (Simmons 2014). Once a system has emerged, individual social actors work to maintain the structure through explicit and implicit mechanisms like social norms and expectations (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). From this view, individuals have little to no autonomy in upholding what the system requires of them, rather they are passive

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participants within the system (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). Parsons' understanding of the system provides some contributions and limitations in analysing contemporary society.

### *Contributions*

A key concept in the structural functionalist model is the notion of prerequisite needs (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). For instance, the human need to convert air into oxygen serves as the prerequisite for the respiratory system (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). Animals who do not have the same oxygen conversion needs as humans, have different systems (consider sea animals). Prerequisite needs also explain the role of more specialized subsystems (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). Think of the lungs as one specialized subsystem within the human respiratory system. Parsons' ideas are based on a biological model that is transferred to social phenomena (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995).

This notion of prerequisites manifests in contemporary social structures clearly. Consider a formal organization. Typically, there is an attached vision and mission that serves as the organization's guiding principles (Allison 2019). These statements also make a case for why the organization is required to exist (Allison 2019). Indeed, a vision that has already been actualized suggests an organization is wasting system resources rather than contributing to them. Of course, there is room for multiple systems to serve the same function. Industries like social services often show duplication of services. However, each service goes through a process where they are required to establish a prerequisite need for the system to secure funding and operationalize. In fact, this prerequisite need must be continuously demonstrated for funding to be renewed.

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Parsons' notion of specialized subsystems can also be explored in the context of social services. Addiction services can be seen as a subsystem within two larger social systems: healthcare and community-based services. Within the addiction's subsystem, we can see different approaches that address substance use. These can be seen as subsystems of their own: the medical model and the harm-reduction model.

Traditionally, the medical model views addiction as disordered and promotes abstinence as the solution (Szott 2015). This discourse aligns with Parsons' perspective and can be seen as a systems effort to move back towards equilibrium, or in other words go from disorder to order (Simmons 2014). However, this model poses barriers to success and has shown to create a greater burden on healthcare and community services (Szott 2015). From a structural functionalist stance, the introduction of a new subsystem, namely the harm-reduction approach is a system adaptation to decrease friction and move back to equilibrium. From Parsons' perspective, the individual autonomy harm-reduction provides substance users is a by-product of the system adjusting to address the steadfast presence of substance use in society and the failure of traditional programs to address this phenomenon (Szott 2015). The introduction of a harm-reduction subsystem within the addiction services system decreases the healthcare burden of addiction related disease and promotes greater safety for the social system at large (Szott 2015). Indeed, understanding functional prerequisites and the role of subsystems within society provides a helpful model to understand elements of contemporary society like healthcare and community services.

Another contribution of Parsons' understanding of the system is the key concept of functional imperatives (Simmons 2014). This concept is often referred to as the AGIL

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schema, an acronym for adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (Simmons 2014). Considering the last example of addiction services, it has already been demonstrated how a system adapts to continue successfully meeting prerequisite needs. This process also illustrates the addiction services system strategically adjusting goals from abstinence to harm-reduction to promote greater system success.

Furthermore, system integration is demonstrated as healthcare and community services collaborate and coordinate the delivery of harm-reduction services through community healthcare clinics (Szott 2015). Finally, the introduction of this new subsystem also requires an uptake of harm-reduction values not just practices (Szott 2015). This latency imperative is critical as abstinence values serve as the basis for the traditional model and need to shift to operationalize an alternative system (Szott 2015). These combined functional imperatives ensure the mobilization and success of the harm-reduction subsystem within addiction services. Understanding these elements of a system provides a useful framework to make sense of how systems are created to maintain social order.

### *Limitations*

One of the criticisms the harm-reduction approach makes of the traditional model is that abstinence driven services are a top-down approach to addressing substance use (Szott 2015). This criticism can be directly transferred onto Parsons' entire notion of the system itself. As mentioned, Parsons asserts that individuals have little to no autonomy within their social system (McQuarrie and Denisoff 1995). Although the development of a harm-reduction model can be explained as a system adaptation, it devalues individuals as the driving force for this adaptation. The traditional system was

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rejected by a group of people, forcing the system to come up with a more adaptive response, harm-reduction. Parsons' view assigns complete power to the system, dismissing the intimate play between systems and individuals (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995).

It does not take a deep dive into the current socio-political climate to see how individuals have demonstrated the ability to organize and push against various systems. Look no further than the last half decade and there are blatant examples that suggest individual social actors are not as motivated to passively attend to the system's predetermined needs as Parsons suggested (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). Flashback to 2017 when Donald Trump was elected president. Liberal protests erupted nationwide, challenging not only the elected representative, but the political system (Gillion 2020). In 2020, we saw the Black Lives Matter movement challenge the police and justice system across nations (Gillion 2020). As I write this paper, we are amidst a controversial Freedom Convoy demonstration which began in response to COVID-19 vaccination mandates issued by provincial governments (Vieira 2022). The collective consciousness produced by individual social actors coming together leads to increased voter turnout, demands repercussions for the system's silence and creates accountability for leaders who have maintained the status quo (Gillion 2020). In many cases, social movements have foreshadowed important system change (Gillion 2020). None of this is clearly accounted for in Parsons' notion of system (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995).

## BARRIERS TO SOCIAL CHANGE

In the spirit of thorough reflection, it must be noted that even though social movements can propel institutional change, it is often done by propelling allies

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(individuals empathetic to the cause) into positions of power (Gillion 2020). These efforts are still being launched within the existing system that is often slow to change in any fundamental way (Gillion 2020). For example, in 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada put forward 94 calls to action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action 2019). As of June 2021, only fourteen of those calls have been answered (Aziz 2021). Dishearteningly, the progress is not nearly enough when considering the harm Indigenous communities continue to endure at the hands of Canada (Aziz 2021). Many people from Indigenous communities across Canada feel that the progress is “too slow” (Aziz 2021). And the detrimental effects of residential schools continue to compound as thousands of unmarked graves of missing Indigenous children were found on the sites of residential schools nationwide (Aziz 2021). Does the progress of a national holiday match the detriment to Indigenous communities this nation is fully responsible for? No, it is not enough (Aziz 2021). Though this is not exactly what Parsons advocated, it does lend some credibility to the idea that individual, or community led systemic change is often slow and difficult.

## LUHMANN'S SYSTEMS THEORY

Another way to consider the reality of social reform efforts being launched within the system they hope to change is Luhmann's systems theory. One perspective on social systems that Luhmann provides is the concept of an autopoietic system. An autopoietic system is one that self-references to recreate itself (Allan 2006). Luhmann views society as a collaborative result of social systems and human's meaning-making processes (Allan 2006). Thus, the idea of individuals rising against a particular social phenomenon is conducive with this stance. However, the nature of an autopoietic



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system is that the status quo is always the starting point. Social change can only be actualized within the existing system (Allan 2006). Citizens may move to elect different representatives or demand the restructuring of institutions, but these efforts will have to work from the inside out, rather than the outside in (Allan 2006). For instance, we must use the existing political system (including the limitations it poses) to elect new leaders or work with individuals within the existing institution to influence meaningful change. This applies to the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was a body within the Canadian government (Government of Canada 2021).

To understand autopoietic systems with greater clarity, the concept of system within Luhmann's perspective must be established. Luhmann's approach differs greatly from that of Parsons in that systems are not seen as entities that inherently fulfill a prerequisite need (Allan 2006). Instead, Luhmann viewed systems as happening when finite parameters around time, space and symbols are created, developing a boundary between itself and the infinite possibilities within the larger environment (Allan 2006). Boundaries are created by organizing time, space and symbols in a way that reduces risk and complexity (Allan 2006). Furthermore, these boundaries must be established repeatedly for a system to remain intact (Allan 2006). If this finite meaning-making ceases to exist, so does the system (Allan 2006). Systems still serve a function as Parsons suggested, however in Luhmann's view it is boundaries that create functionally differentiated systems (Allan 2006). In other words, the only prerequisite for a system to happen is the need to reduce risk and complexity to promote survival (Allan 2006).

As an example, let us consider soccer. The reason we can recognize soccer as a sport is because there are consistent rules and equipment being used in the same way

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over time. If a soccer ball was used differently every single time, soccer would quickly disintegrate as a universally understood concept. There is nothing inherent about a soccer ball that suggests it should be kicked instead of thrown. It is the consistent boundaries around the sport that have separated it from other sports and made it a universally understood system among the infinite ways a field and ball could be used. From Luhmann's perspective social systems can be understood in the same way.

### *Contributions*

What does this tell us about contemporary society? One way to apply this perspective is to the slow nature of social change. The interdependence of social systems and the human psychic system means change in one has a ripple effect on the other (Allan 2006). A consistent recreation of a particular boundary and thereby social system may also reinforce the same meaning-making processes in individuals. The introduction of new ways of thinking would require the newer meaning to consistently recreate itself over time to have the same uptake. Applying this to the example of soccer, for the sport to be considered differently, the new way of looking at it would have to be re-established consistently over time. It would also require a two-fold shift: within the system of soccer itself and another in the way people perceive and interact with the sport. Clearly, this would take significant time and effort.

This way of understanding systems can be applied to contemporary social justice issues. Although the LGBTQ2+ community always opposed this oppressive narrative, the mainstream medical model considered same-sex attraction a disease until the 1960's (Blakemore 2019). Within this oppressive perspective, conversion therapy was seen as a viable solution to same-sex attraction (Blakemore 2019). A significant shift

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came in the 1960's because of gay rights movements that condemned the medical perspective (Blakemore 2019). However, despite the human rights violations of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse carried out by conversion therapy, the concept still exists today (Blakemore 2019). The narrative shift continues to require active efforts from the LGBTQ2+ community to push an alternative meaning-making process - one of acceptance over hate - into the mainstream despite some of the laws having changed (Blakemore 2019). Still, there is much progress to be made in both areas: the system itself and the engrained meaning-making processes of people (Blakemore 2019). Indeed, the ongoing work of creating new boundaries within an existing environment explains social change in a way Parsons' perspective does not.

### *Limitations*

Both Parsons and Luhmann provide a limited explanation of inequalities in society (Allan 2006; McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). The structural functionalist analysis suggested that systems of oppression serve a positive function within the larger system (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). With that, Parsons excused himself from any meaningful explanation of inequality. Luhmann noted that systems evolve through a process of differentiation that is not linked to any egalitarian belief (Allan 2006). Differentiation happens to decrease risk and complexity in three ways. First, systems break into equal but separate systems (Allan 2006). Second, systems are separated in a hierarchical manner (Allan 2006). And third, systems separate to attend to different functions within the environment (Allan 2006). This evolutionary process creates specialized subsystems that require increased communication to operate (Allan 2006). Inequality is seen as a by-product of system neglect where subsystems fail to communicate

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appropriately across differentiated systems rather than intentional exploitation (Allan 2006). Indeed, Luhmann's perspective also fails to provide any proactive consideration for the oppressive experiences of nondominant groups.

American and Canadian history points to a much more intentional disadvantaging of groups than Luhmann's idea of neglect suggests (Blakemore 2019). Mechanisms of oppression are created with deliberate forethought. A prime example of this is how certain groups have been intentionally stratified by white people, not as a by-product of societies natural differentiation process (Allan 2006). For instance, consider the 1921 massacre that happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In addition to hundreds of people, an entire social system was deliberately burnt to the ground by white people who had the clear intention of inflicting violence and generational disadvantage on Black residents of that community (Parshina-Kottas et al. 2021). This occurrence set back the progress of the Tulsa Black community for generations to come, effectively reinforcing a social system that intentionally serves white people and limits Black people (Parshina-Kottas et al. 2021). Luhmann poses an obvious contradiction by stating that a system can be created as easily as an individual starting a conversation - highlighting individual autonomy - but also stating that society cannot control the direction of its evolution (Allan 2006). Luhmann's definition of a system being inseparable from human meaning-making processes suggests a high level of intentionality but conveniently claims that society is not based on any egalitarian beliefs when it comes to the issue of inequality (Allan 2006).

Another contradiction that Luhmann's approach makes is regarding communication. On one hand, systems theory recognizes that as differentiation

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becomes more complex, the level of communication required to coordinate increases (Allan 2006). However, this perspective also asserts that as complexity increases (as in modern times) people adjust to accept irresolvable problems and become less interested in one system because they are spread out across many different systems (Allan 2006). Because of this, people are more accepting of themselves and others (Allan 2006). Of course, this is not seen as a conscious decision, rather a by-product of differentiation and managing demands across systems (Allan 2006).

Luhmann's concept of differentiation can be clearly applied to contemporary society. For instance, in the Province of British Columbia the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General provides funding for programs that support survivors of gender-based violence but also overlooks elements of policing in British Columbia (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General n.d.). This is a clear example of differentiation within a system. As the system evolved, different subsystems emerged to decrease risk and complexity. However, the assumption that individuals are less invested in one particular system because they are navigating many systems at once does not necessarily hold up. In fact, an argument can be made for the opposite. Because systems are interrelated, people are deeply invested in the outcomes of all their social systems. Thus, when a system differentiates and some of its subsystems begin to pose barriers to other subsystems within the environment, people are not passively accepting of the inconvenience this causes. Rather, they are placed in positions of significant distress and are deeply frustrated by the system's lack of cohesion. Continuing with the gender-based violence example, women rely on the justice system to enact their rights to safety. However, police are not always trained to understand the gender-based nature

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of violence against women and may perceive it as bilateral, when in fact the structure of patriarchy affords men unilateral power and control (Cory and Mcandless-Davis 2016). This nuance perpetuates oppression of women within a system that also explicitly aims to support women. Women are put into positions that perpetuate limiting cycles and are deeply invested in the functioning of all elements of the differentiated system, not less invested as Luhmann would suggest.

## WALLERSTEIN'S WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY

In contrast to Luhmann, Immanuel Wallerstein's world system's perspective places the exploitative nature of various parts of the system at the center of analysis. Wallerstein's perspective is broader than Parsons and Luhmann and considers the ideas of a system in the global context. World systems theory also moves away from social order and considers a dependency model that is more resonant of a conflict approach (Marshall 2013). This approach looks at tiers of social phenomena like local communities, cities, geographical regions, and nations at large as a part of one operating world system that is based on economic inequalities (Wallerstein 1975). Wallerstein put forward the notion that the world is organized into hierarchical terms of core, periphery, and semi-peripheral nations (Marshall 2013). The core is made up of wealthy nations that have historically been colonizers to the semi-peripheral and peripheral nations (Marshall 2013). The semi-peripheral and peripheral nations remain dependent on their historical oppressors even if they are now independent nations (Marshall 2013). This phenomenon can be understood as neocolonialism and is a result of semi-periphery and periphery nations lacking the resources colonizers stripped to develop the required industry and infrastructure for economic progress (Marshall 2013).

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The lack of resources also creates ongoing debt to core nations which keeps the semi-periphery and periphery in an exploitative relationship to the core (Marshall 2013). What separates the semi-periphery from the periphery is that semi-periphery nations also maintain an exploitative relationship with the periphery even though they themselves remain indebted to the core (Marshall 2013). Interestingly, Wallerstein's perspective accredits inequalities directly to intentional oppression at the hands of the core nations, demonstrating accountability in a way that Parsons and Luhmann did not. Though the world systems theory focuses largely on economics, labeling the detriments of colonialism on semi-periphery and periphery nations creates dialogue regarding socio-political ramifications and how exploitative patterns are perpetuated at the macro, meso and micro level. In addition, world-systems theory also serves as an informative theoretical framework to understand immigration patterns in Canada.

### *Contributions*

To briefly recap, structural functionalism denotes inequalities as serving a positive function and systems theory dismisses it as negligence rather than an intentional pattern of exploitation. On the other hand, Wallerstein's focus on economic exploitation details the historic occupation of semi-periphery and periphery nations by the core for the explicit purpose of extracting goods and services (Marshall 2013). This power dynamic is intact today and is projected to remain relatively stable as it is recreated through price inequalities that are justified by core nations as a way for semi-periphery and periphery nations to make progress on their debts (Marshall 2013; Wallerstein 1975). The cycle continues as the core sells cheaply produced goods for a profit, reinforcing the economic gap (Marshall 2013). In this model, the core intentionally

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sustains financial control and semi-periphery, and periphery nations are unable to break the cycle of debt, limiting their ability to develop their own infrastructure in any significant way (Marshall 2013).

This understanding begins by recognizing the role of colonialism in the world context. It also lends to better understanding the socio-political climates of core nations, including Canada. Canada's colonial history includes creating economic inequality between groups but also developing a socio-political system that oppresses nondominant groups (McRae n.d.) This began with Europeans bringing enslaved African people to North America and enslaving Indigenous peoples upon their arrival (McRae n.d.). Systemic racism continues to permeate our socio-political and economic systems today. It also extends to non-white immigrants who settle in Canada, although these groups come with privileges the previous two groups do not (Kouri 2020).

Here are some statistics on how inequality and exploitation are recreated in contemporary Canadian society that can be explained by world systems theory. Indigenous women make up three percent of females in Canada (Native Women's Association of Canada 2019). They make up ten percent of female homicide victims (Native Women's Association of Canada 2019). "Almost half of the murders of [Indigenous] women remain unsolved, compared to 84 percent clearance rate for [non-Indigenous] women" (Hansen and Dim 2019). Clearly, there is a discrepancy in how the justice system is handling the murder cases of Indigenous women that can not be chalked up to system negligence. A striking 34% resolution difference points to a much more intentional dismissal of some groups versus others. Another example of non-accidental oppression is the difference between Black and white male incarceration



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rates. In Ontario, “one out of every 15 young Black man” has been incarcerated; this number is one in every 70 for white men (Rodriguez 2021). If a system is not built on egalitarian beliefs as Luhmann posits, why are there clear differences in how the same system serves racial groups? Differentiation does not account for this nuance.

Wallerstein's world systems model also demonstrates a clearer understanding of immigration patterns in Canada and the role non-white immigrants play in the economy. Canada is well known for its multiculturalism, but the reasons individuals immigrate is less commonly discussed as a product of the exploitative relationship between Canada and their countries of origin (Marshall 2013). Without a world system understanding, one may simply attribute the economic realities of other nations as an inherent shortcoming of those countries (Perkins 2015). Interestingly, this perspective can be stretched to see immigration itself as a part of exploitation. Immigrants contribute to the Canadian workforce, pay taxes, and consume goods and services that fuel the economy (#ImmigrationMatters: Canada's Immigration Track Record n.d.). This economic contribution is made difficult in countries of origin where the core has created an exploitative economic system (Marshall 2013).

Furthermore, exploitation continues once immigrants have arrived in Canada as many of them are subjected to survival jobs instead of occupations they are qualified for (Survival to Success: Transforming Immigrant Outcomes n.d.). In fact, if newcomers were compensated appropriately it would amount to \$31 billion that are currently missed earnings (Survival to Success: Transforming Immigrant Outcomes n.d.) Indeed, if the system were interested in equality, this amount would serve in creating more abundance for the nation. However, it remains an intentional priority to maintain a

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hierarchical socioeconomic structure that is a function of neocolonialism (Wallerstein 1975). In this way, world systems theory contributes to the understanding of economic and socio-political phenomena.

### *Limitations*

Understanding aside, when it comes to providing tangible solutions to the exploitative nature of world systems, Wallerstein offers little actionable advice. Instead, the suggestion that semi-periphery and periphery nations focus on self-reliance rather than international collaboration proves contradictory (Perkins 2015). As earlier, independence from the cycle of debt is difficult to achieve when there are few resources available to build internal industries that can drive the economy (Marshall 2013). The cyclical nature of exploitation is at the centre of Wallerstein's world systems perspective (Perkins 2015). Thus, the independence solution is counterintuitive to the entire understanding of the world system from this standpoint. Second, technological advances that create an increasingly interconnected reality are often by-products of trade and collaboration between nations (Perkins 2015). Thus, a nation would have to surrender current advances and place themselves in a worse situation than the present state to begin rebuilding. In stride with the slow nature of social change examined in this paper, the painfully slow rate of internal advances would leave the nation in dire condition that it may or may not be able to recover from. Thus, Wallerstein's perspective does not provide any feasible solution to the existing inequalities.

### CONCLUSION

When considering the core components of a social theory there are three considerations (Simmons 2014). First, a social theory provides a polemic or an

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argument for how social phenomena ought to be considered (Simmons 2014). Second, social theories provide clear vocabulary to be applied to social phenomena in a context specific manner (Simmons 2014). Third, social theories produce a guide to action which informs how to move forward as a society (Simmons 2014). The three theories considered in this paper lack at least one of three prongs of an effective social theory. Parsons provides a description rather than an argument explaining social phenomena. (Simmons 2014). There is no tangible, evidence-based argument that structural functionalism contributes to our understanding of social phenomena and thereby is a limited as a guide to action (Simmons 2014). Perhaps this is because from a structural functionalist stance, individuals are not free to act anyway. On the other hand, Luhmann accounts for individual and group autonomy and places great importance on the human ability to create systems simply through conversation. However, systems theory becomes superfluous and difficult to apply clearly as it begins to pose contradictions (Allan 2006). For instance, Luhmann argues that a conversation at a coffee shop is enough to create a system (Allan 2006). However, Luhmann then goes on to state that society can not control the direction it evolves in, discrediting the notion of autonomy altogether (Allan 2006). Finally, Wallerstein's world systems analysis is unable to provide a true guide to action, significantly limiting its application to social phenomena. Wallerstein paints a picture of an unequal society that penetrates all elements of social interaction and is most likely unchangeable (Wallerstein 1975). Indeed, this does not provide an empowered way in which to manage the consequences of an unequal society. Which begs the question: why acknowledge it if we cannot change it? Perhaps this way of thinking is closer to the disposition of Parsons and Luhmann.

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Nonetheless, elements of each structural functionalism, systems theory and world systems theory can be applied to our understanding of contemporary society. Parsons' perspective creates an intentionality around systems that we often see in organizational vision and mission. We also see systems demonstrate adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency by pivoting to maintain equilibrium (McQuarie and Denisoff 1995). The significant role of individuals in affecting change in their social systems that is overlooked by Parsons is accounted for by Luhmann. Systems theory combines the importance of social systems and the human meaning-making process to explain social phenomena (Allan 2006). Where Luhmann remains limited in explaining the occurrence of oppressive mechanisms in society, Wallerstein uses exploitation as the basis for his understanding of world systems (Allan 2006; Wallerstein 1975). Wallerstein provides a framework to better understand economic and socio-political economies at the macro, meso and micro level in a way that places more responsibility on the oppressor's role in inequalities (Marshall 2013). Thus, even though each of these theories is missing at least one identified domain of an effective social theory, each notion of system contributes a framework that can be applied to parts of social phenomena if not contemporary social phenomena as a whole.

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